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REPLICATING THE EFFECTS OF DEBATE PARTICIPATION ON ARGUMENTATIVENESS AND VERBAL AGGRESSION

Dr. Kent R. Colbert
Director of Debate
Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA

Over the years, a growing body of empirical research suggests that competitive academic debate is beneficial to those who participate. Debate competitions motivate students to develop extensive research abilities and refine communication skills (Colbert & Biggers, 1986). Moreover, 50 years of research associates debate training with the enhancement of critical thinking skills (Howell, 1943; Brembeck, 1949; Williams, 1951; Beckman, 1957; Jackson, 1961; Cross, 1971; Colbert, 1987).

A neglected area of pedagogy research, however, involves the effects that tournament debating could have on student communication traits. Early research reported positive effects for those participating in debate (King & Phifer, 1968; Tucker, Keohler, & Mlady, 1967). Infante (1982) found those with the most high school training in argumentation were the most argumentative (motivated to advocate or refute the positions of other people over controversial issues). He reasoned it is possible that "students who are initially high in argumentativeness [elect] the most high school training in argumentation" (p. 146). He concluded, "Research at the high school level is needed to determine what the speech communication curriculum and extracurricular activities do to the student's level of argumentativeness" (p. 146). Despite the call to examine the effects of debating on participant traits, Simons (1990) observed that, "research into the area of debater's personality has refrained during the past decade.

More recently, Colbert (1993) reported research measuring the effects of debate participation on argumentative (ARG) and verbal aggression (VA). Basically, VA involves attacking another person's self-concept in place of or in addition to disagreeing over controversial issues. He found that debaters scored higher on ARG and lower on VA than students attracted to debating who had yet to gain competitive experience. In addition, Colbert reported that specific types of debate training have different effects on ARG and VA. Specifically, Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debaters differ significantly from pre-experienced debaters on VA, while National Forensic League (NFL) debaters differ significantly on ARG from their pre-experienced counterparts.

It is important to establish the effects of forensic training on participants, especially if these activities predictably diminish positive or reinforce negative traits. If different methods of debate training increases VA or reduces ARG, then serious rethinking of how these activities are being taught may be justified on those grounds. The present study attempts to replicate findings that high school debate competition affects ARG and VA traits.

Several recent commentaries assert that the competitive aspects of tournament debating dominate educational goals, and often tolerate and even

reward hostile or verbally aggressive behavior. For example, Steinfatt (1990) reported, "a good deal of hostility was sometimes generalized, sometimes aimed specifically at an opponent, and sometimes aimed at the judge" in debates that he observed (p. 67). McGough (1988) visited a high school workshop tournament and said debating is analogous to "Dungeons and Dragons, the thrill of combat, and an imaginary universe" making it like "war games" (p. 20). Frank (1991) wrote, "the virtual disappearance of civility in modern debate can be traced to the belief that debate not only shares some characteristics of a game, but that debate is a game" (p. 6). Horn and Underberg (1991) concluded, "pressure to win [is] not unique to students—coaches often experience a similar need to win. Regardless of who is at fault for these misplaced priorities, the results are detrimental to educational forensics" (p. 9). Despite these observations, few empirical studies measuring the effects of contemporary debate participation on ARG and VA have been reported.

This study focused on two specific traits related to arguing-argumentativeness and verbal aggression. Infante and Rancer (1982) explained:

the locus of attack may be used for distinguishing argument from VA...[A]rgument involves presenting and defending positions on controversial issues while attacking the position taken by others on the issues. VA...denotes attacking the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person's position on a topic of communication. (p. 62)

VA includes character attacks, competence attacks, insults, maledictions, teasing, ridicule, profanity, threats, background attacks, physical appearance attacks, and nonverbal indicators (Infante, 1987; Infante & Wigley, 1986).

Research suggest VA often precedes and could be related to a range of effects including damage to self-concepts (Infante, 1987; Infante, 1988), physical violence in families (Gelles, 1974; Hoffman, 1984; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989), juvenile delinquency (Straus, Sweet, & Vissing, 1989), criminal violence (Toch, 1969; Zillman, 1979; Geen & Donnerstein, 1983a, 1983b). While relationships between debating and aberrant behavior is beyond the scope of this study, the literature clearly illustrates why VA should be strongly discouraged by the debate community.

Typically, the use of VA is indicative of (a) psychopathology, (b) disdain for others, (c) social learning, and (d) argumentative skill deficiency (Infante, 1988). Given that debate tournaments are co-curricular educational experiences, it is reasonable to expect that successful training would reduce argument skill deficiency. Infante (1988) reasoned:

If the parties in an argument are skillful arguers, VA is less likely. Skillful arguers will rarely run out of things to say when defending and attacking positions. In fact, they typically think of so many things to say that they do not have enough time to reach their final thought on the controversial issue. Verbal aggression is also less likely because skillful arguers have a clear conception of the difference between genuine argument and verbal aggression. (p. 27)

Infante, Chamblor, and Rudd (1989) noted that VA is more likely to occur when ARG skill deficiency exists. Individuals without the verbal skills to advocate their views constructively are more likely to resort to VA. If argumentative skills are developed through debate training, a corresponding reduction in VA should result if the "skill deficiency" theory is operating.

An "argumentative approach involves informative and persuasive aspects. In addition, each person attacks the other's position on the issue in order to establish the superiority of one's position" (Infante, 1988 pp. 5-6). It is, therefore, reasonable to expect debate participation to enhance individual ARG. The present study attempted to replicate Infante's (1982) and Colbert's (1992; 1993) studies and extend their findings regarding ARG and debating. Those studies report significant relationship between debating and ARG. However, Infante's (1988) findings were preliminary because his design did not control for self-selection and Colbert's (1993) study was limited to a large sample of California high schools. Replicating the relationship between debating and ARG with a large nationally representative group of high school students would strengthen the generalizability of such findings. This study also attempted to replicate preliminary findings that some formats of debate training significantly reduces VA. (Colbert, 1993)

Because there is limited research supporting specific relationships between debate competition and ARG and VA, two non-directional hypotheses were tested:

H₁: Students who participate in competitive debate differ in their level of VA from students who have not yet participated in debate.

H₂: Students who participate in competitive debate differ in their level of ARG from students who have not yet participated in debate.

METHOD

Respondents

Respondents were 480 high school students participating at 1993 Barkley Forum Forensic Tournament hosted by Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Given 178 high schools, from 29 states, and 1 foreign country (Greece) were represented, it was considered a reasonably adequate sample of well-trained high caliber high school debaters.

The sample consisted of 258 males, 210 females, and 1 who did not indicate their sex, ranging in age from 13 to 18 (13 = 1%; 14 = 3%; 15 = 10%; 16 = 25%; 17 = 48%; and 18 = 13%). The birthplaces of the respondents represented 44 states and 22 countries. Both private and public schools were included in the study. Overall, the experienced debaters and those beginning their debate experience appeared to represent a wide cross-section of those who typically participate in national level debate tournaments.

Respondents indicated their debate experience by years and types of events on the questionnaire (policy, and value). Beginning debate students were assigned to the no experience group; students with one to four years of debate experience were assigned to the experienced debate group. This design attempted to control for self-selection by comparing students new to debating with those that have acquired substantial experience. Since high ARG

students seek out debate activities, this predisposition should exist in both beginning and experienced groups.

Instruments

Each student completed the Infante and Rancer (1982) Argumentative Scale and the Infante and Wigley (1986) Verbal Aggression Scale prior the first debate round. Self-contained written instructions requested respondents to complete the ARG and VA scales to the best of their knowledge. The instructions explained the questionnaires would contain statements about disputing controversial issues and that their participation in the study would help us learn more about the effects of tournament competition. The students were instructed to indicate how often each statement is true for them personally by placing the appropriate number in the blank to the left of the statement. The instructions also stated that individual names would not be associated with the findings or publication of the data. Debriefing forms were distributed at pairing sheet distribution locations at the tournament.

The ARG and VA instruments each consisted of 10 approach items and 10 avoidance items. Examples of questions from the ARG questionnaire include, "I have the ability to do well in an argument" and "Arguing creates more problems for me than it solves." [Appendix A] Examples of questions from the VA questionnaire include, "When I attack a persons' idea, I try not to damage their self-concepts" and "I like poking fun at people who do things which are very stupid in order to stimulate their intelligence." [Appendix B] The 20 statements on each scale are rated on a five-point scale ranging from "almost never true" to "almost always true."

Both instruments have demonstrated reliability, stability, and construct validity. Infante and Rancer (1982) reported Cronbach's alpha reliability estimates ranging from .86 to .91, and test-retest reliability estimates of .86 for high argumentative individuals and .87 for low argumentative individuals.

Other studies report similar reliability estimates (Infante & Gorden, 1985; Rancer, Baukus, & Infante, 1985). Validity was supported from a series of studies, for example, correspondence between self-perceived argumentativeness and a colleague's perception was $r = .54$, $p < .001$ (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Concurrent validity of the scale was supported by correlating ARG scores with scores from several other measures of communicative predispositions (Infante & Rancer, 1982).

The reliability and validity of the VA scale also has been supported. Infante and Wigley (1986) reported a Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate of .81 and a test-retest reliability estimate of .82. Concurrent validity was supported by correlating the VA scale with the Buss-Durkee Scale (1957) and obtaining $r = .32$, $p < .001$. Predictive validity was supported by a study in which predicted preference for VA messages was examined in a variety of social situations (Infante & Wigley, 1986). A positive correlation of the VA scale with VA messages in three different social situations was observed, $r = .69$, $p < .001$. Additionally, VA scores also were found to correlate significantly with a seven-point likeliness rating of six messages. Overall, findings suggest that the ARG and VA instruments have sufficient reliability and validity.

Procedure

Data were collected near the beginning of the academic year so the debate students without or having little debate experience could be contrasted with

those having prior experience. This procedure allowed the researcher to control for self-selection effects by comparing inexperienced participants attracted to the activity with those having more extensive previous experience. The instruments and administration instructions were distributed to judges with their ballots before a debate round they were judging. The judges distributed the instruments, answered questions, collected, and returned the completed instruments after the round (with their ballots). The process of filling out questionnaires at debate tournaments is not uncommon and there was no reason to believe any of the participants felt threatened.

RESULTS

Tests of Hypotheses

First, do those with participation experience in competitive debate (value and/or policy) differ in their level of ARG from those who have not yet participated? Those without debate experience scored statistically significantly lower than the experienced debate group, $t(479) = -2.60$, $p < .05$. Both experienced policy debaters $t(471) = -2.37$, $p < .01$, and experienced value debaters $t(481) = -4.90$, $p < .01$, significantly outgained their pre-experienced counterparts in ARG. Table 1 presents the ns , means, standard deviations, t -test results, and their associated point-biserial correlations (r_{pb}), and squared significant correlations (Cohen, 1977) for the ARG instrument. The squared correlations provide an indication of the variance accounted for by the t -test, that is, the importance (as opposed to the statistical significance) of the results.

The second hypothesis predicted that students with competitive experience in academic debate (LD and/or NDT) differ in their level of VA from debate students without debate experience. The mean level of VA for the group of experienced debaters was statistically significantly greater than the group without debate experience, $t(479) = -2.60$, $p < .05$. The policy experienced group produced significantly higher VA scores when compared with the preexperienced group $t(481) = -2.26$, $p < .05$. Although the debaters with LD experience had lower VA means than those without value experience, the difference was not significant. Table 2 presents the results.

Post-Hoc Tests

Differences between male and female forensic competitors were significant. Male participants scored significantly higher than female participants on the VA instrument, $t(468) = 7.37$, $p < .001$. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting males are more verbally aggressive than females (Infante, 1987; Colbert, 1992; 1993).

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study suggest some noteworthy conclusions. First, they support Infante's (1982), and Colbert's (1992, 1993), research reporting a relationship between ARG and competitive debating. Likewise, this study accounts for the self-selection feature that may have affected Infante's (1982) results. Because all respondents had chosen to compete in debate, the difference was probably not a function of their attraction to the activity. Comparing debate students (often high on ARG) with non-debate students (often lower than debate student on ARG) may only reflect the pre-existing differences in the traits of the groups being compared. By comparing groups

with similar predispositions, it was possible to better isolate the specific events attributed to debate training.

This study, however, was unable to replicate Colbert's (1993) finding that debating results in significant decreases of VA scores. In fact, overall debate experience and policy (NFL) experienced debaters both had significantly higher VA scores than the pre-experienced group. The value experienced group had a lower mean than the pre-experienced group, but the difference was not significant.

A number of explanations could account for these findings. First, it may be attributed to sampling differences. Colbert (1993) sampled a group of high school students who were trained in one state, California. The present data representing high schools from 29 states is more nationally representative.

Second, the present data may better reflect the pedagogical efforts of a wider spectrum of debate educators, rather than those from just one state. In California value debating is presumably more dominant. It is plausible that distinct instructional goals and teaching strategies may affect debater VA traits differently, despite participating in similar activities.

Even though debaters increased in their motivation to argue, there was not a corresponding decline in VA. Colbert (1993) reported that a specific debating format (Lincoln-Douglas) significantly increased ARG and decreased VA lending preliminary support that argument skill deficiency (Infante, Chandler, Rudd, 1989) is a major cause of VA. The present study did not replicate that finding, leaving one to speculate if the emphasis that educators place on "value debate" in California produces different trait development than debating taught on a national scale. Additional research should determine if, and which, specific instructional strategies are most effective for reducing VA. In doing so, a more controlled setting like an extended debate workshop would enable researchers to record and document the specific teaching strategies, so they could be more precisely compared with other approaches of teaching tournament debating.

Although several differences between experienced and inexperienced debate participants were statistically significant, caution should be exercised before attempting to generalize these results. While mean differences were significant, squared point biserial correlations indicated very small effect sizes (Cohen, 1977) accounting for only 1% to 11%. In other words, significant differences between groups does not imply the magnitude of gains or losses in ARG and VA traits is large. The degree of debate training's potential to reduce VA and increase ARG needs further examination.

Future research should consider the long-term effects of debate and individual events participation on ARG and VA. Are debater ARG and VA traits more positive with experience in both IE and debate? Does debating in college affect the development of ARG and VA traits differently than high school? Are debater ARG and VA traits different from students that are not in forensics? Is two or three years of debate experience different than six or seven years? Do students reach a point of diminishing returns or experience too much forensics competition (forensics overload)? Factual data to answer these and many important questions concerning the assessment of forensics outcomes (in general) is needed. Simply educating a highly ARG student to become more argumentative is not enough. Especially, when negative traits like VA could potentially be reduced with appropriate methods of debate