

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION, SOCIAL PREFERENCE, AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN A COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

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An investigation of high and low communication apprehensives in a college environment indicated that high communication apprehensives interact less with peer strangers, are less likely to accept a blind date, have fewer dates, are more likely to engage in exclusive dating, have close relationships with fewer faculty, are less satisfied with a university's advising system, and are less satisfied with the college environment. These results are examined within the context of the Berger-Calabrese developmental theory of interpersonal communication and an extension of that theory is tentatively advanced.

In recent years a substantial number of studies have been reported that have investigated the relationships among communication apprehension, communication behavior, and interpersonal perceptions.¹ While many of these studies have involved college students, most have tested hypotheses concerning communication apprehension in general, and the use of college students as research subjects was merely incidental to the purpose of the research. Very few of the previous studies have focused on the impact of communication apprehension on the lives of young people in the college environment.

The major exceptions to the above pattern have been studies which focused on the relationship between communication apprehension and academic achievement.² These

studies provide considerable support for the notion that high communication apprehensives achieve significantly less than low communication apprehensives in most instructional environments. Thus, it has been fairly well established that communication apprehension is negatively related to success in one of the two major dimensions of college life, the academic dimension. The current research was directed toward the other major dimension of college life, the social dimension.

Rationale and Hypotheses

Communication apprehension has been shown to be associated with a variety of social withdrawal behaviors. For example, high communication apprehensives, as compared with lows, have been found to talk less, to choose more remote housing and seating, and to find other people less attractive.³ Within the college environment, particularly larger colleges and universities, students have considerable freedom to control the amount of interaction they have with their peers and faculty. On the basis of the previous research, therefore, we would expect that high communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, would develop fewer relationships with either peers or faculty in the college environment.

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¹For a summary of this research, see James C. McCroskey, "Oral Communication Apprehension," *Human Communication Research*, 4(1977), 78-96.

²See, for example, Michael D. Scott, Michael P. Yates, and Lawrence R. Wheelless, "An Exploratory Investigation of the Effects of Communication Apprehension in Alternative Systems of Instruction," paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Chicago, Illinois, 1975; James C. McCroskey and Janis F. Andersen, "The Relationship Between Communication Apprehension and Academic Achievement Among College Students," *Human Communication Research*, 3(1976), 73-81; and Michael D. Scott and Lawrence R. Wheelless, "The Relationship of Three Types of Communication Apprehension to Classroom Achievement," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 42 (1977), 246-255.

³For a summary of some of this research and several theoretical propositions drawn from it, see James C. McCroskey, "The Effects of Communication Apprehension on Nonverbal Behavior," *Communication Quarterly*, 24(Winter, 1976), pp. 39-44.

It is important to note at this point that research has not demonstrated that high communication apprehensives, as compared with lows, have a lower need or desire for close relationships with other people. Rather, the research suggests that their communication apprehension is a barrier to engaging in the communication necessary to form such relationships. The rationale for the present research, therefore, was as follows:

- (1) High and low communication apprehensives do not differ in their need or desire for social relationships with others in the College environment;
- (2) High communication apprehensives are limited by their communication apprehension from engaging in sufficient communication necessary to establish many social relationships in the college environment;
- (3) As a consequence, high communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, establish fewer social relationships; and
- (4) High communication apprehensives are less satisfied with their college environment than are low communication apprehensives.

On the basis of the above rationale eight hypotheses were generated for testing in this study. We will consider each of these in turn.

(1) *High and low communication apprehensives do not differ in the number of dates they would like to have during a given 14 day period.* Unlike the remaining hypotheses, this hypothesis was framed in null form. Since no previous research has indicated differences attributable to communication apprehension in the need or desire for social relationships, we had no reason to expect a difference here. It was considered important to test this hypothesis, however, because should communication apprehension and amount of dates desired prove to be related, this would challenge the first point in our rationale and be very important in interpreting the results related to later hypotheses.

(2) *High communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, are less likely to engage in interaction with peer strangers within the college environment.* The first step in establishing a social relationship is getting acquainted. At the University where this study was conducted students ride back and forth between two campuses on a university bus system. This provides daily opportunities to encounter peer strangers. This hypothesis

posited that the high communication apprehensives would be less likely to interact with these individuals than the low communication apprehensives would be.

(3) *High communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, are less likely to accept a blind date.* An alternative to engaging in communication with a peer stranger and developing a social relationship which could subsequently lead to a dating relationship would be accepting a blind date arranged by someone else. We believe, however, that for the high communication apprehensives this would provide a very threatening communication experience and would be avoided.

(4) *High communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, will report having fewer dates for a given 14 day period.* This hypothesis follows from the two previous hypotheses. If high communication apprehensives form fewer social relationships and/or are less willing to accept blind dates, they are likely to have fewer dates.

(5) *High communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, are more likely to date one person to the exclusion of others.* This hypothesis is based on the assumed equality of need for social relationships of high and low communication apprehensives and the reduced dating opportunities of high communication apprehensives hypothesized above. If high communication apprehensives need or desire close social relationships but are prevented from "playing the field" by their apprehension, it follows that they will attempt to satisfy their need by holding on to whatever relationship they can establish.

(6) *High communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, established fewer close relationships with faculty members.* This hypothesis is based on the previous research indicating that high communication apprehensives engage in social withdrawal. This pattern should be clearly evident in the superior-subordinate nature of typical faculty-student relationships.

(7) *High communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, have less positive attitudes toward a faculty-student advising system.* At the university where this study was conducted, students are required to consult with a faculty advisor for each semester's registration. The advisor must approve the student's schedule before he or she is permitted to enroll. Because of the superior-subordinate nature of the interaction pro-

duced by this system, it was believed that such interaction would be very threatening to high communication apprehensives and would result in negative attitudes toward the system.

(8) *High communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, have less positive attitudes toward the college environment.* This hypothesis is based on the assumption that all, or at least some, of the previous hypotheses are correct. If such is the case this would indicate less success on the social dimension of college life for high communication apprehensives and presumably would lead to less satisfaction with the college environment as a whole.

Method

This study involved 71 students, 34 low apprehensives and 37 high apprehensives, enrolled in a basic communication course at West Virginia University. Nearly all of the subjects lived on campus or in private apartments in the community. The class rank of the subjects was approximately 34% freshmen, 49% sophomores, 11% juniors, and 6% seniors. There were approximately the same number of males and females among the high and low apprehension groups. Participation in the study was voluntary.

The subjects were selected from a group of 275 students who completed an initial screening. Students who were married ($N = 36$) were excluded from the data analyses. The initial screening involved administration of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) College Form.⁴ Students who scored beyond one standard deviation above the mean for the sample were classified as high communication apprehensives, those who scored beyond one standard deviation below the mean were classified as low communication apprehensives. The split-half reliability estimate for the PRCA was .93, which is comparable to previous estimates of reliability for this instrument.

Four weeks after the initial screening the subjects completed a questionnaire designed to elicit data relevant to the hypotheses of the study. A total of 25 questions appeared on the instrument. Eight of these were relevant to

the study; the remainder provided a cover for the purpose of the study. Four of the relevant items requested an open-end numerical response, one required a dichotomous choice, and three provided a nine-step response option bound by bipolar adjectives. The items employed, in the order of our hypotheses noted above, are reported in Figure 1.

The data generated from item 5 were subjected to chi square analysis. The data from the remaining items were submitted to a single classification (high versus low communication apprehension groups) multivariate analysis of variance. Since the MANOVA produced a significant result, the individual hypotheses were tested by means of *t*-tests between the high and low communication apprehension groups for the data related to that hypothesis. The .05 alpha level was set for significance of all tests.

Because the first hypothesis was tested in null form and not rejected, a power analysis for that test was conducted to determine the likelihood that the result was an artifact of Type II error.⁵

Results

The results of the multi-variate analysis and the *t*-tests are reported in Table 1. As indicated in that table the MANOVA analysis yielded a significant effect (Pillai's Trace, $F = 2.50, P < .05$). The communication apprehension independent variable accounted for 23 percent of the variance on the canonical variable generated by the analysis. All of the *t*-tests, with the exception of that performed on the data concerning number of dates wanted, produced significant results. In each case the observed difference between high and low communication apprehensives was in the hypothesized direction.

The chi square analysis of the data concerning exclusive/steady dating produced a significant result (Chi square = 5.97). While only nine of the 34 low apprehensives reported that they dated one person to the exclusion of others, 20 of the 37 high apprehensives reported that they did so. In percentage terms, 26 percent of low apprehensives and 54 percent of the high apprehensives reported exclusive/steady dating behavior.

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⁴James C. McCroskey, "Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety," *Speech Monographs*, 37(1970), 269-277.

⁵Jacob Cohen, *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences*, (New York: Academic Press, 1969).

Figure 1
Questionnaire Items Administered

1. How many dates would you like to have in the next 14 days? _____
2. In the past week, how many times have you spoken to a person you did not know while on or waiting for a campus bus? _____
3. How likely would you be to accept a blind date?
Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Likely
4. How many dates have you had in the last 14 days? _____
5. Do you date one person regularly to the exclusion of others?
Yes _____ No _____
6. How many faculty members do you know well enough that you would be willing to engage in a social conversation with them? _____
7. How satisfied are you with the advisor system here at _____ ?
Very Dissatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Satisfied
8. How pleased are you with your overall experiences here at _____ ?
Very Displeased 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very Pleased

Table 1
Results of the Multivariate
and t-test Analyses

Dependent Variable	Apprehension Level Means		Correlation with Canonical Variable	t
	High Apprehension	Low Apprehension		
Canonical Variable	.41	.54	—	—
Dates Wanted	5.2	5.9	.16	.69
Persons on Bus	2.1	6.3	.42	1.84*
Accept Blind Date	3.6	4.6	.39	1.69*
Dates Had	2.4	4.2	.43	1.89*
Faculty Known	2.0	3.9	.44	1.93*
Satisfaction/Advisor	4.7	5.7	.39	1.72*
Satisfaction/College	6.2	7.2	.49	2.14*

*p < .05, directional test.

hypothesis indicated a power of .21 for a very small effect size ($d = .2$), .67 for a moderate effect size ($d = .5$), and .95 for a large effect size ($d = .8$). This analysis suggests that while we cannot discount the possibility of the existence of a weak relationship between communication apprehension and desired number of dates, we can be reasonably confident that no moderate relationship exists, and almost certain that there is no strong relationship between these variables.

In a supplementary analysis, Crowne-Marlowe social desirability scores, which were available from all subjects as a result of an unrelated study, were correlated with each of the variables in this study.⁶ Significant correlations were observed between social desirability and the PRCA scores ($r = -.26$) and the number of dates desired ($r = .26$). No other correlations were significant. Consequently,

⁶Douglas P. Crowne and David Marlowe. *The Approval Motive* (New York: Wiley, 1964).

the data on dates desired were submitted to a one-way analysis of covariance, levels of communication apprehension being the independent variable and Crowne-Marlowe scores being the covariate. The results were virtually identical to the t-test previously reported. No significant effect for communication apprehension was observed ($F = 0.56$, $t = .75$). The means adjusted for social desirability were virtually the same as the unadjusted means (High = 5.2, Low = 5.8). Thus, social desirability was discounted as a factor influencing the results of this study.

Discussion

The results of this study provided support for all of our theoretical hypotheses. High communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, were found to interact less with peer strangers, to be less likely to accept a blind date, to have fewer dates, to be more likely to engage in exclusive dating, to have close rela-

tionships with fewer faculty, to be less satisfied with the university's advising system, and to be less satisfied with the college environment. Although, as was posited in our rationale, high and low communication apprehensives were not found to differ in their need or desire for close relationships, high communication apprehensives were found to engage in withdrawal from communication with others, have fewer dates than others, and to have less positive attitudes toward their college environment.

We believe it is useful to consider these results within the framework of the developmental theory of interpersonal communication advanced by Berger and Calabrese. A central axiom of that theory states:

Given the high level of uncertainty present at the onset of the entry phase (of the acquaintance process), as the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the level of uncertainty for each interactant in the relationship will decrease. As uncertainty is further reduced, the amount of verbal communication will increase.⁷

This axiom stresses the importance of communication among strangers for the building of an initial relationship. In the absence of communication, as is typically the case with high communication apprehensives, uncertainty is maintained at a high level. With uncertainty at a high level there is no opportunity for the development of a close or intimate relationship. Thus, as Berger and Calabrese note, "amount of communication and liking are positively related."⁸

Thus, for the high communication apprehensive in the college environment, the inability to interact initially with strangers, either peers or faculty, results in the maintenance of high levels of uncertainty on the part of both the communication-apprehensive individual and others in the communication apprehensive's environment. The presence of this uncertainty militates against both communication between the people and the development of close or intimate relationships.

In the present study the high communication apprehensives were observed to interact less with strangers and to have fewer dates. Both results would be predicted by the Berger-Calabrese theory. In addition, the

theory tentatively may be extended from these results. Consider the following proposition:

Given people with equal needs or desires for the establishment of close or intimate relationships, those who establish the fewest such relationships will strive harder to retain those which they do establish.

The results of the present study indicate that high communication apprehensives establish fewer relationships, but that they are more likely to restrict their dating to a single individual.

While the present data are far from sufficient to provide empirical proof of this theoretical extension, they are supportive of it. Future research should examine other hypotheses that may be deduced from this proposition, such as:

- (1) High communication apprehensives are less likely to seek a divorce than are low communication apprehensives.
- (2) High communication apprehensives are less likely to voluntarily leave a job where they have a close relationship with a peer or superior than are low communication apprehensives.
- (3) High communication apprehensives are less likely to move from their home environment (home town, neighborhood) than are low communication apprehensives.
- (4) High communication apprehensives are more likely to attend college in their home town than are low communication apprehensives.
- (5) High communication apprehensives will suffer from greater psychological stress as a result of the destruction of a close relationship than will low communication apprehensives.
- (6) High communication apprehensives marry at an earlier age than low communication apprehensives.

Should such hypotheses ultimately receive confirmation, our tentative theoretical extension would have a much stronger empirical base. At present, we must conclude that high communication apprehensives in the college environment differ substantially from low communication apprehensives in terms of their social preferences, their social behaviors, and their satisfaction with their college environment. Whether the behavioral pattern evidenced in this study is symptomatic of a life-long pattern or unique to the college atmosphere must be determined through future research.

⁷Charles R. Berger and Richard J. Calabrese, "Some Explorations in Initial Interaction and Beyond: Toward a Developmental Theory of Interpersonal Communication," *Human Communication Research*, 1(1975), 101-102.

⁸Berger and Calabrese, 108.