

“Please Don’t Call on Me:” Self-esteem, Communication Apprehension, and Classroom Participation

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship of self-esteem, communication apprehension, and classroom participation. Fifty female undergraduate General Psychology students participated in groups of five to provide feedback regarding two children’s videos. They were shown two five-minute clips and asked to respond based on the education and entertainment values for preschool aged children (ages 5-7). The number of times each person spoke, as well as the number of seconds each spoke were recorded. Following the video, they filled out questionnaires containing a self-esteem scale, communication apprehension scale and introversion/extroversion scale. A hierarchical regression was used to determine the relationship of global self-esteem to participation while controlling for the effects of the other mediating variables. Self-esteem was not a significant predictor of classroom participation as was expected. However, communication apprehension was a significant predictor of classroom participation.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, education is one of the cornerstones for success. Education level helps determine one’s job type, income level, and status in our society (Tsui, 1998; Witherspoon, Long & Nickell, 1991). Therefore, success in the classroom may have a long-term impact on individuals. Educators use many methods to evaluate students including assessing the amount of participation in the classroom. College instructors typically pose questions, permit students to ask questions or offer comments, and structure small group activities to increase classroom participation (Williams, 1971). Classroom participation includes hand raising, head nodding, sharing opinions, asking questions and generating new ideas (Burnett, 1998). Indeed, classroom participation has been found to be directly related to educational success (Jaasma, 1997).

Several personal attribute variables have been linked to participation. In particular, self-esteem has been correlated with the level of classroom participation (Morrison & Thomas, 1975, Burnett, 1998). Self-esteem is defined as “the set of evaluative attitudes that a person has about himself or his accomplishments” (Morrison & Thomas, 1975, p. 374). Research on self-esteem and classroom participation has found that several behavioral differences among children with varying levels of self-esteem exist (Burnett, 1998). For example, children with low self-esteem give limited responses in the classroom whereas children with high self-

esteem display strong communication skills and are interactive with others (Burnett, 1998). Students with low self-esteem say less in class and sit further back in the classroom than students with high self-esteem (Morrison & Thomas, 1975). The relationship between self-esteem and participation appears to be reciprocal. That is, increased participation may increase self-esteem or increased self-esteem may increase participation. However, research also finds that people who have high self-esteem are more confident in social situations than people who have low self-esteem (Baron, 1998). Therefore, this study will consider the impact of current self-esteem on the level of participation in a new classroom situation.

Other variables that may contribute to the level of classroom participation are communication apprehension (Jaasma, 1997) and introversion and extraversion levels (Williams, 1971). Communication apprehension is "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication" (McCroskey, 1982). Excessive communication apprehension may be correlated with low self-esteem, poor communication skills, and low education achievement (Witherspoon, Long & Nickell, 1991). Communication apprehension could be a factor that inhibits students' participation as well as the learning of adequate communication skills and ultimately leads to students' lack of success in the classroom (Witherspoon, Long, & Nickell, 1991).

Introverted students also have much difficulty participating in the classroom. Often times these students remain unnoticed by teachers and peers because of their general shyness and passivity in the classroom (Byrnes, 1984). Introversion is characterized by quiet, unsociable, reserved, passive, careful and thoughtful behavior (Myers, 1995). These characteristics cause students to be almost "invisible" in the classroom (Byrnes, 1984). Those who are extraverted can be characterized by their social, outgoing, talkative, active and impulsive behavior (Myers, 1995). Therefore, it is suggested that extraverted students are more likely to participate in class. Although findings in this area are mixed, the relationship between class participation and introversion and extraversion is important to consider (Williams, 1971).

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship of self-esteem, introversion and extraversion, and communication apprehension with classroom participation. We expected to find a positive correlation between self-esteem and classroom participation. We expected to find participation positively relates to extraversion. We expected participation to be negatively correlated with communication apprehension. Furthermore, we expected for self-esteem to contribute independently to classroom participation, after controlling for the other variables of interest.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 50 participants took part in this study. Due to the large amount of evidence that suggests complicated gender effects in regards to classroom interactions between students and faculty (Allen & Niss, 1990), we utilized only female students as well as a female experimenter. We solicited these students from the General Psychology human subjects pool at a mid-sized Midwestern public comprehensive university and they received extra credit for their participation. Furthermore, we utilized traditionally aged freshmen with (mean age of 19) from a variety of declared majors across the five colleges of the university. Respondents participated in groups of five. Over-enrollment of the groups was used and participants who are familiar with one another were released in order to ensure five strangers per group.

Procedures

The room was set up prior to the arrival of the participants. Paper and pencils were used to indicate the desired placement of the participants in the room. Once everyone was seated, the experimenter told a cover story that she needed feedback on children's movies. The participants were told that their input was important and that they would receive a candy bar at the end of "class" as an additional incentive for their cooperation. They were asked to think about what would be considered entertaining and educating for preschool aged children (ages 5-7) and were instructed to utilize the paper and pencils to record any thoughts or feelings they had while attending to the movie clips. Following this brief introduction, a short five-minute clip of a Richard Scarry video was shown followed by a short five-minute clip of "Blue's Clues."

Once the videos were finished, the experimenter sat down next to the participants and asked for feedback. The experimenter was trained to make no eye contact and give no verbal nor nonverbal feedback to the participants. The experimenter appeared to be concentrating on taking notes regarding the content of the conversation. We used a video camera to record the participants during the experiment and coded the tapes for classroom participation at a later date. Classroom participation was measured in two ways: the number of times each person spoke and how many minutes each spoke (overall and per "turn").

Following the end of discussion, the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire included the measures of self-esteem inventory, introversion/extroversion, communication apprehension, and additional measures to help disguise the purpose of this study. Self-esteem was measured with Coopersmith's (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI), a 50-item true-false scale that measures evaluative attitudes across four domains pertaining to the self (peers, parents, school, and personal interests). Although the SEI has been criticized for a negative skew, a high correlation with social desirability and an unstable factor pattern (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991), it has shown good reliability and validity indicators and it has been a traditional measure of self-esteem in classroom research. Introversion/extroversion was measured with Cheek and Buss' (1981) single item 10-point scale. Communication apprehension was measured with the 24 item Likert-based Personal report of Communication Apprehension scale (PRCA) (McCroskey, 1982). The PRCA has been widely used and is reliable and valid (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991). Questions regarding the participants' familiarity with children's videos and child development were also included to ensure that familiarity with the topic was not a factor resulting in more or less participation. After completion of the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the correlations among the independent variables self-esteem, communication apprehension (PRCA) and extroversion. Correlations ranged from $-.42$ to $.36$. The descriptive statistics on the independent and dependent variables are as follows: global self-esteem ($M = 44$, $SD = 8.9$), introversion/extroversion ($M = 7.0$, $SD = 1.72$) and communication apprehension ($M = 8.5$, $SD = 16.42$) and two dependent variables including: the number of times each person spoke ($M = 2$, $SD = 1.56$) and number of seconds each spoke ($M = 12.8$, $SD = 17.54$). Table 2 shows the zero order and partial correlations between each of the independent variables and the dependent variable of classroom participation (an aggregation of the times spoken and overall number of seconds spoken). For our primary analysis of exploring the unique relationship between global self-esteem and classroom par-

ticipation, we used hierarchical regression to control for the effects of the other mediating variables. We assessed the variance in participation that is accounted for by introversion/extroversion, communication apprehension, and school esteem in the first step of a regression. Then, we entered global self-esteem. This allowed us to look at the relationship of global self-esteem to participation while controlling for the effects of the other mediating variables (see Table 3).

Finally, because the Coopersmith self-esteem scale includes a school subscale, we were able to explore the domain specific role of school self-esteem. School self-esteem provided no independent explanation of participation. In all of the analyses, familiarity with the subject and seating position had no affect on the dependent variable.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis stating that self-esteem would contribute independently to classroom participation was not supported. Self-esteem was not an independent predictor of classroom participation, however it was moderately correlated. Extroversion, familiarity with children's videos and seating arrangement also did not affect the amount of classroom participation. Communication apprehension was a significant indicator of classroom participation and was strongly correlated. This indicates that even when students are motivated to contribute, familiar with the discussion topic, and/or interested in the topic, they may be inhibited due to fear of speaking.

As discussed earlier, educational success has long-term effects on individuals including income levels and status in our society (Tsui, 1998, Witherspoon, Long & Nickell, 1991). High communication apprehension has academic effects on students including dropping out of classes earlier and obtaining lower grade point averages compared to students with low communication apprehension (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield and Payne, 1989). In fact, students with high communication apprehension will attempt to avoid as much communication as possible to the extent that they will avoid meeting with peers or teachers to talk about the subject matter (McCroskey & Sheahan, 1978). These students will attempt to avoid the class as much as possible, and the apprehension will interfere with successful completion of assignments, if he/she cannot avoid the class (McCroskey, 1977). Students with high communication apprehension, as compared with those of low communication apprehension chose seating in the classroom where they feel the least amount of interaction will be expected (McCroskey, 1976). Beyond the classroom, these students are less likely to become involved with campus activities and interact less with peers (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield and Payne, 1989). They also have few close relationships with faculty and advisors and are overall less satisfied with the college environment (McCroskey & Sheahan, 1978).

Given this, it is important to reduce communication apprehension in the classroom in order to increase participation. It is important to address high communication among students to help them attain success in the class (Tollefson & Smith, 1998). Early intervention is necessary because communication apprehension seems to have its strongest impact during the first two years of college. (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989).

A survey conducted in 1997, revealed that only 13% of colleges and universities reported offering a special course or program students with communication apprehension (Robinson, 1997). Instead, instructors are working on adding techniques into their speaking courses to help students overcome their apprehension. These techniques including systematic desensitization, cognitive restructuring, visualization and skills training (Dwyer, 2000). Additionally,

instructors are creating a supportive and positive environment to help alleviate some apprehension (Robinson, 1997). "It is concluded the impact of communication apprehension on the probability of high communication apprehension students' survival in college is substantial and this impact adds to the case favoring the provision of training programs to assist such students overcome their apprehension about communication" (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989; p. 100)

Although we expected to find a relationship between self-esteem and participation, the strength of communication apprehension as a correlate of participation may be a more heartening finding. Whereas research indicates reliable reductions in communication apprehension in response to interventions, there is no such consistent finding in terms of interventions for self-esteem. It is important for future research to evaluate interventions that promote speaking out in class and minimize communication apprehension among students for long-term effects. In order for future studies to be more successful, a real classroom setting already established for educational purposes could be used and/or more intense motives for future respondents to participate.

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Table 1. Correlations Among the Independent Variables

	Self-esteem	CAP	Extroversion
Self-esteem	1.00	-.36	.36
PRCA ^a		1.00	-.428
Extroversion		1.00	

^a higher score indicates higher communication apprehension

Table 2. Zero Order and Partial Correlations between the Independent Variables and Classroom Participation

	Classroom Participation ^a	
	Zero-order	Partial
Self-esteem	.34*	.17
Extroversion	.30*	.07
PRCA	-.50***	-.38**

^astandardized aggregate of the number of times spoken and overall number of seconds spoken

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

Table 3. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Classroom Participation (N=47)

Variable	B	SE	—
Step 1 Communication Apprehension	-3.880	.014	-.407
Extroversion	5.927	.138	.064
Step 2 Self-esteem	3.053	.027	.165

Note: $R = .254$ for step 1; $R = .276$ for step 2. Not a significant change.