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# Fair and Square?: An examination of the relationships among classroom justice and relational teaching messages

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# Fair and Square? An Examination of Classroom Justice and Relational Teaching Messages

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## Abstract

Students and instructors acknowledge the importance of the instructor–student relationship in the classroom. Despite the importance of the instructor–student interpersonal relationship, there can also be unexpected or undesirable outcomes associated with relational teaching. Using the theoretical framework of leader–member exchange, we explored relational teaching messages to understand how they may relate positively or negatively to student perceptions of classroom justice. Participants (N = 124) completed measures about relational communication strategies (i.e., rapport, confirmation, and affinity-seeking) and classroom justice (i.e., procedural, interactional, and distributive). Results indicate the enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport positively predicted perceptions of all three types of justice. The response to questions dimension of confirmation positively predicted perceptions of procedural and interactional justice.

Justice refers to the idea of moral rightness between people (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Relatedly, classroom justice refers to perceptions of fairness in regard to outcomes and processes in the classroom (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004b) and has become a growing concern for students and instructors alike (e.g., Chory-Assad, 2002; Horan & Myers, 2009), as students enter the classroom expecting fair treatment (Moore, Moore, & McDonald, 2008; Strage, 2008; Walsh & Maffei, 1994). While both students and instructors believe that justice is important in the classroom, there are often differences when comparing their perceptions of justice (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b; Horan & Myers, 2009; Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2005). Specifically, college instructors report feeling concerned about justice in their classrooms (Horan & Myers, 2009). However, as evidenced by Chory's line of research (e.g., Chory, 2007; Chory-Assad, 2002; Horan, Chory, & Goodboy, 2010), students may have differing opinions about whether they believe instructors are concerned with classroom justice. Student perceptions of justice, whether positive or negative, can profoundly influence individual and classroom outcomes including resistance, deception, and aggression (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b; Chory & Goodboy, 2010; Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2005) and can affect the classroom experience for all involved (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b; Horan et al., 2010). Given the importance and potential impact of fairness in the classroom, it is important to understand college instructor behaviors that elicit perceptions of justice or, conversely, detract from perceptions of justice. Consequently, in this study we examined instructors' relational messages for their potential relationship(s) with student perceptions of justice in the classroom.

**Classroom Justice**

Classroom justice can be described as distributive, procedural, or interactional. First, *distributive justice* describes perceptions of fairness regarding outcomes (Deutsch, 1975). Specific to the classroom context, students may compare their grade to grades of their peers or hold expectations about grades they deserve or expect to achieve (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004b). Second, *procedural justice* describes perceptions of fairness regarding the process used to determine outcomes (Byrne & Cropanzano, 2001). In other words, this includes how the class sessions are conducted, grading processes, or policies for student behavior—ultimately, any decision that determines how the classroom is designed and how assignments are evaluated (Chory, 2007). Finally, *interactional justice* describes fairness regarding interpersonal treatment when classroom policies are implemented (Bies & Moag, 1986). Students generate interactional justice judgments about the way their instructor communicates with them personally or the class as a whole (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a).

Although the justice construct is rooted in organizational studies, the three dimensions of justice occur in the classroom and appear to be common from a student's perspective (Horan et al., 2010). Recent research has revealed how students perceive and/or react to perceptions of (un)fairness in the classroom. For instance, Horan and his colleagues found that students' responses to classroom injustice involved communicating dissent toward the instructor through negative instructor or course evaluations and complaining to other students. Likewise, when students perceived their instructors were not concerned with justice, they were likely to engage in aggression, hostile behaviors, and instructor-owned resistance strategies (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b; Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2005). Thus, because students are readily able to recall instances of

injustice and emotional and behavioral outcomes, classroom justice appears to be a very salient issue for students.

Viewing the body of justice work together, Horan and Myers (2009) highlighted two reasons underscoring the importance of studying justice in the classroom. First, students who believe instructors are not concerned with fairness are more likely to react in a host of negative ways, such as resisting or enacting in revengeful ways, becoming verbally aggressive or reverting to deceptive acts with their instructors (Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b; Horan et al., 2010; Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2005; Paulsel, Chory-Assad, & Dunleavy, 2005). Second, Horan and Myers (2009) identified a more student-learning-oriented theme whereby students who believe the instructor acts with injustice will be less motivated and less affectively engaged in the classroom (Chory-Assad, 2002). Therefore, in agreement with what has been previously argued, an instructor's responsibility to enhance student learning is inherently tied to a more complete understanding of the role that particular instructor behaviors play in perceptions of classroom justice. Because instructors believe that being fair is important (Horan & Myers, 2009), further investigations are warranted concerning specific behaviors that instructors can enact to bolster student perceptions of fairness.

Many instructional communication scholars view the teaching process as having a critical relational component (e.g., Horan, Chory, Carton, Miller & Raposo, in press; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Goodboy & Myers, 2008; Graham, West, & Schaller, 1992; Horan, Houser, Goodboy, & Frymier, 2011; Hosek & Thompson, 2009; Mottet, Parker-Raley, Cunningham, Beebe, & Raffeld, 2006). As one example, Frymier and Houser (2000) found that students valued many of the same relational skills found in friendships when working with their instructor. However, it remains unclear how instructors' attempts at initiating, developing, and sustaining the relational component of teaching in the classroom will influence students' perceptions of fairness.

**Relational Teaching Messages**

Effective teaching is argued to be both a relational and a rhetorical process (Mottet, Richmond & McCroskey, 2006). Implicit within effective teaching is the notion of fairness. For instance, antisocial outcomes associated with perceived unfairness (e.g., Horan et al., 2010) are likely to disrupt the learning and instructional process. From a rhetorical perspective, instructors use messages with the intention of influencing and/or persuading students. By contrast, a relational communication perspective suggests both students and instructors mutually use verbal and nonverbal messages to develop relationships with one another (Mottet & Beebe, 2006). While many relational messages could have been selected for our study, rapport, confirmation, and affinity-seeking behaviors were selected because all three messages build toward a common goal in the classroom—building relationships between instructors and students.

**Rapport**

Identified as one component to effective teaching, rapport has been defined as an overall feeling of mutual trust and respect between two people (Catt, Miller, & Schallenkamp, 2007). Although students report that rapport is important in the classroom (Jorgenson, 1992), when compared to

other relational classroom factors such as immediacy, relatively little is known about rapport. Most rapport research focuses on student perceptions of instructors, and only recently it has been argued that the classroom is not an environment restricted to a one-on-one interaction (Frisby & Martin, 2010). It is interesting to note that establishing rapport has been suggested as an essential characteristic of an effective instructor (Catt et al., 2007; Faranda & Clarke, 2004; McLaughlin & Erickson, 1981).

Teaching is argued to be a rapport-intensive field (Jorgenson, 1992), meaning that rapport may enhance perceptions of an interpersonal relationship in the classroom on two dimensions: a personal connection and an enjoyable interaction (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Frisby and Martin (2010) studied both student–student rapport and student–instructor rapport. These authors argued that rapport, on the whole, encourages social interactions, a positive classroom climate, and increased perceptions of learning. In fact, they found that instructor rapport was the *only* variable that emerged as a predictor of student participation and perceptions of learning. Thus, instructor rapport was found to play a significant role in the classroom. Findings suggest that instructors should be aware that student–instructor rapport is valued from a student perspective and, consequently, is part of the relational teaching process (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

**Confirmation**

Schrodt, Turman, and Soliz (2006) proposed confirmation as an interactional phenomenon. Confirmation is needed to assure us of our worth, and Buber (1957) argued confirmation was the most significant aspect of human interaction. In the classroom, Ellis (2000) defined instructor confirmation as occurring when instructors respond to students' questions in the classroom, demonstrate common interest with students, and create a teaching style that allows for a positive atmosphere. Prior research has associated confirmation with teaching competence (Goodboy & Myers, 2008; Schrodt et al., 2006), prosocial power use (Turman & Schrodt, 2006), and positive predicted outcome judgments (Horan et al., 2011). Similar to rapport, a confirming instructor led students to report more learning and positive communication (Goodboy & Myers, 2008).

**Affinity-seeking**

Affinity-seeking behaviors generate liking (Bell & Daly, 1984). Researchers have identified a typology of 25 behaviors (e.g., altruism, concede control, facilitating enjoyment, inclusion of others, nonverbal immediacy) as behaviors that instructors use to increase liking in the classroom (Bell & Daly, 1984; Frymier, 1994; Frymier, Houser & Shulman, 1995, 1996; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986). Instructor affinity-seeking behaviors are considered relational behaviors (Frymier & Thompson, 1992) because they generate liking and positive responses to the liked communicator. Because affinity-seeking is referred to as an active and strategic communication behavior, Bell and Daly (1984) suggested that instructors who use affinity-seeking strategies are usually perceived positively. Thus, students may interpret this type of behavior as one way instructors welcome student participation, interaction, and involvement in communication exchanges that extend beyond the classroom.

The previous review of research documents a number of benefits associated with relational teaching strategies. Collectively, research suggests that there are both costs and rewards associated

with relational teaching messages (e.g., Babad, 1995; Myers, 2006; Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, & Paulsel, 2005). We aimed to examine the potential for relational messages to benefit or hinder perceptions of justice.

**The Dark Side of Relational Teaching and Classroom Justice**

Initially, it seems intuitive that students would perceive relational teaching as desirable and fair. However, Mottet et al. (2005) proposed that relational teaching may have a dark side. For example, instructors who demonstrate positive relational communication are often viewed as more approachable by students, and potentially, students may seek out additional requests from these instructors (e.g., make-up exams, acceptance of late work). This provides opportunities for instructors to demonstrate or minimize procedural justice. If an instructor denies one of these requests, it could tarnish perceptions of fairness regardless of existing course policies.

The primary focus of justice studies has been understanding students' perceptions of (un)fair instructors and their responses toward (un)fair instructors. However, when Horan and Myers (2009) studied college instructors to understand how they viewed justice, they found that instructors reported being primarily concerned with interactional justice, followed by procedural justice and distributive justice. Thus, it is clear that instructors report maintaining a vested interest in communicating fairly with students. Extant research highlights that when instructors promote perceptions of credibility through competence, care toward students, or the use of prosocial power, students perceive enhanced levels of fairness (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004b; Paulsel et al., 2005). These studies focus on the prosocial aspects of classroom justice perceptions: instructors perceived as credible and as using prosocial power are viewed to be fair. Despite these findings, communicating in both relational and fair ways may tarnish perceptions of justice, a notion we explored in this study.

Relational teaching can promote perceptions of favoritism and curve grade assessments for students who are perceived to be closer to a professor than the other students. Babad (1995) found that students perceived the teacher's pet phenomenon, or rather the "rate of student's consensus in identifying teachers' pets in the classroom" (p. 361), and they observed that differential treatment was given to high achievers who were relationally connected to the professor. In turn, students also perceived that instructors gave negative emotional treatment to low achievers. Babad's work indicates that each student in the classroom may perceive a different relationship with his or her instructor, calling to mind leader–member exchange theory (LMX; Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen, Liden, & Hoel, 1982; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982). Leader–member exchange scholars argue that subordinates, or students when applied to the classroom (Horan et al., in press; Myers, 2006), perceive differential roles with their superiors or, in this case, instructors. These scholars further argue that three types of relationships exist: in-group, middle-group, and out-group. Out-group relationships exist when there are poor interactions and little trust/support/reward between the teacher and student; middle-group relationships exist when there are moderate trust levels between teacher and student and moderately good interactions; and in-group interactions exist when there are quality interactions along with trust, support, and mutually beneficial rewards (Dansereau et al., 1975).

Babad's work harkens LMX theory, namely that the teacher's pet would feel in-group connections with the instructor, whereas nonpets would feel part of the out-group. Such different group relationships appear to influence communication. Specifically, Myers (2006) found that students who perceived in-group relationships with their instructors reported communicating more for relational motives than students who felt they were part of the out-group. Other studies also support the notion that relational communication in the classroom may influence group perceptions, namely that relational teaching may be perceived as unfair. Consider Mottet and colleagues' (2005, 2006) studies, in which responsive students were granted referent (relational) power and also received significantly higher essay grades than students who were not granted this type of power for the exact same work. Students were responsive, likely in response to instructors' responsive behaviors (e.g., Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995), which resulted in different exam grades that likely tarnished perceptions of justice for less responsive students.

Taken together, these studies indicate that "(a) teachers do not treat all students similarly, (b) students are cognizant of such differential treatment (e.g., Babad, 1995; Babad, 2005; Babad, Bernieri, & Rosenthal, 1989), and (c) this differential treatment likely has implications for fairness perceptions (e.g., Lee, 2001)" (Horan et al., in press, p. TBD). Ironically, these conclusions are likely the result of relational teaching messages, suggesting that they may be perceived as unfair by some students in the classroom. Horan et al. found that perceptions of LMX mediated the relationships among students' perceptions of classroom fairness and students' reports of aggression and deception. Horan et al. further found that LMX and justice perceptions were related; that is, the closer students felt to their teacher, the fairer they reported the teacher to be. Conversely, this means that students who felt a poor quality relationship with their instructor also viewed the instructor as less fair. As evidenced by Horan et al.'s findings, instructors' relational communication messages potentially foster differing relationships with students, and these relationships influence students' perceptions of classroom fairness.

Overall, then, communicating from a relational perspective is important in fostering both classroom relationships and perceptions of justice. However, extant research (Babad, 1995; Horan et al., in press; Mottet et al, 2005, 2006; Myers, 2006) highlights the potential backlash associated with communicating from a relational dimension, suggesting that relational messages may elicit perceptions of either justice or injustice. Because relational teaching messages have the potential to elicit positive perceptions in the classroom, but also have the potential to reveal the dark side of instructional communication, we posed the following research question: RQ:

How do students' perceptions of relational teaching messages (i.e., rapport, confirmation, and affinity-seeking) relate to students' perceptions of classroom justice (i.e., procedural, distributive, and interactional)?

**Method**

After receiving IRB approval, student participants (*N*=124) were recruited from communication classes at a large, urban, private Midwestern university. Forty-four men and 77 women participated (3 declined to report their sex), and the average age was 22.39 years (*SD* =3.93). Students were instructed to report on the instructor they had in class prior to completing the survey, a common

instructional communication method adapted from Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986). Participants reported on 64 male and 58 female instructors (2 declined to report instructor sex), representing 31 subject areas.

**Instrumentation Justice**

Chory-Assad and Paulsel's (2004b) measures were used for *distributive* and *procedural justice*. Perceptions of distributive classroom justice were assessed on 12 Likert-type items (e.g., "Your grade on the last exam compared to other student's grade on the exam", "The grade you will probably receive in this course compared to your grade on the last exam") using response options ranging from 1 (*extremely unfair*) to 5 (*extremely fair*). *Procedural justice* was assessed on 15 Likert-type items (e.g., "Course attendance policies," "Grading scale for the course"). Both scales were reliable: distributive justice ($\alpha$=.95, $M$ =49.32, $SD$ =9.96); procedural justice ($\alpha$=.91, $M$ =63.11, $SD$ =9.59). *Interactional justice* was assessed with Chory's (2007) 7-item, Likert-type instrument (e.g., "The way the instructor treats students," "The way the instructor deals with students"). The interactional justice measure was reliable ($\alpha$=.96, $M$ =30.10, $SD$ =6.43).

**Rapport**

Frisby and Martin's (2010) 11-item adaptation of Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) scale was used. This Likert-type scale asked participants to respond from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) on two dimensions. The first dimension, enjoyable interaction, contains six items (e.g., "My instructor relates well to me"). The second dimension, personal connection between students and instructors, contains five items (e.g., "I have a close relationship with my instructor"). Both dimensions were reliable: enjoyable interaction ($\alpha$=.93, $M$ =31.16, $SD$ =7.80); personal connection ($\alpha$=.93, $M$ =20.37, $SD$ =7.12).

**Confirmation**

Perceived instructor confirmation was measured using the Teacher Confirmation Scale (TCS; Ellis, 2000, 2004). This 16-item scale uses a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Participants report their agreement on three dimensions of confirming behaviors instructors may use in the classroom. The first dimension includes 5 items about how instructors responded to questions (e.g., "The instructor took time to answer student's questions fully"). The second dimension includes 6 items about demonstrating interest in students and their learning (e.g., "The instructor made an effort to get to know students"). The third dimension includes 5 items about instructor teaching style (e.g., "The instructor used an interactive teaching style). Measurement of the three dimensions of confirmation proved to be reliable: response to questions ($\alpha$=.91, $M$ =16.86, $SD$ =4.23); demonstrating interest in students ($\alpha$=.89, $M$ =19.15, $SD$ =5.17); teaching style ($\alpha$=.89, $M$ =15.40, $SD$ =4.76).

**Affinity-seeking behaviors**

Instructional affinity-seeking (IAS) was measured by Frymier et al.'s (1995) abbreviated version of Bell and Daly's (1984) affinity-seeking typology. In developing the 1995 scale, the 12 affinity-seeking strategies identified by Frymier (1994) served as the most relevant to the classroom and are the basis for their IAS scale (e.g., altruism, assume equality, comfortable self, concede control,

conversational rule-keeping, dynamism, elicit others' self-disclosure, facilitate enjoyment, listening, nonverbal immediacy, optimism, and sensitivity). The IAS scale comprises 37 Likert-type items ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) *to* 6 (*strongly agree*), each which reflects a single affinity-seeking behavior. Frymier et al. (1995) found the IAS measure to be a unidimensional and reliable instrument, indicating the scale should be summed ($M$ =145.81, $SD$ =19.18). The scale was reliable in the current study ($\alpha$=.86).

## Results

The research question asked how students' perceptions of relational teaching messages (i.e., rapport, confirmation, and affinity-seeking) correlated with student perceptions of classroom justice (i.e., distributive, procedural, and interactional). Correlations were calculated for all variables (see Table 1). Three regressions were conducted in order to understand how each variable explained variance in students' perceptions of the three types of justice. Confirmation, rapport, and affinity-seeking were entered simultaneously and served as the predictor variables to explore how each predicted the different dimensions of classroom justice (see Table 2).

For procedural justice, the model was significant, $F$ (6, 117) = 16.41, $p$ <.001), and explained 43% (adjusted $R^2$=.429) of the variance in perceptions of procedural justice. Only enjoyable interaction ($\beta$=.47, $p$ =.00) and response to questions ($\beta$=.38, $p$ =.01) were significant predictors of procedural justice.

For interactional justice, the model was significant, $F$ (6, 117) = 24.18, $p$ <.001, and explained 53% (adjusted $R^2$=.530) of the variance in perceptions of interactional justice. Only enjoyable interaction ($\beta$=.59, $p$ =.00) and response to questions ($\beta$=.39, $p$ =.004) were significant predictors of interactional justice.

For distributive justice, the model was significant, $F$ (6, 116) = 10.78, $p$ <.001), and explained 33% (Adjusted $R^2$=.325) of the variance in perceptions of distributive justice. Only enjoyable interaction ($\beta$=.36, $p$ =.01), response to questions ($\beta$=.36, $p$ =.03), and style of teaching ($\beta$=−.36, $p$ =.02) predicted distributive justice.

Comparing the correlations and regressions for style of teaching in relation to distributive justice reveals conflicting findings: style of teaching is positively related to distributive justice, yet a negative predictor of distributive justice. This contradictory set of findings suggests a possible suppressor effect may be responsible. To explore this possibility and better understand these findings, a stepwise regression (Field, 2009) was conducted in which all variables were entered simultaneously into the regression model to see how they predicted distributive justice. Enjoyable interaction ($\beta$=.554, $p$ =.00) was the only predictor variable that remained significant to the model, $F$ (1, 121) = 53.72, $p$ <.001, adjusted $R^2$=.302. The remaining predictors were not significant: personal connection ($\beta$=.092, $p$ =.447); response to questions ($\beta$=.127, $p$ =.174); demonstrated interest ($\beta$=.062, $p$ =.522); teaching style ($\beta$=−.046, $p$ =.606); affinity-seeking ($\beta$=.045, $p$ =.680).

**Discussion**

In the present study, we explored students' perceptions of three relational teaching messages (i.e., rapport, confirmation, and affinity-seeking behaviors) and perceptions of justice (i.e., distributive, procedural, and interactional) in the classroom. A general pattern emerged indicating that engaging in *enjoyable interactions* (i.e., dimension of rapport) with students is important for creating positive perceptions of all three type of justice. Further, effectively *answering student questions* (i.e., dimension of confirmation) is also important to consider for creating fair perceptions of classroom procedures and interpersonal interactions between the student and instructor. These results extend the literature on relational teaching messages and classroom justice, and provide support for the potential benefits of relational teaching.

To explain, the first regression analysis suggested two specific relational messages: *enjoyable interaction* and *response to questions* were significant positive predictors of all three types of justice (i.e., distributive, procedural, and interactional). While exploring potential suppressor effects of style of teaching, however, the post hoc analysis actually revealed response to questions was not a significant predictor for distributive justice, leaving this variable a significant predictor of only procedural and interactional justice. Thus, enjoyable interaction remains the sole predictor for all three types of justice. Consequently, students who feel as though the instructor promotes an enjoyable interaction are more likely to perceive him or her as a fun and relational instructor. The positive feelings achieved in an enjoyable classroom are likely to create a positive perception of the instructor, potentially promoting a halo effect for fairness perceptions.

Further, instructors who effectively respond to student questions, or rather confirm them, are more likely to be perceived as fair in classroom procedures, outcomes, and interactions with students. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that students want instructors to help them feel good about themselves, particularly in the classroom (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Therefore, instructors who are responsive are confirming that students are worthwhile, and their interest in the subject matter is important. Thus, we suggest that perceptions of justice regarding procedures and interactions are enhanced when instructors respond positively toward an individual student's relational needs.

These findings can also be explained through the lens of LMX theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen, Liden, & Hoel, 1982; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982). Specifically, leaders (i.e., instructors) develop different relationships with different members (i.e., students) of the group. As previously mentioned, these relationships develop into in-group, middle-group, or out-group relationships. Thus, the creation of an enjoyable interaction will likely be unique to each individual, depending on the perceived closeness of the student–instructor relationship. Those students who have built a strong relationship with the instructor are more likely to perceive the instructor's actions as fair due to the relationship that has been established. Likewise, students who have created a closer relationship with the instructor will also respond and/or accept confirmation behaviors from the instructor. Perceptions of justice, then, may be reliant on the relationship the student has (or has not) developed with the instructor.

Despite the strong predictive power of enjoyable interaction and response to questions, the remaining relational teaching variables were all nonsignificant predictors of all three types of justice. These findings appear inconsistent with previous research in which positive classroom outcomes are associated with rapport, confirmation, and affinity-seeking (e.g., Frisby & Martin, 2010; Goodboy & Myers, 2008; Horan et al., 2011). First, and arguably the most interesting, while affinity-seeking behaviors were positively correlated with perceptions of justice, affinity-seeking behaviors were not significant predictors of all three types justice (i.e., distributive, procedural, and interactional). Intentionally, this study included relational teaching messages that overlapped to provide a more complete picture of relational teaching. Perhaps, then, this finding was caused by the multicolinearity among the variables. Further, to measure affinity-seeking behaviors, we used Frymier et al.'s (1995) global measure of affinity-seeking, which does not allow researchers to tease out the specific behaviors used by instructors. As instructors may engage in some affinity-seeking behaviors and not others, it is difficult to determine which behaviors the instructors are (or are not) performing and how these behaviors relate to perceptions of justice. Thus, instrument selection may account for the nonsignificant findings in regards to affinity-seeking behaviors. However, this result is similar to the findings in Houser's (2005, 2006) work on nontraditional students. Specifically, Houser's results can be interpreted such that professors who are too friendly and/or too concerned with being well liked in the classroom are viewed as poor educators by nontraditional students. This would suggest, then, that too much affinity-seeking may have negative repercussions. Much like Houser (2005, 2006), our findings further allude to the idea that affinity-seeking measures may be less relevant when considering perceptions of justice.

Further, while it is intriguing that a confirming style of teaching (i.e., dimension of confirmation) was found as a negative predictor of distributive justice, subsequent analysis revealed this not to be the case. Instead, a suppressor effect occurred among the variables, which caused a positive correlation and a negative beta weight. The additional analysis revealed style of teaching to be nonsignificant. Thus, it is most important to focus on enjoyable interaction and the ways in which this perception relates to perceptions of justice.

Though *enjoyable interaction* could be argued to be interactional in nature, we contend that it may be anchored in the choices put forth by the instructor in procedures such as syllabus, policies, and grades, all components of procedural justice. Enjoyable interaction may not be restricted to connections with an interpersonal relationship, but instead may be associated with how fair the instructor is in making the classroom atmosphere enjoyable for all students through enacted classroom procedures. For instance, enjoyable interaction includes behaviors such as creating an atmosphere where the students enjoy comfortably interacting with the instructor and relating to other students. Procedural justice includes instructor choices such as the course schedule, how the instructor conducts class discussions, the way the instructor calls on students, the instructor's expectations of students, and the course syllabus. Thus, how the instructor designs the class (i.e., syllabus, the way they call on students, etc.) could potentially affect how enjoyable (or not) the interaction within the classroom is perceived. Largely, students may perceive they have more control over interactional justice in the classroom (Frymier & Houser, 2000) and, therefore, may see less significance in even trying to predict how interactional justice is perceived. On the contrary, students know and understand that classroom grading methods and procedures are out of

their control. This is where the perception of justice in the classroom may be mostly affected. Students may have a stronger motive to perceive procedural and distributive justice differently from interactional because they feel the instructor has total control over procedures and grading.

Classroom relationships are a two-way process in which both students and instructors play a role in rapport, confirmation, and affinity-seeking (Bell & Daly, 1984; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frymier & Thompson, 1992; Goodboy & Myers, 2008; Schrodt et al., 2006). This interpersonal dynamic illuminates the need for instructors to be more strategic in their behaviors that convey both procedural and distributive justice. Identifying the role of enjoyable interaction could be an initial step toward understanding where students feel they belong in co-constructing classroom justice. This finding, however, could be potentially problematic when considering the findings of Horan and Myers (2009), who found that instructors reported being primarily concerned with interactional justice, followed by procedural justice and distributive justice. Results here demonstrate that relational teaching messages and fairness are related perceptions.

This finding aligns with prior LMX research (Horan et al., in press), which suggests that fairness and relational qualities are related perceptions. Thus, to create a relational atmosphere, there is a need for instructors to incorporate more strategy into portraying procedural and distributive justice, rather than focusing solely on the interactional fairness. Perhaps instructors misdirect their attempts at building perceptions of justice, or perhaps there is a disconnect between the need of instructors and the need of students. Nevertheless, *perceptions* of justice are indeed just that: perceptions. As recognized in prior studies, students' perceptions of injustice "may not reflect objective reality" (Horan et al., 2010, p. 471). In other words, despite any classroom relational message, students will still perceive things that are fair as unfair, and may ignore unfair behaviors if they work in their favor (as argued by Horan & Myers, 2009). A similar pattern of results was seen in a recent study of misbehaviors, in which participants identified misbehaviors as violating institutional policy when, in reality, they were in line with institutional practices (Horan et al., in press).

Mottet et al. (2006) argued that instructors who are well liked by students and are in higher demand are able to challenge students to work harder. Perhaps these instructors choose to employ an atmosphere that encourages an enjoyable interaction between the instructor and student. Perhaps this type of classroom is one that forces students to push the limits and work much harder to achieve a higher grade. Though this teaching decision can be viewed as positive from the instructor's point of view, students may perceive it to be unfair due to the relationship level with the instructor. In this sense, instructors may believe their classroom decisions reflect the learning process rather than focusing on grades received. Students, however, may perceive this as unfair because they may not understand the rationale behind the instructor's choices, or because the expectations they hold for the class have been violated in some way. Thus, instructors must take into account the perception of students when making distributive, procedural, and interactional choices within the classroom.

**Theoretical Implications**

Throughout the rationale of our study, LMX theory was reviewed and argued to be pertinent to the study of classroom justice. We posited that utilizing relational messages with students might differentially influence perceptions of group standing. Here, enjoyable interaction and response to questions likely promoted perceptions of better-quality relationships with instructors. The initial question driving this investigation was: *Are relational messages fair*? Do the findings of previous research give us reason to believe that such messages promote relationships with students that may cause them to perceive instructors as *unfair*? Or, as intended, do such messages promote perceptions of a supportive classroom culture based on principles of fairness? Our findings pertaining to enjoyable interaction and response to questions, as interpreted through the lens of LMX theory and research, suggest that these dimensions do promote better-quality relationships with students and, concurrently, perceptions of classroom justice.

Beyond LMX, there are implications for emotional response theory (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006). Scholars who study emotional response theory argue that students have emotional responses to instructors' communication, and these responses dictate students' approach-avoidance behaviors. These arguments have recently been studied in the context of classroom justice (Chory, Horan, Carton, Houser, & Goodboy, 2012; Horan et al., 2010; Horan, Martin, & Weber, 2012). Such studies report that students perceive injustice to be severe and hurtful (Chory et al., 2012), and that they respond to perceived unfairness with a range of negative emotions (Horan et al., 2010, 2012). Potentially, enjoyable interaction and response to questions elicit positive emotional responses from students, which would help explain the better-quality relationship as argued above occurring via LMX. Thus, students' emotional responses may be one explanatory factor for both the perceived quality of the student–instructor relationships and associated perceptions of fairness in the classroom.

**Practical Implications**

It is important to note that instructor behaviors are indeed modifiable (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a; Frymier & Thompson, 1992; Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2005; Mottet & Beebe, 2006), and our findings provide continued support for instructor training to achieve a desirable classroom climate. Specifically, to build rapport, instructors might consider cancelling the official meeting time for class and inviting students to additional office hours when due dates for large assignments (e.g., final papers/presentations) are approaching. This small, but impactful gesture can help to build rapport with the students, as it shows that the instructor cares about student success and is willing to spend extra time on specific projects. Further, instructors can design interactive class activities that encourage classmates to get to know one another to create an enjoyable experience within the classroom.

To show confirmation, instructors can outline interactive classroom expectations (e.g., encourage students to ask questions) on the syllabus and during the first day meeting. Instructors can also encourage all questions to be asked, either during class or during office hours, and never shut down any student questions. Most important, instructors should always follow up with answers to questions when a questions arises with which they do not have the answer. This will help to confirm that every student question is important and worthwhile, which ultimately helps to create a relational classroom.

As suggested by Horan and Myers (2009), college instructors are often trained as content experts in their specialized area, yet rarely receive much instructional or pedagogical training. Any pedagogical training is likely received while the instructor is a graduate teaching assistant, and this training typically focuses on policy and procedure (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1992). In addition, instructors should be taught that their students have different goals when entering the classroom, and therefore, instructors should take time to get to know their audience and keep their goals in mind when preparing class for them. Further, training instructors to engage in more effective relational teaching behaviors will likely influence students' overall perceptions of the instructor and may be used as a tool to avoid problematic behaviors uncovered in previous classroom justice research including deception, resistance, and aggression (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b; Horan & Myers, 2009; Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2005). If these behaviors are enacted early and often, it is likely that a consistent image of fairness in the classroom will become the norm. Using relational teaching messages to avoid these antisocial behaviors will affect each individual student and their peers.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any study, it is important to view the results with limitations in mind. First, consistent with previous research, we chose to sum the items as an indicator of the amount of the affinity-seeking done by the instructor. Although consistent with prior work and Frymier et al.'s (1995) factor analysis, results may differ if behaviors were each analyzed as individual items. Future research should further explore the psychometric properties of the affinity-seeking measure. Second, the measures of justice assess a general perception of justice and are not incident-specific. A student may perceive an instructor to be fair overall, but may have received one grade deemed unfair. Relatedly, this survey was administered early during the academic term. Assessing justice longitudinally would allow for a deeper understanding of how justice perceptions are developed and potentially tarnished as the semester progresses. For example, it is possible that distributive injustice would be more salient at the end of the semester when final exams and projects are being graded and returned. As Horan and Myers (2009) suggested, scholars should explore how perceptions of justice differ based on learning/grade orientation.

Third, we conducted our study with an undergraduate sample at a private university with small classes, potentially limiting the generalizability of the results. Nearly 60% of students reported that the class size reported on was 30 students or fewer. Therefore, future research should examine the differences in perceptions of justice between a small classroom setting and a larger classroom setting. Fourth, relational messages are only one component of teaching, and future studies should examine both relational and rhetorical messages. The specific behaviors that instructors use to meet both goals will further inform instructors and scholars of the ways in which perceptions of justice are developed and maintained.

Finally, future studies should continue to explore the implications, both positive and negative, of communicating relational teaching messages. We argued throughout our manuscript that there are potential drawbacks and negative perceptions associated with relationally grounded instructors. Although the specific messages explored here failed to support this argument, we still maintain this position and believe that future studies will help us further understand this dynamic.

## Conclusion

Frymier and Houser (2000) suggested that once formal roles are removed from the classroom context, interpersonal relationships can begin to form. In general, relational teaching may reduce perceptions of formalized roles where power differences are often present (Turman & Schrodt, 2006). Therefore, if instructors want to effectively manage their classrooms, they should be fair when preparing procedures and create an enjoyable atmosphere in which they respond well to student questions about procedures and interactions. When mutual trust is created between students and instructors, the openness factor creates an atmosphere in which students feel more comfortable asking questions (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Consequently, students perceive a safe learning environment a fair instructor. Thus, instructors should carefully consider the choices they make in preparing for the classroom and the behaviors they demonstrate in the classroom.

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**Table 1 Correlation Matrix of Variables**

| | *M* | *SD* | α | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Distributive | 49.32 | 9.96 | 0.95 | – | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Procedural | 63.11 | 9.59 | 0.91 | 0.70** | – | | | | | | | |
| 3. Interactional | 30.10 | 6.43 | 0.96 | 0.55** | 0.73** | – | | | | | | |
| 4. Enjoyable Interaction | 31.16 | 7.80 | 0.93 | 0.55** | 0.60** | 0.68** | – | | | | | |
| 5. Personal Connection | 20.37 | 7.12 | 0.93 | 0.47** | 0.42** | 0.46** | 0.78** | – | | | | |
| 6. Response to Questions | 16.86 | 4.23 | 0.91 | 0.41** | 0.59** | 0.59** | 0.58** | 0.47** | – | | | |
| 7. Demonstrated Interest | 19.15 | 5.17 | 0.89 | 0.38** | 0.54** | 0.54** | 0.61** | 0.56** | 0.86** | – | | |
| 8. Teaching Style | 15.40 | 4.76 | 0.89 | 0.26** | 0.46** | 0.43** | 0.53** | 0.53** | 0.81** | 0.84** | – | |
| 9. Affinity Seeking | 145.81 | 19.18 | 0.86 | 0.42** | 0.51** | 0.57** | 0.71** | 0.60** | 0.62** | 0.60** | 0.58** | – |

*** p < .01*

**Table 2 Multiple Regression Predicting Procedural, Interactional, and Distributive Justice**

|  | Procedural Justice | Interactional Justice | Distributive Justice |
|---|---|---|---|
| *df* | (6,117) | (6,117) | (6, 116) |
| *F* | 16.410 | 24.118 | 10.781 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .429 | .530 | .325 |
| *p* | .001 | .001 | .001 |
| Variable | *β, p* | *β, p* | *β, p* |
| Enjoyable Interaction | .467, .000 | .589, .000 | .360, .013 |
| Personal Connection | −.12, .292 | −.157, .134 | .176, .161 |
| Response to Questions | .384, .010 | .387, .004 | .357, .029 |
| Demonstrated Interest | .053, .741 | .071, .626 | .050, .773 |
| Teaching Style | −.103, .453 | −.226, .070 | −.361, .017 |
| Affinity Seeking | .040, .700 | .324, .094 | .012, .918 |