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Instructional Feedback III: How Do Instructor Facework Tactics and Immediacy Cues Interact to Predict Student Perceptions of Being Mentored?

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Instructional Feedback III: How Do Instructor Facework Tactics and Immediacy Cues Interact to Predict Student Perceptions of being Mentored?

Abstract

Mentoring is a trusting, developmental supervisory relationship whose success largely depends on participants' interpersonal abilities. Feedback interventions (FIs) with mentees commonly present interactional challenges to maintaining that relationship, yet are integral to any teaching-learning context. In this study we examined whether and how two key, trainable teacher communication abilities--face-threat mitigation and nonverbal immediacy--predicted students' perceptions of being mentored by a teacher. Levels of actual face-threat mitigation (FTM) tactics and teacher nonverbal immediacy (TNI) cues were manipulated in a feedback intervention situation on video and analyzed across a 2x2 design. Factorial MANCOVA analysis of perceived mentoring detected significant multivariate main effects for both FTM tactics and TNI cues, no significant two-way interaction effect between the two interpersonal variables, and differences regarding how TNI and FTM alone each contributed to predicting each of mentoring's four measured dimensions. Theoretical and pedagogical implications are discussed in light of facework, approach-avoidance, feedback intervention, and leader-member exchange theories.

Keywords: Mentoring, Face-Threat Mitigation; Facework; Teacher Nonverbal Immediacy Cues, Nonverbal Approach Behaviors, Feedback Intervention; Identity Management; Leader-Member Exchange

Instructional Feedback III: How Do Instructor Facework Tactics and Immediacy Cues Interact to Predict Student Perceptions of being Mentored?

Instructional mentoring can shape healthy learning relationships and productive outcomes with students (Stowers & Barker, 2010). Cultural and contextual forces can encourage students to treat their teachers either as friends or law enforcement during feedback interventions, but mentoring is an alternate type of supervisory relationship teachers can negotiate, where a more able, experienced role model helps develop a protégé as a professional and, often, as a person (Anderson & Shannon, 1988). Offering feedback is essential to teaching and mentoring (Wright, 1992), but the emotional arousal and identity threats associated with critical interactions (Kerssen-Griep, 2001; Värlander, 2008) pose challenges to maintaining a trusting mentor-mentee dynamic.

Though it usually occurs in organizational contexts and satisfies certain psychological needs, mentoring ultimately is an interpersonal accomplishment whose success relies on participants' communication abilities (Stowers & Barker, 2010). Like others in supervisory positions, teachers value the interpersonal tools that help them improve students' performance and learning without jeopardizing smooth instructional relationships (Daly & Vangelisti, 2003). Referencing the organizational leadership phenomenon of leader-member exchange, in this study we examined how two established instructional communication tools--teachers' nonverbal immediacy and face-threat mitigation abilities--might interact to predict students' perceptions of being mentored via high-quality communication rather than being hectored, befriended, or essentially ignored by a teacher during a feedback intervention encounter.

Approach behaviors, including teacher nonverbal immediacy (TNI) cues like physical proximity, frequent gesturing and eye gaze, smiles, vocal variety, and open body positioning, can

reduce a sense of interpersonal distance (Andersen, 1979; Mehrabian, 1969, 1971) and associate with students' increased motivation to learn (Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Frymier, 1993, 1994; Kerksen-Griep & Witt, 2012) and compliance with teachers' authority and requests (Witt & Kerksen-Griep, 2011; Kearney & Plax, 1991). A second communication ability, face-threat mitigation (FTM), invokes a range of verbal and nonverbal tactics to express messages of approbation, tact, and solidarity (Lim & Bowers, 1991). FTM tactics have predicted students' motivations to learn, attentiveness, responsiveness, feedback receptivity, and perceptions of instructor fairness and credibility (Kerksen-Griep, Hess, & Trees, 2003, Kerksen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008; Kerksen-Griep & Witt, 2012; Trees, Kerksen-Griep, & Hess, 2009; Witt & Kerksen-Griep, 2011). FTM and TNI can overlap to a degree in practice, but each is a distinct ability to learn and use; teachers--and students--clearly can offer face-threatening immediacy cues or face-protecting nonverbal distancing cues, for example. We sought to understand how a teacher's TNI and FTM abilities, alone and together, contributed to students feeling mentored by that teacher during a feedback intervention encounter.

Literature Review

Effective Feedback Interventions

Feedback interventions (FIs) give information about at least one aspect of another person's task performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Learners gain the most benefit from FIs when they believe the feedback is useful, high-quality information (King, Schrod, & Weisel, 2009). Detailed FIs usually outperform simple "correct-incorrect" feedback in producing motivational and learning gains (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991; Butler & Winne, 1995), and learners themselves generally prefer elaborated feedback over impersonal or non-specific guidance (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). How FIs are

received, processed, and affect performance depends on a learner's self-identity beliefs and trait orientations to feedback, but also on the manner by which they are communicated (Butler & Winne, 1995; King et al., 2009; Pintrich, 2003).

Integrating several relevant theories, and tested via meta-analysis that found feedback interventions often *reduced* students' performance, Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) feedback intervention theory (FIT) offers a mechanism explaining how and why FIs impact learners in helpful or unhelpful ways. FIT proposes that feedback messages prompt learners to compare their work against a set of criteria or goals. FIs thus expose a "feedback-standard gap" that motivates the learner to apply energy to any of three cognitive control processes in sequence: first to deal with any apparent, emotionally loaded "meta-task" concerns about self-identity (e.g., managing impressions), then with task-motivation issues, and finally, if enough cognitive energy remains, with the task-learning concerns actually targeted by the FI itself. According to FIT, feedback messages alter performance by influencing where learners focus their cognitive attention and energy.

Kluger and DeNisi (1996) argued that seeing the feedback-standard gap spurs only a finite amount of cognitive energy in response to an FI, and that FI message cues as well as personality, task, and situational factors influence learners' FI responses. Students responding to an FI first will spend their cognitive energy repairing their self-identity where needed, as when students mistrust an FI's source or feel an FI ignores, diminishes, or attacks some aspect of their self. By siphoning off finite cognitive resources, energizing this impression management process diminishes the FI's influence on all but the simplest task performances (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002) and renders the FI neutral or even unhelpful in its longer-term relational effects.

By this logic, FI message cues that learners feel target their work rather than diminish their identity should provoke the most adaptive student responses, while poorly conveyed feedback can cost the student the energy needed to tackle the effort and learning tasks targeted by the FI itself (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). For example, early adolescent learners engage academically within environments that mitigate identity-based anxieties and regularly support their abilities, belonging, and autonomy needs (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). Ideally, learners spurred by an FI will feel little need to manage identity concerns and thus will be able to reserve more of their finite cognitive energies for the task-motivation and task-learning processes targeted by the FI itself. Skillfully communicated FI messages are those that give students little reason to divert energy to self-identity repair or protection (Kluger & DeNisi, 1997).

Because the identity and relative power claims negotiated during FI encounters can affect relational perceptions and messages' effectiveness (Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2011), skilled teachers must recognize the recursive relationship between their instructional message tactics and their perceived roles with students. den Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels (2004), for example, found that teachers' actions seen as understanding, considerate, and freeing predicted students' greater effort, pleasure, and subject-specific motivation, while teacher activities seen as dominating or admonishing associated with reduced student confidence in themselves and their work. Clearly, according to FIT's conceptual mechanism, "mentor" is a productive instructional identity to earn from learners via one's communication choices, especially in feedback encounters.

Mentoring

Teachers able to sustain harmonious rapport with learners reap rewards including students' enhanced help-seeking and intrinsic motivations to learn, perceptions of teacher fairness, and trust (Daly & Vangelisti, 2003; Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996; Granitz,

Koernig, & Harich, 2009; Kozanitis, Desbiens, & Chouinard, 2007). Although often differentiated from the processual function of academic advising (Mansson & Myers, 2012), some institutions' advisors are asked to model developmental (rather than prescriptive) advising, which can develop advisor-advisee relationships that share many characteristics with mentor-mentee relationships. Mentoring is a particular kind of supervisory rapport that includes directing and challenging as well as supporting mentees toward autonomy and investment (Daloz, 1983). Kram's (1985) pioneering work distinguished professional (e.g., sponsoring, protecting) from psychosocial mentoring, while highlighting both as essential to a mentee's self-image and ability. Psychosocial mentoring involves, for example, challenging, validating, and counseling a protégé (Kram, 1985; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990).

Most college students fall within the 18-25 age range identified by Arnett (2000) as *emerging adulthood*. During this developmental period, "Good mentors play a vital role in stewarding the promise of a worthy future. As emerging adults are beginning to think critically about self and world, mentors provide crucial forms of recognition, support, and challenge" (Parks, 2011, p. 165). Parks further asserts that, in order to thrive, emerging adults need the influence of able mentors and a supportive environment that allows them to probe, explore, and embrace new ideas and ways of being. When teachers take up the role of psychosocial mentor, they provide more than instructional support alone as they construct formational and influential relationships with their students. In fact, when reflecting on their college years, many individuals can name one or more faculty mentors who were strategic in their ongoing formation and transition to adulthood. In commenting on her college experience, Lertzman (1999) noted, "The people I look to as role models and teachers are those who live contemplatively, ask keen

questions, and tolerate uncertainty. They thrive on the rim. Their minds are like diamonds, glittering with inquiry and beauty...deeply engaged with the world of the living” (p. 2).

Instructional mentoring both resembles and differs from similar practices in a business setting. Studying mentorship in an educational setting, Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney (1997) found that students saw most value in mentoring’s psychosocial aspect, unlike corporate setting mentees who often perceive professional guidance more helpful from mentors than psychosocial guidance. Instructional mentoring involves role modeling, providing individually tailored opportunities to develop toward long-term goals, and showing concern for a student’s comprehensive welfare (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Jenkins & Keefe, 2002; Wright, 1992). Students (i.e., supervisees) rather than teachers usually initiate instructional mentoring relationships, which is another contrast with standard corporate mentoring practices (Myers, 2006).

Educational researchers have examined this sort of teacher-student relationship as relatively large component of “personalized education” both within and beyond the classroom context (Bippus et al., 2003; Jenkins & Keefe, 2002; Waldeck, 2007). Perceived “caring” of this sort in classrooms results in large part from students’ trust in a teacher’s teaching and FI ability over time (Lee & Schallert, 2008). Aspects of mentoring dominate the “personalized” instructional actions recounted by students in Waldeck’s (2007) study, including cultivating social and personal relationships with students, offering their time and counsel, and exhibiting “competent” interpersonal and communication abilities with students, such as skilled speaking and group facilitation, as well as abilities to come across with immediacy and make their “communication relevant to students” (p. 426). For first-generation college students, perceptions of pedagogical and interpersonal relationships with their instructors are influenced in part by the

degree of personal and academic support students receive at critical points in the teaching-learning process (Wang, 2014). In a service learning context, engaging in personally mentored interactions with teachers--whether formally or informally initiated--helps retain first-generation college students (Tinto, 2006), aids their academic and social integration, and builds their self-efficacious thinking about academic goal achievements (McKay & Estrella, 2008).

Mentoring involves a more individualized, less impersonally role-bound pattern of interactions across status lines. In any setting, the perceptions of mutual respect essential to and fed by mentoring can result from informal or formal supervisory relationships, even amidst larger group interactions (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Zimmerman & Paul, 2007). Over time such interactions can create the productive perception that one is involved in a high-quality, in-group relationship with a superior. Such supervisory relationships and their outcomes have been studied in organizational settings as leader-member exchanges.

Leader-member exchange. Leader-member exchange theory posits that superiors develop unique dyadic relationships and differently treated in-groups and out-groups among their subordinates over time (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982), a phenomenon also prevalent in classroom contexts (Myers, 2006). Such high- or low-quality LMX relationships reflect and are shaped by the role-making supervisory communication choices made within those dyads (Sias, 2005 Yrle, Hartman, & Galle, 2002).

Participants involved in high-quality, in-group LMX relationships reliably reap several benefits. Involvement in high-quality LMX creates perceptions of coordinated, participative organizational communication (Yrle, Hartman, & Galle, 2002) and helps subordinates' perceptions of interactional justice positively influence their involvement and performance at work (Burton, Sablinski, & Sekieguchi, 2008), which itself lets subordinates see organizational

practices as more cooperative (Lee, 2001). Such participants tend to show more commitment to the organization, give it more energy and time, and take on greater responsibility (Abu Bakar, Dilbeck, & McCroskey, 2010; Dansereau et al., 1975; Kinicki & Vecchio, 1994; Sias, 2005). Not surprisingly, people involved in high-quality LMX relationships perceive less threat in upward communication (Waldron & Sanderson, 2011).

Responding to LMX theory's relative silence about the specific communication phenomena responsible for LMX attributions, communication scholars have studied the specific actions that create perceptions of involvement in high-quality LMX relationships. Such "person-centered" supervisory communication overlaps with mentoring in that it includes higher quality and greater amounts of information, relatively more positive relational and job-relevant messages, and more permitted upward participation (Abu Bakar et al., 2010; Sias, 2005; Yrle et al., 2002). Such communication itself has predicted employee job satisfaction and perceptions of involvement in higher quality LMX relationships (Fix & Sias, 2006). Person-centered supervisory communication also has been shown to modify positive outcomes such as strong teamwork and performance beyond job requirements (Madlock, Martin, Bogdan, & Ervin, 2007), job satisfaction and commitment to an organization (Sias 2005), and immigrants' smoother adjustment to a host culture (Jian, 2012), previously associated with membership in high-quality LMX relationships,

Key to this study, these organizational employee attributes also describe a desirable student identity perhaps negotiable via similarly high-quality, person-centered LMX interactions in classroom contexts. Myers (2006), for example, found that students in LMX in-group relationships with their teachers communicated at a higher rate than out-group students did, actualizing several healthy motives. He posited that such students may feel themselves

encouraged by teachers to play a vital support role in the classroom, believing their in-group input is both valued and needed to support a healthy learning environment. Given that instructional face-threat mitigation and nonverbal immediacy abilities have been able to predict several classroom phenomena that resemble LMX-associated outcomes, those two instructional communication abilities seem central to interpersonally accomplished perceptions of mentorship in a classroom.

Two Instructional Communication Abilities

Negotiating personal and relational identities is important to shaping supervisory interactions and relationships. Similar to LMX findings in organizational contexts, learners at many educational levels invest in learning activities, attend better to teachers, work harder, manage difficulties better, and more readily accept teachers' criticism when they feel involved in supportive relationships with their instructors (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pintrich, 2003; Trees et al., 2009). Students in one study were more motivated to interact with the teachers they perceived were psychosocial mentors for them, for example (Bippus, Kearney, Plax, & Brooks, 2003).

Though communication apprehension or incompetence can be detrimental to creating such high-quality interactions (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993; Madlock, Martin, Bogdan, & Ervin, 2007), skilled impression management is central to helping students feel included in an LMX in-group relationship with a teacher (Myers, 2006). Instructors' face-threat mitigation and nonverbal immediacy abilities--alone and together--have predicted several outcomes related to maintaining this relationship quality in classrooms.

Face-threat mitigation (FTM). Although particularly true of feedback interventions (Kerssen-Griep, 2001), all teaching is fraught with "face-threatening" moments, and instructors

vary in their abilities to manage those in classroom interaction. *Face* refers to a person's desired social self-image offered in all interaction (Goffman, 1967). Interactions are driven by people's needs to be socially affirmed by valued others and to be free of unnecessary constraints on their actions, needs that Brown and Levinson (1987) labeled positive and negative face needs.

Facework names the communication tactics people use to restore or protect each other's and their own identities. Although negative and positive face needs are routinely threatened by daily interactions, interpersonally skilled communicators use patterns of nonverbal and linguistic strategies to minimize face loss and facilitate smooth interchanges and relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). So-called "positive facework" often involves verbal and nonverbal messages indicating solidarity and approbation, while tactful "negative facework" tactics usually buffer the impositions or implied constraints inherent in a message (Lim & Bowers, 1991). Asking a favor threatens negative face less than demanding that favor would, for example.

FIs can provoke unhelpful attributions and responses if carelessly communicated (Cazden, 1979; Smith & King, 2004). Offering students advice--especially when the student has not initiated that conversation--inherently threatens face by imposing on their freedom to act and often critiquing something they have done (and their competence, by implication). For example, Jenkins and Dragojevic (2011) found a persuader's use of more controlling language led hearers to perceive greater relative power claimed by the speaker, see greater face threat in the persuasive message, and then derogate the persuader, the message, and even the topical attitude advocated in that message. None of these listener responses aid optimal feedback reception and performance response (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Successful FIs correct students' performances, yet those interactions inevitably aggregate to develop ongoing teacher-student relationships, for better and worse. Those relations combine with cultural, contextual, and situational forces (e.g., influence goals) to impact how each student interprets the type and level of face threat, and to mediate how well they will understand, process, and utilize any feedback (Daly & Vangelisti, 2003; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Sabeel & Wilson, 2005; Senko & Harackiewicz, 2005; Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998). Levels of FI face threat may be perceived differently by students depending on their rapport with the teacher, for example, or their differing cultural expectations about appropriate and effective communication. Regardless, the student's interpretation ultimately trumps the teacher's intention when it comes to processing and responding to FI messages.

In instructional settings, mitigating threats to positive face needs (i.e., a student's competence or place in the group) has been the stronger predictor of classroom outcomes, perhaps because students simply expect and give license to teachers to impose negative face threats as part of doing their job (Cazden, 1979; Trees et al., 2009). Students who perceive skilled face-threat mitigation during feedback interventions show less defensiveness about and greater receptivity to the feedback and see it as more useful; demonstrate a task mastery goal orientation (task-mastery oriented students tend to treat teachers more as mentors than as adversaries; Darnon, Muller, Schragar, Pannuzzo, & Butera, 2006) and greater intrinsic learning motivations, attentiveness, and responsiveness; perceive their learning environments as more supportive and interactively fair; and view their teachers as more credible, and as instructional mentors (Kerssen-Griep et al. 2003, 2008; Trees et al., 2009). Increasing actual FTM tactics predicted students' greater motivation to learn and perception of interactional fairness (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012), as well as a teacher's higher perceived credibility (Witt & Kerssen-Griep,

2011). Because students experiencing FTM during FIs seem to respond to those teachers as they would to mentors, enhanced FTM during FIs should predict students perceiving a psychosocially mentoring relationship with their instructor.

Teacher nonverbal immediacy (TNI). When he introduced the theoretical construct of *immediacy*, Mehrabian (1969, 1971) identified sets of verbal and nonverbal communication cues associated with perceptions of reduced psychological or physical distance between persons involved in an interaction. After Andersen (1979) imported the construct into the classroom context, instructional communication researchers typically operationalized TNI as smiling, frequent eye contact, open body position, gestures, appropriate touch, moving around the classroom, and using vocal variety in inflection, tone, pace, and pitch (Witt, Wheelless & Allen, 2004). The term *immediacy behaviors* has been used to denote this generally accepted set of U.S.-derived TNI cues, but Mehrabian's original construct focused on receivers' affective responses to these nonverbal approach behaviors. Though both concepts are legitimate, clarity is warranted in their application. In the present experiment we integrated particular nonverbal approach behaviors into experimental manipulations, thus implementing the behavioral view rather than the perceptual view of TNI cues.

Most students expect their instructors to demonstrate a degree of personal warmth and approach (Witt & Schrodt, 2006), and the use of TNI cues helps establish and maintain a communicative connection that enhances the teacher-student relationship. Research has shown that students' perceptions, attitudes, and feelings are influenced positively by the instructor's nonverbal expressions of liking and approach (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Witt, Schrodt, & Turman, 2010). For example, TNI cues are associated with classroom outcomes such as learning (Witt et al., 2004), motivation (Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Frymier, 1993, 1994), perceived

instructor credibility (Chamberlin, 2000; Schrodt & Witt, 2006; Teven & Hanson, 2004), course evaluations (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996), perceived instructor clarity (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998, 2001), effectiveness (Andersen, 1979), and power (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). Given the persistent and wide-spread association between TNI and positive perceptions of classroom instructors, there is theoretical and practical justification to hypothesize that TNI cues will also correlate with positive perceptions of an instructor's role as mentor.

Rationale and Hypothesis

Interaction effects. Teachers' interpersonal abilities are key to preventing or repairing FIs' threats to participants' identities, thus facilitating healthier and more direct cognitive engagement with feedback (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2008; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Communicating FIs incompetently can distract students from cognitively processing the improvement information and reduce the FI's effectiveness, as well as the credibility of its provider. Manipulations of teachers' face-threat mitigation and nonverbal immediacy tactics in tandem (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011) have showed these key instructional abilities interact to predict students' motivation to learn and all three components of a teacher's perceived credibility. TNI and FTM interacted most purely to predict credibility's character dimension, but TNI cues dominated the interaction effects predicting students' motivation and perceptions of teacher competence, while FTM tactics were primarily responsible for students' perceptions of teacher caring (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011). The two abilities did not interact to predict student perceptions of classroom interactional fairness, though each predicted that outcome on its own (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012).

Interpersonally skilled FI messaging creates more personalized, effective information reception and processing. Recognizing one's involvement in high-quality communication (in an LMX sense) contributes to viewing its provider as a credible source of helpful guidance. Because mentoring is a source variable similar to credibility, we speculated here that TNI and FTM again would show reference to each other (i.e., an interaction effect) in students' judgments about whether a mentoring relationship was or was not indicated during a feedback intervention episode:

H₁: During a feedback episode, greater combined negative and positive face-threat mitigation (FTM) tactics from an instructor will interact with greater teacher nonverbal immediacy (TNI) cues to predict students' perceptions of greater psychosocial mentoring from the instructor.

Method

Participants

Participants were 269 students enrolled in one of 14 undergraduate communication courses at a large, metropolitan, Southwestern U.S. university. The gender mix included 121 males and 144 females (four did not indicate sex) from 18 to 55 years of age ($M = 20$, $SD = 3.4$), including 99 first-year students, 46 sophomores, 49 juniors, and 73 seniors (two did not indicate academic classification), pursuing a variety of academic majors.

Procedure

Most teacher nonverbal immediacy (TNI) researchers have used as their data students' recollected frequency counts recorded on a teacher behaviors checklist (i.e., smiling, eye gaze, gesturing, body positions, vocal variety), about which the findings of TNI methodological critiques (Hess, Smythe, & Communication 451, 2001; Smythe & Hess, 2005) have established

some worthy cautions about validity and freedom from other measurement biases. Similarly, much research about teachers' face-threat mitigation (FTM) to-date has investigated only students' perceptions of the degrees to which such phenomena were present in their teachers' communication. Moreover, very few researchers have examined potential interactions among the variables' relationships with key instructional outcomes (see Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011; Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012 for exceptions). The literature thus far says little about what happens when teachers use a lot of one tactic with little of the other--using face-threatening immediacy cues during feedback interventions, for example, or non-immediate face-threat mitigation tactics.

To extend existing research about both of these instructional communication phenomena, in this study we manipulated a teacher's FTM and TNI actions across video-recorded scenarios rather than assess only students' perceptions of FTM and TNI presence or absence in interaction. Students were invited to participate in return for extra credit offered by their course instructor. Each reported to a designated computer lab at a specified time and logged into the study. Participants opened the online questionnaire, gave demographic information, and completed the Instructional Feedback Orientation Scale (King, Schrod, & Weisel, 2009) about their usual responses to feedback interventions.

The data collection system then randomly assigned each participant to view one of the four experimental conditions described below, where they watched a video segment of an instructor addressing student feedback to the camera as though directly to them. That white male actor in his forties was an experienced classroom instructor of average physical attractiveness, dressed in an unremarkable professional manner suited to a U.S. college classroom, and from a state far from where data were collected, virtually ensuring no participant was acquainted with

him. Every effort was made to simulate a contemporary small U.S. college classroom context to maximize ecological validity. Participants were told to view the video as if they had completed their first speech in the instructor's class a few moments before and now were receiving some feedback about it as a relatively private aside in the classroom during transition time as the class let out. Participants then completed the Mentor Role Instrument (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990) to assess their perceptions of the instructor's psychosocial mentoring. All participation took place in the computer lab with a researcher present to help standardize procedure and experimental control. Students completed the survey anonymously and were thanked and debriefed at the end of the 20-minute session.

Experimental Manipulations

Face-threat mitigation. Existing research about supervision and facework tactics (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goldsmith, 1999, 2000; Jameson, 2004; Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Piorkowski and Scheurer, 2000; Wilson & Kunkel, 2000) was consulted to create videotaped conditions of greater and lesser face-threat mitigation (FTM) used by a teacher offering a student (i.e., the viewer) feedback about her/his just-given speech in class. The essential content of the feedback message was identical in the two videotaped scenarios, but they varied in how much face-threat mitigation the instructor utilized to buffer the criticism. The two conditions varied in their directness-indirectness, in their positive-negative face redress via the relative absence or presence of informal, complimentary, in-group language; tactful hedges and qualifiers; humor and self-disclosure; and solidarity messages; and in assuring (or not) that any downplaying a dilemma's seriousness was accompanied by advice. While the comment "When you lost your place, you completely lost your composure" offered little face-threat mitigation, for example, its counterpart in the other condition was a self-disclosive expression of solidarity

showing much greater FTM: “When you lost your place, it threw you off for a while, but you managed that better than I did in my first college speech.” Potentially threatening directives in the lesser FTM scenario, such as “You have to practice giving the speech,” were replaced in the greater FTM condition with the tactful and less direct assertion that “You might also consider...” and an informal question asking “What went well from your perspective?” The greater FTM scenario lasted four minutes, and the lesser FTM lasted three minutes. Appropriately congruent paralinguistic and other nonverbal cues accompanied all scripted verbal tactics.

Manipulation checks validated these video conditions of greater and lesser FTM. We created written scripts for each experimental condition, including exact wording as well as notation for the occurrence of FTM-relevant nonverbal cues. Four trained graduate students randomly received the script used in the greater FTM scenario; another four students received the script used in the lesser FTM scenario. All raters knew we were experimentally measuring effects of teacher FTM and TNI, but were unaware of the dependent variable. Each reviewed a checklist of verbal and nonverbal face-saving strategies drawn from existing facework research, examined their assigned script, and used a 5-point semantic differential scale to assess the components of the instructor’s face-threatening (= 1) vs. face-saving (= 5) feedback intervention. An independent samples *t*-test supported the validity of the conditions depicted in the scenarios, $t(6) = -13.00, p < .001$. Perceptions of FTM were significantly higher in the greater FTM condition ($M = 5.00, SD = .00$) than in the lesser FTM condition ($M = 1.75, SD = .50$).

Teacher nonverbal immediacy. We obtained experimental conditions depicting two levels of teacher nonverbal immediacy by scripting specific nonverbal cues and vocal inflection cues drawn from the theoretical taxonomy of Mehrabian (1969, 1981) and Richmond, Gorham, and McCroskey (1987). The instructor engaged in frequent eye contact, smiled and used pleasant

facial expressions, left his desk and moved closer to the camera, used relaxed body positions, and gestured freely in a relaxed manner to illustrate or emphasize points in the greater immediacy condition. He used vocal variety as he spoke and adopted a general nonverbal manner associated with friendliness, informality, and approachability in mainstream U.S. society. When performing the script for the lesser immediacy condition, the teacher engaged in little eye contact and few facial expressions, sat at his desk, maintained a formal body position, and used few gestures as he gave feedback to the student. He spoke with little vocal variety and adopted a general nonverbal manner associated with formality, authority, and psychological distance in American college classrooms (Zhang & Oetzel, 2006). The two TNI scenarios were relatively equal in length.

As with the FTM scenarios, manipulation checks validated these conditions of greater and lesser TNI. After reviewing a checklist of nonverbal immediacy cues drawn from Mehrabian (1969, 1981) and Richmond et al. (1987), four trained graduate students viewed the video of the instructor performing the greater immediacy script, while four other raters viewed video of the instructor performing the lesser immediacy script. Though video evidence could have been utilized for both manipulation checks--raters probably would have been able to distinguish FTM from TNI tactics on video--we reserved video assessment for determining the purely nonverbal actions constituting nonverbal immediacy cues (e.g., facial expressions; eye and body movement). TNI raters were instructed to ignore verbal tactics and focus solely on the teacher's nonverbal cues (the FTM checks had involved assessing both nonverbal and verbal tactics on the scripts). Each rater then assessed the instructor's feedback for TNI using a 6-point semantic differential scale distinguishing nonverbally non-immediate (= 1) from nonverbally immediate (= 6) actions. An independent samples *t*-test supported the validity of the conditions depicted in

the scenarios, $t(6) = -4.33, p = .005$. Perceptions of TNI were higher in the greater TNI condition ($M = 5.25, SD = .96$) than in the lesser TNI condition ($M = 2.0, SD = 1.16$).

Measurement

Perceived mentoring. We utilized four 3-item subscales of Ragins and McFarlin's (1990) published Mentor Role Instrument (MRI)--challenge, friendship, role model, and counselor--to measure students' perceptions of psychosocial mentoring from an instructor. The overall MRI was validated to assess the relative presence of each professional and psychosocial mentoring function proposed by Kram's (1985) mentor role theory. While Kram's "psychosocial" mentoring functions have logical connections with the instructional communication phenomena examined here, we omitted all the "professional" MRI subscales (e.g., "My mentor and I frequently socialize one-on-one outside the work setting") because those perceptions are not likely influenced by variations in an instructor's TNI or FTM actions. These MRI subscales previously earned Cronbach's alpha scores between .74 and .92 (Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for this study were consistent with those scores and appropriate for analysis (challenge $\alpha = .84$; friendship $\alpha = .89$; role model $\alpha = .91$; counseling $\alpha = .86$). We altered the MRI's overall prompt from "My mentor" to "My instructor" and changed "organization" to "school" each time it appeared. Respondents used a 7-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to report their judgment about each item.

Feedback orientation. In order to control for students' trait orientation to instructional feedback, we measured that phenomenon using the Instructional Feedback Orientation Scale (IFOS, King et al., 2009). The scale's four dimensions reveal participants' ordinary perceptions of and responses to instructional feedback: its *utility* (ten items like "I pay careful attention to

instructional feedback”), *sensitivity* (nine items like “Corrective feedback is intimidating”), *confidentiality* (five items like “I prefer to receive feedback from a teacher in private”), and *retention* (three items like “I can’t remember what teachers want me to do when they provide feedback”). Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients in this study were .66 for utility, .85 for sensitivity, .85 for confidentiality, and .60 for retention, consistent with previous IFOS reliability scores (.85 for utility, .86 for sensitivity, .74 for confidentiality, .69 for retention; King et al., 2009). Respondents used a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Table 1 contains a correlation matrix of all variables in the study. We conducted a factorial MANCOVA to investigate the hypothesis proposing potential co-influence of both FTM and TNI on students’ perceptions of instructional mentoring. After controlling for a significant effect for the instructional feedback orientation dimension of retention, Wilks’ $\lambda = .949$, $F(4, 260) = 3.509$, $\eta^2 = .05$, $p = .008$, we detected significant multivariate main effects for both FTM (face-threat mitigation) tactics, Wilks’ $\lambda = .796$, $F(4, 260) = 16.692$, $\eta^2 = .20$, $p < .001$, and TNI (teacher nonverbal immediacy) cues, Wilks’ $\lambda = .874$, $F(4, 260) = 9.375$, $\eta^2 = .13$, $p < .001$. However, no significant two-way TNI plus FTM interaction effect was detected. We conducted univariate *t*-tests to compare the contributions of TNI and FTM on each of the four dimensions of perceived mentoring. TNI showed similar effects across all dimensions of mentoring ($\eta^2 = .08$ to $.10$), but variations were observed in the magnitude of effects shown for FTM ($\eta^2 = .01$ to $.14$). The largest FTM effect was observed on the perceived *Friend* dimension of mentoring, and the smallest (non-significant) FTM effect was detected on the *Challenging* dimension. Table 2 contains a comparison of cell means and effect sizes.

Discussion

Teachers' skilled face-threat mitigation (FTM) and nonverbal immediacy (TNI) are interpersonal means to communicate effective instructional feedback while sustaining smooth teacher-learner relationships similar to those associated with high-quality leader-member exchanges (LMX) in other organizations. In this study we hypothesized that FTM and TNI together would co-influence students' judgments regarding whether a mentoring relationship (vs. one of lesser quality) was present during a feedback intervention (FI) episode. As anticipated by the study's literature review, the facework and immediacy students experienced during the FI from the instructor each had significant impacts on their classroom mentoring perceptions. However, multivariate analysis of the 2x2 design revealed that levels of FTM and TNI did not show an interaction effect in influencing students' perceptions of instructional mentoring in this FI situation.

Witt and Kerssen-Griep's (2011) study of a different message source characteristic—credibility during FIs—discovered an interaction effect between TNI and FTM that this study of mentoring perceptions did not find. It may be that mentoring is a simpler relational determination for students to make than is credibility, where students must integrate a teacher's apparent character and competence as well as the professional caring component of credibility (Teven & Hanson, 2004) that perhaps overlaps the most with mentoring. A similar rationale conjectured the TNI-FTM interaction effect Kerssen-Griep and Witt (2012) found was present when predicting students' motivations to learn, but absent when predicting their probably less complicated perceptions of interactional fairness.

Perhaps students always consult a teacher's TNI and FTM actions for relational information, as evidenced by consistent main effects for both phenomena across several studies,

but further interpret FTM and TNI activities relative to each other only when making more complex determinations that involve combining more, or more disparate decision variables. Though the current study shows it may be possible to be seen as “mentoring” by demonstrating either greater FI immediacy or greater FI face-threat mitigation (the means for high levels of each tactic are very close on all but one mentoring variable), it would make little sense to choose using one over the other in practice, given that much research now has demonstrated the relational benefits of having both abilities in one’s instructional communication repertoire. This is a testable question with theoretical implications for understanding how students process relational communication information in classroom settings.

Additional insights can be found by examining the main effects, as FTM and TNI here each predicted students’ perceptions of mentoring similarly, but separately. First, the directionality of the FTM and TNI main effects was the same for all four tested dimensions of mentoring (*Counselor, Friend, Role Model, Challenge*): more of each was better for perceiving all four dimensions of psychosocial mentoring.

Second, TNI effects were consistent across all four psychosocial mentoring dimensions, while the FTM effects were consistent across all dimensions except lower-FTM’s subdued effect on the *Challenge* aspect of mentoring. That may be because students generally expect some face threat and challenge as inherent in teaching (Cazden, 1979), perhaps making minimal face-threat mitigation less remarkable for students within the context of a mentor’s *Challenge*. Instead, this and previous research shows teachers’ FTM most strongly predicts the warmer side of learning relationships, such as the character and caring dimensions of credibility (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011), the teacher support component of learning environments, and the *Friend* dimension of psychosocial mentoring (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2008). These findings differ from previous

research in that TNI cues in this case did not moderate the effects of the other (FTM) communication variable examined here (Kearney, Plax, Smith, & Sorenson, 1988; Witt & Wheelless, 2001), nor did FTM tactics moderate TNI cues' effects relative to perceived instructional mentoring as Kerssen-Griep and colleagues (2008) postulated based on their study's findings.

These results do affirm that FTM and TNI tactics apparently complement each other to help students hear instructional advice as coming from individually concerned, directive, expert mentors. Similar to the social support and guidance preferred by emerging adults in other interpersonal contexts (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998; Samter, 2003), students here apparently were more inclined to perceive a mentoring relationship with an instructor who could offer face-adroit feedback while engaging in the eye contact, physical approach, smiling, and vocal expressiveness that comprise TNI cues common in contemporary U.S. college classrooms.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

This study's findings extend the heuristic application of feedback intervention theory (FIT; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) in the classroom context. In this study, instructional FTM tactics and TNI cues during feedback positively influenced perceptions of mentoring by an instructor, which FIT suggests should help students activate the task- and motivation-related cognitions that produce the most appropriate and effective attitudinal and behavioral responses to feedback messages from that teacher. FIT's mechanism shows how an instructor's interpersonal skill in offering critical messages can keep identity threats and other distractions in the background and thus help students respond productively to the feedback's content.

The study's findings also help scholars and teachers understand classroom teaching as very similar to key aspects of team and organizational leadership. Often conceived only as a kind

of public speaking, classroom instruction also involves long-term group leadership and relational work in an organizational context. Discovering here that a teacher's TNI and FTM abilities predict perceptions of being mentored by that teacher echoes similar organizational findings about effects of person-centered supervisory communication (Fix & Sias, 2006, Sias, 2005) and participation in LMX in-group relationships (Myers, 2006). Relevant implications of such relationships may include that students perceive less threat in communicating with teachers they view as mentoring them, as is true of employees who feel involved in high-quality LMX relationships with their supervisors (Waldron & Sanderson, 2011). This matters when communication apprehension is the biggest stumbling block to engaging an LMX in-group supervisory relationships (Madlock et al. 2007).

Although additional factors likely help regulate why a teacher's students may vary in the relationships they develop with a teacher, it is clear from these findings that increased FTM and TNI abilities indeed enhance rather than detract from the likelihood that an instructor's teaching will be perceived as more "mentoring." These findings add further *behavioral* TNI and FTM evidence (see also Kerksen-Griep & Witt, 2012; Witt & Kerksen-Griep, 2011) to complement the mainly perceptual focus and data otherwise available about these variables' roles in educational outcomes. Research now indicates that students exposed to nonverbally immediate feedback interventions supporting their face needs should perceive that their teacher is mentoring them rather than in some lesser relationship with them. Even though each student enters each new learning relationship fueled with expectations formed by cultures, context, and situational forces, FTM and TNI each function as consequential relationship builders, as ways to negotiate FI interactions over time into allied instructional relationships that motivate and improve performance.

Teachers should consider keeping TNI and FTM in mind both as desired perceptions to earn from students, and as particular behavioral repertoires to have in their FI toolkits (see common tactics applied in this study's experimental manipulations, for example). While incompetent FI interactions very likely dilute a teacher's influence on students' learning, reliably creating skilled FTM and TNI FI interactions may help facilitate the classroom relationships and learning environments that help teachers maximize the impact of a teacher's subject matter-focused efforts with students (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2008; Patrick et al. 2007; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011). Overall, these findings help teachers and scholars better understand how patterns in teachers' TNI and FTM communication can help create key student role and relational perceptions that facilitate improved student performance and productive learning outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

Findings here as anywhere should be interpreted within the context that produced them. In this study we examined some effects of instructional immediacy and facework as seen primarily through U.S. Caucasian eyes. Although face needs are universally felt, each culture sets baseline expectations covering facework and immediacy norms in classroom communication (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). This study's conclusions also must be understood within its video-based experimental conditions. Offering various feedback interventions from an instructor on video helped create the procedural control needed for this research design, but could not achieve the ideal ecological validity that could come from examining students' responses to multiple feedback interventions offered under particular conditions (e.g., private versus public) by their own instructors *in situ*. Those relationships and situations themselves deserve exploring as potentially helping frame the face threats students perceive in particular FIs. Despite these limitations, using recorded FIs allowed manipulations of actual FTM and TNI cues here rather

than relying only on students' perhaps flawed or distorted recollections of a teacher's actions (Hess et al., 2001; Smythe & Hess, 2005).

Instructional researchers can build on these findings by determining which sorts of students' mentoring perceptions are affected in which ways by what sorts of facework and immediacy tactics used within particular teaching-learning relationships and contexts. Researchers also might investigate how particular teachers apply both FTM and TNI practices in their own classroom communication, and with what consequences. The new knowledge here offers heuristic means to examine and explain teachers' FI communication tactics. It also helps instructors develop and refine feedback intervention practices to improve their teaching's affinity, clarity, and effectiveness. Although FTM and TNI are conceptually distinct abilities that impact the interactional and relational components of classroom communication, they may be even simpler to apply than to study: teachers likely influence their students' mentoring perceptions by regularly utilizing both face-threat mitigation and nonverbal immediacy tactics during feedback interventions.

Looking ahead, how *are* face-threat mitigation and immediacy outcomes accomplished in practice by instructors who are embedded in particular contexts and relationships with their learners, organizations, and cultures? Domenici and Littlejohn (2006) described the work of "facework artisans" in interpersonal and organizational contexts, for example. Seeking additional nonverbal and verbal manifestations of face threat mitigation and immediacy in learning environments may reveal that teachers embody many means--some of them no doubt idiosyncratic--to save face for and create affinity and rapport with their students. Such relations help clearing the path for greater teacher influence, more aligned learning, and ultimately better performance through cleanly processed feedback interventions.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Product-Moment Correlations for All Variables (N = 269)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	IFOS Util	IFOS Reten	IFOS Sens	IFOS Confi	MRI Chall	MRI Frnd	MRI Role	MRI Coun
1. IFOS – Utility	4.34	.37	--							
2. IFOS – Retention	2.20	.56	-.36*	--						
3. IFOS – Sensitivity	2.40	.60	-.17*	.26*	--					
4. IFOS – Confidentiality	3.65	.71	-.01	.20*	.39*	--				
5. MRI – Challenge	3.77	.74	.07	-.18*	-.04	-.09	--			
6. MRI – Friend	3.34	.98	.08	-.03	-.04	-.03	.60*	--		
7. MRI – Role	2.74	1.02	.10	-.01	-.06	-.08	.52*	.83*	--	
8. MRI - Counselor	3.28	.93	.12	-.09	-.08	-.14	.66*	.83*	.80*	--
9. MRI - Overall	3.28	.82	.11	-.08	-.06	-.10	.76*	.93*	.91*	.93*

Note. IFOS = Instructional Feedback Orientation Scale. MRI = Mentor Role Instrument.

* = Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 2

Comparisons of Cell Means and Main Effects (N = 269)

Outcome	Overall	MRI -	MRI -	MRI -	MRI -
	Mentoring	Challenge	Friend	Role	Counselor
Lower TNI (<i>n</i> = 137)	3.04	3.58	3.06	2.46	3.07
Higher TNI (<i>n</i> = 132)	3.53	3.96	3.63	3.03	3.50
Effect Size (η^2)	.10	.08	.10	.09	.08
Lower FTM (<i>n</i> = 149)	3.08	3.76	3.02	2.48	3.07
Higher FTM (<i>n</i> = 120)	3.53	3.78	3.73	3.06	3.54
Effect Size (η^2)	.08	.01	.14	.09	.08

Note. TNI = Teacher Nonverbal Immediacy. FTM = Face-Threat Mitigation. MRI = Mentor Role Instrument.