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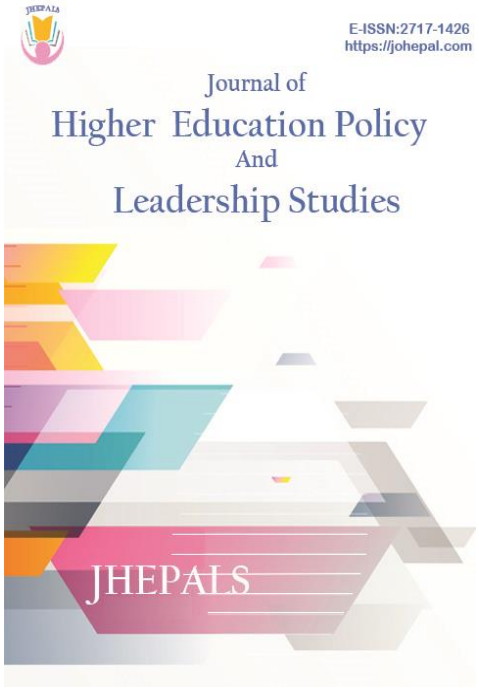

Classroom Justice in Non-Western Higher Education Institutes: Interview with Prof. Sean M. Horan

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Interview

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https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sean-Horan-5

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Horan, S. M.

Interviews with internationally acclaimed figures within the domain of higher education policy and leadership provides us with fresh insights gained from many years of working experience, knowledge, and research. JHEPALS is honored to publish an interview with **Prof. Sean M. Horan** (Professor, Canisius Faculty Fellow, & Chair of the Department of Communication at Fairfield University - USA); a distinguished Research and Teaching Fellow of the Eastern Communication Association. We are confident that **Prof. Horan**'s critical, thought-provoking, and valuable responses obtained from his research and leadership experience in higher education will be interesting to a wide range of audience, including leaders, professors, policymakers, students, and researchers in higher education.

Question #1

Please tell us about your research on classroom justice in higher education. Do you believe your research findings have only implications for the Western higher education context or also have implications for non-Western settings?

Answer:

My first study on classroom justice was the first test of Emotional Response Theory in the classroom. Put simply, this theory argues that teacher messages elicit emotional responses in students, and the valence of these emotional responses predicts their approach/avoidance behaviors. I tested this theory by looking at students' perceptions of instructors' justice and power messages, their emotional responses, and how that predicted approach/avoidance (via reports of learning and motivation). Findings partially supported the theory, and justice was a salient predictor of outcomes. For more information, readers can consult:

Horan, S. M., Martin, M. M., & Weber, K. (2012). Understanding emotional response theory: The role of instructor power and justice messages. *Communication Quarterly, 60*(2), 210-233. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2012.669323

My second justice study focused on instructors', rather than students', perceptions of justice. Years of research from Chory had demonstrated that students were concerned with justice and had reactions to (un)fairness – however, less explored was the question of how concerned instructors were with fairness. Using Chory's justice scales, instructors were asked to rate how important each fairness item was to them. Instructors were most concerned with interactional justice, followed by procedural and distributive justice. The study further describes relationships among reported justice concerns, instructor power base use, and behavioral alteration techniques.

Horan, S. M., & Myers, S. A. (2009). An exploration of college instructors' perceptions of classroom justice, power, and behavior alteration techniques. *Communication Education, 58*(4), 483-496. http://doi.org/10.1080/03634520903055981

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I recognize this study came out in 2009 and the above came out in 2012, however, I am reporting the studies in order of which I conducted them (not publication order – which changes based on time of review, how backed up a journal is, etc.).

Next, and along with my classmate/friend (now Dr. Alan Goodboy; Professor of Communication at West Virginia University), and with Rebecca Chory, we aimed to validate the classroom justice construct. Although the classroom justice scales had performed reliably, and the organizational justice constructs made intuitive sense in their classroom application, we wanted to ask students about their experiences with unfairness. In doing so, we coded their responses and were able to verify that unfairness experiences did, indeed, fall into procedural, distributive, and interactional categories. Moreover, we asked students about their *emotional* and *behavioral* reactions. Not only did this help inform Emotional Response Theory, it validated that classroom justice scales.

Horan, S. M., Chory, R. M., & Goodboy, A. K. (2010). Understanding students' classroom justice experiences and responses. *Communication Education*, *59*(4), 453-474. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2010.487282

While an Assistant Professor, I had Laura Young (now Dr. Laura Young, Assistant Professor of Practice in Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Communication, University of Nebraska-Lincoln) in my MA seminar. Following this, she became my first ever MA advisee. In her thesis, we embraced the arguments of my former professor/mentor, Tim Mottet (past president, Colorado State University-Pueblo), who argued that relationally skilled and well liked teachers faced more boundary pushing from students – that is, students might feel that they can approach these teachers to move deadlines, accept late work, miss class, and accommodate them in various other ways. We further speculated that a classroom of 30 students would not view the instructor uniformly – that is, some students might feel they are *out group* and, therefore, relational messages might be perceived as unfair. Following her time with me, Laura began her PhD program with my former classmate/friend, Dr. Brandi Frisby (Associate Provost for Academic Affairs, University of Kentucky). Once she arrived at Kentucky, Laura, Brandi, and I prepared the thesis for publication.

Following this, and working with an excellent group of MA students, we used leader-member exchange theory to examine classroom justice perceptions. Building on the arguments above, we once again argued that a classroom of 30 would not view an instructor uniformly: some would view the instructor as fair, others as unfair. Potentially, whether one feels that he/she/they is in-group or out-group could explain his/her/their (un)fairness perceptions and associated reactions.

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Horan, S. M., Chory, R. M., Carton, S. T., Miller, E., & Raposo, P. C. J. (2013). Testing leader member exchange as a lens to understand students' classroom justice perceptions and antisocial communication. *Communication Quarterly*, *61*(5), 497-518. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2013.799511

My final justice studies were conducted with Rebecca Chory, my former MA student (Shannon Carton), and my MA advisor/mentor (Marian Houser). Once again interested in Emotional Response Theory, these studies examined students' responses to unfairness.

Chory, R. M., Horan, S. M., Carton, S. T., & Houser, M. L. (2014). Toward a further understanding of students' emotional responses to classroom injustice. *Communication Education, 63*(1), 41-62. http://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2013.837496

Chory, R. M., Horan, S. M., & Houser, M. L. (2017). Justice in the higher education classroom: Students' perceptions of unfairness and responses to instructors. *Innovative Higher Education*, *42*(4), 321-336. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-017-9388-9

My initial research with classroom justice was completed while I was a PhD student at West Virginia University. At that time, Rebecca Chory was on faculty. I took her *Advanced Organizational Communication* seminar, where we began workplace romance research—research we have been conducting together since 2007. Due to my interest in her work, I began classroom justice research in other classes (with different faculty) where that focus was appropriate. Later, Chory served as a member of my dissertation committee, where I proposed and studied *deceptive affection*—instances where the *feeling* and *communication* of affection diverge. I am thankful for her consistent (and time consuming) mentorship throughout my PhD program and career that has since turned into friendship.

Though I no longer initiate my own original studies of classroom justice, Rebecca and I have written about it in various handbook chapters.

Chory, R. M., & Horan, S. M. (2022). Looking back and looking ahead at negotiating power in the classroom. In M. L. Houser & A. M. Hosek (Eds.), *Handbook of Instructional Communication: Rhetorical and relational perspectives* (pp. 151-170). Kendall Hunt.

Justice has also been key in our rationales for workplace romance studies as well as a frame for interpreting our findings.

Regarding whether findings have application to non-Western populations, I believe more research needs to be done. Though I believe the concept of fairness in the classroom can be applied to various cultures, the cultural norms and beliefs will influence what specifically is viewed as fair/unfair. Therefore, research across cultures is needed on classroom justice.

Question #2

What makes higher education a unique context for studying classroom justice? How does it differ from primary and secondary education in this respect?

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Answer:

Each educational rank has differing norms, expectations, and messages: elementary school, middle school, high school, undergraduate education, and graduate education. Messages from a first grade teacher would be received much differently from someone in 12th grade compared to someone in a doctoral program. I believe the programmatic work of Chory has great value and application to Wester higher education, and her conceptualization and theorizing regarding justice has value to classrooms across the globe. As mentioned previously, though, more work needs to be done to understand what is considered (un)fair across cultures and grade levels.

Question #3

Considering that the concept of classroom justice is theoretically rooted in Western higher education context, do you think it is applicable to non-Western contexts as well? Under what conditions might such an extension be possible?

Answer:

As mentioned above, I think the concept of justice applies in non-Western classrooms across grade levels. However, the specifics about 1. What is considered (un)fair, 2. Students' emotional responses, and 3. Students' behavioral reactions need to be examined.

Question #4

What are the most critical challenges in ensuring justice in classroom practices within non-Western higher education systems?

Answer:

Steve Beebe (past president, National Communication Association & Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Texas State University) argues that effective communication and training depends on the needs of the audience. Therefore, to ensure fairness in non-Western higher education systems, you first need to understand the needs of the audience. What does this population consider (un)fair? How can an instructor communicate in a way that meets these needs—that is, to convey that he/she/they is addressing fairness concerns.

Question #5

Do you believe the study of classroom justice should be context-sensitive? Are there any potential cross-cultural differences in how justice is perceived or enacted in Western and non-Western higher education contexts?

Answer:

I do think that classroom justice should be context-sensitive. Though fairness is likely a shared concern across cultures, the specific messages, processes, and allotments are culture

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and context sensitive. Researchers and practitioners should be concerned with understanding their audience and tailoring messages to address their needs.

Question #6

How does your research on classroom justice influence your teaching, assessment, and interactional practices as a university instructor?

Answer:

I try to approach every classroom and every student with *respect*. My career involves dealing with adults who understand how to behave, and all humans are deserving of respect and dignity—even in times of disagreement, feedback, accommodation denial, and instruction. Interactional justice, as a professor in a Jesuit University, is always a primary value. I speculate that, without interactional justice, one cannot be perceived as credible and will struggle with perceptions of procedural justice.

Regarding interactional justice, Mottet long speculated, in his teaching and theorizing (Relational Power & Influence Theory) that relationally skilled teachers who are well liked can actually push students further in terms of assignment length, depth, classroom discussion, and rigor of content. He speculates that well liked teachers can actually be *more difficult* – yet not be perceived that way. Instead, being a respectful and well liked teacher may give you the permission to be a harder teacher.

For procedural justice, I work—whenever possible—to make assessment processes clear. This means that, for exams, students have a list of *learning objectives* prior to the exam. The exam is balanced, meaning that the distribution of questions across content days is even. I avoid trick questions. I tell students during exams to ask as many questions as they want – and that I will restate exam items however I can (my goal for them is to get the correct answer, not to get hung up on any phrasing that might be unclear to them). I post assessment forms, in advance of due dates, when possible and even samples of prior students' work. I do all of this, though, while maintaining high standards, not accepting late work, and being rigorous. Many of these practices are modeled after my time being Mottet's student.

I speculate that if you can manage interactional and procedural justice perceptions, distributive justice perceptions are almost guaranteed.

Question #7

Do you think integrating the principles and dimensions of classroom justice into teacher education programs in non-Western higher education contexts would be beneficial? If so, how do you envision such an integration in practice?

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Answer:

I firmly believe that education and training around classroom justice can benefit all instructors, regardless of grade level and/or country of instruction. To integrate this into practice, I would first explain the three types of justice to teachers in a professional development seminar. Next, I would ask teachers to recall a time they thought a teacher was unfair to them. Though the audience is likely far removed from their time in the classroom, I bet many could recall a time. For example, I can still recall the time when, 20 years ago, a professor told us to complete an assignment for extra credit. The professor, however, did not give us extra credit. When I asked the professor about this in front of 75 other students, he said: "I lied, so sue me." In our work where students recalled a time an instructor was unfair (Horan et al., 2010), college students described an event that happened, on average, about 10 months prior (we argue these events are memorable).

Following a brief discussion of their unfairness experiences, we would then go over practical ways to help foster perceptions of interactional, procedural, and distributive justice. These methods should be tangible, clear, and message based. An instructor cannot say "I am fair"—that will not be effective. Instead, working on how to foster these perceptions while attending to cultural and grade-based expectations is important.

Question #8

From your perspective, which of the three dimensions of classroom justice is most emphasized, and which one is most overlooked in research and practice? Why?

Answer:

I believe that interactional justice is the most important dimension. I think it is the gateway to beginning the teacher-student relationship and invites students into the classroom. It begins on the first day of class (see Horan & Houser, 2012) and sets the tone for your academic time together. As mentioned above, I believe it allows instructors to push classroom boundaries in terms of assignment, rigor, and intensity of content.

We found that instructors were least concerned with distributive justice (Horan & Myers, 2009), compared to procedural and interactional. This is not to say that instructors are *not* concerned with distributive justice – instead, they are to a lesser extent compared to procedural and distributive justice. Most instructors are likely well-intentioned and assume they are distributively and procedurally fair – therefore, professional development and research should focus more on ways to promote these fairness practices and perceptions.

Horan, S. M., & Houser, M. L. (2012). Understanding the communicative implications of initial impressions: A longitudinal test of predicted outcome value theory. *Communication Education, 61*(3),234-252. http://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2012.671950

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Question #9

Based on your research and professional experience, how does perceived classroom injustice affect university students' emotional responses, behaviors, and academic performance?

Answer:

I believe that students' experiences with unfairness mirrors the findings we have obtained. Of note, though, is that about 1/3 of students simply did nothing when faced unfairness, and 6.5% either withdrew from the class or stopped trying (Horan et al., 2010). Although roughly half engaged in dissent, and some to administrators, some students were being lost in the mix. At times, unfairness is a perception issue that could simply be addressed via a productive and respectful conversation. At times, unfortunately, some instructors are unfair to the detriment of students – and that is the most concerning, and likely least studied, aspect of this research.

Question #10

From your perspective, how can higher education policies and leadership contribute to creating a culture of justice in instructional settings beyond the efforts of individual instructors?

Answer:

I believe professional development seminars, previously described, would be the best way to start.

Question #11

How do you envision the future of classroom justice research in both non-Western and worldwide higher education in terms of trends, priorities, and policies?

Answer:

Though we know a lot about classroom justice in Western higher education, it is important for us to address the voids in research. For example, we know less about it in: elementary school, middle school, high school, trade schools, churches, police and military training, and various other sites of instruction. Culturally, we know little about classroom justice perceptions outside of the USA. Importantly, as technologies continually to evolve, we need to understand the role they play in (un)fairness perceptions.

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Question #12

What recommendations would you give to language and educational researchers and policymakers to improve classroom justice in non-western settings?

Answer:

First, I would recommend that instructors become trained in and mindful of classroom justice perceptions. In doing so, instructors should be trained in messages and processes that can be used to promote perceptions of fairness.

Second, I would recommend that instructors be reminded that justice perceptions are *perceptions*. Therefore, there are times when fairness is practiced but a student refuses to recognize it, or, where an instructor is unfair and a student does not recognize it.

Third, I would recommend that instructors remain mindful of academic policies and classroom goals. Fairness *does not mean* complying with every request a student has. In fact, most of the time, we cannot accommodate all requests as it would compromise the rigor of the class. Therefore, there are times when enforcing a policy will seem unfair to a student. Remember that making a policy exception for one student, but not all students, will seem unfair to the larger population.

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