



Shyness mindset: Applying mindset theory to the domain of inhibited social behavior

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ABSTRACT

This study applies mindset theory to the domain of inhibited social behavior. Incoming college freshmen ($N = 93$) completed web-based assessments upon beginning college and 7 months later. Time 1 shyness mindset predicted changes in performance anxiety from Time 1 to Time 2; those who viewed inhibited social behavior as fixed showed increases in performance anxiety and those that viewed shyness as malleable showed decreases. The effect was partially mediated through college belongingness. Shyness mindset did not moderate changes in interaction anxiety. More research is warranted to determine if shyness mindset is a useful target for intervention during the transition to a new social environment.

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1. Introduction

This study applies mindset theory (Dweck, 2006; Dweck & Sorich, 1999) to the domain of inhibited social behavior. Mindset theory has been effectively applied to the domain of intelligence. In brief, mindset theory posits the degree to which an individual views intelligence as fixed (i.e., holding an entity theory of intelligence) versus growth (i.e., holding an incremental theory of intelligence) has important consequences for that individual's learning behavior (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006) and academic functioning (see Dweck, 2006). Mindset theory interventions improve academic performance of students in middle school (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007) and college (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002). Mindset theory has also been applied in the morality (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007), body weight (Burnette, 2010), and peer relationships (Rudolph, 2010) domains.

1.1. Stability and change in socially inhibited behavior

Prior research has not applied mindset theory to understanding socially inhibited behavior. Some researchers have acknowledged both continuity and change in personality during adolescence (Shiner, 2000). Some researchers have emphasized that inhibited social behavior is fixed through studies of behavioral inhibition (e.g., Kagan, Reznick, & Snidman, 1987), shyness and sociability (e.g., Buss & Plomin, 1984), and the heritability (Stein, Jang, & Livesley, 2002) and stability (Gest, 1997) of social anxiety. Some

researchers have emphasized malleability through studies of how social anxiety and related constructs are influenced by peer rejection and victimization (Siegel, La Greca, & Harrison, 2009) and traumatic social events (Stemberger, Turner, Beidel, & Calhoun, 1995). Growth and discontinuity are also apparent because many children with behavioral inhibition do not go on to develop social anxiety disorder (Hayward, Killen, Kraemer, & Taylor, 1998), and because social anxiety is quite treatable (Clark et al., 2003).

Not surprisingly, many children with inhibited social behavior have poor social, academic, and occupational outcomes (Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1988), and a substantial portion develop social anxiety disorder (Hayward et al., 1998). A better understanding of the ways in which inhibited social behaviors are malleable might lead to prevention of social anxiety disorder and its negative effects on many areas of functioning (Lydiard, 2001).

Two dimensions of social anxiety that are often examined are performance anxiety and interaction anxiety (e.g., Mattick & Clarke, 1998). Performance anxiety is a fear of performance situations (e.g., public speaking), in which one's behavior may be scrutinized but is not contingent upon the responses of others; interaction anxiety is a fear of interaction situations (e.g., conversations), in which one's behavior is contingent upon the responses of others (Leary, 1983). These two dimensions are believed to underlie two subtypes of social anxiety disorder (Carter & Wu, 2010; Turner, Beidel, & Townsley, 1992). The subtype characterized by performance anxiety is sometimes viewed as more environmentally-determined and treatable, and the subtype characterized by interaction anxiety is sometimes viewed as more genetically-determined and stable (Hook & Valentiner, 2002). Thus, performance anxiety might be more appropriately understood using a growth mindset, and interaction anxiety using a fixed mindset.

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1.2. A shyness mindset construct

Drawing from Dweck's (2006) 'intelligence mindset' construct, we propose to characterize views of inhibited social behavior using the parallel 'shyness mindset' construct. Intelligence mindset has demonstrated importance to academic behavior, learning, and outcomes (see Dweck, 2006). Similarly, we hypothesize that shyness mindset can help us to better understand behavior, learning, and outcomes in the social domain. Shy individuals that view their shyness as malleable may look for opportunities for skill acquisition, experience hope and interest related to social activities, and persist in learning new social behaviors. Shy individuals that view their shyness as fixed may interpret social dysfunction as a personal characteristic, feel shame, and avoid trying new social behaviors.

1.3. Transition to college

The current study examines change in the context of the transition to college, during which relationships with high school friends decline (Larose & Boivin, 1998), and adolescents are expected to enter new social situations, perform new social tasks, meet new people, and develop new relationships (Asendorpf, 2000). Adolescents who initiate and maintain more positive social contacts (Buss & Plomin, 1984) may have an advantage over other adolescents in the age-graded task of forming a new social network, thereby warding off loneliness, depression, and anxiety. For shy college students, failure to establish new relationships results in negative outcomes, most notably persistent loneliness, leading Asendorpf (2000) to conclude that shy students have more difficulty with the transition to college because of their hesitancy to initiate friendships and dating relationships. Thus, the transition to college seems likely to provide significant opportunities for students to meet or avoid new social challenges, to engage in or refrain from new social behaviors, and to reduce or maintain their social inhibition.

The effects of mindset emerge in the context of a challenge situation, such as the transition to college. For example, intelligence mindset moderates math achievement during the course of seventh and eighth grade, when students were actively engaged in learning math skills (Blackwell et al., 2007, study 1). In that study, intelligence mindset was associated with maintenance of low math achievement grades, and a growth mindset with improvement in grades. Similarly, we hypothesize that shyness mindset will be associated with maintenance of social anxiety and a shyness growth mindset to be associated with an improvement (i.e., decrease) in social anxiety.

1.4. Potential mechanisms

Intelligence mindset is believed to have its effect upon academic behavior and outcomes by orienting individuals with an entity view toward academic performance goals, and those with a growth view toward mastery goals (Dweck & Sorich, 1999). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the moderating effect of shyness mindset, if any, would be mediated by social mastery and performance goals (i.e., mediated moderation).

Recognizing that social anxiety is often viewed as both cause and consequence of social functioning, we also hypothesized that viewing shyness as malleable would contribute to decreases in inhibited behavior through the social network. For example, individuals with high levels of shyness mindset and social anxiety might adopt few mastery goals because they have no expectations of being able to learn, and therefore refrain from social behaviors that develop more social connections and thereby reduce their social anxiety. College belongingness, peer support, and loneliness appear to be particularly relevant to the college transition (Mounts,

2010; Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the moderating effect of shyness mindset, if any, would be mediated by these three indices of social functioning.

1.5. The current study

The current study tests the applicability of mindset theory to the domain of inhibited social behavior during the transition to college. College freshmen were assessed upon arriving at college and again, seven months later. We hypothesized that the stability of social anxiety would differ as a function of shyness mindset; that the moderating effect of shyness mindset would be more apparent for performance anxiety than for interaction anxiety; and that the moderating effect of shyness mindset would be mediated by social goals (approach and avoidance performance and mastery goals) and social functioning (college belongingness, peer support, and loneliness).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Incoming college freshmen ($N \sim 800$) were contacted by email to participate in an online assessment conducted by the Housing and Dining Division at a large Midwestern university. Those that completed the assessment and were at least 18 years old ($N = 445$) were invited to participate in the current study, also conducted online. Seventy-eight percent ($N = 349$) agreed and completed the Time 1 assessment on average 4.3 days after the first day of classes ($SD = 6.3$ days). The Time 1 sample was 66% female ($n = 231$); was 99% ($n = 346$) never married; had a median annual family income between \$50,001 and \$55,000; had an average age of 18.8 years ($SD = 0.93$); and was 65% non-Latino white/Caucasian ($n = 225$), 18% black/African-American ($n = 63$), and 18% of other or unidentified race/ethnicity ($n = 61$).

Time 1 participants were contacted by email and offered five dollars in compensation to complete a second assessment. Ninety-three (27%) of these Time 1 participants completed the Time 2 assessment, on average 7.1 months after the Time 1 assessment ($SD = 8.8$ days). The Time 2 participation rates for non-Latino white/Caucasian (29%) and those of other or unidentified race/ethnicity (34%) were significantly higher than for black/African-American (10%; $\chi^2 = 12.14$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). There were no significant differences in Time 2 participation rates as a function of gender, income, age, performance anxiety, interaction anxiety, and shyness mindset.

2.2. Measures

Time 1 and Time 2 assessments included measures of performance anxiety, assessed with the Social Phobia Scale, and interaction anxiety, assessed with the Social Interaction Anxiety Scales (SPS and SIAS, respectively; Mattick & Clarke, 1998; sample items: "I feel awkward and tense if I know people are watching me," and "I am tense mixing in a group," respectively). These 20-item scales are widely considered to have strong psychometric properties (Peters, 2000). These scales showed good internal consistency (Cronbach alphas of .94 and .94, for the SPS at Time 1 and Time 2, and .92, and .90 for the SIAS at Time 1 and Time 2, respectively).

The Time 1 assessment also included a new four-item scale adapted from Dweck's work on mindset for intelligence (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999) to measure shyness mindset: "You have a certain amount of social grace and you can't really do much to change it," "Your level of shyness is something about

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