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WHY STUDENTS MISBEHAVE IN CLASS: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOM INCIVILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Classroom incivilities are distracting to everyone involved in the learning process. Insight into the causes of these behaviors could potentially lead educators to successfully develop methods of reducing their prevalence. Many studies have discussed the causes and consequences of classroom behavior, though empirical evidence is lacking. In this paper we empirically examine the factors associated with six different types of student classroom incivilities using a sample of business students registered in principles of economics courses. Our experience demonstrates that, although each type of incivility has a unique set of determinants, some general conclusions can be drawn. First, though students and instructors may not agree on what constitutes an incivility, if students believe an act is inappropriate, they will be less likely to engage in it. Second, business students appear to be more concerned with getting caught engaging in incivilities than they are about the consequences of getting caught. These results suggest that specific steps can be taken by educators in order to reduce the frequency of classroom incivilities. Our results are limited to business college students. Further research in other areas is needed.

I. INTRODUCTION

Classroom environment is an important component of a student's educational experience, and it impacts an instructor's professional satisfaction (see e.g., Boice 1996, Braxton, Bayer, and Noseworthy 2004, and Hirschy and Braxton 2004). A pleasant, cooperative classroom environment, however, is not always the norm. Instructors frequently complain about students who walk in late or leave class early; about students who talk with friends during class, who leave their cell phones on during lectures, who read the newspaper in class, etc. In turn, students complain about instructors who are unfair, uncaring, irritable, and unprepared.¹ Regardless of who

¹ See, e.g., Sorcinelli (1994), Anderson (1999), Carbone (1999), Holton (1999), Kuhlenschmidt and Layne (1999), Richardson (1999), and Feldmann (2001).

originates classroom incivilities, be it the students or the faculty, their presence is distracting to all in the learning process, and insight into the causes of these behaviors could potentially lead educators to successfully develop methods of reducing their prevalence. Thus, the focus of this study is on the determinants of classroom incivilities and the steps that may be taken to deter them. More specifically we concentrate on student incivilities that disrupt lectures, such as walking in after class has started or chatting during lectures.²

The existing literature suggests that student incivilities can be explained using sociological and managerial theories. For instance, using emotion development theories (including Ellis and Harper's 1997), Kuhlenschmidt (1999) explores ways in which students and faculty can moderate their emotions to minimize outbursts in the classroom, while Tiberius and Flak (1999) use catastrophe and negotiation theories to examine how student-instructor interactions can experience sudden deviations from their traditional norms, how to prevent them, and how to approach them after they have occurred. Bray and Del Favero (2004) tender several sociological theories that can explain faculty and student incivilities, including social control theories,³ which emphasize social expectations that keep people from behaving badly; strain theory and social disorganization theory, which emphasize feelings of attachment to, for example, a group of people; and social learning theories, which focus on the most important associations of individuals and the role these play in the decision making process. Furthermore, Snow (2004) discusses how speech stereotypes and social power can explain why female and non-white faculty members seem to have a harder time with student incivilities. Finally, Braden and Smith (2006) take a look at Jungian personality theory and discuss how introvert and extrovert faculty can manage classroom incivilities.

Although there are many potential explanations for the causes of incivilities, in our opinion, the literature lacks empirical support. Two authors who study student incivilities empirically are Appleby (1990) and Boice (1996). Appleby (1990) surveys faculty and students to find out what each group finds irritating about each other. The surveys show that faculty members are irritated when students act bored or uninterested, and when they behave in a disrespectful manner. Students get irritated with faculty members they consider to be bad communicators, and with faculty

² The literature on incivilities distinguishes between incivilities originated by faculty, by students, and by both. Within the student generated incivilities, the literature identifies two basic types: those that disrupt lectures and those that threaten the integrity of tests, assignments, and other examinations, such as copying from others during tests and plagiarism. For a review of the cheating literature, see Bisping et. al (2008). For faculty originated incivilities, see, among others, Meyers (2003), Bartlett (2004), Braxton and Mann (2004), and Caboni, Hirschy, and Best (2004).

³ Economists often model academic misconduct following the economics of crime literature pioneered by Becker (1968) and Ehrlich (1973). Such analysis could be classified within the social control theories. Applications of economics of crime to the classroom usually relate to cheating in tests or written assignments. For a review, see Bisping et. al (2008).

members who they perceive to behave disrespectfully. In a similar study, Boice (1996) observed classroom incivilities by students and instructors at a large research university over a five-year period. During this time, he attended lectures, documented incivility according to what he observed, and interviewed students and instructors. From his observations he concludes that incivilities are not unusual, that both instructors and students engage in them, and that instructors' deficits in the first few lectures, including aloof behaviors and fast paced, unengaged lectures appear to be their main triggers.

II. DATA AND HYPOTHESES

We study the causes of the following six behaviors:

- BEHAVIOR 1: Talking with classmates during lecture
- BEHAVIOR 2: Watching movies or playing games on a laptop computer during lecture
- BEHAVIOR 3: Reading or studying non-related class material during lecture
- BEHAVIOR 4: Arriving late to class
- BEHAVIOR 5: Leaving class early
- BEHAVIOR 6: Leaving cell phone on during lectures or examinations

We measure the frequency with which students engage in these behaviors and their determinants using the results of a survey which we administered to 262 students registered in several sections of principles of economics courses at a midsize, public university during the 2003 through 2005 academic years. The surveys were administered during regular class time. Participation was voluntary and participants were reassured that their answers would be anonymous.

Our survey is based on an older study by Stern and Havlicek (1986). We chose to use their survey instrument due to the fact that it fits well with our research questions, and also because it is part of an often-cited study where the authors carefully consider the validity of their instrument. Stern and Havlicek employed a well-conceived method in which they first developed a questionnaire based on the literature. The questionnaire was distributed to 60 college faculty members who, after answering the various questions, suggested additional behaviors that should be added to the survey. The questionnaire was then modified to accommodate these suggestions. In the resulting survey, students and faculty were asked whether a variety of situations (36 to be exact) could be thought of as misconduct and whether they had either engaged in them (in case of students) or observed them (in the case of faculty) during their college careers. Some of the behaviors considered included "copying

from another student during a quiz or examination”, “using unauthorized crib sheets during a quiz or examination”, “sitting in for another student during an examination”, among others. In our study we use the same format of this survey but add the six behaviors listed above in order to study what we consider to be the most common forms of classroom incivilities.

Even though in this paper we label behaviors 1 through 6 as “classroom incivilities”, the survey questions were phrased in terms of “academic misconduct”. More specifically, and following Stern and Havlicek, for each of the six behaviors students were asked to choose one of the following alternatives:⁴

- a. This is not academic misconduct and you have not done this while in college.
- b. This is not academic misconduct and you have done this at least once while in college.
- c. This is academic misconduct and you have not done this while in college.
- d. This is academic misconduct and you have done this at least once while in college.

We also asked the students to provide demographic information regarding their GPA, age, gender, race, year in school, and their parents’ educational level. Further, we gathered information on student perceptions concerning the percentage of students who misbehave, the percentage who get caught, and the severity of the punishment they receive if caught.⁵ Table 1 summarizes the frequency with which students admit engaging in behaviors 1 through 6, while Tables 2 and 3 contain definitions of all the variables used in the study and their summary statistics.

TABLE 1: FREQUENCY OF INCIVILITIES		
Behavior	Number of Students (%)	Observations
1. Talking with classmates during lecture	156 (60%)	261
2. Watching movies or playing games on a laptop computer during lecture	60 (23%)	261
3. Reading or studying non-related class material during lecture	159 (61%)	262
4. Arriving late to class	165 (63%)	262
5. Leaving class early	152 (58%)	262
6. Leaving cell phone on during lectures or examinations	94 (36%)	262

⁴ These options are written exactly as in Stern and Havlicek (1986, p. 131).

⁵ Our original survey included all the question in the surveys developed by Stern and Havlicek (1986), and some questions from the surveys in Tom and Borin (1988), and Grimes (2004). The results from this survey were used in a previous study of academic incivilities that threaten the integrity of tests and written assignments. We added behaviors 1 through 6 listed above to be able to study incivilities.

Table 1 reveals that students frequently engage in these behaviors. More than half the students surveyed admit talking and reading non-class related material during lectures, arriving late, and leaving class early, at least once in their college career. Less common behaviors are playing with laptops and leaving cell phones on during class (only 23% and 36% of students admit to these).

TABLE 2: DEFINITION OF VARIABLES

Variable	Definition
Behavior 1	1 if student reports engaging in this behavior at least once while in college, and 0 otherwise
Behavior 2	1 if student reports engaging in this behavior at least once while in college, and 0 otherwise
Behavior 3	1 if student reports engaging in this behavior at least once while in college, and 0 otherwise
Behavior 4	1 if student reports engaging in this behavior at least once while in college, and 0 otherwise
Behavior 5	1 if student reports engaging in this behavior at least once while in college, and 0 otherwise
Behavior 6	1 if student reports engaging in this behavior at least once while in college, and 0 otherwise
Male	1 if student gender is male, 0 if student gender is female
Parent	1 if either mother or father have at least a college education, and 0 otherwise.
Age	Student's age
White	1 if student race is white, and 0 otherwise
Year	1 if student is a freshman; 2 if student is a sophomore; 3 if student is a junior; 4 if student is a senior
GPA	Student's self-reported grade point average
Greek Organization	1 if student belongs to a fraternity or sorority, and 0 otherwise
Punishment	1 if student thinks that those caught practicing behavior classified as misconduct are punished severely (by failing the class or by being suspended from school), and 0 if student thinks the punishment is not severe (a scolding, having to retake the test or assignment, or getting a failing grade in the test or assignment)
Extent	1 if student believes that the percentage of students that engage in academic misconduct is "high" or "very high", and 0 if student thinks that the percentage of students who misbehave is "very low", "low", or "about 50 percent"
Pcaught	1 if the student thinks that those who practice behavior classified as misconduct "often" or "always" get caught, and 0 if the student thinks that those who misbehave "never" or "rarely" get caught
Misconduct 1	1 if student reports that Behavior 1 constitutes academic misconduct, and 0 otherwise
Misconduct 2	1 if student reports that Behavior 2 constitutes academic misconduct, and 0 otherwise
Misconduct 3	1 if student reports that Behavior 3 constitutes academic misconduct, and 0 otherwise
Misconduct 4	1 if student reports that Behavior 4 constitutes academic misconduct, and 0 otherwise
Misconduct 5	1 if student reports that Behavior 5 constitutes academic misconduct, and 0 otherwise
Misconduct 6	1 if student reports that Behavior 6 constitutes academic misconduct, and 0 otherwise

Table 3 further reveals that – with the exception of Behavior 6 – most students do not perceive these behaviors to be inappropriate.

TABLE 3: SUMMARY STATISTICS

Variable	Mean	Median	Min.	Max.	St. Dev.	Sum	Sample
Behavior 1	0.60	1	0	1	0.49	156	261
Behavior 2	0.23	0	0	1	0.42	60	261
Behavior 3	0.61	1	0	1	0.49	159	262
Behavior 4	0.63	1	0	1	0.48	165	262
Behavior 5	0.58	1	0	1	0.49	152	262
Behavior 6	0.36	0	0	1	0.48	94	262
Male	0.49	0	0	1	0.50	128	262
Parent	0.79	1	0	1	0.41	206	262
Age	20.10	19	17	44	2.78	5024	250
White	0.81	1	0	1	0.39	210	260
Year	2.17	2	1	4	0.73	566	261
GPA	2.17	2	1	4	0.73	566	261
Greek Org.	0.23	0	0	1	0.42	61	262
Punishment	0.30	0	0	1	0.46	79	262
Extent	0.11	0	0	1	0.31	28	262
Pcaught	0.12	0	0	1	0.33	32	261
Misconduct 1	0.29	0	0	1	0.46	76	261
Misconduct 2	0.38	0	0	1	0.49	98	261
Misconduct 3	0.24	0	0	1	0.43	62	262
Misconduct 4	0.32	0	0	1	0.47	84	262
Misconduct 5	0.32	0	0	1	0.47	83	262
Misconduct 6	0.48	0	0	1	0.50	126	262

To study the reasons why students engage in classroom incivilities, we construct variables following the theoretical and empirical papers reviewed in the previous section. Based on social control theories we include variables that measure social norms of conduct, and the costs and benefits of misbehaving. To account for social norms of conduct we include the extent to which other students in the college misbehave (EXTENT). Presumably, the more common misconduct is, the more socially acceptable it is perceived to be, and the more frequently students engage in it. We measure the expected costs of misbehaving with the students' perceived probability of getting caught (PCAUGHT), with the severity of the punishment if caught misbehaving (PUNISHMENT) and GPA (GPA).⁶ Benefits of engaging in incivilities are difficult to quantify. We work from the assumption that benefits are uniform across students, which allows us to focus on the costs alone.

Based on anomie and social bond theory we include variables that stand-in for the student's beliefs and the beliefs of social and demographic groups students are

⁶ Though GPA is likely relevant, its expected sign is unclear. If students with high GPA's are those who also value learning the most, then the cost of missing class material is high, and the sign of GPA would be negative. If, however, students with high GPA's are also those who find it easier to learn the material, they might find that missing class material is less costly because they are more capable of learning the material on their own.

associated with. The theories suggest that both sets of beliefs have an effect of an individual's actions. We include the students' beliefs or perceptions of each behavior as appropriate or inappropriate (MISCONDUCT i , $i=1,2,\dots,6$), their maturity level (AGE), the academic upbringing and system of beliefs of their parents (PARENT), and the system of beliefs of student organizations they belong to (GREEK ORGANIZATION).⁷

Finally, given Snow's (2004) finding that gender and race influence an individual's prejudices, we include the variables WHITE and MALE. The student's year in school (YEAR) is included to control for the opportunity's students have had to misbehave.⁸

In summary, and based on the literature, we have the following a priori expectations:

Hypothesis 1: Students are more prone to incivilities the larger the extent of misconduct in school, the longer they have been in college, if they belong to a fraternity or sorority, and if they are males.

Hypothesis 2: Students are less prone to incivilities the higher their parents' educational level, the larger the probability of getting caught, the more severe the punishment, and if they believe the behavior is inappropriate.

III. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In order to test our hypotheses, we take a two-step approach. We first calculate pair-wise correlation coefficients between each independent variable and each of the classroom behaviors. Furthermore, we estimate the significance of the correlations using t-statistics and their corresponding p-values. In a second step, we estimate six probit models, one for each of the behaviors. In each model the dependent variable is BEHAVIOR i ($i=1, 2,\dots,6$), and the independent variables are those discussed previously.

Table 4 presents the correlation coefficients and significance levels.

⁷ We specifically consider membership in fraternity or sororities as a source of social bonds based on Caboni, Hirschy, and Best 2004, who find that the perceptions of members and non-members about what constitute incivilities are different.

⁸ We treat the student's year in college using a categorical variable that takes on the values 1 through 4. The alternative would have been to use four dummy variables. We chose the single categorical variable to keep the number of dummy variables in the model down to a manageable size. This treatment is consistent with other studies in the literature (see e.g., Kerkvliet 1994). Similarly, the definitions of PCAUGHT, PUNISHMENT, EXTENT and PARENT are based on Bunn et al. (1992) and Kerkvliet (1994).

TABLE 4: CORRELATIONS

	Behavior					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Male	0.02	0.07	0.01	0.05	0.09	0.14 **
Parent	-0.04	-0.02	0.00	-0.05	-0.12 **	0.04
Age	-0.07	-0.05	-0.06	-0.04	-0.07	-0.09
White	0.02	0.04	0.09	0.15 **	0.10 *	0.06
Year	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.12 **	0.10 *	-0.02
GPA	0.05	-0.07	0.16 **	-0.04	-0.09	-0.03
Greek						
Organization	0.07	0.04	0.02	0.07	0.12 **	0.17 **
Punishment	-0.04	-0.10 *	0.00	-0.05	-0.05	-0.02
Extent	0.06	-0.04	0.05	0.01	0.09	0.02
Pcaught	-0.10 *	-0.12 **	-0.15 **	-0.08	-0.08	-0.13 **
Misconduct 1	-0.32 **					
Misconduct 2		-0.22 **				
Misconduct 3			-0.14 **			
Misconduct 4				-0.17 **		
Misconduct 5					-0.25 **	
Misconduct 6						-0.23 **

Significance levels: *=10%. **=5%

The three main results that emerge from this table are that: (1) the beliefs of student's matter. More specifically, there is a significant and negative correlation between each behavior and the belief that it is wrong to engage in it; (2) the probability of getting caught misbehaving matters. There is in fact a negative and significant correlation between four behaviors and the probability of getting caught misbehaving; (3) the significance of other potential relationships varies by behavior type. For example, PUNISHMENT is only significant (and marginally at that) in the case of behavior 2 (playing with laptop).

**TABLE 5: PROBIT MODELS
(COEFFICIENTS AND P-VALUES IN PARENTHESIS)**

	Behavior					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Constant	0.04 (0.97)	0.18 (0.90)	-1.00 (0.26)	0.65 (0.46)	1.21 (0.21)	0.66 (0.60)
Male	0.24 (0.22)	0.21 (0.31)	0.14 (0.46)	0.04 (0.83)	0.14 (0.47)	0.47 (0.02)
Parent	-0.01 (0.96)	-0.04 (0.86)	0.03 (0.89)	-0.17 (0.44)	-0.52 (0.02)	0.19 (0.39)
Age	-0.02 (0.48)	-0.04 (0.57)	-0.03 (0.45)	-0.03 (0.46)	-0.03 (0.42)	-0.06 (0.29)
White	-0.03 (0.48)	-0.09 (0.72)	0.24 (0.31)	0.67 (0.00)	0.49 (0.04)	0.05 (0.84)
Year	0.17 (0.19)	0.12 (0.44)	0.23 (0.07)	0.18 (0.17)	0.21 (0.12)	0.00 (0.99)
GPA	0.18 (0.32)	-0.03 (0.87)	0.40 (0.03)	-0.15 (0.41)	-0.24 (0.18)	-0.02 (0.93)
Greek Organization	0.04 (0.84)	0.07 (0.77)	-0.05 (0.82)	0.10 (0.63)	0.36 (0.10)	0.36 (0.09)
Punishment	-0.07 (0.72)	-0.35 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.79)	-0.16 (0.40)	-0.06 (0.76)	-0.09 (0.66)
Extent	0.20 (0.52)	-0.01 (0.98)	0.39 (0.26)	0.11 (0.73)	0.55 (0.10)	0.40 (0.21)
Pcaught	-0.27 (0.32)	-0.77 (0.05)	-0.80 (0.00)	-0.51 (0.06)	-0.41 (0.15)	-0.74 (0.04)
Misconduct 1	-0.72 (0.00)					
Misconduct 2		-0.68 (0.00)				
Misconduct 3			-0.36 (0.09)			
Misconduct 4				-0.47 (0.01)		
Misconduct 5					-0.77 (0.00)	
Misconduct 6						-0.51 (0.01)
Unrestricted Log Lik.	-138.3	-111.7	-137.1	-137.8	-132.6	-132.0
Restricted Log Lik.	-149.2	-122.6	-149.7	-149.7	-153.2	-147.1
Included Observations	224	224	225	225	225	225
Y bar	0.62	0.24	0.62	0.62	0.58	0.36

In order to correctly measure the impact of each determinant on misbehaving, we run probit models. Results from the probit estimations, which are summarized in Table 5, mostly mirror the correlation analysis.

Although some of the relationships between variables lose significance in the probit estimations, this is mostly due to correlation among regressors (summarized in Table 6) as confirmed by F and Likelihood ratio tests of joint significance.

We conclude then that the students are less prone to engaging in Behaviors 1 through 6 when the probability of getting caught is high and when students believe that the behavior is inappropriate. The severity of punishment does not have a statistically significant relationship with any of the incivilities considered⁹ which suggests to us that the humiliation of being caught doing something inappropriate is enough punishment.

Other aspects of our hypotheses were not supported for every type of misconduct, though we find that students are more likely to engage in certain types of incivilities the larger the extent of the misconduct, the longer they have been in school, if they belong to a Greek organization, and if they are male. Students are also less likely to engage in certain incivilities the higher the level of their parents' education.

There is also an interesting result from the probit estimations that deserves specific mention. For Behavior 3, reading non-class related material during lectures, the effect of GPA is positive and significant. A possible explanation for the sign of GPA is that good students (as measured by their GPA) feel that they do not need to pay as much attention in class and can afford to do something else during lectures. Alternatively, the pressure to keep grades up can lead these students to use regular class time to study and prepare for other classes.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Classroom incivilities can be a distraction from the learning process and are undesirable to those interested in education. Insight into the causes of such behavior could potentially lead educators to successfully develop methods of reducing their prevalence. The results of our study imply that classroom incivilities can be explained in part by several key factors, some of which are specific to the nature of the

⁹ An exception is behavior 2, playing with laptops in class. The statistical significance is not very strong in this case however.

incivility, and others that are not. While factors that are specific to one type of incivility might be useful in designing policies to reduce that behavior, here we summarize those results that appear to be applicable in a more general sense.

First, it appears as though there is a disconnect between what students and faculty perceive to be incivilities. Our estimates show that if students feel that a behavior is inappropriate, they are much less likely to engage in that behavior. Unfortunately, many students do not feel that the behaviors listed in this study are inappropriate.

TABLE 6: CORRELATIONS OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

	Age	Extent	Greek Org.	GPA	Male	Parent	Peaught	Punishment	White	Year	Misconduct 1	Misconduct 2	Misconduct 3	Misconduct 4	Misconduct 5	Misconduct 6
Age	1.0															
Extent	0.0	1.0														
Greek Org.	-0.1	-0.1	1.0													
GPA	0.0	0.1	-0.1	1.0												
Male	-0.0	-0.1	0.0	-0.3	1.0											
Parent	-0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	1.0										
Peaught	0.2	-0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	1.0									
Punishment	-0.0	-0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0								
White	0.1	-0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	-0.0	0.1	-0.0	1.0							
Year	0.3	0.1	0.0	-0.1	-0.0	-0.0	0.1	0.0	-0.0	1.0						
Misconduct 1	0.1	-0.1	-0.2	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	-0.0	-0.1	1.0					
Misconduct 2	0.1	0.1	-0.1	0.1	-0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	-0.0	0.0	0.5	1.0				
Misconduct 3	0.1	0.0	-0.1	-0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	-0.1	0.0	0.5	0.5	1.0			
Misconduct 4	0.1	0.0	-0.0	-0.0	0.1	-0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	-0.1	0.5	0.5	0.6	1.0		
Misconduct 5	0.1	-0.1	-0.0	-0.1	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.1	-0.0	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.7	1.0	
Misconduct 6	0.1	0.1	-0.2	-0.1	0.0	0.1	0.2	-0.0	0.0	-0.0	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	1.0

Therefore, students need to be educated on the matter, either through college orientation classes, or by individual instructors. Second, students appear to be concerned with getting caught engaging in incivilities, though the severity of the consequences is less important. This implies that instructors need to have credible, consistent, monitoring systems that are known to the student. Our results suggest that if this approach causes students to believe that the probability of getting caught is high, they will be less likely to behave inappropriately.

Our study uses business students registered in principles of economics courses. Since it is possible that these students are intrinsically different from students in other fields, this study is likely most helpful to instructors in business schools. Furthermore, our study focuses on traditional lecture environments as these are still predominant in college classrooms, especially among the most experienced instructors.¹⁰ Our results

and opinions are thus limited only to this type of classrooms, as opposed to, for example, cooperative learning environments.

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