

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION: A REVIEW
OF RESEARCH AND A SURVEY OF EDUCATORS

by

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Research concerned with fear and anxiety about oral communication has been conducted under various labels. Clevenger (1959) referred to oral apprehension as "stage fright" and associated it with the feelings most people experience when being in front of a group or audience. Phillips (1968) discussed it as "reticence," being restrained or reserved in expression and presentation during a speaking situation. Zimbardo (1977) wrote an entire book on fear and anxiety in communication and referred to it as "shyness." McCroskey (1970) has extensively researched this area of communication and has labeled and defined it. He refers to an individual's level of fear and anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons as communication apprehension (CA). In the past decade of research, the term communication apprehension has been most widely used. The purpose of this report is to survey research on the causes of communication apprehension, the effects it has on an individual's life, and the available treatment methods. Finally, I will suggest an approach to training our teachers in the prevention of CA in the classroom.

State And Trait

CA has been approached from two angles, by subdividing it into what has been termed state apprehension and trait apprehension. Spielberger (1966), McCroskey (1977b), Richmond (1978) and Lamb (1972) have made useful distinctions between state and trait apprehension. State apprehension

is characterized by fear or anxiety with regard to certain situations, which is what Clevenger and Phillips were referring to. Trait apprehension is characterized as a more constant feeling or fear regarding various types of encounters. A person with trait apprehension has feelings of fear and anxiety when talking to another person or when functioning in a group, such as a classroom. McCroskey and Wheelless (1976) have further stated that the person suffering trait apprehension is a person for whom apprehension about participating in communication "outweighs any projection of gain" from the interaction. The person anticipates negative feelings or outcomes from communication and thus, either avoids interaction if possible, or suffers from a variety of anxiety related feelings while communicating.

State CA is the more typical reaction experienced by the majority of people, whereas trait CA is not characteristic of well-adjusted individuals. Lohr, Rea, Porter and Hamberger (1980) report two studies that correlate state-trait measures of anxiety with communication apprehension and public speaking fear. Their data demonstrates that CA is associated with trait anxiety and that public speaking fear is associated with both state and trait anxiety. This study extends the findings of Lamb (1972) and is consistent with McCroskey's (1977c) position that public-speaking anxiety as a situation-specific fear is significantly correlated with state anxiety when trait anxiety is held constant.

How many people are there who suffer from the higher levels of communication apprehension? Research conducted by the Bruskin Associates in their Bruskin Report (1973) revealed that the most commonly reported fear was apprehension about public speaking. Various other studies show high percentages of people who suffer from CA. As reported by Friedman

(1980), 28% of students do not communicate sufficiently in the classroom. Zimbardo (1977) reported findings that revealed 80% of the respondents in his survey have been shy at some time in their lives, 25% chronically shy and 4% felt shy all the time, regardless of where they are. Zimbardo also reported finding that 42% of a group of fourth, fifth and sixth graders revealed feeling shy and 54% of the junior high students had the same feelings.

On a larger scale, McCroskey (1977b) collected data from 20,000 college students at five major universities which suggest that 15 to 20% of the student population suffer from high levels of CA. He also reported in the summary study that research involving the general United States population, varying from grade-school children through college students to senior citizens, indicates that the proportion of apprehensives in all age groups in the United States is approximately 20%. Zimbardo states that some estimates range as high as 40%.

The causes of CA have been difficult to determine. However, four areas of concern have been studied: demographic variables, environmental influences, heredity, and intelligence.

Demographic Variables

Among demographic variables, both sex and culture seem related to differences in apprehension levels. Lohr, et al. (1980) found females to be more anxious than males in public speaking situations. This finding is supported by Greenblatt, Hasenauer and Freimuth (1980) who discovered that feminine females were more apprehensive than androgynous males and females. Zimbardo (1977) found that girls are more frequently shy than boys. Zimbardo also studied apprehension levels among different cultural