The Effects of Anxiety Levels on Classroom Behavior

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Abstract

Levels of anxiety were examined in classroom behavior, in the form of a Likert scale questionnaire. I predict students in the Speaking section will experience more anxiety than those in the Writing or Partner. Levels of anxiety will increase depending on the task given. In this study, undergraduate students were put into three sections; Speaking, Partner and Written. They were instructed to read an article and complete a questionnaire. When students are required to speak in class their anxiety levels will be higher than if they had a partner or were instructed to write the answer down.

*Keywords:* anxiety, participation, classroom behavior, learning

The Effects of Anxiety Levels on Classroom Behavior

Anxiety is feeling everybody experiences at some point in their life. It is a term used to describe feelings such as nervousness, fear and worry. These feelings are normal for most children, teenager and adults; anxiety is a part of development. Anxiety is when a student experiences excessive and uncontrollable worry about future and past events, excessive concern about performing, and significant self- consciousness. Anxiety can have a big impact on people’s lives; it not only affects emotional health, but physical health too. It is important that society learn about anxiety so if they ever find themselves worrying it being scared, they will know how to control it. “In the school setting, anxiety is experienced often by students when being evaluated, such as when taking a test or giving a public performance” Cowden (2010). According to Cowden (2010), some students with social anxiety are afraid to speak and interact with an educational setting. Within the classroom, these students will often daydream and their thoughts will be filled with anxiousness, concern and uneasiness. For example students might think of something that they saw in the news or an incident may have occurred where they live and will be all they think about and it tends to make them more worried. One of the biggest problems today is teachers are unaware of student’s anxiety. Teachers know little about how they are affecting student’s behavior in class. Most of the time teachers are more concern about teaching the students what they need to learn and giving them grades, they never stop to see that all students work in different ways and teacher should attempt to adjust to their needs Rocca (2010). For example, Kelly (1950) found that students who perceived their instructors as “cold” initiated significantly less verbal interaction in the classroom than did students who viewed their instructors as “warm”. According to trait-state anxiety theory (Spielberger, 1966, 1972), persons who are high in trait anxiety are especially prone to perceive evaluative situations in state anxiety (Peters, 1978). If they feel the instructor is a treat their anxiety levels will rise. Most students are more comfortable in class when approached with a situation and they know what to do. Once a student has confidence that will determine how well they cope with anxiety and whether they participate.

When students participate in class they engage with their teacher and students by asking and answering questions during discussion. Participation can also be defined with how many students volunteered to respond to the teacher. Fassinger (1995a) noted that both students and professors can see the benefits of student participation, and Fritschner (2000) found that students thought participation was ‘‘essential’’ to their own learning. Students have been found to earn higher grades as their participation increase (Handelsman et al., 2005). (Rocca, 2010) Reasons why students may or may not participate in class are class size. Many students are more comfortable speaking in classes that are small. One way to enable students whose anxiety levels may rise while in a larger class setting is to put them into smaller groups. Dividing the large class into smaller groups also can be helpful to facilitate discussion (Ferguson, 1986) and to enhance group activities (Cohen, 1991). “Teachers must be aware of academic anxiety and how it may affect their students. Students can experience academic and social success, provided that good supports are in place, whether in schools or at home or both. It is absolutely crucial that teachers, parents, guardian counselors, social workers, and health professionals are knowledgeable about academic anxiety and prepared to help students who suffer from them overcome their challenges and live happy, full lives. Teachers can be part of the healing process, and students with academic anxiety can not only perform better academically but also socially, physically, and mentally” Cowden (2010). Until instructors realize the pressure that students are under anxiety which social or testing with continue to be a problem and affect the ways students learn.

In the recent experiment I measured anxiety levels of college students by placing students in different conditions. Students who are placed in the speaking section will experience more anxiety than those in the writing or partner. Based on the condition the student is assigned to whether being called on by experimenter, writing their answer down on a worksheet or discussing with a partner will determine how much anxiety affects their behavior.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants will consist of 90 undergraduate students ranging in age from 18 to 22 years old. The participants will participate as a class requirement.

**Materials**

Participants will receive the article titled A Weird Way of Thinking Has Prevailed Worldwide (2010) written by Anand Giridharadas. This article will be used in all of the sections.

The questionnaire is based on a Likert scale ranging from 1-5. There will a list of 10 words that express either feelings of happiness or anxiety, for example joyful or uncomfortable.

**Procedure**

The participants will come in and receive an article to read. The time is unlimited to read the article. Once the students are finished reading the experimenter will collect the article. In the Speaking section, the students will be randomly selected to answer a question asked by the experimenter. In the Writing sections, the students will be given a worksheet with a question and they will write down their answer. In the Partner section, the students with a partner will take two minutes to discuss the answer to the questions they received. Here is an example of a question they would be asked: what did the abbreviated word WEIRD stand for? In each section once those task are done students will receive a questionnaire to measure their anxiety levels.

**Results**

The statistical test used in the research was a t- test. This test is being used to determine if anxiety levels of students have an effect on their classroom behavior. Figure 1 shows the means for all three sections. The mean of the students in the speaking section is 4.5. The mean of the students in the writing is 2 and for the partner 1. Therefore students are more likely to feel anxious when being called on to answer questions.

**Discussion**

Due to the recent research on anxiety and participation, I hypothesized that students in the speaking section would experience more anxiety than those in the writing and partner sections. The results supported the hypothesis and showed that when students are required to participate in class they are more likely to be anxious. Limitation for this study could be participant effects. Once they receive the questionnaire they may figure out that they were supposed to feel anxious and make all their answer seem as if they were anxious. I avoided this by putting multiple words that express different emotions so they give me their actually feelings. Another limitation could be how many participants show up to the study. I would have to adjust the data so even if I don’t get how many I want I will have enough to analyze and determine whether my data fit my hypothesis. To avoid having the independent variables become a limitation I would add volunteering to answer the questions as a fourth level. For my factorial design my second independent variable would be class order; freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior. I would use the same design, but students will be put into categories based on what class they are in. I predict that freshmen will feel more anxiety than any other class.

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*Figure 1*. Means representing anxiety levels for each section.

Appendix A

**A Weird Way of Thinking Has Prevailed Worldwide**

**By ANAND GIRIDHARADAS**

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CORTES, [CANADA](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/canada/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) — Imagine a country whose inhabitants eat human flesh, wear only pink hats to sleep and banish children into the forest to raise themselves until adulthood.

Now imagine that this country dominates the study of psychology worldwide. Its universities have the best facilities, which draw the best scholars, who write the best papers. Their research subjects are the flesh-eating, pink-hat-wearing, forest-reared locals.

When these psychologists write about their own country, all is well. But things deteriorate when they generalize about human nature.

They view behaviors that are globally commonplace — say, [vegetarianism](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/v/vegetarianism/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) — as deviant. Human nature, as they define it, reflects little of the actual diversity of humankind.

This scenario may sound preposterous. But if a provocative new study is to be believed, the world already lives in such a situation — except that it is American undergraduates, not flesh-eating forest dwellers, who monopolize our knowledge of human nature.

In the study, published last month in the journal Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine and Ara Norenzayan — all psychologists at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver — condemn their field’s quest for human universals.

Psychologists claim to speak of human nature, the study argues, but they have mostly been telling us about a group of WEIRD outliers, as the study calls them — Westernized, educated people from industrialized, rich democracies.

According to the study, 68 percent of research subjects in a sample of hundreds of studies in leading psychology journals came from the United States, and 96 percent from Western industrialized nations. Of the American subjects, 67 percent were undergraduates studying psychology — making a randomly selected American undergraduate 4,000 times likelier to be a subject than a random non-Westerner.

Western psychologists routinely generalize about “human” traits from data on this slender subpopulation, and psychologists elsewhere cite these papers as evidence.

In itself, such extrapolation is hardly fatal. Freud built his account of human behavior from his work on patients in Vienna and generalized for the world. So many great analysts of human nature, from Aristotle to the Buddha, reached for transcendent human truths despite limited contact with the range of humanity.

The Canadian study’s claim is not to invalidate all extrapolation so much as to suggest that American undergraduates may be especially unsuitable for it.

The study’s method was to analyze a mountain of published, peer-reviewed psychology papers. It found evidence both of a narrow research base and of the eccentricity of that base. Among the many peculiarities of the usual subjects who serve as “universal man” are these, the study found:

American subjects disproportionately prize choice and individualism. In a survey of six Western societies, only Americans preferred a choice of 50 ice creams to 10. Studies have found that Americans are all but alone in giving newborns their own room.

Americans are also peculiar in the so-called Ultimatum Game, in which a subject receives money and must make an offer to share it. The second subject can accept or reject the offer, but if it is rejected, neither subject gets paid.

Americans playing the game are fair in the extreme, making higher offers than most. But they are also outliers in another way. In various places, including Russia and [China](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), psychologists observe the rejection of excessive generosity — a demurring when offered too much. This behavior is absent from American undergraduates.

The study’s list goes on and on. Westerners tend to define themselves by psychological traits, and non-Westerners by relationships. In some languages, including English, directions are built around the self (“Take a right after the church”), while in other languages, they refer to immovable objects (“It is behind the church”).

Americans are worse than many at overcoming common optical illusions about the length of lines. But they are better than East Asians at recalling an object when the background changes, perhaps because the latter focus on context.

The data on these differences are patchy, the study’s authors acknowledge. Not enough work has been done on human variation. The Canadian attempt was simply to synthesize the existing research and to establish with their synthesis that psychological sameness is an implausible assumption.

Some critics of the study have suggested that there are universals underlying surface differences, and that the WEIRD variables may not be the right ones. But there has been little dispute about the premise that psychologists have extrapolated from an outlying few the ways of the global many.

It is an extrapolation with consequences. Democracy promoters tell us that all humans feel the same way about authority, despite evidence of diversity. Economists say that all humans are self-interested rational actors, though many succumb to selfless and irrational pursuits. Abstract rights are proclaimed for all humans, overlooking the fact that many prefer their ethics in more grounded, context-specific ways.

China, [India](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/india/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) and many other societies shy away from such universalizing. Their thinkers avoid proclaiming that all humans do this or do that simply because the Chinese or the Indians do. If they began to do so, how might things change?

For now, those outside the West continue to feel a certain pressure from beyond to think in ways not their own. The television sitcoms they watch, the books they read, the superheroes they grow up with, the PowerPoint presentations they give — these were often designed with someone else’s psychology foremost in mind, on the hope that they fit universally.

One response to the WEIRD study, by the psychologist Paul Rozin, is that extrapolating from Americans is acceptable because the world is Americanizing. “The U.S. is in the vanguard of the global world,” he said, according to Science magazine, “and may provide a glimpse into the future.”

But it is also possible that people around the world are not simply in the process of becoming like American undergraduates, and relying on WEIRD subjects can make others feel alienated, with their ways of thinking framed as deviant, not different. Among the less-examined facets of globalization is its psychic pressure: a force that makes people feel that they are playing by others’ rules, that makes their own home turf feel like an opponent’s stadium. In this WEIRD people’s world, so many only know away games.

Appendix B

Directions: For each question circle the response that best applies to you at this moment.

Not at all Somewhat Very

Happy 1 2 3 4 5

Fearful 1 2 3 4 5

Relax 1 2 3 4 5

Pressured 1 2 3 4 5

Nervous 1 2 3 4 5

Tense 1 2 3 4 5

Courageous 1 2 3 4 5

Uncomfortable 1 2 3 4 5

Joyful 1 2 3 4 5

Cautious 1 2 3 4 5