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Communication Traits and Social Phobia

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Abstract

This paper is directed toward the potential relationship between the psychological construct of Social Phobia and several communication traits. The results of the present research indicate that communication apprehension, and to a lesser extent, behavioral shyness, self-perceived communication competence, and assertiveness are substantially related with two of the sub-constructs of social phobia (fear and avoidance of performance). Willingness to communicate, compulsive communication, responsiveness, and nonverbal immediacy had small or no relationship with these social phobia constructs. None of the communication traits were found to be strongly associated with the other two sub-constructs (fear and avoidance) of social phobia. Researchers are cautioned about the questionable validity of the measure of social phobia for use in communication research.

Psychological and communication scholars often appear to be interested in the same phenomena. Frequently, however, they focus their attention on different aspects of those phenomena. As an illustration of this claim, psychologists have become interested in what they refer to as Asocial phobia.@ There are two primary elements of this constructBfear and avoidance. Liebowitz (1987) developed an instrument (the LSAS) to measure the components of social phobia that yields four scores, one each for fear of performance, avoidance of performance, fear of social situations, avoidance of social situations. Wrench, Brogan, McCroskey, and Jowi (2006) hypothesized that LSAS scores would positively correlate with scores for the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (fear) and negatively correlate with ones for the Willingness to Communicate (avoidance) scores. Their results showed positive correlations between the PRCA and the LSAS scores ranging from .44 to .56 and negative correlations between the WTC and LSAS scores from -.30 to -.37. Although all these correlations were statistically significant, the measures are far from isomorphic. When it comes to the cluster of concepts this manuscript has addressed it is clear that psychology and communication scholars are not studying the same things, even though they are conceptually similar and and empirically related. The primary purpose of the present study was to assess the degree to which additional communication traits are associated with the components of social phobia.

Rationale and Hypotheses

Since the results of Wrench et al.=s (2006) study indicated that all of the components of social phobia were associated with communication apprehension and willingness to communicate, if valid, the findings presumably would be replicated in the present research. Hence, our first two hypotheses were:

H1. The components of social phobia are positively correlated with communication apprehension.

H2. The components of social phobia are negatively correlated with willingness to communicate.

Since the construct of social phobia suggests that people who are phobic fear and avoid communication and the theory of behavioral shyness suggests that some people behave in a shy manner because they fear communication, we posed a third hypothesis:

H3. The components of social phobia are positively correlated with behavioral shyness.

The construct of self-perceived communication competence suggests that people who think of themselves as competent communicators are more likely to initiate communication than those who see themselves as less competent. Similarly, people who indicate that they are talkaholics (compulsive communicators) ostensibly communicate virtually without concern for other factors. Consequently:

H4. The components of social phobia are negatively correlated with self-perceived communication competence.

H5. The components of social phobia are negatively correlated with compulsive communication.

The theory related to assertiveness and responsiveness suggests that both traits are positive elements in the communication process. Since a phobic reaction to communication would be likely to interfere with effective communication, we hypothesized that:

H6. The components of social phobia are negatively correlated with assertiveness.

H7. The components of social phobia are negatively correlated with responsiveness.

Method

Participants

Participants were students in elective undergraduate classes in a Mid-Atlantic university. Students could use the courses to satisfy university core requirements. There was a total of 187 participants (93 males, 90 females, 4 unknown), predominately Caucasian (over 90%), with ages ranging from 18 to 26 years (161 first or second year students, 22 juniors, 4 unknown) who took part in the study. Forty-eight students were planning to major in the Arts and Humanities, 53 in the Social Sciences, 42 in the Sciences and Mathematics, 38 in Business, and 6 undecided.

Procedure

Collection of the data for this study occurred during the first day of class. This research had the approval of the university=s IRB. To maintain anonymity, we detached the cover page, which explained the study and requested the above data, as well as a signed agreement to participate in the study, from the research instrument. Different research assistants collected the different items.

Measures

Social Phobia. The Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS; Liebowitz, 1987) was the measure of the four components of social phobia. This instrument has 24 items, for which participants indicate how likely they would respond to the situation with Afear or anxiety.@ To the same items, the participants indicated how likely they would Atry to avoid@ this kind of situation. Scoring for the avoidance/fear items in the measure are scored separately into twelve Aperformance@ items and twelve for Asocial situations.@ Scoring for the avoidance items is the same. Descriptive statistics for all measures appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Measure	Mean	S.D.	Alpha
Fear of Performance	9.02	5.78	.80
Avoidance of Performance	8.32	5.77	.81
Fear of Social Situations	8.89	6.04	.84
Avoidance of Social Situations	8.44	5.78	.84
Communication Apprehension	68.41	16.81	.95
Willingness to Communicate	72.73	15.77	.90
Shyness	42.03	10.42	.91
Self-Perceived Communication Competence	73.73	14.74	.89
Compulsive Communication	43.28	10.31	.89
Assertiveness	36.10	6.00	.83
Responsiveness	39.43	5.76	.89

Communication Apprehension. The measure employed for communication apprehension was the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24; McCroskey, 1982). It has 24 items from which generates one overall score.

Willingness to Communicate. The measure employed for willingness to communicate was the Willingness to Communicate scale (WTC; McCroskey, 1992). This instrument contains 20 items, 12 of which are scored and 8 of which serve as distracters.

Behavioral shyness. The measure employed for behavioral shyness was the McCroskey Shyness Scale (MSS; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982). This instrument has 14 Likert-type items in the Likert format..

Self-Perceived Communication Competence. The measure employed for self-perceived communication competence was the Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale (SPCC; McCroskey & L. McCroskey, 1988). It has 12-items.

Compulsive communication. The measure employed for compulsive communication was the Talkaholic Scale (TS; McCroskey & Richmond, 1993; 1995). This instrument has items in the Likert format, 10 of which are scored. The other six items are used as distractions.

Socio-communicative orientations. The Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure was employed to measure the two dimensions of socio-communicative orientations (ARM; Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). The ARM has 20-items, 10 items measuring assertiveness and 10 items measuring responsiveness.

Data Analyses

Wrench, et. al (2006) conducted a factor analysis indicating that some of the items on each of the dimensions of the social phobia measure appeared to be inappropriate. Therefore, we conducted two factor analyses prior to analyzing our data. Since we expected any observed factors would be correlated, we employed Promax factor analyses. The first analysis involved the 24 items relating do the fear of performance and fear of social situations constructs. The result was two distinct factors. The first we labeled fear of performance. Fifteen items loaded on it: 9, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 27, 29, 31, 35, 37, 39, 41, and 47. The second factor was fear of social situations, which had nine items loading on it: 1, 3, 5, 7 13, 25, 33, 43, and 45. The correlation between these factors was $r = .50$.

The second analysis involved the 24 items of the avoidance of performance and avoidance of social situation constructs. Again, two distinct factors were emerged. The first Tapped avoidance of performance and had eleven items loading on it: 10, 12, 16, 20, 22, 30. 32, 36, 38, 40, and 42. The second factor was avoidance of social situations with thirteen items loading on it: 2, 4, 6, 8, 14, 18, 24, 26, 28, 34, 44, 46, and 48. The correlation between these two factors was $r = .53$. The scores for all four social phobia measures drawn from these factor analyses served as data in the pertinent tests of the hypotheses.

Pearson correlations were computed to determine whether or not our hypotheses could be accepted. Because of the large number of correlations involved, we established the $p < .001$ as the level of confidence. This effectively required explained variance to be approximately 5% to be qualify as meaningful. For the purpose of this research, we considered statistically significant correlations below $r = .45$ to be Amoderate.@ Those correlations equal to or above $r = .45$ we considered to be Astrong.@

The descriptive statistics for all measures appear in Table 1. The alpha reliability estimates for all measures employed in this research were .80 or higher (see also Table 1).

Results

H1 & H2. Our first two hypotheses were that communication apprehension would be positively related to the components of social phobia and that willingness to communicate would be negatively related to the social phobia components. The obtained correlations supported these hypotheses. The correlations between communication apprehension and both fear of

performance and avoidance of performance were positive and strong. Those for communication apprehension and both fear of social situations and avoidance of social situations were positive, but only moderate. The correlations between willingness to communicate and all of the social phobia components were negative and moderate (see Table 2).

Table 2

Correlations Between Social Phobia Scores and Communication Trait Scores

	Social Phobia Components			
Communication Traits	Fear of Performance	Avoidance of Performance	Fear of Social Situations	Avoidance of Social Situations
Communication Apprehension	.65	.59	.43	.36
Willingness to Communicate	-.44	-.40	-.36	-.30
Behavioral Shyness	.45	.43	.34	.29
Self-Perceived Communication Competence	-.50	-.46	-.43	-.35
Compulsive Communication	-.28	-.29	-.18*	-.14*
Assertiveness	-.49	-.45	-.28	-.20*
Responsiveness	-.18*	-.22*	-.17*	-.23*

* Not statistically significant, p> .001H3.

Our third hypothesis, that social phobia would be positively correlated with behavioral shyness, received support. The correlation between shyness and fear of performance was strong. The ones between shyness and the other three social phobia components were moderate (see Table 3).

Table 3

Correlations Among Fear and Avoidance Scores

	Avoidance of Performance	Fear of Social Situations	Avoidance of Social Situations
Fear of performance	.77	.65	.54
Avoidance of performance		.51	.67
Fear of Social Situations			.73

H4 & H5. Our fourth and fifth hypotheses posited that social phobia would be negatively related to both self-perceived communication apprehension and compulsive communication. The results indicated that self-perceived communication competence had strong relationships with both fear of performance and avoidance of performance and moderate relationships with both fear of social situations and avoidance of social situations. Observed relationships of compulsive communication and social phobia were considerably weaker. Fear of performance and avoidance of performance revealed moderate relationships with compulsive communication. However, the correlations were between compulsive communication and both fear of social situations and

avoidance of social situations were not statistically significant. The data, then, support hypothesis for fear/avoidance of performance, but not for fear/avoidance of social situations (see Table 2).

H6.& H7. Our sixth and seventh hypotheses were that social phobia would be negatively correlated with both assertiveness and responsiveness. Assertiveness showed modest negative correlations with fear of performance, avoidance of performance, and fear of social situations, with a somewhat lower correlation for the latter component. Whereas the first three correlations supported our sixth hypothesis, the non-significant relationship between assertiveness and avoidance of social situations. The results indicated no support for our seventh hypothesis. None of the social phobia components were significantly correlated with responsiveness (see Table 2).

Discussion

The results of this study show a substantial positive relationship between communication apprehension and both the fear and avoidance components of social phobia. Communication apprehension accounted for 42% of fear of performance and 35% of avoidance of performance. However, it could only account for18% of the variance of fear of social situations and 13% of the variance of avoidance of social situations. Although these are substantial relationships, it is clear that the fear and avoidance reflected in the PRCA-24 scores and in LSAS scores are not isomorphic.

The results of this research indicate modest negative relationships of willingness to communicate with the social phobia components of fear and avoidance of social situations. The WTC measure accounted for 19% of the variance in the measures of fear of performance, 16% in avoidance of performance, 13% in fear of social situations, and 9% in avoidance of social situations. Clearly, WTC is not isomorphic with any of the components of the LSAS.

Of the correlations among the scores on the measures of fear and avoidance scales, two stand out. Although all of th correlations were strong, fear and avoidance of performance (r =.77) and fear and avoidance of social situations (r = .73) were stronger than other relationships. It is likely that these results are a function of the form the LSAS measure takes. Participants respond to both their fear and their avoidance for each item before going to the next item. In the raw data it was clear that many of the participants responded to both response options with the identical score for all items. This could be produce a strong response bias that those using the instrument and should be considered in future research. As noted above, the factor analyses we conducted indicated that several items on the LSAS do not seem to be measuring what they are purported to measure. Communication researchers should take these into account when considering use of this instrument. An improved LSAS would be useful, but the actual problem may be the lack of clarity in the construct of social phobia. We encourage psychologists with expertise in social phobia to consider this possibility. Few scholars in communication have the expertise since Asocial phobia@ is not commonly considered to be a communication phenomenon as such.

Psychological traits and communication traits have attracted considerable attention among scholars in these two fields. The results of the present study reinforce the common interests of these disciplines. However, the results also reinforce our understanding that they often are looking at the same things though different eyes. Both have much to learn from the other, but we should always remember that no matter how much we have in common, psychologists view things from the perspective of human psychology and communication researchers view things from the perspective of human communication. Isomorphism of psychological and communication constructs should never be the expectation in either discipline.

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