



# Perceived autonomy support, intrinsic motivation, and student ratings of instruction



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## ABSTRACT

Motivation theory suggests that autonomy supportiveness in instruction often leads to many positive outcomes in the classroom, such as higher levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement. The purpose of this study was to determine whether perceived autonomy support and course-related intrinsic motivation in college classrooms positively predict student ratings of instruction. Data were collected from 47 undergraduate education courses and 914 students. Consistent with expectations, the results indicated that both intrinsic motivation and autonomy support were positively associated with multiple dimensions of student ratings of instruction. Results also showed that intrinsic motivation moderated the association between autonomy support and instructional ratings—the higher intrinsic motivation, the less predictive autonomy support, and the lower intrinsic motivation, the more predictive autonomy support. These results suggest that incorporating classroom activities that engender autonomy support may lead to improved student perceptions of classroom instruction and may also enhance both student motivation and learning.

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## 1. Introduction

For faculty in colleges and universities throughout the world, student ratings of instruction are a common means for evaluating instruction for improvement, and for merit, tenure, and promotion decisions (Chen & Watkins, 2010; Darwin, 2010; Hendry & Dean, 2002; Husbands & Fosh, 1993; Husbands, 1998; Leckey & Neill, 2001; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001). When instructors consider how they may improve their teaching, the dimensions of instruction found on many instructional rating forms offer some guidance on those areas that one should examine first. For example, it is not uncommon for instructional rating instruments to contain dimensions such as content organization, clarity of presentation, and availability of instructor to students (Abrami, d'Apollonia, & Rosenfield, 2007; Apodaca & Grad, 2005). Feldman (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of research on student ratings of instruction and was able to calculate the mean correlation between various instructional rating dimensions and student achievement. The top four dimensions, all of which demonstrated correlations with achievement ranging from 0.46 to 0.57, were instructor's preparation/organization of course, clarity and understandability of course content, adherence to course objectives, and the

perceived outcome or impact of instruction (i.e., skills or knowledge gained).

In addition to the four dimensions listed above, Feldman (1997) also identified two other dimensions that he judged to be of high importance for instruction and learning: instructor stimulates interest in course/subject matter, and instructor motivates students to do their best (or sets high standards for performance). Both of these dimensions correlate 0.38 with student achievement, and both represent important aspects of student motivation in the classroom. Educational researchers have long recognized that motivation plays an important role in student learning (Covington, 2000), and motivation may affect the way students perceive instruction (Feldman, 1998). Within the literature on student ratings of instruction, there is evidence that more motivated students, such as those with higher levels of interest in the subject matter of the course, provide higher ratings when evaluating instructors (Marsh, 1987). Howard and Maxwell (1980), Marsh (1980, 1983), Cashin and Downey (1992), and Prave and Baril (1993) found that students' pre-course interest – defined as desire to take a course – predicted student ratings and course satisfaction. Olivares' (2001) research showed that change in interest over the period of a course, rather than initial pre-course interest, provided an even stronger prediction of instructional ratings.

While pre-course interest predicts student ratings and course satisfaction, this measure does not capture levels of intrinsic or

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extrinsic motivation that may develop because of exposure to either the course material or instructor. Ryan and Deci (2000) explained that intrinsic motivation refers to engagement in an activity because one finds that activity naturally pleasing or interesting, and extrinsic motivation is activity engagement not for internally derived interest but instead for targeted outcomes, rewards, or in reaction to the control of others (Stipek, 1998). Often in student ratings research extrinsic motivation is measured by actual or anticipated grades in a course. The relationship between course grades and student ratings of instruction has been a highly researched topic in this area for decades (Brockx, Spooren, & Mortelmans, 2011; Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997; Marsh & Roche, 1997). Marsh (1987) and Marsh and Roche (2000) noted that, on average, there is a positive association between expected grades and student ratings. As discussed by Greenwald and Gillmore (1997) and Marsh and Roche (1997), what remains unclear is the causal mechanism underlying this relationship. Does the association reflect validity (i.e., better instruction leads to greater understanding and achievement which leads to higher ratings), invalidity (i.e., grading leniency; students rate lower those instructors who are not lenient graders), or a spurious association (i.e., the association between grades and ratings is due to confounding variables, such as motivation)?

Course grades can certainly be a strong motivator for students, but Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that while various manifestations of extrinsic motivation can be helpful in encouraging learning, one should desire to enhance students' intrinsic motivation as a driving force because of its centrality for self-determined behavior. Teachers can adopt classroom practices that lead to greater student engagement and motivation, noted Niemiec and Ryan (2009), and research shows that classroom instructional activities do predict variations in dimensions of motivation among students (Church, Elliot, & Gable, 2001; Garcia & Pintrich, 1996; Greimel-Fuhrmann & Geyer, 2003; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). While there are myriad methods teachers may employ to enhance student motivation (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002), the adoption of autonomy supportiveness appears to be one well supported by research and theory (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Reeve, 2009; Haerens, Aelterman, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Van Petegem, 2015).

According to Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, and Turner (2004), autonomy-supportive behavior, as opposed to controlling behavior, incorporates teacher attitudes and actions that are designed to encourage student engagement and learning by including students in decisions, offering choices among academic activities, seeking student input, and providing information and explanations for classroom activities and requirements. By contrast, a controlling instructional style, explained Reeve (2009), is one that may force or pressure students to adopt the teacher's perspective, to think or behave in specific ways, or to rely on extrinsic motivational sources. As noted above, research shows that when teachers adopt an autonomy-supportive instructional approach, a number of positive benefits result including, for example, improved intrinsic motivation and intrinsic goal orientation (Bieg, Backes, & Mittag, 2011; Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981; Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981; Garcia & Pintrich, 1996); enhanced self-regulation and perceptions of efficacy (Williams & Deci, 1996), and higher levels of student engagement (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Haerens et al., 2015; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). Reeve (2009) offers a more complete list of empirically supported benefits of autonomy-supportive classroom behaviors.

Given that autonomy-supportive instructional approaches appear associated with more engagement and motivation among students, it is possible that students would perceive autonomy-supportive teachers as better instructors when compared to their

more controlling colleagues. Authors of at least three studies have examined the possible link between autonomy-supportive classroom behavior and student ratings of instruction. Filak and Sheldon (2003) reported results of two studies. In their first, Filak and Sheldon asked students to recall a recent course that was important to them and complete a data collection instrument based upon their recollections. Filak and Sheldon found that perceptions of autonomy and competence (i.e., enjoyment of challenge, accomplishment, and stimulation) were the best predictors of both instructor and course ratings. Their second study employed student data from 12 sections of a common course. As before, both autonomy and competence were the strongest predictors of student ratings. In a related study, Filak and Sheldon (2008) found that autonomy support again predicted both course and instructor ratings thus replicating their earlier findings. In addition, they examined a latent variable model and found autonomy support predicted student self-determined motivation and student need satisfaction, and student need satisfaction, in turn, predicted both course and instructor ratings. It is unclear whether Filak and Sheldon (2008) tested a direct path between autonomy support and course or instructor ratings.

More recently, Jones (2010) examined how components of an academic motivation model predict student effort, instructor ratings, and course ratings. Jones collected data from two sections of one course; one section was on-line and the other was face-to-face. Jones' analyses consisted of 12 stepwise regression models, one for each sub-group as defined by student sex (female vs. male) and course section (on-line vs. face-to-face), and for each of three outcomes: student effort, instructor ratings, and course ratings. Jones found mixed results for each outcome modeled; however, the single best predictor across all combinations was situational interest (a temporary and context specific conceptualization of interest), which was a statistically significant predictor in 10 of the 12 models examined. Results showed that the greater situational interest, the greater student effort, the higher instructor ratings, and the higher course ratings. Academic caring (degree to which instructor provides academic support) and autonomy support (which Jones labeled empowerment) were the next most consistent predictors with both showing an association with the modeled outcomes in 5 of the 12 regression models examined. Jones argued that given these results instructors should find ways to generate situational interest among students to enhance effort and possibly alter instructor and course ratings. While not examined in Jones' data, it is possible that autonomy support may have an indirect linkage – mediated through situational interest – to student effort, instructor ratings, and course ratings.

In summary, the research cited above links autonomy support and intrinsic motivation, and both appear to be associated with better instruction as judged by students. Intrinsically motivated students are likely to have a more positive experience within the classroom and therefore should rate higher both instructor and course. Similarly, students who experience more autonomy support should similarly rate higher their instructor and course. The purpose of this study was to examine how intrinsic motivation and perceived autonomy support predict multiple dimensions of student ratings of instruction while simultaneously controlling for a number of covariates, described below, previously demonstrated to predict student ratings.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants in this study included 914 undergraduate students enrolled in 47 randomly selected, education-related courses at a medium-sized (20,000 students), regional university in the

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