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# The Relationship Between a Required Self-Disclosure Speech and Public Speaking Anxiety: Considering Gender Equity

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## Recommended Citation

# The Relationship between a Required Self-Disclosure Speech and Public Speaking Anxiety: Considering Gender Equity[1]

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A good deal of research exists about the role of self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships (Aires & Johnson, 1983; Bochner, 1983; Chelune, 1976; Derlega & Chaikin, 1976; Dolgin, Meyer & Schwartz, 1991; Gitter & Black, 1976; Jourard & Jaffe, 1970; Komarovski, 1974; McCroskey, 1977; Pearce & Sharp, 1973; Reis, Senchak & Solomon, 1985; Rosenfeld, 1979; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991a; Shaffer, Pegalis & Cornell, 1991b; Snell, Miller & Belk, 1988; Taylor & Hinds, 1985; Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977; Williams, 1985; Winstead, Derlega & Wong, 1984). This existing research generated some commonly accepted conclusions. For example, appropriate self-disclosure can foster attraction, comfort, trust, and intimacy. Conversely, inappropriate self-disclosure can lead to negative evaluations, loss of self-esteem, loss of control over a situation, and projection of a negative self-image.

Self-disclosure has received relatively little attention, however, with regard to its function in public speaking situations. A few studies suggest that appro-

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[1] Parts of this article are based on a similar study conducted for Ms. Golish's Master's thesis project under the direction of Deanna Sellnow.

priate self-disclosure can warm the communication climate, thereby reducing speech anxiety levels expressed by students (Petronio, Martin and Littlefield, 1984; Littlefield and Sellnow, 1987; Mulac and Sherman, 1975; Rosenfeld, 1979; Derlega and Chaikin, 1977). If this research is correct, then it seems sensible to require a self-disclosure speech early in the term as a means by which to warm the communication climate and reduce perceived speech anxiety.

A potential gender bias may be inherent, however, in requiring such a speech. To clarify, interpersonal communication studies document fairly consistently that significant gender differences exist in terms of self-disclosure. Generally, females tend to be socialized in ways that make them higher disclosers than males (Aires & Johnson, 1983; Gitter & Black, 1976; Pearce & Sharp, 1973; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991a; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991b; Williams, 1985; Winstead, Derlega, & Wong, 1984). Not only do females tend to self-disclose more often than males, they also seem to feel more comfortable doing so (Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991a; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991b). Conversely, males may be reluctant to disclose in public speaking contexts because doing so is a sign of weakness (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Further, "men who identify with the masculine role may fear being rejected or ridiculed if they violate ... appropriate sex-typed behavior" (p. 377). If educators are to maximize the potential climate-warming and anxiety-reducing benefits of a self-disclosure speech, then, care must be taken to overcome the potential gender bias inherent in such an assignment.

Some guidelines for overcoming potential gender bias can, again, be drawn from interpersonal research. Aires and Johnson (1983), for example, discovered that males and females tend to self-disclose about different

topics. More specifically, "women share more about themselves, their feelings, homes, and close relationships; men share more about sports and amusements; competition and aggression; and things they have seen, read, or heard" (p. 1185). Males also tended to self-disclose more about activity-oriented topics, whereas females tend to discuss topics focused more on relational issues (Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). Public speaking research also suggested that students should pick a topic they like and are interested in to diminish speech anxiety (Littlefield & Sellnow, 1984). Hence, taking these gendered topic selection differences into account may also reduce the potential for gender bias in such an assignment.

This study sought to answer four general research questions.

- First, we examined whether or not requiring self-disclosure in a formal public speech influences anxiety levels experienced by student speakers. In other words, we sought to expand on the assumptions made by Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield (1984), Littlefield and Sellnow (1987), Rosenfeld (1979), and Derlega and Chaikin (1977) that appropriate self-disclosure among students may warm the communication climate and, consequently, reduce public speaking anxiety. If anxiety levels expressed by speakers are higher when they are required to self-disclose than the levels they report about public speaking in general, then the disadvantages may outweigh any potential climate-warming advantages inherent in such an assignment. For purposes of this study, self-disclosure was described as the degree to which one person reveals personally significant, and probably unknown, information about him or herself to

another. Examples and stories that were considered self-disclosure, then, were limited only to those that revealed personally significant information that was generally unknown to each speaker's classmates.

• Second, we attempted to discover whether there is an inherent gender bias in a required self-disclosure speech assignment. Since interpersonal research suggested that females are socialized to be higher disclosers than males and appear to be more comfortable doing so, then a required self-disclosure speech may be inherently biased against males. In other words, if males report higher anxiety about self-disclosing in a public speech than their female peers, then this assignment may unfairly discriminate against males.

• Third, to gain more depth of understanding, we also examined student perceptions about particular characteristics of communication anxiety. In other words, we asked students to define what they believe to be the primary characteristics of "comfort" and "anxiety" as they relate to a public speaking situation. We examined students' answers qualitatively to identify emergent themes about the characteristics of public speaking anxiety. Comfort level was operationally defined for this study as the degree to which a student feels he or she is in a state of well-being. Anxiety, on the other hand, was described as the level of uneasiness, nervousness, apprehension, or worry the student feels about speaking in front of an audience. Although comfort level and speech anxiety may not be diametrically opposed, the terms were defined to students in this way for purposes of this

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study. Doing so provided a means by which to examine student perceptions of anxiety within both a positively and a negatively charged valence. Providing these definitions so also allowed increased reliability of our findings, as well as helped us generate greater depth and breadth of insight regarding students' perceptions about the characteristics of comfort level and contributors to anxiety in a public speaking situation.

Current research assumes that the elements of communication anxiety embedded in clinical definitions are synonymous to student perceptions. To date, no research has been conducted to discover whether or not student perceptions about the characteristics of communication anxiety are congruent with clinical definitions. If students describe elements of comfort and anxiety in ways that are incongruent with characteristics described in existing literature, then it may be necessary to engage in new research and develop new teaching strategies designed to help students cope effectively with public speaking anxiety, as well.

• Fourth, we conducted a qualitative analysis of gender differences regarding topic selection and thematic content for this speech assignment. Doing so allowed us to expand on previous research (Aires and Johnson, 1983; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991, Littlefield & Sellnow, 1984) to speculate as to whether or not any potential gender bias in a required self-disclosure speech is reduced when students are provided freedom in terms of topic selection and thematic content.

Results of this study may extend current research about the characteristics of public speaking anxiety and the role self-disclosure may play in reducing it. Results may also help educators determine new pedagogical approaches for reducing speech anxiety in public speaking situations. If a required self-disclosure speech is not inherently gender biased, and if the required self-disclosure speech does not give rise to higher than "normal" perceived anxiety levels by speakers, then such an assignment might be used to warm the communication climate and, ultimately, reduce perceived speech anxiety levels experienced by students as the semester progresses.

# METHOD

## *Subjects*

For this study, 538 students at a mid-sized, Midwestern university, ranging from first-year students to seniors, were asked by their public speaking fundamentals instructors to complete a questionnaire during one class session. Of the 538 students who completed the questionnaire, 42 percent (227 students) were female and 58 percent (311 students) were male. Also, 52 percent (280 students) of the students who completed a questionnaire were first-year students. Approximately 28 percent (150 students) of the respondents were in their second year of college, 12.5 percent (67 students) identified themselves as juniors, and about 6 percent (34 students) as seniors. Students received no extra credit for participating in this study.

## *The Required Self-Disclosure Speech*

The *Speech of Personal Significance* is a four- to six-minute informative speech about a person, object, or belief that has somehow influenced the student. This speech is the first of four major speeches required of students during the term. Main points must be specific characteristics or values held by the student that are represented by the speech topic selected. No external sources are required for this assignment. Rather, supporting material and evidence for each main point must be stories, illustrations, and examples that come directly from the student's personal life experiences. Since self-disclosure was described as the degree to which one person reveals personally significant, and probably unknown, information about him or herself to another, examples and stories that had arisen in earlier class periods with the same students were not considered to be evidence of self-disclosure. By the time the speaker finishes delivering his or her speech, audience members should understand why the speech topic is important to the speaker and how it has shaped their personal beliefs and values.

## *Instrument*

The three-part questionnaire was designed to measure students' perceived comfort levels with self-disclosing information as part of a required public speech assignment entitled the *Speech of Personal Significance*. The questionnaire was comprised of 20 questions and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The instrument was field tested using 15 students who were also teaching assistants for the course. Their responses to the questions and format were used to

modify the questionnaire in ways that would better insure content validity and reliability.

The first part of the questionnaire asked students to report personal demographic information, as well as the topic and supporting material used in the speech. We asked questions about topic choice and supporting material in order to determine whether or not existing research that suggests gendered topic selection differences in interpersonal settings is transferable to public speaking situations (Aires & Johnson, 1983; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991).

The second portion of the questionnaire used a self-created Likert-type scale to determine the speaker's perceived anxiety about disclosing personal information in the public speech. Students were asked to respond to these closed-ended statements on a scale of 1 - 5 (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree). These questions were adapted from Richmond and McCroskey's (1992) "Situational Communication Apprehension Measure" (SCAM) and McCroskey's (1970) "Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety" (PRPSA). One question from this portion of the questionnaire, for example, states: "I felt comfortable talking to other people about something or someone personally significant to me." Other statements focus on extraneous variables that may have played a role in the speaker's perceived anxiety level (e.g., amount of preparation time spent, difficulty in topic selection, overall enjoyment in completing the assignment). The reliability coefficient for this scale was .75.

The last portion of the questionnaire attempted to measure variables such as student's actual and perceived grades on the assignment, perceived speech anxiety, and unforeseen difficulties incurred while completing the assignment. One week earlier, students had completed McCroskey's (1970) "Personal Report of

Public Speaking Anxiety" (PRPSA) and calculated their own speech anxiety score. To compare students' general speech anxiety level to their perceived anxiety regarding self-disclosure in a public speech, one of the items asked students to report their PRPSA score.[2] Subsequent questions were designed to determine any perceived difficulties expressed by the students, and also provided an opportunity for students to address any concerns not accounted for in the questionnaire.

## *Procedure*

After obtaining IRB (Internal Review Board) approval, packets of questionnaires were distributed to all public speaking instructors who required the *Speech of Personal Significance* in their course. These instructors were asked to administer the questionnaire to their students after all students had completed their personal significance speech. Each teacher was provided with oral and written instructions detailing how they were to administer the questionnaire. Students were informed about the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that all answers would be anonymous.

The data collected were divided into two groups (male and female) so that comparisons could be drawn. Central tendencies of male and female perceived anxiety levels were then analyzed quantitatively, using percentages, frequencies, chi-square, and t-tests. Open-ended questions were coded according to emergent themes and examined qualitatively.

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[2] Personal copies of each student's PRPSA had been returned to them for reference. Instructors were also available if students chose to ask them for the score.

# RESULTS

The results were grouped into one of the three categories. The first category was titled "perceived anxiety about self-disclosing in a public speech." The second category was labeled "what comfortable means in a public speaking setting." And the final category was identified as "topic selection and thematic content."

## *Perceived Anxiety*

One of the questions on the survey asked if the student felt comfortable disclosing personally significant information in the public speech. Based on responses to this statement, "I felt comfortable talking to other people about something or someone personally significant to me," most students did not report increased anxiety levels due to self-disclosure. As Table 1 indicates, responses from a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, showed that a majority of the participants agreed (46.8%) or strongly agreed (18.0%) that they felt comfortable disclosing personally significant information in their public speech. The majority of the respondents indicated that they felt comfortable self-disclosing, even though 80 percent of this pool scored moderate to high on the PRPSA one week earlier. Moreover, contrary to results of gender differences in interpersonal settings, t-test results comparing males and females revealed no significant differences in comfort level about disclosing personally significant information (t = 2.5, d.f. = 310 and t = 2.2, d.f. = 226, respectively; p =.71).

Table 1
Degree of Comfort, Resistance, and Confidence with
Self-Disclosing Information

| Degree | n | Comfort | n | Resistance | n | Confidence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 97 | 18.0% | 15 | 2.8% | 53 | 9.9% |
| Agree | 252 | 46.8% | 62 | 11.5% | 232 | 43.1% |
| Neutral | 114 | 21.1% | 112 | 20.8% | 144 | 26.8% |
| Disagree | 64 | 11.9% | 254 | 47.2% | 87 | 16.2% |
| Strongly Disagree | 11 | 2.0% | 95 | 17.7% | 22 | 4.1% |
| T-test Results (F=Female; M=Male) | | | | | | |
| Means | F=2.2 | | F=3.8 | | F=2.6 | |
| | M=2.5 | | M=3.6 | | M=2.6 | |
| | Prob>F'=0.7051 | | Prob>F'=0.5235 | | Prob>F'=0.6096 | |

An additional question asked whether students attempted to avoid revealing certain information about themselves in the speech. More specifically, students were asked to respond to the statement, "I tried not to disclose or reveal personal information about myself in my speech." As is illustrated in Table 1, nearly half (47.2%) of the students reported that they were not inhibited to self-disclose. Again, there were no significant gender differences between males and females with regard to anxiety level in self-disclosing personal information in the personal significance speech (t = 3.6, d.f. = 310 and t = 3.8, d.f. = 226, respectfully; p = .52). In fact, based on this survey, a large number of both males and females expressed minimal anxiety about revealing personally significant information about themselves in the speech.

One item on the questionnaire examined students' degree of confidence about giving this speech in front of other students. Students responded to the statement, "I felt confident giving this speech in front of the other students." Again, nearly half of the students surveyed (43.1%) did report that they were confident about presenting this speech in front of others. Again, as depicted in Table 1, no significant gender differences between males and females were revealed with regard to degree of confidence (t = 2.6, d.f. = 310 and t = 2.6, d.f. = 226, respectfully; p = .61).

Also related to comfort level is the student's perceived level of security while preparing the speech. Students responded to the statement, "I felt insecure while preparing this speech." Consistent with the findings on comfort, Table 2 illustrates that only 19.0% of the students surveyed indicated feeling insecure while preparing the speech compared to 55.4% who indicated

Table 2

Degree of Insecurity with Self-Disclosing Information

| Degree | n | Insecurity |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 19 | 3.5% |
| Agree | 85 | 15.5% |
| Neutral | 136 | 25.3% |
| Disagree | 241 | 44.8% |
| Strongly Disagree | 57 | 10.6% |
| T-Test Results | | |
| | Female = 0.79 | Male = 0.79 |
| | Prob>F'=0.1140 | |

   

that they did not feel insecure. No significant gender differences were revealed with regard to level of insecurity while preparing the speech (t = .79, d.f. = 310 and t = .79, d.f. = 226; p = .11).

Two other questions examined the amount of time spent preparing and rehearsing the speech as they might impact comfort level. Each statement asked students to respond with "agree" or "disagree." One item stated, "I spent enough time writing this speech." Another item stated, "I spent enough time rehearsing the delivery of this speech." As Table 3 indicates, the majority of both males (64.3%) and females (83.25%) indicated that they did not believe they had spent enough time writing the speech. Moreover, chi-square results reveal a statistically significant gender difference. Although both males and females reported a need to spend more time rehearsing the speech, females spent significantly more time rehearsing the delivery of their speech than did males (x2 = 18.33, d.f. = 4, p = .00).

Table 3
Feeling That Enough Time
Was Spent Writing the Speech

| Gender | n | Agree | n | Disagree | n | Total |
|--------|-----|--------|-----|----------|-----|--------|
| Female* | 189 | 83.25% | 38 | 16.74% | 227 | 42.19% |
| Male** | 200 | 64.20% | 111 | 20.63% | 311 | 57.81% |
| Totals*** | 389 | 72.30% | 149 | 27.70% | 538 | 100.0% |

Prob>F'=0.000

*This percentage is based on the total number of female students surveyed.
**This percentage is based on the total number of male students surveyed.
***This percentage is based on the combined number of male and female
   students surveyed.

Table 4 shows that significantly more females (60.79%) agreed with the statement that they spent enough time rehearsing the speech than did males (40.83%)($x^2$ = 18.73, d.f. = 2, p = .00). In other words, more females reported that they spent enough time rehearsing the speech than males, although a majority of students of both genders reported being comfortable, confident, and secure presenting the speech.

Table 4
Feeling That Enough Time Was
Spent Rehearsing the Speech

| Gender | n | Agree | n | Disagree | n | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female* | 138 | 60.79% | 89 | 39.20% | 227 | 42.19% |
| Male** | 127 | 40.83% | 184 | 59.16% | 311 | 57.81% |
| Totals*** | 265 | 49.26 | 273 | 50.74% | 538 | 100.0% |

Prob>F'=0.001

*This percentage is based on the total number of female students surveyed.

**This percentage is based on the total number of male students surveyed.
***This percentage is based on the combined number of male and female students surveyed.

## *What Comfortable Means*

To help gain insight into why students may or may not feel anxious about self-disclosing in a public speech, respondents were asked to define in our open-ended portion of the questionnaire what being comfortable in a public speaking situation means to them. Five predominant themes emerged from the responses.

The first theme focused on the need to feel in control of the situation and to deal effectively with nervousness (see Table 5). About one-third of the females (31.71%) and one-third of the males (35.69%) responded that comfortable means being in control of the situation. Nervousness was described in both physical and psychological terms. For example, participants reported a desire to control physical reactions such as shaking, sweating, stuttering, stomach aches, cracking voice, and so forth. According to one student, being comfortable meant "not having your heart race, face turn red, stutter over words ... basically, being calm, cool, collected." Students also indicated a need to control their psychological reactions, such as maintaining a positive attitude, casting out doubts, and feeling secure. As one student explained, being comfortable means "not being so nervous that you can't think of what you're going to say next, that your thoughts are clear and reasonable." In the words of another, being comfortable is "feeling a little nervous about getting up in front of people but not 'out of control' nervous."

Confidence was another dominant theme that arose in 33 (6.13%) of the responses (see Table 5). Of those 33, about half were female and half were male. Confidence was related to both the topic and personal ability. Based on the responses offered consistently by students in this study, confidence meant not being afraid to reveal information about the self and overall confidence in the self and speaking ability. For example, as one student explained, it is "when you feel ... confident in your topic and abilities." Or, as another indicated, "Being comfortable means to me that I can get up in front of people and give my speech with confidence and ease ... . Also not being afraid to say things about myself or the subject I am discussing in front of my classmates."

Table 5
What Comfortable Means to Students

| Gender | n | Control | n | Confi-dence | n | Deli-very | n | Topic | n | Audi-ence |
|--------|---|---------|---|-------------|---|-----------|---|-------|---|-----------|
| Female* | 72 | 31.71% | 17 | 7.48% | 27 | 11.89% | 43 | 18.94% | 72 | 31.71% |
| Male** | 111 | 35.89% | 16 | 5.14% | 55 | 17.68% | 40 | 12.86% | 83 | 26.68% |
| Total*** | 183 | 34.01% | 33 | 6.13% | 82 | 15.24% | 83 | 15.42% | 155 | 28.81% |

*This percentage is based on the total number of female students surveyed.
**This percentage is based on the total number of male students surveyed.
***This percentage is based on the combined number of male and female students surveyed.

Clear delivery emerged as another important dimension of comfort (see Table 5). Eighty-two students (15.2%) responded to the comfort question in this way. Twice as many males (n=55) as females (n=27) reported that comfort meant clear delivery. In terms of percentages, about 17. 68% of the males and 11.89% of the females reported delivery as a major component of comfort. According to one participant, comfortable meant "being free to discuss the topic well enough to add necessary ad libs and tailor it for an audience instantaneously upon feedback." Students reported the desire to communicate intelligibly and with relative ease. As one student wrote, comfortable meant "being able to talk fluently throughout the speech. Being able to converse with the audience." Or, so that "your nervousness doesn't interrupt or outshine the flow, presentation, and quality of your speech."

The fourth theme focused on having a genuine interest in and knowledge about the topic (see Table 5). Eighty-three students (15.4%) offered responses coded into this theme. The gender distribution was fairly evenly divided between males (12.86%) and females (18.94%). Being interested in and enjoying the subject

played an influential role in being comfortable. For example, one respondent stated that "comfortable means that I'm well prepared and enjoy what I am talking about." Some students indicated that using personal experiences as supporting material fostered this. As one student noted, "If the speech is from your personal experiences, I think this is comfortable." Another student illustrated, "I'm comfortable if I'm speaking about something I care about and know about... I like to let people know who I am and where I stand on important issues." The students also indicated the need to be perceived as knowledgeable about the topic. For instance, to one respondent, it meant "feeling at ease with myself and feeling as though I know a lot about my topic." Or, "Comfortable to me means that the person giving the speech feels the audience will learn something or be entertained. Also that you ... sound like you know what you are talking about."

The final theme concerned the audience (see Table 5). One hundred fifty-five students (28.8%) mentioned the role audience plays in comfort level. A fairly evenly distributed number of males and females indicated that it was important to gain the audience's approval, not be looked upon with judgment, and imagine talking to audience members as though they were close friends. Similar to the first theme (in control), about one-third of the females (31.71%) reported audience as a major factor. About one-fourth of the males (26.68%) reported in this way. For instance, according to one student, comfortable meant "being able to look out at the sea of faces comfortably, not feeling like you are being stared at or like the walls are closing in on you." To another student, "being comfortable in public speaking situations would mean that I would be able to talk about anything in a way that I would talk to my best friend." To another, it meant "not being worried about what

others think." Or, "To me, comfortable means being able to communicate with others in a way that you're able to talk naturally and not worry about what your audience is thinking about or how they are judging you."

Based on these results, it seems that students believe a sense of control (34.01%) and respect from the audience (28.81%) are the most important components of comfort level in public speaking situations. Four of the five themes were fairly evenly reported by males and females. The only gender difference emerged in the clear delivery category. Males reported a link between clear delivery and comfort level twice as often as females.

## *Topic Selection and Thematic Content*

As Table 6 illustrates, students were afforded the opportunity to base their personal significance speech on an object, person, belief, or "other." Previous research conducted in interpersonal settings suggests that males and females tend to self-disclose about different topics and in different ways (Aires & Johnson, 1983; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). More specifically, females tend to disclose more about their feelings, their homes, and their close relationships. Males, on the other hand, tend to share more about sports, competition, activities, and things they have seen, read, or heard. This portion of the questionnaire was designed to discover whether similar gender differences arose in a public speaking setting. If so, it may provide insight into how instructors might structure a self-disclosure speech assignment with gender equity in mind.

Results reveal that there was a significant gender difference with regard to topic selection. Significantly fewer females (23.34%) chose to talk about an object

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than did males (35.36%). More males (12.22%) chose a belief than did females (0.08%), and more females (41.40%) than males (28.29%) chose to talk about a person. In other words, males were more likely to talk about objects and beliefs than females. And, females were more likely to talk about a person than were males. Hence, consistent with the results of topics discussed in interpersonal settings, a gender difference did emerge with regard to topic choice.

To extend our understanding of gendered topic differences, an open-ended question asked participants to explain the thematic content (or the main points) used for their speeches. Students were asked, "In a few short sentences, briefly explain the main points of your speech." Several themes emerged for each of the possible topics: object, person, belief, and other.

Table 6
Topics Chosen for the Speech

| Gender | n | Object | n | Person | n | Belief | n | Other | n | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female* | 53 | 23.34% | 94 | 41.40% | 20 | 0.08% | 60 | 26.43% | 227 | 42.19% |
| Male** | 110 | 35.35% | 88 | 28.29% | 38 | 12.11% | 75 | 24.11% | 311 | 57.81% |
| Total*** | 163 | 30.30% | 182 | 33.83% | 58 | 10.78% | 135 | 25.09% | 538 | 100.0% |

*This percentage is based on the total number of female students surveyed.

**This percentage is based on the total number of male students surveyed.

***This percentage is based on the combined number of male and female students surveyed.

First, there were significant gender differences with regard to how objects were discussed in the speeches. For instance, stuffed animals or pets were often used as topics, but the way speakers referred to them differed according to gender. Females (17 out of 19 respondents

or 89%) spoke about animals as if they were human, capable of being best friends and maintaining relationships. In other words, they tended to personify their pets or stuffed animals. For instance, as one woman wrote, "I talked about my Snoopy and how he is a long time best friend to me. I included stories of our times together throughout my childhood, how I took him to college and Arizona with me, and how I continue to collect Snoopys today." Males (6 out of 10 respondents or 60%), on the other hand, tended to talk more about the proper training techniques, responsibility, and learning gained from pets. One male wrote, for example, that "dogs mean much to me and it is of importance to me that people know proper care and training techniques and following these simple guidelines can benefit both owner and dog."

In addition, more males (71 out of a total of 311 males or 23%) discussed sports and activities than did females (22 out of a total of 227 females or 9%). When they did, their thematic content emphasized competition, the hard work ethic as it leads to success, responsibility, confidence, and self-esteem. As one student stated: "My speech was about basketball and what it taught me. It taught me competitiveness, teamwork, and hard work." Another male stated, "My main points were how athletic competition helps me to feel good about myself, it makes exercise less monotonous, and is a way I enjoy spending my free time." Conversely, females who reported talking about sports and activities identified consistently thematic content revolving around important relationships that developed as a result of participating, dedication, and teamwork. One female, for example, told how it "helped me with friendships, teamwork skills, and a skill of playing ball that I can use in the future for recreation."

Also consistent with gendered self-disclosure differences conclusions drawn from interpersonal settings, females talked more about family members and best friends than did their male counterparts (81 out of a total of 227 females or 36%; 67 out of a total of 311 males or 22%). The bonds and relationships formed among family members were identified as the primary themes. More specifically, sisters and mothers were described as best friends and as role models. For example, one female wrote "My sister is a very important part of my life. Our relationship is more like best friends than sisters. Her life has been a good role model for me." Or as another woman explained "I wrote about my twin sister as being my best friend. She's my best friend because she's someone I can go to. I've learned valuable lessons from her, and we've been through a lot together." Mothers were also selected by many female respondents. As one female wrote "My speech was about how important parents are, especially my mom. My mom has provided me with a role model unlike any other. She has continued to impress me with her unending love and empathy for others as well as her understanding." As another women explained, "I spoke about my mother I talked about how she is one of my role models, a best friend, and someone who continues to help me learn and grow."

Some males also talked about friends and family members (about 282% as compared to about 36% of the females). Interestingly, however, males who spoke about friends and family members emphasized thematic content focused on activities they participated in together rather than relational issues and feelings. For example, one male noted that "I talked about how hunting with my dad helped me get closer to him, how hunting with my friend helped me keep friendships, and how I will be looking forward to hunting with my kids."

And another wrote, "The main points that I covered were how my Grandpa affected my life in three ways: First, how he got me started in sports. Secondly, how he got me to be a fisherman, and finally how he helped to keep up my confidence and to stay in school." These responses regarding thematic content chosen by males and females who talked about important people in their lives support the conclusions drawn in interpersonal research about gender differences in self-disclosure (Aires & Johnson, 1983; Dolgin, Meyer & Schwartz, 1991).

Finally, some students talked about a specific place or event (32 of the 538 respondents or 6%). Ten of these 32 respondents were female (31.3%) and 22 respondents were male (68.8%). Thematic content chosen to develop these speeches was, again, consistent with the conclusions drawn in interpersonal settings. Females spoke about things like dedication, responsibility, and family. One female's "topic was about the town of Hazelton, ND; the people who live there, my family, and the values I learned from this town." Another female described "how living on a farm has taught me dedication, responsibility, and family unity and how it has helped me become who I am today." Males, on the other hand, talked about it as a place to get away from it all, where it was peaceful, or where there were lots of things to do. For instance, one male claimed, "In my speech, I talked about a place where I could go to get way from it all called the castle. I talked about how the castle got its name, how much the place meant to me, and the knowledge I gained by going there."

# DISCUSSION

Numerous studies exist that conclude that appropriate self-disclosure can foster attraction, comfort, trust, and intimacy in interpersonal relationships. Although relatively few studies exist to date focused on the role of self-disclosure in public speaking situations, some have suggested that appropriate self-disclosure can warm the communication climate, thereby reducing speech anxiety levels in students (Petronio, Martin and Littlefield, 1984; Littlefield and Sellnow, 1987; Mulac and Sherman, 1975; Rosenfeld, 1979; Derlega and Chaikin, 1977). These two veins of research seem to support requiring a self-disclosure speech as part of the public speaking fundamentals curriculum as a possible means by which to attempt to reduce anxiety levels of students. We sought to determine the relationship between a required self-disclosure speech and perceived public speaking anxiety experienced by student speakers. If perceived speech anxiety of speakers is not negatively influenced by required self-disclosure, then such an assignment might be used early in the term to warm the climate and, perhaps, reduce anxiety levels experienced during future presentations.

If the existing research about gender differences with regard to self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships holds true in public speaking situations, however, then an inherent gender bias might exist in a required self-disclosure speech (Aires & Johnson, 1983; Gitter & Black, 1976; Pearce & Sharp, 1973; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991a; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991b; Williams, 1985; Winstead, Derlega, & Wong, 1984). This study also examined whether or not differences exist between perceived anxiety levels of females and males when they are required to self-disclose in a public

speaking situation. If males report higher anxiety about self-disclosing than their female counterparts, then the potential advantages of such an assignment may be outweighed by the inherent gender bias in it. The results of this study revealed four primary conclusions.

First, the results of this study indicate that a majority of both males and females feel comfortable self-disclosing personal information in a public speech. Essentially, although 80 percent of the students reported general PRPSA scores in the "moderate" to "high" anxiety ranges, approximately 65% of these same respondents indicated that they were comfortable presenting this self-disclosure speech. Results of this study suggest that a required self-disclosure speech did not raise anxiety levels expressed by student speakers. Hence, this assignment might be used by public speaking instructors to warm the communication climate and reduce perceived anxiety levels experienced by student speakers later in the term. Although other factors may have influenced students' perceptions about reduced anxiety (such as length of time spent with others in the classroom and reduced uncertainty about teacher's grading criteria), the results of this study do suggest a relationship between the self-disclosure speech and a reduction of perceived speech anxiety.

If our conclusions are accurate, then public speaking fundamentals instructors might consider ways to incorporate self-disclosure as a requirement to warm the communication climate and, perhaps, reduce anxiety. This study affirms previous research suggesting that appropriate self-disclosure can warm the communication climate and potentially reduce public speaking anxiety. Our research extends current thought by approaching self-disclosure in the form of a required public speech. Our conclusions here also raise additional research questions about more specific causal relation-

ships between public speaking anxiety and a required self-disclosure speech.

Second, this study suggests that there are no significant gender differences with regard to perceived anxiety levels experienced when presenting a required self-disclosure speech (*Speech of Personal Significance*). Although gender differences did emerge in some areas of the study (i.e., males spent less time rehearsing their speeches than did females), both male and female students reported feeling comfortable presenting the required self- disclosure speech.

Interestingly, our findings contradict conclusions drawn in interpersonal settings, which suggest that females self-disclose more often than males and feel more comfortable doing so (Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991a; Shaffer, Pegalis, & Cornell, 1991b) and that males might be reluctant to self-disclose because it is a sign of weakness (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Perhaps future research might be conducted to determine why males do not report increased anxiety about self-disclosing in a required public speech. More study is needed to discover possible relationships between a required self-disclosure speech and perceptions of "appropriate sex-typed behavior" (Derlega & Chaikin, 1997, p. 377).

Third, our qualitative analysis of what comfortable means provided new insight about the nature of public speaking anxiety. More specifically, current research tends to assume that the elements embedded in clinical definitions of communication anxiety are synonymous to student perceptions. Results of this study extend current research by revealing the multifaceted nature of comfort and anxiety in public speaking situations according to student perceptions. Student responses reveal that, to be comfortable in a public speaking situation, students need to feel (a) in control of the situation,

(b) confident, (c) fluent with delivery, (d) adequately prepared and knowledgeable, and (e) respected by the audience. About one-third of the students surveyed (34.01%) reported that feeling in control of the situation was an important facet of comfort. Twice as many males as females indicated that delivery was an important component associated with comfort. More females (31.71%) than males (26.68%) noted feeling respected by the audience as an important dimension of comfort.

Our conclusions suggest that more research could be conducted to discover the nature of communication anxiety based on student experiences and perceptions. It seems prudent to consider elements of anxiety and its counterpart (comfort) as expressed by students in order to create more effective tools and strategies for coping effectively with it. Our research also suggests possible gender differences with regard to the elements of comfort and anxiety in public speaking situations. These potential differences also warrant further study. Failing to enhance existing research about communication anxiety in ways that consider student perceptions of its components limits the degree to which we might create successful treatments for it.

Fourth, this study supports existing research conclusions that males and females tend to disclose about different topics and in different ways. Gender differences did exist with regard to the topics chosen and thematic content used in the self-disclosure speech. Males surveyed in this study self-disclosed about activity and sports oriented topics, whereas females discussed topics related to relationships, community, and personal issues (e.g., Aires & Johnson, 1983; Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991). The majority of female respondents in this study reported talking about people (41.40%), whereas the majority of males indicated discussing topics related to objects (35.36%). Traditional

gender differences were also born out in these public speeches in terms of thematic content. For example, when females talked about an object such as a pet, they tended to personify the pet by talking about it as a friend with whom they have a relationship. Males, on the other hand, talked about pets as tools to help them learn (e.g., use them as hunting dogs) or to become more responsible (e.g., master training techniques). When males talked about people, they tended to talk about the kinds of activities they engaged in together or what they learned from the person (competition, independence, self-reliance). Conversely, females talked about people as their best friends, role models, and supporting characters with whom they continue to have relationships. Based on these results, perhaps the potential gender bias inherent in a required self-disclosure speech can be accounted for by allowing students freedom in terms of topic selection and thematic development.

The conclusions drawn from this study provide impetus for considering a required self-disclosure speech in the beginning public speaking course. Moreover, the results of our research give rise to several new questions for future study. Perhaps one of the most intriguing of these questions is: to what degree are anxiety levels actually reduced after presenting a required self-disclosure speech? We know from this research that anxiety levels do not rise and even appear to be lowered. Future studies should study more directly causal relationships between a required self-disclosure speech and public speaking anxiety. Moreover, additional questions about gender differences emerge from this study, as well as about other demographic characteristics of speakers such as race and ethnicity. Similarly, does the gender of the instructor influence perceived anxiety about required self-disclosure in a public speech?

Finally, results of this study give rise to a potential need for curricular reforms in public speaking fundamentals programs. Perhaps educators could require a self-disclosure speech early in the term to address public speaking anxiety. Likewise, instructors might adjust our approach to the discussion of comfort and anxiety with regard to public speaking in ways that account for student perceptions of what comfortable really means in a public speaking situation. It also follows that gender differences do exist in public speaking situations and instructors might reach more students effectively by adapting curricular requirements in ways that strive for gender equity.

The relationship between public speaking and anxiety poses continual challenges for us as educators and as communication researchers. This study offers a required self-disclosure speech assignment as a possible strategy for warming the climate and, perhaps, reducing anxiety. This research has revealed that requiring a self-disclosure speech does not negatively influence perceived anxiety expressed by speakers. We also determined that no gender bias exists in requiring this assignment as long as students are free to select their own topics as well as self-disclosive examples and stories. We have uncovered new avenues to explore regarding students' perceptions of comfort as they relate to public speaking situations. Finally, new questions have been raised which will require examination as instructors in our classrooms and as researchers in our journals if we are to increase our understanding of the relationship between self-disclosure and public speaking anxiety.

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