TEST ANXIETY: A POLITICAL PROBLEM AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

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Abstract

The conceptual framework expressed by Deffenbacher (1977) in his article "Test Anxiety: The Problem" is challenged and described as being inadequate for a thorough understanding of test anxiety. The present article describes test anxiety as a political problem needing preventive counselling strategies rather than remedial corrective approaches. Testing and evaluation are seen as tools of oppression and a means to express power and authority in educational settings. By assuming that test anxiety is the student's problem, school counsellors contribute to the problem by facilitating a student's guilt. Counsellors may work to eliminate the problem through consulting with faculty, acting as student advocates, and publicly affirming research findings on humanistic growth.

Résumé

Le schème conceptuel élaboré par Deffenbach (1977) dans son article "Test Anxiety: The Problem" est mis en question et dit inadéquat pour permettre une compréhension complète de l'anxiété lors d'un test. Cet article décrit cette anxiété comme un problème politique qui nécessite des stratégies de consultation préventives plutôt que des approches correctives. On perçoit le testing et l'évaluation comme des outils d'oppression et un moyen pour exprimer le pouvoir et l'autorité dans les cadres scolaires. S'ils prennent pour acquis que l'anxiété face à un test est le problème de l'étudiant, les conseillers contribuent au problème en facilitant le sentiment de culpabilité chez l'étudiant, Les conseillers peuvent travailler à éliminer ce problème par des échanges avec les professeurs, en agissant comme les défenseurs des étudiants, et enfin en faisant connaître publiquement les découvertes que la recherche sur la croissance humaine a mis en évidence.

Test Anxiety: A Political Problem An Alternative View

For some time now the author has been aware of the research on the concept of test anxiety, but only recently, stimulated by a colleague, Jerry Deffenbacher, has he been able to get certain concerns, ideas and experiences to coagulate. After reading Deffenbacher's (1977) analysis of test anxiety, agreement was reached that a presentation of differing views would provide a broader perspective on the issue. The following paper is in part a reaction to Deffenbacher's notions, but in the main suggests a quite different and rather narrowly held perspective.

Through his research and experience Deffenbacher (1977) sees test anxiety as a significant, psychological pproblem which interferes with a student's performance capabilities. He suggests a preferred method of treatment, namely, providing the test anxious person with particular coping skills that are specifically designed to reduce anxiety under conditions of evaluative stress. This author sees test anxiety as a political problem that indicates exploitation and oppression by an institution, thereby preferring that treatment include preventive measures directed at altering the methods and procedures of evaluation. Both authors see students suffering and both agree that there are many constructive actions to take which are not exclusive of each other, but nonethless are radically different.

What follows presents in detail the three major conceptual differences: (a) test anxiety is more complex and pervasive than present research would lead one to believe, it represents a political problem as well as a psychological problem; (b) testing and evaluation techniques in educational

settings are basically methods for allocating power — hence they are political in nature; and (c) the focus of school and university counselling on remedial instead of preventive approaches serves to magnify the problem by supporting institutional goals, paying little attention to the role of the institutional policies which create the problem.

When a student has difficulty studying and/or becomes anxious around examinations to the extent that performance is handicapped, the conventional wisdom of education would conclude that the student needs to study harder or better, turn on to anxiety management counselling, drop out, or change the institutional (faculty) approach to evaluation. Of these alternatives, a university usually provides services for the first three options, but rarely will assist a student to change the system. However, it is unlikely that many students would presently select to change — the — faculty option. By focusing on test anxiety as a psychological problem, counsellors pay too much attention to the presenting symptoms and ignore anxiety as a political experience. This focus has been described as the fallacy of symptoms since the counsellor fails to look beyond the symptoms to the situations that generated them. Using the label "test" anxiety further obscures the nature of the problem. One logically concludes that the anxiety comes from or is inherent in tests or testing. Logic in this case can be considered a highly precise system leading one to wrong conclusions. A recent scientific experiment may prove illustrative:

> Several scientists were working to train fleas to respond to vocal commands. When they asked the fleas to fly, the fleas would fly; when they asked the fleas to flit, the fleas would flit around. Then they wondered what the flea's reaction to the commands would be if they removed the flea's wings. Now, when they asked the fleas to fly, the fleas just stayed in the same place and when they asked the trained fleas to flit around, the fleas did not move. The scientists concluded that when the wings are removed from fleas, the fleas become deaf.

Because a student does better on examinations after personal counselling, the counsellor concludes that the problem has been eliminated.

Anxiety, stemming from the Latin, *anxietas,* means uncertainty, agitation or dread, and as John Wood (1976) has pointed out, anxiety also means strangulation. Students have little control over their evaluation and do not experience any certainty as to how performance will be assessed. What often is called anxiety is really the feeling of powerlessness — the feeling that students cannot direct their own lives and maintain worth and dignity. Students will often accept the values of their teachers, simply because of the balance of power, Professors strengthen this topdog pattern by getting students to believe in the professor's values. This makes wielding power easier and limits the student's willingness to protest against the professorial values. The students wind up feeling responsible and guilty for their own condition. Fritz Perls (1969) once stated that guilt was primarily a form of resentment. The student is unable to express the resentment and is afraid that his feelings will be uncovered and the professor will consider him unworthy. Fearing judgment, rejection and humiliation, the student becomes anxious and fearful. This anxiety becomes particularly strong when the power needs of students and faculty are at the interface — evaluation periods. A person's view of himself/herself greatly influences his/her behavior and this sense of guilt seriously interferes with the creative abilities of all students. Students will not risk their survival. As Maslow (1954) has elegantly pointed out, survival needs must be met, before actualizing needs can be achieved. Faculty often rely on what has been termed the "Just World Theory" which explains how we blame victims for their own misfortunes. The individual (alcoholic, doper, poor, anxious student) is entirely responsible, therefore the faculty has no obligation to act; this perspective *helps* them to make themselves feel more secure and less inclined to self-examination.

At the same time, it is essential that students be able to differentiate between that which they can do something about and that which they can do nothing about; this distinction is essential for growth. But virtually all aspects of educational institutions are set up to present *the illusion* that students can do nothing (appeal committees are made up of faculty members and administrators who control grades and examination patterns) and the student is deceived into thinking that he/she is not being oppressed by others, but that the problem is really his/her own fault. This distribution of power or the allocation of delusion as Castaneda's Don Juan might say, is the heart of test anxiety as a socio-political rather than psychological problem. Using Eric Berne's (1972) perspective, test anxiety becomes the testing "racket". Students do, however, experience psychological distress, but they are confused about its source.

Counselling centres on university campuses often contribute to this phenomenon by empha-

sizing that it is the student's problem, and that since tests are a way of life in Western countries, students *should* learn to control their anxiety. Indeed, anxiety management techniques have been developed which are very effective in decreasing "test anxiety". Remedial programs in reading and study skills or anxiety control, however, do little to change the *increasing* number of students who experience these difficulties. One promising note is the advent of self-control behavioral techniques, where the student can operate independent of the counsellor. However, giving the student this self-control power does not change the distribution of power. It only hopes to give the student his share of better grades, and calms him from challenging the system that exploits him. Given the perspective described, why don't more (or all) students experience test anxiety? The author estimates that almost everyone who takes tests experiences anxiety, but few persons are willing to bring it out in the open. Expressing feelings is not generally accepted or valued in academic settings. Alan Paton (1967) put in this way:

> I am searching for an explanation for the fact that under some circumstances men readily admit fear and under other circumstances do not. I assume that readiness to admit fear is part of a general readiness to look at the world as it is and therefore at oneself as one is, while unwillingness to admit fear may be a strong element in self-esteem. One does not readily admit to a fear of which one is ashamed. (p. 20)

In addition students are too busy preparing and taking tests to do anything about the evaluation system. As my neighbor told me, "I'm too busy chasing stray cows to fix the fences".

Feelings which threaten the orderliness or smooth functioning of the institution may not be encouraged by university counsellors. Counsellors associated with educational establishments have a realistic stake in seeing the school function without incident. They are often asked to provide services for students who are disruptive, have personality problems, or who don't fit in with the ongoing practices of the school (value clash) and get low-grades that threaten an orderly flow towards graduation. Ironically, potential drop-outs or "professional" students are considered a problem for administrative reasons since they interfere with expected progress. Furthermore, the planning of remedial and corrective programs is ostensibly, to help students (and counsellors) from effecting system change. How often do counsellors work with students to change faculty/administrative policies and practices? How often do counsellors respond to students' anxiety as though it was a signal of environmental distress? The evaluation system has been compared to a guillotine with the counsellor's role being directed at toughening the student's neck or changing the student's perception of the blade from steel to jello. Eventually the blade falls: it may only pierce halfway through the outstretched neck or more likely the student won't know his head has been lopped off.

Counsellors, although extensively trained in human learning and development, are usually disengaged from the academic policies and practices of educational settings. They have little impact on the instructional program at a university and while they may perceive their major responsibility as working to assist particular students, their overall responsibility is to all participants in the educational community. This conflict in responsibility often leads counsellors to work with a small number of individuals in remedial, corrective or prescriptive ways only. Preventive and developmental approaches which involve the entire population are severely restricted. Contrary to the opinion expressed by Deffenbacher (1977), consultation services with faculty would in the long run be less costly and more effective in helping students to become fully functioning learners (Harper and Belch, 1975). Rather than working with each individual student to decrease anxiety, counsellors can work with faculty to assist them in developing learning conditions which are effective and have impact on a greater number of students than an individual counsellor could possibly manage. Caseloads and waiting lists of counselling centres are continuously jammed, despite the noted improvements in skills, techniques and training of direct service counsellors.

Counsellors working at a preventive level of intervention generally approach problems in a larger, more long-term perspective, despite the seductiveness of immediate visible direct service techniques. They perceive their responsibility to all students and focus in-depth on the causes of student problems, extending their services to students whose concerns are developmental and often not directly visible. Counsellors who perceive their target client as the institution risk encountering administrative or faculty censure, which would severely threaten the existence (and expansion) of university counselling services. The methods used by preventive counsellors are often indirect (Carr, 1976) and focus on consulting (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1973) and research in order to facilitate growth of all students. While

prevention focuses on strengthening student's ability to resist harmful stress, it also works to reduce distress producing factors in the environment.

Whether anxiety helps or hinders total academic growth is unsettled. Counsellors have seen both positive and negative outcomes from anxiety. Deffenbacher (1977) reports that certain levels of anxiety may be helpful to student performance. May (1953), Frankl (1969), Mowrer (1964), and Ellis (1974) have stated that anxiety may have growth promoting effects and may lead students to greater levels of self-awareness. Fritz Perls (1969) believed that anxiety was a form of life energy:

> the formula of anxiety is very simple: anxiety is the gap between the now and the then. If you are in the now you can't be anxious, because the excitement flows immediately into ongoing spontaneous activity. If you are in the now, you are creative, you are inventive. (p. 2)

Current perspectives on test anxiety suffer from narrowness. Test anxiety is considered to be an exclusively student-owned problem while the evaluation systems predominant in North American education are believed to be good (they're the best we have); necessary (we must use something); or neutral (tests are okay, it's the way they're used). Few persons seem concerned that educational institutions place more emphasis on evaluation than they do on learning itself. Suggestions for "doing away with tests" or dramatically restructuring evaluation techniques, particularly towards greater student involvement, are met with such great resistance that one might believe evaluation was the very cornerstone upon which the university was built. This strong need to keep evaluation sacred makes sense when the word power is substituted for the word anxiety. At present, there are over 550,000 students enrolled in Canadian universities, but there are only 15,000 faculty members. Students have forty times the numbers, but have the least power. Authoritarian power, not tests makes students anxious. Evaluation methods are frequently used to exercise power and authority (Scott & Dornbusch, 1975). Keeping students anxious increases their governability. It separates student from student by encouraging competition for faculty imposed limitations on rewards. Deffenbacher points out that testing was created to meet an information gathering need, but seldom according to the author has testing actually influenced decision-making except as a way of depersonalizing the process. The fact that tests are not constructed by the persons taking them, the content is generally secretive and the results are usually used to enhance the power of the decision-makers who support the use of tests in order to express power and not just to obtain information. Students are being exploited since the true motives of faculty members are seldom revealed by their testing evaluation procedures.

While many of these remarks stem from personal perceptions of educational systems, the author has had several opportunities to systematically explore student evaluation methods and is greatly surprised that there is such poverty in the literature on test anxiety concerning the relationship between the anxiety experienced by students and the testing process the student encounters. Students have been known to become more creative, imaginative and knowledgeable when they have significant opportunities to participate in the process and creation of methods of evaluation (Carr, 1976). On occasion the author has encouraged discussions in classes about student perceptions of professor power. What usually results is a demystification and equality of relationship which generates mutual growth. Tension, however, has been experienced during these discussions which has led the author to believe that individuals may fear losing power — power which other faculty members appear to believe should always be kept. Faculty members have stated that standards would be lowered if power were mutually shared. Possibly, anxiety about loss of power is contagious in a classroom.

It is important to note as Deffenbacher (1977) has already stated, that students who experience anxiety in evaluative situations are generally equal in ability to those who do not experience anxiety. But since their performance or demonstration of their ability will be restricted, it is essential the faculty members develop methods which enhance performance. University and school counsellors can facilitate these changes by providing information, workshops, consultation and research to faculty and administration. Counsellors may need to perceive themselves as change agents or client advocates. Deffenbacher states that testing is pervasive in our society, so providing students with coping skills will give them practical training to deal with situations outside the university. However, wouldn't it be even more practical to assist them to deal with power and its authoritarian use in a democratic society?

In summary, counsellors need to perceive test anxiety as a reaction to an unequal distribution

of power, an environmental distress call. The problem won't disappear, but the counsellors responsibility for action broadens. Rather than working exclusively in a remedial framework by providing anxiety reduction treatments, the counsellors can provide preventive and developmental services aimed at eliminating distressful environmental conditions.

Counsellors may pay attention to not only the psychological experiences of students but must also consider the socio-political context within which growth can occur. Oppression in educational settings is not new and has been discussed by many writers, notably Illich (1971), Fanon (1968) and Friere (1970). What is important is that counsellors may unwittingly be agents of the oppression rather than liberators. Test anxiety is a learned response and a widespread phenomenon in our society; let's find out who is teaching it and help them change their methods.

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