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Should You be a "Bossy" Professor? Exploring the Dual Pathway of Obedience and Reactance

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When a professor makes a recommendation concerning students' study behaviors, does it have an effect? Advice given by professors is a type of injunctive norm. Injunctive norms have effects on many domains, but little attention has been paid to their effects in academia. If professors use controlling language when establishing an injunctive norm ("You *must* study"), do students react differently than if noncontrolling language ("I *recommend that* you study") is utilized? To address these research questions, we conducted an experiment with 135 undergraduate Introduction to Psychology students—all of whom reported studying below the recommended 6 to 9 hours per week for the course. After providing informed consent, participants viewed a recommendation from the Psychology Department faculty to increase their study time using either controlling or noncontrolling language. The students' worry about academic progress, anger toward professors, and subsequent motivation to study more in the future were then measured using questionnaires. Results indicated that when professors use controlling language, students' motivation to study in the future increased slightly. However, the use of controlling language was also related to increased academic anxiety and resentment toward professors, and these feelings were negatively related to students' motivation to study. Thus, there appears to be a dual pathway through which students may interpret and react to professors' advice. Being firm and using controlling language seems to have a weak encouraging effect on study behavior, but this positive effect is largely overwhelmed by the negative effects of anxiety and anger this approach can produce.

Research advisor Daniel Miller writes, "Almost every professor I know has a standard speech they give to their class at the beginning of the semester in order to increase their students' motivation to study. Lindsay's work indicates that these very speeches could have the ironic effect of actually decreasing study motivation in some students."

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