You Don’t Have to Be Their Best Friend: Complicating the Instructor-Student Relationship Through a Mixed-Method Typology

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Keywords: instructor-student relationship, instructional communication, interpersonal communication, organizational communication, typology

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the nuances of instructor-student relationships with a nationally representative sample of students. Participants were randomly assigned to describe relationships with their best, worst, and/or last instructor and rate their satisfaction with each relationship, and the level of closeness with the instructor. Coding of student descriptions revealed 13 themes, organized into six pairs of constructive/destructive relationship anchors and one neutral category (Professional Relationship). Importantly, professional relationships were not as close as constructive relationships but were equally satisfying, indicating the closeness in instructor-student relationships has diminishing returns. Results are discussed in the context of instructional communication research and pedagogy.

Introduction

The instructor-student relationship has formed a central focus of scholarship in the field of instructional communication, based on the foundational assertion that a positive relationship has a generally positive influence on student motivation and success in the classroom. This scholarship has tended to focus on instructor-student relationships as though they exist as a singular, all-encompassing association. Indeed, a 2017 Communication Education forum (Hess & Mazer, 2017) focused exclusively on the role of interpersonal communication in instructional settings, with most contributors focusing on student-teacher interactions as best understood as interpersonal or not—not the degree, kind, or type of
interpersonal relationship that is negotiated (see Myers, 2017 for the exception). Certainly, past research has illuminated important ways for teachers to develop relationships that enhance their pedagogical acumen. However, there remains the question of the unique contours of student-teacher relationships as they are experienced in the everyday classroom.

Past scholars have addressed the trend to downplay the unique dynamics of relationship creation, negotiation, and dissolution in a variety of ways (see Rudick & Golsan, 2014; Thompson et al., 2018). Though some scholars maintain the inherently interpersonal nature of the instructor-student relationship (Nussbaum & Scott, 1980) and others argue that it may be more akin to an organizational hierarchy (e.g., superior-subordinate, Myers, 2017), we agree with Sellnow (2017), who denies the either-or dichotomy often embedded in how we discuss the relational nature and interactions between students and their instructors. Across the 2017 Communication Education forum, themes emerged focusing on the need for instructional scholars to consider context and situation in their research to help define and delineate the identity of our subfield. These calls match those found in relational and interpersonal scholarship, which has developed a robust understanding of relationships as processual, negotiated, and situational (see Baxter, 2011).

**Characterizations of Student-Teacher-Relationships**

The assumption that students and teachers share an interpersonal relationship is grounded in Nussbaum and Scott’s (1980) foundational work, which demonstrated how communicator style, disclosure, and interpersonal solidarity correlated with perceived learning. Since that time, instructional communication scholars have come to agree that there is a uniquely interpersonal nature to the student-teacher relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000), and have investigated a range of variables connected to this premise including immediacy, power, influence, and rapport (see Houser & Hosek, 2018). Extant research has found that many of these variables, and more, share relationships with student affect for the course and instructor, indicating empirical support for conceptualizing the student-teacher relationship as interpersonal.

Despite the bevy of research that indicates that the student-teacher relationship can be understood as interpersonal, there is little investigating how it is so. Instructional communication scholarship has been slow to bring insights beyond its traditional interpersonal focus into its own research. Notable scholarship in this area has conceptualized student-teacher relationships either as a subordinate-superior relationship (Myers, 2017) or as a customer-service worker (Lawless et al., 2019; McMillan & Cheney, 1996). Furthermore, scholarship outside of instructional communication has conjectured the student-teacher relationship is akin to a patient-physician (Postman, 1988), athlete-coach (McEwan, 2007), or co-collaborator in dialogue form of relationship (Fassett & Warren, 2007). However, it should be noted that none of these ascriptions are empirically based; that is, none are rooted in an examination of how students understand or experience a relationship with their instructor. Rather, each of these ideas are metaphors used by scholars to highlight certain features of the student-teacher relationship to advance a particular program of research. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, it does beg the question as to what, if any, relationships students experience (or want) with their instructors.

Interpersonal communication research, for example, conceptualizes a wide range of relationship types, each with their own unique (and, sometimes, overlapping) sets of priorities, features, and communicative patterns. For example, interpersonal communication is shaped by context (e.g., workplace, family, or
romantic), needs (e.g., support), personality traits, and channel (e.g., F2F or online). These various factors can influence closeness, conflict style, face concerns, and other forms of relational dynamics (see Knapp & Daly, 2011). As a result, these different factors influence how individuals conceptualize their relationships with others and differentiate among terms such as family, friends, romantic partners, friends with benefits, acquaintances, or strangers. Frisby et al. (2024) examined the question of how instructor-student relationships compare to other types of interpersonal relationships through the lens of relational framing theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Solomon et al., 2002). Results indicated that students perceived multiple relational frames in their relationships with instructors, including affection, trust, composure, formality, and task orientation, as well as relatively low levels of dominance. Comparison with various other types of interpersonal relationships revealed similar levels of dominance and lower levels of affiliation between instructor-student relationships and other associations. Although instructor-student relationships may share characteristics with some other types of interpersonal relationships (Frisby et al., 2024), they may also work together in a unique way within the context of higher education.

To this end, in contrast with previous attempts to apply broad characterizations of relational frameworks (e.g., organizational, interpersonal) to the instructor-student relationship, or compare them to other types of relationships using a priori constructs, we hope to add to this literature and the insights provided by Frisby et al. (2024) through an inductive examination of students’ descriptions of their relationships with instructors. We undertake this endeavor not only as a means of addressing the need for contextually situated and increasingly nuanced understanding of instructor-student relationships and interactions, but also to challenge assumptions inherent in the relational communication approach to instructional communication.

Specifically, there seems to be a general assumption in instructional communication research that forming meaningful attachments with students is universally desirable and beneficial for both parties. But what if there are students and instructors who feel no need for these connections (Rudick & Golsan, 2014)? Instructors for whom these relationships further issues of role strain, intrusive teaching, and care labor (Goode et al., 2020)? Or students for whom these relationships are inauthentic, forged primarily for the practical rewards they provide (Rudick et al., 2019)? We know that students and instructors can and do create genuine and meaningful relationships that can have a positive impact on their shared experiences that may persist beyond the time they spend in the classroom together (Frisby et al., 2019). In truth, our relationships with students vary based on myriad considerations, including the characteristics, preferences, and dispositions of the actors involved, as well as the larger institutional and cultural context in which these relationships are formed, enacted, and managed. The purpose of the present study was to provide space for students to describe their relationships with instructors, whatever they might look like, to address the following research question:

**RQ:** What types of relationships do college students describe having with their instructors?

**Method**

**Participants**

In an effort to capture the experiences of a wide range of students at a variety of institutions, and not just those at the authors’ home institutions, participants were recruited through a Qualtrics research panel. Qualtrics engaged in quota sampling to recruit a nationally representative demographic sample from a variety of institutions, including public colleges ($n = 47$), public universities ($n = 73$), private colleges...
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(n = 7), private universities (n = 21), community colleges (n = 23), vocational/trade schools (n = 5), and art and design schools (n = 5), as well as other institution types (n = 7).

Participants (N = 188) self-identified as male (n = 88), female (n = 96), female to male transgender (n = 2), or gender queer or nonbinary (n = 2). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 (M = 22.6, SD = 4.77). Participants self-identified as White (n = 115; 61.2%), Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin (n = 35; 18.6%), Black or African American (n = 24; 12.8%), Asian or Asian American (n = 8; 4.3%), bi- or multiracial (n = 3; 1.6%), and Native American (n = 2; 1%). Participants also self-identified their income level as low income (n = 20; 10.6%), lower-middle income (n = 28; 14.9%), middle income (n = 90; 47.9%), upper-middle income (n = 38; 20.2%), or high income (n = 10; 5.3%), with 2 participants (1.1%) preferring not to identify their income level. Participants represented first-year students (n = 40; 21.3%), sophomores (n = 37; 19.7%), juniors (n = 34; 18.1%), seniors (n = 37; 19.7%), and graduate students (n = 38; 20.2%). Two participants (1.1%) identified their class standing as other.

Procedure

Once approved by the institutional review board, Qualtrics recruited participants to take part in an online survey, allotted to take approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Participants read the IRB-approved cover page and chose to consent or exit the survey. Those who consented were directed to initial demographic items; if they qualified based on quotas set by Qualtrics, they were then directed to the study questions. Participants were randomly assigned to answer questions about two out of three instructor conditions: their best instructor, their worst instructor, or the instructor in the last class they attended. These conditions were created to capture relationships of all types and not just those that might be most prevalent in student recall. Upon completion, participants were thanked and received a monetary payment from Qualtrics.

Instrumentation

Instructor-student relationships. For each scenario, participants were asked to think about an instructor (best, worst, or last), and then provide three adjectives that best describe their relationship with this instructor. They were then asked, for each adjective, to provide at least three sentences describing a story or example that illustrated that aspect of their relationship.

Relationship satisfaction. Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with their relationship using a single item ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). As would be expected given the prompts, participants in the best instructor condition rated their relationship satisfaction highest (M = 8.44, SD = 1.74), followed by last (M = 7.55, SD = 2.34) and worst instructor (M = 3.93, SD = 3.11).

Relationship closeness. Participants were asked to rate how close they felt with their instructor using a single item ranging from 1 (not at all close) to 10 (very close). As would be expected given the prompts, participants in the best instructor condition rated their relationship closeness highest (M = 7.17, SD = 2.33), followed by last (M = 6.61, SD = 2.53) and worst instructor (M = 3.52, SD = 2.81).

Data Analysis

For this research project, we used taxonomic coding (Manning & Kunkel, 2014) to develop our typology of student-instructor relationships. Taxonomic coding is warranted when researchers hope to gather the
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tacit meanings people assign to a phenomenon (i.e., a folk term) and identify/label those meanings into structured and organized patterns (i.e., analytic terms) (see McCurdy et al., 2005). To do so, we followed Manning and Kunkel’s specific taxonomic approach, where we focused on participant meaning as it related to the taxonomic form of strict inclusion (i.e., X is a kind of Y). In this case, X is a kind of student-teacher relationship (Y), where X is an analytic category that we generate through our examination of participants’ folk descriptions.

To begin the process, we placed participants’ three adjectival phrases and examples/stories in an Excel spreadsheet according to their referent of best, worst, or last instructor. To develop the codebook, the two researchers coded each set of responses (best, worst, or last) separately. In this phase, the team generated relationship types that characterized the data and ascribed a code to each of the three responses per participant singularly (rather than ascribing a code to encompass all three responses as a collective ascription). Our initial coding phase produced two broad relationship types (i.e., constructive and destructive) as well as our emergent categories within those trends. Based on this information, we created a taxonomic tree showcasing the strict inclusion relationships we developed. For example, the Inspirational Relationship (i.e., sublevel) is a type of Constructive Relationship (i.e., middle-level) which is a type of Student-Teacher Relationship (i.e., domain) (see McCurdy et al., 2005).

After the initial coding phase, we discussed the terms used to describe the relationships and developed a codebook based on agreed-upon terms, collapsing categories with synonymous phrasings and operationalizing each code. For example, the “Clear” relationship (i.e., one where students felt they could rely on the instructor to give clear directions, due dates, and syllabus) was collapsed with the “Clerk” relationship (i.e., one where students felt they could rely on the instructor to update the gradebook regularly, have clear rubrics for grading, and respond to emails promptly) to create the “Reliable” relationship since both codes address a relationship where students feel they can depend on the instructor to give prompt, unambiguous directives. We then re-evaluated the data with the codebook, generating six positive codes, six negative codes, and one neutral code that we then used to re-code all the data. Importantly, our analysis of the codes showed that no participant gave mutually exclusive codes to the same instructor. This finding, in addition to the finding that the composite scores aligned with their valence—constructive relationships ($M = 15.62, SD = 2.15$), last relationship ($M = 13.99, SD = 2.54$), and destructive relationships ($M = 7.45, SD = 2.96$)—on the two measures, indicated that the codes were valid descriptors of participants’ ascriptions of their relationships with instructors. Finally, all adjectives/descriptions were compiled to understand students’ ascriptions of their best, worst, and last instructor relationship.

Results

Our research question asked what types of relationships college students describe having with their instructors. There are three key analyses of the data to report. First, is the coding of participants’ responses and the types of relationships they report experiencing with their instructors. Our coding of participant descriptions generated emergent themes representing anchors on a continuum exemplifying, on one side, constructive relationships, built upon teacher behaviors and pedagogical practices lauded by instructional communication scholars, and on the other side, destructive relationships built upon a range of instructor behaviors that devalue students and/or teaching responsibilities. In line with this trend, resulting inductive themes are presented in pairs representing two ends of a relational spectrum. These themes and pairings emerged naturally through participant responses and were not imposed
by a priori design. Second, we analyzed participants’ ascriptions of their relationships to understand if and where there was variation when referencing the same instructor. This analysis showed that participants used the same theme repeatedly (i.e., less variety in descriptions) to describe a destructive relationship than when they reported on constructive relationships. Finally, we offer a post-hoc analysis of participants’ relationship satisfaction and relationship closeness as they relate to the inductively derived categories. The analysis supports the differentiation of the codes into constructive, neutral, and destructive relationship types. See Table 1 for frequencies and percentages for each theme across student descriptions of their best, worst, and last instructor.

### Table 1
Category and Theme Frequency for Best, Worst, and Last Instructor Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Best Instructor ($n = 309$)</th>
<th>Worst Instructor ($n = 270$)</th>
<th>Last Instructor ($n = 271$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructive Teacher Relationships</strong></td>
<td>Frequency (%)</td>
<td>Frequency (%)</td>
<td>Frequency (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregiving</td>
<td>110 (35.60)</td>
<td>12 (4.44)</td>
<td>67 (24.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend/Family</td>
<td>44 (14.24)</td>
<td>3 (1.11)</td>
<td>29 (10.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>24 (7.77)</td>
<td>2 (0.74)</td>
<td>21 (7.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiring</td>
<td>28 (9.06)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24 (8.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>40 (12.94)</td>
<td>6 (2.22)</td>
<td>30 (11.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edutaining</td>
<td>32 (10.36)</td>
<td>7 (2.59)</td>
<td>27 (9.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral Relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Relationship</td>
<td>27 (8.74)</td>
<td>8 (2.96)</td>
<td>50 (18.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Destructive Teacher Relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>68 (25.19)</td>
<td>10 (3.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14 (5.19)</td>
<td>1 (0.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taskmaster</td>
<td>2 (0.65)</td>
<td>47 (17.41)</td>
<td>4 (1.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tedious</td>
<td>1 (0.32)</td>
<td>20 (4.41)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreliable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>64 (20.70)</td>
<td>5 (1.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsocial</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18 (6.67)</td>
<td>3 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Inductively Generated Thematic Pairs**

**Caregiving vs. Bullying Relationships.** The first pair of themes involves interpersonal behaviors. *Caregiving Relationships* ($n = 189$) provide individualized support, interpersonal warmth, and emotional help for students, developing a relationship whereby instructors communicate care for students both personally and academically and want students to succeed. For example, one participant wrote, “She would ask me how my day was. She would compliment me in basic things like how I did a task. And she always made sure we were mentally okay in her class.” Another participant talked about how their instructor communicated this ethic of care in their response:
They saw I was having trouble and actually reached out to me. After hearing me out, they helped come up with a custom due date schedule tailored to the extra time I might’ve needed for each assignment. They even accepted a decent amount of very late work because they saw that I had actually done the work and decided to give me a chance at passing.

These types of responses showed general agreement among participants that they recognized prosocial, care-oriented communication. In contrast, relationships that were characterized as Bullying \((n = 78)\) involved interpersonal and often targeted communication, but these messages and behaviors are inappropriate, unhelpful, or intimidating. Instead of providing warmth and support, these relationships are characterized by destructive connections and, at times, harassment. For example, one participant wrote, “My instructor was really mean and disrespectful . . . [they] always picked on me and made me feel stupid.” Other participants recounted identity-based discrimination, such as one participant who described how their instructor “made subtle racist comments about me.” These types of communication were viewed by participants as intentional uses of anti-social or aggressive communication rather than messages that came from ignorance.

**Friend/Family vs. Superior Relationships.** The second pair of themes differ in power distance, familiarity, and both range and quality of interactions. Friends/family Relationships \((n = 76)\) are characterized by their focus beyond academics and into realms more traditionally viewed as friendship, including shared interests, mutual benefits/reciprocity, and treating students as equals. For example, some participants recounted, “I would often stay after class to help my instructor with grading and work. We would often have many different conversations. This was the highlight of my time in school,” “Our relationship was a jovial one that involved getting beers after work,” and “I love her. She was always there to help me with work or just to have some girl chat!” Some participants viewed instructors more akin to family due to their level of support, consistency, or help with basic needs. These participants described important facets of their relationship with instructors, giving examples such as, “They gave me food and shelter and helped me financially in my time of need,” “She is a mother figure to me and I call her every week to ask how she has been doing,” and “We bonded very well and he was like an uncle to me . . . He always looked out and cared for me in and outside school.” Either as friend or family, participants often downplayed the role-oriented features of their relationship (i.e., instructor-student/superior-subordinate) in favor of terms that connoted low social distance or perceived power imbalance. Conversely, students who shared a Superior Relationship \((n = 15)\) with instructors characterized their interactions as lacking regard for students’ needs or desires (e.g., mental health, well-being), emphasizing instead instructor power, social distance, and institutional authority, often through a condescending communication style. For example, one participant stated, “He portrays himself to be high and mighty,” and another said their instructor “Had a condescending nature that made me feel unimportant and that my ideas were always flawed.” In these cases, participants felt that their instructor foregrounded their superior status in the superior-subordinate relationship to the point to where they were associated with destructive values such as pride/arrogance, condescension, or conceit.

**Mentoring vs. Taskmaster Relationships.** Participants described Mentoring Relationships \((n = 47)\) as being developed through instructors’ efforts to encourage students outside of class, provide advice, guidance, and resources to support students’ work toward future goals and opportunities, and to protect students. In these relationships, participants view instructors as both expert and caring. For example, participants characterized these types of relationships in the following ways: “My instructor gave me great college and career advice,” “He was always there to protect, guide and also give me advice whenever
I needed,” and “[They] taught me a lot about life and how the world worked and I really enjoyed my time there.” Here, we see how participants foregrounded instructors’ advice-giving function—within and beyond the classroom—which characterizes how participants, in turn, relate back to them. Conversely, Taskmaster Relationships \((n = 53)\) were depicted as those where instructors impose overbearing or unreasonable workloads, often without educational or pedagogical purpose, on students. Instead of helping to guide students to and through meaningful experiences, these relationships are characterized by meaningless work and a low level of caring from instructors. For example, one participant complained about “The way he loads us down with homework. Then your papers are due the next day. You get a F if you don’t have it completed.” Participants felt that instructors who did not make themselves available for guidance in the classroom reduced students’ desire to seek advice from them for issues that went beyond the classroom.

**Inspirational vs. Tedious Relationships.** This pair of themes was heavily focused on emotional contagion, with relationships and motivation levels built off the emotional tone set by instructors. Students who characterize their relationships as Inspirational \((n = 52)\) described their instructors as experts in their subject matter who provide intellectual stimulation and inspire joint exploration of course content with students through their passion and enthusiasm. One participant wrote, “You could tell he had a drive for mathematics. He loved teaching it, and it was evident in the way he spoke of it. Never was a question too hard, it was always just out of reach.” Another described the impact their instructor had on their academic pursuits:

> One professor inspired me to pursue an area of study, Classics, that I wasn’t familiar with at all, but he was so passionate about it. His breadth of knowledge blew me away and sparked a passion for learning. He was also instrumental in convincing me to study abroad for a summer. I had a fantastic experience that I will never forget. I can never repay him for all the experiences he made possible.

Participants who characterized their instructors in this relational category often recounted instances where their academic or scholarly trajectory was changed (e.g., changed major or went to graduate school) due to their relationship with their instructor. In contrast, participants viewed relationships as Tedious \((n = 21)\) when they felt their instructor engaged in behaviors that indicated that they did not like their job or care about their students. Far from being passionate in these relationships, they seemed to perform their jobs with ill-humor. One participant described an instructor who “always had a bad demeanor. Looked mean anytime he spoke. Seems like he hates his job.” Another stated, “There was always a sense of hate on her. It was like she hated her job and the students. Everything was a problem.” The recurring utterance that an instructor seemed to “hate their job” often accompanied descriptions of poor relationships with students in this category, in contrast to those instructors who infused passion into their classrooms.

**Reliable vs. Unreliable Relationships.** These relational anchors are characterized by differences in communication clarity and consistency and the impact on students’ uncertainty and motivation. Reliable Relationships \((n = 76)\) were developed by instructors focusing on material care through instructional help, availability to students, willingness to answer questions, and clear and effective instruction that were generally viewed as facilitating students’ learning. For example, one participant characterized their instructor relationship positively, stating, “They did a great job at explaining course material.” Instructors also built reliable relationships through the clerical side of teaching, maintaining their relationships with
students through fulfilling responsibilities such as posting grades or feedback quickly, being consistently responsive to students, and articulating well-defined expectations (e.g., assignment guidelines, rubrics). One participant summarized this clearly in their description: “I could always count on her to make sure she would respond constantly, she was always around, she would always keep grades updated.” Participants’ emphasis on the role-oriented function of the instructor indicates that accuracy, reliability, and timeliness are important dynamics of these instructor-student relationships. In contrast, Unreliable Relationships ($n = 69$) were characterized by unclear (e.g., “It was hard to understand. I don’t know why I didn’t get full points on my assignments”; “Talked fast. Confusing notes. Never reviewed anything.”), inconsistent (e.g., “They were really flaky. They wouldn’t show up to class on time. Sometimes they missed a whole class”; “He did not show up to class at least half the time.”), unpredictable (e.g., “I always was anxious because his class was very unpredictable.”), or complete lack of communication (e.g., “They didn’t talk and they didn’t show up”) from instructors. These relationships lack well-defined boundaries and instructional goals, making it difficult for students to know what to expect or what was expected of them, which ultimately impeded their ability to learn or succeed.

Edutaining vs. Unsocial Relationships. Edutaining Relationships ($n = 66$) were premised on how instructors engaged with students through humor and fun activities. One participant wrote that their instructor was, “Always cracking jokes. Let us play games every now and then. Very cool,” while another stated, “She loved making us laugh and seeing our smiles. She enjoyed our company and when we were with her, we would always have a great time.” The way that participants combined education and fun—whether as a tool for learning or alongside it—indicates the power of humor and games in developing a positive relationship. In contrast, Unsocial Relationships ($n = 21$) were awkward in ways that made students uncomfortable or hesitant to interact or ask questions. Descriptions often associated these instructors with being socially inept, ultimately failing to engage students or facilitate positive emotion and engagement. As one participant observed, “We never interacted much. They weren’t great at social interaction. I never felt very content and comfortable around them.” Importantly, participants’ descriptions of this type of relationship foregrounded feelings of discomfort and anxiety due to their instructor rather than simply a lack of fun or humor. These relationships seemed to have inverse impacts on the general learning and environment and student engagement.

Professional Relationships. In addition to these positively- and negatively-valenced anchors, one neutral theme emerged, encompassing instructor-student relationships that were akin to acquaintances or professionally distant associations—what we would call a Professional Relationship ($n = 85$). These relationships were characterized by politic communication (i.e., role/context appropriate; Watts, 2003); participants described instructors as engaging in communicative interactions that were role-appropriate and thus non-noteworthy. Participants described clear roles and boundaries, with emphasis on respectful and/or professional interactions. For example, one participant noted that “I wasn’t his best friend. He showed up to work, I showed up to class.” Another noted that their relationship “was okay because we didn’t really talk or interact.” Thus, relationships in this category were not viewed positively or negatively but conformed to proscribed roles to the point of unremarkability.
Constructive and Destructive Instructor Relationship Groupings

To analyze the various dimensions of participants’ relationship descriptions, all responses with three adjectives/descriptions were compiled to understand students’ ascriptions of their best, worst, and last instructor relationship. This process resulted in 270 descriptions for best instructor, 234 descriptions for last instructor, and 192 for worst instructor. Analysis proceeded in two ways. We first reviewed the three ascriptions for best (90 sets), last (78 sets), and worst (64 sets) instructor as a set. In the instructor data, a participant’s three responses were assigned a number code using the 13 descriptors: Caregiving (1), Friend/Family (2), Mentoring (3), Inspirational (4), Reliable (5), Edutaining (6), Professional (7), Bullying (8), Superior (9), Taskmaster (10), Tedious (11), Unreliable (12), and Unsocial (13). For example, those whose three descriptions of their relationship were coded as Caregiving, Friend/Family, and Mentoring was coded as a “1-2-3.” Results showed that the most often appearing sets of relationship terms for constructive relationships in the best instructor category were 1-1-1 (all Caregiving; nine sets), 1-1-2 (Caregiving and Friend/Family; six sets), and 1-1-5 (Caregiving and Reliable; six sets). Overall, 63 of the 90 coding sets (70%) were a combination that included Caregiving. Conversely, findings demonstrated that the most frequently appearing sets of relationship terms for destructive relationships in the worst instructor category were 8-8-8 (all Bullying; 10 sets), 8-13-13 (Bullying and Unsocial; five sets), and 13-13-13 (all Unsocial; five sets) (i.e., 8- Bullying and 13-Unreliable Relationships). Furthermore, 31 of the possible 64 sets (48.44%) contained at least one indicator of Bullying.

Interestingly, there were more instances of repeated codes in participants’ understanding of their worst instructor (e.g., “8-8-8” or “13-13-13”) than for their best instructor. For the best instructor relationships, participants used three different descriptors 32 times, repeated one descriptor 42 times, and utilized the same descriptor in all three responses 16 times in their ascriptions (i.e., participants repeated a descriptor at least once for 64.44% of the sets). Conversely, participants utilized three different descriptors 10 times, repeated one descriptor 29 times, and utilized the same descriptor in all three responses 25 times in their ascriptions for worst instructor relationships (i.e., participants repeated a descriptor at least once for 84.38% of the sets). This finding suggests that students may view their constructive instructor relationships as encompassing many communicative and relational forms or dimensions, but students seem more inclined to seize upon a particular violation or behavior pattern and ascribe that as the primary identity of the destructive student-instructor relationship.

We then reviewed the three ascriptions as associations in relation to each other rather than as a grouping. So, for example, an ascription of 8-Bullying, 9-Superior, 10-Taskmaster was coded as 9 and 10; 9 and 11; and 10 and 11. As seen in Table 2, results revealed that the most variation of codes (i.e., constructive, neutral, and destructive codes were all used) was in the last instructor condition, which is expected since that category was not inherently valenced.
Code combinations for the best instructor condition are displayed in Table 3. We found that for constructive instructor relationships, the Caregiving code (1) was the most repeated code (i.e., the 1-1-1 code was used 47 times) and was the most connected code to other codes (a set contained at least one Caregiving code 57.41% of the time). These findings suggest that instructors may utilize a variety of relational indicators when developing constructive relationships, as long as the instructor primarily cultivates a caregiving relationship.

The converse was true for the worst instructor condition. Specifically, as seen in Table 4, the Bullying code (9) was the most repeated code (i.e., associations of 9 to 9 were used 37 times) and was the most connected to other codes (a set contained at least one Bullying code 42.19% of the time). That is, students’ high frequency of including the Bullying Relationship in their descriptions of destructive relationships may indicate that most of their destructive relationships are based on bullying behaviors or that bullying is so threatening that it may overwhelm other indicators within those relationships.
TABLE 4
Worst Instructor Co-occurring Code Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Code</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
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<td>8. Bullying</td>
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<td>9. Superior</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>10. Taskmaster</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Tedious</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>12. Unreliable</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Unsocial</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
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Post-Hoc Analyses

In order to explore further the differential relational outcomes associated with different instructor-student relationship themes and the conceptual organizational scheme developed in our qualitative coding process (i.e., dichotomous anchors), a series of independent samples $t$-tests were run to investigate differences in relational satisfaction and relational closeness between each pair of anchors. Results are displayed in Table 5 and confirm the significant differences between each pair of relational anchors in students’ satisfaction with the instructor-student relationship and their self-rated closeness with their instructor.

TABLE 5
Results of Independent Samples $t$-tests for All Theme Anchors and Student Ratings of Relational Satisfaction and Closeness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anchor</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Cohen’s $d$</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
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<td>Caregiving vs. Bullying</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>12.67</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.17</td>
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<td>Closeness</td>
<td>11.17</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>7.54</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1.99</td>
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<td>Friend/Family vs. Superior</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>8.73</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>2.61</td>
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<td>Closeness</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>7.64</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>3.60</td>
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<td>Mentoring vs. Taskmaster</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>9.91</td>
<td>21.97a</td>
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<td>Inspiring vs. Tedious</td>
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<td>1.97</td>
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<td>Reliable vs. Unreliable</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
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<td>47</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>7.92</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>2.70</td>
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<td>Closeness</td>
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<td>Edutaining vs. Unsocial</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.16</td>
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</table>

Note. All results significant at the $p < .001$ level. *Equal variance not assumed.
In order to explore how the neutral category of Professional Relationship compared to the positive and negative relational themes that emerged in participant responses, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted for each of the dependent variables. Results were significant for both satisfaction, \( F(12, 293) = 40.81, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .63, \) and closeness, \( F(12, 293) = 27.68, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .53. \) Examination of the Tukey post-hoc comparisons, specifically for the professional category, revealed some interesting results. With regard to relational satisfaction, Professional Relationship (\( M = 7.28, SD = 2.14 \)) was significantly different from all of the negative anchors (Bullying, Superior, Taskmaster, Tedium, Unreliable, and Unsocial), but none of the positive anchors (see mean and standard deviations for all anchors in Table 1), indicating that students perceive these role-oriented relationships equally as satisfying as all positively valenced relationships, and more satisfying than all negatively valenced relationships.

Results for closeness were mixed, with students rating their Professional Relationships (\( M = 5.16, SD = 2.60 \)) as significantly less close than Caregiving, Friend/Family, Mentoring, Inspiring, and Edutaining Relationships and significantly closer than Bullying, Taskmaster, Tedium, and Unreliable Relationships. However, no differences emerged in closeness between Professional relationships and Reliable, Superior, or Unsocial relationships. These results suggest that role-oriented instructor-student relationships are viewed as closer than those with instructors who violate basic norms and expectations of their roles (e.g., professionalism and respect, reliability, availability to students), as would be expected. Closeness is perceived as similar, however, to those other relationship types where instructors fulfill basic role functions (e.g., reliable) without necessarily engaging in further interpersonal interactions (e.g., unsocial). Overall, these results support the structure and conceptualization of the themes and framework that emerged in our study.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to complicate past characterizations of the instructor-student relationship concept. To do so, we inductively examined students’ descriptions of their relationships with instructors and developed a relationship typology that was unique to their experiences, context, and goals. Through our qualitative analysis, we generated 13 relationship types: six were constructive (i.e., Caregiving, Friend/Family, Mentoring, Inspiring, and Edutaining Relationships); six were destructive (i.e., Bullying, Superior, Taskmaster, Unreliable, and Unsocial Relationships); and one was neutral (i.e., Professional Relationship). These themes address a wide range of relationship types based on behaviors, contexts, settings, and dispositions. Additionally, the analysis of the description sets shows students may view their constructive instructor relationships as encompassing many communicative and relational forms or dimensions (i.e., students perceive that many dynamics can go into a Constructive Relationship), but students seem more inclined to seize upon a particular violation or behavior pattern and ascribe that as the primary identity of the destructive student-instructor relationship. Additionally, students’ frequency of describing Bullying Relationships may indicate that most of their destructive relationships are based on bullying behaviors or that bullying is so threatening it may overwhelm other relationship indicators. In either instance, it is in instructors’ best interests to eschew behaviors that may induce students to characterize their relationship as a bullying one since it is associated with poor outcomes.

In addition to the qualitatively generated dimensions of student-instructor relationships, the analysis of students’ reports of satisfaction and closeness offer empirical support for their conceptual differentiation
and organization into binary pairs. Furthermore, although constructive relationships were associated with higher reports of satisfaction and closeness than destructive relationships, they were not found to be significantly higher than the neutral relationship (i.e., Professional) on ratings of satisfaction (but were, intuitively, generally higher on closeness). Collectively, our findings show that a significant contribution to the conversation surrounding instructor-student relationships is that students reported being just as satisfied with instructors whose relationship with them was characterized as simply fulfilling their role-oriented tasks/communication (i.e., the Professional Relationship) as those in constructive relationship types. These findings offer a more complex view of instructor-student relationships as well as complicate pedagogical advice to instructors. Thus, we offer practical and theoretical implications for instructional researchers and higher education instructors.

**Practical Implications for Instruction**

Our qualitative findings indicate that there are a range of communicative ways to build constructive and neutral relationships with students. The quantitative results demonstrate that students generally find these relationships as equally satisfying, suggesting that instructors have a great deal of latitude in choosing what kind of relationship they want, and how they cultivate it, with students. The first implication of this finding is that instructors should not feel pressured into developing close relationships with students under the auspice that relational closeness and effective teaching are synonymous. Although certainly a student may perceive, for example, a Caregiver as more relationally close than an Edutainer, students (as a whole) do not differentiate greatly among the various constructive relationship types. Certainly, instructors should avoid instructor misbehaviors (e.g., antagonism, Balkan et al., 2022; Goodboy et al., 2018; classroom injustice, Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004), or discriminatory language/actions (Vallade et al., 2023), which characterize destructive relationship types and were associated with lower levels of satisfaction and closeness. Our finding suggests that if an instructor wishes to establish and maintain a constructive relationship with students, then they are free to choose which type of relationship best suits the needs, communication styles, motives, attitudes, and resources involved. Students seem to respond positively if they perceive that the instructor is engaging appropriately and instructors are best served being the type of instructor that fits their talents and dispositions, instead of feeling pressured to conform to a particular communicative style. These findings, and continued investigations to more fully understand how we communicatively constitute relationships in our classrooms, may offer a rebuke in the face of increased expectations being put on faculty (particularly female faculty and faculty of color, see Lawless, 2018) to engage in the emotional labor of managing students’ mental and personal wellness, which can increase feelings of role strain and care labor in the form of “required relationships” and intrusive teaching (Goode et al., 2020, p. 58).

Interestingly, participants who provided three descriptors for their best student-instructor relationship were more likely to give responses that required different codes than those who gave three descriptors of destructive student-teacher relationships. In other words, it appeared that participants were more likely to focus on one dimension of a destructive student-teacher relationship as the reason why the relationship was negative. This may indicate that students’ relationships with their worst instructor are based on the actuality that the instructor consistently engages in destructive communicative behaviors or it may be that a transgression in that relationship was of a magnitude so large that it eclipsed other potential relational evaluations. Indeed, Vallade (2021) found that there are some instructor misbehaviors that students view as impossible to reconcile or recover from, thus becoming the dominant and lasting influence within that instructor-student relationship. As Goodboy et al. (2018) note, “a single antagonistic episode,
or one bad day of teaching, can potentially ruin a student’s perception of the instructor by diminishing affect” (p. 320). Vallade (2021) also found that students reported the most common instructor response to perceived misbehaviors, such as antagonism, in the classroom was to ignore or disregard the behavior altogether. To mitigate the potential impact of a particular transgression on the way students view and enact relationships with instructors, we should more consistently address these events through instructor accounts (Vallade, 2021).

Implications for Instructional Scholarship

Our hope is that these results and the typology presented here provide a foundation and a framework for future scholars to investigate the nuances of instructor-student relationships in more depth. Previous scholars have called for increased specificity and depth in research on traditional instructional variables (e.g., instructor misbehavior, Baker & Goodboy, 2018). We contend that this is true for classroom relationships as well; as researchers work to delineate instructional communication as a distinct subfield, we have the opportunity to provide a more contextualized and comprehensive understanding of the relational dynamics present in our classrooms and how they function within societal and academic systems.

In addition to the framework and relational labels offered here, each theme provides a targeted way to frame and investigate dimensions of student-instructor associations, such as caring, emotional support, and emotional/care labor (e.g., Caregiving vs. Bullying), power (e.g., Friend/family vs. Superior), passion, emotional contagion, and burnout (e.g., Inspirational vs. Tiedious), and role-based communication (e.g., Professional). Communication scholars (e.g., Hendrix et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2023) have called for greater attention on the ways that race, class, gender, and sexuality influence student-teacher relationships. Combining our findings with these calls raises important questions, such as how do mentor-mentee relationships develop when the mentor/mentee are from different identities or how do dominant group students’ discriminatory beliefs predict their perceptions of destructive relationships with faculty from marginalized identities? Finally, scholars should work to connect the ways that states’ laws and regulations shape and constrain instructors’ abilities to support students (Rudick & Golsan, 2014). For example, state laws that do not support gender-affirming practices may harm student-instructor relationships because instructors are regulated to make choices that trans students may perceive as destructive (e.g., Bullying). Future research may further investigate the interplay of these dynamics through both qualitative and quantitative methods to determine how and to what extent they influence the relationships we form with students and their subsequent impact on the experiences and outcomes of all parties involved.

Limitations and Future Directions

These results must be interpreted within the limitations of the study design. Because we were trying to elicit a range of descriptions from a representative sample of college students, our prompts were designed to access breadth, not necessarily depth in student experiences. The resulting typology may provide a useful framework for future research to home in on particular categories, relational anchors, and additional means of examining the nuance of instructor-student relationships, as well as what they mean to and for those involved. Interviews would provide the opportunity to probe these relationships further and gain valuable information about the role and impact of instructor-student relationships.
Further, it is important to note that participants in our study primarily reported on smaller classrooms. Although this is not necessarily a limitation of the study, it is nevertheless important to interpret the results within this context; perhaps future research could more purposefully target instructor-student relationships in large lecture courses to build upon our understanding of student-instructor communication and dynamics.

Additionally, the quantitative data in the current study was included primarily as a means of examining differences among relationship types but consisted of simple single-item measures. Future research should replicate and extend these results using more robust and diverse measurements and methodologies. Finally, because some participants did not heed instructions and seemed to identify adjectives and descriptions relevant to more than one instructor (cases that, when explicit, were removed from analyses), the resulting themes may not be mutually exclusive. For example, an instructor could be both reliable and a source of caregiving. Future research could elicit student descriptions more clearly focused on one instructor, and then themes could be analyzed to see whether they group together to form a more comprehensive relationship typology. Ultimately, these results indicate that relationships between students and their instructors involve variance, supporting the need to examine these associations in more depth, not only through the lens of existing interpersonal or organizational concepts, theories, and frameworks, but situated within their unique contexts and functions.

Conclusion

We undertook this project to address the need for contextually-situated, empirically-based, and holistically-nuanced research concerning instructor-student relationships (Baxter, 2011; Rudick & Golsan, 2014; Thompson et al., 2018). In the same way that interpersonal literature has complicated concepts such as friendship (i.e., close, casual, expedient, or familial) or romantic (e.g., friends with benefits, back burner, infidelity, or committed) relationships, student-teacher relationships are multifaceted and can be characterized by issues such as power distance, role emphasis, quantity and focus of interactions, individualized care, multiple types of support, task-goals, culture, context, face needs, and abilities/resources, all of which are communicatively constructed and enacted. This study provided an initial attempt at addressing this complexity, with participant descriptions providing a rich portrait of the type, depth, and outcomes associated with different student-instructor relationships. We look forward to future research that builds this work by developing methodologically precise and theoretically robust understanding of student-instructor relationships.

References


