

Understanding Anxiety through Communication in a Performance of Everyday Life

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### Abstract

Beads of sweat. Shortness of breath. Paralysis. These and other symptoms are may what come to mind when those without anxiety imagine what anxiety might be. Perhaps, more importantly, communication scholars can be concerned with the everyday performance of anxiety and how it impacts human communication. In this auto-ethnography I explore my anxiety-ridden performance of my everyday life. Over a sixteen-week period, I kept field notes of my interaction of everyday life and the forms of communication that impacted me and those around me. It follows weekly writings related to communication scholars; rhetoric, communication theory, and performance. Emergent themes are noted, including: My inner avatar and the alternatives, making sense of the world and playing the role, becoming the role-taker and role-player. This autoethnography sheds light on the life of someone dealing with anxiety and the effort to communicate in everyday life. Studying my anxiety is opening my awareness in how my anxiety impacts my communication daily and understanding why certain aspects of that day happen the way that they do. This project remains ongoing, and the full result is still being explored. This auto-ethnography is meant to study my anxiety and the different routes I take to communicate in everyday life, because my anxiety is ever changing further study of it will teach me more about myself and ways to anticipate my anxiety to better communicate.

*Keywords:* anxiety, performance, auto-ethnography, communication

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### Introduction

This project began with the intention of understanding my anxiety and how I communicate in an everyday life situation. I began this project not expecting the outcomes, but just creating an interesting paper to share, in which I decided to take the route of an autoethnography. The main point of this paper began as a story to tell but grew into an understanding of myself and how to anticipate my anxiety and how I communicate in everyday life. This desire to share my findings comes from the unknown of individuals who live with anxiety. This paper is not simply understanding my anxiety, and how I communicate, but also learning more about myself and ways to anticipate my anxiety to better communicate. Juhl (1993) explains “Everyday life performance is a way of vicariously experiencing, through performance, the movement, sensations, and, subsequently, the emotions generated in another person’s body . . . They have already discovered that imitating the movement and sound of others engenders a performed understanding of a subject’s emotion and thought processes” (p. 205). Throughout the paper there will be bracketed text in italics sharing personal thoughts from the author, themes related to scholarly written articles; rhetoric, communication theory, and performance. First rhetoric; my inner avatar and the alternatives, second communication theory; making sense of the world and playing the role, third performance; becoming the role-taker and role-player, and finally my personal implications.

### **Method of Study**

The methodology consisted of myself following the weekly writings related to communication scholars; rhetoric, communication theory, and performance. Every day for that week I would study the weekly writings related to communication scholars. Utilizing both my

personal journal and field notes that supports the reading, I am able to see how my anxiety has affected my communication when it comes to those specific areas. Morin (2017) explains in her article to embrace anxiety “you can still succeed even when you’re anxious as long as you are open to the idea that nervous energy can fuel your performance. Thinking your anxiety will hold you back is likely to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Morin, 2017 para.5). Understanding my anxiety can help identify where my energy is spent especially in areas that would give me more anxiety, this is backed up by Nahman’s (2016) article on how we can talk ourselves down from an anxiety spiral. Here she explains “If there is a particular scenario for you that consistently precedes anxiety, define it as a trigger and avoid it, or, if you can’t, mercilessly recognize it as such. A glitch that you prepare for, expect, and move past” (Nahman, 2016 para. 5). Utilizing the weeks reading and combining that with my personal journal and any field notes taken I am hoping to give the readers a look into my world and how I communicate in a day to day basis, even though I deal with anxiety every day, this is meant to take away any stigma from people who are mentally ill and emphasizing that although we have our hardships we are able to recognize them in hopes to live regular lives.

### **My Inner Avatar and the Alternatives**

*[My archnemesi s “the door”<sup>1</sup> the only thing that keeps me from being able to step outside to take a fresh take in of breathable air. I suffocate being stuck inside because I am fearful of what is to come outside, yet me, myself tells me is fine, but my mind tells me it is not, and my body reacts confused in what to do. I hide myself in my insecurities, I have no idea what to do,*

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<sup>1</sup> The door is the obstacle, I go through everyday that sometimes keeps me from leaving my home. The door is what keeps me from going outside it is my house door that can affect my agoraphobia and potentially keep me from leaving the house.

*even though my mind is telling me the moment I step outside I will die! at the same time is trying to help me, it frustrates me, because it makes me feel hopeless. I must create someone to relate with others even though it is not me, but for the sake of myself and others I become the avatar that is accepted by everyone else (March 10, 2018).]*

Taking this from a rhetorical perspective, the agent in my artifact is myself, and the audience is also myself. Personas would be what the agent is made of while the identities are what my audience is based on. My personas are characters that I am constantly creating daily depending on the situation I am going to be in, and my identities is what I am identifying myself in and how I want people to identify me. The distinction between a private and public persona presupposes that we invest efforts in maintaining a public “persona” whereas at home we can “be ourselves”. Examining it closer shows that we have a persona within our immediate family and close friends (Morag, 2014).

In my autoethnography regarding rhetoric I am studying how I communicate when I deal with anxiety every day, I am looking at both the agent and the audience. Putting special attention to the personas I created depending on the situation, and the effort exerted to maintain that persona to persuade my audience, by creating a persona with an identity my audience can relate to. This is creating a fiction character that the speaker wishes an audience to accept as real (Crick, Pecchioni, and Butcher, 2007). This can be done at home, going to work, being a student, or running errands, my persona will take a specific role that I will create to have the audience accept as real. My identities are making connections between my persona and the audience, in a way to persuade my audience that I am one of them to create a sense of “we” (Crick, Pecchioni, and Butcher, 2007, p.61).

Creating a persona and an identity requires a lot of energy exerted from myself, that is used to maintain that persona throughout the day. Typically creating a persona for school is simple because I am aware of the work I will be doing in class, usually personas fail when my anxiety rises and becomes a panic attack, that I can't control emotionally. Even though my audience may see me as a calm individual this is because I am creating a persona that is calm and identifying myself to be "relaxed and great", but deep down inside, I am holding the door shut to not allow my panicked side to show. While having this persona, I still need to play a role and make sense of the world around me, this comes from a communication theory perspective.

### **Making Sense of the World and Playing the Role**

Looking at myself as the agent and my audience being the people I am interacting with, when seeing my anxiety from a communication theory perspective. Instead of focusing on persona and identities there is more focus particularly on certain elements of the agent's perception, roles and the self and how those elements are created and impact my behavior (Crick, Pecchioni, and Butcher, 2007). I am constantly adapting to my audience based on the situation, relationships with others involved, and the knowledge of those others. This audience can vary from a friend, family member, my boss, a stranger, etc. (Crick Pecchioni, and Butcher, 2007). In communication theory I studied how my anxiety affects my perception, roles and the self when interacting with the audience who may be my parents, schoolmates, and friends.

When looking at perception I would select certain stimuli and create patterns while making sense out of those patterns, by studying my perception whether interacting online or offline I was able to recognize situations in which I shouldn't be worried about whether or not I said the wrong thing. Roles are "a set of expected behaviors that are associated with a particular situation and guide how we are expected to behave toward others." (Crick, Pecchioni, and

Butcher, 2007, p. 2). Just like persona, the roles that I have as a son, student, gamer, are my identity scripts that guide me in how I need to behave so that others will perceive me in a certain way without knowing I go through anxiety. By studying my roles, I was able to see similar behaviors, those similar behaviors had pieces of my real self, but also avoided any form of embarrassment, shame or humiliation. *[Every day I must properly prepare myself to go to school, it would be really embarrassing if people knew what I go through every day; what may be simple to them, isn't for me.]*

The self is a broader concept is not just various roles, but also a collection of personality traits, what we like and don't like about ourselves. An important aspect about the self is the public self vs the private self, when people meet me they may see a gamer, but may not know of my anxiety. In studying the self, I was able to understand certain aspects of myself and where those aspects came from. Developing that sense of who I am can come through interactions with others; while I am still learning how others see me, I am internalizing their view into my view of myself. I can think about who I am and whether I like what I learn about myself (Crick, Pecchioni, and Butcher. 2007, p.3). While I still create a persona and analyze the world around me I must also become the role-taker and role-player.

*[Why do I sweat when it is not even hot? Even my breathing gets hard, all I want to do is get my errands done, but the thought of going somewhere, anywhere scares me. How do people see me? How is my environment like? It is so hard to please anyone, that I cannot even please myself. My anxiety holds me prisoner that I have to constantly keep aware of my surroundings and become someone people expect of me, I do this because it is easier to continue on (March 30, 2018).]*

### **Becoming the Role-Taker and Role-Player**

*[I always imagined myself being my character from World of Warcraft<sup>2</sup>, with so much grace and confidence. Why can't I be that strong? How come I must constantly be someone I am not? Not only am I lying to others, but I am lying to myself about myself. It sucks, when even though I become a role-taker or a role-player, I still hide the person I want to be. It is almost as if I am not good enough, yet when I put on those headsets and get online is almost as if my true character shines. It is me, the real me, the person I want to be able to share with everyone (April 15, 2018).]*

Becoming a role-taker and role-player, can differ on what the day may be varying from, being a student, an employee, a son, a friend, an online gamer. What also goes on in creating a character is the amount of energy I am willing to use to create these specific characters, this depends on how much my anxiety is affecting me that day. To be more specific, I can be a happy student, a distant friend, an excited son, a tired employee or an invisible online gamer. The audience is whom I am willing to speak to, that is if I am wanting to interact with people. These come in forms of alienation, introversion, self-esteem and communication apprehension which are all related to the unwillingness to communicate (Pearson et al., 2011). When looking at it more closely, if I alienate myself it is usually because I distrust other people and avoid communication due to past negative communication experiences. As an introvert I am characteristically quiet, timid, and shy and am perceived to communicate less with others. Individuals with low self-esteem may have defensive behaviors and have less faith in their opinions (Burgoon, 1974). Communication apprehension is usually the level of fear or anxiety

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<sup>2</sup> World of Warcraft is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). It was released in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment.

associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (J.C. McCroskey, 1977).

Studying the roles I portrayed, I paid close attention at the types of characters I created when playing a role. Depending on my anxiety level the roles that I played would change; even when I would solely role-play as a student, I wouldn't always just be a student, I could be a shy student, a talkative student, etc. The field notes that were noted are a good example of good and bad cases of my anxiety and what happens in my performance during my everyday life.

An example would go as follow; Thursday April 12, 2018. I was quite happy to find out that my interpersonal communication class was cancelled and that I was only going to attend my marine biology class and to know that it was only a group test only made it a lot easier for me to role play a student. Arriving to class and starting the group test, we were all able to collaborate and get the answers, there was no feeling of anxiety in me because my mind and body is already use to that environment, as I get accustomed to the students in my class it is a lot easier to communicate. As the hour passed, the group test was turned in and class was over, I now had plans on going to Target to buy some essentials for myself. I had to change roles from a student to a customer, a quiet customer that already knows what he wants if I can go in and out within 10 minutes with no interruptions I can easily go one with my day and make it home with no worries. Exiting school, I drove down Grand Ave, to Target located at Eastland Center the only thought in my mind was to make it out as quickly as possible, it was around 1:30 pm I felt that Target was going to have many customers and that might break my 10-minute limit.

As I arrived at Target, I spend no time finding parking, I parked on the first open space, and then my anxiety rises to maximum, there are people outside Target taking petition signings. My heart raises, my palms get sweaty, my breathing gets heavy the last thing I want is to

communicate with someone. I take a deep breath and I become 100% unapproachable, as I get closer to the door I hear the words “excuse me sir, are you registered to vote?” I keep my head down, and power walk right into the store, those ten minutes reduce to “GET OUT ASAP”. My anxiety is at a 10, I grabbed the basket and the only thing in my mind are the words “I feel so stupid, for not saying anything, they must think I am such a jerk”. My body is extremely tense at this point, and I just can feel eyes staring because of how uncomfortable I am feeling, I quickly grabbed cat food, hand soap, lint roller, a cleaning cloth and turn around. I raced to the self-check-out, going through the cashier would mean communicating, and the last thing I wanted to do was to communicate. I quickly paid and head to my car, the moment I step into my car, the only thing my body could do is panic because of the amount of thoughts running through my head, twenty to thirty minutes was spent so that my panic attack would calm down. Arriving home felt so good, the first thing I did was go into my bed and I fell asleep”.

### **Personal**

While studying myself deeply in a 16-week period following scholarly articles, I never would have thought that I would gain the confidence that I need to continue going forward in life. I been committed to growing stronger and not live in fear of my anxiety but live alongside it and be able to live life doing the things that I enjoy doing. In my entirety I have grieved over the fact that my anxiety would rule my life. Developing the sense of maintaining in the moment of mindfulness has made me a stronger person and has allowed me to muster up the strength in learning more about myself. I was too focused in the future that I forgot about living in the moment. Carrying with me the six tips that Dixit shares about mindfulness has allowed me to continue forward (Dixit, 2013). I will continue learning more about myself and start to discover the person I am meant to be.

*[To think that I would be able to move forward in life knowing that my anxiety can hold me back is a scary thought. Though, I have always wanted to move forward in life, that even when I was at my lowest and the only escape was to leave this world, I would always pull myself back. Because the thought of death scares me that I couldn't give up, I must keep fighting. To think I have come this far in life, makes me proud of myself, I can't stop now, there is still so much more to live for and explore. My adventure has been delayed for so long, now is the time to take the trip of a life time (May 11, 2018).]*

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## **Endnotes**