

# I WANT AN INSTRUCTOR JUST LIKE ME! PERSONALITY AND LIFESTYLE DIFFERENCES AND THE STUDENT EVALUATION OF TEACHING

Dennis E. Clayson, University of Northern Iowa

It is known that the students' perception of an instructor's personality affects the evaluation of teaching, but it is not known what happens if the students' own personality differs from that of their instructors. Further, there is no literature base relating lifestyle differences to the evaluations.

Consequently, this study investigates two hypotheses.

1. *The difference between the students' perception and their perception of the instructor's personality will not be related to SET.* Specifically, the absolute value of the student's personality minus the instructor's personality will not be related to the SET of the instructor.
2. *The students' perception of their own lifestyle compared to their perception of the instructor's lifestyle will not be related to SET.* Specifically, the categories identified by the VAL measure for both the student and the instructor will not be related to SET of the instructor.

## Method

A survey was made available on the class internet site of four sections of undergraduate consumer behavior at an AACSB accredited business. One hundred and nine students completed the survey. They were asked to think of a teacher they currently had, but not to identify that instructor. The survey requested that the students evaluate the instructor on several scales. 1) The first measure of personality utilized the same instrument used in previous studies matching personality with SET. The students evaluated their instructor and themselves on five scales. As in previous studies, the five scales were summed and averaged to create an overall personality measure for both the instructor and the student (Cronbach alpha for student personality = 0.504, and for the instructor's personality,  $\alpha = 0.784$ ). 2) Students went online to complete the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) Five Factor Personality inventory for both themselves and their selected instructor, and 3) Students completed the VALS inventory and recorded their primary and secondary type along with the same information for their instructor. Students also recorded their response on a seven point scale to two questions: "How would you rate your overall satisfaction with your learning in the class?" and "How would you rate the overall teaching effectiveness of the instructor in the course?" The differences between students' perception of themselves and their perception of the instructor were operationalized as:  $Difference = ABS(Student\ Measure - Instructor\ Measure)$ .

## Results

As a validity check and consistent with the literature, no relationship between the students' perception of their own personality and SET was discovered, but a strong relationship between the students' perception of the instructor's personality and SET was found. The greater the difference between the students' perception of their own personality and their perception of the instructor's personality, the lower the instructor was rated on the SET measure. The greatest effect was on the factors of "neuroticism" and "agreeableness."

The students did not generally classify their instructors as the same VAL type as themselves. Almost 60 percent (59%) of the students classified themselves as "Experiencers," but put only seven percent of instructors into the same category. Not a single student self-classified as a "Thinker," but they put 32 percent of their instructors into this classification. None of the differences in primary VAL types resulted in any significant differences in SET, irrespective of how differences between the students' own classification and their classification of their instructor were operationalized.

## Test of Hypotheses

The first hypothesis stated: *The difference between the students' perception and their perception of the instructor's personality will not be related to SET.* This hypothesis was rejected. The more an instructor deviated from the students' perception of themselves, the lower the SET given to that instructor. For every increase of one standard deviation in personality difference, SET was lower by 0.3 standard deviations. The primary personality factors that influenced SET, when all five were included in the analysis, were "neuroticism" and "agreeableness." The second hypothesis stated: *The students' perception of their own lifestyle compared to their perception of the instructor's lifestyle will not be related to the SET of the instructor.* This hypothesis was not rejected. While differently perceived lifestyles were related to the students' perception of their own and the instructor's personality, these differences were not related in any way to SET.

## Discussion

The highest evaluations are reserved for instructors who the student sees as being like him or herself (there were no gender differences found). They apparently don't "like" instructors who are perceived as being more or less neurotic and/or disagreeable than themselves. Controlling for gender and GPA did not affect the general outcome, implying that both good and poor students reacted in a similar manner. Given that VAL types were related to personality, it was somewhat surprising to find that differences in lifestyle (at least as measured by the VAL instrument) had no significant impact on SET. It was also disconcerting to find that in a group of college juniors and

seniors, not one student was found in the “Thinker” type. In fact, the students rated the personality of instructors lower if they thought their instructor was a “Thinker,” and they also rated their own personality lower even if they took a class from a “Thinker.” At the same time, however, students did not significantly lower SET for an instructor perceived to be a “Thinker.”

### Limitations

It is possible that this sample of students may be unique or specific to a certain type of institution, or because they were all students in consumer behavior classes. However, the comparisons with other studies that could be made found consistent patterns with other samples of students. There is, however, a causality issue raised by the research. Since these measures are the students’ perception of both themselves and their instructor, it is not known if the differences in perceived personality affect SET, or whether the feeling towards the instructor (SET) affects the personality measures. An interesting, but not conclusive, attempt was made to unravel this issue by using another variable gathered in the survey. Past research has shown that SET best creates what could be called a “likeability” scale. Students were asked how “likeable” the instructor was. A causal path analysis was run using this variable as a control. When “likeability” was used to predict the personality difference which then predicted SET, the model accounted for 49.5% of the total variance of SET. When “likeability” was used to predict SET, which then predicted the personality difference, the model only accounted for 19.4% of the total variance, implying that the best fit of the data occurs when the personality difference is the causal agent of SET and not the other way around. There is also a statistical problem. Since the students’ perception of the instructor is correlated with the evaluations, and the perception of their own personality is not, it would be expected that a correlation would exist between the difference of the two personality measures and SET as a pure statistical artifact. This, in fact, can be demonstrated in the data. However, in this case, the artifact cannot be said to invalidate the findings because we are still left with the fact that the greater the difference between the two personality measures, irrespective of direction, the more negatively the evaluations were rated.

### Research Implications

This study did not allow for further investigations of lifestyle in the SET process. The nature and implications of the relationship between instructors who are seen as “innovators” and “thinkers” with students who see themselves as “experiencers” needs to be clarified. Further, the study did not address the pedagogical implications of personality differences in the evaluation process. Would instruction be weakened or strengthened if students and instructors were more alike, and if there

does need to be change, would learning be facilitated if the instructors became more like their students, or if students were encouraged to become more like their instructors?