Examining the silence of academic disappointment: A typology of students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades with instructors

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Abstract: Although student-teacher interactions about disappointing grades can be beneficial, students do not always engage in them. The objective of this study was to explore the domain of reasons undergraduate students report for not discussing disappointing grades with their instructors. The data analysis yielded six main categories of reasons: utility of grade conversations, judgment of the evaluation, understanding of grade cause(s), instructor/relational considerations, student characteristics, and situational factors. This study advances the first typology of students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades and offers implications for instructional practice, theory and research. Study limitations and future research directions are also discussed.

Keywords: students' communication with instructors, grades, feedback, student-teacher interaction

I. Introduction.

Although difficulties often characterize student-teacher interactions about grades (Goulden & Griffin, 1995; Wright, 2012), they can have important implications for students' educational experiences in areas including learning processes (Henningsen, Valde, Russell, & Russell, 2011), motivation (Kerssen-Griep, Hess, & Tress, 2003), and the quality of the student-teacher relationship (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009). Recent studies, however, suggest that students may often miss out on the academic, personal, and relational benefits potentially afforded by these interactions. Though academic disappointment is common and most students can easily recall earning a disappointing grade, many students are unlikely to discuss a disappointing grade with their instructor (Henningsen et al., 2011; Sabee & Wilson, 2005; Wright, 2012). Some scholars consider the silence of academic disappointment in the classroom problematic and assert that "a failure to discuss disappointing grades is a failure of education in some respects. The faculty member does not have the chance to clarify and teach…[and] the student does not have the opportunity to get additional feedback to improve future assignments" (Henningsen et al., 2011, p. 188). Thus, students' decisions not to initiate these discussions are worthy of further investigation.

Unfortunately, there has been little attention to the investigation of student-teacher interactions about grades and the relevant research that does exist privileges the experiences of students who initiate these discussions. Consequently, there is limited understanding of the experiences of academic disappointment that go unexpressed in the college classroom. Understanding of factors that may influence the silence of academic disappointment is important

to the scholarship of teaching and learning, and may prove even more important to our understanding of student-teacher interactions about grades than the experiences of students who discuss disappointing grades with instructors (Wright, 2012). Therefore, in this study I directly examined student experiences of academic disappointment that were not discussed with instructors. My objective was to refine understanding of the diversity of students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades with their instructors by developing the first typology of factors that hinder students from initiating a conversation with an instructor upon experiencing academic disappointment.

II. Literature Review.

Research identifies instances in which a student who would benefit from meeting with an instructor about a disappointing grade chooses not to do so. Instructor feedback can affect a student's self-concept in areas such as their self-esteem (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003) and perceptions of personal success (Sanders & Anderson, 2010). In these ways, negative feedback can create concerns about self-image (or face), which may influence a student's decision to meet with an instructor to discuss the evaluation. Individuals have desires to present a certain self-image (or face) to others and take steps to protect or maintain this image (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Some students may perceive a face-to-face discussion with an instructor as potentially face-threatening and consider not meeting with him or her as a method of protecting their face.

Due to the interpersonal nature of the student-teacher relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000), relational factors also have implications for how students respond to feedback and their decisions to interact with instructors. Students' positive perceptions of instructor communication behaviors can enhance the quality of the student-teacher relationship and student academic achievement (Kerssen-Griep, Tress, & Hess, 2008). Immediacy (the perceived physical or psychological distance between communicators) and immediate behaviors (nonverbal/verbal behaviors that communicate liking, affect, and/or positive evaluation) have received significant attention in instructional communication research (e.g., Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011; Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012). An instructor's use of nonverbal (e.g., open body position, smiling, vocal variety) and verbal (e.g., self-disclosure, positive recognition, use of humor) immediacy behaviors can have implications for the student-teacher relationship, positively influencing students' perceptions of the instructor (e.g., credibility, liking) and willingness to interact with the instructor as a result. An instructor's (actual or perceived) abilities can also further affect student motivations to initiate conversations with instructors about grades. For example, an instructor's referential skills, or ability to effectively explain course material, are pertinent to students' educational experiences. Deficiencies in this area can inhibit an instructor's ability to effectively offer assistance, which can create feelings of uncertainty and frustration among students (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Thus, it is not surprising that students' perceptions of instructors as incompetent are negatively related to their out-of-class communication with them (Myers, 2004).

Although some students may not obtain useful insights into their performances without meeting with the instructor, not all disappointing grades warrant a follow-up conversation to provide the clarity and instruction that can enhance a student's subsequent performances. Research suggests an instructor's ability to communicate effective feedback can reduce a student's need to discuss a disappointing grade. Critical feedback that is effective should cause

students to develop understanding of what they did incorrectly and how to improve in the future, consequently affecting student learning and motivation (Husman, Brem, & Duggan, 2005). Feedback intervention theory (FIT) indicates that the focus of feedback affects its impact on the target's learning. Learning improves when feedback is objective and directly focused on the assessment, but is reduced when feedback offers subjective, indirect, and emotional judgments (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). To this point, students prefer detailed feedback (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008), which enhances student learning. Detailed feedback can also limit the face-threat students perceive in the feedback when instructors provide justifications for them (Butler & Winne, 1995). Furthermore, detailed feedback can reduce a student's ambiguity and/or questions about an evaluative decision (i.e., grade) (Svinicki, 1998). Since such uncertainty has been thought to influence students' challenging behaviors and inquiries about their evaluations (Simonds, 1997), detailed feedback may also reduce student displays of aggression and resistance in the classroom.

The above demonstrates the diverse factors that may affect students' responses to disappointing grades and their decisions to discuss them with an instructor. Though a potential failure of the education process exists when students who would benefit from meeting with the instructor are dissuaded from doing so by destructive factors (e.g., instructor communication face management concerns, instructor incompetence), research demonstrates this is not always the case. There are factors that can enhance students' learning experiences following a disappointing grade without a meeting with the instructor (e.g., detailed feedback). When considering the various factors that can influence students' decisions in this regard, instructors likely encounter unique challenges in their efforts to evaluate a student's academic disappointment and intervene appropriately. Therefore, it is important that research identifies factors that influence students to withhold academic disappointment from instructors, rather than initiate potentially beneficial discussions about grades with them. The following research question guided this investigation:

RQ: What reasons do students report for choosing not to discuss a disappointing grade with their instructors?

III. Method.

A. Participants and Procedures.

Upon receiving human subject's board approval, undergraduate students from the Communication Studies research pools at two universities were recruited to participate in this study. The 586 students who chose to participate completed an online consent form and a questionnaire in which they were asked to recall a disappointing grade they recently earned in a course. Only the data for the 261 students who reported that they did not discuss the disappointing grade with the instructor were pertinent to the objective of the present study. These students were then asked to respond to open-ended questions about why they chose not to discuss it with the instructor. Among them, two students reported that they had meetings set up with their instructor, which had not yet taken place, and two other students reported that they had yet to receive a disappointing grade. The data for these subjects were not included in the analysis. Thus, the data for the 257 undergraduates who indicated that they did not discuss the grade were analyzed in this study. The sample was primarily Caucasian ($n = 193$, 75%) and female ($n = 173$, 67%); one respondent did not provide this information. The average age of respondents was 19.90 years ($SD = 2.06$); however, 13 respondents did not report their age. The sample was comprised of 37 freshmen, 106 sophomores, 72 juniors, and 42 seniors.

B. Data Analysis.

The participants who indicated they did not discuss the disappointing grade with their instructor were asked to report why they had not done so. Although some responses contained multiple and varied reasons, the entire response served as the unit of analysis because the majority of participants wrote very brief responses (one to three sentences). A trained student coder examined each response and organized the reason(s) reported within them into thematic categories containing definitions that emerged from the data (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1984). These categories and their structural definitions were used to develop coding instructions in which a definition and exemplar for each category was presented. A miscellany category was also included to account for any reasons reported that did not fit into the identified categories.

Using a sample of responses, two other students were trained to use the instructional codebook and analyze the data accordingly. The coding was not mutually exclusive and hence, coders indicated the presence or absence of all categories of reasons. Every analyzed response contained at least one reason. During training, any disagreements were resolved through the discussion of the codebook definitions and the response in question until an agreement on the appropriate code(s) was reached. After completing the training, the coders independently placed the remaining data into at least one of the supra-categories and where relevant, the appropriate sublevel category(ies) using the codebook. Any disagreements that occurred during this time were resolved by the author who considered which category seemed to be most consistent with the way the coders categorized the other units.

IV. Results.

Results indicated students consider evaluation, individual, instructor/relational, and situational factors in their decisions not to discuss a disappointing grade with an instructor. A total of 343[2] reasons were identified in the responses provided by the 257 participants in this study. The data analysis revealed seven supra-categories, and in some instances lower level categories, that were labeled as follows: utility of the grade conversation, understanding of grade cause(s) (3 sublevels: insufficient preparation, instructor feedback, and general understanding), judgment of the evaluation (3 sublevels: grade impact, fairness perceived, evaluation/course unimportant), instructor/relational considerations (4 sublevels: approachability, competence, legitimate authority, and relational concerns), student characteristics, situational factors, and miscellany.

The miscellany category contained seven reasons that did not fit in the supra-categories that emerged from the data. Two respondents indicated they did not know why they did not discuss the grade with the instructor. Two others stated they did not feel the need to discuss the grade but provided no additional explanation of whether this reflected their personal preference, judgment of the evaluation, awareness of the cause(s) of the grade, or other reason. Another response stated the student preferred to go over the instructor's head rather than talk directly with him/her. And in two cases, grade conversations and the opportunity to make corrections and resubmit the assignment were initiated by the instructor.

Table 1 contains definitions of each code, exemplars, the proportion of units in each code, and their individual Cohen's kappa (κ). Cohen's kappa measures the inter-coder

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[2] The sum of the frequencies for (1) the sublevels within judgment of the evaluation, understanding of grade causes, and instructor/relational considerations and (2) the supra-categories: utility of the grade conversation, student characteristics, situational factors, and miscellany.

agreement. Results indicated acceptable levels of agreement for each supra-category (all κ ≥ .80) and that all, but one sublevel category (i.e., instructor competence) met or exceeded a moderate level of agreement (e.g., κ > .70).

Table 1. Explanation of Codes Used to Analyze Students' Reasons for Not Discussing Disappointing Grades with Instructors.

Category	Definition	Exemplars	Cohen's *kappa*	Proportion
UTILITY OF THE GRADE CONVERSATION	Reasons citing perceptions that a grade conversation was unlikely to produce any benefits and/or change the outcome	"I didn't think I would gain anything from it" "There didn't seem to be a chance that anything would help."	.92	.27 (n = 70)
UNDERSTANDING OF GRADE CAUSE(S) (includes three subcategories)	Reasons citing one's understanding of the cause(s) for the disappointing grade through:		.89	.22 (n= 57)
	1) *Insufficient Preparation* - the student's own behavior contributed to the grade (e.g., quality of preparation, attention, personal situations, etc.)	"I felt that it was mostly my own fault for not studying well enough; talking to the professor wouldn't really give me any new insights" (*Insufficient Preparation*)	*.94*	*.11 (n = 29)*
	2) *Instructor Feedback* - a clarity and understanding regarding the instructor's assessment of their work	"I understood where my failings were, the notation/comments on the paper were pretty extensive" (*Instructor Feedback*)	*.79*	*.05 (n = 12)*
	3) *General Understanding* - "other" causes or the absence of any details regarding the specific cause(s) for the grade	"It was the first test, and I was getting to know her style of exam." "I knew why I got the disappointing grade and didn't feel it was necessary" (*General Understanding*)	*.75*	*.07 (n = 18)*
INSTRUCTOR/ RELATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS (includes four subcategories)	Reasons citing the instructor's characteristics and/or the anticipated consequences for the student-teacher relationship:		.84	.22 (n = 57)
	1) *Approachability* – statements indicating it would not be pleasant or easy to discuss the grade with the instructor.	"He is extremely intimidating;" "I did not talk to her because she is always rude and never lets you get a word in edgewise." (*Approachability*)	*.78*	*.16 (n = 42)*
	2) *Competence* – concerns about the instructor's ability to adequately	"I was not convinced that she could adequately	*.68*	*.04 (n = 11)*

	fulfill the responsibilities of their position, engage in the discussion, behave ethically, and/or address their questions/concerns.	explain it to anyone else but herself." "I wrote the instructor several emails but she never responded." "He had failed at explaining [the material] to me when I had gone to office hours." (*Competence*)		
	3) *Legitimate Authority*- the instructor's general power and authority to evaluating their work	"I decided he must know something I didn't because he was the T.A." (*Legitimate Authority*)	*.72*	*.03* *(n = 7)*
	4) *Relational Concerns*- concerns about the relationship with the instructor and the potential adverse consequences of the conversation on it (e.g., retaliation, backlash, etc.).	"Because I do not think my instructor likes me and any attempt to dispute my grade would cause her to like me even less." "I believe this professor was biased toward female students. Therefore, discussing the grade with him likely would have resulted in additional backlash." (*Relational Concerns*)	*.80*	*.03* *(n = 7)*
JUDGMENT OF THE EVALUATION (includes three subcategories)	Reasons citing the perceived severity, importance, and/or fairness attributed to the grade.		.81	.21 (n = 54)
	1) *Grade Impact* - responses imply that the impact of the grade on their academic performance, in comparison to classmates, etc. was not significant enough to warrant talking to the instructor and/or that there were sufficient opportunities remaining to raise the grade	"While the grade was less than I expected, it still wasn't terrible, and it didn't affect my overall grade very much." (*Grade Impact*)	*.72*	*.11* *(n = 27)*
	2) *Fairness Perceived* - cited directly or indirectly that they perceived the grade as fair	"I deserved the grade;" "The grade reflected my abilities/effort." (*Fairness Perceived)*	*.74*	*.09* *(n = 23)*
	3) *Grade/Course Unimportant* - responses noting that the student did not care about or were not interested enough in the grade and/or course.	"Primarily the grade wasn't that important to me." (*Grade/Course Unimportant)*	*.87*	*.05* *(n = 12)*

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS	Reasons citing the student's personal perspectives, emotional reactions, and/or traits as hindrances from discussing the disappointing grade. Responses in this category also stated concerns related to face management, self-efficacy, and social appropriateness.	"Embarrassed and too lazy." "…I am not comfortable enough to go up and explain my stance whether I'm right or not."	.84	.16 (n = 41)
SITUATIONAL FACTORS	Reasons citing scheduling conflicts, inconveniences, and/or changes in circumstances that caused them not to discuss the grade with the instructor.	"The lines were always very long. There were a lot of disappointing grades in that class." "I was busy with other work getting ready for finals…." "The grade was on a final exam and the procedures for changing a final grade are tedious." "I dropped the class."	.87	.14 (n = 37)
MISC	Any response that does not fit within the supra-categories identified in the data analysis.	"I don't know why I didn't talk to the instructor." "I did not feel the need" (void of any further explanation for why not)	.90	.03 (n = 7)

V. Limitations and Discussion.

This study answers calls for further investigation of students' decisions regarding grade conversations (Henningsen et al., 2011), in particular, their decisions against discussing academically disappointing experiences with instructors (Wright, 2012). Appropriately, the objective of this study was to advance the first typology of students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades with instructors (see Table 1). The method used to identify the domain of reasons reported, however, assumes that a student's decision against discussing a disappointing grade results from a rational process that one can coherently express. Consequently, the typology advanced by this study may, at best, capture students' reflections and sense-making processes for not discussing disappointing grades with instructors.

Although participants were instructed to report a recent event in which they earned a disappointing grade, the frequency of the themes reflected in the reasons reported may have been confounded by other variables such as the degree of negative outcomes elicited by the grade (e.g., emotional responses, adverse consequences), the type of assessment on which they received the disappointing feedback (e.g., essay vs. multiple-choice, paper vs. exam, major vs. minor grade, individual vs. group), and individual difference variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, goal motivation). The influence of these and other potential confounds on students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades deserve further investigation. Social desirability biases may have also influenced the results such that students underreported (or withheld) reasons thought to reflect negatively upon them (e.g., perceived the grade as unimportant, student characteristics) and over-reported those which were less likely to do so (e.g., utility of the

grade conversation, instructor/relational considerations, situational factors). As a result, the reasons observed in this study may not account for all existing reasons for students' decisions against discussing disappointing grades. Furthermore, though the students in this study reflected upon experiences in which they earned a disappointing grade, the factors that determine a student's assessment of academic disappointment are relatively unknown and require further research.

A. Possible Explanations for Students' Unexpressed Academic Disappointment.

Despite these limitations, this study refines understanding of why some experiences of academic disappointment are not shared with instructors. The typology indicates that the reasons students report for not discussing disappointing grades with instructors are diverse and reveals five areas students consider when making these decisions: utility, the evaluation, and relational, individual, and situational factors.

First, perceptions of the benefits of discussing disappointing grades framed students' reasons related to the utility of the grade conversation (27%). Most common responses attributed the lack of utility in initiating a grade conversation to the unlikelihood of obtaining a higher grade as a result. This emphasis provides further evidence of the prevalence of social influence and students' desires to use grade conversations to obtain a higher grade (e.g., Henningsen et al., 2011; Sabee & Wilson, 2005; Svinicki, 1998; Wright, 2012).

Second, there were two distinct ways through which students' consideration of the evaluation manifested in their reasons for not discussing a disappointing grade. The first reflects the use of student-teacher interactions about grades to seek information to enhance student understanding and abilities to improve in the future [i.e., understanding of grade cause(s) (22%)]. Some students did not need to meet with their instructors in order to achieve these learning goals because they acquired the desired clarity and insights through their own understanding of the cause(s) of the disappointing grade. Primarily, students reported gaining this understanding from the instructor's feedback on the assessment and/or the awareness that they were insufficiently prepared for the assessment (e.g., poor study habits). The second way in which students' perceptions of the evaluation influenced their decisions against meeting with the instructor was in their judgments of the impact, fairness, and importance of the evaluation (and/or course) [i.e., judgment of the evaluation (21%)]. Specifically, some students avoided grade conversations because they perceived that the grade produced limited adverse effects, resulted from fair grading practices, and/or was generally unimportant to them. These factors may function as important criteria some students use to help them decide whether to discuss a disappointing grade with instructors. Students' considerations of fairness support previous findings that grades are often the topic of classroom justice issues (Horan, Chory, & Goodboy, 2010), which may motivate some students to interact with instructors aggressively (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004).

Third, students' considerations of the instructor and/or the student-teacher relationship (22%) demonstrate the interpersonal nature of the student-teacher relationship (see Frymier & Houser, 2000). Perceptions of an instructor's approachability [or lack thereof] and professional characteristics such as their incompetence (e.g., inability to fulfill responsibilities of their position, possess knowledge of course content, etc.) and legitimate power to evaluate their performance were often reflected in students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades. The consideration of instructor power is also relational as it takes into account the social appropriateness of discussing one's academic disappointment with a superior. Considerations of

the student-teacher relationship also included concerns regarding the affinity between them and the potential for the discussion to adversely affect their relationship as hindrances to sharing academic disappointment. This indicates some students are aware that student-teacher interactions about grades can serve as relational turning point events (e.g., Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009). Interestingly, the data also suggest that relational turning points may be experienced secondhand as some students determined the instructor was unapproachable or incompetent based upon the experiences of classmates.

Fourth, students reported considerations of self in their reasons for not discussing disappointing grades with instructors [i.e., student characteristics (16%)]. These reasons reflected students' perceptions of their abilities to engage in, and construct cogent arguments during, a grade conversation and to do so with emotional control. This focus upon self-efficacy suggests that some students perceive grade conversations as effortful interactions requiring certain skill sets and emotional intelligence. Just as earning a disappointing grade can elicit negative emotions so, too, can the prospect of discussing academic disappointment with an instructor. Indeed, some students cited feelings of fear and anxiety as deterrents to discussing the disappointing grade. These negative emotional responses suggest students who are sensitive to the face threatening potential of a grade conversation may withhold their academic disappointment as a means of protecting their face (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1978).

The fifth and final area of consideration pertained to situational factors (14%). Scheduling conflicts, timing of the assessment (e.g., end of the academic year), and tedious procedures were frequently reported barriers to students sharing their academic disappointment. Because these issues are often specific to particular circumstances rather than permanent conditions, the students who were hindered by them may not be predisposed against initiating grade conversations.

B. Study Contributions, Implications for Theory, and Future Research.

As the initial effort to develop a typology of students' reasons for not discussing academically disappointing experiences with instructors, this study makes several contributions to research on student-teacher interactions about grades and offers directions for future research. First, though previous research has examined the utility of communication theory to predict students' decisions to initiate grade conversations (e.g., goals-plans-action model and theory of planned behavior, Henningsen et al., 2011), the present findings suggest additional theoretical perspectives for refining understanding of students' decisions against sharing academic disappointing experiences with instructors. Social exchange theories assume individuals base their decisions and actions on perceptions of costs and rewards and make decisions and engage in behaviors perceived to be rewarding (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). With regard to the present findings, some students' calculations of the perceived costs (e.g., relational damage, loss of valuable resources (time)) and benefits of initiating grade conversations influenced their decisions against doing so. Although such cost-benefit analyses could explain many of the considerations in students' reasons, these calculations were explicit in the supra-category, utility of the grade conversation. As previously noted, students tended to focus on the grade-centered benefits of discussing disappointing grades with instructors (i.e., to get a higher grade). This narrowed focus likely inhibits their abilities to recognize and take advantage of the many learning-centered and relational benefits of these interactions. It is important that research further examines the factors that affect students' perceptions of the costs and rewards of discussing

disappointing grades with instructors. However, it seems likely that these beliefs stem broadly from personal experiences discussing grades with instructors, observations/experiences of classmates who engaged in grade conversations, instructor communication behaviors, and/or from the advice of others (e.g., parents) about discussing grades with instructors.

Theories pertaining to the influence of uncertainty on communication may also be useful to future examinations of students' decisions regarding discussing disappointing grades. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) assumes individuals use communication to reduce their uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The heurism of URT to research of student-teacher interactions about grades is evident in the influences of uncertainty about course content, grading practices, and/or of how to improve in the future on students' decisions against discussing disappointing grades with instructors. The Theory of Motivated Information Management (TMIM) is another theoretical perspective of uncertainty, which explains how individuals use cognitive abilities and other resources to manage information in interpersonal settings (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). Specifically, TMIM focuses upon situations in which individuals are motivated to manage their uncertainty and examines the influence of efficacy perceptions and the information provider on the management processes. TMIM would enhance understanding of how students' considerations of issue importance (labeled as "judgment of the evaluation"), communication efficacy (labeled as "student characteristics"), and the information provider (labeled as "instructor characteristics," sublevel-competence) influence how students manage uncertainty regarding academically disappointing experiences. In the case of the present findings, TMIM suggests that students may choose not to seek information from the instructor if they perceive the evaluation as unimportant, have doubts about their ability to engage in the conversation, and/or question the ability of the instructor to effectively provide the desired information.

Second, the reasons students report for not discussing disappointing grades with instructors reflect their considerations of factors related to research on students' motives for communicating with instructors (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999). This association is most evident in students' motives to offer excuses (i.e., challenge a grade), to relate (i.e., relational development and maintenance), for participation (i.e., demonstrate interest in the course and learning), to obtain favorable impressions of the instructor (i.e., sycophancy), and those regarding functional reasons (i.e., increase understanding of content or assignment). In the case of the present study, students' negative perceptions of these personal, relational, and academic areas dissuaded them from discussing disappointing grades with instructors. Considering some students' motives for communicating with instructors have strong implications for their cognitive learning (Martin et al., 1999), students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades may have similar implications for motivation and cognitive learning outcomes. If so, students who reported instructor characteristics as deterrents to initiating a grade conversation may have lower motivation to learn and experience lower levels of cognitive learning than do students whose reasons pertained to their understanding of the cause(s) for the grade. Although these relationships were beyond the scope of the present investigation, the implications of students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades for their educational outcomes warrants empirical support. When considering the similarities observed with the present findings, the similarities between students' motives to communicate with instructors and the reasons students report *for* discussing disappointing grades with instructors should also be examined. Though the present typology identifies factors that reasonably influence students' decisions regarding grade conversations, it is possible that students who choose to discuss disappointing grades do so for

reasons not identified in this study. Therefore, future research should explore the similarities and differences in the factors that influence students' decisions toward and against discussing academic disappointment with instructors.

Third, and unexpectedly, students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades share similarities with reasons reported for withholding complaints and engaging in conflict avoidance in close relationships. Just as some students considered the utility of a grade conversation [or lack thereof] in their decisions against discussing disappointing grades with instructors, individuals may avoid conflict because they believe the confrontation will not produce the desired change in one's partner and/or the situation (Cloven & Roloff, 1994; Makoul & Roloff, 1998). Students' considerations of the severity, fairness, and importance of the evaluation (i.e., judgment of the evaluation) are also similar to those regarding issue importance in individuals' decisions to withhold complaints and avoid conflict in close relationships (Cloven & Roloff, 1994; Roloff & Solomon, 2002). In both cases, these considerations serve as thresholds that aid individuals in making decisions of whether or not to initiate a discussion about the issue (i.e., a disappointing grade or complaint). It is possible that students perceive grade conversations as effortful interactions that, like conflict, require spending one's valuable resources, and can leave one exhausted if it is prolonged (Vuchinich & Teachman, 1993). Thus, students, like relational partners, strive to "pick their battles" with regard to the potentially conflict-inducing issues they choose to discuss with instructors and these thresholds assist them in doing so. Also, an instructor's perceived unapproachability and potential retaliation can serve as a type of "chilling effect" (Cloven & Roloff, 1993) that decreases students' willingness to discuss disappointing grades with instructors. The similarities between students' reasons for not discussing disappointing grades and those identified for withholding complaints and avoiding conflict suggest that some students (and teachers) may perceive and respond to grade conversations as one might respond to a conflict situation or social confrontation episode. This is reasonable when considering the intensity and strong emotions often attributed to interactions about grades (Goulden & Griffin, 1995). In consideration of this, conflict management and avoidance research may benefit future research on student-teacher interactions about grades and initiatives to increase the willingness of students and teachers to discuss them.

C. Implications for Instructional Practice.

The findings from this study identify several areas where instructors may positively influence students to discuss disappointing grades with them. First, an unfortunate challenge to an instructor's ability to appropriately intervene in students' experiences of academic disappointment is that some students do *not* believe discussing a disappointing grade with an instructor is useful. The limited perceptions of utility in grade conversations is likely influenced by students' narrow perceptions of the benefits of these discussions (i.e., to get a higher grade). This narrow focus may cause some students to misjudge the utility of meeting with an instructor, missing out on the many potential benefits afforded from doing so. To address these issues, instructors can use direct (e.g., classroom instruction) and indirect (e.g., syllabus content) methods to expand and reframe students' perceptions of the benefits of student-teacher interactions about grades, with special attention given to learning-centered benefits (Wright, 2013). However, future research is warranted to identify the most effective instructor practices to address this issue because research does not completely inform us as to the origin of students' beliefs about the utility of grade conversations.

Second, since subordinates may have difficulties initiating discussions with their superiors, instructors should be aware that perceptions of their legitimate authority can hinder students from discussing disappointing grades. Therefore, instructors must not abuse their power or influence students to perceive constructive conversations about grades as illegitimate or socially inappropriate. An instructor's efforts in these areas can also address students' concerns about self-efficacy and impression management that can deter them from initiating grade conversations.

Third, instructors must enhance students' perceptions of them as competent and approachable. Therefore, it is important that instructors are diligent in fulfilling the responsibilities of their position (e.g., responding to email, clear explanations of course content) as incompetencies in these areas can discourage students from meeting with them about disappointing grades. Instructors' uses of verbal and nonverbal immediacy behavior can enhance liking and student perceptions of a supportive classroom environment (Myers, 1995), which can increase perceptions of approachability. Teacher training initiatives in the areas of instructional communication face management and feedback interventions (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003; Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012) can also equip instructors to provide the face support and ego support that can encourage students to initiate grade conversations.

Furthermore, course policies may also influence students' perceptions of an instructor's approachability. For example, rigid and impersonal classroom policies that control when and how students can initiate conversations about grades (e.g., 24-hour waiting period before discussing a grade, require written documentation of students' questions or concerns about the grade) can make these interactions seem more akin to a legal dispute than an educational conversation. Although strict guidelines may minimize the unpleasantness of grade conversations, they may also influence students to perceive that the instructor does not welcome discussions about academically disappointing experiences. By giving greater attention to facilitating grade conversations instead of regulating grade disputes, instructors can enhance students' understanding of the diverse benefits of discussing disappointing grades and their legitimate right to initiate them.

VI. Conclusion.

The present findings suggest that (1) the diversity of reasons students have for not discussing disappointing grades with instructors and (2) the possible implications of these reasons for students' educational experiences may contribute to the challenges instructors encounter determining how to appropriately intervene in students' experiences of academic disappointment. The constructive reasons students reported [e.g., understanding of grade cause(s)] indicate positive consequences for their educational experiences. Specifically, that some students can gain an awareness of the cause(s) for disappointing academic performances and acquire strategies for improving through means other than meeting with the instructor. Two important conclusions should be drawn from this observation. First, instructors need not always intervene in students' experiences of academic disappointment and second, students' decisions against discussing disappointing grades with instructors do not always reflect a failure of education as some scholars previously suggested (see Henningsen et al., 2011). These conclusions, however, do not justify efforts to inhibit student-teacher interactions about grades. Rather, readers should utilize the findings from this study to enhance their abilities to ensure that

students who would benefit from discussing their academically disappointing experiences are not hindered from doing so by factors within an instructor's influence.

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