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Attributions of shyness-resembling behaviors by shy and non-shy individuals

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Abstract

Shy and non-shy individuals' attributions of shyness-resembling behaviors in scenarios involving either themselves or other, hypothetical, people were studied through the use of a questionnaire. The participants were Swedish high-school students who rated the extent to which a number of such behaviors could be explained by four different causes, two internal (shyness and lack of interest) and two external (other persons and situational circumstances) causes. The results showed that shy participants attributed their own shyness-resembling behaviors to internal causes to a higher degree than did non-shy participants. Furthermore, non-shy participants attributed their own behaviors to external rather than internal causes, whereas shy participants judged internal and external causes to be about equally good explanations of their own behaviors. Both shy and non-shy participants attributed other people's behaviors to internal rather than external causes. The differences between shy and non-shy participants were discussed in terms of differences in focus of attention, meaning that shy individuals seem to be much more self-focused than non-shy ones. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Shyness has been defined as a state of inhibition and discomfort in the presence of other people (Jones, Briggs, & Smith, 1986; Garcia, Stinson, Ickes, Bissonnette, & Briggs, 1991; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1995). This particular definition encompasses the notion that shyness involves emotional as well as behavioral components (Leary, 1986). Thus, emotionally, shy individuals tend to feel embarrassed (Buss, 1986) and worried about other people's reactions to their behaviors

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(Zimbardo, 1977), so called subjective social anxiety. Shy people also tend to exhibit inhibited social behavior (Leary, 1986). That is, in social settings, shy individuals are passive or withdrawn (Van der Molen, 1990; Leary & Kowalski, 1995), quiet (Zimbardo & Radl, 1981; Ishiyama, 1984; Leary & Kowalski, 1995) and have difficulties making eye-contact with other people (Zimbardo & Radl, 1981). Furthermore, Zimbardo (1977) argues that shy individuals have a tendency to blush.

The idea that people may not only *feel* shy but also exhibit shy *behavior*, makes it twice as problematic for these individuals, since Leary (1986, p. 34) argues that “each component of the shyness syndrome can, directly or indirectly, elicit or exacerbate the other, creating a spiraling anxiety–inhibition cycle”. In other words, shy individuals might be aware that they act in an inhibited way and this may strengthen their already existing anxiety. Thus, to reach an understanding of the complex relationships that constitute the “spiraling anxiety–inhibition cycle”, studies should involve factors that constitute shy people’s cognitive processes.

One such important cognitive factor concerns causal explanations, or attributions, which have been extensively studied (e.g. Monson & Snyder, 1977; Eisen, 1979; Watson, 1982; Bierhoff, 1989; Bentall, Kinderman & Kaney, 1994; Kinderman & Bentall, 1996a, 1996b, 1997). The reason people make attributions is that they seek causes for their own and other people’s behaviors as well as for various occurrences in the environment. Attributions are subjective by nature in that they do not stem from real causes but from the individual’s own beliefs or assumptions about causes (Bierhoff, 1989).

Previously, research has involved the study of attributional style (AS) in relation to shyness (e.g. Alfano, Joiner, & Perry, 1994; Bruch & Pearl, 1995). AS consists of a battery of different types of attributions which every individual holds. In other words, people feel that they succeed or fail in every day and long-term events. They tend to explain these failures and successes through the use of some particular attributional style (Anderson, Jennings, & Arnoult, 1988).

AS can be either negative or self-serving. Individuals displaying a negative AS attribute negative events to stable, global and internal causes and attribute positive events to unstable, specific and external causes. When exhibiting a self-serving AS, people reverse the attributions for negative and positive events (Abramson, Garber, Edwards & Seligman, 1978). However, research involving the concept of AS makes use of success- and failure-related items and the definitions of these outcomes could be ambiguous. That is, researchers describe certain events as being either a success or a failure, whereas the participants may not make the same interpretation of these events. Furthermore, the concept of AS divides events and behaviors into ‘good’ (success-related) and ‘bad’ (failure-related) outcomes which seems to be a somewhat simplified framework. Moreover, the use of AS in research has been debated, e.g. by Bruch and Pearl (1995, p. 92) who claim that “the assumption that AS functions as a dispositional variable is controversial”. Even so, there should be no reason to abandon the concept of AS, since it might be valuable to isolate the factors that constitute AS (i.e. causal controllability, causal stability and causal locus) instead of viewing these combined factors as some particular style.

Due to the fact that results have shown that controllability and locus had greater ability to predict shyness symptoms than stability (Bruch & Pearl, 1995), it should be of importance to further explore locus and controllability separately. Causal locus could be used in exploring attributions made of either the individual’s own behavior or that of other people. Since there seems to be a lack of research on the types of attributions people make of the kinds of behaviors many shy

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