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A Study of Hispanic Students' Perceptions of Homophily and Immediacy and Their Relationships to Perceived Affective Learning and Content Relevance

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Abstract:

The study investigated the relationships between Hispanic students' perceptions of instructors' homophily and nonverbal immediacy behaviors and their perceptions of affective learning and content relevance. Utilizing convenience sampling, 141 Hispanic students completed a series of self-report scales. Multiple regression analysis found a significant relationship among these measures. Results further indicate that as students' perceptions of immediacy and attitude homophily increased, perceptions of affective learning and content relevance were enhanced.

Keywords: *Instructor homophily, instructor immediacy, student affective learning, content relevance*

1. Introduction

Some teachers and administrators see teaching goals as exclusively cognitive and/or performance-centered. However, in instructional settings, affect is a significant component of the learning process. For more than two decades, communication researchers have studied affective learning as an important outcome variable (Richmond & Gorham, 1996). Affective learning is the domain that focuses on the adoption of beliefs and attitudes about a particular task, principle, or subject. In fact, McCroskey (1994) argues that instructor communication behavior may have its strongest impact on affective learning. Affective learning, in turn, influences cognitive learning (Rodriguez, Plax & Kearney, 1996). Therefore, if students acquire positive affect toward school and/or a particular subject area, their affect serves not only as a motivational catalyst to achieve higher levels of cognitive learning, but also to motivate self-directed learning (Frymier, 1994; Richmond, 1990).

When teachers communicate with students in an immediate manner, they build perceptions of homophily (Glascock & Ruggiero, 2006; McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006; Rocca & McCroskey, 1999), and increase students' perceptions of the importance and connection of course content to their personal lives (i.e., content relevance) (Kelley & Gorham, 1988; Richmond, 1990) resulting in an overall increase in students' affective learning (Andersen, 1979; Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey 1985; McCroskey, Sallinen, Fayer, Richmond, & Barraclough, 1996; Frymier & Shulman, 1995).

Previous research, while beneficial, has relied primarily on predominately Caucasian-student samples. However, multi-cultural classrooms are now the norm (National Center for Educational Statistics, May 2015); therefore, incorporating students' culture into the investigative model is a natural next step for instruction research.

The racial and ethnic composition of the American population is changing dramatically (Lopez & Patten, 2015). Increasing instructor awareness of the cultural diversity in education may help in identifying specific communication behaviors that aid student learning in multicultural classrooms.

The Hispanic population is the largest minority group in the United States and their numbers are only expected to increase (Krogstad, 2015; Lopez & Patten, 2015). There is concern, however, because a large percentage of this group is low academic achievers (Krogstad, 2015; Fry & Gonzales, 2008). Only 15% of Hispanics are graduated from four-year colleges or universities (Krogstad, 2015). Given the educational and employment disadvantages experienced by the Hispanic community, understanding the problem and providing insight that will enhance student learning for this population is crucial. One possible reason for the low level of academic achievement may be the dearth of positive communicative behaviors believed to have positive implications for the relationships between teachers and Hispanic students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Homophily

According to McCroskey, Richmond and Daly (1975) homophily may have a significant influence on the development of the teacher-student relationship. Homophily suggests that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than contact among dissimilar people (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Further, individuals are more likely to develop and maintain supportive relationships with others who are similar to them on important social dimensions, including ethnicity, age, sex, socioeconomic status, and organizational role (McPherson et al., 2001). Students who perceive homophily with teachers may also perceive those teachers to be more empathic and responsive (McCroskey et al., 2006). Overall, homophily appears to improve student-teacher communication in a manner that has a positive effect on the entire learning process (Glascock & Ruggiero, 2006).

2.2. Immediacy

Another communicative strategy found to be effective in creating positive student-teacher relationships is immediacy. In the classroom, immediacy is believed to have powerful, positive implications for the student-teacher relationship (McCroskey et al., 2006). Immediate behaviors enhance perceived closeness (Mehrabian, 1969; 1971) between teachers and students that can improve the overall learning experience. Collectively, teacher immediacy findings have evidenced a positive association with cognitive learning (Gorham, 1988; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987), affective learning (Andersen, 1979; Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1985; McCroskey et al., 1996), information recall (Kelley & Gorham, 1988), students' evaluations of teachers (Andersen, 1979; McCroskey et al., 1996) and motivation (Frymier, 1994; Richmond, 1990).

2.3. Content Relevance

Students are motivated to learn not only through an increase in affective learning, but also when they perceive the content/information being taught is personally relevant (Frymier, 2002). Relevance refers to a student's ability to perceive a connection between what is being taught and how that information is related to satisfying a personal and/or professional need or goal (Keller, 1987; Frymier and Shulman, 1995). Teachers who increase students' perceptions of content relevance observe an increase in motivation in the classroom that parallels the positive impact that immediacy has on motivation (Frymier, 2002). Relevance has been positively associated with student empowerment (Frymier, 2002), affective learning (Frymier & Shulman, 1995), student motivation (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Keller, 1987), and immediacy (Kelley & Gorham, 1998; Richmond, 1990). In addition, greater increases were revealed in student motivation when teachers combined making the content relevant to students' interests and career goals with instructor immediacy (Frymier & Shulman, 1995).

3. Rationale

Clearly, there are problematic issues occurring with the Hispanic population in the area of education. There is reason to predict that improved immediacy and homophily will have the same positive effect on predominately Hispanic students' perceived content relevance and increased affective learning as it has with Caucasian/non-Hispanic students. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

- H1: There will be a positive relationship among Hispanic students' perceptions of homophily and immediacy with affective learning and content relevance.

Perceptions of a teacher's level of nonverbal immediacy have been found to be a predictor of many positive instructional outcomes (Andersen, 1979; Glascock & Ruggiero, 2006; Richmond et al., 1987; Santilli, Miller, & Katt, 2011; York, 2015), including affective learning and content relevance (Frymier, 1994). A student's perception of a homophilous relationship with her/his teacher has also been found to be a predictor of cognitive learning (Glascock & Ruggiero, 2006). Therefore, the following research questions are offered:

- RQ1: Will predominantly Hispanic students' perceptions of homophily and teacher immediacy influence their perceptions of affective learning?
- RQ2: Will Hispanic students' perceptions of homophily and teacher immediacy influence their perceptions of content relevance?

4. Methods

4.1. Participants and Procedures

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in introductory courses at a large, predominately Hispanic, Southwestern university. The sample included 141 participants (89 females, 52 males) whose ages ranged from 18-62 years ($M = 23.27$, $SD = 7.55$).

During a normal class period, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire as it pertained to their perceptions of the instructor in the class immediately preceding the one in which they were completing the questionnaire. This methodology is consistent with an interaction study by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey and Richmond. (1986). Participation was voluntary and students received extra credit for their participation.

4.2. Instruments

Homophily. The Homophily Scale is an 8-item, 7-point, bi-polar, semantic differential scale that measures perceived similarity on attitude and background homophily. Participants were asked to indicate their perceived similarity of attitudes and backgrounds to their instructor's. Previous reliabilities for these measures have been consistently above .80 (McCroskey et al., 1975). The current study yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .55 ($M = 12.27$, $SD = 4.80$) for background homophily and a Cronbach's alpha of .84 ($M = 14.31$, $SD = 6.10$) for attitude homophily. Due to low reliability, background homophily was excluded from any further analysis.

Nonverbal immediacy. Participants were asked to indicate the perceived nonverbal immediacy demonstrated by their instructor using the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (NIS-O), a 26-item, 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from (5) *Very Often* to (1) *Never*. Previous reliability has been consistently reported above .90 (Richmond, McCroskey & Johnson, 2003). The current study yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .90 ($M = 98.72$, $SD = 15.50$) for nonverbal immediacy.

Affective learning. The Affective Learning Instrument is a 16-item, 7-point, semantic differential scale. Participants were asked to respond to the items pertaining to their attitudes about the course content and the instructor. Previous reliability for this scale has been consistently reported above .90 (McCroskey, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 1996). The current study yielded an alpha of .95 ($M = 89.96$, $SD = 20.84$) for affective learning.

Content relevance. The Relevance Scale is a 12-item, 5-point Likert scale ranging from (5) *Very Often* to (1) *Never*. Respondents reported how often they perceived their instructors performed behaviors thought to make content personally relevant. Previous reliability for this instrument has been consistently reported above .88 (Frymier & Shulman, 1995). The current study yielded an alpha of .92 ($M = 45.07$, $SD = 10.53$) for content relevance.

4.3. Data Analysis

In order to test the hypothesis, a simple correlation analysis was calculated. In order to address the research questions, multiple regression analyses were used. Immediacy and homophily were identified as independent variables and content relevance and affective learning as dependent variables.

5. Results

The hypothesis predicted a positive relationship among Hispanic students' perceptions of homophily and immediacy with affective learning and content relevance. This hypothesis was supported. Strong sized, positive correlations between immediacy and affective learning and content relevance were found (.68 and .73, respectively). Positive, moderate sized correlations between homophily and affective learning (.53) and content relevance (.58) were also found. All correlations were significant at or above the .0001 level.

The first research question asked how Hispanic students' perceptions of homophily and immediacy influence their perceptions of affective learning. A multiple regression analysis found the predictor variables of immediacy and attitude homophily to be significant contributors to the outcome variable of perceived affective learning (see Table 1). The regression equation yielded a multiple R of .70, $F = (2, 118) = 56.94$, $p < .0001$. Adjusted R^2 indicated that the model explained 49% of the variance in students' perceptions of affective learning. The partial correlations were .54 for immediacy and .24 for attitude homophily, indicating that the unique contribution of each variable to perceived affective learning was 29% and 5.7%, respectively. Shared variance for homophily and immediacy was 14%.

The second research question asked how Hispanic students' perceptions of homophily and immediacy influence their perceptions of content relevance. A multiple regression analysis found immediacy followed by attitude homophily to be significant contributors to perceived content relevance (see Table 2). The regression equation yielded a multiple R of .75, $F = (2, 122) = 79.18$, $p < .0001$. Adjusted R^2 was .56, indicating that the variables in the model explained 56% of the variance in students' perceptions of affective learning. The partial correlations were .60 for immediacy and .29 for attitude homophily, indicating that the unique contribution of each variable to perceived relevance was 35% and 8%, respectively. Shared variance for homophily and immediacy was 11.6%.

6. Discussion

The principal objective for this study was to investigate the potential relationships immediacy and homophily had with Hispanic students' perceptions of affective learning and content relevance. As predicted, a strong, positive relation was found for teachers' nonverbal immediacy and both affective learning and content relevance. Consistent with prior research (Andersen, 1979; Gorham, 1988; Kearney, et al., 1985; McCroskey, et al., 1996), Hispanic students were more likely to assign higher preference ratings to instructors who communicate with behaviors that enhance closeness and reduce perceived physical and/or psychological distance among them. Further, students who perceived their instructors to be immediate reported positive affect and also reported class content to be more relevant.

These findings offer additional support for the claim that teachers who are perceived as immediate may also be perceived more positively in other ways by their students. Teachers who wish to be perceived more positively by their students may wish to engage in behaviors such as establishing eye contact, smiling at students, engaging in positive head nods toward students and using positive facial expressions (LeFebvre & Allen, 2014). These behaviors are more likely to enhance the student's appreciation for the class and may also promote students' perceived importance of course content (Aydin, 2012).

Results concerning perceived homophily were also consistent with prior research findings, supporting the claim that as individuals recognize common interests they begin to establish a foundation for a relationship that is based on something more than simple demographics (Glascok & Ruggiero, 2006; Rocca & McCroskey, 1999). Hispanic students' reported moderate, positive associations between instructors who employed communication strategies that emphasized similarity and shared experiences and ratings of

affective content relevance and affective learning. Accordingly, perceived homophilous relationships have a positive association with content relevance and affective learning. Thus, strengthening Hispanic students' perceptions of attitude homophily may improve the relationship between teacher and student. These results suggest that developing specific student-teacher related communicative behaviors may have a positive impact on building perceived content relevance and enhancing affective learning for Hispanic students. These results, in conjunction with past investigations, bolster claims that teachers who are perceived as immediate may also be perceived as homophilous. Further, there is an increased likelihood that Hispanic students may feel more motivated to learn from teachers they perceive as being homophilous; and these homophilous behaviors may indicate that the teacher is interested in student contributions. Students' interest in sharing is more likely when they perceive others are listening to what they have to say (Baringer & McCroskey, 2000). Teachers who can relate content through similar experiences or examples develop a much longer-lived and personal relationship (Fisher, Berliner, Fully, Marliave, Cahen, & Dishaw, 1981).

Expectations are that Hispanic students exposed to teachers with positive immediacy and homophily will experience the greatest amount of affective learning and find information in class to be relevant. This may also suggest that Hispanic students may value and possibly perform better if a teacher is immediate and if students perceive similarities between themselves and their teacher. As classrooms in the United States become more culturally diverse, increasing teachers' and students' understanding of those cultural factors that affect learning is crucial (National Center for Educational Statistics, May 2015).

This study provides additional support for both homophily and immediacy as major predictors of student affective learning and increased content relevance. The results support teacher homophily and immediacy as determining factors of student outcomes. The study also raises questions for future research on how teachers and students may be able to influence each other through the use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors. The results also indicate a significant impact on both affective learning and content relevance is present when a teacher is immediate and homophilous. Future research should continue to explore other predictor variables that may increase a positive relationship with affective learning and content relevance in the classroom.

Variable	B	Variance	SE	B
Immediacy	.74*	.29	.11	.56
Attitude Homophily	.72*	.06	.27	.21

Table 1: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Affective Learning

* $p < .01$

Variable	B	Variance	SE	B
Immediacy	.41	.36	.05	.59
Attitude Homophily	.42	.084	.13	.24

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Content Relevance

$p < .01$

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