Communication Apprehension and Imagined Interactions

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Communication apprehension (CA) is associated with fear of anticipated communication. Yet, imagined interactions (IIs) can help reduce fear of communication in which individuals use mental imagery before and after to prepare and review communication. A series of regression analyses in which characteristics of IIs were the independent variables was used to predict overall CA, as well as in four different contexts. The regression analysis indicated that CA could be predicted by the II characteristic of discrepancy across multiple contexts. The II catharsis function was predictive in one context. Results are discussed in terms of cognitive modification as a therapeutic technique for treating CA.

Keywords: Communication Apprehension; Imagined Interactions

Since the time of its conceptualization, communication apprehension (CA) has been the subject of extensive study within the field of communication. According to McCroskey (1977b), CA can be defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p. 78). A critical word in this definition is "anticipated," and it is important to note that the anxiety regarding a future communicative encounter can be as powerful as the real interaction itself. The transitive verb, anticipated, implies foresight, which is a quality of imagined interactions (IIs). IIs are defined as the "process of social
cognition whereby actors imagine and therefore indirectly experience themselves in anticipated and/or past communicative encounters with others” (Honeycutt, 2003, p. 2). From this definition, one can see how IIs could function with CA. An individual is able to directly affect his or her own anxiety by experiencing a future conversation through one's imagination. A major characteristic of IIs is proactivity in which individuals envision encounters beforehand to rehearse messages. We examined how catharsis and rehearsal functions of IIs, as well as discrepancy, facilitate or reduce the level of CA in conversations, groups, meetings, and public speaking engagements.

**Communication Apprehension**

CA can be thought of as an “internally experienced feeling of discomfort” (McCroskey, 1983, p. 16) that causes ineffective communication when experienced in high amounts. CA describes how people feel about communication, not about how they communicate (McCroskey, Richmond, Berger, & Baldwin, 1983). CA can also be defined as an individual’s “... anxiety syndrome associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977a, p. 28). Although high levels of CA can act as an active hindrance to public speech or to any type of communication for that matter, experiencing CA does not automatically mean that communication will suffer. There are, in fact, times when CA can help somebody focus and improve performance. The problems with CA occur when it is experienced at chronically high levels. For example, people with high levels of speech anxiety engage in a variety of preparation actions that limit the effectiveness of their presentations (Daly, Vangelisti, & Weber, 1995). In general, individuals who suffer from high levels of CA are viewed negatively by their peers (McCroskey & Richmond, 1976) and often withdraw themselves from communication interactions (McCroskey, 1976; McCroskey & Richmond, 1976).

Because CA has been found to affect at least 20% of the population (McCroskey & Richmond, 1979), there has been strong support for more information regarding the subject. Observing the impact CA has had on individuals, researchers have thus been able to monitor its potent influences. Many of these studies have examined CA as a trait or enduring personality disposition across different communication contexts and across time (e.g., Daly, McCroskey, Ayres, Hopf, & Ayres, 2009; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). Here, however, we examine CA in terms of a contextual approach across dyadic conversations, group meetings, and public speaking engagements.

**Imagined Interactions**

IIs refer to the cognitive process of individuals indirectly experiencing themselves in anticipated or future communicative encounters with others through the process of imagination (Honeycutt, 2003, 2008). IIs may be important in coping with CA because of their benefit in helping individuals define situations and reduce uncertainty. Honeycutt (2003, 2009) reviewed numerous studies detailing how IIs help individuals define views of themselves, others, and situations through the process
of rehearsing for future, and reviewing previous, communication interactions (Honeycutt & Ford, 2001). A self-awareness occurs through this practice of II that allows the individual to examine one's own and other's communicative objectives. IIs aid people through clarifying thoughts and feelings and, thus, enable them to uncover opposing or differing aspects of the self. Zagacki, Edwards, Honeycutt (1992) indicated that those IIs involving conflict increase understanding of the self as individuals ruminate about their positions after arguments. Furthermore, Berkos, Allen, Kearney, and Plax (2001) discussed how IIs can be used to help individuals define a situation and cope with the changes associated with violated norms.

IIs have their theoretical foundation in symbolic interactionism and script theory. Mead (1934) discussed the internalized conversation of gestures in which individual actors are able to consciously monitor social action by reviewing alternative endings of any given act in which they are involved. Individuals use internal dialogues to explore within their minds the various possible scenarios of an event in advance of the act. Relational scripts are partly formed through the process of mental imagery and daydreaming in which individuals often think about conversations with significant others (Honeycutt & Bryan, in press).

II research has spent considerable time examining message rehearsal (Honeycutt, 2003). This use of IIs is linked to cognitive editing, which allows adjustments to messages after their potential effects on a given relationship have been assessed (Meyer, 1997). The implication here is that individuals rehearse messages, presumably through the use of IIs, and make changes as necessary for achieving desired outcomes.

The catharsis function of IIs refers to the ability of IIs to help individuals release the stress and tension associated with others' actions (Honeycutt, 2009). Research demonstrates that IIs are often utilized to practice behaviors for future scheduled or anticipated interactions (Honeycutt, 2003, 2008). In fact, both the catharsis and rehearsal functions have been shown to help individuals reduce their fears and prepare for particular situations (Gotcher & Edwards, 1990). Also, we wondered if these functions may decrease CA in some contexts.

Discrepancy is an II characteristic that provides for the incongruity between imagination and the actual interaction. Studies show that individuals with weak communication skills find discrepancy in their actual encounters when compared to the rehearsed IIs (Honeycutt, Zagacki, & Edwards 1990). In addition, having an anxious or ambivalent attachment style is associated with discrepancy (Honeycutt, 1999). Anxious attachments imagine relational encounters and then find that the actual interaction is different from what was constructed in the mind. It is possible that ambivalence evolves after a series of discrepant encounters. The individual wishes to be prepared but learns that planning for encounters is to no avail. Discrepancy has also been found to be negatively associated with communication competence, forensic success, and positively associated with loneliness (Edwards, Honeycutt, & Zagacki, 1988; Gotcher & Honeycutt, 1989; Honeycutt et al., 1990). Therefore, we examined how discrepancy is associated with CA in different contexts.
Hypotheses

Ayres (1996) found that individuals high in apprehension tended to focus on non-communicative means for preparing for speeches. Furthermore, individuals with high CA tended to avoid thinking about impending interviews, and instead focused on note taking for preparation (Ayres, Keereetawee, Chen, & Edwards, 1998). This research indicates that individuals with higher levels of CA do not want to think about their future interactions because the thought process increases their levels of apprehension and discomfort. Based on this analysis, the following hypotheses are tested:

\[ H1: \text{As CA levels increase, use of the II catharsis function will decrease.} \]
\[ H2: \text{As CA levels increase, use of the II rehearsal function will decrease.} \]

The discrepancy characteristic of Us is of interest to this study given previous research indicating that introversion, shyness, and loneliness are all associated with high levels of CA. For instance, Opt and Loffredo (2000) observed that individuals with high levels of CA also exhibited high levels of the personality trait of introversion. Such findings are consistent with McCroskey and Richmond’s (1979) work demonstrating that individuals with high levels of CA have fewer interpersonal relationships and increased levels of shyness compared to individuals with low levels of CA. The relationship between loneliness and CA is thus well documented; however, as noted earlier, Honeycutt et al. (1990) found that loneliness was also related to II discrepancy. More specifically, these researchers observed that II discrepancy was higher among lonely (vs. non-lonely) individuals, and this finding was probably due to their poorly developed communication skills and lack of cognitive scripts. This research thus indicates that individuals with higher levels of CA should also experience highly discrepant Us. Based on this assumption, the following hypothesis is advanced:

\[ H3: \text{As CA increases, II discrepancy will increase.} \]

Method

Participants

Participants for the study were taken from undergraduate communication classes at a large Southern university, who participated to satisfy course requirements from a variety of research options \((N=174)\). The gender of the participants within the sample was 49.4% male \((n=86)\) and 50.6% female \((n=88)\), and their ages ranged from 18 to 33 years \((M=20.0, SD=1.78)\). This research had institutional review board approval. To maintain anonymity, the cover page was detached, which explained the study and requested demographic data, as well as a signed agreement to participate in the study. After gathering informed consent, participants filled out the surveys.
Instrumentation

The survey packet included the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA–24; McCroskey, 2005) and a modified version of the Survey of Imagined Interactions (SII) (Honeycutt, 2009). The PRCA–24 was given to participants to test for their levels of CA. Previous research with the PRCA–24 has shown the instrument to be reliable with reliability estimates above .90, even when compared to other CA scales (Levine & McCroskey, 1990; McCroskey, 1978). The PRCA–24 is a 24 item survey that uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument determines an individual's overall CA, as well as context specific CA in the areas of group discussions, meetings, interpersonal interactions, and public speaking engagements. Sample items for each context are as follows: group CA ("I dislike participating in group discussions."); meeting CA ("I am afraid to express myself at meetings."); dyadic CA ("Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations."); and public speaking CA ("Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech."). Reliabilities of the scales were as follows: group discussion CA (.86), meetings CA (.85), dyadic CA (.86), public speaking CA (.88), and overall CA (.93).

Participants were given the SII to determine their use of IIs. Although discrepancy questions remained unchanged from the original scale, the questions for the rehearsal function and the questions for the catharsis function were modified so they reflected a general use of these functions. Participants were asked to answer questions from the SII using a 5-point Likert scale. Sample items include discrepancy ("When I have a real conversation that I have imagined, the actual conversation is very different from what imagined."), rehearsal ("Imagined interaction helps me plan what I am going to say for an anticipated encounter."), and catharsis ("Imagined interactions help me relieve tension and stress."). The reliabilities of the scales were as follows: discrepancy (.83), rehearsal (.79), and catharsis (.76).

Results

The five CA variables (total, group, meeting, interpersonal, and public speaking CA) were the dependent variables in a series of simultaneous regression models. The independent variables were the II indexes. Table 1 presents the analysis of variance tests for the overall significance of each model, variance accounted for, and the standardized regression coefficients.

H1 received partial support, as increased levels of CA lead to decreased levels for the II catharsis function in the public speaking context, $F(2, 173) = 17.59, p < .001$. This model accounted for 17% of the variance. II catharsis was negatively associated with CA only within the public speaking context ($\beta = -.30$). Table 1 reveals that within the contexts of interpersonal, group, meeting, and overall CA, II catharsis proved to not to be a significant predictor of the CA. The data did not support H2. The analysis revealed that II rehearsal was not a significant predictor of CA, regardless of context. However, the data fully supported H3. As shown in Table 1, CA levels were predicted by discrepancy across all contexts, as well as the total CA,
Table 1  Simultaneous Regression Models Predicting Communication Apprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$r^2$</th>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total CA</td>
<td>(1, 173) = 12.15**</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>II discrepancy</td>
<td>.410</td>
<td>6.60*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II rehearsal</td>
<td>-.050</td>
<td>-.70</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II catharsis</td>
<td>-.080</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group CA</td>
<td>(1, 173) = 3.45.*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>II discrepancy</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>3.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II rehearsal</td>
<td>-.010</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II catharsis</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting CA</td>
<td>(1, 173) = 8.80**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>II discrepancy</td>
<td>.360</td>
<td>5.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II rehearsal</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II catharsis</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal CA</td>
<td>(1, 173) = 22.30**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>II discrepancy</td>
<td>.340</td>
<td>4.72**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II rehearsal</td>
<td>-.090</td>
<td>-1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II catharsis</td>
<td>-.080</td>
<td>-1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking CA</td>
<td>(2, 173) = 17.59**</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>II discrepancy</td>
<td>.400</td>
<td>5.76*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II rehearsal</td>
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<td>0.26</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>II catharsis</td>
<td>-.300</td>
<td>-2.14*</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note. CA = communication apprehension; II = imagined interaction.
*p < .01. **p < .001 (one-tailed).

$F(1, 173) = 12.15, p < .001; r^2 = .17$. Furthermore, as hypothesized, the data revealed a positive association between CA and discrepancy ($\beta = .41$).

Discussion

The findings present some interesting implications for the study of CA. First, the data revealed that II catharsis was a predictor of higher levels of CA only when the CA was for public speaking. This finding is not surprising given that previous research has shown that CA is a common problem of students in public speaking courses (e.g., Adler, 1980; Daly, Vangelisti, Neel, & Cavanaugh, 1989; McCroskey, 1977b). However, the fact that significant findings were not found in the other three areas, and with overall CA, is interesting. It is possible that the public speaking situation elicits the most amount of CA and, as such, would be the most likely to be detected within the sample. Furthermore, this finding supports the research of McCroskey, Richmond, and Davis (1986), who reported that situational contexts are a stronger predictor of audience-based CA than the trait predispositions of people. As such, further research should analyze the differences between the situational CA types tested on the PRCA–24 to determine why differences in II catharsis would exist between them.

The study also revealed that rehearsal was not a significant predictor of CA. This finding is contrary to the previously reviewed research suggesting that individuals with high CA levels focused on non-communicative rehearsal methods, like note taking. Yet, these results suggest that, although individuals high in CA might focus more on note


