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# Teacher Misbehavior and its Effects on Student Interest and Engagement

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*This study sought to investigate whether there was any relationship between teacher misbehaviors and student interest and engagement. Consistent with Emotional Response Theory and models for how teacher behavior impacts student interest and engagement, teacher misbehaviors were strongly correlated with student interest and weakly correlated with student engagement. Teacher incompetence predicted the most variance in student interest, followed by indolence and offensiveness. There was a difference in teacher misbehaviors between the two universities where this study was conducted, but not in student interest or engagement.*

*Keywords: Teacher Misbehaviors; Student Interest; Student Engagement; Incompetence; Indolence*

A 10-year study funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation found that personal relationships with peers and faculty members is one of the most important factors for engaging students and impacting success and retention, and even just one or two meaningful interactions at the right moment can have a tremendous impact (Chambliss, 2014). This and many other studies show that high-quality communication interactions and positive, caring relationships with faculty have a tremendous impact on the quality of student educational experiences, both during and after students' time in college. If positive interactions are so powerful for spurring long-term interest, engagement,

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motivation, and success, then it is also possible that negative faculty interactions might have a similarly detrimental effect. The goal of this study is to investigate whether teacher misbehaviors significantly impact student interest and engagement.

### *Teacher Misbehaviors*

Teacher misbehaviors are defined as “those teacher behaviors that interfere with instruction and thus, learning” (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991, p. 310). Kearney et al. identified three primary types of teacher misbehaviors that students experience: incompetence, offensiveness, and indolence. *Teacher incompetence* includes behaviors that “reflect the lack of very basic teaching skills” (p. 322). *Teacher offensiveness* includes behaviors reflect cruelty, meanness, and condescension toward students. *Indolent teachers* appear not to care about the class or students through their lack of attention to the class.

Since then, teacher misbehaviors have been associated with reduced affective learning (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009), reduced motivation to communicate (Goodboy, Myers, & Bolkan, 2010), and increased student use of antisocial Behavioral Alteration Techniques, or BATs (Claus, Booth-Butterfield, & Chory, 2012), and have been found to be triggers for instructional dissent (Goodboy, 2011). However, student-to-student connectedness can mediate the relationship between instructor misbehaviors and students’ willingness to talk, self-regulated learning, and affective learning (Sidelinger, Bolen, Frisby, & McMullen, 2011). Even though these are important findings, there is a significant gap in this research: except for Kearney et al.’s (1991) initial development of the Teacher Misbehaviors Scale, all of these studies relied on manipulations based on artificial scenarios. Research that better captures the complexities of real student–teacher relationships in the classroom is needed.

### *Culture*

The second gap in teacher misbehaviors research is an absence of studies investigating whether teacher misbehaviors have similar impacts across regions, cultures, and types of universities in the U.S. Previous studies have found differences in the perceived frequency of teacher misbehaviors in the U.S., China, Germany, and Japan (Zhang, 2007), as well as national differences in which types of misbehaviors result in student resistance (Zhang, Zhang, & Castelluccio, 2011). Many of these differences are likely due to national culture differences, including dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, masculinity, time orientation, indulgence, and context (Hall, 1976; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2013).

Woodard (2011) argues that the United States is culturally composed of 11 different “nations,” each of which reflects deep-seated cultural values, practices, and expectancies influenced by the national cultures of the people who initially settled those regions. Thus, it is reasonable to expect similar differences between regional cultures as between national cultures, which would have implications for instructor–student effects in the classroom. For example, Woodard describes the two regions that this

study will address as El Norte and Tidewater. El Norte was once part of the borderlands of the Spanish American empire and is now dominated by the Hispanic language, culture, and societal norms; has historically been a region of democratic reform; and is a place where independence, self-sufficiency, adaptability, and work are highly valued (2011). Thus, we would expect to see high power distance, collectivism, high uncertainty avoidance, and high context communication patterns in this region. Tidewater, on the other hand, was historically developed by the sons of English gentry in semifeudal socioeconomic patterns that for a time included slavery. Due to this heritage, the Tidewater region tends to value respect for authority and tradition, but does not always place a high value on equality and public participation. Thus, we might expect to see low power distance, greater individualism, low uncertainty avoidance, and low context communication patterns in this region.

### *Student Engagement*

Student engagement is defined as “the quality of the effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to the desired outcomes” (Hu & Kuh, 2002, p. 555). There are decades of education research supporting the hypothesis that academic engagement, time on learning tasks, and active instruction are tied to student learning (e.g., Brophy, 1986). Despite this, student engagement has been little addressed in communication research. Mazer (2012) developed the Student Engagement Scale (SES) to “assess specific student behaviors that comprise their engagement in the learning process” (p. 110). The SES comprises four factors, each of which reflects a different dimension of student engagement: (1) silent in class behaviors, (2) oral in class behaviors, (3) thinking about course content, and (4) out of class behaviors. Guided by Emotional Response Theory (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006), Mazer argues that students who experience higher levels of emotional and cognitive interest will be more likely to engage in classroom and other learning activities, which will lead to greater learning.

### *Student Interest*

Like student engagement, student interest has been a variable that has long been studied as a construct in education (e.g., Dewey, 1916/1966), but has received less attention in communication. Several previous studies used the Learner Empowerment Measure as a proxy for student interest (e.g., Weber, 2003), but it is uncertain whether empowerment is the same construct as student interest. To remedy this, Mazer (2012) developed a Student Interest Scale (SIS) that included both cognitive and emotional interest cues. Mazer (2013) explains, “Students who experience *cognitive interest* are pulled toward a subject because they possess a clear structural understanding of the content,” whereas, “Students who experience heightened *emotional interest* are pulled toward a content area because they are energized, excited, and emotionally engaged by the material” (p. 256). Since then, a model has been established that indicates that teacher immediacy predicts emotional interest, teacher clarity predicts

cognitive interest, and emotional interest and cognitive interest together predict engagement (Mazer, 2013).

Because positive teacher communication (immediacy and clarity) positively predict student interest and engagement, we expect that negative teacher communication (teacher misbehaviors) will negatively predict student interest and engagement. In order to assess whether this expectation is met and address the absence of teacher misbehaviors research in real classroom situations, the following hypotheses were posed:

H1: There is a negative relationship between teacher misbehavior and student interest.

H2: There is a negative relationship between teacher misbehavior and student engagement.

Because different regions of the U.S. have different cultural heritages and local patterns of interaction, and because cultural influences often impact roles and expectations by gender and ethnicity, it is possible that perceptions of and responses to teacher misbehaviors will vary by geographic region and demographic group. To find out whether this is the case, we posed the following research question:

RQ1: Do regional and demographic variables impact the levels of and relationships among student interest, student engagement, and teacher misbehavior?

## Methods

### *Research Design and Procedures*

Students who were enrolled in selected sections of a general education required oral communication course at each of two large public universities, one on the west coast and one on the east coast of the U.S., were invited to participate in this study. Both universities have high levels of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious, political, and socioeconomic diversity, and both are located in or near major urban centers. However, there are several important differences between the campuses. The west coast university is located in Los Angeles, CA, in what Woodard (2011) would describe as El Norte and is predominantly Hispanic (56.7%). The east coast university is located in the outskirts of Washington, DC in what Woodard refers to as the Tidewater region, is predominantly Caucasian (35.1%), and has substantially higher median ACT and SAT scores for incoming students.

Participants were asked to complete questionnaires anonymously for course credit. Using the approach developed by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986), participants were asked to complete the surveys while referring to the class they had been in immediately prior to the research session to allow reporting on a variety of instructors and courses across academic disciplines.

### *Instrumentation*

#### *Teacher Misbehavior Scale*

Teacher misbehavior was measured using the Teacher Misbehavior Scale created by Kearney et al. (1991), a 28-item measure that uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging

from *very unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (5). In our study, teacher misbehavior had a high reliability,  $\alpha = .90$ .

#### *Student Interest Scale*

We used the SIS developed and validated by Mazer (2012), a 16-item measure that uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). In our study, the SIS had a high reliability,  $\alpha = .95$ .

#### *Student Engagement Scale*

We used the SES developed and validated by Mazer (2012), a 13-item measure that uses a 7-point semantic differential scale with bipolar response options (e.g., *never/very often*). In our study, the SES had a high reliability,  $\alpha = .88$ .

## Results

### *Participants*

A total of 815 participants completed our survey. Of these students, 142 attended the west coast university, and 673 attended the east coast university. For the west coast university, 63.1% of participants were female, 36.9% male, 56.7% Hispanic, 14.9% Asian, 8.5% more than one ethnicity, 7.1% Caucasian, 5.7% African American, 3.5% other, 2.8% Pacific Islander, and 0.7% Native American. For the east coast university, 59.5% of participants were female, 39.9% male, 0.6% prefer not to disclose, 35.1% Caucasian, 19.6% Asian, 19.2% Hispanic, 11.2% African American, 5.8% more than one ethnicity, 5.2% other, 2.7% prefer not to respond, 0.9% Pacific Islander, and 0.3% Native American. A variety of student majors were represented on both campuses.

### *Relationship Between Variables*

The primary goal of this study was to find out whether there was any relationship between teacher misbehavior, student interest, and student engagement. When looking at all participants together, bivariate correlations showed a strong negative correlation between teacher misbehavior and student interest ( $r = -.538, p < .001$ ), a weak negative relationship between teacher misbehavior and student engagement ( $r = -.153, p < .001$ ), and a strong positive relationship between student interest and student engagement ( $r = .404, p < .001$ ).

However, when the data were split by university, correlations showed that there was no significant relationship between teacher misbehaviors and student engagement for students at the west coast university. As Table 1 shows, all of the other correlations were significant and of a similar degree at both universities.

To investigate this further, three multiple regressions were conducted. The first analysis showed that 31.3% of the variance in overall student interest could be predicted by the three types of teacher misbehaviors,  $F(3, 811) = 123.38, p < .001$ ; incompetence,  $\beta = -.45, t = -9.958, p < .001$ , indolence,  $\beta = -.22, t = -5.306, p < .001$ ,

**Table 1** Correlations by University

	West coast university			East coast university		
	Teacher misbehavior	Student interest	Student engagement	Teacher misbehavior	Student interest	Student engagement
<i>M</i>	50.83	52.55	57.27	41.97	56.40	58.94
<i>SD</i>	18.74	14.98	14.46	16.26	14.04	13.49
Teacher misbehavior		-.561**	-.018		-.523**	-.180**
Student interest			.345**			.416**
Student engagement						

\*\* $p < .001$ .

offensiveness,  $\beta = .097$ ,  $t = 2.272$ ,  $p < .05$ . The second regression showed that 31.1% of the variance in emotional interest could be predicted by teacher misbehaviors,  $F(3, 811) = 121.989$ ,  $p < .001$ ; incompetence,  $\beta = -.437$ ,  $t = -9.579$ ,  $p < .001$ , indolence,  $\beta = -.231$ ,  $t = -5.519$ ,  $p < .001$ , offensiveness,  $\beta = .088$ ,  $t = .2062$ ,  $p < .05$ . The third regression showed that 29.8% of the variance in cognitive interest could be predicted by teacher misbehaviors,  $F(3, 811) = 114.645$ ,  $p < .001$ ; incompetence,  $\beta = -.460$ ,  $t = -9.981$ ,  $p < .001$ , indolence,  $\beta = -.204$ ,  $t = -4.820$ ,  $p < .001$ , offensiveness,  $\beta = .105$ ,  $t = 2.425$ ,  $p < .05$ . In all three analyses, teacher incompetence predicted the greatest reduction in student interest, followed by indolence, followed by teacher offensiveness.

### Group Differences

In order to reduce familywise inflation of alpha and to test for interaction effects, a MANOVA with three independent variables (university, sex, and ethnicity) and three dependent variables (teacher misbehaviors, student interest, and student engagement) was conducted. Box's *M* test for the equality of covariance matrices was violated,  $F(138, 7363.84) = 2.083$ ,  $p < .05$ , so Hotelling's Trace corrections were used. Multivariate tests showed a significant main effect for university,  $F(3, 776) = 2.797$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , which indicates that there are differences by university for at least some of the dependent variables. Significant interaction effects were found for sex by ethnicity,  $F(30, 2324) = 1.626$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ , which suggests there are differences in the way the combination of gender and ethnicity impacts at least some of the dependent variables. No other main effects or interaction effects were significant.

Tests of between-subjects effects indicated significant effects for university on teacher misbehaviors,  $F(1, 778) = 8.106$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , but not for student interest,  $F(1, 778) = 3.573$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , or for student engagement,  $F(1, 778) = .734$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ . Similarly, for sex by ethnicity, significant interaction effects were found for teacher misbehaviors,  $F(10, 778) = 2.663$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ , but not for student interest,  $F(10, 778) = 1.396$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ , or for student engagement,  $F(10, 778) = 1.242$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . Pairwise comparisons indicate that students at the west coast university are more likely to report experiencing teacher misbehaviors ( $M = 52.18$ ) than students at the east coast university ( $M = 42.05$ ). An inspection of the profile plot suggests that African American and Asian males are slightly more likely

to experience teacher misbehaviors than their female counterparts, but females are more likely to experience teacher misbehaviors than their male counterparts for all other ethnicities.

## Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to investigate whether teacher misbehaviors have a negative impact on student interest and student engagement. The hypotheses predicting that teacher misbehaviors would impact student interest and engagement were supported since significant, negative correlations were found between teacher misbehaviors and both student interest and engagement, but this should be interpreted with caution. The relationship between teacher misbehaviors and student engagement was weak overall and was insignificant for students at the west coast university. However, this finding is consistent with Mazer's (2013) model explicating the relationships between teacher behaviors, student interest, and student engagement; it appears that student interest is mediating the relationship between teacher misbehaviors and student engagement.

When comparing the relative impact of each type of teacher misbehavior on student interest, we found that teacher incompetence was followed by teacher indolence and then teacher offensiveness in negatively impacting student interest. It is possible that teacher offensiveness ( $M = 8.33$ ) had the least effect because it was experienced less frequently than incompetence ( $M = 14.14$ ) and indolence ( $M = 10.16$ ). It is also possible that some of the elements included in the teacher offensiveness items, such as sarcasm and favoritism, are seen as having elements of immediacy and are therefore not interpreted as misbehaviors.

Next, the difference in the reported levels of teacher misbehaviors and student interest between the two universities deserves attention. Since the west coast university had higher levels of teacher misbehavior, it makes sense that it also had lower levels of student interest. However, this study does not tell us why these differences exist. It is possible that teachers at the west coast university engage in more teacher misbehaviors, but it is also possible that cultural influences and students' previous experiences and socialization might cause them to interpret some teacher behaviors as misbehaviors, while others might interpret those same behaviors as normal, acceptable classroom interactions. Future research should investigate whether this is a difference in actual behaviors or in interpretation of behaviors.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study found that teacher misbehaviors are negatively correlated with student interest and student engagement, but it appears that student interest is mediating the relationship between teacher misbehaviors and student engagement. This study also suggests that teacher offensiveness does not impact student interest as much as incompetence or indolence. This study was conducted before Goodboy and Myers (2015) published a revised instructor misbehaviors measure, and these



data corroborate the need to revisit that measure. Finally, because the effects varied by geographic region, future research should examine how other research-based assumptions about instructional effect hold up across regions, types of universities, and diverse groups of students.

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