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Behaviour Research and Therapy 43 (2005) 1019–1027

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Psychiatric correlates of childhood shyness in a nationally representative sample

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Received 14 April 2004; accepted 15 July 2004

Abstract

Relations between adult anxiety and mood disorders and retrospective reports of excessive childhood shyness were investigated in the US National Comorbidity, Survey ($n = 5877$). Results indicated that 26% of women and 19% of men described themselves as 'very shy' when they were growing up. Of these shy individuals, 53% of women and 40% of men met criteria for a lifetime diagnosis of one or more anxiety or mood disorders. Relations between excessive shyness and each of the anxiety and mood disorders were examined after adjusting for elevated neuroticism, self-criticism, and low maternal care. The largest odds ratios were found for social phobia in both men and women, particularly for the complex subtype of this disorder. Significant associations also emerged for posttraumatic stress disorder in women and for major depressive disorder in men. Childhood shyness remained significantly associated with a lifetime history of social phobia when individuals with current (past year) social phobia were excluded from the analysis. The results of this study suggest that childhood shyness is strongly related to the complex subtype of social phobia in the general population. Excessive shyness does not appear to be strongly associated with other anxiety and mood disorders when related psychosocial and developmental dimensions are statistically controlled. Finally, many individuals who report excessive childhood shyness do not meet criteria for any anxiety or mood disorder. In a similar fashion, approximately 50% of individuals with a lifetime history of complex social phobia did not view themselves as very shy when growing up.

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Keywords: Shyness; Social phobia; National comorbidity survey

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1. Introduction

The title of an authoritative text on the nature and treatment of social phobia ('Shy Children, Phobic Adults,' Beidel & Turner, 1998), underscores the widespread interest in understanding how closely shyness and social phobia are linked. If a close relationship is indeed found to exist, there are a number of important implications that could arise such as: (a) the identification of treatment targets in cognitive behavior therapy for social anxiety disorder, (b) the addition of valuable information for research questions in studies of developmental trajectories of psychological functioning, and ultimately (c) the development of new knowledge to guide early intervention efforts for emerging anxiety disorders. Yet there have been very few direct comparisons between shyness, social phobia, and other forms of psychopathology. A preliminary clinical study of treatment-seeking individuals in an outpatient setting found a higher level of perceived childhood shyness (76%) in 52 adults with generalized social phobia compared to a 52% frequency of childhood shyness reported by 25 normal controls (Stemberger, Turner, Beidel, & Calhoun, 1995). Although these initial group comparisons appear promising, there is a lack of research that has addressed the issue of psychiatric correlates of childhood shyness in unselected samples.

To begin to address this research need, Heiser, Turner, and Beidel (2003) conducted a cross-sectional study of the prevalence of social phobia and other psychiatric diagnoses in relation to perceived shyness in a university student sample ($n=200$). Using a computer-administered version of the Composite International Diagnostic Interview, Heiser et al. found that the prevalence of social phobia was significantly higher in individuals who were classified as shy based on self-reports of shyness compared to individuals who were not shy. Despite this significant difference, the majority of shy individuals (82%) did not meet diagnostic criteria for social phobia. Further, the prevalence of several other anxiety disorders and mood disorders was significantly elevated in the shy group compared to the non-shy individuals. Finally, the severity of self-reported shyness was only moderately correlated ($r=0.39$) with diagnoses of social phobia.

Heiser et al. (2003) were able to reach several tentative conclusions that warrant further study. First, social phobia does not appear to be the equivalent of severe shyness. They appear to be overlapping but separable conditions, and the fact that the two were only moderately correlated in this study questions whether they are on the same continuum. Most people with elevated shyness did not have social phobia. Further, the two conditions did not share an exclusive relationship based on the increased rates of other anxiety disorders and mood disorders associated with elevated shyness. Rather, the results were more consistent with the conceptual writings of Heckelman and Schneier (1995) as well as Beidel and Turner (1999) who view shyness as a broad and heterogeneous construct that can be associated with a variety of forms of psychopathology. From this perspective, shyness may be one of several potential contributing factors to the development of social phobia.

The preliminary findings on the relationship between excessive shyness and social phobia in clinical patients (Stemberger et al., 1995) and in college students (Heiser et al., 2003) raise several interesting questions, and there is a need to extend this line of investigation. In this regard, it is noteworthy that there has never been a nationally representative survey of excessive childhood shyness and how it relates to adult psychopathology in the general population. The present study

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