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"Doing Gender" in Public Speaking Education: A Focus Group Analysis of Biological Sex and Gender Identity in Public Speaking Education

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory focus group analysis examines the ways in which students of a Capstone Communication Studies course ($N = 15$) perceive factors, such as their communication studies education, biological sex, and gender roles, that have impacted their experiences with Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) and Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC), as well as the effectiveness of various treatment methods for the reduction of PSA. Three independent student focus groups were conducted – one comprised of biological females ($n = 5$), one of males ($n = 3$), and one containing subjects of both biological sexes ($n = 7$). Herein participants discussed their personal experiences with PSA, and whether/how their education within the communications major aided them in overcoming it. Results were analyzed using thematic analysis to draw implications for the enhancement of instructional PSA mitigation methodologies and to determine whether different PSA treatments are more effective for one biological sex or the other, or based upon identified gender roles.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, between 30 and 40 percent of individuals suffer from PSA – the most common manifestation of communication apprehension – to an extent that inhibits their abilities to succeed in personal and professional realms alike (McCourt, 2007; McCroskey,

1984). As early as 1965, researchers have sought to identify and understand the various presentations of anxiety related to oral communication and communication situations (Glaser, 1981). As awareness of the prevalence and potential impediments associated with maladies of this type continues to expand and evolve, likewise do efforts to discover their most effective remedies. Glaser (1981) was one of the first to suggest that the complex and multidimensional nature of communication apprehension warranted an equally multifaceted educational approach to its reduction. He proposed three primary models "to explain the etiology, maintenance, and treatment" of communication apprehension: conditioned anxiety, negative cognitive appraisal, and skills deficit (Glaser, 1981, p. 322). Considerable research focused on determining the effectiveness of various educational treatments has drawn upon this model and, in coordination with its trilateral nature, three methods of approach are commonly assessed in order to address each of these elements: exposure therapy, cognitive modification, and competence training (Ady, 1987; Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt; Hunter, Westwick, & Haleta, 2014; McCourt, 2007). Multiple studies have sought to evaluate the effectiveness of programs that utilize an integrative approach to the reduction of PSA. Of these studies, those focused on the variable of biological sex in their methodological assessments reveal that biological females consistently experience higher levels of PSA than do males (Hunter, et al., 2014). In a recent study conducted at a Midwestern university, a pre-test post-test analysis revealed that, while students of both biological sexes achieved significant reduction in PSA following completion of the basic public speaking course, female students exhibited a significantly greater response to treatments, substantially reducing the disparity between the sexes (Hunter, et al., 2014). These results indicate the need for a closer examination of the role of socially-constructed gender identity, in addition to biological sex, as an indicator of both susceptibility to PSA and receptiveness to educational treatment methods.

In the realm of academia, much controversy surrounds the distinction between gender and biological sex, as evidenced by the wealth of research existing on the subject. This distinction represents a shift from previous, essentialist ascriptions of male and female traits to the consideration of gender as a socially-constructed practice, independent of biological sex (Bem, 1981; Tortajada & Van Bauwel, 2012; van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009). West and Zimmerman's (1987) seminal article introducing the concept of "doing gender" was an elemental contribution to this shift; their definition of gender is sociological in nature,

reliant upon codes and customs that are foundational in everyday activities (van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987). "Doing gender" refers to the complex and continuous process of societal interactions, perceptions, and activities that characterize individual endeavors as expressions of either masculine or feminine qualities (Sullivan & Kedrowicz, 2011; van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009).

In an effort to understand this distinction in the context of public speaking education, this study focuses on the perceptions of student participants and their experiences with PSA within the communications major. In addition to PSA and Communication Competence (CC), this study examines communication biases related to biological sex and gender identity and elaborates on the integrative approach to PSA reduction and the potential relationships between biological sex, socialized gender, and the effectiveness of these treatment methods. In short, how is communication education "doing gender."

Biological Sex, Public Speaking Anxiety, and Communication Competence

The pervasiveness and potential liabilities of PSA within educational systems has been the subject of copious quantities of research over the years. Historically, a variety of labels have been allocated to the many different manifestations of communication related anxiety: stage fright, social anxiety, communication apprehension, and performance anxiety (Bodie, 2010; Glaser, 1981). It is, however, important to note that, as Glaser (1981) attests, "This variation in terminology is more than semantic; the differences represent disparate orientations toward explaining a complex communication problem" (p. 321). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, PSA is defined as "a specific, communication-based anxiety in which individuals experience physiological arousal, negative cognitions, or behavioral responses to real or anticipated presentations" (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012, p. 100). This type of anxiety afflicts nearly 40 percent of Americans, and its symptoms, ranging from minor increases in heart rate and sweating to confusion, dizziness, and the complete inability to speak, can greatly inhibit an individual's ability to succeed in personal, professional, and educational pursuits alike when experienced in high levels (McCroskey, 1984).

The development of communication competence, however, or "…the quality of interaction behavior in various contexts," (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, p. 43) is evidenced to be an

effective means of reducing PSA (Ellis, 1995; Rubin, Welch, & Buerkel, 1995).
Furthermore, in a study conducted to examine the relationships between public speaking
anxiety, self-perceived public speaking competency, and teacher immediacy, researcher
Ellis (1995) asserted the following: "Indeed, research indicates that perceptions of
communicative ability may be central to apprehension" (p. 65). Additionally, as Osorio,
Crippa, and Loureiro (2008) asserted, "The extent to which this condition is experienced
has an inhibitory or facilitating influence on the development of communication
competence and communication skill"

Research also suggests that women (biological females) are somewhat disadvantaged in
this capacity, as they commonly report higher levels of PSA and communication anxiety in
general (Behnke & Sawyer, 2000; Hunter, et al., 2014 & McCroskey, 1984). Moreover, as
Bem (1981) asserted, within contemporary American culture, societal rewards are afforded
to those whose behavior conforms to social expectations of normality as they apply to one's
biological sex. Essentially, a woman receives societal rewards for feminine behavior, as do
men who are perceived as masculine.

Blended Approach to PSA Reduction

As previously mentioned, many institutions have implemented a multifaceted design into
their basic public speaking courses in an effort to address issues related to PSA and the
development of communication competency. A recent study examines the effectiveness of
a three-pronged approach to PSA mitigation that has been commended as "more effective
than any single method" (Hunter, et al., 2013; Pribyl et al, 2001, p.149). The three
instructional methods employed are exposure therapy, cognitive modification, and skills (or
competence) training. Exposure therapy involves repeated exposure to gradually more and
more complex or challenging speaking scenarios in an effort to treat the psychological
arousal associated with PSA through desensitization (Bodie, 2010; Hunter, et al., 2013).
Fremouw and Scott (1979) elaborate on the second process – cognitive modification - in
their study, which involved training students to recognize and reflect upon negative
attitudes and self-statements in regards to speaking situations, and displacing those attitudes
with more productive coping strategies and strength-based feedback. Finally, skills training
can increase a student's level of self-perceived communication competence, thereby
reducing PSA.

Although previous findings indicated that women tend to experience higher levels of PSA than men have been criticized as essentialist, recent research has supported these findings quantitatively and has furthermore confirmed that public speaking education can be successful in the mitigation of PSA for men and women, alike. For those individuals who experience high levels of PSA, and are therefore prone to its negative and inhibiting effects on their personal satisfaction and accomplishment of professional goals, refining the treatment techniques employed within these courses is imperative. To this end, I propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How does biological sex impact students' perceptions of their own public speaking experiences?

RQ2: How does gender impact students' perceptions of their own public speaking experiences?

METHODS

Participants

Participants in this study were junior and senior speech communication majors at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Each of these students were currently enrolled in the Capstone Communications course, and all had completed and received assessments and feedback from multiple communication courses including at least one in public speaking. The students were divided into three individual focus groups according to their biological sex; one group was entirely composed of females ($n = 5$), one of males ($n = 3$), and the third was a combination of the two ($n = 7$).

Procedure

Upon receiving approval through university human subjects review, students were informed via email of the opportunity to participate in this study, wherein it was stated that they would be awarded five points of extra credit for taking part in an online survey and participating in one of three focus group sessions. Students were informed that these points would only be awarded to those who completed both aspects of this study. The email also included a link to the QuestionPro© survey site, which included a brief demographics questionnaire (age, ethnicity, biological sex, and major/ minor studies) and a letter of informed consent stating that completion of the survey to participate in the study.

With the instructor's permission, the focus group sessions were conducted within the usual

class time-frame, facilitated by the researcher in the absence of the instructor, to decrease the potential for researcher-introduced bias. At the beginning of each session, students were offered the opportunity to review the letter of informed consent, and were reminded that their participation was strictly voluntary. Additionally, subjects were informed that the sessions would be recorded, and were asked to verbally consent to this when the recordings began. Finally, students were assured that every effort would be taken to ensure the anonymity of their remarks; all transcriptions of the sessions would be done by the researcher alone, all transcriptions would be anonymized by leaving out potentially-identifying information from the transcripts, and the recordings would be destroyed following transcription.

Thematic Analysis

The primary aim of thematic analysis is to identify themes within a text or conversation. In this case, the themes were identified within the focus group recordings and transcriptions according to the three criteria of thematic analysis, as established by Owen (1984). These criteria are recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Throughout the process of analysis, themes which recurred with regularity were noted and logged, as were those themes which were often repeated during students' responses to facilitator inquiries. Additionally, forcefulness was assessed by examining "vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances from other locutions," all of which were recorded in the transcriptions (p. 275).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the thematic analysis of student focus group transcripts, four primary themes emerged: 1) Students, both male and female, reported feeling very low levels of PSA, 2) they believed that socialized gender was a more important predictor of PSA and SPCC than biological sex, 3) they stated that, perhaps, the communication major taught women to speak using more stereotypically masculine tendencies, especially within public speaking situations, perhaps explaining their felt lack of PSA, 4) students, male and female, alike, were hesitant to agree that socialized gender roles aligned along traditionally-viewed lines, and yet, their communication continued to affirm the existence of those roles and 5) participants discussed concerns that gender bias regarding expected communication behavior, in some cases, may more strongly and negatively impact males than females.

First, participants reported that they felt very little apprehension and a great deal of confidence and competence in public speaking and other communication situations. Some reported being attracted to the communication major as a result of having already felt strong self-assurance in their communication. Others stated that the major was elemental in alleviating their apprehension. All agreed that the major had played a major role in helping them develop their current levels of communication competence and confidence.

Secondly, they expressed belief that, while biological sex may influence PSA and SPCC, socialized personality traits are far more significant indicators. They stated that, although the women in the Capstone Course did not feel PSA to a large extent – possibly due to the fact that they did not necessarily identify with the stereotypical depictions of men as masculine and women as feminine – they believed this to be a result not of their sex (or gender), but of their individual background and experience. They cited their collegiate experience as a place where gender roles often blended and even, at times, seemed to reverse.

The concept did emerge, however, that individuals who demonstrate certain personality traits typically regarded as "masculine" are often considered more confident and capable in public speaking situations. The women interviewed in the focus group identified strongly with these communication characteristics. Focus group participants expressed noticeable improvement in PSA and SPCC throughout the development of their studies in this field, even asserting that the major taught them to "talk like a man." Interestingly, within the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis, some contradictory beliefs were evident, particularly in the case of the female participants. Although apparent was the recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of the belief that women are not, biologically speaking, more prone to suffering from PSA, female students also asserted that they were more likely to demonstrate "masculine" qualities when actively delivering a speech in an academic setting than in other settings.

Some reticence, and even some distinguishable uneasiness, was noted when students (females) were asked if they believed that their biological sex or gender related traits had any impact (either positive or negative) on their experiences with PSA or their level of competence. For example, one student, at varying points in the session, made the following remarks: "I hate calling them [character traits] masculine;" "I like to be, like, to speak my mind, or because I can fly off the handle or just be, like, ridiculous – I don't feel like that's

a strictly masculine trait;" "historically speaking, women weren't allowed to be like that;" and "…I feel like almost all the females I know in the communication major have more masculine traits. Where, we're all, like, less afraid to speak our minds." This student made it clear that the labels of masculinity and femininity were distasteful to her, yet at other times, she confirmed and validated their existence.

Finally, student responses thematically validated their beliefs that gender biases do, indeed, exist especially with regard to perceived violations of expected gender behavior by males. One student recalled an occasion on which, while watching a documentary, she afforded credibility to the speaker – who had a high-pitched, "feminine" voice – until she saw his face. At this point, she was unable to take him seriously, owing to the fact that the narrator exhibited qualities that contradicted expectations of how masculinity should be performed or represented. Another student confirmed her feelings; "…guys with like, high-pitched voices are like, people literally, uh, don't take them as seriously. …they kind of, like, make fun of them in the crowd." This assertion is consistent with Bem's work, which posits that men and women are rewarded in society by behaving in ways that conform to the socially-constructed framework consistent with their biological sex (Bem, 1974).

Implications and Future Research

In general, the fields of studies known as the "soft sciences" are populated with a higher ratio of women to men. In the field of communications alone, an American Community Survey Report found that over 60 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded in 2009 were earned by women (Siebens & Ryan, 2012). Although the sample for this study was small, the numbers represent a larger trend. The emergent themes within the focus group texts present some interesting notions regarding socialized gender, specifically within the field of communication studies. While the findings of this study cannot afford an answer to whether or not specific gender-related characteristics make one more or less susceptible to PSA or receptive to treatments, it does suggest that further inquiry into the emergent themes may provide a great deal more insight into the topic.

The primary question that arises is one regarding the emergent theme that the educational system teaches women to "talk like a man," or that the communication discipline or the department in question, in particular, has a particular draw for women who already possess certain characteristics associated with masculinity. Which of these is actually the case? In

order to address this question, I suggest a longitudinal study employing both quantitative and qualitative measures. In addition to participation in focus groups, students within the communication major would be required to complete a pre-test and post-test at the beginning and end of each academic year, respectively. The suggested instrumentation for these studies includes three scales: the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) (McCroskey, 1970), the Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) scale (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988), and Bem's (1981) Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), which assesses masculine, feminine, and androgynous character traits. By following students from the start of their educational career in communication, patterns may emerge that provide evidence as to whether it is the system or the subjects that result in a higher ratio of female students with stereotypically masculine speech characteristics.

LIMITATIONS

Consisting of only fifteen participants, this study was limited primarily in regards to its sample. Fifteen is too small to allow for any findings to be generalizable to a larger population. This limitation was, however, unavoidable, as the aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of students nearing the completion of their communication studies degree. A second limitation is also related to the sampling frame and procedures. The participants represented a homogenous demographic, and therefore, were not representative of students in other areas of the country, or participating in other types of communication programs. Furthermore, these demographics represented an extremely limited racial and ethnic variation. Students of varying cultural backgrounds may experience public speaking education quite differently, and may have extraordinarily different experiences with PSA and communication competence.

Future Directions

As suggested earlier, in light of the findings of this study, future research should compare quantitative pre- and post-test findings about PSA and SPCC as well as socialized gender to the qualitative findings of this study. Additionally, performing research with a larger sample including students of varied ethnic backgrounds and from multiple institutions will enhance the potential for generalizability of the study's findings.

CONCLUSION

Rarely, after decades of research on the persistent affliction of public speaking anxiety, has the subject been approached through a qualitative lens. The addition of the factors of biological sex and its relationship to socialized gender may provide valuable insight into the refinement of educational PSA treatment methods. This exploratory focus group analysis examined students' perspectives on the impact of biological sex and socialized gender identity on their personal experiences with PSA and competency within their communication education. Primarily, thematic analysis revealed that students perceived socialized character traits to be a far greater indicator of PSA susceptibility and communicative capability. Contradictory statements by focus group participants, however, leave researchers with many questions to be addressed in the future – not the least of which is this: does communication education teach its students to "talk like a man?"

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