January 2012

Social Distance In The College Classroom

Chassity Paige Sanner

SOCIAL DISTANCE IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

by

Chassity Paige Sanner
Bachelor of Science, University of North Dakota, 2006

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota
May
2012

This thesis, submitted by Chassity P. Sanner in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

_____

Dr. Daphne Pedersen
Chairperson

_____

Dr. Bruce DiCristina

_____

Dr. Justin Berg

This thesis meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

_____

Wayne Swisher
Dean of the Graduate School

Date April 11, 2012

PERMISSION

Title Social Distance in the College Classroom

Department Sociology

Degree Master of Arts

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my thesis work, or in her absence, by the chairperson of the department or the dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this thesis or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Signature _____
Chassity P. Sanner

Date April 11, 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Daphne Pedersen, my committee chairperson. The completion of this thesis would have been much more challenging without her continuous encouragement and support. She is dedicated to helping her students to succeed, and for this, I thank her.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Bruce DiCristina and Dr. Justin Berg for their suggestions and support.

I would finally like to thank Mr. Frank White. Throughout my entire academic journey he has offered guidance and positive reinforcement. His faith in me has never ceased.

ABSTRACT

The importance of student learning outcomes is apparent. Past research has examined the relationship that students have with their instructors and the impact this has on student learning, yet the concept of social distance in student-instructor relationships has yet to be incorporated. This thesis was conducted to explore student perceptions of social distance. A scale based on the work of Emory Bogardus (1926) was developed and then administered to a sample of introductory level sociology students and upper level sociology students at the University of North Dakota during the Fall Semester of 2007. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that social distance exists across different scenarios. When looking at perceived social distance that students felt towards their instructor as compared to their graduate teaching assistant, statistical significance was found. Students perceived less social distance towards their designated graduate teaching assistant as compared to their instructor in lower level, large enrollment classes. Graduate teaching assistants could ultimately be used as a tool to gain such insight into perceptions, constructions, and misconceptions of students that constructivists find to be crucial in the learning process.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One way to characterize the student-instructor relationship is to consider how near or distant the student may feel towards their instructor. As of yet little work has been done in this area. Emory Bogardus (1925a) is most famous for introducing the idea of social distance to describe the willingness to interact with others and later developing the social distance scale to measure this concept. He, along with constructivists, argued that learning is a social activity (Bogardus 1928). Although he never used his scale to test his ideas, he did speak of the potential influence that social distance between instructor and student may have on student learning. The greater the social distance between teacher and pupil, the less likely the teacher is to "connect with the pupil's thinking, and the more likely is education to become unnatural and formal" (Bogardus 1928:595). He argued that great social distance means the teacher's failure to appreciate the pupil's universe of experience which in turn indicates the possibility of limiting student learning (Bogardus 1928).

Constructivist theory refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves, by looking for meaning and order. Students interpret what they hear, read, and see based on their previous learning and habits. Those who lack "appropriate" backgrounds may not be able to accurately grasp what an instructor is asking or digest the

material being taught. That said, constructivists focus more on the student than the actual material of a course. One aspect that constructivists believe to be crucial for student learning is the relationship between student and instructor, this due to the belief that learning is ultimately a social activity. Understanding is shaped not only through actual encounters with the physical world but more importantly through interactions between people in relation to the world. Edwards and Mercer (1987) argue that the world is not only physical and captured through our senses, but cultural, meaningful and significant, and made so primarily through communication with others.

Students have not been asked to rate the level of social distance felt toward their instructor(s). In this thesis, using constructivist theory as a foundation, the idea of social distance between instructor and student will be examined and explored because of its implied importance for student learning.

Statement of the Problem

Greater calls for accountability have led to a focus on improving student learning. Past research examining student learning has focused heavily on pre-enrollment characteristics of individual students. Characteristics that have been taken into account include gender of the student (Comeaux 2006), socioeconomic status (Morris 2005), and group involvement (Broh 2002), among others. It is apparent that the relationship that students have with their instructor(s) plays a role in student learning, yet the concept of social distance in student-instructor relationships has not yet been looked at. This idea of social distance, unlike many of the pre-enrollment characteristics examined, is amenable

to change. On the basis of the theoretical assumption that social distance impacts student learning, ways to promote and improve this correlate could be devised.

Purpose and Design of Study

Much research has been conducted pertaining to student learning. Social distance between instructor and student, however, has yet to be examined in this context. Emory Bogardus (1928a) spoke of the importance of this relationship, yet did not test or explore the issue empirically in a university setting. The present study was conducted to explore student perceptions of social distance. Data were taken from a survey of introductory level sociology students and upper level sociology students at the University of North Dakota during the Fall Semester of 2007. In addition to examining social distance between instructor and student, distance between graduate teaching assistant and student will be explored. Data from small and large enrollment courses will allow for a comparison of social distance by class size.

Hypotheses or Questions to Be Answered

The hypotheses formulated for this exploratory study based on the constructivist theory are as follows:

H1.) Social distance is positively associated with class size. As class size increases, social distance felt towards the instructor will also increase.

H2.) Social distance is greater between students and their instructors than between students and their designated graduate teaching assistants.

H3.) Social distance is negatively associated with group involvement. Those students who are involved in student organizations will feel less social distance towards their instructor as compared to those who are not.

Operational Definitions

Social distance is defined as the willingness to interact with others. The less willing you are to interact with a particular individual or group, the more socially distant you are from that individual or group. To measure social distance in this thesis, six questions were modified from the work of Pascarella and Terenzini (1977). Students were asked to rate how willing they would be to interact with their instructor and if applicable, the graduate teaching assistant of the course in different situations. The less willing one is to interact in each situation, the greater the overall social distance felt; the more willing one is to interact with another, the less social distance reported.

Student learning in this thesis is not necessarily how well a student performs in a class but the knowledge and skills that the student attains through his or her educational experience. Although this variable will not be measured at this time, in the future it could be. Data from a value-added assessment of the University of North Dakota Sociology Department was collected at the same time the social distance scale was given. An instrument developed to test knowledge of social theory, statistics, and research methods was administered to those students enrolled in the courses offered at UND during the fall of 2007 from which the social distance data were drawn. Later that same semester upper level students were given the same instrument to determine the skills that they had

acquired through the duration of their program. This data could be linked to social distance measures.

Upper-level students are defined as those students who are enrolled in all sociology courses examined above the 100 level.

The sample examined in this thesis consisted of students enrolled in introductory and upper-level sociology courses at the University of North Dakota in the Fall of 2007. Both male and female students were included in the sample. Regarding social class, students were predominately self-proclaimed middle class. Race was not measured as a variable, although the campus student population is predominately White (89%) with 1% of students identifying as Black, 1% as Hispanic, 2% as Asian, 3% as Native American, and 1% listing "Other." This information was gained from the University of North Dakota website (www.und/research/institutional-research/factbook/2010-students.cfm).

Organization of Thesis

In the following chapter, the concept of social distance will be discussed, along with an examination of past research conducted on instructor-student relationships. The constructivist theory will also be explored. Chapter Three will describe the methodology chosen; the instrument and sample will be discussed. In Chapter Four the findings will be detailed for each of the hypotheses. Finally in Chapter Five both the limitations of this particular study will be touched on, and suggestions for those conducting research on the topic in the future will be offered.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Justification of the Topic

The importance of student learning outcomes for the individual is apparent. According to a 2002 report by the United States Census Bureau, college graduates earn almost twice as much as high school graduates over the course of their careers. Differences in earnings only continue to grow. "In 1975, those with a bachelor's degree had 1.5 times the annual earnings of workers with only a high school diploma. By 1999, this ratio had risen to 1.8 times the earnings" (Day and Newburger 2002:3). Today many of the best jobs available require a minimum of a college degree. Almost every sector of the economy is not only seeking workers with skills and competencies beyond those that are acquired in high school, but rather mandating them (Kuh 2001).

Kuh (1995) argues that in addition to the monetary gains and occupational status that those students graduating from college will experience as compared to their peers who hold only a high school diploma, they will also exhibit social maturation and competence. Malcolm X (1970) makes the claim that "education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today" (as cited in Richardson 2008:382). The more students are encouraged to learn, the more apt they are

to question the systems that keep themselves and others oppressed, ultimately seeking the change necessary to eliminate such things as discrimination.

Student learning outcomes in higher education are undoubtedly of great importance to the individual but also to the institution and departments within the institution. "Students and their learning should become the focus of everything we do…from the instruction that we provide, to the intellectual climate that we create, to the policy decisions that we make" (Cross 1998:4). It should be no surprise that the call for accountability in higher education has become widespread. Institutions along with departments within are feeling the burden as state legislatures become involved. Several have applied pressure on institutions to "engage in a systematic process of assessment of their programs and to document the outcomes and value of the education provided" (Weiss, Crosbey, Habel, Hanson, and Larsen 2002:64). As accountability of institutions and departments is becoming more customary and the positive role of student learning becomes more undeniable, now more than ever, researchers are determined to identify what impacts student learning in the college classroom.

In the past, pre-enrollment characteristics of the individual student were the focus in studies of student learning. This thesis will shift away from such emphasis, and look more closely at social factors, more specifically the student-instructor relationship and the social distance that potentially exists within. In the following pages, a description will be offered of how research on the student-instructor relationship has evolved and the importance that this has on student learning. In addition, the absence of social distance in previous research will be exposed and discussed.

Historical Context

A number of studies have been conducted on the student-instructor relationship in higher education (e.g., Anderson 1979, Coupland 2003, Kuh, Hu, and Vesper 2000). Everything from student-instructor immediacy (Baker 2004) to the idea of rapport (Catt, Miller, and Schallenkamp 2007) has been examined; and the debate between formal versus informal interaction continues (Mook 2002). One thing that has yet to be examined, as can be seen in the following pages, is the idea of social distance when measuring the student-instructor relationship.

Immediacy

Immediacy refers to perceived physical and psychological closeness between people (Mehrabian 1967). Most often found in research out of the field of education, immediacy is most closely related to the idea of social distance. Much literature available defines immediacy by both verbal and nonverbal behaviors; students rate the extent to which their instructor exhibits these behaviors (Wilson 2006). Speaking with students outside of the classroom, calling students by first name, and sharing outside personal experiences would all be deemed as verbal immediacy behaviors (Gorham 1988). On the other hand, nonverbal immediacy behaviors would include such things as smiling, making eye contact with students, and using gestures while lecturing (Richmond, Gorham, and McCroskey 1987).

Although recently popular with the emergence of online courses, immediacy originally developed years before and has since been used in all aspects of instructional

communication research in higher education. One of the first and most referenced studies was conducted by Anderson in 1979. He studied college students enrolled in an interpersonal communication course. After administering his 15-item Likert scale to students in regards to the instructor of the course, he concluded that "instructor immediacy was a meaningful predictor of teaching effectiveness" (Anderson 1979:554). Gains in student learning outcomes due to immediacy were significant. Although modified, the Behavioral Indicants of Immediacy Scale (BII) developed by Anderson is still widely used today. For example, Schrodt, Witt, Turman, Myers, Barton, and Jernberg (2009) used a modified version of Anderson's scale to test the extent to which credibility mediated the impact of perceived teacher confirmation, teacher clarity, and nonverbal immediacy cues on learning outcomes. Among other things, it was determined that nonverbal immediacy enhances the credibility of an instructor, which in turn leads to increased student learning (Schrodt et al. 2009).

This idea of immediacy gained attention recently with the addition and growth of online courses. In the study entitled, "How Instructor Immediacy Behaviors Affect Student Learning in the Web-Based Courses" (Arbaugh 2001), the author asked whether faculty add value to education in the online environment. This article reports findings from a six-semester study conducted at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, to identify if this is in fact the case. Twenty-five web-based classes offered by the MBA program from the summer of 1999 to the spring of 2001 were surveyed. Student satisfaction and student learning, along with immediacy behaviors were measured. The findings undoubtedly "support earlier studies that appropriate immediacy behaviors enhance

student learning and course satisfaction" (Arbaugh 2001:46). The author concludes that student interaction can be influenced by instructors and suggests that instructors provide a sense of humor towards course material, offer personal experiences pertinent to course material and encourage students to seek feedback.

Baker (2004) performed a similar study; he too focused on learning in the online classroom and immediacy. One hundred forty-five online students were given a web-based survey to measure instructor immediacy, affective and cognitive learning. The primary finding was that instructors do significantly influence the learning process through immediacy behaviors, even in the online classroom. The research shows then, that regardless of whether a traditional classroom or an on-line environment is being examined, it can be assumed that immediacy will play some role in the learning outcomes of students.

Rapport

Different from the idea of immediacy, rapport is defined as an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond (Catt et al. 2007). As can be recalled, immediacy refers to perceived physical and psychological closeness between people. Coupland (2003) argued that building rapport can have positive effects in the college classroom; specifically, it can structure and encourage social interaction by reducing anxiety. Students who develop a rapport with instructors and who interact frequently with them were found to earn higher grades, were more satisfied, and were more likely to return to school in subsequent years (Wasley 2006).

Researchers have begun to seek ways to measure and construct rapport. Gremler and Gwinner (2000) originally developed an 11-item scale to measure perceptions of rapport in customer-employee relations. This scale was modified by Frisby and Myers (2008) to identify the level of rapport felt in the student-instructor relationship. They found in their study that perceived student-instructor rapport consistently emerged as a significant predictor of both learning and participation (Frisby and Meyers 2008). They concluded that, as previous research has suggested, the instructor plays a crucial role in the college classroom.

Wilson (2006) found that students who experienced a sense of rapport as early as the first day of class reported higher motivation across the semester and also achieved higher grades compared to those who did not share the same experience. Based on this discovered importance of early rapport building, Legg and Wilson (2009) suggested that instructors could possibly contribute to a positive class climate prior to the beginning of the course. They envisioned the use of a welcoming e-mail to have rapport building potential, and put it to the test. Participants in their study included sixty-six students enrolled in an introduction to psychology course. Exactly one week prior to the first day of the course, half of the participants received a welcoming e-mail from the instructor whereas the other half did not. As the semester progressed, it became apparent that more students who had not received the initial welcoming e-mail were withdrawing at a higher rate than those who had received the e-mail. Later analysis confirmed that "a positive, welcoming e-mail sent before the first day of school significantly enhanced student

motivation, attitude toward the instructor, and perceptions of the course" (Legg and Wilson 2009:209).

In addition to a welcoming e-mail, Meyers (2009) provided concrete suggestions as to how instructors can develop rapport with their students, regardless of the discipline. Hoyt and Lee (2002) reported that instructors in some fields typically assign less importance to developing rapport as compared with others. For example, chemistry, computer science, and history departments generally did not value developing rapport whereas communication, education, and literature departments were found to greatly value rapport building. Myers recognized the discrepancies yet argued in spite of differences, instructors in all fields need to be aware of the importance of rapport. Increases in instructor-student rapport are associated with greater student enjoyment of the class, improved attendance, increased study time, and additional course enrollment in the discipline (Benson, Cohen, and Buskist 2005). To better improve rapport, Meyers (2009) suggested that instructors address students by name, use humor, look at the students while speaking, and move around the room while teaching, to name a few.

Other Informal Interaction

Much literature is available on both formal and informal interaction between student and instructor. The focus of this thesis is social distance which tends to be, in this context, regarded as more informal interaction. The following will focus on the literature available on informal relations other than those previously discussed.

The amount of research supporting student-instructor informal interaction is astounding, and the positive outcomes associated with it seem to be endless. Study after study has confirmed that a good student-instructor relationship undoubtedly has a positive impact on academic achievement, occupational decisions, educational aspirations, institutional persistence, intellectual and personal development, academic and non-academic satisfaction, and overall attitudes towards college (Mook 2002).

Prior to the late 1970s much research on student learning concentrated on pre-enrollment characteristics of the student (Astin 1971). It was not until Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini's work (1977) that the social environment was taken into account; more specifically the frequency and quality of a student's interaction with his or her instructor.

Chickering (1969), in the development of a conceptual model for college impact, suggests that informal interaction between student and instructor has an influence on development of intellectual and general competence along with students' sense of autonomy and purpose. Spady (1970) came to very similar conclusions. His explanatory model of the dropout process has implied that "students' patterns of interpersonal relationships and interactions with faculty will have an independent and direct influence, not only on their intellectual development, but also on more objectively assessed indicators of their academic achievement, e.g., grade performance" (as cited in Pascarella, Terenzini, and Hibel 1978:451). Both Chickering and Spady only hypothesized, however; and it took close to a decade before findings supporting these hypotheses were made conclusive rather than suggestive. Pascarella, Terenzini, and a

research assistant by the name of James Hibel conducted a study to investigate this hypothesized relationship between student-instructor informal interaction and student learning.

One thousand eight freshman students at Syracuse University were selected at random to participate in their longitudinal study throughout the 1975-1976 school year. An instrument was developed to measure the number of times for six specific reasons each student had informal interaction with an instructor. This instrument is important and will be discussed in greater detail at a later point as it is a model for the instrument used in this thesis. The results of this study support the hypotheses already identified by earlier researchers in that informal student-instructor relationships may have a significant impact on academic performance. The findings further suggest, "that faculty through non-classroom interactions with students, may have an incremental influence on students' motivation for academic achievement over and above the typical predictors of academic performance (i.e., secondary school performance, academic aptitude, personality dispositions)" (Pascarella et al. 1978:459).

Studies continued to confirm into the 1990s the notion that the more contact between students and instructors both inside and outside of the classroom, the greater the student development and satisfaction (Astin 1993). However, as of recently at least a few contradictory findings have emerged. Kuh, Hu, and Vesper (2000), for example, determined that those students declaring themselves to be artists reported having more frequent contact with instructors but reported fewer benefits from their overall college experience as compared to other groups of students reporting less frequent contact. Due

to the discrepancy in recent study results and the awareness that much has changed in the college classroom over the past few decades, Kuh and Hu (2000) chose to examine the character and impact of student-faculty interaction on student learning and personal development in the 1990s. A total of 5,409 students were randomly selected from 126 colleges and universities. The data source came from student responses to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, which collects information about student characteristics and students' experiences. The results of this study were for the most part consistent with earlier research: for most students, the more interaction with faculty, the better. "The most important finding from this study is that student-faculty interaction encourages students to devote greater effort to other educationally purposeful activities during college" (Kuh and Hu 2001:555).

Social Distance

Although similar concepts pertaining to student-instructor relationships have been explored, no work to date specifically examines social distance.

Thought by many to have been developed by Emory Bogardus, the idea of social distance actually originated with Georg Simmel, a German sociologist. The portion of Simmel's work to seemingly have had the earliest and possibly greatest impact on American social research can be found in the only chapter of *Soziologie* yet to be translated into English. Although the chapter has yet to be translated in its entirety, a short section of the chapter entitled "The Stranger" was converted to English and included in the *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* by Robert E. Park and Ernest W.

Burgess (1921). It has been "widely acknowledged as a stimulus to two prominent research traditions: the social psychology of the stranger and the measurement of social distance" (Levine, Carter, and Gorman 1976:829). The concept of social distance began here as a complex interpretation of sociality as forms of distance both in a geometric and a metamorphic sense (Ethington 1997).

Robert Park was a student of Simmel's in Berlin in the late 19th century. He took in many of Simmel's ideas pertaining to the concept of social distance and shared these ideas with Emory Bogardus who in turn developed the "Bogardus Social Distance Scale." It is commonly believed that this scale "made Simmel's notions of social distance more concrete" (Kadushin 1962:519). As mentioned previously, Simmel's idea was a complex interpretation; both Park and Bogardus defined social distance very clearly, referring to "the grades and degrees of understanding and intimacy which characterize pre-social and social relations generally" (Park 1924:339).

Bogardus (1925a) set out to determine how and why these grades of understanding and intimacy differ. To do so, he asked 248 students from two graduate and upper level social psychology courses to classify a list of several races into three separate columns. The first column was chosen if the student felt a friendly feeling for members of that particular race, the second was chosen if neutrality was felt, and the third was chosen if the student felt a sense of dislike towards members of that particular race. In addition to categorizing a list of races, students were then asked to select the race to which he or she felt the greatest dislike and describe why; preferably experiences were asked to be discussed rather than opinions. Based on these open-ended discussions,

Bogardus found that even after asking specifically for experiences, opinions were most apparent. He attributes this to a widespread habit of generalizing first: "sometimes a single sensory image engendering fear or disgust or both, and experienced in childhood, is the basis of a generalization against a whole race" (Bogardus 1925a:226).

To supplement the previous experiment, Bogardus (1925b) attempted to measure the concept of social distance. The sample chosen consisted of 110 young businessmen and public school teachers. The same list of several races was displayed. Rather than simply putting them in a category of like, neutrality, and dislike as the previous experiment, Bogardus devised seven various classifications. Participants were asked whether they would willingly admit members of each listed race into one or more of the listed classifications, if so an "x" was placed by the item. The list of classifications was composed of: 1. To close kinship by marriage; 2. To my club as personal chums; 3. To my street as neighbors; 4. To employment in my occupation in my country; 5. Citizenship in my country; 6. As visitors only to my country; 7. Would exclude from my country (Bogardus 1925b). The Bogardus Social Distance scale was devised. "The index does not indicate merit or traits of the respective races, but rather something of the extent of the social contacts open to each race" (Bogardus 1925b:302). Not only can it be determined which race the respondent feels the closest to or furthest from but also as shown in this instance, distance can be determined based on group affiliation. Based on this study, it was determined that businessmen felt greater social distance to all races than did public school teachers. In his concluding remarks, Bogardus suggested that at this time the index required extensive experimentation.

To gain more insight, Bogardus (1925c) asked the 110 respondents from the previous study to select from the same list of races used in the social distance experiments, the race towards which they had a more friendly feeling as compared to ten years ago, and the race towards which they had a less friendly feeling with than before. In addition, they were asked to explain in great detail the circumstances as to why their feelings changed. Bogardus found that "of the races toward which a favorable change in opinion has been encountered, personal contacts arousing a fellow-feeling have been experienced" (Bogardus 1925c:376). "The changes of opinion from neutral to unfavorable, or favorable to unfavorable, usually occur on the basis of a few personal experiences, where the feelings, not of sympathy, but of disgust or fear, are aroused. The reactions are more or less automatic, and deep-seated, being exceedingly difficult, as a rule, to overcome" (Bogardus 1925c:378). Ultimately Bogardus came to the realization that the role of a few personal experiences in changing one's opinion overshadows everything else.

Bogardus (1926) continued to gain insight by administering the scale to other samples of people. In 1926, he asked 450 native-born Americans living in cities to respond to the scale; to identify whether their "first-feeling reaction" towards the races coinciding with the scale were more favorable, less favorable, or if there was no change; and to explain these changes through personal interviews. He found that, among other things, "despite the physical proximity of city people, social distance prevails; the lack of fellow-feeling and understanding which characterize social distance is everywhere evident in cities" (Bogardus 1926:40). Similar to the results of his previous work,

Bogardus now accepted that social distance was not limited to certain groups of people, it existed amongst all groups. Religious groups, occupational groups, and even educational groups were all examples that he compiled (Bogardus 1926).

Bogardus associated this wide spread social distance with the maintenance of a person's social status or standing, so to speak. He more clearly defined the term as "the personal rating given one person by his fellows" (Bogardus 1928b:30). In addition, he determined that "whatever lowers the social rating given a person or his group arouses prejudice; what boasts one or his group is likely to stimulate favoritism" (Bogardus 1928b:30). Thus, it can be assumed that social status is very unstable. This too can be seen in responses from several of Bogardus' participants. Often, just one unpleasant experience with one individual from a particular race would cause negative feelings towards the entire group. Once engrained however, it may be very difficult to free one's self of. This too can be seen in the responses offered by participants in the previous studies. Although acknowledging that these assumptions are only in preliminary stages, it offers much insight into potential reasoning behind the undeniable existence of social distance.

Many others picked up where Bogardus left off in his work with race relations. Starr (1978) asked instructors of representative groups at the American University of Beirut to have students fill out a questionnaire which included a modified version of the Bogardus Social Distance scale. This same questionnaire had been administered to similar groups of students at the same university in 1933 and 1952. With drastic political and economic changes in the Arab East, the researcher was attempting to determine

whether change in social distance had occurred as well. Changes in social distance towards some national and religious groups were discovered over the forty years examined, however much remained consistent. "Most importantly, there was no serious indication that the sweeping political and economic changes which took place in the region were accompanied by a decline in the significance of traditional sectarian boundaries" (Starr 1978:1227).

It is apparent that Emory Bogardus focused much of his work on race relations. Many followed his lead and continued to make revelations pertaining to such, yet others took his idea of social distance and sought understanding in other issues and fields as can be seen. Kadushin (1962) sought out to find how social distance differs between ministers, physicians, and psychotherapists and their clients. This is of importance because "in the distant relationship understanding is lost; in the close relationship the professional loses his objectivity" (Kadushin 1962:517). One hundred ten applicants to a religio-psychiatric clinic were interviewed either right before or immediately after the first intake interview to gain data. It was determined that ministers are closest, physicians are more distant, and psychotherapists are deemed to be the most distant from their clients.

In an exploratory study, Schram (1999) attempted to establish whether social distance varied between female inmates, peer counselors, and program staff. An instrument designed to gain background information and social distance was administered to a sample of each of the previously listed groups within a northeastern women's correctional institution. The section of the instrument identified to measure

social distance was composed of seven items, these items ranged from "avoiding" to "talking about personal problems." Each participant was directed to identify whether they would engage or would not engage in the interaction for each of the seven items with various group members, including their own. Findings from this study revealed that "female inmates were least likely to have interactions within and outside their own group; and both peer counselors and program staff were significantly more likely to interact amongst themselves and other groups" (Schram 1999:89).

One area in which social distance has yet to be explored is the college classroom. The student-instructor relationship has undoubtedly been examined in higher education but never through the scope that Bogardus envisioned. He expressed multiple assumptions about social distance and student learning. "Wherever education is formal, impersonal, 'intellectual,' a pouring-in process, lecturing, fault-finding, or 'hard-boiling,' social distance usually exists between teacher and her pupils" (Bogardus 1930:497). "With overcrowded classes and with new kinds of routine reports to make out, the less time do teachers have to appreciate each child in the light of his or her own universe of life problems" (Bogardus 1930:498).

Bogardus assumed that with time social distance and the possible impact it may have on student learning would undeniably be examined and studied. In his essay on social distance in the classroom, he argued the degree of social distance between student and instructor to be at least one of the fundamentals that current educational sociology was beginning to study (Bogardus 1928a). While it was apparent that there were no available statistics concerning social-distance changes in the educational fields in 1929,

there were certain signs that would have indicated how the research was headed (Bogardus 1930). However as of present, social distance as defined by Bogardus has yet to be looked at in relation to student learning.

Theoretical Framework

Previously in this thesis, studies pertaining to student-instructor relationships in higher education have been discussed along with the background of social distance. In the following pages, the rationale behind introducing social distance while studying student learning and the potential importance of the idea will be reviewed.

Three major learning theories exist; those being behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. Behaviorism is based on observable changes in behavior and focuses on a new behavioral pattern being repeated until it becomes routine (Good and Brophy 1990). Cognitivism differs in that its focus is on the thought process behind the behavior. Changes in behavior are observed and used as indicators as to what could be happening inside the learner's mind (Good and Brophy 1990). Constructivism is based on the proposition that learning means constructing, creating, inventing, and developing our own knowledge (Marlowe and Page 1998). Constructivists argue that others can give us information, we can find information in books, and we can get information from the media but simply receiving it or hearing it does not necessarily mean that we are learning it.

There are several basic assumptions that are essentially the framework of the constructivist theory. Identified by Merrill (1991), these are:

1. Knowledge is constructed from personal experience.
2. Learning is an individual's unique interpretation of the world.
3. Learning should take place in practical settings.
4. Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience.
5. Conceptual growth comes from negotiating meaning with others, the sharing of others' perspectives and the changing of the individual's prior conceptions through collaborative learning.

It has been established that the main proposition of constructivism is that learning means constructing, creating, inventing, and developing knowledge. From a constructivist's point of view, "learning is both the process and the result of questioning, interpreting, and analyzing information; using this information and thinking process to develop, build, and alter our meaning and understanding of concepts and ideas; and integrating current experiences with our past experiences and what we already know about a given subject" (Marlowe and Page 1998:10). This means that different individuals coming from different backgrounds will undoubtedly see the world in very different ways. Knowledge of the world is always shaped in some way by the position of the knowledge producer (Kincheloe 2005). Although the knowledge producer can be almost anyone imaginable, in a classroom, it is typically believed to be the instructor. If instructors have intentions of promoting effective learning within their classroom, it is essential that they determine what current perceptions, constructions, or misconceptions that students bring with them. A basic principle of constructivist theory is finding out

what students already know about a concept, process, or attitude that an instructor introduces. An instructor becomes better prepared to support student learning if they are aware of what students already know or think about an idea (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001).

For this thesis, the last assumption identified by Merrill will be the focus; learning as a social activity. The world is socially constructed; not only is the world socially constructed, but so are the people and the knowledge that people possess (Kincheloe 2005). Human beings are by nature social, interactive learners. Observations of others are made and then behaviors are tried by the individual to see if they too work for them. Simple tasks such as walking and driving are learned this way, and also more challenging tasks such as how to handle ideas. Ideas are checked individually and argued with others. They are passed back and forth amongst peers and critiqued. By attending meetings, gossiping, and testing others, people extend their understanding of others and of themselves (Meier 1995).

Vygotsky (1986) discussed the notion that learning is a social activity. He described the movement through three separate phases of "meaning making" to illustrate the process of socially constructing knowledge. Individuals thinking alone first make personal meaning. They then go on to test their thinking in dialogue with others to construct social meaning. Finally, they construct collective meaning by reviewing shared meaning in a larger community. Thomas Kuhn (1996) explains a similar process of socially constructing knowledge on a worldwide level in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." He points out that many newly introduced theories in the past century

were first proposed by individuals, debated by groups who studied the theory, and eventually accepted by the international scientific community (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001).

Jean Piaget, argued to be the founder of constructivism, believed that, "in knowing the world, we don't just take in the world passively-rather; we actively construct our experiences and understandings of the world according to our own concepts, categories, levels of development and previous experiences" (Jardine 2006:3). This notion of active learning simply means that students do better when they think together in groups, record their thinking, and explain to their peers what they have deciphered. As students actively engage with others to think together, they become more interested in learning (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001). Small groups are the most ideal and almost necessary for this to take place. One hypothesis of this thesis states that (H1) *social distance is positively associated with class size*. As class size increases, social distance felt towards the instructor will also increase. The smaller the size of the group or class, the easier it is for students to move from personal meaning to shared meaning in the social construction of knowledge. This is the case because an establishment of rapport and trust is more apt to take place. Students begin to support one another's learning through encouragement, constructive criticism, and realistic assessment of each student's work (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001). Smaller classes allow students to feel membership, so to speak, in a community of learners as they are actively engaging in learning.

The second hypothesis identified in this thesis is that (H2) *social distance is greater for students and their instructors as compared with students and their designated*

graduate teaching assistants. This too can be assumed due to the importance of the smaller group. In larger lecture type classes, it can be assumed that students do not have the opportunity to develop the same relationship with their instructors as they do in smaller lab type classes typically facilitated by graduate teaching assistants. In addition to the discrepancy between class size, the GTAs may resemble the student more than the course instructors. Not only would age factor in, but also educational attainment. Students may feel as though they can relate more to someone who is also attempting to complete their schooling as compared to someone who has already graduated with an advanced degree and is established in their field.

The third hypothesis identified in this thesis states that (H3) *social distance is negatively associated with group involvement*. Those students involved in student organizations will feel less social distance towards their instructor as compared to those who are not; this in part because they are often times required to make contact with their instructors more than other students. At the University of North Dakota, for instance, students involved in athletics are mandated to periodically approach the instructor for academic progress reports. Students not only involved in athletics but also academic clubs, religious organizations, etc. may need to discuss absences associated with their group affiliation. Although quantity is different from quality, quantity of encounters cannot be dismissed, "frequent student-faculty contact in and out of class is a most important factor in student motivation and involvement" (Chickering and Ehrmann 1996:3). That initial and required contact can potentially open the door for a relationship that may not have otherwise existed, especially in a larger class setting. An instructor is

more apt to become aware of a student they have been exposed to, possibly allowing for an eventual feel for that student's "current perceptions, constructions, or misconceptions" (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001:52) to promote student learning. Those students associated with groups are often in personal contact with instructors at a higher rate than those students who are not; ultimately alleviating social distance.

In a constructivist classroom, an instructor does not simply stand up in front of students and recite material. Rather, students uncover, discover, and reflect on content and their conceptions of such inquiry, investigation, research, and analysis in the context of a problem, critical question, or issue. Understanding is the focus, not regurgitation; whereas in a traditional classroom an instructor is unaware of whether the student is in fact grasping the material. A student may very well be able to recite information but this could be far from understanding or the ability to apply. "A constructivist student/ teacher communication system does not mean that the teacher gives up responsibility. The teacher must take on the responsibility to determine whether or not the learning process is heading to a relevant and academically productive conclusion" (Marlowe and Page 1998:57). Applying constructivist learning principles requires that instructors move away from simply asking students to recall specific answers to asking questions that encourage student thinking (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001). Instructors are urged to "engage students in a purposeful situation that involves collaboratively formulating questions, explaining phenomena, addressing complex issues or resolving problems" (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001:127). By lessening social distance, this is more likely to take place.

Those agreeing with the ideas and perceptions of the constructivist theory would argue that social distance between instructor(s) and student should be eliminated or at least reduced to enhance student learning in higher education. In the following chapters of this thesis, a study of social distance will be detailed, taking data from sociology students at the University of North Dakota. After doing so, conclusions and recommendations will be discussed.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Much research has been conducted pertaining to student learning. Social distance between student and instructor, however, has yet to be examined in this context. Emory Bogardus (1928) spoke of the importance of this relationship yet did not test or explore the issue empirically in higher education. The present study was conducted to explore student perceptions of social distance between student and instructor and student and graduate teaching assistant. Three hypotheses have been proposed: (H1) Social distance is positively associated with class size. As class size increases, social distance towards the instructor will also increase; (H2) Social distance is greater between students and their instructors than between students and their designated graduate teaching assistants; and (H3) Social distance is negatively associated with group involvement of the student. Students who are involved in student organizations will feel less social distance towards their instructor(s).

Earl Babbie (2004) identified the three most common purposes of social research to be exploration, explanation, and description. Each coinciding study is done for various reasons. Exploratory studies are either performed to "satisfy the researcher's curiosity and desire for better understanding, to test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive

study, or to develop the methods to be employed in any subsequent study" (Babbie 2004:88). An explanatory study will typically answer what, where, when and how; and a descriptive study will depict situations and/ or events. In this thesis a better understanding of student perceptions of social distance is being sought and therefore an exploratory study is most appropriate. Exploratory studies are deemed to be of great value in social scientific research. "They almost always yield new insights into a topic for research" (Babbie 2004:89).

A scale based on the work of Emory Bogardus (1926) was devised to explore this notion of social distance. The original Bogardus Social Distance Scale is a cumulative scale known as a Guttman scale. This means that agreement with any item implies agreement with all of the items following (Babbie 2004). The scale asks participants at what point they are willing to accept people of an identified group. A score of 1 would indicate no social distance, whereas a score of 7 would indicate greatest level of social distance. For example, respondents are asked if they would approve of a Canadian:

1. As close relatives by marriage
2. As my close personal friends
3. As neighbors on the same street
4. As co-workers in the same occupation
5. As citizens in my country
6. As only visitors in my country

7. Would exclude from my country (Bogardus 1926).

Bogardus identified the main focus of social distance studies to be on the "feeling reactions" of people towards either other people or groups of people. A primary problem he found in doing so is actually capturing these reactions without the presence of other aspects. He suggested quickness and anonymity as an attempt to eliminate this problem (Bogardus 1947). Participants should be given as little time to think as possible and should reply with their first thought. They may be concerned with what others may think of their responses but to measure actual innermost feelings accurately it is important that responses are not distorted; therefore they should also be assured that their answers will be confidential.

The scale used to measure social distance in this thesis was similar to that of Emory Bogardus' scale in that it upheld his call for importance of capturing those first feeling reactions. One major criticism of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, as with any Guttman scale, is its simplicity. In an attempt to allow for more precision, a modified version was developed. After detailing the sample and data collection strategy, the scale will be described.

Data Collection and Sample

The sample examined in this study consisted of students enrolled in introductory and upper-level sociology courses at the University of North Dakota in the Fall of 2007. Two larger introductory classes had an enrollment rate of 240 students each. The upper level courses had enrollment rates as follows: Basic Sociological Theory, 40;

Sociological Research Methods, 40; Sociological Statistics, 120. Potentially 480 introductory level students and 200 upper level sociology students could have completed the scale; the sample was made up of those students still enrolled in the course at the time of administration and those students who attended class on that particular day. The actual response rate was 447 (66 %); this was made up of 313 introductory level students and 134 upper level students.

It can be assumed that both male and female students were represented. Students were predominately self-proclaimed middle class, and although race was not measured, according to the University of North Dakota website, the campus student population is predominately White (89%) with 1% of students identifying as Black, 1% as Hispanic, 2% as Asian, 3% as Native American, and 1% listing "Other" (http://und.edu/research/institutional-research/fact-book/2010-students.cfm).

The social distance scale was administered to students at the end of the fall semester in 2007. Thus, students had the duration of the course to develop feelings toward their designated instructor and graduate teaching assistant. To receive the most adequate, honest feedback, instructors and graduate teaching assistants were not to administer the scale themselves but instead have an outsider come into their classroom and hand out the instrument.

Data were gathered by administering the identified instrument and open-ended questions to participants in their designated classrooms. Prior to administration, students were made aware of the purpose of the study, given brief instructions on how to fill out

the instrument, and informed that it was voluntary. University of North Dakota identification numbers were asked of introductory level students, but only to potentially match responses of this social distance scale to the results of another assessment that they had completed earlier in the semester. Under no circumstances would this number be later used to identify students by name. To also assure anonymity, an administrator other than the course instructor or graduate teaching assistant would hand out and collect the instrument. It took students approximately five to fifteen minutes to complete the instrument and it was collected by the same individual who had administered it. This individual was often times a graduate teaching assistant for another instructor and class. IRB approval was granted so that the findings could be shared outside of the department and in this thesis.

Measures

Social distance as defined in the introduction of this thesis is the willingness to interact with others. The less willing you are to interact with a particular individual or group, the more socially distant you are from that individual or group. Borrowed from the work of Pascarella and Terenzini (1977) students were asked to identify how willing they would be to approach the instructor of their class and the graduate teaching assistant (if applicable) with various concerns. These concerns were originally developed to measure how often students would interact with their instructor (Pascarella and Terenzini 1977), however in this thesis willingness is measured rather than actual frequency. The concerns are as follows:

1. To get basic information about my academic program
2. Discussion of career concerns
3. Help in resolving a disturbing personal problem
4. Discussion of intellectual or course-related matters
5. Discussion of a campus issue or problem
6. To socialize informally (Pascarella and Terenzini 1977)

A modified version of these concerns along with their designated response categories is in the Appendix. Willingness to interact for each of the listed concerns is measured by using a five-point Likert scale. Named after Rensis Likert, respondents simply specify their level of agreement to each particular statement, or in this case concern (Likert 1932). Although 7-point and 10-point scales are also commonly used, it has been determined that all show very similar statistical characteristics (Dawes 2008). Therefore, in this thesis students were simply asked to identify whether they would strongly agree, agree, felt neutrality, disagree, or strongly disagree with each concern. The more unlikely they would be to interact in each listed scenario, the greater the social distance; whereas the more likely they would be to interact in each listed scenario, the perceived overall distance would decrease. Based on constructivist theory it is assumed that student learning improves when social distance decreases.

Once data were collected, the instrument was coded. For each strongly agree, a score of 1 was given, agree was 2, neutral was 3, disagree was 4, and strongly agree was 5. A social distance score was then identified for each participant based on how they responded to the entirety of the distance survey. A minimum score of 6 would designate

the least level of social distance possible, whereas a score of 30 would designate the greatest level of social distance possible. Each student had a separate score for the instructor of the course and the graduate teaching assistant, if applicable. For the scale measuring student social distance with instructor, an alpha reliability coefficient of .834 was obtained. For the scale measuring student social distance with graduate teaching assistant, an alpha reliability coefficient of .865 was obtained. This variation of the scale, unlike the Guttman scale, allows for greater level of variation in responses and thus may more precisely capture social distance.

To supplement his quick yet effective scale, Bogardus in many instances would follow up with personal interviews to gain more insight and attempt to understand the level of distance identified. Following the scale in this thesis, several open-ended questions were asked in an effort to gain the same level of comprehension into the level of distance. In addition, students were asked who they perceived to control the level of social distance, if it had changed throughout the duration of the course, and if they thought it ultimately impacted their overall student learning. This list of questions is in the Appendix.

Group involvement in this thesis is ultimately whether the student is a part of any student organizations. More specifically, on the original instrument, students were asked if they were involved in the following: university athletics, intramural athletics, academic clubs, religious clubs, or to specify other possibilities.

After coding was complete, data were entered into SPSS, a statistical computer program often used in the social sciences. Patterns were identified within the open-ended questions, and will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.

Proposed Data Analyses

The following hypotheses have been proposed in this thesis: (H1) Social distance is positively associated with class size. As class size increases, social distance towards the instructor will also increase. For (H1), a t test will be used. Social distance of introductory level students in a larger classroom environment will be compared with social distance of upper level students in a smaller classroom environment. (H2) Social distance is greater between students and their instructors than between students and their designated graduate teaching assistants. For (H2), a t test will again be used. Focusing only on the introductory level students, social distance felt towards instructor will be compared with social distance felt toward graduate teaching assistant. (H3) Social distance is negatively associated with group involvement. Those students who are involved in student organizations will feel less social distance towards their instructor compared to those who are not. For (H3), a t test will be used. Social distance of students (both introductory and upper level) involved in student organizations will included.

To supplement these analyses, the open ended questions that were attached to the social distance scale will be coded in an attempt to identify themes. These themes could

potentially answer the why, how, and when questions that will inevitably arise throughout the process of analyzing the data.

In the following chapter, the findings of these tests will be presented, along with a detailed analysis of these hypotheses.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The current study was conducted to explore student perceptions of social distance. In this thesis three hypotheses have been identified. Hypothesis 1: Social distance is positively associated with class size. Hypothesis 2: Social distance is greater between students and their instructors than between students and their designated teaching assistants. Hypothesis 3: Social distance is negatively associated with group involvement.

Quantitative Findings

A total of 447 students completed the social distance instrument. This was a sixty-six percent response rate. Of those students who completed the scale, 69.8 percent were lower level students and 30.2 percent were upper level students. The majority of students were involved in one or more campus groups (57.9 percent).

To measure social distance, a 5 point Likert Scale was used, as can be recalled from the previous chapter. Each respondent was given a distance score based on their completion of the scale. Scores could range from a 6, which would represent the lowest level of social distance, to a 30, the highest level of social distance felt. Students were asked to complete a scale pertaining to the instructor of their course and if applicable, the

graduate teaching assistant for their course. Descriptive statistics for both scales can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Scale Descriptives

	N	Mean	St. Deviation	Cronbach's α
Instructor	445	13.67	4.41	.83
GTA	403	14.13	4.71	.87

To analyze each of the identified hypotheses t tests were used. Table 2 shows the results.

Hypothesis 1: Social distance is positively associated with class size. As class size increases, social distance towards the instructor will also increase.

To compare the social distance means of lower level students, or those in larger class size settings with the social distance means of upper level students, or those in smaller class size settings, a t test was used. A small difference in means was apparent: those students in larger size classrooms perceived slightly greater social distance from their instructor (M=13.79, SD=4.24) as compared to those in smaller size classrooms (M=13.37, SD=4.78). This difference in means, however, was not found to be statistically significant $t(.94) = 443$, $p > .05$. Therefore Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2: Social distance is greater between students and their instructors than between students and their designated teaching assistants.

To compare the means of social distance of students and their instructor with the social distance of students and their designated teaching assistant, a t test was used. When both upper level and lower level students were examined together, the results of the t test showed a statistically significant difference in means. Students perceived less social distance with their instructor (M=13.67, SD=4.41) and greater social distance with their graduate teaching assistant (M=14.13, SD=4.71), t(65.35) = 444, p = .000. This is opposite of what was anticipated.

When only lower level students were taken into account, a statistically significant difference in means could be seen. Students did in fact perceive greater social distance with their instructor (M=13.79, SD=4.24) as compared to social distance felt towards their graduate teaching assistant (M=13.31, SD=4.16), t(57.34) = 310, p =.000, confirming what was predicted.

In turn, when looking at only upper level students, a statistically significant difference in means was also shown t(32.35) = 133, p =.000. Students in upper level courses perceived less social distance with their instructor (M=13.37, SD=4.78) as compared to social distance felt towards their graduate teaching assistant (M=16.79, SD=5.40). Often times in the upper level courses, the graduate teaching assistants play more of a "behind the scenes" role in comparison to the graduate teaching assistants working with students in lower level sections. When examining the supplementary open ended questions, upper level students tended to explain the reasoning for their distance from their GTA due to a lack of exposure. Many saw their designated graduate teaching assistants only once throughout the semester, with some not able to identify if there was

even a graduate teaching assistant for the course. This is in contrast to the graduate teaching assistants in lower level courses, who would see students in smaller group settings at least twice a week. Overall, then, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

Hypothesis 3: Social distance is negatively associated with group involvement.

To compare the social distance means of those students involved in campus groups with those not involved, a t test was used. Although a slight difference in means was apparent, the difference was not statistically significant $t(1.26) = 442$, $p > .05$. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

In sum, the quantitative findings support Hypothesis 2, although only for lower-level students. In this case, social distance is greater between students and their instructors than between students and their designated teaching assistants.

Table 2. T-tests for Social Distance

		N	Mean	Std Deviation	t	df	Sig	Mean Difference
H1: Social Distance Class Size	LL	311	13.79	4.24	.94	94	.35	.43
	UL	134	13.37	4.78				
H2: Social Distance Prof vs. GTA	All:							
	P	445	13.67	4.41	65.35	444	.00	-0.47
	GTA	403	14.13	4.71				
	LL:							
	P	311	13.79	4.24	57.34	310	.00	0.48
	GTA	308	13.31	4.16				
	UL:							
	P	134	13.37	4.78	32.35	133	.00	3.42
	GTA	95	16.79	5.40				
H3: Social Distance Group Involvement	Some	259	13.44	4.36	1.26	442	.21	.53
	None	185	13.98	4.49				

a. LL = lower level students
b. UL = upper level students
c. P = professor
d. GTA = graduate teaching assistant

Qualitative Findings

In addition to the social distance scale, open ended questions were asked in an attempt to better understand the distance identified, just as Bogardus often did. The answers to these questions were coded and entered into SPSS. The frequencies for each of the five questions and supplementary responses are as follows:

Question 1 asked students whether they felt as though they had become more comfortable with the instructor and if applicable, the graduate teaching assistant of the class, over the course of the semester. Of those 440 students that answered this question in regards to their instructor, 75.9 percent said yes. One student stated, "The belief that there is a boundary between the educated teacher and the uneducated student was with me in the classroom but that changed over time." In describing what led to this change, one student declared that throughout the semester, the instructor "cared about our opinions and asked for them." Another student was impressed by the instructor "calling me by my name." Of those students (311, all being introductory level) who answered the same question in regards to their graduate teaching assistant, 86.8 percent felt that their comfort level with that individual had increased. "I feel I've become closer with both my professor and GTA and as though I could talk to them both academically and personally because they are both very approachable and have a great sense of humor." "I have seen both instructor and GTA outside of class and both are willing to associate with me." While some students identified why the comfort level had changed for both instructor and graduate teaching assistant, others offered insight into why distance was potentially greater towards their instructor as compared to their graduate teaching assistant. "I'm more comfortable with my GTA because she teaches us in a smaller environment with fewer people and there is more interaction." Another student offers, "The instructor is a bit more intimidating, as opposed to the GTA, I feel more comfortable with her."

After briefly defining social distance, Question 2 asked students to determine whether the instructor, they as a student, or both controlled the social distance in the

classroom. Of the 432 students who responded to this, 12.5 percent deemed the instructor to control the social distance, 35 percent placed responsibility on themselves, 48.8 percent identified both, and 3.7 percent chose neither. One student answered, "Both, but initially the instructor and GTA made conversation with me which makes it easier in the future to approach them later." Another student stated, "Both, the instructor has to be approachable but the student takes the initiative." One student justified his call for student control by stating, "The instructor or GTA have to keep somewhat of a professional distance." In agreement, another student responded," The student controls the social distance because it's the students' responsibility to approach the instructor in regard to any concern."

Question 3 asked if the instructor of the class does anything to either encourage or discourage interaction. Of the 437 upper and lower level students, 81.9 percent responded that their instructor did in fact encourage interaction. Only 3.4 percent felt that their instructor discouraged interaction, and 14.6 percent replied that their instructor did neither. Many various examples of encouragement, both formal and informal, were presented. The majority of students who touched on how their instructor encouraged interaction formally within the classroom mentioned emphasis of availability and importance of welcoming questions and concerns. Also one student went on to say, "Our instructor tries to relate the material to our lives, making for better understanding and better discussion." Students also listed more informal ways that the instructor encouraged interaction, potentially unknowingly. Referring to their instructor, one respondent stated, "He approached me when he saw me outside of class and that

encouraged me to feel more comfortable in class." Another way given as a means to encourage interaction was, "she didn't talk to us like were below her in any way but just as she would a group of friends." Similar to this statement, yet another student said, "She made us feel important like were an equal not just a student."

Question 4 asked students to determine if their academic performance in the surveyed class was impacted by the comfort level they felt with the instructor and/ or graduate teaching assistant of the course. Of the 438 students that responded, 49.3 percent answered yes, 50.2 percent answered no, and 0.5 were unsure. Those students who answered no often explained this by declaring they worked hard in courses regardless of the instructor. Those students answering yes typically had one of two explanations. The first was that they would be less apt to attend class if they were uncomfortable with their instructor. Along the same lines, those students who felt uncomfortable with their instructor, but did attend class would be unable to gain anything from the experience due to inability to express questions and concerns. For example, one student answered, "If I didn't like my instructor or feel comfortable, I would be less inclined to show up for class, therefore my overall performance would decline." Yet another answered, "Being more comfortable enabled me to ask more questions and pay more attention and I performed better as a result." The second explanation for declaring that comfort level did affect academic performance was related to feelings of embarrassment or humiliation. "Because the instructor does know my face, if not my name, I do feel more encouraged to do well on the exams. I don't want him to look at my

score and be unimpressed." Another student stated, "I was willing to work harder so I didn't feel so stupid when they saw my score."

Question 5 asked students whether they felt closer to instructors within their major as compared to those who teach in other departments, or who teach general education courses. Of the 436 students that responded to this question, 49.1 percent deemed themselves to be closer to the instructors within their major. Of the remaining students, 35.6 percent felt more comfortable with instructors in other departments and those who teach general education courses and 15.4 percent were unsure. The students who felt more comfortable with instructors who taught general education courses or were unsure tended to be either self-identified freshmen or early in their college career and therefore had an undecided major. When asked why they tended to feel closer to those instructors in their major, students had a recurring theme of shared passion or interests. "I think anyone would feel closer to someone they can relate with. I think past experiences and knowledge of one's major is a good start to relating to another person."

To conclude, the qualitative findings offered much insight to the how, why, and when questions pertaining to perceived social distance that students felt toward their instructors. The major themes that could be identified were: 1) The majority of students felt more comfortable with their instructor, and if applicable, graduate teaching assistant, over the course of the semester. 2) Most students felt as though social distance in the classroom was controlled by both student and instructor. 3) A large number of students felt instructors encouraged rather than discouraged interaction. 4) The number of students who felt their comfort level with their instructor affected their academic

performance was equal to the number of students who disagreed with this. Finally, 5) The majority of students felt closer to instructors within their major as compared to instructors who taught in other departments or who taught general education courses.

In the following chapter, conclusions from these open ended questions along with the results of the t tests will be drawn. A discussion of implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research pertaining to this study will also be presented.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, & LIMITATIONS

Conclusions

This thesis focused on two main aspects of the Constructivist Theory. The first aspect that heavily influenced this study is that learners construct knowledge for themselves, and the second is that learning is a social activity. Students interpret what instructors put forth in the classroom based on previous learning and experiences. If backgrounds of instructor and student lack "alignment," students may not be able to accurately grasp what the instructor is attempting to relay. Social distance would prevent instructors from acknowledging potential issues associated with this, and therefore, if a problem did exist, it could go unnoticed. The presence of social distance will ultimately inhibit instructors from ensuring that comprehension is taking place in regards to the material being taught.

This exploratory study showed that some variation in social distance exists across different scenarios. First, for this sample of sociology students, there was no difference in the means for social distance by class size. Those students in smaller classes perceived a similar average level of social distance towards their instructor as students in larger class environments. This hypothesis may not have been supported because of the

instructors of the larger level classes. Both instructors for Introduction to Sociology courses, which composed the entire larger level class category, were deemed by their students to be "approachable," "available," and "friendly," in addition to other positive descriptions. As can be recalled from Chapter 2, to increase both rapport and immediacy, researchers suggested to address students by name, use humor (Meyers 2009), and share outside personal experiences (Gorham 1988). In the open ended responses, these were consistent descriptions of how the instructors teaching Introduction to Sociology interacted with their students. These were merely suggestions, and are by no means standard teaching protocol; every instructor possesses his or her own traits and style. In this study, however, the students seemed to have depicted similar portrayals of the two instructors at hand. If more variation would have been present, different results may have been seen.

When looking at perceived social distance that students felt towards their instructor as compared to their graduate teaching assistant, statistical significance was found. As anticipated, students perceived less social distance towards their designated graduate teaching assistant as compared to their instructor in lower level, large enrollment classes. Students said that they were ultimately more comfortable with their graduate teaching assistant. As can be recalled, those in agreement with the Constructivist Theory would argue that in larger lecture type classrooms, it can be assumed that students would not have the same opportunity to develop a relationship with their instructors as they do in smaller lab type classrooms facilitated by graduate teaching assistants. Responses to the open ended questions coincided with this argument.

Again, like class size, when involvement in student organizations was taken into account, statistical significance was lacking. Those students who were involved in student organizations perceived a similar level of social distance towards their instructor as compared to students who were not involved in student organizations. This hypothesis may not have been supported, because there was no differentiation by type of organization. Simply, whether a student was involved or not in student organizations was taken into account in the analysis. As can be recalled, it was assumed that students in organizations would have more contact with their instructors due to possible absences or progress reports that are required of athletes. However, those students in many groups listed, such as Ducks Unlimited, Chess Club, and Nightlife, would not require either, therefore initial contact would not be initiated due to involvement. Thus, the relationship that was anticipated to develop would not necessarily exist.

Social distance is evident and occurs in varying degrees. The Constructivist Theory reminds us that it is important to focus on the student in addition to the material being taught. The overall impact that social distance has on student learning is still being discovered. Its implications will be discussed further in the following section.

Implications

Constructivists believe that to promote effective learning within the classroom, instructors need to determine what current perceptions, constructions, and misconceptions students bring with them. This could potentially be a daunting task if social distance is present. Statistical significance was found in the difference in social

distance that lower level students perceived to have towards their instructor as compared to their graduate teaching assistant. Lower level students perceived less distance with their graduate teaching assistant as compared to their instructor. This means that graduate teaching assistants could ultimately be used as a tool to gain such insight into perceptions, constructions, and misconceptions of students. Graduate teaching assistants may thus be more valuable to an instructor than someone who simply grades papers and facilitates discussion groups.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

It has been implied that social distance influences student learning, but a major shortcoming in the literature is that social distance is never actually tested to determine its relationship to student learning. Emory Bogardus (1930) acknowledged that social distance exists between instructor and student and implied that the greater the social distance, the more challenging it would be for student learning to take place. This thesis explores the extent that social distance is present in the college classroom. It looks at differences in social distance that students have towards their instructor dependent on class size, group involvement, and in regard to graduate teaching assistants. It also begins to offer insight into how comfort level with instructor changes throughout the duration of a semester; who ultimately is in control of social distance; encouragement of interaction versus discouragement by the instructor; if and how it affects academic performance; and finally whether students deem themselves to be closer to instructors in their major or other departments. Babbie (2004) identifies the primary shortcoming of exploratory studies to be that they rarely provide a satisfactory answer to research

questions. However, on top of hinting at what the answers presumably are, they also ignite interest and offer awareness for those interested in future research. Thus, the current study can be viewed as a first step in the right direction.

For those conducting research pertaining to social distance and student learning in the future, one thing to keep in mind is the possibility that instructors view those students that have pursued contact or a relationship with them as more inquisitive than other students who have not initiated contact. This could carry over unknowingly into the instructor's grading, as was brought to light in the open ended questions presented in this thesis. Instructor perceptions regarding social distance and related concerns would be beneficial to consider as well.

Another suggestion for other research in this area of study would be to compare students enrolled in traditional on-campus courses with those enrolled in online courses. As online courses continue to gain popularity, how does social distance change with little to no physical contact? In the current study, online courses were not considered. The subject matter of the course may also alter change in perceived social distance. Some courses may be more intimidating than others, and students could potentially go in with preconceived feelings. Required courses compared with elective courses could also be examined. Would those students electing to take a course be more open to developing a relationship with that instructor as compared to those mandated to complete a course?

As can be recalled, pre-enrollment characteristics of the individual were the focus in prior empirical studies of student learning. These student characteristics, in comparison

with those of the instructor, could potentially have an impact on the instructor-student social distance. For example, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and age could all play a role. Constructivists recognize that knowledge is both constructed and social. Knowledge of the world is formed in some way by a student's instructor, or the knowledge producer (Kincheloe 2005). If there is a disconnect between student and instructor, it could ultimately hinder the ability to effectively transmit information. An instructor becomes better prepared to support student learning if they are aware of what students already know or think about an idea (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001). It could be assumed that sharing the same characteristics such as those listed above would only help instructors to acknowledge ever important, "perceptions, constructions, or misconceptions" (Gagnon Jr. and Collay 2001:52)

Finally, this thesis was based on student perceptions rather than actual observations. In future research, it may be more accurate to gather both. Perceptions can vary not only from student to student but the same student can have different views from one day to the next depending on individual circumstances. Measuring social distance across time would also be useful.

Constructivists believe the relationship between student and instructor to be crucial to student learning. Emory Bogardus acknowledged this as well, and in 1928 anticipated that social distance in higher learning would be studied and examined as one of the very basics of educational sociology. Unfortunately, this did not take place. The importance of the student-instructor relationship has undoubtedly been brought to light throughout the years, yet the incorporation of Bogardus' social distance had not yet taken

place. This thesis intertwined the genius of Emory Bogardus with what is already known about student-instructor relationships to offer much more insight into the topic at hand.

APPENDIX
Social Distance Scale

Please circle how willing you would be to approach the professor of this class (MY PROF) and your graduate teaching assistant (MY GTA) with the following concerns:
If you do not have a GTA for this course be sure to ONLY rate your willingness to approach your professor.

1. I would be willing to get basic information about my academic program from this individual.

MY PROF: strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

MY GTA: : strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

2. I would be willing to discuss career concerns with this individual.

MY PROF: strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

MY GTA: : strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

3. I would be willing to seek help in resolving personal problems or concerns with this individual.

MY PROF: strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

MY GTA: : strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

4. I would be willing to discuss intellectual or course-related material with this individual.

MY PROF: strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

MY GTA: : strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

5. I would be willing to discuss a campus issue or problem with this individual.

MY PROF: strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

MY GTA: : strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

6. I would be willing to socialize informally with this individual outside of the classroom.

MY PROF: strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

MY GTA: : strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

What is your family's socioeconomic status?

____ lower
____ middle
____ upper
____ unknown

Are you involved in any of the following campus groups?

____ university athletics
____ intramural athletics
____ academic clubs
____ religious groups
____ other, please specify:
____ none

Please answer the following open-ended questions to the best of your ability. Be as detailed as possible.

1. **Do you feel that you have become more comfortable with the instructor of this class over the course of the semester? What about with the GTA of the course? If so, what has led to this change? If not, why not?**

2. **Your comfort level approaching an instructor or GTA is called "social distance." Thinking about this class, who controlled the social distance between student and instructor? Was it you, the instructor, or both of you? Why?**

3. **Did the instructor of this class do anything to encourage you to interact with them? Did they do anything to discourage interaction? What was it?**

4. **Do you think your comfort level with the instructor and/ or GTA of this course has affected your academic performance in this class? Why or why not?**

5. **Do you find yourself to be closer to instructors within your major compared to those who teach in other departments, or who teach general education courses? If so, why?**

REFERENCES

Anderson, Janis F. 1979. "Teacher Immediacy as a Predictor of Teaching Effectiveness." *Communication Yearbook* 3:543-559.

Arbaugh, J. Ben. 2001. "How Instructor Immediacy Behaviors Affect Student Satisfaction and Learning in Web-Based Courses." *Business Communication Quarterly* 64(4):42-54.

Astin, Alexander. 1971. *Predicting Academic Performance in College.* New York: Free Press.

Astin, Alexander. 1993. *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Babbie, Earl. 2004. *The Practice of Social Research 10th Edition.* Belmont, CA: Thomson.

Baker, Jason D. 2004. "An Investigation of Relationships Among Instructor Immediacy and Affective and Cognitive Learning in the Online Classroom." *Internet and Higher Education* 7:1-13.

Benson, Trisha A., Andrew L. Cohen, and William Buskist. 2005. "Rapport: Its Relation to Student Attitudes and Behaviors Toward Teachers and Classes. *Teaching of Psychology* 32:237-239.

Bogardus, Emory S. 1925a. “Social Distance and its Origin.” *Journal of Applied Sociology* 9:216-225.

Bogardus, Emory S. 1925b. “Measuring Social Distance.” *Journal of Applied Sociology* 9:299-308.

Bogardus, Emory S. 1925c. “Analyzing Changes in Public Opinion.” *Journal of Applied Sociology* 372-381.

Bogardus, Emory S. 1926. “Social Distance in the City.” *Proceedings and Publications of the American Sociological Society* 20:40-46.

Bogardus, Emory B. 1928a. “Teaching and Social Distance.” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 1(10):595-598.

Bogardus, Emory S. 1928b. “Status and Race Attitudes.” *Immigration and Race Attitudes.* Boston: D.C. Heath: 30-40.

Bogardus, Emory B. 1930. “Social-Distance Changes in Educational Procedure.” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 3(8):497-502.

Bogardus, Emory S. 1947. “Measurement of Personal-Group Relations.” *Sociometry* 10(4):306-311

Broh, Beckett A. 2002. “Linking Extracurricular Programming to Academic Achievement: Who Benefits and Why?” *Sociology of Education* 75(1):69-95.

Catt, Stephen, Donald Miller, and Ken Schallenkamp. 2007. “You are the Key: Communicate for Learning Effectiveness.” *Education* 127:369-377.

Chickering, Arthur W. 1969. *Education and Identity*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Chickering, Arthur W. and Stephen C. Ehrmann. 1996. "Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever." *American Association for Higher Education Bulletin* 49(2):3-6.

Comeaux, Eddie. 2006. "Gender, Sport, and Higher Education: The Impact of Student-Faculty Interactions on Academic Achievement." *Academic Athletic Journal* 19(1).

Coupland, Justine. 2003. "Small Talk: Social Functions." *Research on Language andSocial Interaction* 36:1-6.

Cross, K. Patricia. 1998. "Why learning Communities? Why Now?" *About Campus* July-August: 4-11.

Dawes, John. 2008. "Do Data Characteristics Change According to the Number of Scale Points Used? An Experiment Using 5-Point, 7-Point, and 10-Point Scales." *International Journal of Market Research* 50(1):61-77.

Day, Jennifer and Eric C. Newburger. 2002. "The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Like Earnings." *US Census Bureau*.

Edwards, Derek and Neil Mercer. 1987. *Common Knowledge: the Development of Joint Understanding in the Classroom.* London: Methuen.

Frisby, Brandi N. and Scott A. Meyers. 2008. "The Relationships among Perceived Instructor Rapport, Student Participation, and Student Learning Outcomes." *Texas Speech Communication Journal* 33:27-34.

Gagnon, George W. Jr. and Michelle Collay. 2001. *Designing for Learning: Six Elements in Constructivist Classrooms.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Good, Thomas L. and Jere E. Brophy. 1990. *Educational Psychology: A Realistic Approach 4th Edition.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Gorham, Joan. 1988. "The Relationship Between Verbal Teacher Immediacy Behaviors and Student Learning." *Communication Education* 37:40-53

Gremler, Dwayne D. and Ken P. Gwinner. 2000. "Customer-Employee Rapport in Relationships." *Journal of Service Research* 3:82-104.

Hoyt, Donald P. and Eun-Joo Lee. 2002. *Disciplinary Difference in Student Ratings (Technical Report No. 13).* Kansas State University, Manhattan.

Jardine, David W. 2006. *Piaget & Education.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Kadushin, Charles. 1962. "Social Distance between Client and Professional." *American Journal of Sociology* 67:517-531.

Kincheloe, Joe L. 2005. *Critical Constructivism.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Kuh, George D. 1995. "The Other Curriculum: Out-of-Class Experiences Associated with Student Learning and Personal Development." *Journal of Higher Education* 66(22):123-155

Kuh, George D. 2001. "Assessing What Really Matters to Student Learning: Inside the National Survey of Student Engagement." *Change* 33(3):10-17.

Kuh, George D. and Shouping Hu. 2001. "Focus on Faculty: Challenges and Changing Roles, The Effects of Student-Faculty Interaction in the 1990s." *The Review of Higher Education* 24(3):309-332.

Kuh, George. D., Shouping Hu, and Nick Vesper. 2000. "They Shall be Known by What They Do: An Activities-Based Typology of College Students." *Journal of College Student Development* 41:228-244.

Kuhn, Thomas. 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions 3rd Edition.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Legg, Angela M. and Janie H Wilson. 2009. "Technology and Teaching: E-mail from Professor Enhances Student Motivation and Attitudes." *Teaching of Psychology* 36(3):205-211.

Levine, Donald N., Ellwood B. Carter, and Eleanor Miller Gorman. 1976. "Simmel's Influence on American Sociology." *The American Journal of Sociology* 81(4):813-845.

Likert, Rensis. 1932. *A Technique for Measurement of Attitudes.* New York: Archives of Psychology.

Malcolm X. 1970. *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews and a Letter by Malcolm X.* New York: Pathfinder Press.

Marlowe, Bruce A. and Marilyn L. Page. 1998. *Creating and Sustaining the Constructivist Classroom.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Mehrabian, Albert. 1967. "Attitudes Inferred from Non-immediacy of Verbal Communication." *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 6:294-295.

Meier, Deborah. 1995. *The Power of Their Ideas.* Boston: Beacon.

Merrill, David. 1991 Constructivism and Instructional Design. *Educational Technology* May:45-53.

Meyers, Steven A. 2009. “Do Your Students Care Whether You Care About Them?” *College Teaching* 57(4):205-210.

Mook, Laurie. 2002. "Exclusion and Inclusion in Student-Faculty Informal Interaction: A Critical Perspective." *Current Issus in Comparative Education* 2(2):154-169

Morris, Edward W. 2005. “From ‘Middle Class’ to ‘Trailer Trash:’ Teachers’ Perceptions of White Students in a Predominately Minority School.” *Sociology of Education* 78(2):1-121.

Park, Robert E. 1924. “The Concept of Social Distance as Applied to the Study of Racial Attitudes and Racial Relations.” *Journal of Applied Sociology* 8:339-344.

Park, Robert E. and Ernest. 1921. *Introduction to the Science of Sociology.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Pascarella, Ernest T. and Patrick T. Terenzini. 1977. "Patterns of Student-Faculty Informal Interaction beyond the Classroom and Voluntary Freshman Attrition." *The Journal of Higher Education* 48(5):540-552.

Pascarella, Ernest T., Patrick T. Terenzini, and James Hibel. 1978. "Student-Faculty Interactional Settings and Their Relationship to Predicted Academic Performance." *Journal of Higher Education.* 49(5):450-463.

Richardson, Jeanita W. 2008. “Demystifying and Deconstructing the College Application Process.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 77(4):382-397.

Richmond, Virginia P., Joan S. Gorham, and James C. McCroskey. 1987. “The Relationship between Selected Immediacy Behaviors and Cognitive Learning.” *Communication Yearbook* 10:574-590.

Schram,Pamela J. 1999. “Social Distance Between Inmates, Peer Counselors, and Program Staff in a Woman’s Prison.” *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 29:89-100.

Schrodt, Paul, Paul. L Will, Paul D. Turman, Scott A. Myers, Matthew H. Barton, and Kodiane A. Jernberg. 2009. “Instructor Credibility as a Mediator of Instructors’ Prosocial Communication Behaviors and Students’ Learning Outcomes.” *Communication Education* 58(3):350-371.

Spady, William. 1970. “Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis*.” Interchange* 1:64-85.

Starr, Paul D. 1978. “Continuity and Change in Social Distance: Studies from the Arab East- A Research Report.” *Social Forces* 56(4):1221-1227.

University of North Dakota. 2010. “Institutional Research: Fact Book.” Retrieved April 28, 2011 (http://und.edu/research/institutional-research/fact-book/2010-students.cfm)

Vygotsky, Lev S. 1986. *Thought and Language.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wasley, Paula. 2006. “Underrepresented Students Benefit Most from Engagement.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53:39-40.

Weiss, Gregory L., Janet R. Crosbey, Shelly K. Habel, Chad M. Hanson, and Carolee Larsen. 2002. “Improving the Assessment of Student Learning: Advancing a Research Agenda in Sociology.” *Teaching Sociology* 30:63-79.

Wilson, Janine H. 2006. “Predicting Student Attitudes and Grades From Perceptions of Instructors’ Attitudes.” *Teaching of Psychology* 33(2):91-95.