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Wesley T. Durham
University of Southern Indiana

Adam C. Jones
Missouri Western State University

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Undergraduate Teaching Assistants And Their Use of Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors in the Basic Communication Course

Wesley T. Durham
Adam C. Jones

Over the past two decades, perhaps no instructional communication topic has been researched as thoroughly as teacher immediacy. According to Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, and Plax (1987), teacher immediacy is defined as, "a communication variable that impacts the perception of physical and psychological closeness" (p. 574). While Richmond, et al.'s (1987) definition of immediacy has had great utility for instructional communication researchers who have studied the phenomenon quantitatively, in the present study, we approach the communication phenomenon of teacher immediacy from an interpretive, qualitative perspective that requires altering the definition for the purposes of observation (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Consequently, working from the definitions posited by Richmond, et al. (1987) and Titsworth (2001a, 2001b), we will attempt to define teacher immediacy in an "interpretivist-friendly" manner that extends the concept beyond variable status. For the purposes of the present study, teacher immediacy will be defined as, "a verbal and nonverbal communication process through which teachers and students jointly create feelings of perceived closeness to one an-

other." In this analysis, however, only the nonverbal dimensions of immediacy will be studied.

Teacher immediacy is a communication phenomenon that possesses numerous observable nonverbal behaviors, both from teachers and students. According to Titsworth (2001a), these nonverbal teacher behaviors tend to include, but are not limited to, "consistent eye contact, movement, vocal variety, gestures, smiling, and humor" (p. 170). If instructors engage in teacher immediacy behaviors, then they can expect students to take better notes, approach the instructors more often, and ask more questions (Titsworth 2001a, 2001b; Frymier & Houser, 2000). Consequently, immediacy behaviors within the classroom are suitable communication phenomena to study when using observational methods.

The impetus of this particular study is to observe what, if any, immediacy behaviors are used by undergraduate teaching assistants in the basic communication course context. As previously mentioned, studies on teacher immediacy behaviors within the collegiate classroom is certainly not a novel idea. However, one important area that remains underdeveloped within the existing teacher immediacy literature is how undergraduate teaching assistants enact these behaviors, and how, if at all, students respond to these teaching assistants differently based on the enactment of these behaviors.

As institutions of higher learning across the country search for ways to simultaneously serve more students within their basic courses and to do so in a more economical manner, a select number of colleges and universities have developed basic courses that incorporate undergraduate graders who receive credit for instructional

Basic Communication Course Annual

internships. In order to become an undergraduate teaching assistant for a basic course, students must be selected by their instructors on the basis of their performance within the course. Therefore, ideally, the undergraduate teaching assistants represent the premium students from prior offerings of the course in which they serve as teaching assistants. The incorporation of undergraduate graders and teaching assistants are traditionally found in Personalized Systems of Instruction and modified Keller Plans.

According to Fox (2004), Personalized Systems of Instruction (PSI) were developed and introduced in the 1960s as an alternative option to the traditional lecture-based method of college teaching (Keller, 1968) and remains one of education's most prominent examples of mastery-based instruction. Fox (2004) also notes that few educational models have been as scrutinized empirically as PSI, and even fewer have emerged so unscathed. Although interest in PSI peaked in the 1970s and has decreased steadily in the decades since (Buskist, Cush, & DeGrandpre, 1991), it remains an attractive model for educators concerned with improving the quality of their instruction (Fox, 2004).

According to Roberts, Meier, Santogrossi, and Moore (1978), PSI represents a radical departure from the traditional teacher lecture. Instead, PSI represents an instructional format whereby students are involved in mastery learning through examination and peer tutorials. Therefore, PSI shifts the focus of the instruction away from lecture formats to one-on-one student-tutor interaction. The results of these programs, overall, have been positive (Wesp & Ford, 1982); however, the relationships between the undergraduate students enrolled

in these basic courses and the undergraduate teaching assistants who evaluate their performance have gone largely ignored in the instructional literature.

Basic courses in which the Personalized Systems of Instruction and/or modified Keller Plans have been employed represent fruitful contexts for instructional research for two important reasons. First, because both teaching assistants within the courses and their students are undergraduates, it will be interesting to see how instructional communication phenomena (such as immediacy) operate when there exists no inherent legitimate power differential between the two groups. Second, by researching these "new ways" of basic course instruction, administrators will be more informed in terms of evaluating the success (or lack thereof) of these types of instruction. In other words, due to the lack of research in this particular area, programs in the communication discipline are relatively unsure as to how well these systems of instruction are operating within curricula. In a first attempt to explore instructional communication phenomena between undergraduate teaching assistants and their undergraduate students, this study will explore how, if at all, teacher immediacy behaviors are used by undergraduate teaching assistants in the basic communication courses at a large Midwestern university, and how, if at all, their students respond to these behaviors.

RATIONALE

The literature on teacher immediacy can be segmented into four distinct lines of research. First, there

is a bevy of research that links teacher immediacy with teacher effectiveness (Kearney & McCroskey, 1980; Andersen, 1979; Norton, 1977; Sallinen-Kuparinen, 1992). Second, researchers have explored the relationship between teacher immediacy and student motivation within the classroom (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Frymier, 1993; Wanzer & McCroskey, 1998). Third, teacher immediacy has been linked by numerous instructional researchers to student learning (O'Mara, et al., 1996; Teven & McCroskey, 1996; Nussbaum & Scott, 1980; Witt & Wheeless, 2001). Finally, immediacy behaviors have been linked by some instructional researchers as being particularly detrimental if enacted intermittently or when targeted at some students and not others (Feldman, 2001; Bond & Venus, 1991; Cooley & Triemer, 2002; LaFrance, 2001).

Immediacy & Teacher Effectiveness

According to Andersen (1979), immediacy is instrumental to teacher effectiveness because as teachers appear to be more immediate with their students, students' affect also increases which causes more solidarity within the classroom. Consequently, as teachers employ more immediacy behaviors (i.e., smiling, leaning forward, gesturing, etc.), they create a more cohesive and unified relationship with their students. The relationship between solidarity and immediacy has been repeatedly confirmed throughout the literature; however, one of the facilitating characteristics of both immediacy and solidarity is the instructional construct of communicator style.

As Sallinen-Kuparinen (1992) noted, "The following teacher characteristics have been investigated in terms of their impact on student learning: perceived credibility, homophily, attraction, disclosiveness, solidarity, and communicator style" (p. 154). Sallinen-Kuparinen (1992) argued, however, that the construct of communicator style was indeed the best predictor of all the other aforementioned constructs. Communicator style represents the manner in which a teacher verbally and nonverbally communicates how information should be understood by the students (Sallinen-Kuparinen, 1992). Norton (1977) stated, "[Communicator style involves] what is said and the way it said" (p. 225). Consequently, communicator style, more than any other instructional communication construct, facilitates immediacy, solidarity, credibility, etc.

In a landmark study, Kearney and McCroskey (1980) analyzed the aspects of communicator style within Keller Plan and personal system of instruction courses that led to immediacy, solidarity, lowered communication apprehension for students, and increased teacher effectiveness. According to Kearney and McCroskey (1980):

> Teaching styles that are indicative of high responsiveness are characterized as emotional, sensitive, social, understanding, and approachable. The Keller Plan or Personalized System of Instruction incorporates strategies for emitting positive feedback, supplying rewards, and minimizing frustration or failure for the students. (p. 534).

While the aforementioned systems of instruction may be designed to elicit rewards and a supportive environment, the above quotation tends to focus too much on

the actual design of the course and not enough on the actual communicator style and subsequent effectiveness of the actual teacher. Moreover, how these systems of instruction have been incorporated into the college curricula do not fit neatly within the original design that Kearney and McCroskey (1980) illustrated. In reality, many of these Personalized Systems of Instruction have incorporated undergraduate graders that should not only redirect the interests of researchers away from the course design, but it should redirect researchers away from looking at the communicator style of the instructors as well (considering that the actual instructors are more or less peripheral to the undergraduate teaching assistants).

Immediacy and Student Motivation

Recently, instructional communication researchers have looked at how immediacy behaviors motivate students within classroom (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Frymier, 1993; Wanzer & McCroskey, 1998). More specifically, these researchers have extrapolated interpersonal communication constructs (i.e., measures of friendship, etc.) to analyze how immediacy behaviors impact student-teacher relationships. Frymier and Houser (2000) found that Burleson and Samter's (1990) communication skills that were used primarily to study platonic relationships (friendship) could also be highly instrumental when studying student-teacher relationships. In this study, Frymier and Houser (2000) found that teacher immediacy behaviors were highly effective in motivating students; student-teacher relationships are both task and *relationally* oriented. "Students look

to teachers for more than information. Students want teachers to help them feel good about themselves and feel in control of their environment" (Frymier & Houser, 2000, p. 216).

In another important study linking teacher immediacy with student motivation, Frymier (1993) found that teachers who employ immediacy behaviors within the classroom tend to motivate students to study more over the course of a semester. According to Frymier (1993), "If teachers present material in an enthusiastic manner that communicates liking and appreciation for the content, students will learn that the content is worthwhile and something to be appreciated" (p. 456). Therefore, as teachers display more verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors, to the students and about the material, teacher effectiveness and student motivation are likely to increase.

Immediacy & Student Learning

Most of the student learning literature in instructional communication has centered on the communication phenomenon of student communication apprehension (CA). The relationship that exists between communication apprehension (on the part of students) and nonverbal immediacy behaviors (on the part of instructors) has received overwhelming support. O'Mara, et al. (1996) discovered that students who have low immediacy behaviors themselves are more likely to also have communication apprehension. Moreover, when low student immediacy behaviors were coupled with communication apprehension, then O'Mara, et al. also discovered that those students' grades were dramatically lower

than those students who did not meet those conditions. Therefore, not only are immediacy behaviors important when studying teachers, but students as well. However, in terms of prevailing instructional research, teachers still remain the foci when immediacy research is undertaken based primarily on the large part that immediacy plays in terms of student motivation, student learning, and teacher evaluations.

Teven and McCroskey (1996) and Witt and Wheeless (2001) argued that in the classroom environment, it is not as important for teachers to actually care about the well-being of their students, but, instead, teachers should use immediacy behaviors so that they are perceived as caring about the well-being of their students. One particularly salient feature of teacher immediacy behaviors is the relationship that they have with teacher evaluations. According to Nussbaum and Scott (1980), "It is now possible to tell the practicing teacher that students weigh significantly such factors as communicator style and solidarity in their evaluations of a teacher's effectiveness" (p. 263). Consequently, by enacting immediacy behaviors within the classroom, Teven and McCroskey (1996) found that, on evaluations, teachers would be rated by their students positively and that students learning (both affective and cognitive) would be affected positively. Therefore, as Teven and McCroskey (1996) stated, "Students will most certainly be more likely to attend class and listen more attentively to a teacher who is perceived to have their interests at heart" (p. 8).

The Dark Side of Immediacy

Although there has been much support about the use of immediacy behaviors within the classroom, there exists research that argues that all teacher immediacy behaviors are not particularly benevolent or equitable (Feldman, 2001; Bond & Venus, 1991; Cooley & Triemer, 2002; LaFrance, 2001). For instance, Feldman (2001) argued that nonverbal immediacy behaviors, often associated as comforting or encouraging within the classroom context, are behaviors that reflect an Anglo point of view about what constitutes encouraging nonverbal communication. Feldman (2001) stated, "In a practical sense, a black student who averts his [or her] eyes but who accompanies that behavior with a back-channel 'um-hum' may be just as attentive as the white who gazes directly at the teacher" (p. 45). In a similar vein, LaFrance (2001) argued that nonverbal immediacy behaviors may not be perceived consistently across gender. For instance, the immediacy behavior of touch, argued LaFrance (2001), could be perceived by females as more of a power play nonverbal behavior rather than a sign of immediacy. Because people of higher status feel more comfortable touching those of lower status, power, even when looking at immediacy behaviors, becomes an issue of concern. Space, touch, eye contact, and other immediacy behaviors are not always positive behaviors when you analyze the classroom cross-culturally. The scholars who look at the negative impacts of immediacy behaviors argued that instructional communication scholars, for the most part, have used Anglo communication constructs in mainly Anglo classrooms.

The expanse of literature on nonverbal teacher immediacy behaviors thoroughly explains the relationships between immediacy behaviors and teacher effectiveness, student motivation, student learning, and cross-cultural perceptions of such behaviors. The implications of the reviewed literature are four-fold. First, the research that exists on nonverbal immediacy behaviors suggested that immediacy is intrinsically linked to many other theoretical and practical issues concerning current instructional communication research. For instance, it appears relatively difficult to discuss immediacy without discussing solidarity, ego involvement, or power. In the reviewed literature, the concept of power was explored minimally in respect to its relationship to immediacy. When the topic of power was present, the researchers discussed it in terms of verbal aggressiveness and/or assertiveness. Yet, within the student-teacher relationship, power remains an integral part, whether the instructor is supportive or verbally aggressive.

Second, essentially all of the reviewed research had a variable analytic methodology. In the few articles that did include observational (or other qualitative) methods, these research tools were used as a precursor to the administration of a questionnaire or survey instrument. Therefore, any and all observational techniques that were employed by the researchers were used in mixed methods studies that viewed observational methods as merely laying the groundwork for the quantitative analysis that follows. The concern with using essentially all quantitative methods in researching immediacy behaviors within classrooms is that, through generalization, researchers are more inclined to miss the issues

that were discussed by the researchers who studied the dark side of immediacy.

Third, the research on nonverbal immediacy behaviors is extremely useful when considering what an instructor can do to motivate and teach her or his students. In a more utilitarian sense, however, the research also makes claims about how to improve one's teacher evaluations. One of the real strengths in this line of research is the convergence of the utilitarian with the relational. The research, overall, was extremely thorough in addressing the task and relational dimensions of immediacy. Moreover, the scholars cited in this review of research also studied immediacy from multiple points of view, as both students and teachers were sources of interest.

Finally, the implications for teacher immediacy behavior may not operate in the same fashion when studying the relationship that undergraduate students have with their undergraduate teaching assistants. As previously mentioned, the issue of power seems to be particularly relevant in this study because the undergraduate graders do not have the same legitimate power that a graduate teaching assistant or faculty member would. Consequently, the researchers were interested in:

RQ1: How, if at all, are immediacy behaviors enacted by undergraduate teaching assistants in the instructional context?

RQ2: How, if at all, are undergraduate teaching assistants' immediacy behaviors responded to by students in the instructional context?

METHOD

Immediacy behaviors function within the classroom in order to increase student learning, positive affect for teachers and students, and, to some degree, classroom morale. An oversight in the current literature on teacher immediacy behaviors has been the relative lack of interest in how undergraduate instructor assistants and graders have affected the basic course. The use of modified Keller Plans and Personalized Systems of Instruction in many basic courses, paired with the under-researched aspects of undergraduate instructor assistants, has left instructors, researchers, and administrators in a rather precarious situation. Essentially, we currently are unsure about how successful, or unsuccessful, undergraduate instructor assistants are in terms of both instruction and student assessment. Furthermore, instructional communication researchers should attempt to discover, how if at all, undergraduate instructor assistants communicate or behave in competent ways when filling the *role of educator*. To this end, in this study, the functions of the nonverbal immediacy behaviors used by undergraduate instructor assistants will be observed, described, and analyzed.

Participants

The participants of the current study were selected from a list of undergraduate teaching assistants assigned to one of two basic communication courses (referred to as CS 109 and CS 311) at a large, Midwestern University. Each undergraduate teaching assistant was

individually contacted and asked to participate in the study. Each participant gave permission to the researchers to proceed with the observations during the designated class periods. A total of ten undergraduate teaching assistants participated in the study.

Research Setting: The Basic Course Classroom

The instructional setting has been one of the primary contexts of interest for those researchers who are interested in studying nonverbal immediacy. The term "teacher immediacy behaviors" represents the nonverbal behaviors that instructors/educators use in their classroom to increase perceived closeness between the instructor and his/her students. More specifically, the context used for this study is the basic communication course. In this particular study, the two basic communication courses combine elements of traditional public speaking with business and professional speaking. The courses fulfill core graduation requirements for students majoring in a variety of fields including communication, psychology, business, accounting, engineering and fine arts, to name a few.

Approximately 1,020 students enroll in the combined twenty-four CS 109 and CS 311 sections every semester. Within each of these sections, four to ten instructor assistants are used to aide in the instruction and assessment of the students. All instructor assistants are undergraduate students who have successfully completed one of the two basic courses and who took (or are taking) the instructor assistant training course taught by one of the two course directors. In the training course, instructor assistants are trained how to assess students' work

(symposium outlines and presentations), how to give effective lectures, and how to deal with personalized student instruction and student tutoring within small groups. Coincidentally, because instructor assistants have very specific job duties, our analysis will address immediacy issues concerned with the instructor assistants' performances in two distinct instructional contexts: 1) breakout rooms (where speeches and presentations are given), and 2) lecture rooms (where mini-lectures and personalized/tutoring instruction occurs). Moreover, as these instructional environments shift, so to does the physical environment or setting.

Breakout Rooms. The instructor assistants' assessments of student symposiums and speeches are conducted in what are referred to as *breakout rooms.* Breakout rooms are usually small, approximately fifteen feet by ten feet, and are spread out all over campus instead of being held in the typical basic communication course classroom. The capacities of these rooms normally hold no more than fifteen to eighteen individuals. For both the CS 109 and CS 311 courses, breakout rooms allow for students to make presentations in front of small groups of students while receiving feedback from their instructor assistants. In the CS 311 breakout rooms, students are given the opportunity to deliver symposium presentations, which are then assessed by their instructor assistants. Similarly, the CS 109 breakout rooms provide instructor assistants a private instructional environment where student speeches can be graded and both verbal and written feedback can be provided.

Lecture Rooms. For both the CS 109 and CS 311 courses, large lecture rooms are used as the primary in-

structional setting between students and instructor assistants. Lecture rooms are long rectangular classrooms (approximately fifty feet by twenty feet) that can hold approximately sixty to seventy-five students. Because of the unusual length of these rooms, in comparison to its rather normal width, the classroom has a formal feel (much like an auditorium or lecture hall). In both courses, these lecture rooms serve multiple functions. In the CS 311 course, one function of lecture rooms is to provide a private instructional setting where instructor assistants manage what are referred to as mandatory *mini-lectures*. Each semester in the CS 311 course, instructor assistants are required to deliver one lecture over a certain chapter or topic with the CS 311 course. The most notable of these mini-lectures is the *speech critique day*. During speech critique day, all CS 311instructor assistants break down point-by-point how student symposiums will be assessed. Thus, instructor assistants, in essence, relay the information that they have learned from their instructor assistant training course to their students during this lecture. Because all mini-lectures are given within the confines of the long lecture rooms, the physical distance between the instructor assistant and the rest of the class is more pronounced than in the other instructional/physical settings discussed in this report.

An additional function of the CS 311 lecture rooms is to provide instructor assistants with a space where *personalized/tutorial instruction* can be conducted. On most occasions, the CS 311 instructor will give mini-lectures to the class that will last approximately thirty to forty-five minutes. Following each mini-lecture, students are asked to get into their symposium groups

(ranging in size from four to seven students) in order to work on symposiums, projects, or assigned activities. During these *work times*, instructor assistants will visit with all of their assigned groups and assist one person or an entire group if need be. In these settings, instruction is more casual and relaxed due in large part to the physical setting. Although these groups have *work time* in the same fifty by twenty feet room that mini-lectures are given, the room is actually made smaller as the instructor assistants and their student groups stake out their own territory within the larger classroom.

For the CS 109 course, lecture rooms serve similar functions in that they are also used to conduct *mini-lectures* as well as hold *personalized/tutorial instruction* sessions. While the mini-lectures and personalized/ tutorial sessions are similar for CS 109 and CS 311, several differences do exist between the two courses. For the mini-lectures, CS 109 instructor assistants follow a less formal routine than CS 311 instructor assistants. The CS 109 mini-lectures, which typically occur at the beginning of class, give students the opportunity to discuss with their instructor assistants any questions they have in regards to course content or review requirements for speeches and other assignments. While there is no formal routine for CS 109 instructor assistants to follow during these mini-lectures, they are trained to address any and all issues students may raise during these sessions.

As with the mini-lectures, while the CS 311 and CS 109 personalized/tutorial instruction sessions do closely resemble one another, there are distinct differences that exist between these courses. Unlike *work times* conducted in the CS 311 course, personalized/tutorial in-

struction occurs in the CS 109 course only after students have taken quizzes or exams (typically occurring towards the end of class). After quizzes and exams are completed by students and are graded by instructor assistants, personalized/tutorial instruction takes place away from other students in a designated area within the lecture room. As with the CS 311 course, this designated area allows for more personalized, one-on-one instruction to occur. The physical setting of the CS 109 lecture room also allows for more relaxed, informal interaction to take place between students and instructor assistants.

Hence, the physical setting in the CS 109 and CS 311 classrooms not only impacts how instructor assistants and students interact, but the setting also indicates what type of instructional activity is taking place. In the following section, we will discuss how immediacy behaviors are, or are not, enacted by instructor assistants in these specific instructional environments.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection consisted of qualitative method procedures, including empirical observation. While many positivist scholars have criticized the validity and reliability of observational research (Adler & Adler, 2000), Nussbaum (1992) argues that observation should be a primary data collection method for communication researchers in order to capture a "richer, more transactional notion of interaction" (p. 179) within the classroom context. In the current study, the nonverbal immediacy behaviors of ten instructor assistants were observed in each of the aforementioned instructional/

physical settings: student symposium and speech as-
sessment in breakout rooms; mini-lectures in the class-
room; and personalized/tutorial instruction in the
physically modified classroom. The observational data
was collected in eight sections of CS 109 and CS 311
over an eighteen-month period by two independent
observers. Extensive field notes, which are defined as
"gnomic, shorthand reconstructions of events, observa-
tions…that took place in the field" (Van Maanen, 1988,
p. 123) were taken during each of the classroom obser-
vation sessions. According to the procedures outlined by
Lindlof (1995), once each session concluded, the field
notes from the undergraduate teaching assistant obser-
vations were examined and details were added in order
to make them as complete as possible. Validity and reli-
ability concerns were addressed by having multiple ob-
servers collect data over an extended period of time
across a variety of course sections. By using multiple
observers, the validity of observations was enhanced as
findings were cross-checked and any interpretations
that appeared to be inaccurate were eliminated (Adler &
Adler, 2000). To enhance reliability, observations were
conducted in a systematic and repetitious fashion to en-
sure consistency (Denzin, 1989). The observations pro-
duced a total of approximately fifty hours of data.

In order to narrow the focus of the participant ob-
servations, the data was analyzed using well-estab-
lished categories of previously researched nonverbal
immediacy behaviors (Anderson, 1979). The following
categories comprised the observational framework used
to direct this study: a) smiling; b) leaning forward (for-
ward body positioning); c) consistent eye contact; d) ges-
turing; and e) touching. Using this observational frame-

work as an initial reference point, the constant comparative method of Glaser and Strauss (1967, see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to systematically reduce the data obtained from the field notes into the aforementioned immediacy categories.

RESULTS

The first research question examined how immediacy behaviors were enacted by undergraduate teaching assistants in the instructional context. Of the five nonverbal immediacy behaviors Anderson (1979) originally reported (i.e. smiling, leaning forward, consistent eye contact, gesturing, touching), smiling and touching appeared to be more often enacted by instructor assistants and more telling indicators of immediacy. The nonverbal immediacy behaviors leaning forward, consistent eye contact, and gesturing were enacted far less frequently by instructor assistants.

Smiling and Instructor Assistant Immediacy

Smiling was a frequent and highly observable nonverbal strategy that instructor assistants used. In two of the three aforementioned instructional/physical environments (breakout rooms, mini-lectures, and personalized/tutoring instruction), instructor assistants used smiling more frequently than any other nonverbal immediacy behavior. First, smiling was often used during instructor assistant mini-lectures. The verbal accompaniment of smiling tended to be humor usage or references to the relatively low levels of structural

power distance between the students and the instructors assistants. For instructor assistants, smiling would often accompany phrases such as, "when I had to write outlines…" or "when I gave my first symposium, I…." The use of smiling was often jovial in nature and was frequently coupled with self-references to when instructor assistants held the student role. Therefore, smiling in the mini-lecture setting was often used to seemingly decrease power distance between instructor assistants and students.

A second and final use of smiling can be found in the instructional/physical setting of personalized/tutorial instruction. Particularly in the CS 311 course, instructor assistants actually sat in the "group circle" with their students, and they would discuss symposium ideas, problems with the course, and, sometimes, even issues not pertaining to the curriculum. In the CS 109 course, these same issues were discussed, but in a more individualized, one-on-one setting. In this setting, smiling appeared with even more frequency than in the mini-lecture setting. In the mini-lecture setting, although students would use the verbal-nonverbal combination of self-reference/humor with smiling to decrease power distance and make them appear more immediate, the setting itself implied a power differential as they would lecture to the students about how they would be assessed. In personalized/tutorial instruction, it becomes difficult to delineate, if not privy to who the instructor assistants are, between students and instructor assistants. Therefore, there appears to be more freedom on both the parts of instructor assistants and students to be immediate with one another in this particular setting. Smiling, consequently, is one of the nonverbal be-

haviors that tended to illustrate the perceived closeness between the instructor assistants and their students.

The only instructional/physical setting in which smiling was not frequently used was in breakout rooms during student symposium/speech assessment. In most observed cases, instructor assistants' use of smiling was highly infrequent in these assessment situations. Instead, the instructor assistants would often grade speeches either using somber facial expressions or *stone faces*. In these situations, instructor assistants may believe that they should nonverbally reinforce their power distance to their students through the absence of immediacy behaviors such as smiling. Consequently, it may be that in this situation, instructor assistants feel that gaining respect from their students is of more importance than being perceived as likable. It is difficult to discern whether or not the dramatic shift in the appropriateness of smiling in certain instructional contexts is due to personal idiosyncrasies on the part of the instructor assistants, the type of training that instructor assistants receive, or chance.

Touching and Instructor Assistant Immediacy

The second predominant nonverbal behavior that instructor assistants displayed was that of physical touch. Touching occurred in very different ways in two of three instructional/physical settings. Obviously, during the instructor assistants' mini-lectures there were no observable instances of touch due to the fact that the instructor assistants and students were separated based on the spatial layout of the room. However, in the instructional/physical settings of personalized/tutorial in-

struction and student symposium/speech assessment, touch was a major factor.

In personalized/tutorial settings, instructor assistants would often reach out and touch students on their shoulders (often with the instructor assistant standing behind the sitting student), shake their hands, give "high fives," etc. In these types of settings, students would often reciprocate by touching the instructor assistant by patting the instructor assistant on the back, lightly punching the instructor assistant on the shoulder, or initiating the "high five." These touching behaviors appear to epitomize the immediacy between students and instructor assistants in this particular instructional setting. Of the touching behaviors observed, only touching a sitting student on the shoulder while standing behind him/her could be perceived as an overt display of dominance or a nonverbal tactic that could reinforce power distance. However, on several occasions, after the instructor assistant enacted this type of touching behavior, the student would reciprocate the behavior (most often with a pat on the back). Coincidentally, the nonverbal touching in personalized/tutorial settings appears to represent the most useful and effective immediacy behaviors employed by instructor assistants. Thus, their verbal and nonverbal displays of interest in the progress of their students seemed to be appreciated by their students.

The second setting where touch was observed was in the breakout rooms, where student symposium assessment occurs. Touch in this setting was observed as being markedly different from the touching that occurred in the personalized/tutorial setting because in the assessment setting, only those who performed well and

were assessed highly were touched. In the personal-
ized/tutorial setting, touching appeared to occur without
much prejudice; however, this was not the case after
symposium assessment. Instructor assistants in this
setting would only touch students after all the presenta-
tions were completed. Once people began to exit the
breakout rooms, instructor assistants tended to pat the
students on the back who did well. Most students in this
situation would not return touches in this environment.
Unfortunately, this type of discriminate nonverbal be-
havior could function to distance some students within
the classroom. Obviously, more research on this aspect
of nonverbal communication and instructor assistants
needs to be undertaken.

Student Responses to Instructor Assistants' Non-verbal Immediacy Behaviors

The second research question examined how under-
graduate teaching assistants' immediacy behaviors were
responded to by students in the instructional context.
The student responses to the smiling and touching of
instructor assistants were observed to be generally posi-
tive. The instructor assistants' smiling coupled with
verbal communication tended to reduce power distance
between the two groups and seemed to create a more
comfortable environment for all involved. The reciprocal
touching in the personalized/ tutorial instructional/
physical setting was observed to create the most
perceived closeness between instructor assistants and
their students. Through reciprocal touching, the barri-
ers and power differential between instructor assistants
and students was lowered; both groups appeared rela-

tionally closer to each other; and a sense of equality between the two groups was established.

However, the enacted nonverbal immediacy behaviors in the instructional/ physical setting of student symposium assessment appeared to be the most problematic. In terms of both smiling and touching, instructor assistants appeared to recreate and reinforce power distance between themselves and their students. Through indifferent or concerned facial expressions (and the subsequent lack of smiling), instructor assistants appeared to undermine the "we're all in this together" feeling that was built in the other two settings through the appropriate use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors. And second, and most importantly, the discriminatory touching of students in the assessment setting created many observable negative responses in the students who were not touched (as an indication of not doing as well as those students who were touched). Students who were not touched by the instructor assistants following presentations tended to display facial (scowling and blushing) and body cues (slouched posture or hurriedly exiting the room) indicating increased stress, tension, worry, nervousness, disappointment, and anxiousness.

DISCUSSION

The current research study was designed to explore how undergraduate teaching assistants enact immediacy behaviors, and how, if at all, students respond to the enactment of these different behaviors. Through this investigation, a clearer understanding has been achieved regarding the effects instructor assistant im-

mediacy behaviors have on students in the basic communication course. In terms of the first research question, smiling and touching were the two primary nonverbal behaviors undergraduate teaching assistants used to enact immediacy to students. However, the findings indicate that nonverbal immediacy behaviors such as leaning forward, consistent eye contact, and gesturing were not enacted by instructor assistants. With regards to the second research question, students appeared to generally respond to the smiling and touching of instructor assistants in a positive manner. However, the findings suggest that there were instances where students did not respond positively to instructor assistants' smiling and touching behaviors, specifically in the breakout rooms. An explanation for these negative responses may be due to the breakout rooms being the only setting where instructor assistants are subjectively grading student performances. By only using nonverbal immediacy behaviors (particularly touching behavior) with students who performed well on their speeches or symposium presentations, instructor assistants may actually be intensifying the negative reactions of students who did not perform as well. That is, the combination of the students' poor performances and lack of nonverbal feedback received from instructor assistants may lead the students to outwardly express their own negative reactions to the situation.

One practical implication stemming from this finding is that basic course directors need to specifically train instructor assistants to show equal amounts of nonverbal immediacy behavior during speeches and symposium presentations regardless of the students' performances. Since students appeared to respond fa-

vorably when nonverbal immediacy behaviors were enacted towards them, instructor assistants should be trained to use more affirming head-nods, smiles, and body posture when interacting in the breakout rooms. This increase in instructor assistant nonverbal immediacy behavior could ultimately help to reduce students' negative responses to their poor performances. In addition, this training would help instructor assistants realize the importance of enacting nonverbal immediacy behaviors in all instructional settings where interaction with students occurs.

As with all research, a number of limitations in terms of the design and execution of this study were identified. First, the sample of instructor assistants examined in this study could be larger and more hours of observation could be gathered for each instructor assistant. Only ten instructor assistants were observed during this study totaling 50 hours of observation (average 5 hours per instructor assistant), which could keep the research findings from being as generalizable as we would hope for. Second, because of this small sample of participants, the findings of this study may not be applicable for all basic courses that utilize instructor assistants.

However, even with these limitations, a great deal can still be learned from the rich observational data that was collected in this study. This study helps heed Nussbaum's (1992) charge to make observation a primary data collection method for communication researchers. We believe that through this study, the observational data collected within the basic communication course context was of a far more rich and descrip-

tive quality than other quantitative research measures could have captured.

Descriptive research on instructor assistant nonverbal immediacy behaviors and their subsequent impact on classroom instruction in basic courses remains an understudied area. In this report, we have observed how instructor assistants use these nonverbal behaviors in order to create feelings of closeness and/or distance within the classroom. Unlike professors, instructor assistants must instruct and assess their peers without much formal training to ensure their credibility. Issues of immediacy, credibility, and power distance are all of importance here, and as undergraduate instructor assistants and graders are given more responsibility in many basic courses, researchers should address these unresolved issues.

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