

ADVISOR-ADVISEE THREE: GRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF VERBAL AGGRESSION, CREDIBILITY, AND CONFLICT STYLES IN THE ADVISING RELATIONSHIP

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The current study looked at the relation between advisee perceptions of advisor's verbal aggression, credibility, and conflict styles. Participants were 153 graduate students who reported their perceptions concerning their advisor. First, the study found that advisee perceptions of their advisor's credibility (competence, caring/goodwill, & trustworthiness) was positively related to advisee perceptions of advisor mentoring and an advisor's use of solution-oriented conflict management strategies. Second, advisee perceptions of their advisor's trustworthiness were positively related to the advisee's perceptions of advisor use of nonconfrontational conflict management strategies. Last, advisees' perceptions of advisor competence were positively related to advisor use of control-oriented conflict management strategies.

It has been noted that developmental academic advising tends to happen at the graduate level, because advisors are often viewed as mentors for graduate students (Crookston, 1972). The graduate advisor-advisee relationship is an important and essential part of graduate education (Luna & Cullen, 1998). Research has shown that the graduate advisor can have a huge influence on the development and outcome of the graduate student's professional and personal goals (Ulku-Steiner, Kinlaw, & Kurtz-Costes, 2000). The present study is to further elaborate on other dimensions of the advisor-advisee communication relationship by examining verbal aggression and conflict management styles. In addition, the study examined advisee perceptions of source credibility. Specifi-

cally, the study investigated the relationships between the three source credibility subscales (competence, caring/goodwill, & trustworthiness) and mentoring, verbal aggression, and conflict management strategies. Few studies have investigated how organizational variables and conflict styles may be present in advisor-advisee relationships. Understanding the complexities of the graduate advisor-advisee relationship is important because these relationships can be rewarding for both individuals involved. For example, Cronan-Hillix, Gensheimer, Cronan-Hillix, and Davidson (1986) discovered that graduate students who had favorable mentors in graduate school had more publications, more conference papers, more first-authored papers, and were more productive

after graduate school when compared to those graduate students who did not have a favorable mentor during their program. All in all, the graduate advisor can influence the advisee's perception of graduate school, learning, progress, and possibly future success.

Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) found that the extent to which advisees feel they are being mentored was positively related to advisee's perceptions of their advisor's communication competence and perceived credibility. Also, Wrench and Punyanunt found that advisor immediacy was positively related to advisee perceptions of advisor competence, caring/goodwill, trustworthiness, and communication competence. This study reported that advisees perceive that they cognitively learned more and had more effective advisor-advisee relationships with more immediate advisors. In addition, Wrench and Punyanunt-Carter (2005) found a negative impact of verbal aggression in the advisor-advisee relationship on perceptions on student affect and source credibility. Moreover, results indicated the positive influence of humor in the advisor-advisee relationship on perceptions on student affect and source credibility. The objective of this study was to further understand certain communication variables present in the advisor-advisee relationship, such as verbal aggression and conflict styles.

Verbal aggression. Infante and Wigley (1986) defined verbal aggression as a message behavior that attacks a person's self-concept in order to bring psychological pain. Verbal aggression is related to negative communication behaviors

(Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994). Infante and Gorden (1985) found that aggression affects individual's communication variables. Verbal aggression can occur in the manner of blame, rejection, disconfirmation, negative comparison, and sometimes sexual harassment (Infante, 1995). The outcome of verbally aggressive messages can include: embarrassment, anger, humility, and/or depression (Infante, 1995). In the educational setting, researchers have found that verbal aggression is related to negative student perceptions (Myers, 1998). Myers and Rocca (2000) found that perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness is related to lower levels of student motivation. However, researchers have not explored the role of verbal aggression in the advisor-advisee relationship. Because verbal aggressive messages can be damaging to the relationship, it might be beneficial to explore the impact of verbal aggression. In addition, it would be beneficial to understand how verbal aggression may impact perceptions of conflict in a relationship.

Conflict. Within any type of interpersonal relationship, a certain amount of conflict will occur (Lulofs & Cahn, 2000). Putnam and Wilson (1982) created a three-dimension measurement scheme that examined non-confrontational oriented (avoidant), solution-oriented (integrative), and control-oriented (distributive) conflict management strategies. *Avoidant* (non-confrontational) strategies include the use of behaviors that reject the occurrence of conflict by shifting the focus of conversation away from the current conflict (Canary & Spitzberg, 1990). *Integrative* (solution-oriented) strategies include behaviors that are

viewed as cooperative and prosocial (Canary & Spitzberg, 1990). *Distributive* (control) strategies include the use of verbal statements that are mainly competitive and emphasize on more personal rather than relational goals (Canary & Spitzberg, 1990). Canary and Spitzberg (1990) have found that the use of integrative strategies is more appropriate and effective than either distributive or avoidant conflict strategies. These conflict strategies may affect perceptions of source credibility.

Credibility. Credibility or ethos was originally a construct advanced by Aristotle based on the early thinking of Corax and Tisius. Aristotle saw credibility consisting of three primary factors: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Competence is the extent that an individual truly knows what he or she is discussing. The second component of credibility is trustworthiness, which is the degree to which one individual perceives another person as being honest. The final component of credibility, goodwill, is the perceived caring that a receiver sees in a source. Out of all of these, goodwill may be the most important aspect of ethos (McCroskey, 1998).

Based on these previous research studies, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: There are relationships between the three credibility subscales (competence, caring/goodwill, & trustworthiness) and mentoring, verbal aggression, and conflict management strategy.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 84 (54.9%) women, 66 (43.1%) men, and 3 (2%) non-responding people for a total of 153 participants. The mean age of the sample was 32.49 ($SD = 8.83$). Other demographic variables were also gathered. The sample consisted of 9 (5.9%) first year masters students in a two year program, 4 (2.6%) first year masters students in a one year program, 24 (15.7%) second year masters students in a two year program, 21 (13.7%) first year doctoral students, 22 (14.4%) second year doctoral students, 18 (11.8%) third year doctoral students, 6 (3.9%) fourth year doctoral students, 40 (26.1%) all but dissertation, and 7 (4.6%) of the participants had completed their degrees within the last year and still were able to recall their relationship with their advisors.

Participants in this study came from a variety of academic fields: 10 (6.5%) arts, 16 (10.5%) business, 37 (24.2%) communication, 4 (2.6%) education, 6 (3.9%) English, 14 (9.2%) engineering, 4 (2.6%) physical sciences, 33 (21.6%) social sciences, and 23 (15%) other academic areas with six participants not responding to the question. Overall, our population was quite diverse, which allowed for a greater understanding of the advisor-advisee communication process.

Procedures

Participants were graduate students from various American graduate schools who were contacted through electronic means. Specifically, a number of Internet sites and Listservs that have graduate student participants were targeted (e.g., CRTNET, ICA-Net, etc*). When students linked to the website, they were given infor-

mation on Human Subjects, and were then prompted to proceed to the actual survey. Beyond providing an optional e-mail address, all responses were anonymous. 95% of those participating in the study did leave their e-mail address. In order to insure the privacy of the participants, geographic distribution was not collected.

Measures

Verbal Aggressiveness Scale. The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986) was used to measure trait verbal aggression. It contains 25-point scale Likert-type items ranging from 1 (almost never true) to 5 (almost always true). This study employed the 10-item shortened version of the Verbal Aggressiveness scale. Scores on the revised version of the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale can range from 10-50. The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale had an alpha reliability of .89 ($M = 18.00$, $SD = 6.58$).

Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument. The Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) was created by Putnam and Wilson (1982) to examine conflict within organizational settings. Because the relationships between advisees and their advisors generally take on a superior-subordinate relationship, the scale was revised with the word "advisor" to measure an advisor's conflict management style. In previous research (Downs, 1994) found the OCCI to be both a highly reliable and valid construct for measuring conflict within organizations. There are basic sub-dimensions within the OCCI: non-confrontational, solution-oriented, and control conflict management strategies. There are

twelve items for the non-confrontational strategies, 11 items for solution-oriented strategies, and seven items for control strategies. An example of a non-confrontational strategy from the OCCI is "I shy away from topics that are sources of disputes," which was recoded in the current study to read "My advisor shies away from topics that are sources of disputes." An example of a solution-oriented strategy from the OCCI is "I blend my ideas with others to create new alternatives for resolving a conflict," which was recoded in the current study to read "My advisor blends her or his ideas with others to create new alternatives for resolving a conflict." An example of a control-oriented strategy from the OCCI is "I assert my opinion forcefully," which was recoded in the current study to read "My advisor asserts her or his opinion forcefully." Each item is measured by a Likert type scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree." The alpha coefficients found in this study are as follows: non-confrontational .87 ($M = 27.00$, $SD = 7.70$); solution-oriented .90 ($M = 35.85$, $SD = 8.25$); and control .66 ($M = 20.50$, $SD = 4.79$).

Graduate Student Mentoring Scale. The Graduate Student Mentoring Scale was developed by Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) and is based on Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos, and Rouner's (1989) Mentoring and Communication Support Scale, which is a means for assessing a superior's ability to mentor a subordinate in a corporate organization. The scale consists of ten Likert type items with a range from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree." Scores on the Graduate Student Mentoring Scale can

range from 10-50. The Graduate Student Mentoring Scale in this study had an alpha reliability of .94 ($M = 34.08$, $SD = 9.57$).

Credibility Measurement. The Credibility Measure (McCroskey & Teven, 1999) was used to examine students' feelings and perceptions of a teacher's competence, trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill. The scale in this study asked participants to give their perceptions of their advisors' credibility. Item measures were bi-polar with a range from one to seven. The alpha reliabilities found in this study were: competence .84 ($M = 36.33$, $SD = 6.52$); trustworthiness .92 ($M = 31.46$, $SD = 8.95$); and caring/goodwill .93 ($M = 35.28$, $SD = 8.88$).

Results

The goal of this study was to examine the relations between the three credibility subscales (competence, caring/goodwill, & trustworthiness) and mentoring, verbal aggression, and conflict management strategy (nonconfrontational, solution oriented, & control oriented). According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), the most parsimonious test for analyzing the relationship between two sets of variables is the canonical correlation. In this case, we had one set of variables measuring communication behaviors (mentoring, verbal aggression, & conflict management strategies) and a second set of variables measuring credibility. A canonical correlation was calculated using the communication variables as the predictors of credibility. Using Wilks' Λ , the overall model was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .27$, $F(15, 392.40) = 15.78$, $p < .0005$, which indicates that the three variates are signif-

icantly associated by the canonical correlation. All three canonical correlations were found to be significant in this study: Canonical Correlation 1, Wilks' $\Lambda = .27$, $F(15, 392.40) = 15.78$, $p < .0005$, $r_c = .78$; Canonical Correlation 2, Wilks' $\Lambda = .71$, $F(8, 286) = 6.53$, $p < .0005$, $r_c = .46$; and Canonical Correlation 3, Wilks' $\Lambda = .94$, $F(3, 144) = 4.95$, $p < .05$, $r_c = .31$. The first variate accounted for approximately 60.84% of the variance in the dependent variable, the second variate accounted for approximately 21.16% of the variance in the dependent variable, and the third variate accounted for approximately 9.61% of the variance in the dependent variable (see Table 1).

Using structure equation modeling, the relationships were examined between credibility (a latent variable with three indicators: competence, caring/goodwill, & trustworthiness), verbal aggression, mentoring, and an advisor's conflict management style (a latent variable with three indicators: nonconfrontational, solution oriented, & control oriented). The hypothesized model presented in Figure 1 was not a good fit initially. For this reason, the variable mentoring was dropped from the final analysis. Circles represent latent variables, rectangles represent measured variables. Absence of a line connecting variables implies lack of a hypothesized relationship. Results from the revised model indicated that the proposed structural model fit the data quite well, $\chi^2(12, N = 151) = 46.17$, $p < .0005$. All the goodness-of-fit indices far exceeded the recommended levels: normed fit index (NFI) = .90, comparative fit index (CFI) = .92, and incremental index of fit

Table 1
Canonical Correlation Analysis

Variables	Variate One	Variate Two	Variate Three
Credibility			
Competence	.70	-.17	.70
Caring/Goodwill	.98	-.06	-.19
Trustworthiness	.87	.44	.23
Verbal Aggression	-.82	-.54	.00
Mentoring	.86	-.42	-.04
Conflict Management			
Nonconfrontational	-.31	.27	-.72
Solution Oriented	.65	.08	.03
Control Oriented	-.42	-.08	.46

(IFI) = .92. All of the indices of fit were over the .90 mark, which according to Byrne (2001) indicates that the model proposed is a good fit. The final structural equation model can be seen in Figure 2.

Discussion

The results reported in this study revealed that there are relationships between the three credibility subscales (competence, caring/goodwill, & trustworthiness) and mentoring, verbal aggression, and conflict management strategy. The dimensions of credibility are related to both mentoring and the solution oriented type of conflict management. In other words, advisee perceptions of their advisor's credibility (competence, caring/goodwill, & trustworthiness) were positively related to advisee perceptions of advisor mentoring and an advisor's use

of solution-oriented conflict management strategies. Thus, advisors can increase their credibility by using mentoring strategies and solving conflict in a cooperative and prosocial manner. Results revealed that trustworthiness was related to the non-confrontational type of conflict management. Non-confrontational types of conflict strategies are ones that alter or adjust the communication behavior in an effort to avoid the conflict. This implies that advisees view their advisors as more honest when those advisors use such strategies to avoid conflict. In turn, the non-confrontational conflict strategies can result in more satisfactory relationships. Similarly, Luna and Cullen (1998) found that a supportive and beneficial advisor affects the time it takes to complete a dissertation. Moreover, the more supportive and non-confrontational an advisor is, the more likely the advisee will work to complete

their degree. Last, competence was related to the control oriented type of conflict management. In other words, advisees perceive their advisor as being more competently when their advisor focuses on communication behaviors that emphasize on personal goals rather than relational goals. Advisors might make more statements that are mainly competitive in order to increase perceptions of competence. Rubin, Martin, Bruning, and Powers, (1993) discovered that there was a relationship between perceptions of competence and perceptions of relationship satisfaction. Hence, in order to have a satisfying relationship, it is important that advisors communicate in a competent manner. The results also showed that verbal aggression was negatively related to source credibility. Previous research supports the fact that verbal aggression is related to negative perceptions (Martin, Weber, & Burant, 1997). This study helps to reconfirm the negative value of verbal aggression on perceptions of credibility. For that reason, advisors should avoid being verbally aggressive with their advisees. Overall, verbal aggression, conflict style, mentoring, and credibility have an influence on the advisee-advisor relationship. However, the magnitude of this influence and advisor-advisee relationships is not that large considering the amount of variance actually accounted for. In other words, advisors' verbal aggression and conflict style impact advisees' perceptions of source credibility and mentoring, but it is clearly not the most important or only variable. Nevertheless, this study offers an insight on the importance of these variables in the advisor-advisee relationship.

Future avenues of research include other types of conflict-management strategies, such as avoidance or direct assertion. Also, future studies should look at interpersonal communication variables, such as communication competence and communication apprehension, and how these variables may impact perceptions of satisfaction. Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) have illustrated how instructional communication variables impact perceptions of the advisor. Thus, further studies should look at instructional communication variables and other variables that could possibly impact the advisor-advisee relationship.

It is important to note that graduate advisor-advisee studies like this one are essential, because of the long lasting implications. Better-trained graduate students will ultimately create better colleagues and junior faculty members. New faculty members are the sustenance of any academic department and organization. If graduate students are not properly mentored, they may not function as effectively as professors in a college or university setting. Overall, graduate students are the future of their fields, and unless graduate students are properly mentored the chances that they will become disgruntled and leave the field increases. Mentoring helps in faculty retention where other programs tend to fail. This study serves as an initial analysis of this very important relationship between the advisor and the advisee.

Figure 1
Preliminary Structural Equation Model

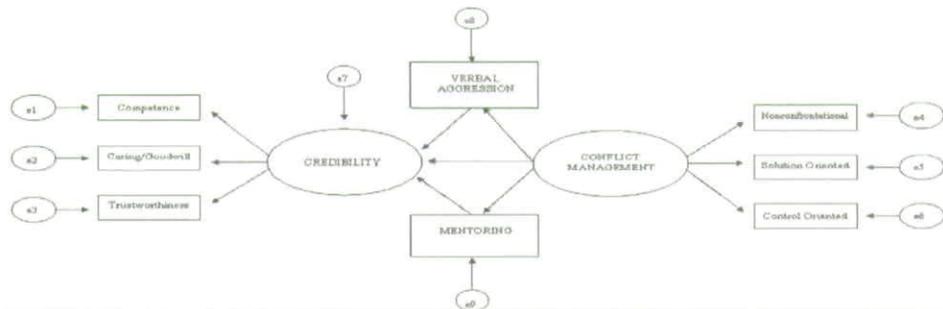
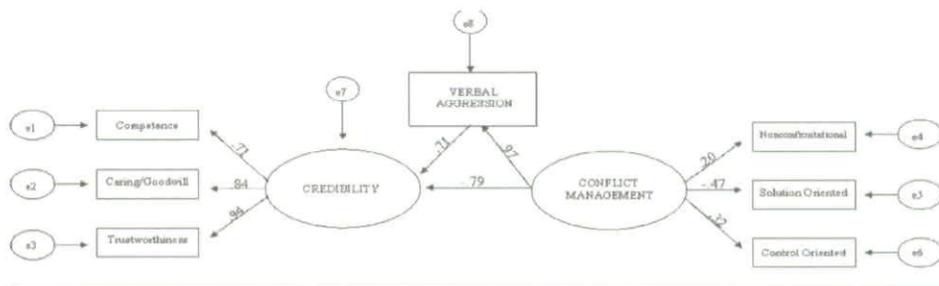


Figure 2
Structural Equation Model



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