



Fearfulness predicts self-blame and shame in shyness

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Abstract

Researchers and clinicians are attempting to delineate individual differences in problematic shyness in order to describe and treat it more effectively. In an effort to find empirical support for Buss's fearful vs. publicly self-conscious shy categories [Buss, A.H. (1980). *Self-consciousness and social anxiety*. San Francisco: Freeman], a self-blaming attribution style with accompanying shame-based emotion was predicted in a group of self-conscious shys, as compared with fearful shys and controls. Surprisingly, fearfulness and private, not public, self-consciousness predicted self-blame and shame in hypothetical interpersonal failure situations. Furthermore, trait-shame was predicted by the same combination. Results are discussed in terms of the interaction of negative emotion and inner focus on self-blame. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Buss (1980, 1986a) suggested two categories of problematic shyness, “fearful” shyness and “self-conscious” shyness that he believes differ in etiology and presentation. Fearful shyness develops in the first year of life and may involve a genetic component in the form of greater than average emotional reactivity. Emotional reactivity may lead these shy children to be more susceptible to negative social conditioning, and to display fear and inhibition around others.

Buss (1980) labeled another group of shy individuals “self-conscious” shys. These shy people are primarily aware of themselves as social objects, and are uncomfortable in interpersonal situations where public aspects of the self are evaluated. Buss hypothesized that self-conscious shyness developed from an excess of parental evaluation and negative comments about publicly observable aspects of the child. According to Buss, children develop an awareness of themselves

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as social objects between the ages of three and six (Buss, 1986a). If they are evaluated frequently and negatively, interpersonal events may become associated with negative outcomes.

Despite the plausibility of Buss's theory, only one study has examined either the etiology or the nature of these categories. Bruch, Giordano, and Pearl (1986) compared college students who were classified as fearful shys, self-conscious shys, non-shys, or previous shys. The findings were mixed. The only statistically significant difference between fearful shys and self-conscious shys was that fearful shys reported more somatic anxiety and debilitating arousal. The two shyness groups also failed to differ in predicted competence areas, for example, seeking career information, assertive responses, and social skills knowledge. In spite of the lack of demonstrated differences in competence, if Buss's theory is correct we could predict that self-conscious shys would be more self-critical in social situations, and see themselves as causal in social situations with negative outcomes, perhaps blaming themselves for negative social outcomes and experiencing negative emotions such as shame.

1.1. Social anxiety and causal attributions

Evidence for the tendency to see the self as causal has been demonstrated by many studies which have shown reversals of the self-serving bias in social anxiety (Arkin, Appelman, & Burger, 1980; Clark & Arkowitz, 1975; Girodo, Dotzenroth, & Stein, 1981; Minsky, 1985; Teglasi & Hoffman, 1982; Zimbardo, 1997; but see Miller & Arkowitz, 1977). That is, shy people reverse the tendency of the average person to attribute success to internal conditions such as ability or skill and failure to external causes such as task difficulty or bad luck (Federoff & Harvey, 1976). Furthermore, Teglasi, and Fagin (1984) found that negative self-evaluation in socially anxious individuals was accompanied by higher expectancies for others' success in problematic social situations, demonstrating self-other discrepancies in attribution style.

Moreover, the manipulated misattribution of arousal symptoms to background noise during social interaction (Brodt & Zimbardo, 1981), has led to greater verbal facility and assertiveness on the part of shy subjects, comparable to controls in the same condition, and a stronger preference for further affiliation, beyond controls however, see Slivken & Buss, 1984, with speech-anxious subjects. Less heart rate change from baseline was observed when subjects were led to misattribute social anxiety to background noise (Leary, 1986), and fewer speech dysfluencies when subjects giving speeches were told that arousal was attributable to subliminal noise (Olson, 1988). These results suggest that both the arousal and behavioral inhibition found in shyness may be affected by manipulating attribution.

In summary, socially anxious subjects appear to reverse the self-serving bias found in people in general and attribute negative social outcomes to themselves. If they experience a difference between their actual performance and their desired performance, shame probably follows. A possible theoretical rationale for these findings will be presented in the next section.

1.2. Self-awareness and causal attributions

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1986) includes the idea that negative emotion influences irrational attributions, suggesting a reciprocal process that could escalate both negative self-attributions and negative emotion. In addition to motivation and emotion, private self-awareness, the state

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