



Trait shyness, actual-ought self-discrepancy and discomfort in social interaction ☆

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Abstract

A trait approach was compared to a social cognition approach in predicting discomfort in a laboratory social interaction. The relationships of trait shyness and actual-own/ought-other (AOO) self-discrepancy with multiple aspects of discomfort were evaluated. Results from a canonical correlation analysis showed that the overall relationship between these two predictors of shyness and criteria of discomfort was significant. Partialled multivariate tests of trait shyness and AOO discrepancy revealed that both predictors of shyness were uniquely related to discomfort criteria. A comparison of these analyses revealed that subjective anxiety and negative self-statements made the strongest contribution to trait shyness, while positive self-statements made no contribution. In contrast, both positive and negative self-statements made moderately strong contributions to AOO discrepancy as did the other measures of discomfort. The findings suggest that a social cognition approach is viable in predicting discomfort related to social interaction. Implications for theory and research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Recent research suggests that basic personality traits (e.g., the Big-five) are formed by early adulthood and can account for meaningful variance in predicting social behavior (Asendorpf

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& Wilpers, 1998). Presumably, personality traits are the result of early emerging temperament differences that result in stable individual differences (Caspi, 1998). In turn, as the person interacts with the social environment, these individual differences become associated with more adaptive or less adaptive social behaviors.

In contrast, cognitive–social learning approaches to personality (e.g., Mischel, 1973) posit that social cognition processes and structures are particularly relevant to our understanding of how personality relates to social behavior. This approach has focused on cognitive variables such as self-schema (Markus, 1977) and self-discrepancy processes (Higgins, 1987, 1989). Self-schema are acquired knowledge structures about specific aspects of the self (e.g., independence) that facilitate social information processing relative to encoding and retrieval (Markus, 1977). Self-discrepancy processes, on the other hand, focus on the relationship between discrepancies in various types of self-beliefs and particular negative emotional states. More specifically, actual–ideal self-discrepancies are hypothesized to be related to dejection emotions (e.g., depression), whereas actual–ought self-discrepancies are hypothesized to be related to agitation emotions (e.g., anxiety).

Buss (1980, 1986) defines trait or dispositional shyness as anxious self-preoccupation and behavioral inhibition in social contexts due to the prospect of interpersonal evaluation. Proponents of trait approaches to shyness (Asendorpf, 1989; Buss, 1986) cite research supporting the inherited and learned origins of childhood shyness and its likelihood of creating significant and lasting problems in social interaction. Also, trait shyness can be distinguished from low sociability, which entails a preference for not wanting to affiliate with others (Cheek & Buss, 1981), and from introversion which entails a focus on solitude and internal mental events but with the ability to interact comfortably when one desires (Briggs, 1988). In contrast, cognitive–social learning approaches to shyness have developed from social psychological models of social behavior such as Schlenker and Leary's (1982) self-presentational model of social anxiety. Cognitive–social learning approaches are less focused on individual differences in shyness and are more focused on the cognitive structures and social cognition processes that are related to the experience of shyness (Leary & Kowalski, 1995).

Research on the relationship between trait shyness and social interaction shows that shyness is associated with multiple types of discomfort and inhibition. When conversing with an other sex stranger, shy in contrast to nonshy individuals report more negative self-statements, greater subjective anxiety, increased physiological arousal, and behavioral signs of anxiety, such as, gaze aversion (Bruch, Gorsky, Collins, & Berger, 1989; Garcia, Stinson, Ickes, Bissonnette, & Briggs, 1991). In particular, the relationship between symptoms of anxiety and shyness holds true for both self and observer measures of anxiety. Furthermore, it is important to note that the substantial direct relationship between shyness and discomfort in social interaction holds true despite the discovery of possible mediating and moderating variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986). For example, several of the authors recently tested a mediated model of men's interpersonal competence (Bruch, Berko, & Haase, 1998) in which shyness, traditional masculine role beliefs, and physical attractiveness were postulated as antecedent variables and emotional inexpressiveness was postulated as a mediator of these antecedents in predicting interpersonal competence. Results showed that although emotional inexpressiveness mediated the relationship between shyness and interpersonal competence, there was still a sizable direct relation between trait shyness and interpersonal competence. Also, attempts by the authors to explore possible moderating variables (e.g., sociability and sociotropy) have generally produced negative results, that is, no shyness by

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