

Analyzing Emotion in a Fictional Setting

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The purpose of this study was to determine anxiety levels in response to fictional settings in which the participants would in theory be experiencing anxiety due to the Spotlight Effect. The Spotlight effect is a phenomenon that in which people tend to believe they are being noticed more than they really are (Thomas Gilovich et al., 2000). We used a questionnaire survey based on a Likert scale. Furthermore, this study is trying to find if there is a correlation between the amount of anxiety/Spotlight effect and students college classification during the undergraduate years. This kind of research is important and can help us understand the differences in anxiety and Spotlight effect within the different student classifications. For example, if freshman show more signs of Spotlight effect than those who are classified as sophomore, juniors, and seniors then we can conclude that it is possible that freshman might have more symptoms of Spotlight effect due to the fact that they might not have as much experience and time in a college setting than their peers who have more hours and classes.

As background literature there are 3 articles to help back the Spotlight effect. One with Gilovich et al. (2000) which hypothesized that there was an existing “Spotlight effect” by using five different tests. The first study of this research did an experiment in which the target participants were required to wear embarrassing t-shirts while entering the room full of other participants which were given the title of observer. They scheduled 6 observers for each session. They ended up with one session with 6 observers, five sessions with 5, seven sessions with 4, and one session each with 3 and 2. When the observers arrived, they were led to a laboratory room and asked to take a seat at a long table in the center of the room, all which were forced to take seats facing the doorway since all of the seats were on one side of the table. Then the experimenter told them that they would start to fill out a questionnaire which they worked on as

the experimenter sat idly by. While the target participant arrived 5 mins later, they were led to another room and told that he needs “to put on this shirt” which he was then handed a shirt (21cm x 24cm) and consisted of a picture which had singer Barry Manilow’s neck and face on the front of it. Interviews with pretest participants confirmed that they would also believe it would be embarrassing to wear a t-shirt that had Barry Manilow’s face on it which made it reliable for this test. The second experimenter then brought the target to the room with the observers and told them to knock on the door so another experimenter could “guide you through the rest of the experiment”. The target was invited into the room and told to sit on the other side of the table facing towards all the observers. However, just before the target is about to sit the experimenter who had greeted our target initially states, “on second thought” the others are too far ahead perhaps it would be best if the target waited outside for a moment. Then which the experimenter who has greeted the target initially joins him in the hallways and explains that the experiment is focused on “incidental memory, or people’s awareness of things they are not told to pay attention to .... I would like to begin by asking you a number of questions to assess your incidental memory and your intuitions about other people’s memory (p.212).” They started with “how many of the \_\_ people in the room you were just in would be able to tell me who is on your T-shirt?” While it was also made clear that the experimenter does not count toward that number. The first experimenter individually asked the observers whether they noticed who was on the shirt of the target participants. This study did show that the target participants experienced the Spotlight effect by predicting how many observers would accurately guess who was on the t-shirt. While they predicted that the target participant would think more observers would notice who was on their shirt than there actually was did indeed come true to help support their claim.

The second article was conducted by Gilovich, Kruger, and Medvec (2002). The study they used 3 different tests which consisted of physical appearance, video game performance, and athletic accomplishments. With these tests in place, they predicted “that individuals tend to overestimate how variable their performance appears in the eyes of others (p.93).” For the first test the experimenter arrived unannounced after several weeks in order for students to get a sense of the others students’ physical attractiveness. He explained a phenomenon in which people can have bad or good days in terms of physical appearance. Then he passed out rating sheets and asked everyone to “rate everyone in the class in terms of what type of day they are having. Keep in mind, we are NOT asking you to rate how attractive everybody is. Rather, we are asking you to rate everyone only in terms of how good a day they are having relative to their own other days (p.94).” Participants were using a 7-point Likert scale in which 1 indicated “much worse than average” and 7 “much better than average” while 4 was “perfectly average day.” Participants also were asked “rate yourself as you feel other members of the class would rate you. Indicate as accurately as you can how you think the other people in the class would see your appearance today relative to your appearance on other days (p.94).” As predicted the results did show that the students failed to appreciate the extent of which the thoughts and attention of others are elsewhere.

The third and final article that will help back this work was conducted by Brown and Stopa (2006). This was a between-subjects design in which participants were either in the high or low social-evaluative condition. In the high social-evaluative condition, the participants would perform a brief memory task which was also openly videotaped and were told that they would be evaluated by a group of experts in communication skills. The participants in the low social-evaluative condition did the same memory task but were told that the experimenter was only

interested in coding the number of significant events they could recall. Instead of being openly recorded like the high social-evaluative condition the participants in the low-evaluative condition were secretly recorded with a hidden camera. Participants then completed the SATP-Q, as well as measures that assessed fear of negative evaluation and depression. They got an independent assessor, who was blind to the experimental conditions who watched the videotapes and task performances while completing an assessor's version of the SATP-Q. They predicted that the participants in high social conditions would report higher levels of the Spotlight effect than those who are in the lower social conditions. As predicted, they found that the participants in high social conditions reported higher levels of the Spotlight effect than those in low social conditions.

Finally, we predicted that the correlational design would be negative meaning as college grade level increases, Spotlight anxiety will decrease. We believe this because as college students start attending class, they will become more attuned to their surrounding and anxiety as they go through more classes and mature in student classification. For example, freshman should show the most signs of Spotlight effect anxiety and as the student classification goes up to sophomore, juniors, and seniors should see decreases of Spotlight effect anxiety throughout the students who have had more hours and time in a college environment.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In this study there were a total of 116 students of which 14 were male, 101 were female, and 1 were non-binary. While the ages of our participants ranged from 18 to 29 ( $M = 19.48$ ,  $SD = 1.867$ ). Our Participants consisted of 50% Freshman, 25% Sophomore, 14.7% Juniors, and 10.3% Seniors. Gender percentages consisted of 12.1% Man, 87.1% Women, and .9% Non-

binary. Our percent on race consisted of .9% Native American, 1.7% Asian, 4.3% African American, 48.3% Caucasian, 37.1% Hispanic, 6% Biracial, .9% Other, and .9% prefer not to answer. Participants were recruited through Sona, an online recruiting tool used by the psychology department.

### **Design**

This research is a correlational design which aims to measure Spotlight Effect anxiety within different student classifications. Since we are comparing the Spotlight Effect within student classifications that means we are trying to find a correlation which seeks to see if students in the early stages of college show more symptoms of the Spotlight Effect than those who have been in school longer.

### **Measures**

We used a questionnaire survey that we created in order to measure Spotlight Effect symptoms between different student classifications. We had a total of 13 questions that were on a Likert scale of 1-7 with 1 being not anxious at all and 7 being extremely anxious. Some examples of questions asked include: *“You get to class ten minutes late and you have to walk to your seat while the professor lectures. It is week five of class. On a scale of 1-7, with 1 being not anxious at all and 7 being extremely anxious, how would you rate your anxiety in this scenario?”* and *“You believe you are having a bad hair day. On a scale of 1-7, with 1 being not anxious at all and 7 being extremely anxious, how would you rate your anxiety in this scenario?”* Our demographics consisted of student classifications in college such as Freshman, Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors since we wanted to see if there was a correlation between classification and Spotlight effect symptoms.

### **Procedure**

We recruited our participants through Sona, which is an online recruiting tool used by the psychology department. We then collected the data using online software from the program Qualtrics, which is a secure platform for collecting data online. To start, our participants will first need to complete an online consent form. From there, they will be presented with our survey. After completion they will be presented with the debriefing page that thanks them and gives them more information about the study and included references for related articles and contact information for our faculty adviser in case they had any questions.

### **Results**

In this research I predicted that the students of Angelo State University who are classified as Freshman would show more symptoms of Spotlight Effect while the symptoms would decline as they become Seniors. To test this, I used an independent samples t-test to compare Spotlight Effect symptoms between Freshman ( $M = 4.31, SD = .99$ ) and Seniors ( $M = 4.65, SD = .84$ ) and found that there was no significant difference  $t(68) = -1.10, p = .28$ . In other words, my hypothesis was wrong since there is no difference found. Even though we did not predict genders we did find a difference between males ( $M = 3.70, SD = 1.18$ ) and females ( $M = 4.5, SD = .88$ ) and the difference that was found  $t(113) = -2.98, p = .004$  shows that female students are showing more spotlight effect symptoms than male students at Angelo State University.

### **Discussion**

We predicted that Freshman students would show more spotlight effect symptoms than Seniors at Angelo State University. Our results concluded that there was no significant difference between the two. When looking at the differences between males and females we did find that females do show more signs of Spotlight Effect anxiety, but this was not something we were trying to predict. I believe that our procedure was flawed when comparing it to our research

background. This is because research like Gilovich et al. used an experimental design in which they asked students questions and made them wear or rate things such as athletic ability. We stuck with a questionnaire design that also did not have reverse scores which should of also been in mind.

The limitation to our study shows when comparing the demographics such as men (14) to women (101) and same with Freshman (58) and Seniors (12). I feel as our stats might not be accurate just because we do not have a good number of men or seniors to really compare the numbers for it to be super reliable. I believe that an experimental design of some sort would have been the best option when trying to find Spotlight Effect but since we had a questionnaire design test, we should have added reverse scores just to test if there would be a difference. If researchers want to look more into Spotlight Effect, then they should stick with experimental designs since most background literature that backs it uses that kind of test.

This research is good because we are looking to see if there is a population of students who are struggling the most with Spotlight Effect. While being able to see which groups of demographics struggle the most it might be able to help us piece why that group of people feel the most Spotlight Effect compared to others.

Spotlight Effect is something that we found very interesting when considering that college students have a possibility to deal with it on a everyday basis. I find it interesting to think that a person feels as there might be others focused on them which in turn gives them anxiety and makes them worry. While forgetting about how others have their own lives and probably do not care much about what others are doing. As I do believe some people experience Spotlight Effect more than others, I think it is important to try to help those who struggle and think that they are almost being judged in moments when people probably do not really care.



### References

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