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AUTHOR	Larkin, Judith E.; Pines, Harvey A.
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ABSTRACT

Most teachers believe that students' active involvement in the classroom promotes learning. To this end, they engage in a variety of behaviors designed to produce participation, one of the most common of which is "calling on students" in class. A recent survey revealed, however, that 56% of a college student sample either disliked or strongly disliked this teacher behavior, and only 12% liked it. The consistency and magnitude of these negative reactions to making public a student's performance led us to investigate whether the practice of calling on students in class might lead students to engage in behavior designed to avoid the apparently negative social consequences of this action. The present study was thus designed to assess the frequency of avoidance behaviors and compare male and female responses to being called on in class. Results reveal that the common practice of calling on students resulted in a clear and unmistakable pattern of avoidance behavior as reported by both male and female students. Women were more likely to engage in the behaviors than men--possibly because they are more attuned to the potentially negative social consequences of looking foolish in public. Yet, the gender difference was less striking than the fact that so many students appeared to be seeking ways to avoid a psychologically unpleasant situation. (Contains 13 references and 2 tables.) (GCP)

When Teachers Call on Students: Avoidance Behavior in the Classroom

by
Judith E. Larkin
Harvey A. Pines

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Judith E. Larkin and Harvey A. Pines
Canisius College
Buffalo, NY 14208

Most teachers believe that students' active involvement in the classroom promotes learning. To this end, they engage in a variety of behaviors designed to produce participation, one of the most common of which is "calling on students" in class. A recent survey revealed, however, that 56% of a college student sample (N=199) either disliked or strongly disliked this teacher behavior, and only 12% liked it (Larkin & Pines, 2001). Consistent with this finding are data showing that those classroom practices which publicly identify a student's name and performance also produce negative responses, e.g., posting name and grade (65% negative), returning exams in order of highest to lowest grade (84% negative), and not returning exams face down (66% negative). The consistency and magnitude of these negative reactions to making public a student's performance led us to investigate whether the practice of calling on students in class might lead students to engage in behavior designed to avoid the apparently negative social consequences of the action.

Other research on embarrassment and reactions to risking public performance has shown that women have a greater fear than men of being embarrassed, receiving social disapproval, and doing poorly in public (e.g., Larkin & Pines, 2003; Miller, 1995; 1996). Accordingly, these findings suggest the hypothesis that women may be more likely than men to engage in avoidant behavior in the face of classroom practices that force them to reveal what they know or don't know in public. Studies which report that men and women experience the classroom differently (e.g., Hall & Sandler, 1982) lend added support to the expectation of gender differences in

response to this teacher behavior. The present study was thus designed to assess the frequency of avoidance behaviors and compare male and female responses to being called on in class.

Method

Participants

Participants were 129 students (50 males, 77 females, 2 gender not specified) in two sections of the Introductory Psychology course who volunteered to fill out the anonymous survey at the end of a class period.

Procedure

In order to develop a survey instrument, we asked eight student employees majoring in psychology to list all the behaviors they have engaged in to avoid being called on in class. In informal discussions, several of these student "experts" had previously commented on their reluctance to speak in class. From these lists we developed a ten-item Yes or No survey checklist (Table I). In addition, the final version of the survey included Likert scales with endpoints of 1=not at all and 7=very much, on which participants rated 1) how likely they were to engage in at least one of the behaviors on the survey, 2) how concerned they were about possibly making a fool of themselves when they participate in class, and 3) how much they agreed or disagreed that "something can actually be done to lessen the chances of being called on" (1=strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Results

Table II shows the percentage of male and female students who responded Yes and No to each of the ten avoidance behaviors. The five most frequently endorsed avoidance behaviors were: avoiding eye contact with the teacher, act like you're writing something in your notes; act like you're looking for something in your notes, pretend that you're reading something course-

related; and look like you're thinking of the answer, but haven't come up with it yet. Most striking is the observation that more than 50% of the students reported engaging in each of the above behaviors. Only 3 students (2.3%) indicated that they didn't engage in any of the listed avoidance behaviors.

In order to test for gender differences, we computed the mean number of "yes" answers separately for males and females. A t-test showed that females (M= 5.1) reported engaging in significantly more of the ten listed behaviors than males (M = 4.42), t (125)= 2.29, p = .02. To determine whether gender differences occurred in the use of specific behavioral strategies, we conducted chi square tests on each of the ten avoidance behaviors. The results showed that significantly more females engaged in acts of avoiding eye contact with the teacher (chi square= 3.61, p<.059), dropping a pen or notebook in order to look busy (chi square=4.02, p<.04), and acting like they were looking for the answer in their notes (chi square=4.30, p<.04). There were no differences between males and females in the other behaviors.

The smaller percentages of males vs. females who reported engaging in these avoidance behaviors suggests that they apparently felt less need to avoid being questioned, a hypothesis consistent with men's typically higher self-confidence in their abilities (cf., Beyer, 1990; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Matlin, 2003). To explore this possible basis for the observed gender differences, we performed a multiple analysis of variance on students' ratings of how concerned they were about making a fool of themselves, how likely they were to engage in avoidance behavior, and whether they felt they could lessen the chances of being called on. The results revealed a significant main effect for gender, $F(3, 118) = 4.24$, p<.007. Consistent with prior research, women were significantly more concerned about "making a fool of yourself in front of others" when participating in class, $F(1, 120)=6.27$, p<.02. Interestingly, males were more likely

to agree that one can actually do something to lessen the chances of being called on, $F(1, 120) = 5.34$, $p<.03$ -- a fitting cognition to accompany self-confidence. There was no gender difference in likelihood of engaging in "at least one" of the listed behaviors. In fact, a very high 81% of the students indicated that they would do so by giving ratings of 4 or higher on the 7-point scale.

Discussion

We found that the common practice of calling on students resulted in a clear and unmistakable pattern of avoidance behavior as reported by both male and female students. Women were more likely to engage in the behaviors than men -- possibly because they are more attuned to the potentially negative social consequences of looking foolish in public. Yet, the gender difference was less striking than the fact that so many students appeared to be seeking ways to avoid a psychologically unpleasant situation.

Although the unpleasant situation that students appear to be avoiding should be a matter of concern to educators, few studies have examined the effects of negative emotions such as shame and embarrassment on performance. With the notable exception of test anxiety, researchers have devoted little attention to "academic emotions" – i.e., emotions related to academic learning and the classroom experience --and their role in students' self-regulated learning (cf. Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002). Importantly, however, recent studies investigating the performance effects of controlling emotions suggest that this self-regulatory behavior depletes the resources that might otherwise be available for a subsequent intellectual task (Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003). If students' emotional and cognitive resources indeed become directed towards avoiding the immediate threat of being called on, then arguably the practice of calling on students may effectively *reduce* active learning, the presumed goal of the teacher's action.

Alternative Actions

Our findings suggest that teachers seeking to stimulate students' active participation might want to consider less threatening means of accomplishing that goal. To that end, we offer some alternative behaviors, culled from a variety of sources including our own experiences, which might increase class participation and decrease avoidance behavior (cf. Davis, 1993; Forsyth, 2003; Napell, 1976).

1) Calling on students isn't so bad if you give them questions before the class in which you plan to ask them. (Preparing your questions in advance should also produce better questions).
2) When showing a video, put discussion questions on the board before you show the video, to focus students' attention.
3) Have students briefly write down their answers to a question before beginning a discussion.
4) Put students in groups to answer questions. Ask for a spokesperson from each group. Have groups respond directly to each other.
5) Combine 3 and 4 above. I.e., Students write down their answers before forming groups.
6) Excessive talkers inhibit shy students from risking raising their hand. Try, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't yet spoken." Then wait.
7) Wait 3 -5 seconds after you ask a question (count one thousand and one, etc.). Students need time to think.
8) Have students keep their own class participation log which you might check periodically. This makes class participation more salient.

9) Experiment with different types of responses to students' answers. Although reinforcement is important, you want to avoid giving the kind of response (e.g., that's right) that stops other students from adding to what's been said.

10) Craft your questions, giving preference to open-ended questions. E.g., "Can you think of an example?" Or, instead of asking "Does anyone have any questions?" try "What questions do you have?"

11) Toss a candy whenever a student answers a question correctly.

12) Give *yourself* a candy each time you get students to participate without calling on them!

Please add your own suggestions below:

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Table I. What Behaviors Do You Engage In

To Avoid Being Called on In Class?

When a teacher is calling on students in class, and you don't want to be called on, are there any behaviors you engage in to ***avoid being called on***? Please circle Yes or No to each of the behaviors below.

Do You:

Yes No 1. Avoid eye contact with the teacher?

Yes No 2. Raise your hand to ask a question about the topic?

Yes No 3. Act like you're writing something in your notes?

Yes No 4. Act like you're looking for the answer in your notes?

Yes No 5. Leave the classroom (to get water; use the restroom, etc.)?

Yes No 6. Hide behind the person in front of you?

Yes No 7. Drop a pen/notebook to look busy doing something?

Yes No 8. Pretend to read something course-related?

Yes No 9. Raise your hand to say something related to the topic?

Yes No 10. Look like you're thinking of the answer, but haven't come up with it yet.

Table II. Percentage of Male and Female Students Reporting Engaging in Behaviors to Avoid Being Called on In Class*

	Males (N=50)		Females (N=77)	
Behavior	% Yes	% No	% Yes	% No
Avoid eye contact with teacher	77%	23%	85%	15%
Raise hand to ask question about topic	16%	84%	18%	82%
Act like you're writing something in your notes	80%	20%	85%	15%
Act like you're looking for the answer in your notes	70%	30%	82%	18%
Leave the classroom (to get water; use restroom, etc.)	9%	91%	12%	88%
Hide behind the person in front of you	26%	74%	37%	63%
Drop a pen/notebook to look busy doing something	11%	89%	25%	75%
Pretend to read something course-related	57%	43%	61%	39%
Raise your hand to say something related to topic	21%	79%	19%	81%
Look like you're thinking of answer, but haven't come up with it yet	87%	13%	81%	19%

*Participants received the following instructions: "When a teacher is calling on students in class, and you don't want to be called on, are there any behaviors you engage in to ***avoid being called on***? Please circle Yes or No.

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