

# 2012 Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Proposal

Alison Wood Brooks

4<sup>th</sup> Year Doctoral Student

Operations and Information Management Department

---

## 1. Project title and descriptive summary

I am excited! Reappraising anxiety as excitement with a minimal statement improves performance

### *Overview.*

Anxiety is pervasive. In anticipation of many routine tasks, such as public speaking, taking exams, or meeting with a boss, individuals experience anxiety. To mitigate the harmful effects of anxiety, many people attempt to (and advise others to) “calm down.” Calming down, however, is difficult and often impossible. Arousal is automatic, and response-focused emotion regulation strategies like suppression (i.e., masking one’s true feelings) may only increase arousal and drain cognitive resources (e.g., Gross & Levenson, 1997). Prior work demonstrates that reappraisal (i.e., changing something about the environment or one’s response to the environment) is the most effective strategy for regulating negative emotion (e.g., Hofmann et al., 2009).

In my dissertation work, I explore the labile nature of anxiety. I examine minimal statements of emotion (e.g., saying “I am excited”) as a strategy for reappraising pre-performance anxiety as excitement. This research makes several theoretical contributions. First, this research fills an important omission in the emotion regulation literature on reappraisal. Prior work has neglected the intrapsychic effects of minimal emotional statements. Second, this research challenges a body of work about misrepresenting emotions (e.g., Grandey, 2003). By “misrepresenting” anxious arousal as “excitement,” a genuine experience of excitement follows. Third, this research points to the fine line that exists between two seemingly disparate emotions, anxiety and excitement.

### *Work Completed.*

I have conducted three studies that demonstrate the feasibility of this program of research and underscore its import. In Study 1, I surveyed individuals for their common wisdom about managing anxiety. I asked participants for the best advice they would give to a coworker before an important public speech. As expected, I found a common misconception in conventional wisdom: 85% of participants believed that the best advice was to “try to calm down,” which is often very difficult or impossible because arousal is automatic.

In Study 2, I asked participants to sing karaoke for pay. I randomly assigned participants to make a minimal emotional statement before singing (“I am excited” v. “I am anxious” v. no statement). I found that stating “I am excited,” compared to “I am anxious” or no statement, increased experienced excitement, boosted singing self-efficacy, improved objective singing performance, and increased beliefs that one would sing well in the future.

In Study 3, I measured heart rate at three different times: 1) resting heart rate, 2) after learning that one would have to sing in front of a group of strangers, and 3) after making a randomly-assigned minimal emotional statement (“I am excited [anxious, calm, sad, angry]”). I found that heart rate increased in anticipation of singing in front of others, and making a minimal emotional statement, regardless of emotion type, did not decrease heart rate.

*Proposed Program of Studies.*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Status</b>
Study 1: Prevalence of anxiety at work	Survey in 30 <sup>th</sup> Street Station	To be completed in March 2012.
Study 2: Common wisdom about managing anxiety	Mturk study examining people's lay beliefs about how to manage pre-performance anxiety.	Complete.
Study 3: Trying to calm down is difficult/ineffective	Collect heart rate data in Wharton Behavioral Lab. Before singing, manipulate instructions: 1. "Try to calm down" 2. Nothing Measure heart rate with pulse oximeters over time.	To run on April.
Study 4: Labile nature of anxiety	Mturk study about the effects of positive/negative framing on pre-performance arousal.	To run on April 12.
Study 5: Emotional statements during American Idol auditions	Archival study of the emotions contestants express in pre-audition interviews on the famous TV show, American Idol. RA's will code anxiety and excitement statements as well as performance success ("making it to Hollywood" or not).	To be completed June-September 2012.
Study 6: Emotional statements and karaoke singing	Randomly assign participants to say "I am excited [anxious, calm]" before singing karaoke in the lab. Measure objective singing performance with voice recognition software.	Complete.
Study 7: Heart rate mechanism	Monitor heart rate with pulse oximeters over time as participants prepare to sing and make a minimal emotional statement ("I am anxious [excited, calm, sad, angry]")	Complete
Study 8: Emotional statements and public speaking	Ask participants to give a public speech in the Wharton Behavioral Lab. I will manipulate emotion statement ("I am anxious [excited, calm]") and speech type (impromptu v. pre-written) to access psychological mechanisms (energy, effort, self-confidence, sense of control, information processing).	To be completed by June 2012.
Study 9: A capella auditions field study	Conduct large field study of 12 acapella singing groups at Princeton University. Manipulate the minimal emotional statements students say before auditions. Measure audition success (making it into the next round of auditions or not)	To be completed in September 2012.
Study 10: Event planner field study	Ask event planners to put a sign up in their office: "Keep calm and carry on" or "Get excited and do things." Measure job satisfaction and performance evaluation over time.	To be completed by February 2013.

**2. Primary advisor:** Professor Maurice Schweitzer (OPIM Department)