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# Shyness, sensation seeking and birth-order position

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## Abstract

The study found no relationship between birth-order position and shyness or sensation seeking in a sample of 250 students. Shyness was significantly negatively correlated with total sensation seeking scores and scores on the four subscales, but closer analysis showed that this relationship was mediated by the correlation between shyness and disinhibition. This pattern implies that shyness is wariness specifically in social situations. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Personality; Shyness; Sensation seeking; Novelty; Disinhibition; Birth-order

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## 1. Introduction

Research in recent years has provided growing evidence for the construct validity of the personality trait of shyness. For example, studies have shown that the various self-report questionnaire scales that have been devised to measure shyness are inter-correlated to a substantial degree and seem to be measuring a common factor. Thus, Briggs and Smith (1986) undertook an analysis of five scales and reported correlations between them ranging from 0.70 to 0.86, with a mean correlation of 0.77. Shyness is correlated moderately with extraversion (a negative correlation) and neuroticism, whether these are defined in terms of Eysenck's theory of personality (Briggs, 1988) or the 'five factor' model (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998). It is possible that within this overall trend there exist sub-groups of shy individuals who are more extraverted (Pilkonis, 1977), nevertheless, there is extensive evidence that shyness scales are moderately and negatively correlated with extraversion scales. Scores on shyness scales also predict behavioural measures of social behaviour (Bruch, 2001) and shyness can be distinguished from the [un]sociability component of extraversion on these measures (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1995; Schmidt & Fox, 1994). This paper aims to

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contribute to this emerging literature by examining two potential correlates of shyness, sensation seeking and birth-order position.

Sensation seeking has been defined as ‘the seeking of varied, novel, complex and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal and financial risks for the sake of such experiences’ (Zuckerman, 1994, p. 27). There are two reasons to investigate correlations between shyness and sensation seeking. The first is that novelty is an important element in the definition of both traits. Apprehension and wariness at the prospect or the reality of novel social situations is central to shyness (Zimbardo, 1977). From a developmental perspective, Kagan (2001) regards shyness as part of a broader temperamental category of ‘behavioural inhibition to the unfamiliar’, defined in terms of wariness and inhibition in novel non-social as well as social situations. Are shy adults less likely to seek out novel sensations and experiences in general, or is shyness specifically a response to unfamiliar social situations? Factor analysis of sensation seeking scales yields four factors, namely Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS), Experience Seeking (ES), Boredom Susceptibility (BS) and Disinhibition (Dis). Items with high loadings on the Dis factor refer to sensation seeking through social activities like parties and dating, and it can be hypothesised that shyness is specifically related to this factor rather than to sensation seeking more generally. There are references to social events in items loading on other factors but these seem to have a different psychological meaning. Thus, references in BS items to intolerance of repetitive experiences include mention of boring people but these do not refer directly to social interactions and hence it is not hypothesised that this factor is related to shyness. Social interactions are not mentioned in the TAS or ES sub-scales (apart from one ES item referring to avoiding someone who is gay or lesbian).

A second reason for investigating the relationship is that it is valuable to locate shyness and sensation seeking relative to each other within the multidimensional personality sphere. Shyness is correlated with both extraversion (a negative correlation) and neuroticism and can be located within the quadrant that Gray (1987) has identified with greater sensitivity to signals of punishment. Sensation seeking might be thought to be located in the opposite quadrant. The timidity and inhibition of shyness would seem to be the converse of the impulsiveness, risk taking and search for novelty characteristic of sensation seeking, but this has not been demonstrated empirically. Sensation seeking is moderately and positively correlated with extraversion, but this relationship may be mediated by impulsivity rather than by sociability (Zuckerman, 1994). Most studies report the independence of sensation seeking and neuroticism (Zuckerman, 1994) with the exception of one study (Gomà-i-Freixanet, 2001) that reports a low, positive correlation ( $r = 0.25$ ) between these dimensions among a sample of 227 women and suggests that the statistical significance of the coefficient is due to the large sample size. The first aim of this study is to examine the relationship between shyness and sensation seeking.

### *1.1. Birth order*

Zimbardo (1977) argued that there was a tendency for single and first-born children to be shy. This suggestion is consistent with theories of shyness that emphasise motivation to create a desired impression in others together with lack of confidence in the ability to do so (e.g. Leary & Kowalski, 1995). The higher expectations that parents might have for their first-born may give rise to lack of confidence in fulfilling them. There may be more pressure on later born children

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