

# A Comparison Of Chinese And American College Students' Perceptions Of Professors' Behaviors

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## ABSTRACT

*This empirical study reports on similarities and differences in the perceptions that Chinese and American students hold about classroom behavior of professors. At issue is identifying behaviors deemed as acceptable as opposed to being offensive. Cultural dimensions and educational philosophical worldviews are offered for context. The underlying premise of the research is that professors establish and maintain the classroom tone; certain behaviors are expected by professors to promote a conducive learning environment. Fifty professors' behaviors were scored by 405 college students at one university in China and one in the US. For the most part, Chinese students perceived the offensiveness of professors' behaviors as significantly less egregious than did American students. Competence and respect for the individual are important to Americans while behaviors that demonstrate fulfillment of the role of teachers are important to Chinese students. This article not only explains the differing expectations students bring to the classroom, but some deep cultural foundations on which they are likely to be based.*

**Keywords:** Professor Behaviors; Student Perceptions; College Classroom; Cultural Values; Learning Environment; Teacher Competence; International Education

## INTRODUCTION

In higher education, instructors recognize that various physical and social contexts -- roles, skills, time, resources, relationships, personality, perceptions, external events, expectations, and abilities -- affect the learning environment. A supportive and productive learning environment depends on good mutual relationships between professors and students. Much of the responsibility for the atmosphere of a classroom is dependent on the professor. Professors set and maintain the tone for the class session, drive course expectations, affect course outcomes, and influence student behaviors (Palmer, 1998). Students take their cues about how to perceive the class from the atmosphere that instructors set.

By and large, Chinese and American cultures are quite different in their perceptions of roles and relationships between teachers and students as they are in their perceptions about authority figures and subordinates in general (Arnett, 2004; Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006; Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Chan, 1999; Ho, 2001; Myers, Zhong, & Guan, 1998; Zhang, 2005). Using Hofstede's (2001) vocabulary, two cultural dimensions in which the differences are most salient in a discussion of teacher-student interactions are individualism/collectivism and power distance.

The U.S. culture, portrayed as individualistic, with a narrow power distance, fosters a different orientation to professors than does Chinese culture, perceived as collectivist, with a large power distance (Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006; Chan, 1999; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Bond, 1998; Hui, 2005; Zhang, 2005).

A collectivist orientation, usually correlated with power distance, refers to emotional dependence on the collective (Hofstede, 2001; Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). In collectivist cultures, preferential treatment from a member of one's group is expected, in fact it is immoral to do otherwise, and shaming is effective in correcting behaviors, but tends to be done to the whole in-group, not to an individual. Education is perceived as the way, with the acquisition of skills and virtues, to become an acceptable member of the group. It is a one-time process in which the young learn how to do things to take their rightful place in society (Chan, 1999; Hui, 2005; Zhang, 2005). In China, students do not speak up in class without being asked to do so, and confrontations are avoided as are activities that may bring one shame or loss of face to teachers or students (Biggs & Watkins, 2001). A direct performance appraisal by a teacher to a student, especially in the classroom, threatens harmony (Chan, 1999; Hofstede, 2001; Zhang, 2005). A diploma entitles the student to belong to a higher status group and be more socially accepted. Individualistic cultures perceive of education as life-long, in which members of a society learn how to cope with the new and unexpected. In American classrooms, assertiveness tend to be positively correlated with academic performance, students expect to be treated as individuals and with fairness, and completing, performing, and graduating are measures of self-esteem and personal achievement (Hofstede, 2001; Palmer, 1998).

Power distance refers to "emotional dependence on more powerful people" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 216); and the extent to which the less powerful members of a social group accept as normal that power is not equally distributed (Hofstede & Bond, 1998). In China, the expectation is that members of a society are unequal, and this arises from the bottom, it is not imposed from the top. Most people are dependent on each other, or should be, and everyone has his or her place in the structure. These are indicators of a high power distance. In Chinese college classrooms, students are dependent on teachers, learning depends on the excellence of the teacher, and students are respectful of the knowledge, status, and authority of teachers (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Chan, 1999; Ho, 2001; Hofstede, 2001). In the US, members of society and organizations do not accept that power is distributed unequally; Americans perceive others as equals, more interdependent than dependent, with equal rights. Power should not be overt. In the US, power distance is low. Classrooms are expected to be student-centered, learning depends on a negotiated interdependence, and students and teachers treat each other more as equals than as superiors and subordinates (Hofstede, 2001; Palmer, 1998).

A comparison of Chinese and American learners in college classrooms requires a consideration of differences in philosophical worldview, one Chinese, in this case Confucian, and the other, American, based on rationalism inherited from the ancient Greeks. Confucianism provides a long, deep, and rich central influence on the cultural values of the Chinese. Confucian principles advocate self-cultivation, social harmony, a stable society (Lee, 2001) and conform to Chinese political utilitarianism (Hui, 2005). Learning from various sources is a principal means by which one becomes virtuous (Cheung & Chan, 2005). Conformity, harmony, and loyalty are learned young to prepare one for roles in which one may benefit society (Cheung & Chan, 2005, Hui, 2005; Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). Parents, teachers, and leaders should be just, moral, ethical, benevolent, patriotic, forgiving, and patient. These qualities enable them to lead, govern, and teach in order to cultivate others to take their rightful place in a naturally hierarchical society (Cheung & Chan, 2005, Hui, 2005). Teachers are highly respected, authoritative "transmitters of knowledge," (Hui, 2005, p. 24) who play critical roles in "cultivating the soul of Chinese people" (p. 17). The infusion of Confucianism in every corner of Chinese education explains the power distance and collectivist orientations of teachers and students in Chinese college classrooms. For centuries, education was the only path to social mobility (Hui, 2005). If one family member passed the civil service examinations, the entire family would earn elevated social status. Today, successful students are driven by the high expectations of their parents and teachers (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Hui, 2005). The higher level of examinations students can pass, the higher level of knowledge they are presumed to possess, and the higher their social values and virtues are presumed to be (Hui, 2005).

In American culture, learning is required to cultivate an individual's sense of social and moral responsibility; both practical skills and intellectual ability are the effective paths to individual development (McGough, 1992). Rationalism, which is absorbing information through experience, and abstraction, which is conceptualizing and reflecting on that information, have formed the basis for formal education. Aristotle's emphasis on happiness, with concomitant intellectual and moral virtue, formed the basis for Western ideas about learning (McGough, 1992). These shifted with the primacy of Christianity, capitalism, and democracy, as well as other social movements. For two centuries, formal and informal American education centered on "becoming American,"

indoctrinating the young with Christian beliefs and principles of American citizenship values (McGough, 1992). In recent decades, additional emphasis has been on individualism and achievement. Students are increasingly responsible for their own learning, encouraged to be autonomous and develop self-worth because of what they know and can do (Lovat, 2003; Tsolidis, 2001). They are expected to come to college with the skills to do college work. Teaching is not a highly respected profession; it is not highly paid, except for those in highly desirable disciplines. Teachers are encouraged to be “facilitators” of learning, with increasingly consumer-students who expect to get their money’s worth. College is a student-centered place for self-exploration (Arnett, 2004).

Using these lenses of cultural orientation and educational philosophical worldviews, we can expect to find differences in students’ responses to professors’ behaviors in college classrooms. This study compares American and Chinese college students’ perceptions of the offensiveness of professors’ behaviors in college classrooms.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

This study relied on quantitative data derived from paper and pen surveys to compare Chinese and American college students’ perceptions. Undergraduate students in two universities, one in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US and one in a comparable sized regional university in the suburbs of Beijing, were recruited by professors teaching one of their courses to complete a voluntary survey. A Chinese professor on the faculty at the American university obtained the participation of her counterparts in the Chinese university.

The two independent groups that formed the study sample (N=405) included 260 American students and 145 Chinese students. Of the American students, 64% were male, 35% were female, ages ranging from 19-25 (M = 21.2), and 9% were sophomores, 54% were juniors and 37% were seniors. The Chinese students were 31% male, 68% female, ages 18-24 (M=20.1), and 54% were freshman, 46% were juniors. The age range of all participants was 18-25; 88% of Americans were aged 22 or younger while 98% of Chinese students were.

### **Instrument**

The instrument used to measure perceptions about potentially offensive behaviors of professors was the Student Perceptions of Professors’ Classroom Behaviors (SPPCB) [self-citation]. This instrument is a 50-item survey developed by the authors in 2008 in which the singular question is “How offensive do you think it is when professors...” The 50 items are phrases about behaviors such as “appearing to be disorganized,” “not calling on a student who raises his/her hand,” “not helping students when assignments or tasks are unclear to them,” “using a student or a student’s work as a negative example,” and “calling on a student when student is likely to be unprepared or unwilling to speak.” Response categories range from 1 = “not at all offensive” to 5 = “very offensive.” The instrument has been deemed reliable (Cronbach alpha = .96). These data were treated as quantitative data for which meaningful means and standard deviations could be obtained.

### **Procedures**

The instrument was translated into Chinese by a Chinese professor on the faculty at the American university used in the study. The Chinese version was presented to participants in both Chinese and English in a lower and an upper level business course. The paper and pen survey was administered by one of the authors, not the course professor, in three course sections of an upper level business course and completed in 5-7 minutes. The surveys completed in China were collected and mailed to the authors. Data were entered into an SPSS database.

### **Data Analysis**

A total score for each participant was calculated. Scores at 50, the lowest end indicating the respondent selected “1” for every item, of which there were five, were eliminated. There were no scores at 250, the highest end indicating a selection of “5” on every item. Respondents with missing data could not obtain a summed score, so incomplete records were also eliminated. The total data set was reduced by 79 records (15%) for a total of 405. The

predictor variable was nationality. The outcome variable was the summed scale score of the SPPCB for each respondent as well as 50 individual item scores for each. Group means by nationality and age were compared on the total score of SPPCB and on the scores on each item rating the potential offensiveness of a professor’s behavior in the classroom using an independent samples t-test. Means were also compared on each of the 50 individual items. A Levene’s test for equality of variances indicated that the variances of the two groups, Chinese students and American students, were significantly different, therefore an independent samples t-test was performed that does not assume equal variances.

**RESULTS**

**All Professor Behaviors**

American and Chinese students’ perceive the offensiveness of professors’ behaviors differently. American students perceived, overall, these 50 potential behaviors of professors as more offensive (M=149.46, SD=30.31; N=260) than did Chinese students (M=129.65, SD=44.74; N=145),  $t(220.8) = 4.77, p = .000$ . The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference =19.9, 95% CI: 11.69 to 28.14) was moderate (eta squared =.06). The null hypothesis was rejected. American students deem most behaviors professors may demonstrate in the classroom more offensive than Chinese students deem the same behaviors. (Table 1).

**Table 1: Comparison of SPPCB Means for American and Chinese Students**

Nationality	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
American	260	149.57	30.66	4.77	.000
Chinese	145	129.65	44.74		

Age was not a predictor of perceptions of offensiveness. Both younger (19-22 year olds) American students (M=149.23, SD=30.48; N=229) and older (23-25 year olds) American students (M=152.03, SD=32.39; N=31) did not vary significantly on their perceptions of offensiveness of various professors’ behaviors,  $t(258) = -.477; p = .634$ . There were only three students in the Chinese dataset over age 22; this test was not conducted. (Table 2). Class level was highly correlated with age.

**Table 2: Comparison of SPPCB Means by American and Chinese Students’ Age**

Nationality	Age	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
American	<=22	229	149.23	30.48	-.477	.634
	>22	31	152.03	32.39		
Chinese	<=22	142	130.43	44.48	--	--

**Specific Professor Behaviors**

While behaviors were not rank ordered by respondents, mean scores for each nationality enabled ordering them in terms of most to least offensive. The small differences in means on some items suggest that the exact ordering should not be taken as definitive, but the relative ordering is of value. Chinese students rated 41 of 52 (79%) specific behaviors as less egregious than did American students. Behaviors which Chinese students perceived as more offensive than Americans were not deemed particularly offensive by either national group, but were slightly more offensive to Chinese students than Americans, and significantly so on 8 of 11 items. The behaviors more offensive to Chinese students by and large fell to the end of the list of behaviors which Americans found offensive. (Table 3).

**Table 3: Comparison of American and Chinese Means on Specific Items (presented in order of offensiveness by means for American students)\***

Professor Behavior		American students	Chinese students	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Humiliating, intimidating students	4.28	3.29	.000
2	Not helping students when assignments or tasks are unclear to them	4.17	2.92	.000
3	Punishing entire class for one student’s misbehavior/lack of performance	4.09	3.29	.000
4	Not answering a student’s question; referring him/her to course materials	4.08	2.90	.000
5	Hitting on a student	3.98	3.13	.000
6	Keeping the class overtime	3.96	2.67	.000
7	Playing favorites	3.87	2.83	.000
8	Embarrassing a student	3.87	2.98	.000
9	Talking about a student who is not present	3.72	2.66	.000
10	Commenting on a student's looks	3.65	3.08	.003
11	Appearing to have arbitrary rules	3.57	2.92	.000
12	Cutting a student off	3.56	2.44	.000
38	Reading power point slides	2.57	2.94	.000
39	Reading lecture notes to the class	2.52	3.01	.000
40	Lecturing the entire class period	2.40	2.55	.030
41	Sitting behind a desk while teaching	2.26	1.82	.002
45	Offering strong opinion	2.12	2.41	.008
47	Talking about his/her personal life	1.84	2.33	.000
48	Swearing	1.72	3.01	.000
49	Ending class early	1.26	1.77	.000
50	Drinking a beverage while teaching	1.15	1.62	.000

\*Shaded rows indicate behavior perceived more offensive, by mean, for Chinese student. Items not included were not significantly different.

Table 4 presents specific professor behaviors in order of perceived offensiveness to Chinese students. Corresponding position of Americans’ perceptions of offensiveness indicate just more than half (13) the items that Chinese students found among the 20 most offensive professor behaviors were also among Americans’ most offensive behaviors; 17 differences between nationalities were significant. Only three of the more disparate differences were not statistically significant (not shaded).

**Table 4: Comparison of 20 Most Offensive Professor Behaviors (in Order by Means for Chinese Students)\***

Professor Behaviors	Students	
	Chinese	American
Humiliating, intimidating students	1	1
Punishing the entire class for one student’s misbehavior/lack of performance	2	3
Hitting on a student	3	5
Not making the class interesting	4	22
Commenting on a student's looks	5	10
Reading lecture notes to the class	6	39
Embarrassing a student	7	8
Swearing	8	48
Being very authoritative	9	19
Appearing disorganized	10	24
Reading power point slides	10	38
Not helping students when assignments or tasks are unclear to them	11	2
Not answering a student's question; referring him/her to course materials	12	4
Not calling on students who raise their hands/offer to respond	13	25
Playing favorites	14	7
Appearing to have arbitrary rules	15	11
Not giving students feedback	16	13
Cancelling class without prior notice	17	28
Keeping the class overtime	18	6
Talking about a student who is not present	19	9

\*Shaded rows indicate a statistically significant difference in perceptions between Chinese and American students,  $p < .05$ .

Three behaviors were shared in the list of five most offensive behaviors (Table 5). Chinese and American students rated *humiliating and intimidating students* as the most offensive behavior for a professor. However, they did not rate the five equally high on the scale of offensiveness (Chinese  $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = .99$ ; Americans  $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ). *Punishing the entire class for one or few students' misbehavior/lack of performance* was second for Chinese students ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) and third for Americans ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). And *hitting on a student* was third for the Chinese ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) and fifth for Americans ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ). Americans perceive *not helping a student* second most offensive ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = .98$ ), which ranked eleventh for Chinese students ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ), and deemed their fourth most offensive behavior *not answering a student's question, but referring him or her to course materials to find the answer* ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). Chinese students considered *not making the class interesting* ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = .14$ ) and *commenting on a student's looks* ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) among the five most offensive things a professor could do in a classroom.

**Table 5: Mean Comparison of the Five Most Offensive Behaviors by Nationality**

Chinese Students	Item as ranked by Americans	American Students	Item as ranked by Chinese
1. Humiliating and intimidating students	1	1. Humiliating and intimidating students	1
2. Punishing the entire class for one student's misbehavior/lack of performance	3	2. Not helping students when assignments or tasks are unclear to them	11
3. Hitting on a student	5	3. Punishing the entire class for one student's misbehavior/lack of performance	2
4. Not making the class interesting	22	4. Not answering a student's question; referring him/her to course materials	12
5. Commenting on a student's looks	10	5. Hitting on a student	3

## DISCUSSION

National level cultural dimensions can explain differences in Chinese and American students' perceptions about offensiveness of behaviors of professors. However, a first consideration is in the act of truthfully completing the survey instrument itself. An unexpected moderating effect of modesty on the dependent variable, perceptions, may have had an effect on how items were scored. The high Chinese value of modesty translates to a reluctance to express true feelings so as not to embarrass or offend (Chan, 1999). Another reactive effect may be the perception about the meaning of "voluntary" when a Chinese professor asks his or her students to complete such a survey. It is possible that the low scores of perceived offensiveness are partially reflective of the reluctance to express true opinions and judge teachers' performance. American students, on the other hand, are not as likely to feel any compunction about expressing opinions or judging the performance of teachers, resulting in more strongly critical assessments of professor behaviors. We also do not know if Chinese students' in-group orientation might be to Chinese professors in this case, thereby influencing them to maintain face and prevent shame of professors by scoring their behaviors as inoffensive.

The professor behaviors that Chinese students would find offensive are those that demonstrate the professor is not playing his or her role appropriately, and students are not playing theirs. These violate central Confucian values. A professor's role is to instruct and not violate the teacher-student dynamic of teacher as authority figure. Professors who don't make the class interesting, read lecture and power point notes, and don't help students, call on those who volunteer, or give feedback are not performing as diligent transmitters of knowledge, "resolvers of doubt" (Hui, 2005, p. 20). For American students, except for not helping students, previously found that these same behaviors would indicate professor laziness or competence, and were only moderately offensive. American students value respect for, and interest in, a student's individual needs; not helping a student is offensive for these reasons, as is keeping the class overtime, talking about a student who is not present, cutting a student off, and other items high on the list of offensiveness (Stork & Hartley, 2009).

Professors who humiliate students, swear, are very authoritative, embarrass, or “hit on” students are violating the social contract between teacher and learner in China. Chinese students have been brought up to respect the wisdom of teachers and the knowledge and status of those in authority, and not question or challenge their position or judgment. If teachers are charged with “cultivating the soul” (Hui, 2005, p. 17), acting benevolently, and deserving of respect, then behaviors that are opposed to these values are going to be perceived as offensive. While American students do not perceive professors as deferentially, they do believe professors have a role to play as teacher/enabler, and there is an expectation for responsible, authoritative behavior. Violating the social contract against predatory behavior of adults in powerful positions on young people in non-powerful positions is offensive. Humiliation, embarrassment, and other direct professor-to-student interactions are offensive to Americans because they violate the regard for the student’s individualism (Stork & Hartley, 2009).

Chinese values include avoiding pettiness by disregarding moral virtues, so punishing an entire class for the misbehaviors or poor performance of one or a few students would not be proper conduct for a teacher. To Americans, it would disregard the student’s rights as well as indicates incompetence of the professor to be fair and just (Stork & Hartley, 2009).

The distinctive difference in egregiousness of offensive behaviors is likely attributable to the differences in power distance between Americans and Chinese national cultures. The narrow power distance of Americans predicts an ease in perceptions of “crossing the line,” whereas in China, the large power distance predicts a perception of privilege for professors to behave as they will because of their status and role, so crossing the line to offensiveness is not an easy judgment call.

Individualism explains much of the scoring and relative ranking of items by both national groups. Americans’ sense of individualism is very strong in college classrooms, and violating or not enabling expressions of individualism would be perceived as somewhat offensive on the part of a professor. Chinese students’ orientations to collectivism influences both the low scores of offensiveness, which maintains cohesion, harmony, and roles of participants in classrooms, and the relative ranking of items as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

Three themes are important to comment on in our conclusion: We recognize that individual values, such as those about politeness, performance, perceptions of roles and differences in communication styles, and generational attitudes, as well as individual differences in the value and opportunity for a college education, also may contribute to individual perceptions. National cultural orientations are broad and, to Americans, and putting too much stock in them subsumes an American value of individualism to an American national culture that is not as easily accepted as an explanation for perceptions or beliefs by Americans.

Students, regardless of nationality and cultural background, presumably expect to be taught in environments that enable rather than hinder learning. The tone a professor sets and maintains is crucial. Chinese students expect and accept a teacher-centered learning environment. American students expect a student-centered learning environment. But both expect an environment conducive to learning and accomplishing the educational goals of the culture. Understanding how students perceive professors’ actions and inactions enables instructors to reevaluate their assumptions and actions (Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006). American professors can learn about the ways their students perceive their behaviors and what those behaviors mean to students.

It is important to understand similarities and differences in the professor-student dynamic in Chinese college classrooms. Many American professors in American classrooms will encounter Chinese students. The fastest growing segment of international students is from China. In the 2009-2010 school year, 127,628 Chinese young people came to US universities (Open Doors, 2010). The drive to “internationalize” curricula and universities means in part to recruit international students. Professors in American college classrooms can become more aware that there will be differences in expectations from foreign students that are likely to affect classroom interactions between professors and students.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

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NOTES