



Research Tools

Relational Parameters

Hierarchy and Distance/Closeness

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Relational Parameters Research Tool

Purpose: to probe Hierarchy and Distance/Closeness in the Tutor-Student Relationship

BACKGROUND

Spencer-Oatey's (1997) research explored British and Chinese conceptions of the typical degrees of hierarchy and distance/closeness of the role relationship, tutor - PG student. It did not include the supervisor-research student role relationship, since this relationship seems particularly subject to individual variation, especially in Britain. Instead, it focused on the role relationship of PG students taking a master's degree by coursework and tutors who teach such students and who have some kind of special responsibility for them (for example, course organiser, dissertation supervisor, personal tutor). It focused on the respondents' conceptions of this role relationship in general, rather than on the actualities of a specific tutor - PG student relationship, in an attempt to probe the respondents' role schemas rather than their person schemas (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:118-9).

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The questionnaire had two main sections that explored the hierarchy and distance/closeness of the tutor - PG student relationship; in addition, there was an introductory section, where subjects were asked to provide a certain amount of background information, such as their role position (i.e. tutor/PG student), course of study/field of specialization, approximate age, and experience of living abroad. (There were also two other sections that dealt with aspects of the role relationship that are not included in this paper.)

Two versions of the questionnaire were produced: an English version and a Chinese version. They were developed using back translation and multiple translators, and using the principle of decentering¹, as recommended by Brislin (1980), so that problems of lack of equivalence could be minimised.

¹ Decentering is a translation process whereby the precise wording of the questionnaire is 'decentred' away from the original language version and adjusted so that it is smooth and natural sounding, as well as equivalent, in both languages. For further details of the process, see Brislin (1980) and Triandis (1994).

Questionnaire Items relating to Tutor Superordination

In order to explore the extent to which tutors are considered to be superordinate to PG students, I used the notion of asymmetry. Asymmetry focuses on the nonreciprocity of unequal relationships; for example, that a superior can criticise a subordinate but a subordinate is less free to criticise a superior. Drawing on results from earlier cross-cultural studies (Triandis et al, 1968; Adamopoulos, 1982), I identified behaviours that were found to have high loadings on the factor *superordination*, and then generated pairs of items such as the following:

A tutor corrects a PG student over an academic matter.

A PG student corrects a tutor over an academic matter.

A tutor challenges a PG student on his/her academic viewpoint.

A PG student challenges a tutor on his/her academic viewpoint.

One member of each pair referred to tutor behaviour, and the other to PG student behaviour. There were 10 pairs of items in all (in other words, 20 individual items), and subjects rated each of the items on a 7-point scale for likelihood of occurrence. My assumption was that any difference between respondents' ratings for the likelihood of tutors performing the behaviours and their ratings for the likelihood of PG students doing so would be a reflection of asymmetry in the relationship; and the greater the asymmetry, the greater the extent to which subjects regarded tutors as superordinate.

Questionnaire Items relating to Distance/Closeness

In order to probe distance/closeness, I used Hays' (1984) conceptualization of close and casual friendships. Hays specifies four behavioural content areas relating to friendship that can be used for differentiating close and distant relations:

Companionship: sharing an activity or experience together, doing something together, sharing each other's company.

Consideration (or utility): friend as 'helper', providing goods, services or support; expressing concern for the other's well-being.

Communication (or self-disclosure): disclosing (verbally or non-verbally) or discussing information about oneself; exchanging ideas, facts, opinions or confidences about any topic.

Affection: expressing any sentiment (positive or negative) felt towards the other, any expression of the emotional bond between partners.

Hays, 1984:78

Using this conceptualization as a framework, and through discussions with British and Chinese informants, I generated a range of items (covering the four behavioural content areas identified by Hays) that represented behaviour typical of a close tutor - PG student relationship; for example:

A PG student visits his/her tutor at home.

A PG student asks a non-academic personal favour of his/her tutor (eg to borrow a household possession, etc.).

A tutor and a PG student talk to each other about their respective families.

A tutor and a PG student feel genuine, long-term concern for each other's welfare.

There were 11 such items, and I asked respondents to rate each of them (on a 7-point scale) in two ways: for likelihood of occurrence, and for the minimum degree of closeness needed between tutor and student for the behaviour to be regarded by both parties as appropriate.

The reasoning behind my design was as follows: if British and Chinese respondents agreed that the items described behaviour typical of close tutor - PG student relations, then any differences in the British and Chinese ratings of likelihood of occurrence could indicate a cultural difference in the degree of perceived closeness of the tutor - PG student relationship.²

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS

1. A PG student visits his/her tutor at home.
2. A tutor tells a PG student that s/he disagrees with him/her.
3. A tutor desires to keep in personal touch with his/her PG students after graduation (e.g. by writing personal letters, etc.).
4. A PG student corrects a tutor over an academic matter.
5. A tutor tells a PG student to do something (relating to an academic matter).
6. A tutor and a PG student talk to each other about their respective families.

² I included the closeness ratings, and did not simply rely on the likelihood ratings, because I was concerned that British and Chinese subjects could have different conceptions of the 'meaning' of different behaviour. For example, visiting a tutor at home could indicate closeness in Britain, but might not indicate this in China. The results suggested that there *were* some differences of this kind, and so I took them into account in my analyses.

7. A PG student advises a tutor on an academic matter.
8. A PG student helps his/her tutor with personal, non-academic chores (e.g. housework, personal shopping, etc.)
9. A tutor criticizes a PG student's academic opinions.
10. A PG student reproves a tutor for failing to fulfil his/her academic duties.
11. A tutor tells a PG student that his/her work is unsatisfactory.
12. A PG student tells his/her tutor about a personally upsetting experience.
13. A tutor advises a PG student on an academic matter.
14. A PG student challenges a tutor on his/her academic viewpoint.
15. A PG student tells his/her tutor about his/her girlfriend/boyfriend.
16. When a tutor is annoyed with a PG student, s/he lets the student know s/he is annoyed.
17. A PG student tells a tutor to do something (relating to an academic matter).
18. A PG student instructs a tutor in a given academic theory.
19. A PG student tells a tutor that s/he disagrees with him/her.
20. A tutor challenges a PG student on his/her academic viewpoint.
21. A tutor corrects a PG student over an academic matter.
22. A PG student gets to know his/her tutor's family quite well.
23. A PG student asks a non-academic personal favour of his/her tutor (e.g. to borrow a household possession, etc.)
24. When a PG student is annoyed with a tutor, s/he lets the tutor know s/he is annoyed.
25. A tutor and a PG student feel genuine, long-term concern for each other's welfare.
26. A PG student criticizes a tutor's academic opinions (i.e. to his/her face).
27. A tutor reproves a PG student for failing to fulfil his/her academic duties.
28. A PG student has a meal at his/her tutor's home on several occasions.
29. A PG student tells a tutor that his/her teaching is unsatisfactory.
30. A PG student shows genuine and practical concern for his/her tutor's health (i.e. concern in both words and action).
31. A tutor instructs a PG student in a given academic theory.

Items 1, 3, 6, 8, 12, 15, 22, 23, 25, 28, 30 were designed to tap distance/closeness; the remaining items were designed to tap tutor superordination (i.e. hierarchy).

Item 12 and the pairs of items 10 & 27, 11 & 29, 16 & 24 had factor loadings of less than .5 and so were discarded.

The extent of asymmetry between tutor and student behaviour was taken as a measure of superordination.

For more information about the study in which this questionnaire was used, please see:

Spencer-Oatey, H. (1997) Unequal relationships in high and low power distance societies. A comparative study of tutor-student role relations in Britain and China. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. 28(3): 284–302.

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