

Social and Communicative Anxiety

Social anxiety refers to psychological distress experienced in reaction to the mere presence of people, whereas the term *communicative anxiety* is used to describe the fear associated with either real or anticipated **communication** with others. It should be fairly obvious that **communication** scholars would focus most of their attention on anxiety associated with **communication**. **Communication** scholars have, in fact, conducted numerous studies designed to develop an understanding of communicative anxiety principally because anxiety in social situations is the antithesis of social composure. Compared to composed communicators, those who are communicatively anxious avoid social interaction when possible, speak less when required to engage in conversation, are less fluent, and experience far more physiological distress.

Researchers have measured the constructs of social anxiety and communicative anxiety in several ways. By far the most popular is through the use of questionnaires that require respondents to note the amount of anxiety they experience in a variety of social situations, including public speaking and conversations with strangers. Although less frequently used, researchers have measured physiological responses such as heart rate as well as behavioral manifestations such as trembling, blushing, and disfluency. In a few studies of children, researchers have used the assessments by parents, teachers, or peers as a measure of a child's level of social anxiety.

One of the major theoretical issues explored in the research literature is whether social and communicative anxiety are characteristic facets of personality or whether they are merely transitory conditions brought on by features of the environment and demands of the situation. A huge body of research has accumulated in which communicative anxiety has been examined as a personality characteristic or trait. James C. McCroskey coined the term **communication apprehension** to refer to the trait version of communicative anxiety.

Communication apprehension refers to the enduring predisposition or proneness to experience anxiety when required to communicate with others. Over the years, research has shown that many people do seem to display a predisposition to experience communicative anxiety. Highly apprehensive people experience anxiety more frequently in social situations and with more intensity than do people low in the trait. Furthermore, research has indicated that people high in **communication apprehension** make a number of life choices designed to minimize contact with others. Choosing a profession that requires little or no contact with other people is an example of such a choice.

Research also shows that aspects of the situation can influence the level of anxiety felt during social interaction. For most people, speaking to superiors, being placed in a conspicuous situation, being unprepared, or receiving negative feedback elevate transient anxiety levels. Short-term or transient anxiety is called state anxiety. Research also shows, however, that not only do people high in trait **communication apprehension** experience higher levels of anxiety when these types of situational factors are present, but also they tend to exaggerate the potency of these features. For instance, highly apprehensive speakers interpret the same feedback as more negative than do people low in the trait.

Another question that has been tackled by researchers interested in social and communicative anxiety concerns the origins of the predisposition to experience social and communicative anxiety. One school of thought is that **communication apprehension** results from a history of negative reactions from significant others such as parents, peers, and teachers. According to this view, people who experience a pattern of predominately positive

response to their communicative efforts developed into adults with no or little fear of **communication**. In contrast, children who were ridiculed or punished in other ways for expressing themselves grow up to associate the prospect of communicating with embarrassment and humiliation.

An alternative theory suggests that a wide array of communicative behaviors and traits, including social and communicative anxiety, are largely products of genetic inheritance. Numerous studies have shown that personality characteristics such as introversion, social anxiety, shyness, and social composure are much more similar for identical twins than for fraternal twins. These findings have been interpreted as evidence for a genetic inheritance model of personality because identical twins are genetically identical, whereas fraternal twins are no more genetically alike than any other siblings. Many of the studies examined whether the similarities in personality traits were affected by home environments. However, this research showed that identical twins separated at birth who never met until adulthood were very similar in personality, but that fraternal twins, even though raised together, were quite different from each other. These findings led researchers to believe that genetic inheritance is the most important determinate of individual traits.

Researchers have also begun to suspect that differences in brain functioning may contribute to social and communicative anxiety. Studies have shown that lower levels of electrical activity in the right-front region of the brain relative to the left-front region are associated with deficits in self-regulation of behavior and emotion. In a nutshell, the right-front region is important to self-control. Studies have shown that socially anxious people display this pattern of brain activity.

Finally, **communication apprehension** researchers are beginning to consider the role of prenatal experience on social and communicative anxiety. An impressive body of research indicates that patterns of prenatal hormone exposure affect several aspects of personality, including those related to one's tendency to approach or withdraw from others.

—Michael J. Beatty

Further Readings

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