

Apprehension About Communicating With Supervisors: A Test of a Theoretical Relationship Between Types of Communication Apprehension

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The purpose of the present study was to provide a test of one component of the theoretical relationships among the various types of communication apprehension (CA) as advanced by McCroskey (1984). The results of the study were supportive of the theory in that traitlike CA was found to be a modest predictor of a form of audience-based CA, subordinate communication with her/his supervisor, while a situational component, affect toward supervisor, was a much stronger predictor.

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION (CA) currently is defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977; 1978; 1982a,b; 1984). While some of the earlier work in the area of CA did not make distinctions among types of CA (McCroskey, 1970); more recently CA has been discussed as having components of both trait and state. The most recent conceptualization (McCroskey, 1984) of the CA construct recognizes three types of CA beyond the trait CA which has received most of the attention in the literature in the past 15 years. This conceptualization suggests there are four types of CA. They are as follows: Traitlike CA; Context-Based CA; Audience-Based CA; and Situational CA (McCroskey, 1984)¹

This reconceptualization goes beyond the simple dichotomy of trait and state CA. In fact, McCroskey (1984) suggests that we have done our research an injustice by suggesting such a simple dichotomy. He states, "This distinction has been quite helpful to researchers in the CA area in their attempt to distinguish older from newer approaches to this

subject. Unfortunately, this distinction has come to be viewed as a dichotomy, a false dichotomy" (pg. 15). He suggests that to view all human behavior as being the product of either a traitlike predisposition or a situation "ignores the powerful interaction of these two sources" (pg. 15). McCroskey suggests we abandon this false dichotomy and view CA as ranging from an extreme trait pole to an extreme state pole, realizing that pure trait and state probably do not exist.

The trait-state distinction with regard to anxiety has been the subject of considerable research and theoretical development in the field of psychology for the past two decades. One of the earliest writers in this area was Spielberger (1966). His theoretical efforts and the measures he developed have strongly influenced research in this area both in psychology and communication. McCroskey (1984), of course, was not the first to raise questions about the trait-state dichotomy. It is now generally accepted that either a pure trait or a pure state approach to anxiety is inadequate (Levitt, 1980; Zuckerman, 1976). Traits and situations interact, and the anxiety a person feels at a given time is far from perfectly predicted by either approach. McCroskey's reconceptualization, then, may be viewed as identifying two types of interactions which occur between traits and states.

The present study is a direct test of one of the theoretical relationships among types of CA advanced by McCroskey (1984). It examines the relationship of traitlike CA with audience-based CA. To understand the nature of the theoretical relationship to be tested, we need to review the four types of CA posited by McCroskey and Richmond (1982) and McCroskey (1982a, b, 1983, & 1984).

Types of CA

Traitlike CA. The term "traitlike" was chosen to distinguish a pure, invariant trait (such as eye color) from the personality-type variable that does not meet the scientific definition of pure trait. However, "traitlike" still means relatively enduring across time. Traitlike characteristics are highly resistant to change, although even adults' traitlike characteristics can be changed. McCroskey (1984) defines traitlike CA as "a relatively enduring, personality-type orientation toward a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts" (pg. 16).

There are three varieties of this type of CA which have been addressed in the literature. They are CA about oral communication, CA about writing, and CA about singing. The primary means of measuring these have been the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982b); the Writing Apprehension Test (Daly & Miller, 1975); and the Test of Singing Apprehension (Andersen, Andersen, & Garrison, 1976). All of these measures are presumed to be traitlike measures of apprehension. This means that the score for an individual on any of these measures will be highly similar over an extended period of time, barring any type of treatment.

Context-Based CA. This type of CA is viewed as "a relatively enduring, personality-type orientation toward communication in a given type of context" (pg 16). This type of CA is one step further removed from a pure trait than traitlike CA. CA viewed from this vantage point represents orientations toward communication within generalizable contexts, such as the fear of public speaking. This view posits that people can have a fear of communicating in one type of context while having little or no apprehension about communicating in another context (McCroskey, 1984).

Although no classification of the varieties of context-based CA has yet been generally accepted, McCroskey and Richmond (1982) have provided a classification of communication settings that seems adequate, although not necessarily exhaustive. They posit that there can be CA about public speaking, dyadic situations (e.g., job interviews), small group discussions, and meetings or classes. A person can have high communication apprehension about meeting new people but not about speaking in public, or the reverse could be true. This type of CA is specific to a type of communication, such as meeting new people, but tends to be influenced little by the situation surrounding the particular communication event.

Several researchers have developed instruments to measure the public speaking anxiety experienced by people. Gilkinson (1942) developed the Personal Report of Confidence as a Speaker (PRCS). Following in Gilkinson's footsteps, Paul (1966) developed a shorter version of the PRCS for measuring public speaking anxiety. McCroskey (1970) developed the Personal Report of Public Speaking Apprehension (PRPSA). More recently, McCroskey and Richmond (1982) have offered instruments for measuring each of the four varieties of context-based CA. It is assumed that the scores on any one of these measures will be highly similar across an extended period of time, barring any treatment program. It is also assumed that moderate to moderately-high correlations should exist between the traitlike measures and the context-based measures of CA. McCroskey states, "To the extent that a traitlike orientation toward communication actually exists, an appropriate measure of that orientation should be at least somewhat predictive of orientations within generalized contexts" (pg. 17).

Audience-Based CA. McCroskey and Richmond (1982) suggest that almost 95 percent of the population report having communication apprehension about communicating with some person or group. For example, a boss or a co-worker could produce this type of apprehension. This type of CA represents the apprehension experienced when communicating with a given individual or group of individuals across time regardless of generalized context. Audience-based CA is viewed as "a relatively enduring orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people" (pg. 17). It is not primarily personality based, but rather is mainly a reaction to the situational constraints created

by the other person or group. While this type of CA is seen as relatively enduring, it can change as a function of the behavior of the other person or group. Even though people with traitlike CA and context-based CA would be expected to have high CA with more groups and persons, traitlike CA should not be expected to be highly predictive of the CA experienced with a particular person or group. Since this CA is induced primarily by the person or group rather than by a personality trait of the individual, length of acquaintance might heavily impact the predictive power of a traitlike measure. In the early stages of acquaintance the personality orientations might be quite predictive, but in later stages of acquaintance the unique characteristics of the situation (person or group) may overpower the personality orientations (Richmond, 1978; McCroskey & Beatty, 1984).

Since traitlike CA has received the majority of attention in the communication field, there has been little attempt to measure audience-based CA. However, McCroskey and Richmond (1982) developed the Situational Apprehension Measure which, when adapted to specific communication relationships, appears to be an excellent method of measuring audience-based CA. The McCroskey and Richmond (1982) instrument can be readily adapted for any person or group.

Situational CA. This is the most state-like of the types of CA. This type is viewed as "a transitory orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 18). Most people experience this type of CA at one time or another. This is the type of CA that represents the apprehension that is experienced only with a given individual or group in a single situation or at a given time. For example, a supervisor may call a subordinate into her/his office and ask the subordinate to explain and justify why she/he engaged in a certain behavior. In most instances this could create state CA within the subordinate when communicating with the supervisor. Although people experiencing high traitlike CA or high context-based CA would be expected to experience higher levels of situational CA than others, there is no evidence that traitlike CA or high context-based CA is highly predictive of situational CA. However, audience-based CA should be expected to be moderately highly related to situational CA (McCroskey, 1984). Since audience-based CA is partially a function of prior history with the person or group comprising the audience, this might impact the level of CA in a given situation involving that person or group or a similar person or group.

There has been attention given to the measurement of situational CA. Spielberger's (1966) State Anxiety Inventory and the Situational Apprehension Measure developed by McCroskey and Richmond (1982) appear to be useful for measuring situational CA.

Theoretical Relationships Among CA Types

The four types of CA outlined above are presumed to fall on a continuum from the most traitlike to the least traitlike. Since a continuum is envisioned, as opposed to discrete categories, an underlying assumption is that the types of CA are all interrelated. The strength of such relationships depends on how close two types are on the underlying continuum. Thus, a measure of traitlike CA would be decreasingly predictive of other types of CA as the other type approaches the least traitlike end of the continuum. Similarly, a measure of situational CA would be decreasingly predictive of other types of CA as the other type approaches the most traitlike end of the continuum.

If this theoretical continuum has validity, neighbors on the continuum should be substantially correlated, while more distant relatives should be less correlated. The lowest correlations should be expected between traitlike CA and situational CA. In fact, such correlations in some cases may approach .00. Predispositions toward experiencing CA (the first three types) should be the most predictive of the actual experiencing of CA in a given situation when that situation is unique and the individual has little basis upon which to anticipate what the experience will be like.

Testing the Theory

Several previous research studies have provided data relevant to the testing of this theory. Before examining these, it is important that we clarify what constitutes an appropriate test of the theory. CA is viewed as an internally experienced, affective response to communication. As McCroskey (1984) notes:

Although CA indeed may have some behavioral implications . . . it is experienced by the individual internally. *The only effect of CA that is predicted to be universal across both individuals and types of CA is an internally experienced feeling of discomfort.* (pg. 33)

Thus, although behavioral differences may occur as a function of CA, the present theoretical position addresses only the internal affective responses of the individual. Hence, testing of the theory must be restricted to reports of such experiences.

McCroskey and Beatty (1984) reinforce this point. They note that while traitlike measures of CA are predictive of behaviors in some instances, this does not mean that such relationships are "appropriate for determining the validity of an anxiety trait." They suggest that behavior is a product of the interaction between traits and situations and that a trait measure should only be able to predict at a modest level the state anxiety the subject will experience in a given situation.

Testing of the theoretical relationships among types of CA, then, must be based on correlations among the various types. Working from a traitlike base, three tests are critical: traitlike to context-based, traitlike to

audience-based, and traitlike to situational. (Three other tests are also important but will be considered in later research: context-based to audience-based; context-based to situational, and audience-based to situational.) Two of these have been addressed in previous research.

In a recent study McCroskey, Beatty, Kearney, and Plax (1985) tested five relationships between traitlike CA and context-based CA. Theoretically, such relationships should yield high correlations, since these represent neighbors on the theoretical continuum. The results obtained were highly supportive of the theory. The obtained correlations ranged from .53 to .76. The median correlation was .70.

Several studies have examined the theoretical relationship between traitlike CA and situational CA. In the broadest test of this relationship McCroskey and Beatty (1984) examined four communication situations representing four different communication contexts: public speaking, speaking in meetings, talking in a small group, and dyadic interaction. Obtained correlations ranged between .25 and .54, with a median of .40. Consistent with the theoretical expectations, correlations for the most unique or unusual situations, public speaking and speaking in a meeting, were substantially higher (.54 and .52 respectively) than for the more common communication situations involving group discussion (.28) and dyadic interaction (.25), although all relationships were statistically significant. Also, consistent with theoretical expectations, employing subscores on the PRCA as measures of context-based CA, higher correlations between context-based CA and situational CA were obtained than were observed for traitlike CA and situational CA.

Two studies which were reported prior to the generation of the present theoretical formulation also provide support for the theory. Richmond (1978) conducted two studies which related traitlike CA to situational CA involving dyadic interaction. In both cases she observed significant relationships between the two types of CA during initial interactions between dyadic partners. However, after a number of interactions between partners, the relationship declined to .00. The later situations, of course, were no longer unique to the subjects, hence low or non-existent correlations probably should have been expected. In the initial phases of the studies, the interactants would not have yet developed a level of audience-based CA for their dyad partners, hence their traitlike and context-based CA (in this case, dyadic) would be expected to be predictive. In later phases, however, a level of audience-based CA would be established and would be expected to be much more predictive of situational CA. Unfortunately, no measure of audience-based CA was taken in either study.

The Present Study

This study was designed to directly test the predictive power of the PRCA as an index of traitlike CA as it relates to CA in a given

source-receiver relationship. Specifically, this study was designed to investigate the relationship between traitlike CA and apprehension generally experienced by a subordinate when communicating with her/his supervisor. This context was chosen because it is fairly representative of a situation in which a person might find him/herself and in which anxiety is likely to occur. We would expect the relationship between trait CA and audience-based CA to generate a moderate correlation (e.g. $r = .20$ to $.40$) based upon earlier results (Richmond, 1978; and McCroskey & Beatty, 1984). Hence, the first hypothesis advanced for investigation was:

- H₁: The traitlike apprehension of a subordinate will be significantly related to her/his audience-based communication apprehension with her/his supervisor.

Since audience-based CA is two steps removed from traitlike CA on the underlying theoretical continuum, as noted above the correlation between the two was not expected to be high. Rather, since audience-based CA is near the situational end of the continuum, we should expect aspects of the situation related to the target audience to be very influential in determining the level of experienced or anticipated CA of the individual. In particular, the general affect of the subordinate for the supervisor should have considerable influence. Communicating with people we like and respect in the work environment should generate less CA than communicating with people we dislike or disrespect. Hence, the second hypothesis advanced for investigation was:

- H₂: The audience-based communication apprehension that a subordinate experiences when communicating with her/his supervisor will be significantly related to the subordinate's affect toward her/his supervisor.

Although we did not advance a specific hypothesis concerning the magnitude of the above hypothesized relationships, we expected the association of affect toward supervisor and audience-based CA to be substantially higher than the association of traitlike CA and audience-based CA.

It should be noted at this point that our expectation of a negative relationship between apprehension and affect toward supervisor should not be taken as a generalized expectation of the association between apprehension and affect. In a dating context, for example, we might expect an opposite relationship, or at least a non-linear relationship. Our expectation was based solely on the context of the work environment.

METHODS

Sample

The sample used in the study consisted of 328 employees from various organizations and areas of employment within the organizations (111 financial; 91 educational; 31 professional/technical; 14 mining/production; 13 sales; 19 secretarial/clerical; 29 management; 15 various blue collar; and 5 non-specific). The sample represented employees who held positions from near the top of their organization to middle management to employees who held positions near the bottom of their organization. There were 190 male subjects and 138 female subjects.

Measurement

Traitlike Communication Apprehension. Traitlike CA was operationalized as the subjects' scores on McCroskey's (1982b) newest version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). This new 24-item PRCA instrument employs the same instructions and response options as earlier versions of the PRCA. However, the PRCA-24 includes six items, three positively and three negatively worded to avoid response bias, assessing each of four contexts: public speaking, meetings or classes, group discussions, and dyadic interactions. As with the older versions of the PRCA, this new instrument is unidimensional. The alpha reliability coefficient for the PRCA-24 was .97 in this study.

Audience-Based Communication Apprehension. A subject's audience-based communication apprehension was operationalized as the subject's score on the McCroskey and Richmond (1982) Situational Apprehension Measure (SAM). The SAM is a 20-item, 7-step, Likert-type measure. In this study the subjects were given the following instructions: "Please complete the following questionnaire about how you feel when *interacting with your supervisor*." The subjects were asked to complete the SAM by indicating from 1 to 7 how accurate each statement was in terms of describing how they felt while interacting with a supervisor. The alpha reliability coefficient for the SAM was .97 in this study.

Subordinate Affect for Supervisor. The Job Descriptive Index (JDI) developed by Smith, Kendall and Hulin (1969) was employed to measure a subject's affect toward his/her supervisor. Since the affect toward supervisor was the concern of this study, only the supervisor satisfaction portion of the JDI was employed. Subjects were asked to complete the JDI measure for satisfaction with supervision by indicating on a 7-point scale the degree to which they agreed that various statements described their supervisor. The alpha reliability coefficient for the measure was .91 in this study.

Data Collection

The data were collected in two ways. Some of the subjects were spouses of teachers enrolled in a graduate class entitled "Communication in the Educational Organization." On the first day of class the subjects were asked to take the questionnaire home and get one other person to complete it. There was no chance for contamination from any material presented in the class since the instrument was sent home before any material related to the questionnaire was discussed. All the respondents returned their questionnaires before the fourth day of the class. There were 217 usable forms from 226 returned. The second set of questionnaires was collected from persons associated with the banking/financial industry during a managerial workshop conducted by one of the authors. These were collected before any material related to the questionnaire was discussed. There were 111 usable forms from 113 returned. On the questionnaire the subjects were asked to list their current job title/position. The authors coded the job descriptions into one of the following categories: financial; educational; professional/technical; mining/production; sales; secretarial/clerical; blue collar; management; and other.

Data Analyses

A correlational analysis was performed between the PRCA-24 and the SAM to test hypothesis one. A correlational analysis was performed between the SAM and the satisfaction dimension of the JDI to test hypothesis two. Since the financial and education categories accounted for over half of the subjects, subanalyses were conducted which retained these categories and collapsed the remaining subject categories. There were no significant differences between subject groups; hence, they were all analyzed as one group. There were also no differences between males and females. All tests were conducted at the .05 level of significance.

RESULTS*Hypothesis 1*

Hypothesis one stated: The traitlike communication apprehension of a subordinate will be significantly related to her/his audience-based communication apprehension with her/his supervisor. The correlation between the traitlike CA and audience-based CA was .24, $p < .05$. This is consistent with the argument that there should be a moderate correlation between traitlike CA and audience-based CA.

Hypothesis two stated: The audience-based communication apprehension that a subordinate experiences when communicating with her/his supervisor will be significantly related to the subordinate's affect toward her/his supervisor. The correlation between the audience-based CA and

affect with supervisor was $-.52, p < .05$. This indicates that as satisfaction with supervisor decreases, anxiety about communicating with supervisor increases.

A post-hoc correlational analysis was performed to test the relationship between the traitlike CA and subordinate's affect toward her/his supervisor. The correlation between traitlike CA and affect with supervisor was low but significant ($r = -.15, p < .05$). This indicates that audience-based CA was a stronger predictor of satisfaction than traitlike CA.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present investigation was to provide a test of one component of the theoretical relationships among the various types of CA as advanced by McCroskey (1984). This theoretical formulation posits that various types of CA distribute themselves along a continuum bound by poles representing traitlike and situational orientations. The theory suggests that a measure of traitlike CA will be decreasingly predictive of other types of CA as the other type approaches the situational end of the continuum.

Previous research has supported the theoretical predictions, with traitlike CA being highly predictive of context-based CA and more modestly predictive of situational CA. No previous test of the theory with regard to the relationship between traitlike CA and audience-based CA has been reported. The present study was designed to provide such a test.

The results of this study indicated that traitlike CA is a significant predictor of audience-based CA in the particular context investigated, subordinate-supervisor communication. The modest correlation obtained was in the range expected based upon the theory and previous research relating to other points on the continuum. Thus, these results should be interpreted as supportive of the theoretical formulation.

The results also indicated that aspects of the situational context are likely to be much more predictive of audience-based CA than are traitlike predispositions. The correlation of affect toward supervisor in this study accounted for 27 percent of the variance in audience-based CA while the correlation of traitlike CA accounted for only 6 percent. In a post hoc analysis, the two predictors were entered into a multiple correlational analysis with audience-based CA. The combined predictors could account for 30 percent of the variance in the criterion variable. Decomposition of the multiple correlation indicated that traitlike CA accounted for 4 percent, affect accounted for 24 percent, and 2 percent represented colinear prediction. These results suggest that traitlike CA has a modest direct effect on the development of audience-based CA as well as a small indirect (by influencing affect) effect. However, the situational aspects of the interaction, in this case affect toward supervisor,

are much more predictive of the level of audience-based CA which will develop.

In conjunction with previous research noted earlier, this study suggests substantial empirical support for the current theoretical formulation concerning CA and the validity of the instruments employed in these investigations. However, before the theory can be considered fully supported, additional research involving context-based/audience-based, context-based/situational, and audience-based/situational relationships is necessary.

ENDNOTES

1 The terms "context-based" and "audience-based" are used here. The terms "generalized-context" and "person-group" were used in the original. The terms chosen were selected to reflect the basis of the CA more clearly.

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