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Rhetorical Dissent as an Adaptive Response to Classroom Problems: A Test of Protection Motivation Theory

San Bolkan & Alan K. Goodboy

Protection motivation theory (PMT) explains people's adaptive behavior in response to personal threats. In this study, PMT was used to predict rhetorical dissent episodes related to 210 student reports of perceived classroom problems. In line with theoretical predictions, a moderated moderation analysis revealed that students were likely to voice their classroom concerns directly to their instructors when threat was high (i.e., the classroom problem was severe and it was relevant to their educational experiences) and when their perceived potential for coping with the problem (i.e., response efficacy and self-efficacy) was high. This finding was conditional upon students' perceptions of the costs associated with dissenting rhetorically; in the context of high perceived threat, students did not communicate dissent to their instructors in high cost situations if perceived coping was low.

Keywords: Protection Motivation Theory; Instructional Dissent; Rhetorical Dissent; Complaining

College instructors are in the business of helping students learn and have a variety of behaviors at their disposal to facilitate this process. However, for various reasons, instructors do not always create effective learning environments and may even engage in behaviors that are counterproductive to student development. Some of these behaviors include unclear or boring lectures, showing up late to class, not answering student emails, being rude to or embarrassing students, playing favorites, or making class too easy (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013). Other behaviors include unfair testing and grading, violating the course syllabus, and not giving enough feedback on course

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assignments (Goodboy, 2011a). Many of these behaviors fall under various categories of instructor misbehaviors (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991) or a lack of justice (Horan, Chory, & Goodboy, 2010) and are detrimental to student learning – both affective and cognitive (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009).

Unfortunately, these behaviors might not be all that uncommon; according to Goodboy (2011a), students are frequently dissatisfied with their instructors. Other researchers support this claim and note that only a small portion of students report never having experienced conflict with their instructors (Harrison, 2007; Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn, & Gokee, 2002). Of course, students are not passive in their learning, and when negative events impinge on their educational opportunities they have the ability to take action to protect their personal interests. Although many students report that they do nothing when they are displeased in their courses (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Horan et al., 2010), students who are unsatisfied with their instruction may engage in a variety of responses including airing their grievances to friends or classmates (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy, 2011a, 2011b; Harrison, 2007), talking to their advisors, addressing the issue with the chair of the department or dean of the college, venting on course evaluations, or dropping the class (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy, 2011a). Many of these grievances are conceptualized as forms of instructional dissent which occurs "when students express their disagreements or complaints about class-related issues" (Goodboy, 2011b, p. 423). Though some of these dissent responses may be beneficial insofar as they help lead to catharsis (e.g., venting to others) or alert supervising individuals to problems in their subordinates' classrooms (e.g., speaking with the chair), others may prove to be maladaptive if they do not lead to positive outcomes.

In addition to the dissent responses listed above, students may choose to engage in adaptive behaviors by speaking directly to their instructors as a way of addressing their concerns. The notion of speaking directly to instructors with the intention of fixing a perceived problem is known as rhetorical dissent (Goodboy, 2011a, 2011b) and is typically considered an adaptive or constructive reaction to environments that threaten students' learning potential (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014). Rhetorical dissent is considered constructive because communicating in this manner gives instructors the opportunity to fix problems for aggrieved students in specific and may inform instructors about teaching practices that are not working in general (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy & Myers, 2012). Considering rhetorical dissent is a constructive process of sharing information with parties who can fix problems in the classroom, facilitating this type of communication should be a primary goal for instructors (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013). This is especially the case considering students who voice their concerns with instructors have been shown to be particularly interested in the learning process (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014).

Since its introduction to the literature, scholars have learned quite a bit about rhetorical dissent and researchers have uncovered a variety of constructs that are associated with this form of communication. Some of these correlates include students' negative emotional responses to injustice (Horan et al., 2010), attributions (LaBelle & Martin, 2014), trait predispositions toward communication (Buckner &

Finn, 2013; Goodboy & Martin, 2014; Goodboy & Myers, 2012), sex differences (Goodboy, 2012), preferred conflict styles (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2013), and perceived academic self-efficacy (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014; LaBelle, Martin, & Weber, 2013). Scholars have also learned that there are a variety of reasons students choose not to rhetorically dissent. These include a lack of perceived efficacy, concerns about the teacher being unapproachable, fear of retaliation, and the perception that complaining is not worth the effort involved (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013).

Despite advancements in our understanding, research in the area of rhetorical dissent may benefit from examining the topic as an adaptive reaction to environments that threaten students' educational well-being. That said, we couch the current study in a theoretical framework associated with adaptive responses to personal threats. Specifically, we examined Rogers' (1975, 1983) protection motivation theory (PMT) to ascertain the potential for its usefulness in making predictions about students' rhetorical dissent.

Protection Motivation Theory

PMT is concerned with how people choose to behave when faced with threats (Floyd, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 2000) and was originally formulated to explain the impact of fear appeals on subsequent action (Norman, Boer, & Seydel, 2005), particularly with respect to health promotion (Floyd et al., 2000). Though its origination was founded on studies of fear and resulting healthy behaviors, PMT has been applied to various areas of study including political issues and environmental concerns. In reality, PMT can be tapped to explain adaptive behaviors regarding "any threat for which there is an effective recommended response that can be carried out by the individual" (Floyd et al., 2000, p. 409).

As a part of an expectancy-value framework of behavior change, the original conceptualization of PMT suggested that there are three critical components leading to behavior change when an individual is faced with a threat (Rogers, 1975). These components include the perceived severity of the event (e.g., the seriousness of an event), the probability of the event's occurrence (i.e., a target's perceived vulnerability – how much the event may impact or effect an individual personally), and the perceived effectiveness of a response to stop it. According to early proponents of PMT, if all three of these components are present, individuals will be motivated to engage in adaptive behaviors that serve to protect them from harm as opposed to maladaptive behaviors that simply protect them from experiencing negative emotions (Rogers, 1975; Rogers & Mewborn, 1976). In this sense, PMT is similar to the parallel response model which focuses on fear control and danger control processes (Leventhal, 1970).

In later reports (Maddux & Rogers, 1983; Rogers, 1983), Rogers added three more variables to the study of PMT including self-efficacy (i.e., the belief that a person is capable of performing the adaptive response), rewards associated with maladaptive responses (e.g., pleasure or social approval), and costs associated with performing adaptive behaviors (e.g., inconvenience or unpleasantness). However, subsequent

researchers have noted that rewards are rarely considered in applications of PMT because they are difficult to separate from response costs (e.g., Abraham, Sheeran, Abrams, & Spears, 1994; Milne, Sheeran, & Orbell, 2000; Norman et al., 2005). Thus, studies examining the components of PMT typically include the severity of an event, a person's vulnerability to an event, the perceived efficacy of a response, an individual's perceived self-efficacy for carrying out the protective behavior, and costs associated with performing the behavior.

Though there are five components to this theory, Rogers (1983) notes that these can be reduced due to their additive effects. For instance, Rogers (1983) argues that severity and vulnerability should combine to form the larger notion of threat appraisal and self-efficacy and response efficacy should combine to form an individual's coping appraisal. Response costs, though independent from the efficacy components, were originally conceptualized as combining with response efficacy and self-efficacy in an additive manner to comprise an individual's final coping appraisal. Though this is the case, many researchers examine costs independently from perceptions of response efficacy and self-efficacy (e.g., Cismaru, Nagpal, & Krishnamurthy, 2009; Floyd et al., 2000) and the current study follows in that trend. Examining costs separately from response efficacy and self-efficacy is tenable in the current investigation because students' decisions to rhetorically dissent have been found to be conditioned upon the costs (e.g., the fear of instructor retaliation, concerns about acting inappropriately, concerns about creating a negative impression, and potential embarrassment) associated with discussing course problems directly with their instructors (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013).

Rogers (1983) claims the effects of PMT variables should be additive within the ideas in threat and coping appraisal and multiplicative between them. Thus, according to PMT, people should become motivated to engage in protective behaviors when they perceive a personal threat to be high, but only when they perceive that they can cope with the threat. In addition to these considerations, people are likely to factor in the costs of taking action into their behavioral calculations (Floyd et al., 2000; Milne et al., 2000; Norman et al., 2005). Because researchers have found that students are likely to react adaptively to threatening environments when they believe they can respond appropriately (e.g., Sprinkle, Hunt, Simonds, & Comadena, 2006), it may be possible to couch the current study of rhetorical dissent in a theoretical framework associated with adaptive responses to personal threats.

Classroom Problems as Threats to Students' Educational Outcomes

Students' rhetorical dissent is largely triggered by their dissatisfaction regarding instructional practices (Ball & Goodboy, 2014; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013; Goodboy, 2011a, 2011b; Goodboy et al., 2014). Though this sentiment may reflect students' unmet expectations in their courses, it may also reflect students' disappointment resulting from substandard educational experiences or outcomes. To this point, researchers have revealed that the same behaviors students find worthy of rhetorical dissent are associated with decreases in students' perceptions of learning (Goodboy &

Bolkan, 2009). This result makes sense considering most student complaints have to do with instructional quality (Goodboy, 2011a; Su & Bao, 2001) and behaviors that are demotivating and distracting in the classroom (Kearney et al., 1991; Zhang, 2007). As Goodboy and Martin (2014) note, students "believe their instructors' failures to be an effective and appropriate educator, is a primary, if not sole reason for their dissent" (p. 271). If the behaviors instructors employ in class are detrimental to students' learning experiences, we may choose to consider these behaviors as threats to students' educational well-being.

As we mentioned in the introduction, when experiencing threats to their educational well-being, students have the ability to effect change in a variety of ways. One of the potentially constructive ways to manage dissatisfaction with instructors is to speak with them directly (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013). Though instructors may be in the best position to address student dissatisfaction, most students who have complaints about class never voice them directly to their professors (Goodboy, 2011a). This result may seem counterintuitive; however, students' choices regarding rhetorical dissent depend upon a variety of considerations.

Research has revealed that organizational, personal, and relational factors influence students' decisions to complain directly to instructors (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013). Organizational reasons for withholding complaints include perceptions that nothing will be done by instructors to fix the problem and also include the fear of retaliation for speaking up. Personal reasons for withholding dissent include students' perceptions that complaining would not be worth the effort, that the problem was the students' own fault to begin with, or that the student did not have enough perceived self-efficacy to make the complaint. Relational reasons for withholding rhetorical dissent include perceptions of the instructor as unapproachable or students' concerns about being perceived as rude for bringing up a complaint. The reasons for withholding rhetorical dissent mirror those found in the literature on dissent in the workplace (e.g., Kassing, 1997, 2008; Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Sprague & Ruud, 1988) and complaints directed to companies in consumer-business transactions (e.g., Chebat, Davidow, & Codjovi, 2005; Cho, Im, Hiltz, & Fjermestad, 2002). Underlying these reasons for withholding rhetorical dissent may be students' perceptions of unequal power. Specifically, perceptions of instructors' legitimate and punishment power (i.e., coercive and reward power) have been shown to discriminate between students who voice their discontent and those who do not (Su & Bao, 2001). From this perspective, withholding complaints because nothing will be done or because the instructor seems unapproachable may be linked to issues of legitimate power. Moreover, fear of retaliation may be linked to punishment power. Thus, as Su and Bao mention, the imbalance of power between students and instructors may ultimately underlie their decisions to withhold complaints.

Though researchers have framed the lack of rhetorical dissent from the perspective of organizational, personal, and relational concerns (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013), students' choices regarding communication with their instructors might be reinterpreted from the perspective of self-protective behaviors. Stated differently, considering that problems in the classroom may create threats to students' success or their

academic well-being, we might choose to examine rhetorical dissent as an adaptive behavior designed to effectively cope with this threat. This is especially the case because students' organizational, personal, and relational reasons for withholding dissent can be mapped onto PMT's concepts of threat, coping, and the perceived costs of complaining in specific ways.

First, according to PMT people will not engage in protective behaviors if they do not consider negative outcomes to be severe or relevant—the same calculations related to perceived threat seem to occur in students' decisions regarding rhetorical dissent. For example, according to Bolkan and Goodboy (2013), students may choose to withhold their rhetorical dissent because of personal reasons including believing that the complaint process involves too much effort. This reason reflects the notion of perceived threat insofar as students may not perceive "their problems to have been egregious enough to warrant speaking up" (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013, p. 292). Next, as it pertains to coping, organizational reasons for withholding dissent in the classroom include perceptions that instructors will not do anything to fix the problem. Moreover, personal reasons for not complaining include a lack of perceived self-efficacy. Both of these notions (a perceived lack of response efficacy and self-efficacy) are included in Rogers' (1983) concept of coping appraisal. Finally, related to costs, Bolkan and Goodboy (2013) noted that students may choose to refrain from rhetorical dissent when they think they may be punished by the instructor for doing so or when they perceive the interaction to be uncomfortable or inappropriate.

Reinterpreted from a PMT perspective, Bolkan and Goodboy's (2013) results indicate that a lack of threat was mentioned in eight percent of students' responses for withholding rhetorical dissent. The combination of efficacy and self-efficacy (coping) made up roughly 52% of the reasons students mentioned they did not speak to instructors regarding problems they had in class. Finally, response costs made up approximately 26% of students' responses. Together, a reinterpretation of students' reasons for withholding dissent reveals that approximately 86% of their reasons for not directly addressing class problems with instructors may be due to variables associated with components of PMT.

Because students' decisions regarding rhetorical dissent may be articulated in terms of PMT, it is our contention that we should be able to predict students' choices for this behavior from the components of the theory in specific ways. First, Floyd et al. (2000) note that threat appraisal should be addressed initially in PMT models because "a threat must be perceived or identified before there can be an evaluation of the coping options" (p. 410). Thus, we predicted that student complaints directed to their instructors should be a function of both the perceived severity of the classroom problem and students' vulnerability to the problem. Specifically, we hypothesized that students would choose to dissent to their instructors when the threat stemming from the classroom event or problem was perceived to be high. To examine this notion, we offered the first hypothesis:

H1: Students' perceived threat is correlated positively with rhetorical dissent.

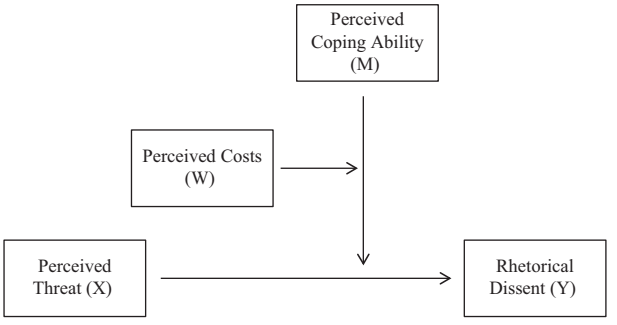

Figure 1 Proposed PMT moderated moderation model for students' rhetorical dissent.

After individuals perceive a threat, they engage in the coping-appraisal process to evaluate "the ability to cope with and avert the threatened danger" (Floyd et al., 2000). Stated differently, PMT predicts that once people experience a threat, they will attempt to ascertain the extent to which it can be averted. Thus, we predicted that the relationship between threat and rhetorical dissent would be conditioned upon students' perceptions of coping ability. Finally, because there may be a number of response costs that inhibit adaptive responses, even if an individual's perception of coping ability is high, we predicted that the relationship between threat, coping, and dissent should be conditioned upon the perceived costs of complaining. Specifically, we predicted a three-way interaction where students would complain directly to their instructors when problems were perceived to be a significant threat, when students could effectively cope with the threat, and when the costs for doing so were not prohibitive. To test this notion, we offered the following hypothesis (see Figure 1):

H2: The relationship between students' perceived threat and rhetorical dissent is conditioned upon their perceptions of high coping ability and low costs.

Method

Participants and Procedures

After securing approval from the institutional review board, 210 participants were solicited from lower and upper division communication courses at a large western university in exchange for minimal extra credit. Participants were 64 men and 146 women with ages ranging from 18 to 44 (M = 22.6, SD = 3.3). To elicit experiences with the potential for rhetorical dissent, participants were asked to think of a time in the last six months when they experienced a specific problem in a college class stemming from teacher misbehaviors or a lack of justice related to teaching practices. This procedure is based on the critical incident technique and has been used in previous studies of student dissent (e.g., Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014; LaBelle et al., 2013). Participants were given examples of classroom problems based on research related to instructional triggers of student dissent (e.g., Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013;

Goodboy, 2011a, 2011b; Horan et al., 2010) including: unclear or boring lectures, unfair grading and testing, coming late for class or not showing up at all, not answering student emails, not being prepared for class, assigning too much work, being rude to students, playing favorites with students, and having unreasonable and arbitrary rules. Next, participants were asked to describe a specific problem/issue they had in class regarding an instructor in an open-ended format. Once this was completed, participants reported on their experiences and behaviors related to the problematic classroom episode as captured by the instruments below.

Instrumentation

The measures used to assess PMT included perceptions of severity, personal vulnerability, response efficacy, self-efficacy, and the costs associated with rhetorical dissent. According to Norman et al. (2005), the preferred method of operationalizing the variables in PMT is to develop "questionnaire items specifically for the planned study" (p. 99) in order to accurately tap into salient beliefs related to the various dimensions of PMT that may be context-dependent. Thus, we created several of the scales used in this study.

Severity. Perceptions of severity were measured with a four-item scale created for this study. Participants reported the degree to which they felt the problem in class represented a negative event by noting the degree to which the classroom failure was: severe, troublesome, problematic, and terrible. Response options could range from (1) *completely disagree* to (10) *completely agree* (α = .89, M = 8.16, SD = 1.37).

Vulnerability. Perceptions of personal vulnerability were collected by asking participants to respond to a measure of this construct as it related to the classroom problem. Vulnerability is typically operationalized by making it appear that a negative event may happen to a person (or not; Rogers, 1983). This notion is similar to the idea of relevance defined as events that have consequences for an individual (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Frymier & Shulman, 1995). Thus, the measure created for this study was based on definitions of perceived vulnerability (e.g., Rogers, 1975) and personal relevance (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and included five items anchored with (1) *not at all* and (5) *very much*. Participants responded to the following questions: "How much did the problem affect you?", "To what extent did the issue interfere with your educational experience in this course?", "To what extent did the problem negatively impact your experience in the class?", "To what extent did the issue impact you personally?", and "How concerned were you with the problem?". The alpha reliability of this scale was .85 (M = 3.96, SD = .84).

Response efficacy. Response efficacy was measured with a four-item scale created for this study based on the definition of the construct from Rogers (1975) and the qualitative responses related to this notion from previous studies of rhetorical dissent (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013). Participants' responses could range from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree* regarding the following statements: "Bringing up the

problem to my teacher wouldn't do any good", "Even if my teacher knew about the issue, he/she would not fix it", "Talking to my teacher about the problem would not make a difference", and "Talking to my teacher about the problem was unlikely to lead to positive change." The alpha reliability for this scale was .91 (M = 3.20, SD = 1.53).

Self-efficacy. A single item measuring self-efficacy was created based on the definition of efficacy as reflected in statements of whether or not a person can accomplish a behavior (Bandura, 1997). Single-item measures of efficacy have been used in previous research (Cox, Koster, & Russell, 2004) and have been specifically promoted by some scholars (e.g., Hoeppner, Kelly, Urbanoski, & Slaymaker, 2011). In the current study, the item used to tap this perception asked students "How certain are you that you could talk to your teacher about the problem?" anchored with (1) *not at all certain* and (7) *very certain* (M = 3.57, SD = 2.01).

Costs. The measure of perceived costs associated with rhetorical dissent was created for this study based on previous work examining students' reasons for withholding rhetorical dissent from their instructors (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013). Costs were operationalized as student discomfort and their perceptions of possible punishment from the instructor. Participants' responses to the following questions could range from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree*. Student discomfort was measured with four items including: "Talking to my teacher about the problem would make me feel nervous", "I felt uncomfortable talking to my teacher about the problem", "Bringing up the issue with my teacher would be rude", and "Bringing up the issue with my teacher would be stressful" (α = .82, M = 4.69, SD = 1.46). Threat of punishment was measured with four items including: "If I addressed the issue with my teacher, he/she would punish me down the road", "Talking to my teacher about the issue would make him/her mad at me", "If I spoke to my teacher about the problem, he/she would think negatively of me", and "If I addressed the issue with my teacher, he/she would hold a grudge" (α = .91, M = 4.09, SD = 1.54).

Rhetorical dissent. Finally, we measured the dependent variable of rhetorical dissent by asking students to respond to items from the *Instructional Dissent Scale* (Goodboy, 2011b). This scale was adapted from its original form to ask students about their dissent behavior related to a specific incident as opposed to their dissent behavior in general. Responses could range from (1) *not at all true* to (5) *very true* for six items including "I told my teacher about the problem" and "I voiced my concern to my teacher" (α = .97, M = 2.12, SD = 1.39).

To assess internal consistency within, and parallelism between, our measures we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis including each of the latent constructs predicted by their observed variables, self-efficacy was modeled as an observed variable. Results confirmed that our model fit the data appropriately (χ^2 = 643.95, df = 330, CFI = .93; SRMR = .07, RMSEA = .07).

Results

Rogers (1983) notes that the concepts from PMT should function in an additive manner within the macro categories (i.e., threat, coping, and costs) but should be multiplicative between them. Thus, unit-weighted composite scores (Bobko, Roth, & Buster, 2007) were used in the analysis and included students' perceptions of threat (measured by the combination of students' perceived severity of the problem and vulnerability; M = .00, SD = 1.82), coping ability (measured by the combination of students' perceptions of response efficacy and self-efficacy; M = .00, SD = 1.52), and the costs associated with rhetorically dissenting (measured by the combination of perceived discomfort and threat of punishment; M = .00, SD = 1.71; see Table 1 for intercorrelations between variables).

A correlation analysis revealed that hypothesis one was supported, perceived threat was correlated positively with rhetorical dissent (r = .24, p < .05). However, this simple, bivariate association was examined for the conditional effects predicted by PMT using the model proposed in hypothesis two. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a moderated moderation analysis using model three from the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Specifically, we used an ordinary least squares regression analysis to test for a significant three-way interaction between perceived threat, coping, and costs, while predicting rhetorical dissent. Results indicated that the three-way interaction was significant (see Table 2 for the regression results).

To determine the nature of this three-way interaction, we examined the two-way interaction of perceived threat and coping ability at various levels of perceived costs. Results indicated that in situations where costs were relatively low (W = 1.71, $\theta_{XM\rightarrow Y}$ = –.01, t = –.34, p = .73; see Figure 2) and moderate (W = .00, $\theta_{XM\rightarrow Y}$ = .05, t = 1.53, p = .13; see Figure 3), the conditional effect of perceived threat (moderated by coping) on rhetorical dissent was not significant. However, in situations where costs are relatively high (W = 1.71), the conditional effect of perceived threat on rhetorical dissent was significant ($\theta_{XM\rightarrow Y}$ = .12, t = 2.16, p < .05; see Table 3, Figure 4).

To more precisely probe the three-way interaction and avoid the "arbitrariness of the choice of values" (Hayes, 2013, p. 239) for moderator variables, we used PROCESS to employ the Johnson–Neyman technique (see Hayes, 2013 for a detailed discussion). We conducted this analysis to identify regions of significant moderated moderation. Results indicated that the moderated moderation was significant when θ_{XMY} = .82 or greater with 35.24% of the values producing moderated moderation.

Table 1 Intercorrelations

	Rhetorical	Threat	Cope
Threat	.24		
Cope	.17	−.19	
Cost	−.28	.29	−.41

Note. All correlations are significant at p < .01 (two-tailed) except for the correlation between Rhetorical and Cope (p < .05).

Table 2 Moderated Moderation Regression Analysis for Rhetorical Dissent

	Coefficient	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Intercept	2.16	.10	22.64	<.01
Cope	.02	.07	.29	.77
Threat	.27	.05	5.07	<.01
Cost	−.28	.06	−4.98	<.01
Threat*Cope	.05	.04	1.53	.13
Threat*Cost	−.06	.03	−2.00	.05
Cope*Cost	−.04	.04	−1.05	.29
Threat*Cope*Cost	.04	.02	2.11	<.05

Note. $R^2 = .23$, $F(7, 202) = 8.84$, $p < .01$.

These results reiterate the significant conditional effect at regions of high cost (see Table 4, Figure 5).

Discussion

This study was conducted to determine if the variables associated with PMT could predict students' choices to communicate rhetorical dissent. To examine this notion, we asked students to report the level of perceived threat associated with a classroom problem, their perceptions regarding their ability to cope with the problem, and their perceptions of the costs associated with communicating to their instructors about the problem. It was our contention that these variables would result in a three-way interaction where students would rhetorically dissent under conditions of high threat, high coping ability, and low costs. Despite finding a significant three-way interaction,

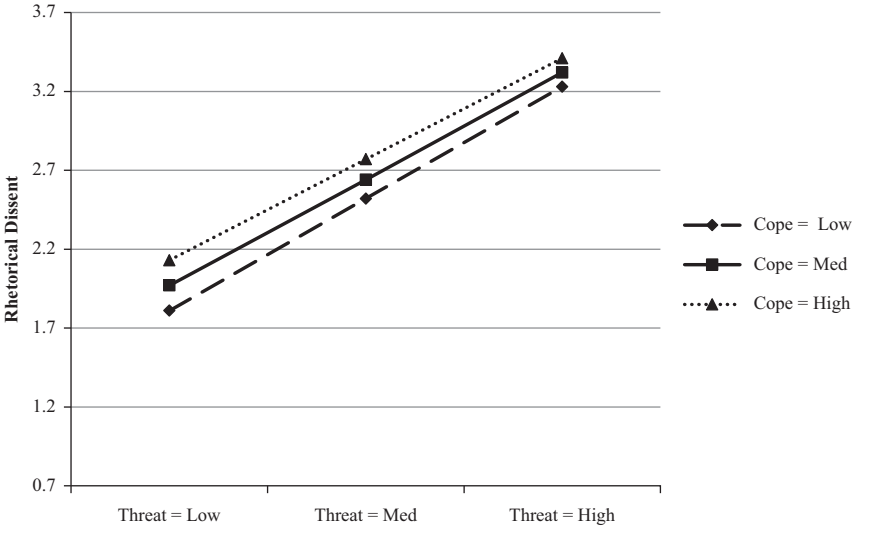

Figure 2 Rhetorical dissent, Threat*Cope at low cost. "Low" and "High" represent –1 or +1 standard deviation.

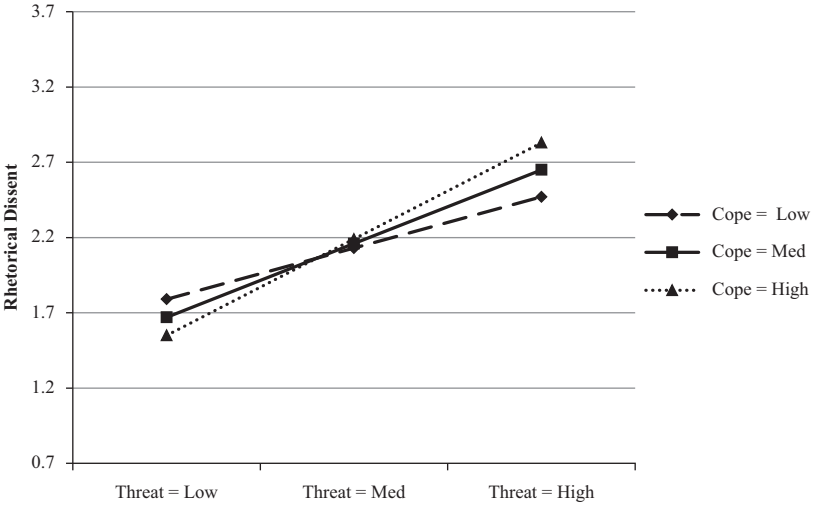

Figure 3 Rhetorical dissent, Threat*Cope at moderate cost. "Low" and "High" represent –1 or +1 standard deviation.

Table 3 Moderated Moderation Analysis: Conditional Effects of Threat on Rhetorical Dissent at Values of the Moderators

Cost	Cope	Coefficient	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
−1.71	−1.52	.39	.10	3.75	<.01	.18	.59
−1.71	.00	.37	.07	5.51	<.01	.24	.50
−1.71	1.52	.35	.07	5.28	<.01	.22	.48
.00	−1.52	.19	.08	2.48	<.05	.04	.33
.00	.00	.27	.05	5.07	<.01	.16	.37
.00	1.52	.35	.08	4.65	<.01	.20	.50
1.71	−1.52	−.02	.11	−.15	.88	−.23	.20
1.71	.00	.17	.08	2.11	<.05	.01	.32
1.71	1.52	.35	.12	2.89	<.01	.11	.59

Note. The conditional effects are estimated using a pick-a-point approach using ±1 *SD* of the moderators.

the results are somewhat different from what we predicted. Specifically, our results indicated that threat and coping interacted to increase rhetorical dissent under conditions of high costs.

Though our second hypothesis was not supported in its original form, the resulting three-way interaction is informative to our study of rhetorical dissent insofar as it illuminates the conditions under which students choose to voice concerns directly to their instructors. Our data revealed that under conditions where they perceived relatively low and relatively moderate costs, students dissented to their instructors increasingly as the severity and the relevance of the problem increased – this was true without regard to their coping ability. Stated differently, our results revealed that students were less discriminating about their rhetorical dissent when costs were low or moderate. This result makes sense; it seems reasonable for students to speak up to

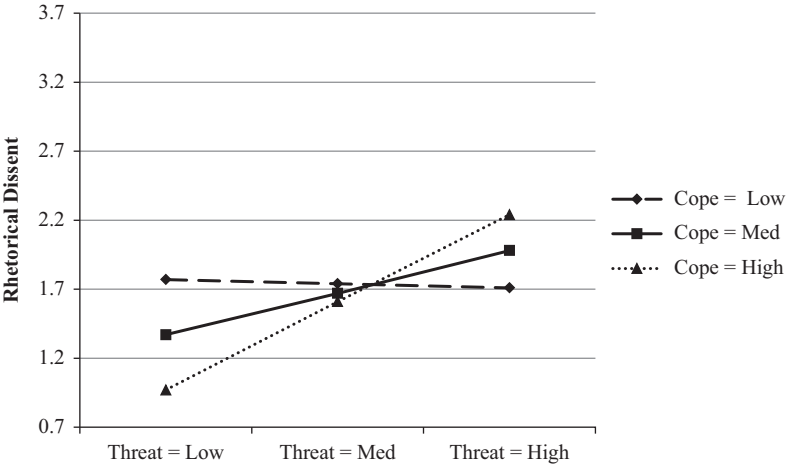

Figure 4 Rhetorical dissent, Threat*Cope at high cost. "Low" and "High" represent –1 or +1 standard deviation.

Table 4 Johnson–Neyman Technique for Identifying Regions of Significant Moderated Moderation: The Conditional Effect of Threat*Coping on Rhetorical Dissent at Values of the Moderator (Cost)

Cost	Coefficient	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
−4.54	−.12	.08	−1.60	.11	−.27	.03
−4.14	−.11	.07	−1.53	.13	−.24	.03
−3.74	−.09	.06	−1.44	.15	−.22	.03
−3.34	−.08	.06	−1.33	.19	−.19	.04
−2.93	−.06	.05	−1.17	.24	−.16	.04
−2.53	−.04	.05	−.97	.33	−.13	.05
−2.13	−.03	.04	−.71	.48	−.11	.05
−1.73	−.01	.04	−.36	.72	−.09	.06
−1.33	.00	.03	.07	.95	−.06	.07
−.93	.02	.03	.55	.58	−.05	.08
−.53	.03	.03	1.03	.30	−.03	.10
−.13	.05	.03	1.43	.15	−.02	.12
.28	.06	.04	1.72	.09	−.01	.14
.68	.08	.04	1.92	.06	.00	.16
.82	**.09**	**.04**	**1.97**	**.05**	**.00**	**.17**
1.08	**.10**	**.05**	**2.05**	**.04**	**.00**	**.19**
1.48	**.11**	**.05**	**2.12**	**.03**	**.01**	**.21**
1.88	**.13**	**.06**	**2.17**	**.03**	**.01**	**.24**
2.28	**.14**	**.06**	**2.20**	**.03**	**.01**	**.27**
2.68	**.16**	**.07**	**2.22**	**.03**	**.02**	**.30**
3.08	**.17**	**.08**	**2.23**	**.03**	**.02**	**.33**
3.48	**.19**	**.08**	**2.24**	**.03**	**.02**	**.36**

Note. The region of significant moderated moderation is shown in bold. Moderator value defining the region of significance = .82 with 35.24% of the values producing moderated moderation.

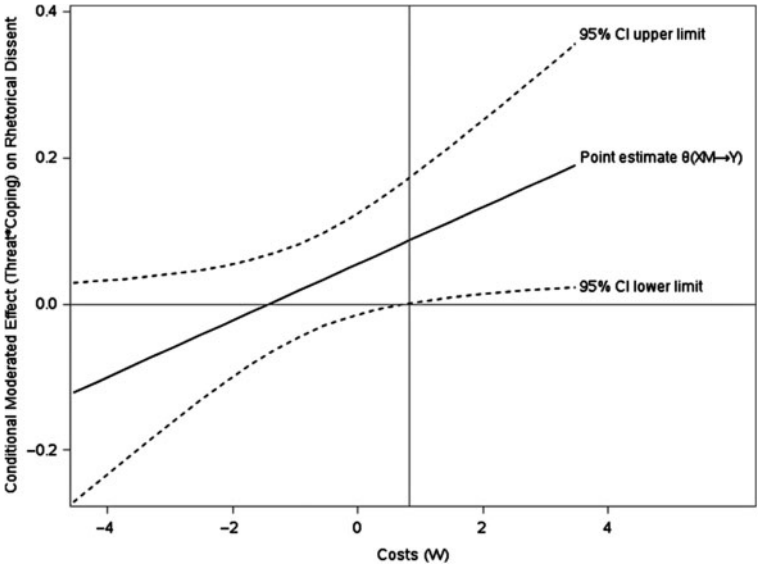

Figure 5 Visual representation of regions of significant moderated moderation using the Johnson–Neyman technique. θ transitions to significance at a value of .82 for Cost.

professors regarding important issues if it costs them little to potentially obtain positive outcomes. On the other hand, students tended to be more discriminating about their rhetorical dissent when costs were high. When costs associated with rhetorical dissent were elevated, students were most likely to rhetorically dissent when they experienced highly threatening problems and believed their communication would be effective in bringing about desired change.

As it pertains to costs, the results of the current study support Su and Bao's (2001) conclusion that students may be wary of their instructors' legitimate and punishment power when making decisions regarding the voicing of their complaints. Specifically, our results corroborate Su and Bao's conclusion that students are "conservative complainers because of their fear of negative evaluation and their high exit barriers" (p. 47). Essentially, our results are similar to a "chilling effect" where researchers have found that individuals are less likely to complain to others in a relationship when they may be punished for doing so (Cloven & Roloff, 1993). Unlike consumers who can simply choose to do business elsewhere, students are largely stuck with professors (for several weeks at least) and may be forced to endure their courses regardless of their instructors' behaviors. Because this is the case, students may be wary of attempting to fix classroom problems when they believe that communicating with their instructors about their concerns will lead to negative repercussions they cannot escape. Though professors might claim that their feelings toward students do not influence what should be considered objective teaching practices, researchers have provided evidence that instructors may think of, and potentially treat, students differently depending on their level of positive affect toward specific individuals (e.g., Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012). Results from Bolkan and Goodboy (2013) reveal that students understand that

this to be the case. As a result, it is difficult to fault students for hesitating to voice their discontent to people in positions of power when this type of behavior may not result in positive consequences and, instead, may lead to both negative interactions and detrimental outcomes.

Despite the potential for a chilling effect to exist in the classroom, our results indicated that students did not just withhold rhetorical dissent because they thought they might be punished for articulating their concerns. Instead, students tended to withhold rhetorical dissent when they thought they might be punished for doing so *and* when they did not believe their communication would lead to positive outcomes. Essentially, if a problem in class had the potential to be fixed, students seemed to be willing to risk negative repercussions when the issue was important. Alternatively, if there was no chance for a wrongdoing to be fixed, students did not risk upsetting their instructors when they believed that the likelihood of this occurring was high. In light of these findings, it seems students' decisions to either withhold or communicate rhetorical dissent follow a rational behavior model (Lala & Priluck, 2011) designed to maximize success in their courses.

The current study benefits the existing literature because it adds to the depth of our understanding of rhetorical dissent by framing complaint episodes as reactions to external threats. From this perspective, researchers can utilize a parsimonious model for predicting rhetorical dissent in the form of perceived threats, coping ability, and costs. Moreover, this approach to studying rhetorical dissent allows researchers to observe the boundary conditions that shape adaptive coping behaviors in response to dissatisfying experiences in educational environments. That said, scholars studying instructional dissent can use the findings from the current study to focus on facilitating adaptive responses and abating maladaptive responses. This is particularly important considering students often engage in maladaptive behaviors in response to classroom problems; as Harrison (2007) noted, "students overwhelmingly approach others who can be of no real help as their first line of pursuit" (p. 361).

Considering that rhetorical dissent provides feedback to instructors regarding potentially harmful teaching practices (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013), it may be wise for instructors to encourage this type of communication in their classrooms. Data from the current study suggests that if instructors want to help students come forward with their problems they would do well to reduce students' perceived costs of speaking with them. This means that instructors need to create an environment where students feel like they can voice their concerns without experiencing discomfort or the threat of retaliation. One way to facilitate this process may be through midsemester evaluations with anonymous feedback (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013). Alternatively, instructors might help students feel comfortable approaching them through the use of referent power and expert power (Mukherjee, Pinto, & Malhotra, 2009) or through the employment of behaviors that reduce the perceived power distance between themselves and students (e.g., verbal and nonverbal immediacy; Zhang, 2005).

In addition to helping students feel more comfortable approaching them, instructors might also consider increasing their students' perceptions of coping ability in order to facilitate increased rhetorical dissent. Even if students believe that

there are costs for articulating their dissent to their instructors, results from the current study revealed that students may be willing to speak up about their dissatisfaction if they believe doing so will be result in positive change. One way to increase students' perceptions of coping ability is to set a precedent and provide distributive, procedural, and interactional justice when students first voice their concerns (Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014). Alternatively, increasing students' perceptions of their academic self-efficacy may help create perceptions that they are in control of their classroom outcomes which may increase their perceptions of empowerment (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996) and their willingness to speak with professors when there are problems in their courses (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014; LaBelle et al., 2013).

As it pertains to the theoretical implications of PMT, this study expands the use of the theory to the instructional communication context. Though it has been applied extensively in the realm of health communication, this project demonstrates PMT's utility for studying behavioral choices in a context that, to our knowledge, had not yet been examined using the theory. That said, the results of our study help strengthen the case for the predictive power of PMT in relation to adaptive behaviors. In addition, the current study differed from typical studies of PMT in that we examined a three-way interaction between costs, coping appraisal, and threat. In the past, costs have been typically thought of as additive in relation to response efficacy and self-efficacy. However, our results make the case that perceived costs may also be informative as a conditional variable. By separating costs from the combination of response efficacy and self-efficacy, we were able to demonstrate a unique pattern of decision making for individuals suffering under conditions of personal threat.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with all studies, this one has its limitations. One limitation is that we examined behavior related to rhetorical dissent by asking students to report on their experiences using a recall method. Because this is the case, we may have confounded the order of students' experiences. For example, it could be true that students who did not rhetorically dissent retrospectively recalled their problematic classroom episodes as less threatening than students who did complain to their instructors. Future researchers may consider using different methods to investigate how various components of PMT influence future behavior to examine our conclusions.

In addition, results from our study show that, on the whole, students chose to report classroom incidents that were highly threatening. It might be the case that students chose to report on incidents that were severe and that they felt vulnerable to because these are the ones they recalled. Events that are low in severity and vulnerability may not be as salient to individuals and, in fact, at very low levels may not be considered problems at all. Still, though the means were generally high, students could choose, and did choose, incidents that induced perceptions of low severity and vulnerability. That said, the results of our study may be different had students reported on less threatening classroom experiences as a whole. If this had

been the case, we might predict that our results would be more exaggerated. For example, the less threatening students perceive a problem to be, the more they may factor in the costs of complaining to their instructors with respect to perceived beneficial outcomes.

Another limitation of this study is its focus on one culture in one country. Because teaching practices and appropriate classroom behaviors differ with respect to their cultures (e.g., Goodboy, Bolkan, Myers, & Zhao, 2011), it may be the case that different aspects of PMT can be differentially influential in various cultures. For example, the costs associated with rhetorical dissent may be higher in cultures with a higher power distance compared with cultures with a lower power distance where dissent may be more likely to be tolerated. Future researchers may consider examining PMT in relation to rhetorical dissent in a variety of cultures to determine whether or not the patterns found in the current study hold in various cultural contexts.

Finally, this study approached the experience of classroom problems and dissent as existing from the perspective of students' reports. Future researchers may be well advised to examine instructors' perceptions of these problems to determine the extent to which problems in class reflect real problems (e.g., teachers not coming to class, being rude to students, playing favorites) versus student preferences (e.g., teachers not accepting late work).

Conclusion

This study revealed that the relationship between perceived classroom threats and rhetorical dissent is a conditional one. That is, in support of PMT predictions, students' rhetorical dissent decisions depend on perceived threat as it interacts with their perceived coping ability and the costs associated with complaining to instructors. Considering rhetorical dissent may provide the opportunity to create a more productive learning environment, instructors should be mindful that students will not always approach them with their concerns. Based on findings from this study instructors might consider how to communicate with students in a manner that encourages them to bring up their problems by emphasizing a judgment-free environment where students can be safe to voice their discontent. In addition, instructors should consider communicating, or openly demonstrating, their willingness to rectify students' problems in order to increase students' perceptions of their coping ability.

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