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FEMINIST FORUM COMMENTARY

Being Shy at School

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Abstract

In our commentary on “Bashful boys and coy girls: A review of gender differences in childhood shyness” by Doey et al. (2013) we provide an analysis of limitations to the study of shyness in children as well as future avenues of research that may be fruitful for better understanding implications of shyness in school. Our focus is primarily on shyness in the classroom context, but we first discuss persistent difficulties in the measurement of shyness in childhood. Like Doey et al., our commentary reflects research in samples from the United States and Canada, unless otherwise noted. We then delve into potential school-related moderators of relations between shyness and children’s academic and social success, such as language skills and self-regulation, which are also associated with gender. To extend work summarized in Doey et al. (2013) regarding gender differences in teachers’ perceptions of shy students, we report on a new analysis of a longitudinal data set to examine gender as a moderator between children’s shyness in preschool and teacher-child relationships in early elementary grades. We conclude with a brief description of research on classroom support as a buffer for shy boys and girls.

Keywords: Shyness, Gender differences, Classrooms, Teacher-child relationships

Introduction

In providing a comprehensive view of what is known about gender differences in childhood shyness, Doey et al. (2013) provide a thorough conceptual overview of shyness at the individual (i.e., personal characteristics), interactive (i.e., with parents, teachers), group (i.e., peer exclusion, victimization), and societal (i.e., cross-cultural) levels. The authors draw attention to the significance of shyness across developmental periods (early and middle childhood) and multiple social (school, home) and cultural contexts, including individualistic cultures of Europe and north America, and collectivist cultures of China, Japan, Korea, and South America, bringing together literature from different epochs and situations. In this review of the literature on gender differences in childhood shyness, it is clear that there are significant areas of headway as well as areas where more information is needed. There are also persistent limitations to the study of shyness, and these are highlighted in Doey et al. (2013). We elaborate here on these limitations as well as possible avenues for further investigation, particularly concerning shyness in classroom and school contexts. Except where noted, cited studies are based on samples from the United States or Canada.

First, however, it is important to note, as reported in Doey et al. (2013), that current research suggests there are minimal gender differences in the prevalence of shyness (particularly in early childhood). Research on the broader construct of temperament supports this claim, as the majority of studies on temperament (Else-Quest 2012 [meta-analysis of 191 studies from all over the world]) have not revealed significant gender differences in the incidence of temperamental dispositions frequently associated with shyness, such as negative reactivity and fearfulness. Indeed, the structure and stability of temperament is generally similar for males and females. The gender differences, rather, appear in the *implications* of temperament (Else-Quest 2012), as is argued by Doey et al. (2013). Taken together, these findings emphasize that gender differences in shyness and effects of shyness emerge in later childhood, and may be the products of differential responses based on stereotypes and expectations of gender-appropriate behavior. From this point of view, it is via societal and cultural gender norms that parents’, teachers’, and caregivers’ perceptions of shyness have different implications for boys and girls (Else-Quest et al. 2006). However, evidence suggests that there are other factors involved, revealing complex relationships between children’s

shyness, gender, and adjustment. Our commentary will be primarily focused on gender differences in shyness as it unfolds in the classroom, a critical social microcosm where peers and teachers perceive and respond to children's shy behaviors.

Deficiencies in the Current Research on Shyness

Inconsistent Conceptualization of Shyness

A persistent limitation in the study of shyness, as with many social science constructs, is the lack of consistent terminology (Coplan and Rubin 2010). Shyness has been conceptualized as a feature of the broader umbrella term of social withdrawal that refers to various internal factors influencing a child's decision to withdraw from peers (Rubin and Coplan 2004). Consequently, in the literature, a number of terms referring to biologically-based temperamental traits reflecting social fear and reticence, or avoidance motivation due to social evaluation concerns, are used interchangeably to describe the adjustment of shy children. Such terms include *behavioral inhibition* (Kagan 1997), *conflicted shyness* (Coplan and Evans 2009), *shyness* (Rothbart et al. 2000), *anxious-solitary behavior* (Gazelle 2006), and *socially withdrawn behavior* (Normandeau and Guay 1998). The differences in conceptualization and terminology in studies of shyness may potentially affect our understanding of its underlying mechanisms, and limit the extent to which findings can be generalized to other conceptualizations or operationalized definitions of shyness. For example, Gazelle (e.g., Gazelle 2006; Spangler Avant et al. 2011) has conducted novel work on children's shyness in the classroom, conceptualizing shyness as "anxious solitude." Gazelle and colleagues (Spangler Avant et al. 2011) define anxious solitude as "characterized by shy, verbally inhibited, and reticent behavior" (p. 1711), and identify other terms (i.e., conflicted shyness and anxious withdrawal) as descriptors of the same construct (Spangler Avant et al. 2011). Their findings indicate that anxious solitary children have better social outcomes (i.e., experience less peer exclusion) when in more emotionally supportive elementary classrooms (Gazelle 2006; Spangler Avant et al. 2011). In particular, boys were less accepted by peers when in less emotionally supportive classrooms (Gazelle 2006), and experienced more peer exclusion than girls (Spangler Avant et al. 2011). This work is important and unique, particularly the examination of classroom emotional support as a moderator between shyness and children's outcomes; but use of the term anxious solitude, rather than shyness, may hinder generalization of these findings to the broader body of work exploring shyness in the classroom. As we move forward in the study of shyness, it is critical that we attend to conceptualizations and definitions so research is translatable and not stymied by overlapping and synonymous terms.

Inconsistent Measurement and Evaluation of Shyness

Research on shyness in childhood often relies on reports by parents, caregivers, or teachers who rate children's shyness based on external behaviors, rather than internal thought processes and motivations (Coplan and Rubin 2010). Shyness, as with other internalizing problems, is difficult for observers to detect. For example, Briggs (1988) argues that a child may play alone for any number of reasons: a preference for solitude (i.e. low sociability), an inward cognitive focus (i.e. introversion), or an approach-avoidance conflict (i.e. shyness). These unique differences in children's internal motivation may potentially place adults at a disadvantage when it comes to recognizing and measuring shyness.

At the same time, parents and teachers have useful perspectives that they can apply when identifying and rating children's shyness. Parents have the advantage of seeing their children in multiple contexts, allowing for assessment of children's behavior relative to their behavior in different situations (Rothbart and Bates 2006). Teachers have the advantage of seeing multiple children in the classroom context, allowing for assessment of children's behavior in comparison to other children (Crozier and Badawood 2009 [in a Saudi Arabian sample]). At the same time, parents and teachers' assessments of children's shy behavior are also likely to have systematic biases reflecting societal expectations and values. In North America, greater sociability (i.e., less shyness) seems to predict better social and psychological adjustment (Rubin et al. 2006) thus placing shyer children at risk for negative outcomes. For example, shy children may be perceived by teachers as less academically competent, compared to non-shy children, due to their lack of participation and confidence in language use (Coplan and Evans 2009). Moreover, shy boys seem to be at greater risk for maladjustment because their behavior contrasts with the gender norms of male power and dominance (Coplan et al. 2001; Rubin and Coplan 2004).

Our work has revealed very low levels of agreement between teachers and parents in assessments of shyness in early childhood, with teacher and parent ratings differentially predicting children's early academic skills (Rudasill et al. 2013). Specifically, we found that teachers' ratings of children's shyness were significantly and negatively associated with performance on literacy and attention measures in preschool, whereas parents' ratings of children's shyness were non-significant predictors of literacy and attention performance (and coefficients were positive). We concluded that teacher ratings of shyness may be more useful for forecasting children's school-related outcomes, given teachers' views of children in the classroom setting where they interact with tasks and peers. It is noteworthy that parents' ratings of children's shyness were positively associated with children's literacy and attention performance, albeit non-significantly, suggesting either

that teachers and parents perceive children's behaviors differently, or that children behave differently with teachers and parents. In a study of teachers' perceptions of children's behavior, Coplan et al. (2011) found that non-shy teachers were more likely to view shy children as less academically competent than non-shy children. In light of those findings, our results point to differences in teachers' and parents' perceptions of children's behavior, and suggest that teachers' tendency to view shy behavior less positively than parents may be a function of lower shyness levels in teachers (Decker and Rimm-Kaufman 2008). Parents, on the other hand, may view their children's shyness more positively because of their own inclination toward shyness, or because of a positive bias in rating their own children (see Rothbart and Bates 2006, for a discussion of parent ratings of children's temperament). Although this work does not address gender differences in shyness, it highlights the disparity in information on shyness that comes from assessments from parents and teachers, the difficulty in gaining accurate ratings of shyness, especially in early childhood, and the potential for parents' and teachers' values and perspectives to affect their assessments of children's shyness.

Child Characteristics as Potential Moderators Between Shyness and Adjustment in Childhood

Gender

It seems that gender differences in childhood shyness may be largely the product of perceptions and treatment of shyness that vary by gender. That said, there is very little research on gender as a moderator between shyness and children's school adjustment (such as academic engagement, school liking, and social success), and this is consistent with work more broadly on temperament (Else-Quest 2012). However, there is some evidence that shy boys have more difficulty than shy girls when it comes to relationships with peers at school (Coplan et al. 2004; Coplan et al. 2008). On the other hand, shy (i.e., anxious solitary) boys also seem to benefit more in terms of social and emotional outcomes from high classroom emotional support than shy girls (Gazelle 2006)

Although there are minimal gender differences in the expression of shyness, other systematic gender differences have been shown for outcomes that are related to shyness. For example, teacher-child relationship quality, a significant developmental marker as children begin and proceed through elementary and secondary grades, is consistently poorer for boys than girls (e.g., Ewing and Taylor 2009; Hamre and Pianta 2001). At the same time, there is emerging evidence that shyness plays a role in teacher-child relationships, with shyer children less likely to develop close (and conflictual) relationships with teachers (Rudasill 2011; Rudasill and Rimm-Kaufman 2009; Rydell et al. 2005). Since teacher-child relationships are

ostensibly sensitive to both social behavior (shyness) and societal expectations for gender-normed behavior, it may be particularly helpful to closely examine gender as a moderator between shyness and teachers' perceptions of relationship quality with children.

Doey et al. (2013) reference several studies (Arbeau and Coplan 2007; Arbeau et al. 2010; Coplan and Prakash 2003; Coplan et al. 2011; Justice et al. 2008; Thijs et al. 2006) to illustrate the lack of support for differences in the ways teachers perceive relationships with shy boys vs. girls. However, just two of these studies (Arbeau et al. 2010 and Justice et al. 2008) included examinations of child gender x shyness as a predictor of teacher-child relationship quality; the Justice et al. (2008) study was conducted in preschool with shyness and teacher-child relationship quality measured at one time point by one rater (teachers), and Arbeau et al. (2010) was conducted with first grade children where parents reported on shyness in the fall of the school year and teachers reported on teacher-child relationship quality in winter of the school year. Assuming that these are, indeed, the only two studies examining gender x shyness as a predictor of teacher-child relationship quality, and given the fact that shyness and gender are consistent predictors of teacher-child relationship quality in longitudinal work (beyond 1 year; e.g., Rudasill 2011), it is clear that this is an understudied phenomenon.

As part of this commentary, we thought it could be illuminating to examine the gender x shyness interaction as a predictor of downstream teacher-child relationship quality across multiple years. We used a large, longitudinal dataset frequently employed in developmental research: the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD). In the SECCYD, shyness was assessed via parent report on the shyness subscale of the Children's Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ; Rothbart et al. 1994) when children were approximately age 4 ½ years, and teacher-child relationship quality (both conflict and closeness) was reported by teachers using the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta 2001) when children were in every grade from kindergarten through sixth grade. For the purposes of this commentary, we tested associations between shyness, gender, and teacher-child relationship quality in early elementary grades (kindergarten through second grade). The SECCYD had 1364 participants at birth, and 1054 participants remaining when children's temperament was assessed. In almost all cases, there was only one study child per kindergarten, first, or second grade class, so analyses did not need to include accommodations for non-independence of observations (i.e., multi-level modeling).

Six separate hierarchical regression models were calculated, regressing teacher-child conflict and closeness in kindergarten, first, and second grades on children's shyness, gender, and shyness x gender. Results suggest that

gender moderated the association between gender and teacher-child closeness in second grade. That is, for boys only, higher levels of shyness predicted lower levels of closeness in second grade. However, the effect size was small, with shyness explaining just 4 % of the variance in 2nd grade teacher-child closeness. This small effect is congruent with the negligible findings summarized by Doey et al. (2013) regarding teachers' perceptions of and behaviors toward shy children as a function of gender. The fact that we were able to examine shyness x gender as a predictor of teacher-child relationship quality longitudinally lends further support to the notion that teachers may be less susceptible to the influence of gender norms when interacting with shy children.

Interpersonal Orientation

A perspective offered by Bruch and colleagues (Bruch et al. 1999; Cheek et al. 1999) suggests that the relationship between shyness and adjustment outcomes can be potentially explained by children's interpersonal orientation. Interpersonal orientation is defined here as the degree of autonomy or dependency in social interactions, characterized as withdrawn or dependent subtypes. Shy-dependent personalities, for example, might be more affected by negative social interactions, because of their high need to be accepted by and belong to others. In contrast, shy-withdrawn subtypes might be less affected by negative social interactions, due to their general preference for independence and autonomy. Bruch et al. (1999) and Cheek et al. (1999) suggest that participants high in shyness and dependence perceive social evaluation situations as more threatening and develop more anxiety. Thus, shyness may matter more for children's adjustment depending on their interpersonal orientation, which may vary as a function of gender.

Language Skills

Recent research also includes examinations of the supportive role of language skills in positive adjustment of shy children. It has been previously documented that shy, withdrawn, and anxious children speak less at school, have fewer interpersonal interactions with the peers and teachers, and have less positive social and academic adjustment (Evans 2010). Since less developed language skills are typically associated with less social interaction, shy children may be at particular risk for social maladjustment. In this regard, it was hypothesized that expressive vocabulary and better language skills should moderate positive adjustment of shy children (Coplan and Armer 2005; Coplan and Weeks 2009). Coplan and Armer (2005) found that shy preschool children who were able to describe more pictures on tests of expressive vocabulary had better peer relationships compared to shy children with lower expressive vocabulary. Similar findings were

reported by Coplan and Weeks (2009), who explored the moderating effect of pragmatic language for socio-emotional adjustment of shy children. Their study provided evidence that shy children who were able to provide more responses to open-ended vignettes had better socio-emotional adjustment in the first grade. In a study of teacher-child relationships among preschool children, Rudasill et al. (2006) found that shyer children with better language skills were more likely to be rated as having a dependent relationship with the teacher, whereas bolder children with poorer language skills were more likely to be rated as having conflict with the teacher. Although dependency and conflict are conceptualized as negative components of the teacher-child relationship, language skills seemed to provide a pathway for shy children to develop relationships with teachers, perhaps resulting in more teacher attention than they may get otherwise.

However the nature of the relationship between shyness and language skills is not yet well understood. Given that girls tend to acquire language earlier than boys (i.e., Fenson et al. 1994), the extent to which language ability ameliorates negative outcomes for shy children may be, at least in part, an artifact of gender. In a review of 48 studies of shyness based on samples from the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, Sweden, Germany, and Norway, Evans (2010) suggested that lower expressive vocabulary of shy children might be associated with underlying anxiety and fear of social evaluation, rather than the lack of language competence. For instance, shy children with better self-regulation abilities might have better skills in managing negative emotions, and potentially, less risk for social maladjustment. In this connection, children's self-regulation could be considered as a potential buffer between child shyness and positive adjustment.

Self-Regulation

Shy children who are high in self-regulation may be less affected by perceived negative evaluations, and more able to manage their anxious or fearful feelings, regardless of their gender. There is some evidence that negative outcomes associated with shyness are mitigated by self-regulation or effortful control. For example, Rudasill and Konold (2008) found that the association between shyness (in preschool) and assertiveness (in early elementary grades) was moderated by attention (in preschool). That is, for shyer children, higher levels of attention were related to more teacher-rated assertiveness. Rudasill and Konold (2008) examined gender as a moderator in multi-group analyses, and found that relationships between temperament and assertiveness, cooperation, and self-control, were similar for boys and girls. However, typically girls demonstrate more self-regulation (e.g., attention, behavioral regulation) than boys (Matthews et al. 2009; Raffaelli et al. 2005). If attention can buffer children from negative outcomes due to shyness, then perhaps that is one

source of advantage for girls. There are very few studies of associations between children's shyness and academic or social outcomes as moderated by other temperament traits, but this seems a promising avenue for understanding outcomes related to shyness, and perhaps gender differences, in adjustment.

Shyness as Protective

Contrary to the predominant position in the review by Doey et al. (2013), there is some evidence that shyness may be protective, particularly in early childhood classrooms. Shy children are viewed as more regulated and cooperative by teachers (Rudasill and Konold 2008), are less likely to disrupt classroom activities (Rimm-Kaufman and Kagan 2005), have less conflict with teachers (Rudasill and Rimm-Kaufman 2009; Rudasill 2011; Valiente et al. 2012), and elicit more attention from teachers (Coplan and Prakash 2003) than children who are not shy. Moreover, from an evolutionary perspective, "safety behaviors" (Wells et al. 1995, p.154) frequently associated with shyness (i.e. avoidant, anxious, reduced eye contact) might be adaptive when dealing with potential aggression. For example, in competition over resources, the evaluation of potential aggressors as superior or inferior is crucial for selecting a defensive or aggressive response (Gilbert and Trower 2001). Thus, a moderate amount of "safety behaviors" might be a good defense mechanism when dealing with potential aggression. In addition, Cheek and Briggs (1990) argued that the complete absence of shyness should be considered an antisocial characteristic. However, whether the benefits of safety behaviors were moderated by gender was not examined.

Supportive Environments for Shy Children

A supportive environment has the potential to compensate for biological and genetic vulnerabilities in shy boys and girls (O'Connor et al. 2014). Research points to supportive parenting practices as critical in reducing internalizing and social problems for shy children (Bayer et al. 2006 [in an Australian sample; gender differences were not examined]) and reducing shy behaviors in school (Early et al. 2002 [no gender differences were found]).

There is also emerging evidence that high quality classrooms, marked by teacher sensitivity and positive climate, promote better academic skills (i.e., critical thinking and math; O'Connor et al. 2014) and social outcomes (i.e., peer relationships; Gazelle 2006; Spangler Avant et al. 2011) for shy children, particularly boys (Gazelle 2006). In a randomized controlled trial of the effectiveness of a temperament-based program to promote social-emotional learning called *INSIGHTS into Children's Temperament (INSIGHTS)*, O'Connor et al. (2014) found that teachers in the *INSIGHTS* classrooms were able to facilitate shy children's positive adjustment, resulting in

higher critical thinking and math skills than their shy peers in control classrooms (gender differences were not examined). Results suggest that increasing teacher awareness of a) situations that may be demanding or stressful for shy children, b) methods for scaffolding shy children in preparation for a demanding or stressful situation, and c) the value of praise for success at each step of the process can be very helpful for mitigating negative outcomes of shy children. Taken together, it is efforts by both parents and teachers to create more supportive environments that may ameliorate the risks associated with shyness for both genders.

Summary

Doey et al. (2013) provide comprehensive coverage of what is known about gender differences in children's shyness. Yet, this compilation of evidence suggests that the implications of childhood shyness, particularly in schools and classrooms, need to be understood as stemming from complex interactions between child characteristics (including gender) and contexts, all while recognizing concerns regarding terminology and measurement. The social nature of the classroom makes it inherently stressful for shy children, so efforts to determine protective factors are critical. The fact that implications for shy children are largely a product of the ways parents and teachers (and society) view and respond to them highlights the importance of addressing gender-based assessments and treatment of shy children so that interventions and positive environments can result in optimal outcomes.

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