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## THE COMMUNICATION OF PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY

Definitional and methodological problems may have interfered with researchers efforts to determine how the speech anxiety of public speakers is communicated to their audiences. Some investigators have used or adapted trait measures of communication apprehension to operationalize speaker anxiety states (e.g., McCroskey and Richmond, 1982). Both the Dickens, Gibson, and Prall (1950) and the Dickens and Parker (1951) studies forced a trait anxiety instrument (PRCS) to function as a state measure. Subjects in these studies filled out the PRCS immediately following their speech performances, thereby increasing the possibility that the PRCS would be sensitive to situational pressures. Most of the items on the PRCS, however, refer to the respondent's *typical* attitudes toward public speaking (Gilkinson, 1942). As a result, previous research may have obscured the relationship between observers' perceptions and actors' affective states by employing trait instruments to measure state variables.

Certain problems arise when attempting to correlate behavioral measures with self-reports of speaker anxiety. Low correlations have been found between personality questionnaire and behavioral checklist scores in studies seeking to provide predictive validity for self-report personality scales. These low correlations between self-reports of actors and the ratings of observers cast some doubt on the validity of constructs assessed through both modes of experience (Mischel, 1968).

Previous studies present another problem in that they constrain audiences to focus on specific phenomena rather than to provide holistic speaker evaluations. For example, in both the Dickens, Gibson, and Prall (1950) and the Dickens and Parker (1951) studies, a simple five step scale was employed to rate speaker anxiety. Mulac and Sherman (1974) point to the limited utility of this approach for assessing the behavioral aspects of speech anxiety. Observation inventory scores can be affected by an audience's subjective evaluations of a communicator, thereby producing less objective measurement of actual behavior (Sypher, 1980). In short, while researchers may assume that their data represent actual reports of behaviors, they may be tapping conceptual schema shared by respondents (Sypher & Sypher, 1984). Unfortunately, the Spielberger state anxiety scale (Spielberger, 1966), the most useful instrument for measuring state speech anxiety (Beatty & Andriante, 1985), has not been employed in studies designed to estimate the degree to which the anxiety experienced by speakers is communicated to audiences. Finally, differences in actor/observer attributions are to be expected because internal states and experiences are more salient to actors than to observers (Funder, 1980). Moreover, actors have more information about their own experiences than do observers (Monson & Snyder, 1977; Nisbett, et al., 1973).

With some exceptions (e.g., Amatora, 1956; Hase & Goldberg, 1967; Kendrick & Stringfield, 1980), studies of self/other agreement reveal a tendency toward low correlation (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Based upon Clevenger's synthesis of earlier research in anxiety, audience-perceived stage-fright and cognitively-perceived

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speaker stage-fright are variables which operate with only moderate interdependence during a public speech (Clevenger, 1959). It should be expected, then, that the state performance anxiety of public speakers will not be communicated well to members of the audience.

Consequently, the present study was designed to test the following hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub>: Speakers' self-reported (mean STAI A-State scores) speech anxiety will be significantly higher than the speech anxiety (mean STAI A-State scores) attributed to them by their audiences.

H<sub>2</sub>: There will be a low to moderate correlation between the level of speech anxiety reported by speakers and the level of speech anxiety detected by their audiences.

## METHOD

### SUBJECTS

All participants in this study were undergraduate college students enrolled in introductory level speech courses. Ninety-five speakers (54 males and 41 females) spoke to audiences ranging in size from fifteen to twenty-five members.

### STATE ANXIETY MEASURE

Spielberger's (1969) STAI (A-State) anxiety scale was selected as the state anxiety measure because it was designed to assess anxiety associated with specific experiences, such as public speaking. In published studies, this instrument has performed according to theoretical expectations and has produced empirical findings consistent with previous research (Behnke, Carlile & Lamb, 1974; Carlile, Behnke & Kitchens, 1977; Beatty & Behnke, 1980; Behnke & Beatty, 1981).

### PROCEDURE

Each of the ninety-five speakers in this study delivered a three to five minute informative speech in a normal classroom setting. Subjects were given one week to prepare their presentations. They spoke extemporaneously and were permitted to use a lecturn and notes. All commentary and discussion about the speeches was deferred until after STAI data were collected. Immediately after each speech, participants responded to scale items as follows: (1) speakers indicated how they felt during their performances, and (2) audience members indicated how they thought speakers felt during the performances.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of a *t*-test indicated that speaker-reported anxiety scores ( $\bar{X} = 44.61$ ; s.d. = 11.30) were significantly higher ( $t = 7.80$ ; d.f. = 188;  $p < .001$ ) than mean audience-perceived speaker anxiety scores ( $\bar{X} = 34.44$ , s.d. = 5.81). These results support hypothesis number one.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient of  $r = .375$  ( $r^2 = .140$ ;  $p < .01$ ) was found between speaker STAI A-State scores and mean audience STAI a-State scores. These results support hypothesis number two.

The findings of this study indicate that: (1) speakers report higher levels of performance anxiety than is attributed to them by their audiences, and (2) the level of speaker anxiety is not very accurately detected by these audiences. It should be noted, however, that all speakers and audience members in the study were students in

introductory level speech courses. While using more sophisticated or better trained subjects could produce somewhat different results, these findings should be particularly interesting to students and instructors in basic speech performance courses which include public speaking assignments.

Students in beginning speech courses are concerned that the anxiety which they feel during public speaking will be communicated to their audiences. The findings of this study, to the contrary, suggest that untrained audiences are not very good at detecting the self-perceived anxiety of beginning speakers. Possibly the audience's attention is focused on communicative channels which do not provide much information concerning a speaker's affective states, or perhaps audiences do not attend well to those channels which have the capacity to leak information which is useful in the accurate assessment of performance anxiety of public speakers. An alternate explanation is that moderate levels of state speech anxiety do not deteriorate speaking performances sufficiently to produce noticeable alterations in behavior.

While future research should attempt to clarify the reasons that anxiety is not communicated well to audiences, other avenues also merit investigation. For example, future studies should investigate the impact of training, experience, nonverbal sensitivity, and other relevant audience characteristics on the communication of public speaking anxiety.

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