



Parental cultural orientation, shyness, and anxiety in Hispanic children: An exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

This study examined associations between parental cultural orientation, childhood shyness, and anxiety symptoms in a sample of Hispanic American children ($N = 127$). Parents completed measures of their level of acculturation, collectivism, and socialization goals, while children provided self-reports of anxiety symptoms and both parents and children provided reports of children's shyness. Results provided some support for the relationship between parental cultural orientation and expressed shyness in children. Additionally, results suggested that although increasing levels of parental collectivism are associated with more consistent levels of child shyness across social contexts; shyness with peers is uniquely associated with anxiety symptoms. Implications of these results for future research on social development and internalizing problems in Hispanic children are discussed.

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Introduction

Shyness refers to feelings of discomfort and inhibition that are specific to social situations (Van Ameringen et al., 1998). Shy children lack social initiative when in the presence of others and consistently exhibit quietness and self-consciousness. Conceptions of shyness have highlighted feelings of fear when encountering novel social situations as well as concerns about negative evaluation across familiar and unfamiliar social contexts (Rubin, Burgess, & Coplan, 2002). The related construct of behavioral inhibition focuses on a disposition to be wary and fearful of novel social and nonsocial situations whereas the construct of social withdrawal refers to isolating oneself from both familiar and unfamiliar peers (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993; Rubin, Burgess, & Coplan, 2002; Van Ameringen, Mancini & Oakman, 1998).

Research conducted with North American children of European descent suggests an association between shyness and inhibition in early childhood and poor functional outcomes in later development, including peer rejection, isolation, and school failure (Rubin, Chen, McDougall, Bower & McKinnon, 1995). Inhibited children are often viewed as being less socially competent and mature relative to more assertive peers (Chen, Rubin & Li, 1995; Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Shy children and adolescents are more likely to report loneliness, social dissatisfaction, negative self-perceptions, anxiety, and depression (Fordham & Stevenson-Hinde, 1999; Masi et al., 2003; Rubin et al., 1995; Rubin, Chen & Hymel, 1993). Furthermore, longitudinal studies

suggest that shyness and inhibition are predictive of later anxiety disorders (Biederman, Rosenbaum, Bolduc-Murphy & Faraone, 1993; Hirshfeld-Becker et al., 2007; Rosenbaum, Biederman, Bolduc-Murphy & Faraone, 1993; Rubin & Burgess, 2001). Thus, in Western samples, shyness-inhibition is generally related to social difficulties and psychopathology in childhood and adolescence.

Conversely, studies of Chinese children suggest that shyness and inhibition may actually be adaptive. In Chinese culture, shy children are regarded as socially competent and understanding (Chen et al., 1998) and shy behavior is positively related to general self-esteem, leadership, school adjustment, academic achievement, peer acceptance, and teacher assessed competence (Chen, DeSouza, Chen & Wang, 2006; Chen, Rubin, Li & Li, 1999; Chen et al., 1998). Thus, unlike studies of shyness in Western cultures, studies of shyness in Chinese culture suggest that childhood shyness is associated with adequate school and social adjustment and positive developmental outcomes.

These contradictory findings suggest that shyness may be a culturally bound construct with differing adaptational meanings and consequences related to the cultural context. Kerr (2001) proposes that culturally influenced reactions to shy and inhibited behavior determine associated developmental outcomes. Similarly, cultural values provide the context that determines which childhood behaviors are viewed as problematic. For example, Weisz et al. (1988) found that Thai parents rated children's internalizing behaviors (including shyness), as less serious and worrisome than American parents. Additionally, the prevailing cultural context and corresponding child socialization practices likely influence general levels of shy-inhibited behaviors observed in children. Indeed, research has consistently suggested that Chinese children are more inhibited than North American children (Chen et al., 1998).

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Studying shyness within the framework of the cultural value paradigms, such as collectivism and individualism, may help explain divergent cross-cultural findings on the association between shyness and social functioning. In collectivistic Chinese societies, achieving and maintaining social order and interpersonal harmony are primary concerns (Chen et al., 1998). Behavioral inhibition is regarded as a sign of social maturity and individuals are encouraged to restrain personal desires for the benefit of the group (Chen et al., 1998). Group harmony may be facilitated by restraint, obedience, submission, and shy behavior, as opposed to more assertive behavior. Chinese children are encouraged to be dependent and cautious; and shy children are described as being “well-behaved” (Chen, 2000). Inhibited behavior may therefore be regarded as adaptive if it is less likely to disrupt and more likely to promote group harmony (Chen, 2000). In contrast to collectivistic cultures that value interdependence and self-regulation, individualistic cultures prioritize self-determination, autonomy, and assertive/competitive behaviors (Chen et al., 1999). Shyness and inhibition may therefore be less adaptive in individualistic cultures and more adaptive in collectivistic cultures.

Shyness has been studied extensively in European American populations, but research outside of this group has been focused primarily on Asian groups. However, like Asian cultures, Hispanic cultures are also collectivistic (Fulgini, Tseng & Lam, 1999; Raeff, Greenfield & Quiroz, 2000) and the adaptive nature of shy behavior may extend beyond Chinese culture to other collectivistic cultures. The socialization goals of Hispanic parents emphasize respect and teaching children how to display proper demeanor in public contexts (Leyendecker, Harwood, Lamb & Schölmerich, 2002). *Respeto* (respect) in Hispanic cultures is tied to qualities such as humility, submissiveness, and obedience and requires appropriate deference based on authority and age hierarchies (Marín & Marín, 1991). Children who are respectful and obedient are described as being well-socialized or “*bien educados*” (Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines, 2000). As such, collectivistic values in Hispanic communities may promote a favorable view of childhood shyness and inhibited behavior on the part of parents. In particular, socialization goals emphasizing respect for elders may contribute to increased child shyness when interacting with adults.

We sought to extend the research on culture and childhood shyness to Hispanic families in three ways. First, we examined the association between measures of parental cultural orientation and levels of shyness in children. Cross-national differences in the levels and correlates of child shyness have been interpreted as evidence of the developmental consequences of collectivistic versus individualistic values, yet the association between specific cultural factors and child shyness has not been directly tested. Cultural values are transmitted from parents to children in a variety of ways that profoundly shape child development. Parents with a more collectivistic orientation may raise their children in a way that emphasizes respect and restraint to promote harmony while discouraging assertive behaviors that call attention to the self. These socialization goals would result in higher levels of shy and inhibited behavior. In contrast, parents who hold more individualistic values may emphasize the competencies of assertion and independence needed for personal achievement while discouraging shyness and inhibition (Chen, 2000). To evaluate this hypothesis, we examined the association between child shyness and indices of parental cultural orientation including collectivistic values, parental socialization goals, and acculturation. While previous research has focused on the construct of collectivism to understand the adaptive nature of shyness, the current project explores associations between shyness and three dimensions of parental culture. Acculturation to United States culture is considered a global construct indicating the extent to which parents adopt the beliefs and behaviors common in the United States. We therefore explore whether a general affinity for American culture is associated with children's social development. Parental collectivism is assessed in the current study in order to examine the

associations between this specific cultural dimension and children's shyness empirically. Finally, the parental socialization goal of respect for elders is included as a hypothesized specific parental goal that may impact children's shyness. These three parental cultural factors were included in the current study in order to more fully understand how cultural constructs, both distally and proximally related to shyness, may impact children's social behavior. We hypothesized that children's shy behavior would be positively associated with parental collectivism and socialization goals of respect for elders and negatively associated with acculturation to American culture.

Our second aim was to examine how parental cultural orientation and the social context influence shyness in Hispanic children. On the one hand, parental collectivistic values emphasizing group harmony may make children's shy and inhibited behavior more likely across social interactions. In fact, previous research provides support for the cross-situational stability of children's social behavior with peers (e.g., Gazelle et al., 2005; Schneider, Younger, Smith, & Freeman, 1998). Regardless of the specific setting, reserved and inhibited child behavior may lead to serene and agreeable relations with others. Conversely, in collectivistic cultures, social behavior may be largely shaped by the role obligations inherent in the relational context (Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and the hierarchical nature of children's social relationships may therefore influence children's shyness. In vertical collectivist cultures (including Asian and Hispanic societies) group harmony is valued, but the relative status of individuals in relationships is also emphasized (Triandis, 1996). In these contexts, children's social behavior and shyness may be context-dependent; more evident when interacting with adults due to a greater demand for respect and restraint than during peer to peer interactions. Thus, the current aim centered on exploring the context-dependence of children's shyness by examining the cross-situational consistency of children's shy behavior when interacting with adults and peers. We tested the hypothesis that parental collectivism is positively associated with increased levels of shyness across relational contexts along with the competing hypothesis that parental emphasis on respect for elders is associated with increased levels of shyness in this specific context.

Lastly, we examined the relationship between shyness and anxiety symptoms in Hispanic children. Because shy behavior may be valued and directly socialized in collectivistic traditions, shyness may not be associated with emotional distress among children raised in this cultural context. Conversely, as parental individualistic values increase, shyness may be more likely to be associated with compromised emotional functioning as found in research on shyness in European American children. This research question is driven by our desire to explore the cultural relativism of the relation between shyness and anxiety. Whereas shy behaviors in Western cultures may imply internal discomfort or distress, it is possible that culturally appropriate inhibited behavior reinforced through socialization practices may not necessarily reflect emotional distress. Understanding the distinction between children's behavior and emotions and the extent to which culture influences their meaning and association is central to this aim. Therefore, we hypothesized that indices of parental cultural orientation may moderate the relationship between children's reports of shy behaviors and their subjective experience of symptoms of anxiety.

The current study therefore extends research on cultural differences in childhood shyness in multiple ways. Prior research has found differences in the level and developmental correlates of shyness between non-Western and Western children and has examined how shyness is associated with emotional functioning within a given group. The current study seeks to build on the literature by explicitly testing the contribution of specific parental cultural factors on the expression of childhood shyness within Hispanic families and by examining how these parental cultural factors may impact the relation between childhood shyness and anxiety. First, we examined the relationship between parental acculturation, collectivistic cultural values, and socialization goals and reported shyness in Hispanic children. Second,

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