

Anxiety Among Marginalized Groups and What it Means for Politics



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Andrew Podob, Department of Political Science, The Ohio State University, podob.1@osu.edu, andrewpodob.com

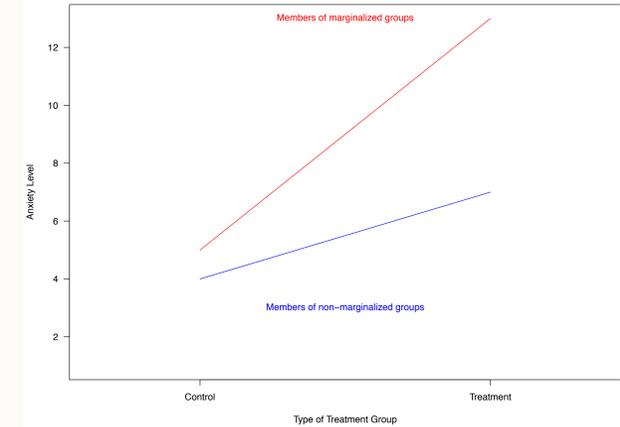
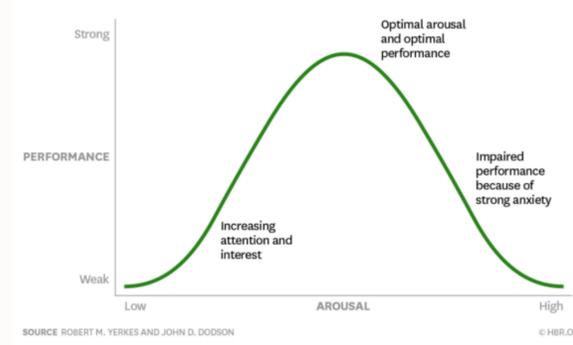
SUMMARY

- (1) Previous research finds anxiety can have mobilizing effects: **But it's a double-edged sword. Anxiety can be demobilizing for many, especially members of marginalized groups.**
- (2) Anxiety is a tax on one's limited cognitive resources: **This leaves members of non-marginalized groups with ample resources available to participate civically and politically, and leaves members of marginalized groups concentrating those resources elsewhere, resulting in a decreased ability to participate.**
- (3) I hypothesize marginalization mediates the relationship between an anxiety-inducing stimulus and one's level of anxiety: **I design a series of three preregistered survey experiments to test my hypotheses among African Americans and welfare recipients.**

Hypotheses

- (1) For many marginalized individuals who are chronically taxed by politics, anxiety is too mentally taxing on the brain to channel anxiety (arousal) into participation (performance). **[H1]: Moderately anxious group members will be the most likely to participate. The least and most anxious group members will be the least likely to participate.**
- (2) How much someone's level of anxiety increases upon being given an experimental prime may be conditional upon an endogenous factor like group membership. **[H2]: Anxiety levels among members of marginalized groups will increase at a higher level due to treatment.**
- (3) **[H3]: Marginalized group members will have lower levels of civic engagement than the non-marginalized.**
- (4) **[H4]: Marginalized group members will have lower levels of civic self-confidence than the non-marginalized.**

The Yerkes-Dodson Law
How anxiety affects performance.



Reconciling Marginalization with Anxiety Scholarship

The marginalized are often at the mercy of government, which leaves them disadvantaged

- (1) Ex. When policymakers declare that food stamp recipients are lazy and respond by adding further work requirements to the program, this can directly affect who eats and who starves
- (2) Ex. When a state changes its Medicaid enrollment requirements and a recipient loses their health insurance, that loss is outside their control
- (3) Welfare case managers are more likely to discipline Latino and black recipients than white recipients (Schram et al. 2009)

Result: For many, government and politics is a source of anxiety.

External Validity

- For many participants in government programs (like Medicaid), program experiences are disempowering, especially when bureaucrats make programmatic decisions without the input of program recipients; or to the chagrin of program recipients (Michener, 2018).
- The differential effects of anxiety among different groups: The stress caused by financial anxiety makes it more difficult for poor Americans to participate politically, as stress uses up limited cognitive resources otherwise used by wealthier Americans to conduct themselves civically (Denny, 2016).

Anxiety as a Tax on Limited Resources

- (1) Like the more traditional resources (education, income, time, civic skills), a person's cognitive resources and brainpower are not boundless – they are finite resources (Miller, 1956; Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013).
- (2) Whereas some people are able to devote much of this resource to engaging in politics, for others they are heavily taxed by stress and their disadvantaged situation, which leaves their mental bandwidth stretched thin (Mani et al. 2013).

Result: The former are able to exercise themselves in normatively positive ways civically and politically, and the latter are less able to.

What about politics makes some people anxious?

Political anxiety results from a threat to one's security, status, or wellbeing:

- (1) Economic security (will I receive or have access to necessary government-provided or protected resources)
- (2) Physical security (will a member of my family be harassed by the government without due process)
- (3) Ontological security (will my lifestyle be disrupted because of government policy or lack thereof)

Result: Freedom from politically caused anxiety is a security members of marginalized groups are less likely to have.

BUT... don't whites report high levels of perceived threat in both surveys and experiments? Yes, they do! My theory does not mean members of non-marginalized groups do not face threats too. The difference is members of non-marginalized groups respond differently to these threats.

My theory in a nutshell...

Chronic anxiety (stress) is a tax on limited cognitive resources. This leaves members of non-marginalized groups with ample resources available to participate civically and politically, and leaves members of marginalized groups concentrating those resources elsewhere, resulting in a decreased ability to participate.

Testing My Hypotheses: A Series of Three Survey Experiments

I design three survey experiments to test the relationship between political anxiety and a variety of psychological, political, and normatively relevant outcomes for two marginalized groups: African Americans and welfare (food stamp and Medicaid) recipients.

Priming anxiety: Respondents in E1 and E2 will first read an edited newspaper article about the increasing likelihood of nuclear war. Respondents in E3 will receive an anxiety stimulus catered to their group. All respondents will then be asked to write down in open-ended form what makes them anxious about the topic.

Experiments 1 and 2:

Control Prompt: "First, I'd like you to take a moment to think about dog ownership. When you think about dog ownership, what do you think of? Please list everything that comes to mind."

Treatment prompt: "First, I'd like you to take a moment to think about the possibility of the United States being involved in a nuclear war with another country in the near future. When you think about the possibility of the United States being involved in a nuclear war with another country in the near future, what makes you worried? Please list everything that comes to mind."

Experiment 3:

Control prompt: "First, I'd like you to take a moment to think about [the police/the social safety net]. When you think about [the police/the social safety net], what do you think of? Please list everything that comes to mind."

Treatment prompt: "First, I'd like you to take a moment to think about [the police/cuts to the social safety net]. When you think about [the police/cuts to the social safety net], what makes you worried? Please list everything that comes to mind."

	Treatment Group	Control Group
White Sample	Anxiety induction for non-marginalized population (1)	No anxiety induction (2)
Black Sample	Anxiety induction for marginalized population (3)	No anxiety induction (4)

Table: Experiment on Worries Surrounding Impending Nuclear War Among African Americans: This 1x2 experimental design allows for studying how whites and blacks respond to an anxiety prime, with control groups of both for comparisons.

	Treatment Group	Control Group
Wealthy Sample	Anxiety induction for non-marginalized population (1)	No anxiety induction (2)
Poor Sample	Anxiety induction for marginalized population (3)	No anxiety induction (4)

Table: Experiment on Worries Surrounding Impending Nuclear War Among Welfare Recipients: This 1x2 experimental design allows for studying how welfare (food stamps and Medicaid) recipients and non-welfare recipients respond to an anxiety prime, with control groups of both for comparisons.

	Treatment Group	Control Group
Black Sample	Anxiety induction for the police (1)	No anxiety induction (2)
Welfare Recipient Sample	Anxiety induction for cuts to the social safety net (3)	No anxiety induction (4)

Table: Experiment Matching Marginalized Groups Only to a Catered Prime: This 1x2 experimental design allows for studying how members of two marginalized groups respond to primes catered to their group, respectively. The top row primes anxiety for the police to an African American sample only. The bottom row is catered to welfare recipients only.

Why is this research important? Why should we care?

Much of the scholarship on affect and emotion finds anxiety can be a mobilizing force, despite anxiety being debilitating for wide swaths of the population.

Scholars know very little about how government policies and rhetoric towards marginalized groups affect their levels of anxiety for politics, and what the downstream consequences are.

Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

The project advances the discussion of the complex relationship between politics and marginalization:

- (1) It can help political actors understand how and why their policies may inadvertently be harmful to marginalized groups
- (2) It can shine a bright spotlight on political actors who endeavor to marginalize group members by purposefully making them anxious

The project has implications for the design and performance of the federal government and nearly every state and local government across America:

- (1) If interaction with government causes anxiety, and if this interaction is especially demobilizing for members of marginalized groups, practitioners will be forced to reevaluate the distribution of welfare provision and to take a hard look at how government presents itself to the vulnerable citizens it is endeavored to serve.

My Research Program:

The study of negative emotions:

- (1a) What role to negative emotions like anxiety and disgust play in political attitude formation and decision-making?
- (1b) and what are the downstream effects on civic and political participation?
- (2) What role does marginalization play in the relationship between interaction with government (broadly speaking) and political anxiety?

Plans for Future Research:

Book Project: A second series of six experiments to study anxiety among five additional marginalized groups: Hispanics/Latinos, immigrants, Muslims, gays, veterans

Intersectionality: Not all who are marginalized are marginalized equally. For instance...

- (1) An LGBTQ person living in San Francisco or NYC versus a similar LGBTQ person living in Indiana or Alabama or Kentucky
- (2) Someone who is Muslim and LGBTQ versus someone who is Muslim and not LGBTQ

Expectation: Being marginalized because of two or three demographic characteristics as opposed to only one should further reduce one's ability to participate.

Hispanics/Latinos may be more likely to channel their political anxiety into disengagement from politics than whites, but the degree of disengagement may be more severe for Hispanics/Latinos who are LGBTQ than Hispanics/Latinos who are not.