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Shannon T. Carton^a & Alan K. Goodboy^a

^a Department of Communication Studies, West Virginia University

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BRIEF REPORT

College Students' Psychological Well-Being and Interaction Involvement in Class

Shannon T. Carton & Alan K. Goodboy

Mental health issues are prevalent and increasing on college campuses. Prior research indicates that students' depression, anxiety, and stress are all related negatively with academic achievement, but little research identifies reasons why students with psychological difficulties do not perform as well as their peers without these difficulties. This research proposed that students with poor psychological well-being (i.e., depression, anxiety, and stress) may be less inclined to communicate in class. Participants (N = 204) completed a survey and reported on their own depression, anxiety, stress, and interaction involvement in class. Results indicated that students who were more depressed, anxious, and stressed reported less interaction involvement in a college course.

Keywords: Anxiety; Depression; Interaction Involvement; Stress

Rates of mental health issues are substantial and increasing in higher education (Gallagher, 2010). In a survey of a general body of university students, 15.6% of undergraduate and 13.0% of graduate students screened positive for a depressive or anxiety disorder (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007). Students who experience psychological difficulties do not achieve as highly in school as their peers (Hodges & Plow, 1990). Hishinuma, Chang, McArdle, and Hamagami (2012) determined that depressive symptoms *caused* lower grade point averages. Because students with psychological difficulties “exhibit disruption in their communicative

Shannon T. Carton (MA, DePaul University, 2012) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. Alan K. Goodboy (PhD, West Virginia University, 2007) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. *Correspondence:* Shannon T. Carton, Department of Communication Studies, 108 Armstrong Hall, P.O. Box 6293, Morgantown, WV 26506; E-mail: stcarton@mix.wvu.edu

and social skills” (Segrin, 1998, p. 222) this study examined the relationship between common psychological factors (i.e., depression, anxiety, and stress) and students’ classroom interaction involvement.

Psychological Well-Being

The most common mental illness on college campuses is depression. Depression is characterized by having two or more depressive episodes, which can include depressed mood for extended periods of time, lowered interest, change in eating and sleeping patterns, and suicidal ideation (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). Hirschfeld (2001) found that as many as 75% of primary care patients who suffered from a depressive disorder also suffered from an anxiety disorder, which suggests that they should be studied in tandem. Anxiety disorders are also common; 11% of college students are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (Eisenberg et al., 2007) that is characterized by an inability to relax or feel calm and involves frequent feelings of shakiness or nerves (APA, 2000). Anxiety, like depression, is related to lower student academic achievement (Desiderato & Koskinen, 1969). Psychological stress is defined as a state of tension, preoccupation, and agitation reported as a result of life events or external stimuli (Lemyre & Tessier, 2003). Stress occurs as a function of adapting to external circumstances and can be beneficial. High levels of stress, though, can result in physical or mental illnesses (Lemyre & Tessier, 2003). These mental health issues often result in social skills deficits (Segrin, 1990); such deficits may manifest in the college classroom via a lack of interaction involvement.

Interaction Involvement

Interaction involvement refers to “the extent to which an individual partakes in a social environment” (Cegala, 1981, p. 112). Frymier (2005) found that in the college classroom, students who are involved tend to be responsive (i.e., feel confident in what to say and how to say it in class), attentive (i.e., pay attention and listen in class), and perceptive (i.e., are able to assess how their instructor responds to them). Students who report high levels of interaction involvement report more affective learning, cognitive learning, motivation, satisfaction, and earn higher grades (Frymier, 2005; Myers & Bryant, 2002). Therefore, students’ interaction involvement is positive for their academic success, but their involvement may be impeded by psychological difficulties.

Interaction involvement requires full attention to an environment without distracting stimuli (Cegala, 1981). Mental illness and related psychological symptoms hinder the ability to focus appropriately in class (Hishinuma et al., 2012), and students who are uninvolved do not perform as well academically as involved peers (Frymier, 2005). Consequently, the reason that students with psychological difficulties have trouble succeeding in school (Hishinuma et al., 2012; Hodges & Plow, 1990) may be in part because they remain uninvolved in important classroom

Table 1 Correlations Between Psychological Well-Being and Interaction Involvement

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5
Psychological well-being								
1. Depression	9.72	8.69	.92	—				
2. Anxiety	10.51	10.38	.93	.71 [†]	—			
3. Stress	16.26	6.67	.81	.70 [†]	.62 [†]	—		
Interaction involvement								
4. Perceptiveness	17.61	5.07	.78	-.09	-.01	-.06	—	
5. Attentiveness	16.29	4.75	.66	-.19**	-.11	-.21**	.17*	—
6. Responsiveness	38.64	9.19	.82	-.18**	-.23**	-.26 [†]	.02	.51 [†]

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, [†] $p < .001$.

communication due to a lack of confidence in interpersonal skills (Segrin, 1990). Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

H: Students' poor psychological well-being (i.e., depression, anxiety, and stress) will be related inversely with interaction involvement (i.e., responsiveness, attentiveness, and perceptiveness) in class.

Method

A sample of 204 college students (128 men, 76 women) was recruited from a large Mid-Atlantic University; the students ranged from 18 to 30 years of age ($M = 20.97$, $SD = 1.76$). Participants were provided with questionnaires including the following measures: the Depression Inventory II (Steer, Ball, Ranieri, & Beck, 1999), the Anxiety Inventory (Beck, Epstein, Brown, & Steer, 1988), the Measure of Perceived Stress (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), and Frymier's (2005) version of the Interaction Involvement Scale. The depression measure is comprised of 21 items that are measured on a 0–3-point scale ($M = 9.72$, $SD = 8.69$, $\alpha = .92$). The anxiety measure uses 21 items on a 0–3-point scale ($M = 10.51$, $SD = 10.38$, $\alpha = .93$). The stress measure is 10 items on a 0–4-point Likert-type scale ($M = 16.26$, $SD = 6.67$, $\alpha = .81$). The interaction involvement measure is 17 items and uses a 1–7-point Likert-type scale across three subscales (perceptiveness: $M = 17.61$, $SD = 5.07$, $\alpha = .78$; attentiveness: $M = 16.29$, $SD = 4.75$, $\alpha = .66$; and responsiveness: $M = 38.64$, $SD = 9.19$, $\alpha = .82$).

Results

Depression was related negatively to both the attentiveness, $r(197) = -.19$, $p < .01$, and responsiveness, $r(197) = -.18$, $p < .01$, but not the perceptiveness, $r(197) = -.09$, $p = .22$, dimensions of interaction involvement. Similarly, stress was related negatively to both attentiveness, $r(197) = -.21$, $p < .01$, and responsiveness, $r(197) = -.26$, $p < .001$, but not perceptiveness, $r(197) = -.06$, $p = .39$. Anxiety was related negatively to responsiveness, $r(197) = -.23$, $p < .01$, but not to perceptiveness,

$r(197) = -.01$, $p = .87$, or attentiveness, $r(197) = -.11$, $p = .10$. See Table 1 for all correlations.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between students' psychological well-being and their interaction involvement in class. Depression and stress were both related negatively to attentiveness and responsiveness. Anxiety was related negatively only to students' attentiveness in class. Interestingly, none of the psychological well-being variables were related significantly to perceptiveness.¹ Perceptiveness may be of more importance in a clinical sample or when instructors criticize students because receiving negative information appears to elicit greater awareness from students with psychological difficulties.

Students with psychological difficulties have a myriad of problems that interfere with their ability to be fully involved in their classrooms, including feelings of hopelessness, exhaustion, impaired functioning, rumination, lack of sleep, and poor sleep quality (Lindsey, Fabiano, & Stark, 2009). Results of this study indicate that these psychological factors account for a small portion of the variance in interaction involvement. Although these effect size is small, college instructors and researchers should consider the complexities of students' psychological states in college classrooms and resulting communication behavior in order to keep these students involved in the learning process.

Note

- [1] Previous research suggests that people with diagnosed psychological difficulties may actually pay more attention to others' behaviors and feelings toward them (Chow, Berenbaum, & Flores, 2013; Wilhelm, Boyce, & Brownhill, 2004), which is due in part to their already low self-esteem and fragile self-concept.

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