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Is Public Speaking Really More Feared Than Death?

Karen Kangas Dwyer & Marlina M. Davidson

The purpose of this study was to investigate the genesis of the 1973 R. H. Bruskin Associate's American Fears study appearing in the London Sunday Times and often reported in communication textbooks as "people fear public speaking more than death," and to replicate the study among college students who read the textbooks. Participants in a multi-section communication course (N = 815) completed the survey during the first week of class by selecting their fears from a list of fears, ranking their top fears, and completing the 6 public speaking context items of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension–24 items. This study found that public speaking was selected more often as a common fear than any other fear, including death. However, when students were asked to select a top fear, students selected death most often. These findings help authors and instructors aptly quote the 1973 Bruskin Associate's findings, which were confirmed by this study.

Keywords: Bruskin Study; Common Fear; Fears Study; Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA); Social Phobia

On October 7, 1973, the London *Sunday Times* reported that the largest number of Americans, 41% of those surveyed by a team of market researchers (see Watson, 1973) listed speaking before a group as their greatest fear. The brief story written by Peter Watson, entitled "What People Usually Fear," has been recurrently quoted in numerous public speaking textbooks and by numerous speech teachers, authors, and consultants, leading many to believe that people fear giving a speech more than death. At least that is the way some communicate it. The following question

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arises: “What did the survey really find, and can it be replicated, almost 4 decades later, among college students as they embark on their public speaking course?”

In December 1973, the Speech Communication Association’s *Spectra* appeared to elaborate on the findings first reported in the London *Sunday Times* and cited the survey source as R. H. Bruskin Associates (Speech Communication Association, 1973). *Spectra* reported percentages to the nearest tenths of a percent and differences related to income and gender. Next, the survey results appeared in *The Book of Lists* under “The Fourteen Worst Human Fears” (see Wallechinsky, Wallace, & Wallace, 1977, pp. 469–470), citing the London *Sunday Times* as the source. It is interesting to note that *The Book of Lists* continues to be cited by communication textbook authors for the “Worst Human Fears List,” with public speaking at the top of the list, as if *The Book of Lists* was the original source.

Few, if any, researchers have investigated the origins of the R. H. Bruskin Associate’s fears study (What are Americans Afraid Of?, 1973), despite how often the list of 14 fears, with public speaking as the top fear, has been rightly or wrongly referenced, again and again, especially in communication classrooms. The purpose of this study was to investigate the genesis and findings of the 1973 R. H. Bruskin Associate’s fears study and query if, almost 40 years later, the results could be replicated among college students who would hear about the Bruskin findings in their communication classrooms or read about it in their textbooks.

Literature Review

The fear of public speaking (i.e., speaking before a group) is a specific, communication-based anxiety in which individuals experience physiological arousal, negative cognitions, or behavioral responses to real or anticipated presentations (Daly, McCroskey, Ayres, Hopf, Sonandre, & Wongprasert, 2009). Public speaking anxiety (PSA) has been highly researched, often focusing on the causes, the correlations with other factors, and the treatments to help those who are anxious overcome their speech anxiety (e.g., Behnke & Sawyer, 1999; Bodie, 2010; Dwyer, 2000; Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt, 2009). High PSA has been associated with poor speech preparation, poor speech decision-making, and negative affect and effect in performance (Daly et al., 2009).

PSA—classified as a social anxiety: “the threat of unsatisfactory evaluations from audiences”—can become a phobia with devastating effects or, at least, lead to the avoidance of any public speaking situation (Schlenker & Leary, 1982, p. 646). Phobias are different from fears in relation to intensity and importance in a person’s life, and some social phobias, such as the fear of public speaking, have become common in the United States (Doctor, Kahn, & Adamec, 2008).

Public speaking is considered one of the four well-researched contexts that contribute to overall communication apprehension—the others include dyads, meetings, and groups (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). From studies focused on communication apprehension, Richmond and McCroskey estimated that approximately “70% of the general public” reports PSA (p. 43).

In 1973, the R. H. Bruskin Associate's fears study (What are Americans Afraid Of?, 1973) queried the prevalence of common fears and reported the results in their monthly *Bruskin Report*. The findings of the survey were reported in *Spectra* (Speech Communication Association, 1973):

R. H. Bruskin Associates carried out a survey in April of 1973 involving 2,543 men and women adults. Respondents were asked to pick items from a list representing situations in which they had some degree of fear. The rank order of fears reported is as follows: Speaking before a group, 40.6%; Heights, 32.0%; Insects and Bugs, 22.0%; Financial problems, 22.0; Deep water, 21.5%; Sickness, 18.8%; Death, 18.7%; Flying, 18.3%; Loneliness, 13.6%; Dogs, 11.2%; Driving or riding in a car, 8.8%; Darkness, 7.9%; Elevators, 7.6%; Escalators, 4.8%. (p. 4)

Spectra added a final paragraph about "speaking before a group" from the R. H. Bruskin Associate's fears study (Speech Communication Association, 1973, p. 4):

About 40% of women have this fear, while 36% of men indicate some concern. There is little difference by age, but people in the \$15,000 + income group seem somewhat less concerned about public speaking. The more education a person has, the less likely he is to fear addressing a group. People living in the southern part of the United States seem to have the greatest fear, while those in the northeast seem less concerned. For information, write R. H. Bruskin Associates, 303 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ. 08903. (Speech Communication Association, 1973, p. 4)

It would follow to ask, "Who is R. H. Bruskin Associates and who commissioned the fears survey?" According to Sterling, Bracken, and Hill (1998), R. H. Bruskin Associates was a survey research company founded in 1958, and it became Bruskin Research (New Brunswick, NJ) and then Bruskin–Goldring Research (Edison, NJ). The company merged with Audits & Surveys Worldwide, Inc. (New York, NY), and eventually became part of GfK Custom Research North America (New York, NY), according to GfK Executive Vice President, Dr Barry Feinberg. Feinberg reported that "Bruskin does not exist anymore as a company, but the omnibus service of weekly surveys (like the one found in the *Bruskin Report*) still exists, as part of the GfK Roper Public Affairs team" (B. Feinberg, personal communication, March 11, 2011).

Bruce Barr, Vice President of Omnibus Services GfK Custom Research North America, worked for R. H. Bruskin in 1973, and remembered that Dick Bruskin, Chief Executive Officer of Bruskin Associates, had no end client who requested the survey. Barr said: "[Bruskin] often used the Omnibus report for promotional purposes by inserting an article in our *Bruskin Report* that went out to clients monthly or quarterly" (B. Barr, personal communication, March 15, 2011). Barr did not have the original report that would indicate the original survey was ever updated. Some have mentioned a follow-up study in 2001, which might be a reference to a Gallup® poll survey about American fears, using a different list of fears and reporting, for example, that 51% of the 1,016 adults surveyed feared snakes, 40% feared public speaking, and 30% feared heights (Brewer, 2001).

Pelias (1989), in a *Communication Education* article, titled “Communication Apprehension in Basic Public Speaking Texts: An Examination of Contemporary Textbooks,” reported that 13 out of 25 texts cited either *The Book of Lists* (Wallechinsky et al., 1977) or the *Bruskin Report in Spectra* (Speech Communication Association, 1973) as the sources for a survey finding PSA a top fear Americans face. Even now, several public speaking textbooks (e.g., Beebe & Beebe, 2012; Ferguson, 2008; Lucas, 2010) report the same finding, and cite the 1973 Bruskin study (see *What are Americans Afraid Of?*, 1973) in *The Book of Lists* or *Spectra* as a source.

After tracking the genesis of the 1973 Bruskin study (*What are Americans Afraid Of?*, 1973), we found that an omnibus survey indicated public speaking was a common fear, being selected more often than death from a list of 14 fears. The Bruskin study did not ask participants to rank the 14 fears or select their top fear. They reported that speaking before a group was the most selected common fear, but it was not selected as the top fear because that question was never asked. Although later publications that cited the Bruskin study made it sound as though death was ranked second, this was not the case. In this study, we sought to discover if these results could be found among college students who still read and hear that public speaking is more feared than death, and to ask the question that was never asked: “What is the top fear?” Thus, based on the 1973 Bruskin fears study reported in *Spectra* (see Speech Communication Association, 1973), we proposed the following research questions:

- RQ1: Will students select speaking in front of a group among their common fears more often than they select death, using the same 1973 R. H. Bruskin Associate’s list of fears?
- RQ2: When asked to rank fears, will students report public speaking as their top fear?
- RQ3: Are there gender differences in the most selected common fear or the top ranked fear?
- RQ4: Is PSA related to the selection of the top fear (i.e., If a student reports higher PSA, would public speaking tend to be ranked as the top fear)?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 815 students enrolled at a large, Midwestern university (372 [45.6%] were men, 416 [51.0%] were women, and 27 [3.3%] did not report their genders), who chose to answer the fears survey questions. The participants were newly enrolled in 39 sections of a basic communication course, which fulfills an oral communication general education requirement. These participants were chosen because they represent pre-public speaking students who would read in their college textbooks that people fear public speaking more than death, and would not yet have completed a college public speaking course, which might impact their fear of public speaking. Respondents also represented a cross-section of class rankings, indicating the highest level of education completed: 402 (49.3%) completed high school, 191 (23.4%) were college freshmen, 110 (13.5%) were college sophomores, 61 (7.5%) were college

juniors, 20 (2.5%) were college seniors, and 7 (1.0%) had a bachelor's or graduate degree.

Procedure and Instrumentation

The survey questions relied on the 1973 R. H. Bruskin Associate's fears list as reported in *Spectra* (Speech Communication Association, 1973) and consisted of three demographic items (e.g., age, gender, and year in college) and three survey items designed to answer the research questions. The first survey item stated the following: "Everybody has fears about some things. Please check all the things on this short list that make you fearful or anxious." The second survey item asked students to rank their top three fears from the same fears list. The third survey question included six items from the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension–24 items (PRCA–24; McCroskey, 1982) called the "public speaking context." This six-item scale generally produces reliability estimates in the range of .80 to .85, with demonstrated construct, concurrent, discriminant, and predictive validity (Bodie, 2010; Levine & McCroskey, 1990). The obtained reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for this study was .88.

The data were collected as part of the general education oral communication assessment. On the first day of a basic communication course during a Fall semester, instructors (20 out of 22, representing 39 sections) assigned their students an online assessment survey about communication. The three questions asking students to select their fears from a list of fears were indicated on the survey as *optional*. Students were assured that the survey would be tabulated by an outside person, who would inform each instructor of the final results. One of the primary researchers collected and tabulated the results, removing all identifiers.

Results

Responses related to *RQ1* (asking if students will select speaking in front of a group among their common fears more often than they select death), using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences–19 (SPSS–19; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) report summaries, showed that participants selected speaking before a group more often than they selected death—the same findings reported in the 1973 Bruskin study (see Speech Communication Association, 1973). The percentage that selected "speaking before a group" as a fear was over 20% higher than those who selected it in the 1973 study. See Table 1 for the results and comparisons with the 1973 findings. Financial problems came in second, compared to fourth in the Bruskin findings; death was ranked third in this study, compared to seventh in the Bruskin findings; and loneliness came in fourth, compared to ninth in the Bruskin findings. Insects and bugs came in sixth in our findings, but third in the Bruskin study. Participants in our study chose a total of 2,978 common fears from the list provided, or an average of 3.65 fears per person. Participants in the 1973 Bruskin study chose a total of 6,304 common fears, or an average of 2.48 fears per person.

Responses to *RQ2* (asking if students will report public speaking as one of their top fears), using the SPSS–19 report summaries, showed that when students were

Table 1 Responses to Research Question 1: Everybody Has Fears About Some Things

Common Fears	2010 Findings					1973 Bruskin Associate's Findings		
	Ranking ^a	<i>n</i>	%	% Men ^b	% Women ^c	Ranking ^d	<i>n</i>	%
Speaking before a group	1	503	61.7	57.2	65.9	1	1,032	40.6
Financial problems	2	447	54.8	52.1	58.0	4	559	22.0
Death	3	352	43.2	40.1	46.8	7	476	18.7
Loneliness	4	312	38.3	35.3	40.3	9	346	13.6
Heights	5	307	37.7	36.1	39.1	2	814	32.0
Insects & bugs	6	294	33.4	33.8	42.2	3	562	22.1
Deep water	7	222	27.2	19.5	34.8	5	547	21.5
Darkness	8	172	21.1	11.5	30.0	12	201	7.9
Sickness	9	154	18.9	17.9	20.4	6	478	18.8
Flying	10	68	8.3	4.8	11.3	8	465	18.3
Elevators	11	66	8.0	4.5	10.8	13	193	7.6
Driving riding car	12	34	4.2	3.2	5.0	11	224	8.8
Dogs	13	25	3.1	1.6	4.3	10	285	11.2
Escalators	14	22	2.7	1.0	4.1	14	122	4.8

^a*n* = 815.^b*n* = 374.^c*n* = 417.^d*n* = 2,543.

asked to rank their top three fears, 20.0% listed death as their top fear, 18.4% listed speaking before a group as their top fear, and 15.0% listed financial problems as their top fear (see the rankings in Table 2). Thus, death was ranked as the top fear among college students, and students selected it as a top fear more often than they selected public speaking.

Table 2 Responses to Research Question 2: Top Fears

Top Fears ^a			Men ^b		Women ^c	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1. Death	163	20.0	64	17.2	94	22.6
2. Speaking before a group	150	18.4	72	19.4	76	18.3
3. Financial problems	122	15.0	62	16.7	58	15.2
4. Heights	95	11.7	56	15.1	35	8.4
5. Loneliness	86	10.6	42	11.3	41	9.9

^a*n* = 812.^b*n* = 372.^c*n* = 416.

Responses to RQ3 (asking if there are gender differences in the most selected common fear or top ranked fear), using a chi-square analysis, showed that there was a significant difference in gender regarding the most selected common fear, $\chi^2(1, N = 856) = 9.24, p = .002$; women selected speaking before a group as a common fear more often than men did. When asked to select their top fear, a chi-square analysis showed participants' top fear also differed by gender, $\chi^2(1, N = 788) = 28.00, p = .008$; 22.6% of women selected death as their top fear, and 19.4% of men selected public speaking as their top fear. Gender had a moderating effect; a slightly higher percentage of men selected speaking in front of a group as their top fear (see Table 2).

Responses to RQ4 (asking if PSA is related to the selection of top fears) were measured by first categorizing individuals as having high, moderate, or low PSA. Based on national norms, high PSA was defined as a score >1 SD above the mean on the PRCA-24 public speaking context score, moderate PSA was defined as a score within 1 SD of the mean, and low PSA was defined as a score 1 SD below the mean (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). Accordingly, for the PSA scores ($M = 19.40, SD = 5.20$; range = 6–30), using standard deviation criteria, 154 students were categorized as high PSAs ($M > 24.59$), and of those 154, 44.7% reported speaking before a group as their top fear (21.4% reported death, and 8.4% reported financial problems, which was tied with loneliness); 551 were categorized as moderate PSAs ($M > 14.19$ and < 24.60), and of those 551, 20.1% reported death as their top fear (15.8% reported financial problems, and 14.7% reported speaking before a group); and 100 were categorized as low PSAs ($M < 14.20$), and of those 100, 24% reported financial problems as their top fear (19% reported death, 14% reported heights, and only 2.9% reported speaking before a group). Chi-square analysis confirmed that participants' top fears did differ by PSA group, $\chi^2(26, N = 812) = 121.10, p = .000$. *Post hoc* analysis determined where the actual differences were. To correct for Type 1 error in the procedure, a Dunn-Sidak procedure (Howell, 2010) was conducted to correct for possible compounded error due to the three pairwise comparisons. The new calculated alpha value is $p = .017$. Based on the new alpha value, all pairwise comparisons were found to be statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 812) = 121.14, p = .017$. Thus, these findings showed that those who reported high PSA also tended to report speaking before a group as their top fear.

Discussion

This study investigated the genesis and findings for the original R. H. Bruskin Associate's fears study appearing in the 1973 *Spectra* (see Speech Communication Association, 1973) which has often been inaccurately communicated that Americans fear public speaking more than they fear death; and to discover if, almost 40 years later, the results could be replicated among college students who hear about the Bruskin findings in their communication classrooms or read about it in their textbooks (p. 9). In addition, this study investigated what students would select as their top fear, gender differences in the most selected common fear or top ranked fear, and if PSA was related to the reported top fear.

The original 1973 R. H. Bruskin fears study was an omnibus survey conducted by R. H. Bruskin Associate's (B. Barr, personal communication, March 15, 2011), and involved telephone representatives, who read from a list of 14 fears and asked participants to indicate if the item was a fear. They did not ask participants to rank the 14 fears or select their top fear. The Bruskin study reported that speaking before a group was the most selected fear, but it was not selected as the top fear because that question was never asked. A fear of heights was the second most selected fear, and death ended up as the seventh most selected common fear. Although later publications that cited the Bruskin study made it sound as though death was ranked second, this was not the case. Death was not even close as a most selected fear.

Based on the 1973 Bruskin survey fears list reported in *Spectra* (Speech Communication Association, 1973), our findings indicate speaking before a group is the fear most selected and, thus, the most common fear. We further found that participants who reported a high PSA score tended to choose speaking before a group as their top fear when asked to rank their top fear. When separated by gender, we found gender had a moderating effect regarding participants' most selected common fear and reported top ranked fear.

Based on prior research, it has been estimated that at least 70% of people report a fear of public speaking (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998); thus, our study supports the findings that a large percentage of individuals—in this case, students—reported a fear of public speaking. In this study, over 61% of students reported a fear of speaking in front of a group, which is even higher than the Bruskin study's report (see Speech Communication Association, 1973), which found that 40.6% of an adult population feared public speaking.

This study also found students selected many fears from a common fears list, with financial problems, death, and loneliness as the top three most selected after public speaking. The Bruskin adult sample (see Speech Communication Association, 1973) reported speaking before a group, heights, insects, and financial problems as the top four fears. The differences between the two studies could be related to students' pre-career and age-based fears. Unlike the 1973 Bruskin study, this study also asked the students to choose their top fear from the common fears list, and they chose death as their top fear, speaking before a group as their second fear, and financial problems as their third fear.

Limitations and Future Research

This study does have some limitations. For example, the data were collected from a large, multi-section, basic communication course at one large, Midwestern university. Thus, more research on common fears needs to be collected using an updated list of fears from current research and a diverse audience of various ages, education levels, and occupations in order to make generalizations. The survey assignment was given the first day of a communication course and, although students had not delivered formal speeches yet, they may have been thinking about the possibility and, thus, were feeling anxious. In addition, follow-up studies need to investigate if students' selections of fears change after successfully completing a college public speaking class.

In conclusion, this study investigated the genesis of the often cited Bruskin fears study, reported in the London *Sunday Times* (see Watson, 1973), *Spectra* (see Speech Communication Association, 1973), and *The Book of Lists* (see Wallechinsky et al., 1977). This study found that public speaking was selected by college students more often as a common fear than any other fear, including death, just as the 1973 Bruskin study found, which was based on an adult population. When it comes to ranking top fears, students selected death as a top fear most often, followed by public speaking, and then financial problems. So, is public speaking the number one fear? The answer is “yes,” it is the most common fear, selected by students more often than other fears. However, it is not the top rated fear; death is. It is ranked among the top three things that students fear most.

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