The Effects of Humor on Perceptions of Compliance-Gaining in the College Classroom

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The purpose of this study is to explore humor as a factor in students' perceptions of college teacher compliance-gaining in the classroom. Four hundred twenty-eight college students reported the frequency of their college teachers' uses of compliance-gaining tactics, the frequency of humor uses with compliance-gaining tactics, and the effectiveness of humor used with compliance-gaining tactics. Results revealed positive and significant relationships between humor uses and uses of particular compliance-gaining strategies. Findings suggest that students perceive teachers to use humor more frequently with certain compliance-gaining tactics. Moreover, students reported that certain compliance-gaining tactics are perceived as more effective than others.

Teacher humor and compliance-gaining both are purported to affect student outcomes but have been studied separately. Research in the educational context has explored the manner in which teachers communicate and use power to influence their students' outcomes in the classroom (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983). Various communication strategies can enhance or detract from the overall effectiveness of teacher power use. Research indicates, for example, that although coercive power or antisocial compliance-gaining may work well for short-term student compliance, these approaches are also associated with lower levels of student learning (Plax, Kearney, Downs, & Stewart, 1986; Wheeless, Stewart, Kearney,

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& Plax, 1987). Such negative approaches to teacher influence may also damage the teacher-student relationship, and thus reduce teacher effectiveness. In contrast, teacher use of prosocial power not only fosters student compliance but also increases learning potential.

Teachers' effective use of humor is generally viewed as a positive factor in the classroom (Check, 1986). Some studies even indicate that humor may play a part in influence (Goffman, 1967). Past research (Goffman, 1967; Martineau, 1972; Powell, 1977) has examined humor as social control, and found that humor does play an important role in influencing others. However, those studies did not specifically state if the humorous techniques were effective or not. Moreover, how compliance-gaining and humor operates in the college classroom is not known. Appropriate humor used with compliance-gaining tactics may bring about a prosocial atmosphere and thus foster a positive teacher-student interaction and relationship. It may even influence the effectiveness of college teacher power and compliance-gaining strategies. It may be that college teachers who are humorous will be more effective in their compliance-gaining attempts. The purpose of this study is to explore humor as a factor in students' perceptions of college teacher power and compliance-gaining in the classroom. Rather than exploring different types of humor, this study will analyze how the presence of humor will affect compliance-gaining in the classroom.

Power and Compliance in the Classroom

The classroom setting is an important arena for social influence. Beginning in 1983, McCroskey and Richmond initiated a series of research projects that dealt with teachers' use of power in the classroom and students' perceptions of the teacher's power. Since then, other research studies have followed (i.e., Plax & Kearney, 1992; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Plax, Kearney, & Tucker, 1986). Overall, the "Power in the Classroom" series possesses some important implications for teachers' use of compliance-gaining when teaching. The "Power in the Classroom" series encourages instructors to use prosocial techniques in order to receive positive outcomes in the classroom. Further, the series indicated that antisocial techniques would receive negative outcomes in the classroom. In addition, the series examined compliance-gaining and its influence in the classroom. The series addressed the importance of students' perceptions of power in relation to students' disposition toward cognitive and affective learning.

Compliance-gaining is a form of social control. Compliance-gaining is defined as, "the performance by one person, the target, of the specific behaviors desired of the target by another person, the agent" (Wheeless, Barraclough, & Stewart, 1983, p. 110). Wheeless, et al. (1983) argued that in order to influence others, one must be perceived as powerful. Furthermore, they deemed that individuals who implement power are able to gain compliance. Past literature has shown that certain compliance-gaining strategies are more effective than other strategies (Imai, 1991; Roach, 1991a; Roach, 1991b). Several studies have revealed the importance of a prosocial atmosphere when a teacher is trying to gain student compliance (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987). Humor might create a prosocial environment that can enhance the effectiveness of teacher compliance-gaining attempts.

Humor in the Classroom

Another important teacher behavior in the classroom is a teacher's use of humor. For years, educational scholars have been in disagreement over the role of humor in the classroom. Humor has been viewed as both an enhancement and a hindrance to classroom

teaching and learning (Shade, 1996). Neuliep (1991) believes that the use of humor in the classroom confers positive outcomes for the teacher and the student. Studies have reported that humor is effective in the college classroom to promote comprehension, create a positive environment, encourage student involvement, hold students' attention, foster cognitive development, and manage desirable behavior (Powell & Andresen, 1985). Moreover, Korobkin (1988) suggested that humor increases retention of material, student-teacher rapport, attentiveness and interest, motivation toward and satisfaction with learning, playfulness and positive attitude, individual and group productivity, class discussion and animation, creativity, idea generation, and divergent thinking.

McGhee (1989) noted that humor is essential to achieve one's interpersonal goals. In addition, Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) argued that, "humor is typically perceived as a positive communication attribute, one that generates support, approval and goal attainment" (p. 206). Civikly (1986) found that teachers are aware of the social and psychological functions of humor and use it to emphasize those functions.

Though there are many studies that explore the effects of compliance-gaining and the effects of humor in the classroom, little or no research exists that specifically examines how these two variables relate to each other. Intrinsically, one would expect a relationship between the two variables. Several others (e.g., Goffman, 1967; Martineau, 1972; Powell, 1977) have noted the role of humorlessness in social control. People who are perceived to be powerful are not always perceived as humorous. The converse of this is reasonable. In light of compliance-gaining research that points to the benefits of the use of prosocial compliance-gaining strategies, one might suspect that instructor humor might make compliance-gaining attempts more favorably received and thus more effective. Humor, then, may have an effect on the success of the compliance-gaining attempt. Although humor and power are different, they both rely on other people's perceptions. If this finding holds true, compliance will be apparent in this study, which investigates how humor affects compliance-gaining strategies.

In summary, large amounts of research have been done separately on power, compliance-gaining, and humor. Yet, there is little research to examining the effects of humor on compliance-gaining. It would be beneficial to study the effects of humor and its potential consequences on compliance perceptions. The findings of these research questions would be advantageous and helpful to instructors who presently use humor or those who are considering the use of humor in their classrooms.

Given the information on past research, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What is the relationship between students' perceptions of teachers' humor use and perceptions of teachers' use of behavior alteration techniques (compliance-gaining strategies)?

RQ2: What is the relationship between students' perceptions of teachers' use of behavior alteration techniques (compliance-gaining strategies) that are used with humor and effectiveness?

METHOD

Participants

Subjects for this study were students at a large southwestern university. The final number of participants who completed the entire survey was 428 students. The demographics of the subject pool are as follows: 241 females and 187 males; 21 freshman, 45 sophomores, 118 juniors, 236 seniors, 7 graduate students, and 1 student who classified himself or herself as "other". Age ranged from 16-57 years with a median age of 22.3.

Procedure

Students were instructed to complete the survey about the class instructor they attended before the class that they were currently in. Two hundred seventy-nine participants completed the survey referencing a male instructor, whereas 149 participants completed the survey referencing a female instructor. Two hundred ninety-three of the instructors referenced were professors; 98 were teaching assistants; and 37 were other instructor ranks.

Measures

Students completed an adapted version of a scale developed by Kearney, Plax, Richmond, and McCroskey (1984). The original scale measures teacher compliance-gaining use and effectiveness with the behavior alteration techniques (BAT) and behavior alteration messages (BAM). The scale contains 22 behavior alteration techniques; teachers are rated on a 5-point scale on the dimensions of uses and effectiveness. For the purposes of this study, two categories were used for this study: prosocial and antisocial (Kearney et al., 1984; Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1985; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). Prosocial BATs are: *Immediate reward from behavior (#1), Deferred reward (#2), Reward from teacher (#3), Reward from others (#4), Self-esteem (#5), Teacher/Student Relationship: Positive (#10), Personal student responsibility (#14), Responsibility to class (#15), Normative Rules (#16), Altruism (#18), Peer Modeling (#19), Teacher Modeling (#20), Expert Teacher (#21), and Teacher Feedback (#22).* Antisocial BATs are: *Punishment from teacher (#6), Punishment from Teacher (#7), Punishment from Others (#8), Guilt (#9), Teacher/Student Relationship: Negative (#11), Legitimate-Higher Authority (#12), Legitimate-Teacher Authority (#13), and Debt (#17).*

The adaptation to the scale was the addition of two extra columns. One column measured teacher humor uses and the other column measured effectiveness of the teacher humor used with each BAT. Uses and uses of humor were rated from 1= never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = always. In addition, students rated instructors on the effectiveness of each BAT with humor on a scale of 1 = very ineffective, 2 = somewhat effective, 3 = undecided, 4 = somewhat effective, and 5 = very effective. In other words, students first rated the frequency of BATs teachers used. Secondly, they rated the frequency of humor used with each BAT. Then, students rated how effective they perceived each BAT that was used with humor. Alpha reliabilities for the behavior alteration scale for uses, effectiveness, and uses of humor were .92, .94, and .95 respectively.

RESULTS

The first research question inquired, "What is the relationship between perceptions of teacher humor use and perceptions of teacher use of behavior alteration techniques (compliance-gaining strategies)?" In order to find the relationship between these two variables, a correlation was run between each BAT use and each BAT humor use. Results found that

certain BATs had higher correlations than other BATs. The highest correlations were among items: 5. Self -esteem (r =.50); 21. Expert Teacher (r =.49); 19. Peer Modeling (r =.48); 20. Teacher Modeling (r =.48). The lowest correlations were found among items: 2. Deferred reward from behavior (r =.25) and 11. Teacher-student relationship (negative) (r =.32). All correlations were positive and significant (p < .001). These results are shown on Table 1.

TABLE 1
Correlations Between Each Behavior-Alteration Technique Use and Humor Use

Behavior Alteration Technique	r*
1. Immediate Reward from behavior	.37
2. Deferred reward from behavior	.25
3. Reward from teacher	.41
4. Reward from others	.36
5. Self-esteem	.50
6. Punishment from behavior	.37
7. Punishment from teacher	.44
8. Punishment from others	.43
9. Guilt	.46
10. Teacher-student relationship (+)	.44
11. Teacher-student relationship (-)	.32
12. Legitimate higher authority	.41
13. Legitimate teacher authority	.41
14. Personal student responsibility	.40
15. Responsibility to the class	.44
16. Normative rules	.48
17. Debt	.41
18. Altruism	.45
19. Peer modeling	.48
20. Teacher modeling	.48
21. Expert teacher	.49
22. Teacher feedback	.38

* p<.001

The second research question asked, "What is the relationship between students' perceptions of teachers' use of behavior alteration techniques (compliance-gaining strategies) that are used with humor and effectiveness?" For this question correlations were performed between each BAT effectiveness item rating with the corresponding BAT humor use rating. All correlations were positive and significant (p <.001). Findings indicated that certain BAT items were perceived as more effective than others when used with humor. The highest correlation values were: normative rules (r =.43) self-esteem (r =.43) and reward from others, (r =.42). It is important to note that the highest correlations were prosocial BATs. The correlations are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Correlations Between Each Behavior-Alteration Technique
Use with Humor and Effectiveness

Behavior Alteration Technique	r*
1. Immediate Reward from behavior	39
2. Deferred reward from behavior	33
3. Reward from teacher	36

TABLE 2, cont'd.
Correlations Between Each Behavior-Alteration Technique
Use with Humor and Effectiveness

Behavior Alteration Technique	*r**
4. Reward from others	.42
5. Self-esteem	.43
6. Punishment from behavior	.38
7. Punishment from teacher	.30
8. Punishment from others	.37
9. Guilt	.31
10. Teacher-student relationship (+)	.38
11. Teacher-student relationship (-)	.34
12. Legitimate higher authority	.35
13. Legitimate teacher authority	.32
14. Personal student responsibility	.38
15. Responsibility to the class	.38
16. Normative rules	.43
17. Debt	.41
18. Altruism	.39
19. Peer modeling	.38
20. Teacher modeling	.39
21. Expert teacher	.35
22. Teacher feedback	.24

* $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The first research question examined the relationship between perceptions of teacher humor use and perceptions of teacher compliance-gaining strategies use (behavior alteration techniques). Findings indicated that all the correlations between each behavior alteration technique use and humor use were positive and significant. Further, certain BATs were reported to be more frequently used with humor than others.

The BATs with the highest correlations were self-esteem and expert teacher. These two BATs fall into the prosocial category. Prosocial BATs are techniques that offer some type of reward. It was Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, and Plax (1987), who discerned that prosocial BATs were positively related with learning. Plax, Kearney, and Tucker (1986) found that teachers employed the use of self esteem to deal with classroom misbehaviors. Moreover, Plax, Kearney, Downs, and Stewart (1986) noted that college students were more likely to comply with teachers who used prosocial BATs. Based on this finding and past research, using humor with prosocial BATs can enhance compliance. Findings imply that humor relates to students' perceptions of compliance-gaining usage. This is worth noting, because it seems that humor may enhance the use of compliance-gaining. Humor may act has a vehicle in making the compliance-gaining tactic more socially acceptable and motivational.

The consequences of using humor with antisocial BATs may result in resentment or indifference. The findings suggest that teachers are mindful of their audience and take that into consideration when using humor. In other words, teachers are less inclined to use humor if it has some type of negative implication, because the student may misinterpret or misunderstand the message.

The second research question deals with perceptions of effective humorous compliance-gaining strategies and students' perceptions of compliance. Results of this question reveal that humorous compliance-gaining techniques and humorous behavior alteration techniques

affect the perceptions of compliance-gaining effectiveness. Hence, this suggests that when prosocial BATs are used with humor, it is more likely to be perceived as effective. Since most requests to gain compliance are things the target does not want to do purposely, humor is used as a motivation tool to make the target comply. Overall, results indicate certain compliance-gaining tactics that are used with humor are perceived as effective. Thus, teachers, who currently use humor to gain students' compliance (depending on the tactic), should continue to do so. Furthermore, teachers who do not use humor to gain students' compliance should not be afraid to, because humor can assist in effectiveness. Nevertheless, this study indicates that humorous techniques are positively and significantly correlated to effectiveness of BAT strategies. Therefore, the findings of this question reveal that students perceive humor with certain compliance-gaining strategies as effective. This implies that teachers can use humor not only to be perceived as more effective when using compliance, but also more effective when gaining compliance. Hence, this study furthers the research on humor affirming that humor can be perceived as effective in getting certain tasks to be performed in the college classroom.

In brief, findings from research question two shows that teachers tend to use prosocial BATs more often than anti-social BATs. Findings suggest that students' who view their teacher as humorous also perceive them to use humor with certain compliance-gaining tactics. Overall, this implies that teachers, who are humorous, use it in the classroom to gain compliance. Further, students are able to perceive when and how teachers utilize humor.

As with most projects of this nature, some limitations were involved that may have influenced the results of this study. First, the original questionnaire was extremely long. The majority of the students completely filled out the questionnaire, but many felt that a large number of questions were repetitive. Second, the study was conducted during the summer. Hence, students may not have gained enough information to critique their instructor. Third, a majority of the students were female and a majority of the students chose to analyze a male professor. This unbalance may have swayed the results. Past literature has shown that men and women not only appreciate humor differently, men and women also create humor differently (Darling & Civikly, 1987). Also, students may have been afraid that their instructor was going to see the results, and hence, rated the instructor as highly humorous. In addition, a cultural difference may have been a limitation. The participants were not asked what race or ethnicity they were, the researcher has no idea how diverse the sample was. People from various cultures may have responded to the questions differently. Not all cultures appreciate the use of humor in the classroom, and hence they may perceive humor contrarily from other students.

Future Research

The results of this study reveal that teacher humor uses affects students' compliance-gaining perceptions. Further, this study indicates that humor may embellish power. Since the present study deals mainly with the college level, more research should be conducted on different educational levels. The college classroom is typically taught differently than most elementary or secondary schools, hence a difference in teaching may lead to a difference in results.

In addition, future studies should investigate various types of humor in relation to compliance-gaining. Studies should look at specifically nonverbal or verbal humor with correlation to compliance. Further, future studies could concentrate on noncompliance. Since

this study mainly focused on compliance-gaining strategies, it would be fascinating to investigate if compliance-resisting has a similar effect when used with humor. Presently, research has shown different techniques and strategies to influence humor, and implies that humor alone does not explain for the variance in compliance-gaining. Thus, further research on humor and compliance-gaining in the classroom may contribute to the current understanding of these concepts and may assist to improve educational quality.

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