



Student temperament and motives as predictors of instructional dissent



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine if students' Big Five personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness) and their motives for communicating with an instructor (i.e., relational, functional, participatory, excuse-making, sycophancy) were significant predictors of instructional dissent (i.e., expressive, rhetorical, vengeful) in the college classroom. Student participants ($N = 240$) completed a questionnaire using self-reports of their own personality traits, motives, and frequency of communicating instructional dissent in reference to a target course. Results of hierarchical regression analyses revealed that (a) expressive dissent was predicted by students' neuroticism, extraversion, and agreeableness, (b) rhetorical dissent was predicted by students' extraversion and agreeableness, and (c) vengeful dissent was predicted by students' openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. After controlling for the Big 5 traits, (d) the excuse-making, sycophancy, and functional motives predicted additional variance in instructional dissent.

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1. Introduction

The college classroom provides a context in which disagreements between instructors and students can occur recurrently. Instructors may irritate students with their class-related behavior, such as engaging in unfair testing and grading (Goodboy, 2011a,b; Kearney, Plax, Hays & Ivey, 1991) which in turn, may spur these disagreements. On the other hand, students may disagree with instructors because they have unrealistic and entitled beliefs about their education and learning (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014). Although some students keep their disagreements to themselves and withhold complaints concerning their coursework (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013), other students address their discontentment by engaging in instructional dissent. Instructional dissent “occurs when students express their disagreements or complaints about class-related issues” (Goodboy, 2011b, p. 423) and can take one of three forms including expressive dissent, rhetorical dissent, or vengeful dissent (Goodboy, 2011a). *Expressive dissent* occurs when students turn to outside parties to vent their frustrations about class to gain sympathy and/or empathy (e.g., complaining to another student about a difficult midterm exam). *Rhetorical dissent* occurs when students communicate directly with an instructor to persuade him/her to rectify a perceived problem in class (e.g., talking to an instructor during office hours about a bad grade in hopes of doing better in the course). *Vengeful dissent* is designed to “get even” with an instructor by tarnishing an instructor's reputation by spreading negative endorsement (e.g., trying to get an instructor in trouble with his/her colleagues). Instructional dissent is an important response to study because it is associated with self-

reported student learning and state motivation in the classroom (Goodboy, 2011b).

1.1. Instructional dissent

Research on instructional dissent suggests that most students perceive their instructor to be the sole cause of dissent by creating classroom conditions that are undesirable to students (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy, 2011a,b; Horan, Chory, & Goodboy, 2010), and in response, feel the need to communicate their displeasure. Research suggests that instructional dissent frequently occurs as a response to student perceptions of ineffective teaching comprised of instructor misbehaviors and unjust classroom decisions (Goodboy, 2011a,b). In contrast though, when instructors engage in perceived effective teaching behavior, such as being clear and immediate, instructional dissent is deterred (LaBelle, Martin, & Weber, 2013). Beyond unfair testing and grading, many students cite that their instructor's inferior teaching style leads them to dissent about their coursework (Goodboy, 2011a).

Although research suggests that student perceptions of ineffective teaching are the main triggering agent behind instructional dissent, research has begun to examine distal factors that influence student dissent expression, despite perceived instructor inadequacies. Some preliminary evidence suggests that students may be more or less likely to dissent in general despite the course or instructor. First, Goodboy (2012) revealed that female students report using more expressive dissent, whereas male students communicate more rhetorical and vengeful dissent. Second, Goodboy and Myers (2012) found that students high in trait verbal aggressiveness communicate more rhetorical and vengeful dissent, and students high in trait argumentativeness communicate more rhetorical dissent. Third, Goodboy and Bolkan (2013) found

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that students who have a dominating conflict style report using all three types of dissent more frequently. Given the role that distal factors play in fostering instructional dissent, Goodboy and Myers (2012) concluded, “it is possible, then, that even effective instructors may receive dissent” (p. 456).

Despite several calls for instructional communication researchers to determine the extent to which student personality traits play a role in encouraging classroom dissent (Goodboy, 2011a,b; LaBelle et al., 2013), extant research has focused primarily on how instructor communication behaviors spur dissent instead (e.g., Goodboy, 2011b; LaBelle et al., 2013). It is likely however, that instructional dissent is better explained as a student reaction to classroom dissatisfaction that is encouraged or discouraged by different students' personalities, because some students approach or avoid disagreements in class based on their general preferences for communicating (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy & Myers, 2012). Likewise, research suggests that student personality traits and communication traits influence how students interpret and process feedback from their instructors (Malachowski, Martin, & Vallade, 2013). Research also suggests that personality traits are important predictors of complaining behavior, which is similar to dissent (e.g., Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011; Harris & Mowen, 2001; Huang & Chang, 2008).

Recognizing that instructional dissent is influenced in part by student traits, Goodboy (2011b) urged researchers to “examine students' personality or communication traits that influence their propensity to use instructional dissent” (p. 436). Goodboy (2011a) also noted that “research on students' individual differences will yield a more complete picture of instructional dissent expression” (p. 309). Therefore, this study examined students' individual differences in personality and communication by including students' Big Five traits and their motives for communicating as predictors of instructional dissent.

1.2. Five factor model of personality (Big Five)

The five-factor model of personality (FFM), otherwise known as the Big Five Trait Taxonomy (John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & John, 1992), identifies five broad personality dimensions as individual differences. As McCrae and Costa (1999) noted, “much of what psychologists mean by the term *personality* is summarized by the five factor model” (p. 139) as this taxonomy provides an overarching and general framework for systematically studying major individual differences of people and “can be generalized across a wide range of personality constructs” (Costa & McCrae, 2009, p. 307) and cultures (McCrae, Terracciano, & 78 Members of the Personality Profiles of Cultures Project, 2005). The Big Five traits include neuroticism, extraversion, openness (to experience), agreeableness, and conscientiousness. *Neuroticism*, which is sometimes referred to as emotional instability, refers to “an enduring tendency or disposition to experience negative emotional states” (Widiger, 2009, p. 129), including feelings such as anxiety, anger, and guilt. *Extraversion*, which is the polar opposite of introversion, refers to a tendency to be outgoing, talkative, and sociable (Wilt & Revelle, 2009). *Openness*, which is sometimes referred to as intellect, refers to an appreciation for intellectual curiosity and variety in experiences and ideas (McCrae & Sutin, 2009). *Agreeableness* refers to a tendency of being “likeable, pleasant, and harmonious in relations with others” (Graziano & Tobin, 2009, p. 46). *Conscientiousness* refers to the tendency to be goal directed and possess impulse control in delaying gratification by following norms and rules (Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds, & Meints, 2009).

Meta-analyses suggest that the Big 5 traits are predictive of actual behavior (e.g., Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009). Much research suggests that students' academic performance, grades, and behavior in class are predicted by their individual differences in students' Big Five traits (Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, & McDougall, 2003). For instance, many studies have revealed that students' grade point averages, exam grades, and overall academic performance are positively predicted by

conscientiousness and openness (Bidjerano & Dai, 2007; Conrad & Patry, 2012; De Feyter, Caers, Vigna, & Berings, 2012; Furnham, Monsen, & Ahmetoglu, 2009; Grehan, Flanagan, & Malgady, 2011; Komaraju, Karau, Schmeck, & Avdic, 2011; Nofle & Robins, 2007; Trapmann, Hell, Hirn, & Schuler, 2007; Zeidner & Shani-Zinovich, 2011). Students' desire to achieve their academic goals and perform well is positively predicted by extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness (Ntaliansis, 2010). Further, overcommitted students, who work harder than necessary to succeed in class, are higher in neuroticism, conscientiousness, and openness, but lower in agreeableness (Hetland, Saksvik, Albertsen, Berntsen, & Henriksen, 2012).

Other research suggests that students' Big Five traits are related to a variety of academic outcomes including motivation to learn (Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006), academic self-concept (Jonkmann, Becker, Marsh, Ludtke, & Trautwein, 2012), depth of learning (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2009), academic stress (Penley & Tomaka, 2002), absenteeism (Lounsbury, Steel, Loveland, & Gibson, 2004), educational aspirations (Gasser, Larson, & Borgen, 2004), educational attainment and earnings (O'Connell & Sheikh, 2011), and intention to withdraw from college (Lounsbury, Saudargas, & Gibson, 2004). In a study profiling the personality of the successful college student, Barthelemy and Lounsbury (2009) found that students who earned high grades were also high in agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness. Houser and Frymier (2009) reported that students who are more grade oriented are higher in extraversion.

Clearly then, students' Big Five traits play a substantial role in their academic performance and success in school. Therefore, it is likely that student dissent is dependent on this performance (or lack thereof) because much of student dissent is an expression of student dissatisfaction with class-related issues such as grades and testing (Goodboy, 2011a). Similarly, Burke (2004) projected that high maintenance students, or “those students who complain and whine, beyond reasonable limits” (p. 743), would be influenced by their Big 5 traits. Given these findings linking Big Five traits to academic success and considering that much of instructional dissent involves complaints about student performance, the first research question is offered:

RQ1. To what extent do students' Big 5 personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness) predict their use of instructional dissent (i.e., expressive, rhetorical, vengeful) in a college course?

1.3. Student motives for communicating

Although students' personality traits are important variables to consider in instructional dissent, why students communicate with their instructors in the first place may explain their dissent as well. Why students communicate with their instructors is based on student characteristics (e.g., communication apprehension), instructor characteristics (e.g., instructor credibility), and environmental characteristics (e.g., time) (Martin & Myers, 2010; Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 2002; Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002b). It is important to study students' motives for communicating because why and how students communicate in the classroom are related to their learning and feelings of stress, satisfaction, and self-efficacy (Goodboy, Martin, & Bolkan, 2009; Martin, Cayanus, Weber, & Goodboy, 2006; Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000; Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005). Martin, Myers, and Mottet (1999) identified five primary motives students reported for communicating with their instructors. The most common motive is *functional*, to learn more about the course material and the assignment. Students also communicate to *participate*, to show involvement in the course. When students communicate with their instructors in order to have an interpersonal relationship, students possess the *relational* motive. Many students at one time or another have the motive of *excuse-making*, to explain why work is late or class was missed. The final motive is

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