

PROCEEDINGS

Competitive Paper Winner

You Gave Me a B-! The Antecedents of Student Reactions to Grades

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Abstract

Student grade complaints are a common topic of conversation among marketing educators. It is not uncommon for students who earn a grade that was lower than expected to feel dissatisfied. Some complain to their instructor, sometimes angrily, and demand a detailed explanation and/or request a change of grade. Some take the complaint beyond the instructor to the department chair, dean, or other high level administrator. Some reflect their anger in negative comments on websites such as ratemyprofessors.com.

Although students have probably always complained about their grades, many educators believe that a sense of entitlement to high grades has become more prevalent (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008; Twenge, 2006). Complaints about even relatively high grades, such as B-, are common. Educators observe that students seem to hold themselves less accountable for their own grade results, and expect positive outcomes inconsistent with the quality of their work (Finney & Finney, 2010; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008). Possible contributing factors to this sense of grade entitlement include the pressures caused by highly competitive job markets, grade inflation to protect students' self-esteem, and a growing tendency among colleges and universities to treat students as

customers (Finney & Finney, 2010; Franz 1998, Twenge, 2006).

This research examines two individual differences related to perceptions of self that might contribute to dissatisfaction with grades and to grade complaining. These are self-efficacy and students' implicit theories. Specifically, we explore the effects of a student's degree of self-efficacy with regard to doing well on academic assignments, and whether the student holds an entity view versus an incremental view of academic ability.

The study used a between-subjects experimental design, with 2 levels of self-efficacy (low self-efficacy vs. high self-efficacy) x 2 implicit theories (entity theory vs. incremental theory) to measure how students with these beliefs would react to a hypothetical scenario wherein they were told they had received a grade of B- on an assignment in a future course. Cumulative GPA was used as a covariate to wash out the effect of prior grade experience. Data were collected from students in five introductory marketing course sections at two large public universities in the southwestern United States (n=266). Students were asked to think about an assignment in a course they would take during a subsequent semester (Marketing Strategy) and read the statement, "You have just received a grade of B-, 80 out of 100 points, on your paper for the Marketing Strategy course." Respondents then completed an online questionnaire, containing closed-ended questions about their self-efficacy and implicit theories toward academic ability, about their satisfaction with the grade and liking for the instructor, about their attributions, and about their emotions.

Results of this study suggest that the implicit theory held by students (entity view or incremental view) is important in determining a student's reaction to his or her grade. When asked to project themselves into a hypothetical scenario where they had received a grade of B- on a Marketing Strategy paper, students who hold an entity view, believing that ability is fixed, reacted much more positively to the grade. They also held stronger attributions that the grade was due to their own ability, their own effort, and chance or luck. By contrast, students who hold an incremental view, believing that ability is malleable, were less satisfied, and attributed the outcome less to ability, effort, and chance or luck. These results held even after washing out any differences in grade expectations using cumulative GPA as a covariate. In fact, cumulative GPA was not significant at all in predicting satisfaction with the grade when in the regression equation with implicit theory.

In addition, implicit theory may impact how self-efficacy influences image management for students. Having been told that they received a B- on a hypothetical assignment, students in our sample who held

an incremental (malleable) view of academic ability were more likely to attribute their performance to their own ability when they also had low self-efficacy. On the other hand, for students in our sample who held an entity (fixed) view, the opposite was true. Higher self-efficacy was associated with attribution to ability. It is as if, with a fixed view of ability, students claim responsibility only once they are sure that their performance was good, a self-presentational motive (Dweck, 2006; Halvorson, 2010).

This research suggests that it is important for instructors to understand implicit theory and how it affects their students' reactions to grades. It seems as if students who hold an incremental view regarding their abilities are less likely to be satisfied with a less than stellar grade. On a more positive note, our findings indicate that they are not angry and the grade does not cause them to dislike their instructor. Since students who hold an incremental view feel that things can change, they may strive more to improve their grade. Instructors could work through various assignments to encourage students to feel that their abilities and ultimately their grades can improve through their efforts in class.

References Available upon Request