The Effects of Audience Pleasantness, Audience Familiarity, and Speaking Contexts on Public Speaking Anxiety and Willingness to Speak

Peter D. MacIntyre and Kimly A. Thivierge

Two potential sources of anxiety about public speaking cited in previous research are audience pleasantness and audience familiarity. More familiar audiences, as well as more pleasant ones, usually evoke less anxiety, but research has shown some exceptions to this general rule. In addition, it is expected that as audiences become more pleasant and familiar, individuals would be more willing to speak. Ninety-five university students each evaluated six situations, in which three levels of audience familiarity (strangers, acquaintances, and friends) were crossed with two levels of audience pleasantness (pleasant and unpleasant). Each student made their ratings with reference to one of three speaking contexts (academic, social, or professional). Using split-plot ANOVA, a significant three way interaction was obtained for both willingness to speak and public speaking anxiety. In general, pleasantness exerted a stronger effect than familiarity. An audience composed of pleasant friends was the most preferred audience type in both the academic and social contexts. It is argued that previous research demonstrating conflicting effects of audience familiarity may have been generating different expectations for the anticipated pleasantness of the audience.

KEY CONCEPTS: Public speaking; audience effects; public speaking anxiety; audience pleasantness; audience familiarity; audience anxiety; stage fright.

PETER D. MACINTYRE Ph.D., University of Western Ontario, 1992) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University College of Cape Breton, Sydney, N.S. B1P 6L2 Canada. KIMLY A. THIVIERGE (B.A. (Honors), University of Ottawa, 1995) is currently a student at the University of Calgary. This research was supported by a Post Doctoral Fellowship from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada granted to the first author. This research was conducted as part of the second author's honors thesis in the School of Psychology at the University of Ottawa. The authors would like to thank R. Clément, K. Noels, and T. Damji for their comments on the design of the study and the written manuscript; thanks also to J. Rolls for comments on an earlier draft. Address correspondence to the first author at the above address.

A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way in which he (or she) anticipates events. (Kelly, 1955, p. 46)

The anticipation of public performance, in particular public speaking, often arouses significant levels of discomfort and anxiety. Jackson and Latané (1981) reported that speaking in front of an audience was perceived to be one of the most anxiety-inducing experiences that a person could encounter, even more anxiety-provoking than writing a final exam for

an important course. Only "crawling along a ledge high on a mountainside" was perceived to be more anxiety-provoking than speaking to an audience.

Public speaking anxiety is the fear and uneasiness caused by the potentially threatening situation of speaking before a group of individuals. Beatty (1988) argues that public speaking anxiety is a cognitive experience. That is, it is a state of mind and a corresponding set of attributions. As George Kelly's fundamental postulate (cited above) indicates, the manner in which a speaker anticipates the public speaking situation will affect that speaker's reactions to the situation, including the arousal of anxiety.

Public speaking anxiety is closely related to constructs such as communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1984), performance apprehension (Jackson & Latané, 1981), stage fright and audience anxiety (Beatty, 1988) and personality traits such as introversion, self-esteem, trait anxiety, and others (Daly & Stafford, 1984). Besides personality traits, situational factors such as familiarity with the audience also play a role in anxiety arousal (Buss, 1980; McCroskey, 1984; but see Beatty, Balafantz, & Kubera, 1989; Beatty & Friedland, 1990). This study will examine how the speaker's beliefs about the characteristics of the audience may affect anticipated public speaking anxiety.

Among the audience characteristics that have been examined, audience familiarity has received some attention. The general assumption about familiar audiences is that they will arouse less anxiety (Buss, 1980, p. 169). Speakers may assume that an audience of friends will be more tolerant and more understanding than an unfamiliar audience (McCroskey, 1984). Strangers, on the other hand, may be more likely to make negative attributions about the performer (Froming, Corley, & Rinker, 1990) because they do not know him/her as an individual. An audience of friends that is tolerant, understanding, and predisposed toward favorable evaluation of the speaker would be as pleasant a speaking context as one could envision. Theoretically, then, an audience of friends should provoke little anxiety or apprehension.

However, when a potentially embarrassing activity is performed, it has been shown that a familiar audience may provoke as much or more anxiety than an audience of strangers (Brown & Garland, 1971; Froming, et al., 1990). Furthermore, Beatty (1988) found only a weak correlation between audience familiarity and anxiety about public speaking. This corresponds to the experience of the current authors who, on several occasions, have experienced more anxiety when speaking to a familiar audience than when speaking to an unfamiliar one.

Perhaps the anxiety-reducing effect of speaking to a familiar audience is based on an underlying expectation that such an audience will be more pleasant and will make more favorable attributions than will an unfamiliar audience. This assumption is not always met in practice. If a speaker anticipates failure or embarrassment, then it may be preferable to speak to an audience of people that she or he will never see again, rather than an audience of friends. This study will investigate the interaction between familiarity with audience members and audience pleasantness on public speaking anxiety. Of particular interest is the case of a familiar audience that is expected to be unpleasant as compared to an unfamiliar audience that is expected to be very pleasant. One wonders if this contrast would show that familiarity continues to have the same effect or would the dimension of pleasantness take on the greater role?

One of the potential effects of anxiety arousal is avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations or attempts to escape from them if they cannot be avoided (Levitt, 1980). In public speaking situations, nervousness has numerous effects, including the tendency for anxious communicators to give shorter speeches than more relaxed speakers (Daly & Stafford, 1984). This seems to reflect an unwillingness to communicate (Burgoon, 1976) in situations likely to provoke anxiety. In public speaking contexts, this may take the form of planning to give a shorter speech. If such concerns override plans for a comprehensive or sufficiently detailed speech, communication goals may be compromised simply to avoid the prolonged exposure to anxiety. Some examples: in an academic context the anxious student may not cover the necessary material in a classroom speech to other students; in a social context, the speaker may plan to escape the situation risking offending others involved; in a professional context, a nervous instructor may plan to skip some of the details of training.

In the present study, participants were presented with a series of brief vignettes describing audiences that varied in familiarity and anticipated pleasantness. Audience familiarity was examined with references to strangers, acquaintances and friends. These three levels of audience familiarity were crossed with two levels of audience pleasantness - pleasant and unpleasant. The effects of audience pleasantness and audience familiarity on anticipated public speaking anxiety were examined. Participants in the research also were asked to report their willingness to speak (measured in the number of minutes they planned to speak) to the various types of audiences. Further, it is possible that the situation in which one is speaking may influence these anticipated reactions. Therefore, one of three speaking contexts will be presented to the participants, an academic one (speaking to classmates), a social one (speaking at a wedding), and a professional one (giving a training seminar).

The data were analyzed using a 2 x 2 x 3 Split Plot (or mixed-model) ANOVA design. The within subjects factors were audience pleasantness and audience familiarity; the between subjects factor was speaking contexts. This design is appropriate for investigation of within-subjects variations across the different audience types and allows a statistically powerful test (Kirk, 1982) of the following hypotheses:

$H1$: More familiar audiences are expected to generate less anxiety and a greater willingness to speak.

$H2$: Pleasant audiences are expected to generate less anxiety and greater willingness to speak.

$H3$: The first two hypotheses may be superseded by a significant interaction between audience familiarity and audience pleasantness for both dependent variables. Pleasant friends are expected to be the most preferred audience. Of particular interest is the contrast between pleasant strangers and unpleasant friends and their relative effects on anxiety-arousal and willingness to speak.

$H4$: Speaking context also may affect the hypothesized relations. Therefore, a three-way interaction is expected involving audience familiarity, audience pleasantness, and speaking context.

This study will employ three different speaking contexts and a check will be performed to examine the perceived pleasantness of the audiences.

Method

Participants

Ninety-five students from second-year university psychology classes and a first-year communication class participated in the study. Testing lasted approximately 20 minutes and was conducted immediately following regular classes.

Materials

The descriptions of six types of audiences were presented in the form of vignettes. Each vignette was presented in one of three speaking contexts: academic, social, and professional. Ratings of the anticipated public speaking anxiety and willingness to speak were made for each of the six potential audiences. A manipulation check also was included to test the difficulty of imagining each of the situations described in the vignettes and the perceived pleasantness of the audience.

Vignettes. Each participant received a questionnaire containing six vignettes. The vignettes asked the respondents to imagine speaking to audiences that varied in familiarity (friends, acquaintances or strangers) and pleasantness (pleasant or unpleasant). The participant was asked to consider all six types of audiences (pleasant friends, unpleasant friends, pleasant acquaintances, unpleasant acquaintances, pleasant strangers, and unpleasant strangers) in one of three different speech contexts: academic, professional, social. The academic context suggested that students imagine making a presentation to classmates as part of a course. The social situation asked subjects to envision speaking

at a wedding. The professional context had subjects visualize giving a speech at a training session to a group of co-workers. The basic text of each is shown below:

1. Academic Context: You are in a university class with 20 students, most of whom you know but not very well. You would consider most of them to be *acquaintances*, neither friends nor strangers. As part of the course, you are required to make an oral presentation. In the past, the class has been very pleasant, warm and *kind* to all of the presenters. You must make your presentation to this group of pleasant acquaintances.

2. Professional Context: As part of your job you are required to give a speech at a training session to a group of 20 employees. You have worked regularly with most of these individuals and consider most of them to be *friends*. In a previous session, you observed this audience to be unpleasant, cold and *unkind* to the speaker. You must give your speech to this group of *unpleasant friends.*.

3. Social Context: You are asked to give a speech at a friend's wedding. It is a wedding of 20 guests - only immediate family. You don't know most of the guests and consider most of them to be *strangers*. The groom's family gets along very well with the bride's family. The audience seems to be pleasant, warm and *kind* . You must give your speech to this group of *pleasant strangers.*.

Each vignette was presented on a separate page along with the ratings of affect described below. These pages were randomly ordered before being stapled together to form a questionnaire. This ensured that no two raters were given the same order of vignettes.

Ratings of Affect. Each of the vignettes was rated on the following scales:

1. Willingness to speak. This measure assessed the number of minutes for which a subject was willing to communicate. The item was phrased as follows: "For how many minutes would you be willing to speak to this group (from 0 min. to 30 min.)?"

2. Anxiety. This six-item measure (taken from Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993) used a nine-point semantic differential response format to evaluate the amount of anxiety that a subject anticipates feeling when speaking. All items were presented as bipolar pairs with a nine-point rating scale. For half of the items, the adjective indicative of anxiety was presented on the left and for the other half it was on the right. All alpha reliabilities for anxiety measures were .90 or higher. An example item is, "I would feel: flustered - composed."   All items were coded such that higher scores on each item indicated greater anxiety.

Manipulation Checks

Two manipulation checks were included in the study. One tested the degree to which respondents rated "unpleasant" audiences as being less agreeable than the pleasant audiences. The other checked on the plausibility of the speaking situations presented.

1. Audience Agreeableness. A four-item measure of audience agreeableness was constructed using nine-point semantic differential scales. Three of the four items were chosen from Goldberg's (1992) agreeableness scale (unkind - kind, cooperative - uncooperative, disagreeable - agreeable) and one other was included (critical - encouraging). All alpha reliabilities for these measures were .80 or higher. It was expected that a pleasant audience would be seen as much more agreeable than an unpleasant one. A total of 18 ratings was made (6 vignettes x 3 contexts) and in every case the pleasant audience was rated as significantly more agreeable than the unpleasant one. Furthermore, all the mean ratings of audience agreeableness for the pleasant audiences were higher than the mean rating for the most agreeable, unpleasant audience. These results will be discussed in more detail below.

2. Plausibility. A two-step procedure was undertaken to test whether the speaking contexts presented were reasonable ones. First, respondents were asked to indicate if they had ever been in a situation like the one described. If not, they were asked, "How difficult is it to imagine such a situation?" Responses were made on a five-point Likert scale where a score of one meant "not at all difficult" to imagine and five indicated it was "very difficult." High scores indicate greater difficulty in imagining the situations.

None of the means for the 18 ratings were greater than the theoretical mid-point of 3 on this manipulation check. This is taken as evidence that the contexts were not difficult to imagine.

Procedure

Following a regularly scheduled class period, students were given a presentation describing the research project and requesting their voluntary cooperation. Almost all students who heard the presentation agreed to participate. Questionnaires containing the three speaking contexts were mixed at random before being distributed to the participants.

Results

Before considering the data on public speaking anxiety and willingness to speak, the manipulation check examined whether there were differences in the perceived pleasantness of the audiences. A 2 x 3 x 3 Split Plot ANOVA was conducted on the mean ratings of audience agreeableness. The within-subjects factors were audience pleasantness (2), audience familiarity (3) and the between-subjects factor was speaking context (3). Results showed significant main effects for all three independent variables, two of the two-way interactions were significant, as was the three-way interaction (F (4, 178) = 3.65, $p < .01$). The interaction can be explained by inspection of the means (see Figure 1). First, the greatest difference between pleasant and unpleasant audiences occurs for the Social context. However, the three-way interaction seems to be isolated primarily in the professional context with the contrast of pleasant versus unpleasant friends. The difference between these two means is smaller than the differences observed between pleasant and unpleasant audiences in the other contexts.

Figure 1 also shows that the most difficult audience to imagine, in both the academic and social contexts, was unpleasant strangers ($M = 2.64$; $M = 2.58$ respectively). In the professional context, unpleasant friends was the most difficult type of audience to envision ($M = 2.49$).

It can be concluded that the manipulation was successful in generating appropriate perceptions of the audiences in the vignettes and that the situations were familiar enough to be easily imagined. Attention will now be directed toward anticipated public speaking anxiety and willingness to speak to the various audiences.

Figure 1. Effects of audience familiarity, audience pleasantness, and speaking context on perceived audience agreeableness (manipulation check).

Professional Context
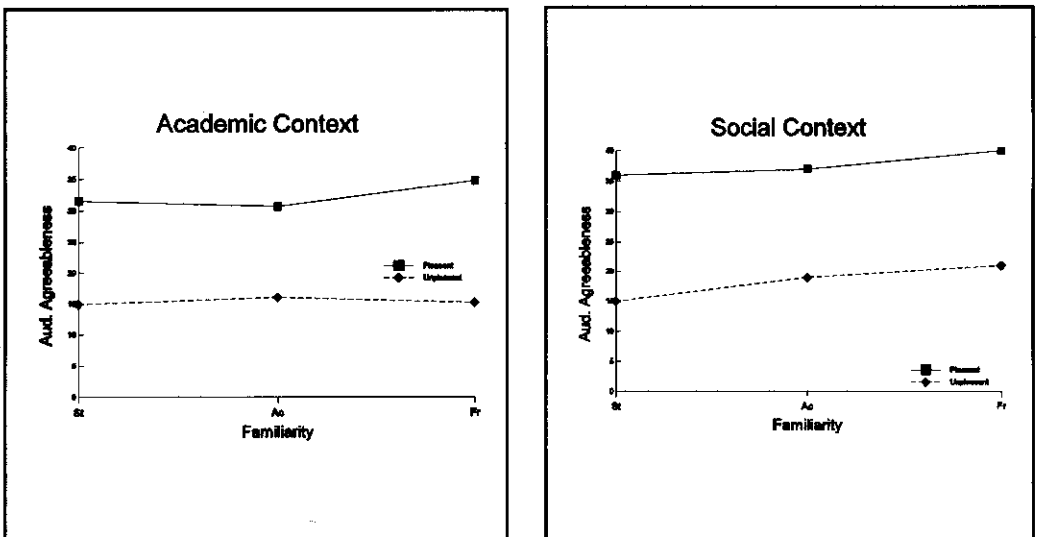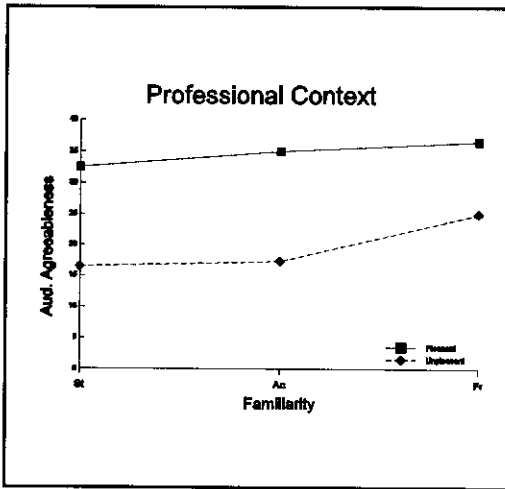
Legend:
St - Strangers
Ac - Acquaintances
Fr - Friends

Effects of Speaking Context, Audience Pleasantness and Familiarity

Public Speaking Anxiety. To investigate the amount of anxiety anticipated in the various conditions, a 2 x 3 x 3 Split Plot ANOVA was performed with the within-subject factors of audience pleasantness (2) and audience familiarity (3), and the between-subjects factor of speaking context (3). Significant main effects were found for audience familiarity $(F(2,182) = 65.8, p < .001)$, audience pleasantness $(F(1,91) = 188.3, p < .001)$ and speaking context $(F(2,91) = 3.99, p < .05)$. These results show that participants anticipated less anxiety speaking to familiar audiences (supporting $H1$), pleasant audiences (supporting $H2$), and audiences in the professional context. A two-way interaction between pleasantness and familiarity was suggested in $H3$ but none of the two-way interactions were found to be significant. However, as indicated by $H4$, these relationships were superseded by a significant three-way interaction $(F(4,182) = 4.76, p < .001)$.

Table 1. ANOVA Summary Table for Anxiety

| Source	F	df	p <
Context			
Academic ($n = 33$)			
Pleasantness	72.59	1, 32	.001
Familiarity	18.59	2, 64	.001
Pleas. x Famil.	6.88	2, 64	.01
Social ($n = 30$)			
Pleasantness	58.06	1, 29	.001
Familiarity	26.39	2, 58	.001
Pleas. x Famil.	3.36	2, 58	.05
Professional ($n = 31$)			
Pleasantness	58.89	1, 30	.001
Familiarity	22.67	2, 60	.001
Pleas. x Famil.	1.20	2, 60	n.s.

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To investigate this interaction, separate 2 x 3 within-subjects ANOVAs were performed for each of the three speaking contexts. The detailed results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. In both the academic and social contexts, significant main effects were observed for audience familiarity, audience pleasantness and the interaction of pleasantness and familiarity. In the professional context, however, the main effects were significant but the interaction was not.

Figure 2 shows the nature of these effects. In all three speaking contexts, post hoc tests of means (using Tukey's HSD) revealed that there is a significant difference (all p's < .01) between the anxiety aroused by pleasant versus unpleasant audiences at all three levels of familiarity. However, in the social and academic contexts, a greater difference is observed for pleasant versus unpleasant friends. Of particular interest, when examining the relative effects of pleasantness and familiarity, were the specific contrasts between the anxiety aroused by pleasant strangers and by unpleasant friends. In both the academic and social contexts, pleasant strangers (M= 33.8 academic; M= 30.0 social) aroused significantly less anxiety (p < .01) than unpleasant friends (M= 39.2 academic; M= 35.7 social). No difference was observed between the two ratings in the professional context (M= 28.1 pleasant strangers; M= 28.1 unpleasant friends) where the manipulation check showed that the perceived difference between pleasant and unpleasant friends was smaller than that observed in the other two contexts.

Willingness to Speak. Willingness to speak also was analyzed using a 2 x 3 x 3 Split Plot ANOVA. Significant main effect for audience pleasantness ($F(1,93) = 171.5, p < .001$), audience familiarity ($F(2,186) = 78.04, p < .001$) and speaking context ($F(2,93) = 11.3, p < .001$) were observed. These main effects indicate that respondents would be more willing to speak to familiar audiences (see $H1$), pleasant audiences (see $H2$), and audiences in the professional context. The pleasantness by familiarity interaction was significant ($F(2,186) = 12.0, p < .001$) as suggested by $H3$, but interpretation of this interaction will not be offered because of the significant three way interaction ($F(4,186) = 3.46, p < .01$ - see H4). To investigate this interaction, separate 2 x 3 within-subjects ANOVAs were performed for each of the three speaking contexts, as was done with the anxiety data. Table 2 demonstrates that in both the academic and social contexts, significant main effects for audience pleasantness and audience familiarity were obtained and the interaction also was significant. For the professional context, a significant main effect for both pleasantness and familiarity was obtained, but the pleasantness by familiarity interaction was not significant. These results closely match those obtained for the public speaking anxiety ratings.

Figure 2: Effects of audience familiarity, audience pleasantness, and speaking context on anticipated anxiety.

Professional Context
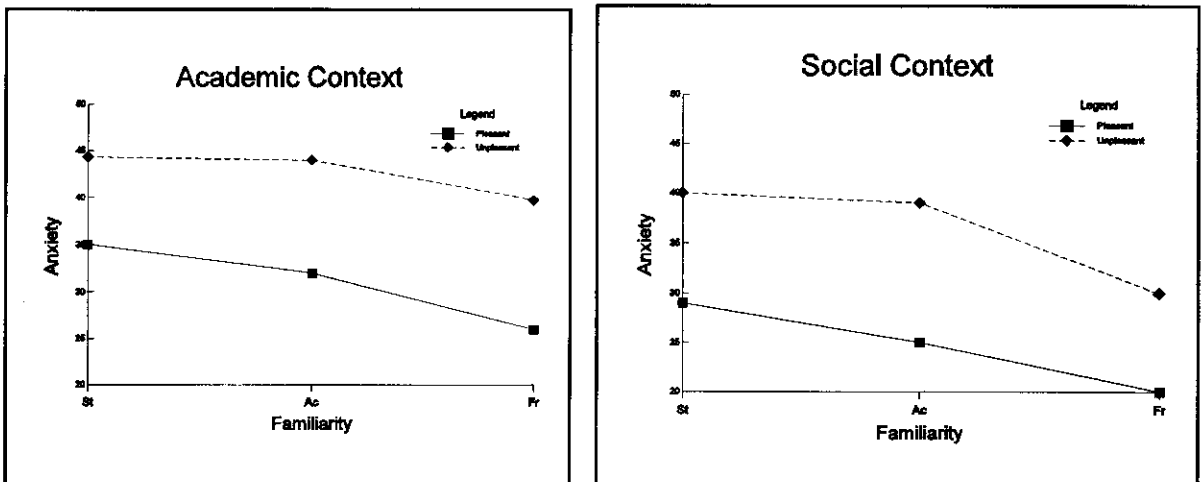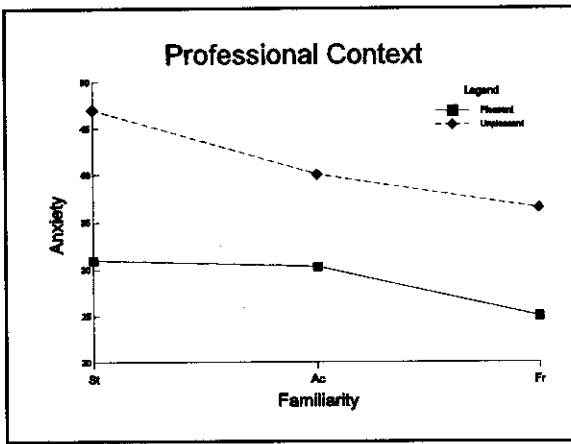
Legend:
St - Strangers
Ac - Acquaintances
Fr - Friends

Figure 3 demonstrates the nature of these effects. In both the academic and social contexts, post hoc tests of means (using Tukey's HSD) found that there was a significant (all p's $< .01$) difference between the number of minutes a subject was willing to speak to a pleasant audience versus an unpleasant audience at all three levels of familiarity. However, in the social and academic contexts, the difference between pleasant and unpleasant audiences is greater for friends than it is for acquaintances or strangers.

In order to explore the relative effects of pleasantness and familiarity, specific comparisons were made between the number of minutes a subject was willing to speak to an audience of pleasant strangers and unpleasant friends. In both the academic and social contexts, subjects were significantly ($p < .01$) more willing to speak to pleasant strangers ($M= 15.1$ min. academic; $M= 10.2$ min. social) than unpleasant friends ($M= 11.8$ min. academic; $M= 8.1$ min. social). The difference in the professional context was not significant ($M= 19.2$ min. pleasant strangers; $M= 17.0$ min. unpleasant friends) but this may have occurred because the contrast between pleasant and unpleasant friends was weaker in this context.

Table 2. ANOVA Summary Table for Willingness to Speak

Source	F	df	p <
Context			
Academic ($n = 33$)			
Pleasantness	49.06	1, 32	.001
Familiarity	19.78	2, 64	.001
Pleas. x Famil.	12.88	2, 64	.001
Social ($n = 30$)			
Pleasantness	63.20	1, 29	.001
Familiarity	33.16	2, 58	.001
Pleas. x Famil.	8.59	2, 58	.001
Professional ($n = 33$)			
Pleasantness	66.48	1, 32	.001
Familiarity	29.91	2, 64	.001
Pleas. x Famil.	0.94	2, 64	n.s.

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Figure 3: **Effects of audience familiarity, audience pleasantness, and speaking context on willingness to speak.**
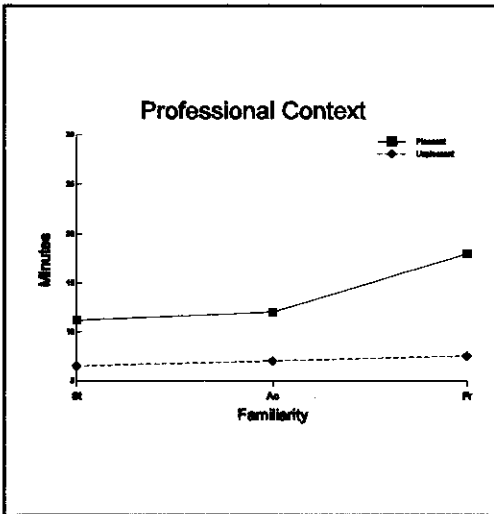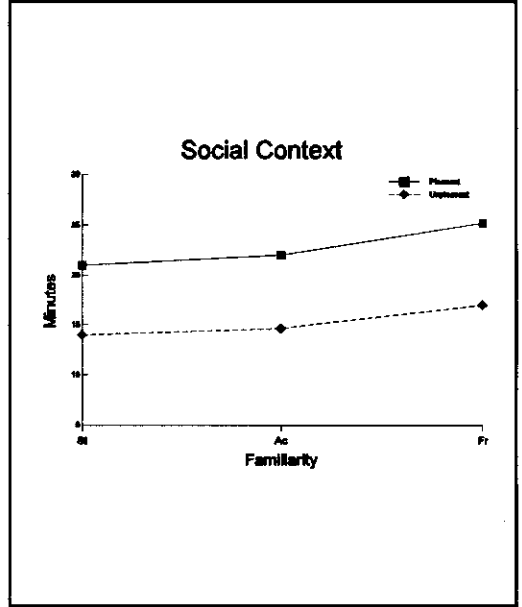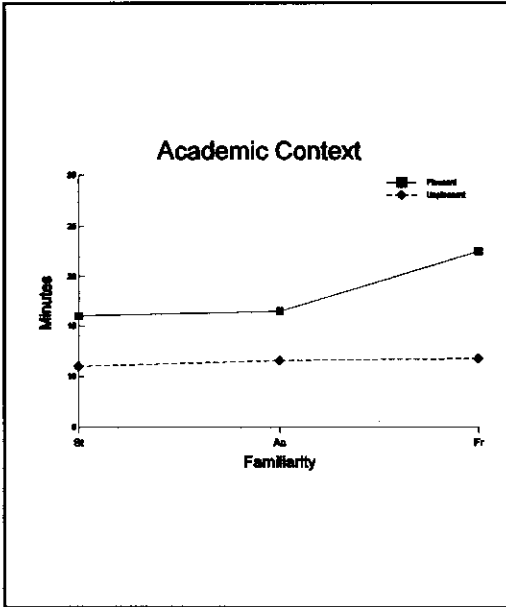
Legend:
St - Strangers
Ac - Acquantances
Fr - Friends

Discussion

Much of the existing research on public speaking anxiety examines the effects of speaker and/or message characteristics on audience reactions. Much less research has focused on the effects of audience characteristics on the speaker (Beatty & Friedland, 1990). Studies examining audience

characteristics have concluded that a familiar audience usually, but not always, reduces public speaking anxiety.

The data for the present study show that people prefer to speak to more familiar and more pleasant audiences, both in terms of anticipated anxiety and their willingness to speak. Thus, both $H1$ and $H2$ are supported. These results are consistent with both theoretical arguments (Buss, 1980) and empirical studies (Beatty, 1988; Daly & Stafford, 1984). Furthermore, the increased willingness to speak may be the result of reduced anticipated anxiety (MacIntyre, 1994; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991).

The obtained results are consistent with the complexity suggested by previous research. The primary conclusion from this investigation is that the element of audience pleasantness seems to exert a stronger effect on anxiety and willingness to speak than does audience familiarity. In both the academic and social contexts, respondents anticipated significantly less anxiety when speaking to pleasant strangers than to unpleasant friends. Similarly, in those two contexts, it was found that participants were willing to speak for a greater amount of time to pleasant strangers than to unpleasant friends. However, the present data clearly show that pleasant friends are the most preferred audience; they arouse much less anxiety and a greater willingness to speak, in all three contexts.

According to Froming et al. (1990), friends are generally more tolerant, understanding and less likely to make negative attributions to the speaker. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that a speaker would expect friends to be pleasant and thus would prefer to speak to such an audience. However, when an individual is performing a potentially embarrassing activity, an audience of friends may arouse more anxiety than a less familiar audience (Brown & Garland, 1977; Froming et al., 1990). This may occur because friends may tease the speaker immediately following a speech, are better able to associate the present with a past *faux pas* and in the future can remind the speaker of an embarrassing action. If performing a speaking task clashes with the wish to maintain a positive image with one's friends, then anxiety seems likely to arise.

When a speaker is faced with an audience of strangers, however, the initial audience sentiment toward the speaker is more difficult to anticipate. The manipulation check indicates that in the academic and social contexts, the most difficult audience to imagine is strangers being unpleasant; it appears to be easier to envision friends being unpleasant. Thus, strangers may have something of an advantage over friends when the communication is anticipated to be unpleasant. The apparently contradictory effects of familiarity reported in previous research might be explained by the expected pleasantness of the familiar and unfamiliar audiences.

Some practical implications of these results can be noted. First, it is clear that, under some conditions, an audience of friends may arouse more anxiety and less willingness to communicate than an audience of strangers. This can occur when either familiar audiences are expected to be unpleasant or when unfamiliar audiences are expected to be pleasant. This pattern may be observed in competitive settings, such as university classrooms, where students compete with each other for higher grades and access to educational programs (honors courses, professional programs, or graduate school). This pattern might also be observed in speech classrooms where students criticize each other. If a speaker anticipates that hearing the audience's criticism will be an unpleasant experience, anxiety will likely increase and willingness to speak will likely decrease.

The results of this study appear to be meaningful and consistent with previous research. However, it must be noted that the participants were not exposed to actual speaking situations. Rather, the various contexts were imagined and anticipated responses were recorded. It can be noted that this approach is consistent with the definition of communication apprehension as the anxiety aroused by either real or imagined communication (McCroskey, 1977). Previous studies have also used this methodology (for example, Froming et al., 1990; Cohen & Sheposh, 1977) and the anticipation of events is both an interesting process in itself and a potential key to explaining anxiety-arousal (Beatty, 1988). Strictly speaking, the conclusions drawn from the study should be applied to the anticipation of public speaking and the anxiety likely to be aroused prior to such communication.

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In conclusion, this investigation examined how a speaker's expectations about the audience can influence the affect the speaker brings to public communication. The results indicate that audience characteristics interact with speaking contexts in complex ways but that, in general, audience pleasantness exerts a stronger influence than audience familiarity. Further research in this area may suggest other characteristics of the audience that provoke anxiety.

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