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Instructors' communicator style in the college classroom: Perceptions of African American and European American students

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INSTRUCTORS' COMMUNICATOR STYLE IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM:
PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN AMERICAN
STUDENTS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
Angela Adair
September 2002

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Approved by:



Kevin G. Lamúde, Chair, Communication

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ABSTRACT

The paper concerns instructors' perceived communicator style in the college classroom with African American and European American students. Respondents were 146 undergraduates students enrolled in a variety of communication courses at a large Western university. Respondents completed the Norton (1978) Communicator Style instrument regarding their instructor in the previous class. Results indicated that (a) African American and European American students perceived similar instructor communicator attributes of contentious, dramatic, attentive, dominant, and relaxed; (b) European American perceive instructor communicator style attributes of openness, animated, precise, friendly and impression leaving differently than African American students. Cultural symbols and appropriateness are possible explanation for differences in perceived instructor style of communication in the college classroom. Future research needs to explore the development of an intercultural communicator style measure, as well as the impact of instructor and student factors on the present findings.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide a foundation for rationale in this study through an examination of studies relevant to communicator style, specifically, research employing the Norton Communicator Style Measure. This review focuses upon selected research relevant to the study. The review is divided into the Problem statement, Communicator style Instrument validity research, communicator style research, and instructor communicator style research.

Problem Statement

The concept of communicator style has received a considerable amount of attention from Instructional communication researchers (Myers & Rocca, 2000; Richmond & Roach, 1992). It should be no surprise that how college instructors present themselves in the classroom has an impact on student learning. Consequently, most research has focused on the relationship between the communicator style of the instructor and relevant instructor antecedents and on task learning outcomes. Little, if any research has focused on characteristics of the student that may influence their perceptions of communicator style attributes of the instructor. The present study is

exploratory and focuses on differences in perception of instructor communicator style as a function of student ethnicity.

Communicator Style Instrument Validity Research

The foundation of the Norton Communicator Style instrument is stipulated to include communication attributes which reflect the way an individual "verbally and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered or understood" (Norton, 1978, p. 99).

An instructor's communicator style can be comprised of any combination of ten communicative attributes: impression leaving, contentious, open, dramatic, dominant, precise, relaxed, friendly, attentive, and animated (Norton, 1978, 1984). Impression leaving communicators have a memorable style, which is reflected through their affinitive expressiveness and use of information-seeking behaviors. Contentious individuals are highly argumentative and may get somewhat hostile, quarrelsome, or belligerent. Open communicators are extroverted, unreserved, and straightforward. They are able to directly communicate their thoughts or emotions. Dramatic communicators use stylistic devices (e.g., exaggerations,

rhythm, stories) to underscore content. Dominant communicators "take charge" of the situation by talking louder, and more frequently than others with fewer interruptions; are less compliant, and initiate more requests. They are assertive and forceful in their communication. Precise communicators try to be strictly accurate, using well-defined arguments and specific proof or evidence to clarify their expressions. Relaxed communicators are anxiety-free and remain calm and at ease when engaged in communication with others. Friendly people recognize others in a positive way and are generally considered to be kind and caring. Attentive communicators are alert and listen with empathy. They appear as good listeners who are concerned with understanding others. Animated communicators use eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body movement, and posture to exaggerate content. Unlike dramatic communicators, animated communicators are physically, rather than verbally and vocally active.

In Norton's study, two independent samples are conducted, the first with 80 subjects and 102 items and the second with 1,086 subjects. Fifty-nine items are analyzed in terms of (1) how the variables cluster, (2) what dimensionality is embedded in the structure of inter-

correlations, and (3) which variables best predict communicator image.

The first study in this research served two purposes. First, strong items for each variable were identified so that they would be used for the measure in Study 2. Second, analysis of the inter-correlations among 10 variables provided the first empirical estimators concerning the structure of the data set in terms of clustering, dimensionality and predictors.

Using the three criteria in Study 1, five clusters were formed: cluster 1, impression leaving and communicator image; cluster 2, dramatic and animated; cluster 3, attentive, friendly, and open; cluster 4, dominant and contentious; and cluster 5, relaxed.

In Study 1 Norton indicates at least two dimensions appear to be part of the infrastructure of the set. Both dimensions are anchored at one end by the relaxed variable. At the other end, two distinct communicative style sets are suggested. For dimension 1, active listening seems to be the defining component; for dimension 2, an active sending of messages seems to be the defining component.

Finally, no clear set of best predictors emerged. Seven of the nine independent variables were suggested by

Norton as possible strong predictors of communicator image.

In Study 2, Norton replicated the broad findings from Study 1 to a larger sample (1, 086 students). Essentially, the findings in Study 1 were confirmed. First, the variables cluster approximately the same way in both studies. Second, the same kind of dimensionality is present in both data sets. Third, the "best predictors" were similar.

In summarizing, Norton indicated that the Communicator style Instrument is structurally reliable because it remains stable across samples and the variables are internally consistent.

Norton cites internal reliability as a function of the number of items in a test and the range of the scale. The internal reliabilities, using 500 cases out of the 1,086 to check the coefficients on a four point scale, are: friendly (.37), animated (.56), attentive (.57), contentious (.65), dramatic (.68), impression leaving (.69), relaxed (.71), communicator image (.72), and dominant (.82). In conclusion, Norton states the reliabilities are good (except for friendly) given the small number of items and short scale range.

In summary, Norton suggests two of the three kinds of validity were focused upon: construct and content validity. The procedures for specifying the domain of communicator style have been multiple. In general, two arguments have been made: (1) the content which has been sampled is important to the notion of communicator style, and (2) the content has been adequately cast in the form of self-report test items.

Miller (1977) replicated and extended a previous study by Norton and Miller (1975). Essentially, Norton and Miller found that subjects reporting low communicator style test scores do not perceive differences between their communicator style and that of high-scoring subjects upon completing a joint task requiring social interactions. In contrast, subjects with high communicator style test scores do report perceiving significant differences. Norton and Miller posit two possible examples: either subjects with low scores did not see the differences, or they did see the differences, but chose not to acknowledge them (social desirability).

Miller suggests two presuppositions, both with some empirical base, underlie the research. First, the human communicator behaviors (styles) characterizing the way a person communicates correlate to the extent that they may

be thought of as a construct or set which has been labeled communicator style. Second, people have different abilities to perceive communicator dynamics.

In summary, Miller indicates that, based on the present data, the expectation is that high and middle scorers will report differences while low scorers will not. Future research should investigate how a person's communicator style relates to perception and understanding of another's (Miller, 1977, p. 112).

Lastly, Miller suggests that the results of any experimental study are as good as the measuring instrument, i.e., continued refinement of the Communicator Style Instrument is vital. In this study, only the dominance dimension of the instrument was employed although there is evidence to suggest that communicator style is a multi-dimensional construct. Future research must continue to develop the best possible measure if the full impact of communicator style in human interactions is to be realized.

Communicator Style Research

The second segment of his review of the literature examines Communicator Style research employing the Norton

Communicator style Instrument that is relevant to the present investigation.

Communicator style is assumed to be different from personality in that it can be deliberately manipulated by the communicator (Norton & Nussbaum, 1980). Communicator style research is grounded largely in the theoretical rationale of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967), evolving from a concern to develop a theory centered around interpersonal communication styles (Norton & Miller, 1975). Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967, p. 50) argue that "every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication." These authors explain further: "The report aspect of a message conveys information and is, therefore, synonymous in human communication with the content of the message. It may be about anything that is communicable regardless of whether the particular information is true or false, valid, invalid, or undecidable. The command aspect, on the other hand, refers to what sort of a message it is to taken as, and, therefore, ultimately to the relationship between the communicants" (pp.50-51). Norton's Communicator Style Instrument represents an effort to operationalize elements

of what Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson define as the "command' aspect of interpersonal communication.

Two primary lines of study have employed the Norton Communicator Style Instrument. One has focused upon teaching outcomes of detailed analysis of dimensions which comprise the style domain. The second line of study has focused upon the antecedents and interpersonal consequents of communicator style in a variety of contexts.

It should be no surprise that the communicator style of instructors in the classroom has an impact on student learning outcomes (Myers & Rocca, 2000). Researchers have established positive correlations between perceived instructor style and perceived instructor effectiveness. Effective instructors are considered to exemplify relaxed, friendly, dramatic and impression leaving communicator style attributes (Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Schroeder & Leber, 1993). College instructors use of attentive, relaxed, and friendly communicator style attributes are perceived as most desirable by college students whereas the contentious and dominant communicator style attributes are perceived by college students as being least desirable (Potter & Emanuel, 1990). A number of studies have found relaxed, impression leaving, friendly, open, dramatic, and attentive instructor

communicator attributes are all associated with students' perceptions of their behavioral and cognitive learning (Kearney & McCroskey, 1980; Nussbaum & Scott, 1980; Scott & Nussbaum, 1981).

Researchers have also noted a link between instructor communication traits and communicator style attributes in the college classroom. For instance, among college students, perceived instructor trait argumentativeness is positively related to perceived instructor assertiveness and responsiveness (Myers, 1998) as well as student motivation (Meyers & Rocca, 2000). In addition, among college students perceived instructor trait verbal aggressiveness is related to lower amounts of perceived instructor immediacy and homophily (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999) and lower amounts of student state motivation, affective learning and motivation (Roach, 1995). In sum, researchers have found several communication traits are associated with student outcomes and perceived style of communication of the instructor. However, little if any studies have examined antecedents of the student making perceptions of instructors' communicator style. With the increasing demographic diversity of college students in the U.S., the ethnic background of students reporting their instructor's communicator style is of increasing

importance and interest to the literature. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore whether students who are African American and European American differ in the perceived communicator style they report receiving from their instructors. To investigate this notion the following research question was posed:

RQ1: What are the perceived instructor communicator styles for African American and European American students?

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

This chapter contains specific information about the methods and procedures employed in this study. The chapter is divided into two sections: (1) respondents, and (2) Communicator Style Instrument.

Respondents

Respondents were 146 undergraduate college students (68 African American, 78 European American) enrolled in a variety of communication courses at a large Western university. The age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 54 ($M = 20.36, SD = 3.94$). Eighty-six of the respondents were female. Nine respondents were freshman, 22 respondents were sophomores, 51 were juniors, 46 were seniors, and eight respondents responded as "other."

Administration Procedures

The Communicator Style Measure

The 51-item Long Form measure asks respondents to report their perceptions of their instructors' communicator style. The researcher met with instructors and their students before classes began to explain the purpose of the research. The logistics of the research were explained, and the confidentiality of the evaluation

procedures was emphasized. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Questionnaire packets were prepared by the researcher (Appendix A) and distributed at scheduled class sessions. Respondents were instructed to fill out the questionnaires before the start of class session and return them to the front of the class. A box marked "Personal and Confidential" was left in the front of each classroom for this purpose.

The ten attributes in this study were the ten variables of the Communicator Style Instrument (Norton, 1978): contentious, open, impression leaving, dramatic, dominant, relaxed, friendly, attentive, animated, and communicator image. Definitions of these attributes are presented Chapter 1. Operationally, each communicator style attribute was defined as a rating on a five-point Likert scale, which indicated the degree to which a respondent perceived a written description of that attributes accurately characterizing a specified instructor. The measure scale ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with the statement.

The Communicator Style Instrument employed in this study was comprised of 51 items. Each of the first 9 attributes of communicator style was defined with 5 items.

The 10th, communicator image, was defined with 6. All items were randomly distributed in the instrument. A score on any given communicator style attribute was derived by summing across the items in that attribute.

After the respondent has read the summary description for each style attribute, he or she responded on the previously described five-point scale, indicating the degree to which the instructor was perceived as manifesting the particular communicator style characteristic. Participants completed the instrument in reference to the instructor of the course they attended immediately prior to the research session and were completing the scales based on their perceptions of their instructor. Data were gathered during the seventh week of the Spring quarter.

Norton (1978, p. 106) has suggested two ways to approach reliability in establishing and employing a multivariate construct. First, if the structure of the measure is stable across samples, situations, and contexts, regardless of the magnitude of the relationships, then the construct is reliable. Second, if the sub-constructs are internally consistent, a function of the number of items in a test and the range of the scale, then the researcher can have confidence in

classifying persons for experimental or correlational studies.

The present study's insufficient sample size constitutes an unacceptable level to assess the overall structural reliability of the communicator style instrument. However, it is important to note that the present study limited error variance in the measurement of stylistic characteristics by employing a large sample of items (5 items for each variable) and sufficient range of scale (5-point Likert scale). Moreover, given acceptance of the 10-communicator style attributes as defined by Norton, internal consistency can be assessed for each attribute with the data in hand.

In the present study, 10 communicator style variables were measured by 51 items from Norton's Communicator style Instrument. Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha was computed for each attribute for the 146 students in the present study. Interestingly, the reliabilities generally were higher than those reported by Norton (1978): Dominant (.72), dramatic (.82), contentious (.72), animated (.66), impression leaving (.73), relaxed (.68), attentive (.78), open (.72), friendly (.73), and communicator image (.82).

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

This chapter includes the statistical analysis and summary of the results.

Statistical Analysis

The purpose of the present study is to identify and describe perceived differences in instructor communicator style attributes as a function of student ethnicity utilizing the 51-item version of the Norton Communicator Style Instrument. In order to examine the significance of differences between respondents' ratings of their instructors communicator style a series of t-tests for mean differences were performed. To decrease the possibility of chance error, the maximum acceptable p value was reduced to $p < .01$.

Summary of Results

In reporting the 'perceptions-of-other communicator style results, respondents rated instructors' communicator style attributes with European American students significantly higher than African American students for five of the 10 measured attributes. Instructors' style of communication were not rated significantly higher for

African American students on any of the items. The t tests indicate European student ratings were significantly different on five styles of communication including: openness, animation, precision, friendly, and impression leaving. The results also show similar ratings by respondents for perceptions of contentious, dramatic, attentive, dominant, and relaxed communicator attributes of the instructor (see Appendix B).

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

This chapter includes limitations of the study, a discussion of conclusions and recommendations for future research concerning communicator style and ethnic background of students.

Limitations of the Study

Before discussing the results of the present study, some reflections on its limitations are necessary. The limitations of this study are inherent in the ex post facto character of this research.

Ex post facto research has three major weaknesses: (1) the inability to manipulate independent variables, (2) the lack of power to randomize, and (3) the risk of improper interpretation (Kerlinger, 1973, p. 390). In other words, direct control was not possible in the present study, i.e., neither experimental manipulation nor random assignment was employed.

Two specific limitations acknowledged in this investigation were: (1) the respondents were from one college major, thus limiting group heterogeneity and influencing reliability estimates, and (2) the sample size

of respondents was insufficient to adequately assess the construct validity of the Communicator Style instrument.

As a consequence of these limitations, discussion of the results of the present investigation will lend themselves to interpretation of significant differences in the research question.

Conclusions

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the differences and similarities in college instructors communicator style in the classroom as a function of student ethnic background. Examination of the literature, indicates little, if any research has been conducted in this area. The importance of this investigation is instructor communication style affects the learning process. Consequently, student perceptions of instructor communicator style are effected by a number of antecedent factors that are reflective in their perceptions-of-other. One important antecedent factor is ethnic background of students.

The research question inquired about the differences in African American and European American students perception of their instructors communicator style. The results indicate respondents have similar perceptions

regarding instructors contentious, dramatic, attentive, dominant, and relaxed communicator style. However, results also indicate European American students perceive their instructors style of communication to more open, animated, precise, friendly, and impression leaving than African American students. These significant difference instructor communicator style attributes are generally consistent with appropriate or effective styles reported in the instructional literature (Myers & Rocca, 2000). One plausible explanation for the inconsistency in ratings effective communicator styles is provide by Hecht, Anderson, Ribeau (1989). These researchers suggest ethnic differences in perceived communicator style may result from cultures having different insights into procedures for achievement and attainment. These insights are projected in the sharing of symbols. For example, Dodd notes, in the "American culture, the symbols of these rites of passage include degrees, promotions, and the like." (1991, p. 33). It may be that the results in the present investigation are reflective of the symbols of instructor communicator style in the European American and African-American cultures. Another possible explanation for the significant differences in the present investigation is that each culture also has communication

styles appropriate for that culture. For example, African Americans tend to exhibit an extremely friendly and warm interpersonal style, whereas European Americans seem to have a reserved subtlety, that stresses understatement and control of interpersonal interaction (Dodd, 1991). In sum, instructor communicator style may be perceived differently by students from varying ethnic backgrounds because of the symbols and appropriateness of styles of communication differ as a function of ethnic culture. Future research needs to examine the notion of an intercultural measure of styles of communication. Future research, also needs to examine how the results of the present generalize to research that examines similar instructors, ethnicity of instructors, and perceptions of students from other ethnic backgrounds.

APPENDIX A
COMMUNICATOR STYLE MEASURE

COMMUNICATOR STYLE MEASURE

You have impressions of the way a person communicates. This is the person's style of communication. There are many aspects to one's style. Furthermore, there are no "correct styles." There are only different styles.

This measure focuses upon your sensitivity to your instructor in the previous class style of communication. Read the description of each style item. Decide if the statements accurately describe your instructor. Then, indicate on a scale from 1 to 5, which numeral represents your agreement or disagreement with the description.

Mark a 1 if you strongly disagree with the description.

Mark a 2 if you disagree with the description.

Mark a 3 if you are undecided.

Mark a 4 if you agree with the description

Mark a 5 if you strongly agree with the description.

Answer each item as it relates to your face-to-face communication with this instructor. All responses will be strictly confidential.

- ___ 1. In most classroom situations the instructor tends to come on strong.
- ___ 2. In most classroom situations the instructor generally speak very frequently.
- ___ 3. The instructor tries to take charge of things when he or she is with students.
- ___ 4. The instructor is dominant in classroom situations.

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = undecided 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree

- 5. The instructor has a tendency to dominate informal conversations with students.
- 6. Regularly the instructor tells jokes, and stories when he or she communicates.
- 7. Often the instructor physically and vocally acts out what he or she wants to communicate.
- 8. The instructor very frequently verbally exaggerates to emphasize a point.
- 9. The instructor dramatizes a lot.
- 10. Very often the instructor uses speech that tends to be picturesque.
- 11. When the instructor disagrees with a student, he or she is very quick to challenge them.
- 12. Once the instructor gets wound up in a heated discussion, he or she has a hard time stopping.
- 13. It bothers the instructor to drop an argument that is not resolved.
- 14. The instructor is very argumentative.
- 15. The instructor often insists that other people document or present some kind of proof for what they are arguing.
- 16. The instructor's eyes reflect exactly what he or she is feeling when the person communicates.
- 17. The instructor tends to constantly gesture when he or she communicates.
- 18. The instructor actively uses a lot of facial expressions when he or she communicates.
- 19. The instructor is very expressive non-verbally in classroom situations.
- 20. Students generally know the instructor's emotional state, even if he or she do not say anything.

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = undecided 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree

- 21. What the instructor says usually leaves an impression on students.
- 22. The instructor leaves students with an impression of him or her which definitely tend to remember.
- 23. The way the instructor says something usually leaves an impression on students.
- 24. The instructor leaves a definite impression on students.
- 25. The first impression the person makes on students causes them to react to the teacher.
- 26. 26. The instructor does not have nervous mannerisms in his or her speech.
- 27. Under pressure the instructor comes across as a relaxed speaker.
- 28. The rhythm or flow of the instructor's speech is not affected by nervousness.
- 29. The instructor is a very relaxed communicator.
- 30. As a rule, the instructor is very calm and collected when he or she talks.
- 31. The instructor really likes to listen very carefully to students.
- 32. The instructor can always repeat back to a person exactly what was meant.
- 33. Usually, the instructor deliberately reacts in such a way that students know that he or she is listening to them.
- 34. The instructor is an extremely attentive communicator.
- 35. The instructor always shows that he or she is very emphatic with students.
- 36. As a rule, the instructor openly expresses feelings and emotions.
- 37. The instructor readily reveals personal things about himself or herself.

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = undecided 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree

- 38. Usually the instructor tells students a lot about himself or herself even if they do not know them well.
- 39. The instructor is an extremely open communicator.
- 40. Usually the instructor does not tell students very much about himself until he or she gets to know them quite well.
- 41. The instructor readily expresses admiration for students.
- 42. To be friendly, the instructor habitually acknowledges verbally student's Contributions.
- 43. Whenever, the instructor communicates. He or she tends to be very encouraging to students.
- 44. The instructor is always an extremely friendly communicator.
- 45. The instructor always prefers to be tactful.
- 46. The instructor is a very good communicator.
- 47. The instructor always finds it very easy to communicate on a one-to-one basis with students.
- 48. In a classroom of new students the instructor is a very good communicator.
- 49. The instructor finds it extremely easy to maintain a conversation with a member of the opposite sex.
- 50. The way the instructor communicates influences his or her life both positively and dramatically.
- 51. Out of a random group of five instructors, my instructor would probably have a better style of communication than all of them.

For statistical purposes only:

Your ethnic background is: African American European American
 Other

THANK YOU FOR ASSISTANCE

APPENDIX B

T-TEST

	African American		European American		t-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Contentious	3.03	1.53	2.75	1.14	1.29
Open	1.38	.52	2.96	1.36	-9.57*
Dramatic	2.40	1.37	2.39	1.10	.05
Animated	1.49	.64	2.51	1.37	-6.01*
Attentive	2.38	1.23	2.75	1.40	-1.74
Dominant	2.51	1.38	2.87	1.34	-1.67
Precise	1.46	.57	2.53	1.26	-6.79*
Friendly	1.42	.67	1.98	.84	-4.54*
Relaxed	2.44	1.08	2.34	1.27	.53
Impression Leaving	1.72	1.07	2.34	1.27	-3.31*

Note.--Five-point scale: 1 = highly disagree to 5 = highly agree. * $p < .01$; if adjusted by the Bonferroni procedure $P.05 = P.002$

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