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Communication Apprehension and its Relationship to Gender and College Year

Jodi Frantz, Amber Marlow, & Jennifer Wathen (Huntington College)

Abstract

This study examined the differences between communication apprehension, one's gender, and his or her year in college. Participants included a convenience sample of full-time undergraduate students at a Midwestern, liberal arts, private Christian college. The students were asked to complete the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24), a self-report measure of communication apprehension. It was predicted that females would have higher communication apprehension levels than males and that as class standing increases, communication apprehension decreases. A statistically significant difference was found between males and females with respect to their overall CA score. The results also showed no significant difference between year in college and CA score.

Communication Apprehension and its Relationship to Gender and College Year

Ranked as the number one fear among American adults, public speaking surpasses the fear of snakes, heights, disease, financial problems, and even death. Studies have revealed that "...practically everyone – about 85% of the population, in fact – experiences 'stage fright' when they give a speech" (Hart, 2005, p. 1). According to communication experts "...2 out of every 10 individuals experience some form of communication anxiety..." (Watson, & Bossley, 1995, p. 111). Ironically, these individuals experience a fear of something they encounter daily, whether it is in a formal or informal situation, communication is experienced by everyone.

Due to the prevalence of communication in an individual's life, studies have examined the relationship between communication apprehension and such things as self-esteem, social personality variables, and gender. Communication apprehension (CA) is defined by McCroskey (1984, p. 13) as "...an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons." Four different types of communication apprehension exist, including: traitlike, generalized-context, personal-group, and situational. Traitlike can be described as "...a relatively enduring, personality-type orientation toward a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts" (McCroskey, 1984, as cited in Everett, 1999, p. 42). Secondly, generalized-context is similar to traitlike; however, it may occur in one situation and not in another. Personal-group communication apprehension repeatedly occurs when an individual interacts with a certain person or group. Lastly, situational communication apprehension depends on a situation where one can be with the same individual or group, but the situation itself causes the apprehension (Ayres, 1998; McCroskey, 1984, as cited in Everett, 1999).

There are numerous causes that trigger communication apprehension. When an individual is placed in new situations or surroundings, the novelty of the situation or having to interact with unfamiliar people can cause CA. Formalistic situations or subordinate status, which is a difference in status where one feels as though he or she is being evaluated, may also trigger CA. Being keenly aware of oneself while speaking publicly or feeling as though one is being watched by others can also lead to apprehension. Lastly, an individual placed in a situation where he or she is unaware of others' attitudes, values, and beliefs experiences CA. Also, if an individual anticipates a negative outcome one might experience apprehension (Beatty, 1988; Buss, 1980 as cited in Pribyl, Keaten, & Sakamoto, 2001).

Different components of an individual have an effect on one's level of CA; two of these components include self-esteem and social personality. Self-esteem and communication apprehension are two variables that have been studied numerous times and research has "...consistently demonstrate[d] an inverse relationship between social-communicative anxiety and self-esteem" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 132). Despite how one defines anxiety or esteem, the inverse relationship stays the same. Researchers have found that "this relationship is one of the most consistent in the literature of social-communicative anxiety" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 132). The other component of an individual that has an effect on one's level of CA is one's social personality. This is the personality of an individual in social situations. Numerous studies examine social personality and the level of CA an individual experiences. Research has found that

introverts experience more CA than extroverts when faced with openly expressing themselves (Opt, & Loffredo, 2000).

Another area of interest for many researchers is the relationship between gender and CA. Aly and Islam (2005) hypothesized that gender, job status, grade point average, and years of experience would not have an effect on the communication apprehension of business students. However, they found that all four did have an effect on CA. This study also led to the finding that women experience a higher level of CA than men. On the other hand, Borzi and Mills (2001) found the opposite, that male accounting majors have a higher level of CA than female accounting majors.

Two other studies examined the relationship between academic achievement and CA. Butler, Pryor, and Marti (2004, p. 293) found that their hypothesis was supported; "...honor students reported a significantly higher communication apprehension level than their non-honors peers." On the other hand, Everett (1999) found that there was no relationship between CA and academic achievement, which was measured by GPA.

Winiecki and Ayres (1999) studied communication apprehension and receiver apprehension (RA) in an actual organization. They hypothesized that "there will be an inverse relationship between an individual's level of state and trait CA and his/her position within a company hierarchy, as well as his or her accompanying salary" (Winiecki, & Ayres, 1999, p. 435). Findings suggested that neither CA nor RA were affected by the length of time an individual was employed with the organization. Examining college year level, Everett's (1999) study of CA and community college students' success supported these findings. Another study compared sophomore accounting students to senior accounting students and their levels of CA. Fordham and Gabbin (1996) discovered that seniors were more confident communicators.

While these different relationships have been widely studied, one of growing interest is the relationship between communication apprehension and gender. "Some research suggests that social-communicative anxiety and sex are, in a very minimal way, related" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 131). However, "the direction of the effect is unclear" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 131). Yet, studies also have been found to "...link the anxiety to a person's psychological sex type. Greenblatt, Hasenauer, and Freimuth (1980) and McDowell, McDowell, Hyerdahl, and Steil (1978) report that highly feminine subjects are more apprehensive than either androgynous or masculine subjects" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 132).

This study will examine the relationship between communication apprehension and gender. Going one step further, this study will also examine the relationship between communication apprehension and one's year in college. This is of interest because of the lack of research in this area. It is hypothesized that females experience more communication apprehension than males and that as one progresses through his or her college experience communication apprehension will decrease.

Method

Participants

All full-time undergraduate students from Huntington College (a small liberal arts Christian college in the Midwest) were sent surveys requesting their participation in this study. A list of students was acquired from the registrar's office, which only included full-time undergraduate students that were enrolled as of February 22, 2005. The total

number (n~699) was used as a convenience sample, but only 185 responded to the survey. Of those who responded, 138 were females and 47 were males.

Measure

The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) was used to measure traitlike communication apprehension. It consists of 24 Likert-type questions (see Appendix B). The PRCA-24's "...reliability...is very high, usually above .90" and there is "...overwhelming evidence for the predictive validity of the measure" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 92).

The PRCA-24 is utilized to compute a total CA score and four CA subscores. The four subscores are comprised of common communication situations: group discussion, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking. Two additional questions were added to the survey asking each participant to indicate his or her gender and his or her current year in college: freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior, assuming each student classifies himself or herself according to his or her earned credit hours. To calculate group discussion CA add items 2, 4, and 6, minus items 1, 3, and 5, and subtracting that score from 18. Communication apprehension in meetings is calculated by adding items 8, 9, and 12, minus items 7, 10, and 11, and subtracting that score from 18. Interpersonal conversations CA is calculated by adding items 14, 16, and 17, minus items 13, 15, and 18, and subtracting that score from 18. Lastly, communication apprehension in public speaking is calculated by adding items 19, 21, and 23, minus items 20, 22, and 24, and subtracting that score from 18.

A total score can be obtained by adding all four subscores together. The mean for the total score of the PRCA-24 is 65.6, with a standard deviation of 15.3. "A 'high' score means that [one] report[s] more anxiety related to oral communication..." (Palmerton, 2005, p. 2). High scores range from 80-120, while low scores are below 50. "A 'low' score means that [one] report[s] less communication anxiety than most people do" (Palmerton, 2005, p. 2). Group discussion, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking have means, in succession, of 15.4, 16.4, 14.2, and 19.3, with standard deviations of 4.8, 4.2, 3.9, and 5.1 respectively (PRCA-24). An individual with a score of 20 for group discussion and 20 for meetings, a score of 18 for interpersonal communication, and a score of 24 for public speaking would indicate a high level of CA.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed through campus mail on March 7, 2005. Each student received a one page survey that included directions on how to complete the survey. An additional page was attached as a cover letter explaining the study and the incentives offered (see Appendix A). On the bottom of the cover page there was a line for the participants to sign his or her name. Tearing off the bottom half of the paper and returning it to a separate mailbox entered them into a drawing for the incentives which include: a \$5 gift certificate to a popular coffee shop, a \$5 gift certificate to Wendy's, or a \$5 gift certificate to Video Vault. Instructions also concerned how to return the surveys. There was also a box, located at the bottom of the cover page that each participant could check if he or she desired to be e-mailed the results of the study in mid-April.

Having the participants send the questionnaire and the bottom half of the cover page to two different mailboxes, which were written on the papers for them, insured confidentiality and anonymity. The paper that was used for the drawing also had a box

that the participant could check if he or she desired a copy of the results from the study, which will be sent out through e-mail in April.

Results

The number of surveys returned totaled 185 out of 699 mailed, with a response rate of 26.6 percent. Of the 185 surveys, 138 were returned by females (74.6%) and 47 by males (25.4%). The hypothesis that females would have a higher communication apprehension levels than males showed a statistically significant difference. A two-tailed independent *t*-test obtained a $t = 2.714$; 1, 183; $p = .007$. Females had a higher mean score, which was 69.12 with a standard deviation of 13.49. Conversely, males had a mean score of 62.62 with a standard deviation of 16.06 (Figure 1). This supported the hypothesis; however, the mean CA scores ($M = 65$) of both males and females were less than one standard deviation from the national mean.

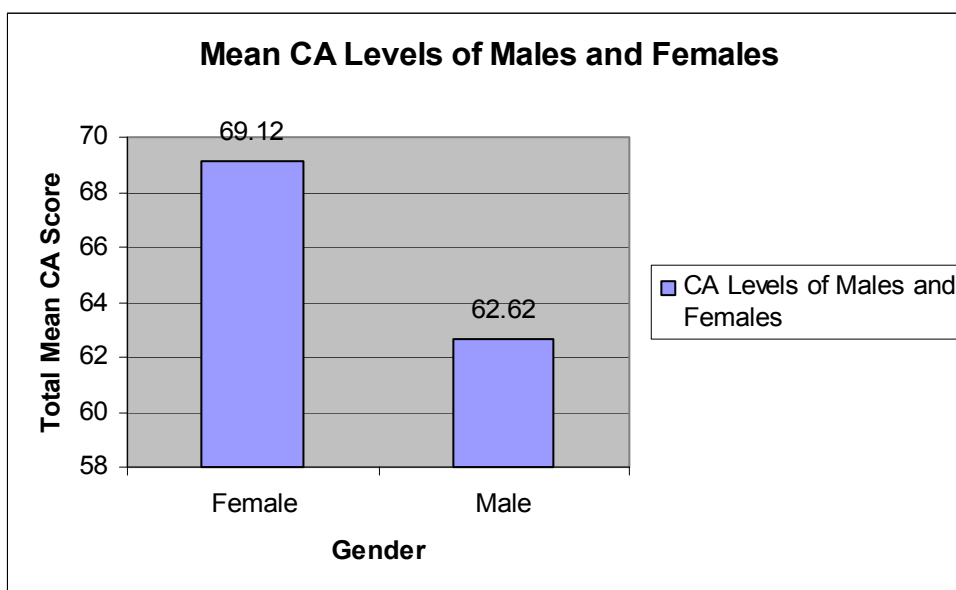


Figure 1

The response rate for each class is as follows: freshmen 30.8% ($n = 57$), sophomores 17.8% ($n = 33$), juniors 26.5% ($n = 49$), and seniors 24.9% ($n = 46$). An ANOVA yielded $F = .402$; $df 3, 184$; $p = .752$. Regarding one's year in college and its relationship to communication apprehension, the results failed to reject the null hypothesis. There was no significant difference between year in college and CA score.

Of the four subgroups, one of particular interest was public speaking. All four classes demonstrated a higher mean score in public speaking than in each of the other subgroups (Figure 2). These scores consisted of the following: freshmen 18.68, sophomores 20.03, juniors 20.00, and seniors 18.39. On the other hand, the subgroup interpersonal conversations held a lower mean score throughout all four classes. These scores included: freshmen 13.93, sophomores 14.52, juniors 14.08, and seniors 14.52. The remaining two subgroups, meetings and group discussion, did not reveal interesting findings.

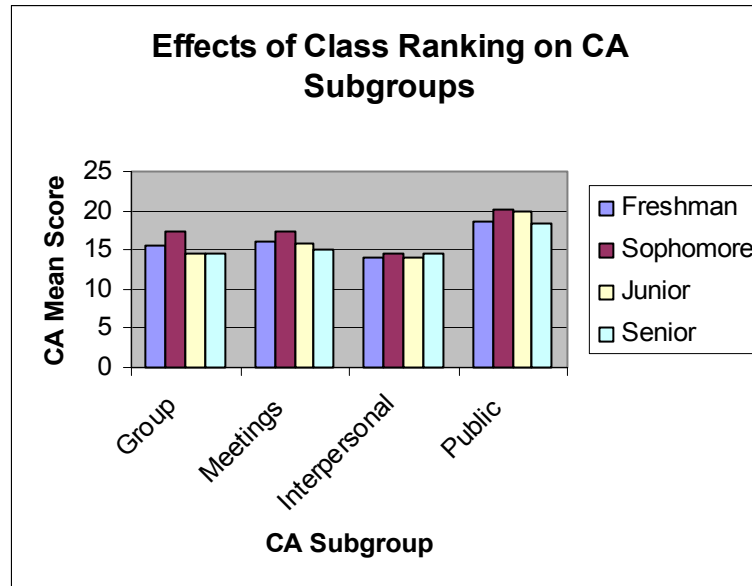


Figure 2

Discussion

The principal goal of this study was to determine whether females experienced more communication apprehension than males. This particular study found a statistically significant difference in the level of communication apprehension experienced by males and females. These results were supported by Aly and Islam (2005), which found that women experience a higher level of CA than men. However, Borzi and Mills (2001) found the opposite, that male accounting majors have a higher level of CA than female accounting majors. Females seem to be more concerned about how they are perceived by others and may be more self-conscious.

Females are more likely to compare themselves to other women. This exerts pressure on females to portray perfection according to society's standards. Television has molded the ideal woman to be aggressive, independent, assertive, and outgoing. If a female feels as though she lacks these characteristics then it may lead to self-consciousness, which may then lead to communication apprehension. This might explain why females showed a significantly higher level CA than males.

The second hypothesis was to determine whether as one's year in college increased his or her communication apprehension decreased. This study did not find a significant difference between CA and one's progression through college. These findings are supported by Winiecki and Ayres (1999) who found that one's level of CA was not affected by the length of time an individual was employed with a particular organization. However, Gabbin (1996) did find that seniors are more confident communicators than are lower classmen.

Perhaps, when it comes to different levels of CA, gender, and class year, one's personality type could influence how one reacts in group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking. Extroverts tend to be more gregarious than introverts, which could lead to extroverts being more comfortable in the previously mentioned situations. Conversely, introverts may feel out of place or self-conscious in situations that place them at the center of attention.

Despite efforts to reduce limitations some still existed. It is not possible for this study to be generalized to the entire population because this particular study was

completed at Huntington College, which is a small, private, Christian college. Also, the instructions did not specify how to classify oneself by either credits earned or the number of years he or she has attended college. If the participant disclosed both credit hours and year, the results were interpreted according to the number of years the participant had been in college. While conducting this experiment, time became another limitation due to some participants responding too late.

The external validity of this study could have been potentially influenced by a variety of variables. These include but are not limited to the following: a convenience sample was utilized and the surveys were only mailed once without a follow up conducted. Due to the use of a convenience sample, the results are not applicable to the general population outside Huntington College. As for internal validity, the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) survey uses self-reporting, which could allow for error when interpreting statements and how it applies to each participant individually. It is also open to interpretation whether the PRCA-24 is the best measure available for traitlike communication apprehension. Other measures exist that calculate communication apprehension and can be used in future studies.

Although the first hypothesis was supported, further study is encouraged. The results failed to reject the null hypothesis pertaining to the class and its CA level. Future studies may want to examine state-like anxiety rather than traitlike anxiety to see if the results would differ. Giving a deadline to participants would prevent late submissions and hopefully produce a larger response rate. Examining a different population may yield different results.

Past studies have found conflicting results when examining gender, CA, and college year. Because this study both supported and rejected past findings, further research should be carried out in this area. While significant findings were not produced, this study is still important to future researchers examining these variables, because communication apprehension can affect many aspects of ones' life.

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Appendix A

Dear Student,

You have been selected to take part in a research project conducted by three psychology majors for an upper level research class taught by Dr. Rowley. In order to complete our project we need your participation. Please take a few minutes to fill out the following survey and place it in campus mail, making sure that Jodi Frantz’s name is on the outside, ASAP. Along with returning the surveys, if you would like to be a part of our drawing to win a \$5 gift certificate to Coffee D’Vine, Wendy’s, or Video Vault please tear off the bottom half of this page and place it in campus mail, making sure that Jennifer Wathen’s name is on the outside. If you would like to receive the results of our study please put a check in the box. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Thanks,
Jodi Frantz, Amber Marlow, & Jen Wathen

------(Please cut here)-----

Name (for incentive drawing): _____

Please check the box if you would like to receive the results of our study.

Appendix B

Measure

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)

Directions: This instrument is composed of 24 statements concerning your feelings about communication with other people. Please indicate in the space provided the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you **(1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Undecided, (4), Disagree, or (5) Strongly Disagree** with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers. Many of the statements are similar to other statements. Do not be concerned about this. Work quickly, just record your first impression.

- _____ 1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
- _____ 2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in a group discussion.
- _____ 3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.
- _____ 4. I like to get involved in group discussions.
- _____ 5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.

- _____ 6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussion.
- _____ 7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.
- _____ 8. Usually I am calm and relaxed while participating in meetings.
- _____ 9. I am calm/ relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.
- _____ 10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.
- _____ 11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.
- _____ 12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at meetings.
- _____ 13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel nervous.
- _____ 14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
- _____ 15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.
- _____ 16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.
- _____ 17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.
- _____ 18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
- _____ 19. I have no fear of giving a speech.
- _____ 20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.
- _____ 21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
- _____ 22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
- _____ 23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
- _____ 24. While giving a speech I get so nervous, I forget facts I really know.

Gender (circle one): Male Female

Year in college (circle one): Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

Authors' biographies

Jodi Frantz is a senior psychology major from Huntington College. She is originally from South Whitley, Indiana. Jodi is involved with campus life at Huntington while serving as a Resident Assistant for three years and involved in student senate. While all aspects of psychology are of interest to her, one area that she hopes to pursue more is eating disorders. She also plans on attending graduate school.

Amber Marlow is a senior sociology major from Huntington College. She is originally from Fort Wayne, Indiana. Amber is involved with a church youth group, while she one day hopes to pursue a career with adolescents in a mental health setting.

Jennifer Wathen is a senior psychology major from Huntington College. She is from Evansville, Indiana. Jennifer is involved with Joe Mertz Volunteer Service at Huntington College. She is attending graduate school at Saint Francis University where she will pursue her master's degree in mental health counseling.

Faculty mentor biography:

Dr. Michael Rowley is the associate professor of communication at Huntington College. Dr. Rowley holds a Ph.D. in communication theory and research from Florida State University, where his studies focused on behavioral psychology, persuasion, public speaking, and research methods. He received his B.A. in public speaking and his M.A. in theory, persuasion, and public speaking from the University of Central Florida. Dr. Rowley has been teaching at Huntington since 1997.