



Comparison of American and Chinese College Students' Perception of Instructor Authority

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Abstract

Teacher authority has long been recognized as one of the critical factors that contribute to the formation of effective learning circumstances (Haywood-Metz, 2006). A survey was developed based on Dornbusch and Scott's (1975) theoretical framework of distinction between formal authority and informal authority, named The Attitude towards College Instructor Authority (ACIA). By using this survey among Chinese and American students at an American University, the current study examines college students' perception of instructor authority, including their preference of formal or informal authority, the valued elements in instructor professional competence, as well as the relation between instructor's perceived demographic features and their authority power. The results indicate that overall students rely highly on instructors' position-attached formal authority rather than professionally-oriented informal authority. Whereas there are culture-specified differences between Chinese and American college students' valued dimension of instructors' professional competence at the informal authority level. Possible reasons for the similarities and differences are addressed.

Key Words: Perception of instructor authority, cross-cultural comparison, authority relation

Teacher authority is defined as the teachers' controllability and gaining of students' content within a learning environment (Oyler, 1996). Although it is argued by some progressive educators that classroom authority should be replaced by educational freedom in which students would fulfill their own needs spontaneously (Pace & Hermings, 2007), classroom teachers still need to present a certain form of authority to optimize their function of facilitating students with active construction of meaningful knowledge (Haywood-Metz, 2006). According to Kneller (1971), a successful teacher should obtain a minimum capacity to organize and direct the classroom activities, to be aware of students' needs and responses to the knowledge, and skillfully adopt the proper methodology.

Teachers should never take their roles of authority for granted. It has been attested that students massively believe they share little interests with their teachers, and being disobedient is the natural way of persisting their independence (Richard, 2011). Waller (1961) maintained that authoritative relation between teacher and students is never ensured because of the "quivering" balance between teachers' performance and students' perception of the authorized power in the classroom (as cited in Pace and Hemmings, 2007).

To investigate how and to what extent college instructors' professional and individual features impact students' perception of them as authority fig-

ures, and to compare the results cross-culturally in a western ideology-oriented country (the United States) and an eastern ideology-oriented country (the People's Republic of China), a survey – *The Attitude towards College Instructor Authority (ACIA)* was developed with the methodology of simultaneous bilingual scale design.

ACIA was established based on Dornbusch and Scott's (1975) theoretical framework of distinction between formal and informal authority. Fourteen statements out of 24 statements of the original instrument were selected based on a pilot test of scale reliability and experts' suggestions. By launching the survey on a Chinese and an American university campus, the study aims to answer two levels of research questions: firstly, to what extent the two different legitimate domains of authority (formal and informal) account for college students' general attitudes towards their instructors as authority figure during the learning process; secondly, whether there are cultural-specified features guided by two different ideological systems (western and eastern) influencing the perceived weight of the two domains among American and Chinese college students. And if there are differences, what the potential causes could be and what kind of implication can be drawn for educators in diverse classrooms?

Review of Literature

Concept of Authority in Educational Environment

The concept of authority has been discussed by social scientists for decades, yet no overall definition has been proposed due to the complex relations among various layers of factors negotiating with each other at both societal and ideological levels (Metz, 1978). In the current study, the author adheres to Weber's (1947) view that an authority figure is someone who is granted the legitimacy to give command, and this person's directives are obeyed by people in the subordinate positions. In other words, authority is a social construction which enables some people to legalize certain norms that hold individuals together by guiding them to carry out institutional goals (Hemmings, 2006).

The discussion of authority in the educational realm has long been a controversial issue because of two reasons. One is in reference to the concept of authority itself. Authority has been referred to as a variety of social and philosophical functions, each of which is related and even problematic to education. In the western epistemological discussion of knowledge construction, some emancipatory paradigms fundamentally question the idea of institutionalized authority and the knowledge constructed under the impact of political and social power system (Kincheloe, 2008). Critical pedagogues reject the reductionist re-creation of knowledge proliferating in the educational world, and call for teachers' and students' deeper exploration of the social-historical and political dimensions of schooling (Freire, 1978). The second reason lies in the historically dialogical contradiction between the general education aim of liberating students' learning autonomy and imposing hierarchical controls over them (Franklin, 1986; Tirri, 1999). Disputed or not, the topic of authoritative relationship between the two ends of daily educational practices- the teacher and the learner, inspired the conduction of this study because of its universal, observable existence in the classrooms across the world.

Although they expressed no objection towards the Weberian understanding of authority as legitimate power, Dornbusch and Scott (1975) shifted their focus from the traditionally-valued concept of subordinate relation to a critical evaluation of the norms and beliefs shared by both parties of the authoritative relation. Their theoretical framework was greatly influenced by Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939)'s book *Management and the Worker*. Dornbusch and Scott (1975) argued that some patterns of human interactions are defined by planned institutional regulations such as laws, rules,

and policies; whereas some other interactions are not represented in the formal organizations, such as individual's spontaneous obedience due to sentimental or behavioral reasons.

In their study of evaluating the power of authority in institutional departments, Dornbusch and Scott (1975) defined formal authority as existing anyway despite the "characteristics of individual position occupants" (p.40). It originates from the historical and cultural values of the specific social groups, and more importantly, "it is available to all its occupants" (p.43). In an educational environment, a teacher's formal authority is guaranteed by both the institutional regulations and the historical binding relationships between the teacher and the taught. Additionally, the perception of authority figures may also be guided by specific cultural values, based on which a student may trust the teacher solely because of his/her "position" as a teacher (Raven & French, 1958). At the informal level of authority, Dornbusch and Scott (1975) maintained that "it is based on the personal characteristics or resources of an individual" (p.43). That is to say, an individual teacher's personal "features", such as his/her natural and nurtured characteristics may also play a role in gaining students' consent and loyalty.

Formal authority is more stable and constant since it is attached to the position in a specific organization. In the educational circumstance, it is the teacher's legitimacy as on a teaching position. However, Dunbar and Taylor (1982) addressed formal authority as incompetent, because it would only ensure students' minimum level of performance. In some cases, if the standards are raised, students may also present resistance or objection to formal authority. As a result, the development of informal authority is more decisive in solidifying the authoritative relationships between teacher and student.

Combined together, the two legitimate domains of formal and informal authority are perceived by students in the learning process as a mutual-complementary and mutual-influential dynamic. This dynamic can also be modified by specific ideological values embedded in varied historical and cultural circumstances where the teaching-learning process takes place (Gumbert, 1981).

Dimensions of Authority in Teaching Process

The maintenance of authoritative relationships can be analyzed from two distinct but interwoven dimensions. One is the potentiality of communication.



Friedrich (1958) argued that although the clarification of the authorized position is not always required, the proper communication of this authoritative relationship is necessary. By proper communication, Friedrich meant mutual agreement rather than single-side obedience. In the process of teaching, the construction of a well-communicated teacher-student relationship will enhance teacher's perceived figure as authority, which in return brings in more trust and credibility in the teaching-learning process.

The second dimension of a supportive authoritative relationship lies in the consistency of consent and content. The individual participant must understand the directives as consistent with the organizational goals, compatible with their own interest, and achievable both physically and mentally (Barnard, 1950). Buzzelli and Johnson (2001) illustrated this dimension of authoritative relationship in the teaching process as the teachers obtain the ability to design appropriate knowledge structure that not only accomplishing the educational goals, but also fulfill students' individual needs for learning.

Both the communication and content dimensions of teacher authority can be reflected in the pre-service and in-service teacher training practices. They can be revealed and measured through the perceived features an individual teacher's presents in the classroom (Arum, 2010).

Cultural Impact on the Perception of Teacher Authority

In a comparison study of attitudes toward institutional authority among English and Australian college students, results have indicated that in contrast to their Australian counterparts, English students had a stronger favor towards institutional authority represented by police, army, lawyer, and teacher. The significant differences were found to be coping with the traditionally emphasized value of hierarchical respect in England (Rigby, 1984). A more extensive study was conducted in seven countries/areas to investigate students' perception of "good" and "poor" lecturers. With the question of examining similarities of perceived teachers' effectiveness in different settings, the researchers have found clustered agreement upon valuable criteria for good lecturers sharing not only by countries geographically close to each other (such as Australian and New Zealand), but also by countries influenced by common cultural belief (such as China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan; Forest, 1998). As noted by Laupa (2005), social context, together with the traits of authority figure and the

types of command, are the most important factors that would impact individual's perceived power of authority.

Among studies on comparisons of Chinese and American people's perceptions of authority figures, Zhang (1996) found that Chinese children between five to 13 years old were more obedient to parental authority than their American peers. Another study focusing on students from Korean, Japanese, and America indicated that Asian students tend to weigh authority attribute very differently to their American peers during the classroom learning process (Kim, 1998). Some studies also showed an age-oriented change of prioritized elements in students' perception of teacher authority such as knowledge superiority and social position (Yau & Metzger, 2008). However, there have been few studies focusing on the cross-cultural comparison of teacher-student authoritative relationship in higher-level educational institutions, at which stage students mostly grow into adulthood and their valued criteria for authority figure is shifted due to the accumulating length of staying in a specific educational system, and the formation of their ontological and epistemological orientations. Additionally, there has been little empirical investigation on both Chinese and American college students' weighted perception of formal and informal authority.

Method

Participant

The sample consisted of 109 Chinese undergraduate students (Male= 31; Female= 78) and 84 American undergraduate students (Male= 47; Female=37). The average age of the Chinese sample was 19.5 years ($SD= 0.5$), and the average age of the American sample was 19.1 years ($SD=1.2$). Under the approval at both universities' administrative offices, participants completed the ACIA survey. Both universities are located in suburb areas of two medium-sized Chinese and American cities, which at the most extent ensure the similar range of the socio-economic status of respondents.

Instrument

ACIA was designed to assess college students' perception of instructor authority, including students' weighted preference of formal or informal authority, their valued instructors' professional competence (communication skills; content knowledge) at the informal authority level, and the relation between instructors' perceived demographic features and power of authority.

For this current study, ACIA consisted of three

sections measuring the authoritative relationship between college students and their instructors. Section 1 contains one expression (Item 11; named Formal Authority in data analysis) focusing on respondents' perception of legitimate formal instructor authority. Section 2 consisted of ten items concerning the perceived two dimensions of informal instructor authority. Item 1 through Item 4 (named IFA- communication) measured the value of communication skills in instructors' perceived power of informal authority, and Item 5 through Item 10 (named IFA- content) focused on the appropriateness of content knowledge taught by the instructors and its impact on instructors' perceived informal authority. Items in both Section 1 and Section 2 were formatted as statements inquiring for respondents' appropriate degree of agreement at five levels ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Respondents were asked to choose one of the best instructors they had during the college study and evaluate this person according to the above items. Section 3 listed three statements (Item 13 to Item 15) concerning respondents' perception of the demographic information of the specific instructor they chose to reflect on. Item 12 was created as filter item to screen out respondents without serious attitudes while responding to the scale. The full version of ACIA can be found in the appendix.

Validity and Reliability of ACIA

ACIA was developed with the method of simultaneous bilingual scale design (Wang, 2004). It was initially developed in English and Chinese at the same time. Every effort was made to ensure that the original meaning intended for each item was carefully conveyed in both language versions. Two bilingual researchers back translated the Chinese version into English, and the English version into Chinese.

The translated versions were compared with original versions and discrepancies were thoroughly discussed and resolved by joint agreement. Content validity of the final version of ACIA was confirmed by a group of experts from both countries in the field of educational psychology. Coefficient alpha was adopted to assess the reliability of the scale with the total sample size of 187 students (Chinese=105, Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$; American= 82, Cronbach's $\alpha = .66$) with their valid returned survey. Since the last three items only concerned perceived instructors' demographic features rather than respondents' attitudes towards their authority power, and these items were not included only in the final stage of cross-cultural comparison.

Table 1
ACIA Reliability

	Country		Overall
	China	America	
N of valid cases	105	82	187
Cronbach's α	.694	.662	.645

Note. Number of item=11

Inter-factor correlation was examined among three factors of Formal Authority (FA), Informal Authority-communication (IFA-communication), and Informal Authority- content (IFA-content). The significant low correlation among the three factors indicated that the theoretical framework of the scale had a satisfactory distinctive power of measuring corresponding features of respondents' perceived instructor authority.

Results

Student's Overall Response

Respondents' overall responses to ACIA were reported at both item level and formal-informal authority factor level, as shown in Table 3. Two sets of paired t-tests were conducted at formal-informal authority level and IFA-communication and IFA-content level, to see overall students' preferred perception of authority dimension while considering a specific instructor as an authority figure. The paired t-test of respondents' perception of formal authority ($M= 4.20$, $SD=.85$) and informal authority ($M=3.94$, $SD=.32$) was significantly different from each other, $t(186) = 4.14$, $p=.000$ (2-tailed).

The mean difference between respondents' perceived formal authority and informal authority was .26, suggesting that for overall college students from the two countries; the authoritative relation between their instructors and them is mostly established by the position-attached legitimacy endowed to the instructors during the teaching-learning process. The paired t-test of respondents' scores in two dimensions of informal authority- instructors' communication skills and competence to teach appropriate content knowledge indicated that students' perceived two dimensions of informal authority were not significantly different from each other, $t(186)=.91$, $p=.36$ (2-tailed).

This result suggested that for overall college students in the two countries, their perceived instructors' informal authority cannot be well-distinguished by the theoretically-established two dimensions of instructors' professional competence.



Differences between Two Countries

The overall means and standard deviations obtained from the completion of the survey by both Chinese college student sample and American college students sample were compared. No significant difference between two countries was found for the overall perception of teacher authority, $t(185) = .642, p = .522$ (2-tailed).

A further analysis of between country differences on subcategorized dimensions of perceived authority was conducted according to the formal/informal and IFA-communication/IFA-content distinctions. The result is shown in Table 2. It is revealed that no between-country differences were detected for respondents' perceived formal, informal, and two specific dimensions of informal instructor authority. The results indicated that Chinese and American college students shared a similar perception pattern while seeing their instructors as authority figures.

Table 2

T-test of ACIA Country Differences

Factor	China (N=105)		America(N=82)		<i>t</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
FA	4.22	.82	4.18	.87	2.60
IFA	3.92	.47	3.96	.40	-.727
IFA-com.	3.95	.56	3.86	.49	1.19
IFA-content	3.88	.51	4.03	.46	-1.96

Note. *df* = 185 for all the variables

The last three items of the survey concerned about the impact of instructors' perceived demographic features such as gender, and professional ranking on respondents' perception of authority power. Results show that instructor's gender has no play in students' perceived authority power for the overall sample. Almost half to half students chose female or male instructors as the more authorized ones. Almost three quarters of the more authorized instructors perceived by Chinese students aged under 35, while about half of American students preferred more authoritative instructors are in their middle-ages between 36 to 55. A

chi-square test was performed to examine the relation between students' country of origin and the proportion distribution of the perceived instructors' age range. The relation was significant with $X^2(3, N = 187) = 20.02, p < 0.01$.

Seventy percent of American students knew or assumed their favorite instructors as Associate Professor and more than a quarter of them considered more authoritative instructor as obtaining a professor ranking level the majority Chinese students did not care much of their instructors' professional rankings.

The chi square test result for the relation between students' country of origin and perceived instructor's professional ranking was $X^2(3, N = 187) = 108.7, p < 0.01$. This situation is consistent with the common sense that the older the instructors are, the higher their professional rankings are likely to be.

Discussion

This study is an explorative investigation of college students' perception of instructor authority in two culturally and ideologically differentiated countries. A theoretically-guided scale: The Attitude towards College Instructor Authority (ACIA) were designed to measure college instructors' perceived values of formal/informal authority as well as the weighted role of their two performed dimensions of professional competence.

The results indicated that for overall students, they tend to respect their instructors as authority figures more based on instructors' endowed authority position. In other words, students from both countries would agree upon the authoritative relationship disregarding their personal attitudes and relation with their instructors. The reasons possibly lies in that college students have already entered the stage of adulthood, and their rationalized sense of hierarchy, no matter in terms of social capitals or academic capitals, have already formed. As a result, their emotional and perceptual level of attitudes towards academic authority would not impact too much on the socially established authority structure in the learning process. This result also echoes to previous findings, indicating that the respect of institutional authority plays an important role in the development process of an individuals' social-communicative competence (Arum, 2010; Rigby, 1984). It would be valuable if the similar explorative study is conducted with secondary or elementary level of students, and if the weighted formal/informal authority domains are compared across different human developmental stages.

No between-country differences were detected at the perceived formal/informal instructor authority for college students in China and the U.S. That is to say, cultural and ideological differences do not perform as a main contributive factor in cross-cultural teacher-taught relationships, as assumed and worried by some international educators. This result further confirms that human beings as one species in the world, though appear in various ways under the impact of different social, cultural codes, they share more similarities than distinctions, especially in the way of how a developing individual being academically merged into the society she/he is living in- respecting experience,

obey overt/convert laws is always one important theme of bringing up a child into an intellectual adult.

The inquiry of the association between college instructors' perceived gender, age, professional ranking and their authoritative relation with students has confirmed the previous finding of cross-cultural differences between Chinese and American students at the perception of informal authority level. The majorities of Chinese students' perceived more authoritative instructors are or being perceived as aged ten years younger than their American peers. This is likely because that younger instructor shares more similarities with students based on the smaller age difference as well as more overlapped experience. The younger the instructors are, the better they would be communicating well with students. However, in the American case, the older the instructors are, the more solid content knowledge they would obtain to establish a stronger authoritative relation. The preference of higher professional rankings for American students is also consistent with the age differences.

The findings of the present study provide the educational researchers and classroom teachers a new perspective into the cultural-specified perception of authority in the higher education institutions by drawing a sample from two culturally, linguistically, and historically different countries of China and the United States. The shared similarities and the distinguished specialties may bring some insights on how to build up an effective teacher-student relation in a diverse teaching environment. The generality of this finding still needs to be investigated with a bigger and diverse sample. In addition, the reliability and validity of the instrument are in need of further examination as well.

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Appendix.

The Attitude towards College Instructor Authority Survey

Participant Information:

Name Initials First: Last: Date of Birth Month: Date: Gender: Male Female
 College Status: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate Student

<I> Please choose one of the best instructors you have had so far in your college study experience, and evaluate him/her according to the following statements. Please select the most appropriate level of agreement to the statements ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1 This instructor provides me a model of exemplary behavior to follow.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
2 I prefer to call this instructor by his/her name instead of a title, such as "Professor X" or "Mr. X".	①	②	③	④ ⑤
3. This instructor shows little concern for the communication with individual student either in or out of the classroom.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
4 This instructor rarely allows students to challenge his/her judgments, even on questions that are really a matter of opinion.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
5 I am interested in the contents this instructor teaches us in class, and I think the information s/he passes on is valuable.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
6 This lecturer organizes and presents his/her teaching clearly in class.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
7 There are enough appropriately arranged group work/discussions in this instructor's class.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
8 The workload, both in and out of class, is comparatively heavier in this instructor's course than in other courses.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
9 This instructor decides the method and criteria of the assessment, which can properly examine the emphasized content taught in class.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
10 The evaluation feedback (grades/comments) provided by this instructor is prompt and valuable to me.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
11 I think this instructor should be respected and appreciated anyway, even if we have some disagreement, because it's the students' obligation to look up to their instructors.	①	②	③	④ ⑤
12 This item is predetermined for the purpose of data analysis; please respond to this item by marking 5 (strongly agree).	①	②	③	④ ⑤

II> Please response to the following questions according to your perceived information of the instructor you chose for section <I>:

- 13 This instructor is a Female Male
 14 This instructor looks like (or actually is) aged between 25-35 36-45 46-55 56-65
 15 This instructor's academic title is Lecturer Associate Professor Professor I don't know

Thank you for participating this survey!!