

# Effects of Forms of Address on Advisees' Perceptions of Advisors

Rebecca J. Adams, Kathryn L. Greene, John E. Hocking, Mary Ann Smith, and Kimberly Lichner, University of Georgia

*One hundred and twenty-five undergraduate student volunteers participated in a three-group experiment in which they observed a videotaped advising session. One group observed the advisor address the student formally (i.e., using "Mr."). Another group observed the advisor use the student's first name, and the third group observed the advisor use no name in addressing the student. As predicted, use of the formal name resulted in an increase in perceived advisor persuasiveness. Name use did not significantly affect perceptions of advisor credibility, approachability, or likability.*

The years spent in college can be difficult and frustrating for students. Relationships formed between students and their advisors can be important determinants of failure or success in college (Fielstein, 1987). Research evaluating the impact of academic advising has found the quality of advising at an institution to be related to student morale (Wilder, 1981), grade point average (Morehead & Johnson, 1964), and student retention rate (Crockett, 1979; Trombley, 1984). One important issue that has been neglected concerns those advisor communication behaviors that may facilitate positive relationships with students. The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of an advisor's use of a student's name on student perceptions of that advisor's competence, trustworthiness, likability, and persuasiveness.

Although university faculty have traditionally been expected to advise undergraduate students, preparation to carry out this responsibility has often been neglected. It is often assumed that the art of advising will emerge as one is assigned advisees (Lumpkins & Hall, 1987). "Almost every study of undergraduate education in recent years has cited as a major problem the poor quality of academic advising that students receive" (Johnson & Sprandel, 1975, p. 17).

Establishing informal relationships with faculty outside the classroom has been found to be related to academic performance and personal fulfillment (Pascarella, 1980). This relationship ordinarily results in the use of informal names by an advisor. However, because of the status

difference, students still address advisors formally (Little & Gelles, 1975). Fielstein (1987) investigated advisor/advisee relationships and found that most students thought advisors should be personally acquainted with their students. Although some students expressed a desire to remain independent from personal contact with advisors, most desired some level of personal contact.

When students rate their personal growth during college years, contact with faculty turns out to be critical, and this contact relates to both academic and nonacademic issues. In fact, faculty are seen as more influential than peers. In a survey of several small liberal arts colleges, Menges, McGill, and Shaeffer (1986) reported that academic advising was the activity mentioned most often by these colleges as a contributing factor in student-faculty rapport. However, we know little about how to best provide this support. One fruitful avenue may be the name the advisor uses to address the student. Names carry information about the nature of the relationship. As Knapp (1984) puts it:

The way we address another person may be quantitatively brief, but it may say volumes about the relationship we have with that person. We are able to communicate our relative status to the other person, how we feel toward them, and whether the situation is a formal or informal one—all by the way we choose to address them. (p. 228)

Perceptions students have of advisors may be influenced by the form of address used by the advisor. This experiment was designed to investigate how students evaluate an advisor when different forms of address are used. Specifically, we predicted that advisees would respond favorably to being called by name and would evaluate their advisors as being more likable, trustworthy, and approachable. Additionally, we expected the increased formality created by the use of a student's formal name would result in higher advisor persuasiveness and perceptions of competence. Students may expect a business meeting in an advising appointment; thus it is likely they would respond positively to the more

professional nature of the "Mr.," "Ms." form of address. This formal form of address maintains the status difference in the situation and, as a result, may make the advisor appear more persuasive and competent. Conversely, the advisor using the informal (first) name of the student was predicted to be perceived as more likable, trustworthy, and approachable. The informal nature of the advising session may allow the student to approach the advisor with both controversial and personal concerns. Thus this study addressed the possibility that the name an advisor calls an advisee may affect the advisee's perceptions of the advisor.

## **Method**

### *Subjects*

Subjects were 74 female and 51 male student volunteers from introductory speech communication courses at a large Southeastern university. The mean age was 22.2 (range 18 to 40), and the majority of participants were juniors or seniors. Subjects arrived at one of six time slots, and experimental treatments were randomly assigned to each of the six sessions (two to each).

### *Stimulus materials*

Three variations of a simulated student advising session were videotaped. An experienced female advisor, who is also a university administrator, and a male undergraduate student played the roles of advisor and undergraduate advisee. The videotape was recorded from the student's perspective so that the undergraduate was not seen; only his voice was heard. The tape was designed to allow subjects to place themselves in the advisee's position.

The actors played their roles in each of the three name conditions, with instructions to repeat as nearly as possible the same verbal and nonverbal content. To ensure close approximation, each situation was taped twice, and the tapes that were most similar were used as stimuli. In the informal condition the advisor was instructed to use the student's first name eight times during the recording. In the formal condition the advisor used "Mr." along with the student's last name, and the student's name was again used eight times. In the final condition, the advisor used no name to address the student. The lengths of the three advising sessions were roughly equivalent (informal—2:12, formal—2:16, no name—2:08).

The content of the interaction related to quarterly academic advising, and the discussion contained two opportunities for the advisor to persuade the student. The first was a discussion about which of two courses to take to fulfill a degree requirement; the student wanted to take a psychology class, while the professor recommended a sociology course. The second persuasive opportunity existed when the professor mentioned the speech course that she would be teaching in the spring and encouraged the student to consider taking the class.

### *Procedures*

After being told to imagine being in the place of the student/advisee, each subject watched one of the three videotaped advising sessions. Each subject was then given a questionnaire and instructed to consider the advising session that had just been viewed by responding to the items. Constructs measured were (a) credibility, (b) perceptions of advisors in general, (c) approachability, (d) persuasiveness, and (e) name preference.

Speaker credibility was measured with 17 semantic differential type scales (McCroskey, 1966). Subjects responded to items beginning, "This advisor is . . ." These items measured three dimensions of credibility: liking ( $n = 7$ ), competence ( $n = 5$ ), and trustworthiness ( $n = 5$ ). The items designed to measure liking were friendly-unfriendly, likable-unlikable, nice-awful, good natured-irritable, sociable-unsociable, pleasant-unpleasant, introverted-extroverted. The items designed to measure competence were competent-incompetent, informed-uninformed, qualified-unqualified, experienced-inexperienced, intelligent-unintelligent. The items designed to measure trustworthiness were trustworthy-untrustworthy, relaxed-tense, honest-dishonest, open-closed, high character-low character. The items were scored on a 7-point scale, with the more positive attribute scaled higher. All three dimensions were computed as averages.

Reaction to advisors in general was measured with 10 semantic differential type scales. Items began, "In general, advisors I have known are . . ." The scales for this construct were intelligent-unintelligent, valuable-worthless, useful-useless, trained-untrained, bright-stupid, competent-incompetent, pleasant-unpleasant, likable-unlikable, sociable-unsociable, cool-uptight. The items were scored on a 7-point

scale, with the more positive attribute scaled higher.

Approachability was measured with six semantic differential items that measured the student's willingness to approach the advisor. These scales were in response to the question, "If you had a problem with a course, how would you feel about approaching the advisor without an appointment?" The items were scored on a 7-point scale, with the more positive attribute scaled higher. The items included comfortable-uncomfortable, relaxed-tense, awkward-smooth, interested-apatetic, happy-sad, secure-insecure. One additional question asked how likely subjects would be to approach the advisor for advice concerning what to do about seeing another student cheating on an exam (scale 1 to 7, "very likely" to "not at all likely").

Persuasiveness was measured by four semantic differential items. One question asked how likely the participant would be to take a class from the advisor (scale 1 to 7, "very likely" to "not at all likely"). Another question related to the sociology and psychology classes discussed in the advising session, and it asked which course the subject would take based on the discussion (scale 1 to 7, "psychology" to "sociology"). Two other questions assessed how much effect *this* advisor's and *any* advisor's opinion would have on choices about what courses the subject takes (scale 1 to 7, "much effect" to "not much effect").

The final section measured subjects' name

preference and collected standard demographic data including gender, age, and year in school. It included an open-ended manipulation check item: "What name did the advisor call her advisee in the videotape?" Other questions asked, "Did you know the individual who was the advisor?" (yes/no) and "How seriously did you take this experiment?" (scale 1 to 7, "very seriously" to "not very seriously"). Two other questions asked what name subjects prefer to be called at an advising appointment and at a formal job interview (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms., first name, nickname).

### Results

Although scale items designed to measure the dependent variables were selected specifically to measure independent dimensions of source credibility (liking, competence, and trustworthiness), approachability, and the persuasiveness of the advisor, all items were factor analyzed to determine if each was indeed doing so. All 38 items were included in the factor analysis. A principle component varimax rotated factor solution was obtained with a particular item being used if it had a primary loading of .7 or higher and no other loading higher than .4. Table 1 reports the factor loadings.

The results of the factor analysis revealed four relatively pure factors, but these were not completely consistent with what was expected. The four dependent variables for the study

**TABLE 1**  
**Factor loadings**

	Credibility	Approachability	Likability	Persuasiveness
friendly/unfriendly	0.254	0.172	0.798	0.082
likable/unlikable	0.277	0.220	0.813	0.131
competent/incompetent	0.791	0.201	0.157	0.126
informed/uninformed	-0.765	-0.147	-0.073	-0.100
qualified/unqualified	-0.829	-0.094	-0.134	-0.185
experienced/unexperienced	-0.819	-0.220	-0.205	-0.098
trustworthy/untrustworthy	-0.711	-0.217	-0.261	0.018
honest/dishonest	0.755	0.104	0.183	0.026
awkward/smooth	0.117	-0.850	-0.164	-0.026
secure/insecure	0.209	0.800	0.103	0.107
take psychology/sociology	-0.053	-0.179	-0.194	-0.708
this advisor's opinion effect	0.408	0.189	0.054	0.801

were derived from these results, and each of the four variables was computed as an average score with a range of 1 to 7.

The first factor included items that were initially designed to measure both the competence and trustworthiness dimensions of source credibility. This factor consisted of the semantic differential scales competent-incompetent, informed-uninformed, qualified-unqualified, expert-inexpert, trustworthy-untrustworthy, and honest-dishonest ( $\alpha = .92$ ). This factor was labeled "credibility." The second factor consisted of the two items that assessed respondents' feelings about approaching this advisor without an appointment, specifically the semantic differential scales secure-insecure and awkward-smooth ( $\alpha = .84$ ). This factor was labeled advisor "approachability." The third factor was comprised of the semantic differential scales friendly-unfriendly and likable-unlikable ( $\alpha = .90$ ). This factor was labeled "likability." The final factor consisted of the two items designed to measure advisor persuasiveness ( $\alpha = .80$ ). The advisor had suggested that the student take a sociology class, although the student had expressed interest in a psychology course. The first item measured the probability of the respondent's preference for these courses, and the second asked how likely the respondent would be to follow this advisor's advice. This factor was labeled "persuasiveness."

One-way analyses of variance were performed on each of these four dependent variables with the three levels of name condition. Table 2 displays the results of these analyses, including the cell means, standard deviations,  $F$  values, and probability levels. Examination of this table reveals that significant results were

achieved only for advisor persuasiveness. Those subjects who were exposed to the advisor referring to her advisee by formal name indicated that they were more likely to follow this advice ( $M = 4.85$ ) than those who observed the advisor calling her advisee by first name ( $M = 3.92$ ) or those who observed her using no name for the advisee ( $M = 3.44$ ). Perceptions of the advisor's credibility, likability, and approachability were not significantly affected by form of address.

## Discussion

The results of this study provide some support for the conclusion that an advisor's treatment of a student can have a pronounced influence on the extent to which the student follows the advisor's advice. The form of address used by the advisor had a demonstrable effect on the respondents' indications of their willingness to follow the advisor's advice.

By using the formal name, the advisor may give a more professional context to the advising session. The meeting may be enhanced by the use of formal name by minimizing potential status differences that could be reinforced by the advisor's use of the advisee's first name; in the formal form of address, the status is closer to equal for both individuals. This feeling of equity on the part of the student can generate positive attitudes toward advisors and their advice, thus making the advisor more persuasive when using the formal name.

No significant results were found for likability, credibility, or approachability. That these other variables were not affected by form of address should not be taken as evidence that the use of name has no effect on them. This was

**TABLE 2**  
Means, standard deviations,  $F$  and  $p$  values for all dependent variables

Dependent Variables	No Name		Informal Name		Formal Name		$F$	$p$
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd		
credibility	5.38	1.28	5.82	.96	5.45	1.30	< 1	NS
approachability	3.74	1.47	4.15	1.29	3.86	1.57	1.09	NS
likability	5.27	1.17	5.42	.96	5.15	1.08	< 1	NS
persuasion	3.44	2.29	3.92	1.81	4.85	1.69	6.01	< .01
	a		b		ab			

Means that share common subscript are significantly different ( $p < .01$ , one-tailed). Higher score equals more "positive" evaluation.

a short interview, and real advising sessions can last 15 minutes or longer. In such an interview, or in a real life student-advisor relationship, an advisor might be more approachable if she or he learned the student's name.

There are several possible explanations for the lack of significance of the likability, credibility, and approachability variables. First, it could be that students' perceptions of advisors are not affected by how the advisor refers to them. This seems highly unlikely. Studies by Kleinke, Staneski, and Weaver (1972) show that people are obviously aware of, if not concerned about, how they are addressed. A second possible explanation seems more likely. It is questionable whether the manipulation of the form of address was strong enough. First, if the person were in an actual situation being addressed formally or informally, then he/she might respond differently than in our study in which subjects only imagined themselves in the place of the advisee. Second, the manipulation check showed that some subjects either did not notice or could not remember the name condition. Given these limitations, it is even more striking to have found the significance for the persuasiveness variable, again pointing to how important form of address may be in creating rapport between an advisor and an advisee. That these results were found for the short session suggests that a longer, more realistic session in which more advice was given, perhaps about career goals or graduate school, might result in more pronounced effects.

An additional limitation should be noted. The advising dyad contained only one of four possible gender combinations, a female advisor and a male advisee. (Analyses of variance were run on each of the four dependent variables with subject gender. All items proved to be insignificant; however, the persuasiveness item [ $p = .069$ ] revealed a tendency for women to be more persuaded than men by the advisor.) Female subjects might have had a difficult time imagining themselves in the place of a male student, especially in the formal "Mr." condition. Future research should use all possible gender permutations. It would be especially interesting to examine the possibility that name use affects same sex dyads differently from opposite sex dyads.

Name use is only one of many variables that may affect students' perceptions of their advisor and their school (which the advisor represents). This study reinforces the notion that advisors

should be aware of their nonverbal demeanor. If something as seemingly insignificant as form of address can have a measurable effect, other variables such as warmth of greeting and other affect displays (e.g. length of the advising session, furniture arrangement, etc.) may also have important effects. More research is needed to shed light on how advisors might behave to positively influence student perceptions of the advisor's competence, trustworthiness, likability, and approachability. The present study shows that the form of address used by the advisor can have an important effect on his/her persuasiveness in an advising setting.

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*Rebecca Adams, Mary Ann Smith, and Kimberly Lichner are working toward masters degrees, and*

*Kathryn Greene is working on her doctorate. John Hocking is an Associate Professor. All are in the Department of Speech Communication. Address correspondence concerning this article to Rebecca J.*

*Adams, Department of Speech Communication, GGS Building, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602.*

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