

The Effect of Teacher Likability on Student Compliance

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This study examined the effects of teacher likability on student compliance. Thirty undergraduate students participated in this study. The participants were given a description of a fictitious college professor. One group read a description of a likable professor. The other read a description of an unlikable professor. They were then asked to comply with the professor's request for input on a personal project. It was hypothesized that students would comply more with the request of a teacher described as likable. Compliance was measured by counting the number of words used in each participant's response. An independent samples t-test was used to analyze the data and did not show a significant difference between groups.

What motivates people? Is it money, good grades, peer approval, or the satisfaction of doing their best? Whatever it is, motivation helps us to be more productive. Many people find themselves extending a hand to someone just because that person was nice to them. Cottringer (2002) theorized that the more likable a person is the more positive influence he/she will have on others. Cottringer noted a number of characteristics that influence a person's perception of likability. The most effective traits were honesty, empathy, humor, politeness, positive thinking, and supportiveness (Cottringer, 2002). These traits were most effective when they were possessed by people who had the power to influence particular others the most, such as in the case of teachers and students.

Previous research has investigated likability as a variable in student ratings of teacher ability and students' perceptions of learning. In their study, Delucchi and Pelowski (2000) reviewed 1,145 student evaluations of teachers (SETS). Their results showed a statistically significant positive effect of instructor likability on students' overall rating of teaching ability. Their results did not find a significant effect of instructor likability on students' perception of learning. Students gave higher ratings to likable teachers but did not perceive that they would learn more if the teacher was likable or less if the teacher was unlikable.

In a similar study, Wilson (2006) surveyed 1,572 students who rated 44 consenting instructors in a southern university. Students rated their instructor's attitude as a variable in student motivation, student outcome, and student attitude toward instruction. At the end of the course, students reported their grades and responded to questions about how much the instructor motivated them and if the instructor showed genuine concern for the students. The results confirmed Wilson's hypothesis that the instructor's attitude had a significant positive effect on predicted attitudes of students, student motivation toward course studies, and student grades.

Kelley (1950) examined a central trait that influenced student's impressions of a teacher. Fifty-five male college students taking 3 different sections of an economics class participated in the study. The students were told that there would be a substitute instructor for the day. One confederate acted as the stimulus person in two of the sections. Another confederate took this role in the third section of the course. The students were introduced to this teacher by a biographical note said to be written by someone who knew him. They were asked to read the note to themselves and instructed not to discuss its contents with each other. Two kinds of notes were distributed. Both were identical except that in one, the person was described as being "rather cold". In the other form, the substitution phrase "very warm" was printed. After the lecture was over, the students were asked to write their impression of and to rate this substitute instructor on a set of 15 scales. The students who read the "warm" description rated the substitute professor as more sociable, more considerate, and better natured as compared to those who read the "cold" description.

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The current study examined the effect of the likability of teachers on the compliance of students. It was hypothesized that students would be more willing to comply with the request of a teacher who was likable than to a teacher who was not likable.

Method

Participants

This study included thirty undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses at a public northeastern university. Participants were given course credit for participating in this study. The sample consisted of 8 male and 22 female students over 18 years of age.

Materials

A description of a fictitious college professor (used interchangeably with teacher) was given to each participant. Group A participants were given a description of a likable teacher (see Appendix A). Group B participants were given a description of an unlikable teacher (see Appendix B). For the purposes of this study, likable was defined as a person who was accepting, attentive, empathetic, honest, supportive, polite, and warm. The descriptions were exactly the same except for one word to limit the confounding effect of language. The word "not" was added to the description of the unlikable professor.

Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, called Group A and Group B. Before participating in this study, both groups were given a consent form that they read and signed. After returning the consent form, each participant was asked to read a description of a professor (likable or unlikable) and answer a short questionnaire. This questionnaire was intended to distract the participants from the true intent of this study and consisted of the following three questions: 1) "Will you take an elective class with this professor?", 2) "Will you take a class in your major with this professor?", and 3) "Would you recommend this professor to others?" The participants answered by circling either "often", "never", or "don't know" to each question (see Appendix C).

The participants were then asked to write a response to this professor's request to help him/her with a personal project, a study concerning birth order effects. Compliance was measured by counting the number of words used in the response. The operational definition of compliance in this study was the response to the professor's request for student's input for his or her personal research.

Upon collection of the questionnaires, participants' questions about the true nature of this experiment were answered. The questionnaires and consent forms were kept in separate envelopes to secure the confidentiality of the participants.

Results

An independent samples *t*-test was used to analyze the effect of teacher likability on student compliance. The results showed that students who responded to a likable teacher's request did not write significantly more words ($M = 99.86$, $SD = 48.86$) than students who responded to an unlikable teacher's request ($M = 87.88$, $SD = 42.75$), $t(28) = .717$, $p > .05$. Analysis of the data from the questionnaire yielded significant correlations. Students would take an elective class with a likable professor significantly more often than an unlikable professor, $r = .622$, $p < .01$. Students would refer others to take a class with the likable professor significantly more often than the unlikable professor, $r = .573$, $p < .01$. More students with the unlikable professor would never refer him/her to others, $r = .573$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The results of this study did not support the hypothesis that there would be a greater response to a likable teacher's personal request than to the same request made by an unlikable teacher. There are several possible explanations for this. One possibility is that students in both conditions perceived the compliance to the professor's request as compliance to the student experimenters, and this eliminated the potential effect of the professor likability manipulation on compliance.

Additionally, the present study used a description of a fictitious professor. The students may not have believed him or her to be real. A personal relationship with a teacher may produce a more accurate response to likability as in the study done recently by Wilson (2006) who used consenting professors to be evaluated by their students. Further study involving the compliance of students to a real professor's request for help outside the requirements of the class may be useful in showing the tendency toward a person's willingness to be helpful.

Further, SETS are completed at the end of a semester. Students have an opportunity to rate their teachers and these results may aid in the decision of tenure that can help or hurt an instructor's professional career. Delucchi and Pelowski (2000), in examining the results of SETS, found a positive relationship between likability and the rating of teachers.

Lastly, there was the question of what a person perceives as 'likable'. Differences of personality and opinions will show a variety of results. The manipulation between the fictitious likable and unlikable professor may not have been strong enough. Perhaps a personalized letter from a friend or colleague as used in Kelley's (1950) experiment would serve as a better indicator of a likable or unlikable professor.

Although students did not show more compliance with a likable professor's request, there was a strong correlation between teacher likability and the possibility of increased future enrollment in courses with the likable teacher.

Our interest in the present study desired to go beyond this point to investigate how likability of a person can encourage or

discourage compliance on a more personal level. This information can be of service in all professional as well as in personal relationships as it may provide support for the notion that all willingness to comply with a person is greater if one identifies that person as likable.

References

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Appendix A

Description of likable professor:

Instructions: Please read the following description and answer the questions that follow. An additional piece of paper is included if you need more room.

Thank you for your participation in this experiment.

Professor description 1

Professor Smith has been employed by a northeastern university for 12 years.

The professor has been noted to be punctual and present at all assigned classes, and available to students on a regular basis by appointment.

The results of the Student Evaluation of Teachers (SETS) over the past five years showed that the majority of students find the professor to be Accepting, Attentive, Empathetic, Honest, Supportive, Polite, and Warm.

Appendix B

Description of unlikable professor:

Instructions: Please read the following description and answer the questions that follow. An additional piece of paper is included if you need more room.

Thank you for your participation in this experiment.

Professor description 2

Professor Smith has been employed by a northeastern university for 12 years.

The professor has been noted to be punctual and present at all assigned classes, and available to students on a regular basis by appointment.

The results of the Student Evaluation of Teachers (SETS) over the past five years showed that the majority of students find the professor NOT to be Accepting, Attentive, Empathetic, Honest, Supportive, Polite, or Warm.

Appendix C

Questionnaire of distracter questions and dependent variable:

Circle either Often, Never, or Don't Know to the following.

1. Will you take an elective class with this professor?

Often Never Don't Know

2. Will you take a class in your major with this professor?

Often Never Don't Know

3. Would you recommend this professor to others?

Often Never Don't Know

This professor is completing a study concerning birth order effects.

To help with this study he/she would appreciate your input. Please write a paragraph or so giving your opinion of an ideal family size and include the benefits and/or handicaps of being the oldest, middle, or youngest child. An additional sheet of paper is included should you need it.