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Communication competence mediates the link between shyness and relational quality

Analisa Arroyo*, Jake Harwood

University of Arizona, Department of Communication, P.O. Box 210025, 1103 E. University Blvd., Tucson, AZ 85721, USA

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ABSTRACT

Human relationships are vital for well-being, however shy individuals report lower relational quality than the non-shy. In an effort to explore *how* shyness affects people's interpersonal relationships, this study focused on communication competence (as perceived by self and other) as the process by which shyness influences relational quality. Undergraduate students recruited a same-sex platonic friend to participate in this study along with them; participants ($N = 310$; dyads = 155) were directed to an online questionnaire to complete a series of measures about themselves, their friend, and their relationship. Results showed that self-perceived and other-perceived communication competence mediate the relationship between shyness and relational quality, such that shy people's difficulty maintaining quality personal relationships is partially a function of their lower self- and other-perceived communication competence.

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1. Introduction

Shyness thwarts interpersonal goals such as initiating friendships (Asendorpf, 2000), by inhibiting communication when interacting with others. Such inhibitions include speaking less and behaving awkwardly during interactions, and these are associated with perceptions of low communication competence (Cheek & Buss, 1981; Pilkonis, 1977). Shyness is associated with communication difficulties during relationship formation because of negative relationship expectations and fear of negative evaluations (Jackson, Towson, & Narduzzi, 1997; Miller, 1995). However, shy people develop and maintain life-long relationships with family, friends, co-workers, lovers, and spouses, albeit at times with lower levels of relationship quality (Nelson et al., 2008). Because relationships are vital for people's well-being (Spitzburg & Cupach, 2003), exploring how shyness affects people's long-term relationships is essential. The current paper focuses on whether shyness' effects on communication competence constitute one process by which shyness influences long-term relationship quality.

Our study focuses on platonic friendships. Friendships are important in helping people cope with stressors, both during childhood (Miller & Coll, 2007) and adulthood (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002; Kisch, Leino, & Silverman, 2005). However, friendships tend to be less studied than romantic relationships. Communication competence has repeatedly been shown to have consequences

for the quality of relationships (Lawrence et al., 2008); here too friendships have received little attention, even though the specific relational manifestations of competence probably vary by relationship type (Spitzburg & Cupach, 2003).

1.1. Shyness and long-term relational quality

The predisposition toward shyness starts at conception and affects personal relationships through adolescence (Miller & Coll, 2007) and adulthood (Baker & McNulty, 2010; Nelson et al., 2008). Shyness is associated with a number of cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics *throughout* people's lives. Shy people are more depressed (Nelson et al., 2008), lonely (Findlay, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009), have lower perceptions of self-worth, social acceptance, and physical appearance (Nelson et al., 2008), and feel discomfort or inhibition during interpersonal interactions (Henderson & Zimbardo, 1998). Shyness is associated with social anxiety (Leary & Kowalski, 1995), and socially anxious people have unrealistic negative self-evaluations of their social skills (Segrin & Kinney, 1995).

Shy people display differences in verbal and nonverbal communication compared to people who are not shy. Shy people have a harder time initiating and structuring conversations (Pilkonis, 1977), speak less, and take a longer time to respond during conversations (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Shy people display higher levels of fidgeting and poor reciprocity of smiling behavior (Heerey & Kring, 2007) and are viewed by others as less friendly, less assertive, and less relaxed (Pilkonis, 1977), and are less verbally competent than their peers (Evans, 1993). People's display of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 520 626 3062; fax: +1 520 621 5504.

E-mail address: aarroyo@email.arizona.edu (A. Arroyo).

appropriate communication behaviors is referred to *communication competence*—the judgment one has about one's own or another's "ability to manage interpersonal relationships in communication settings" (Rubin & Martin, 1994, p. 33). Not only do others perceive shy people to be boring or uninteresting (Alm & Frodi, 2006), shy people themselves report having difficulty articulating their thoughts and feelings, not having appropriate interaction management skills, and believing that they are less competent than non-shy people (Prisbell, 1991). Therefore, it appears that shy people are somewhat less competent in social interactions, and that they are aware of this fact. Because of this low competence, shy people may have difficulties managing their relationships because they are unable to talk effectively, fail to act in accordance to their partners' expectations, or act in ways that are destructive for the relationship. Most broadly, then, we predict that communication competence serves as a mechanism (mediator) by which shyness leads to low relational quality. Below we explicate three specific hypotheses, each of which specifies this mediator relationship in terms of both parties to a friendship.

Interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959) focuses on the rewards and costs incurred within relationships and predicts greater relationship satisfaction when costs are minimized. Minimizing costs involves working through relationship problems, which requires having the communication skills to discuss problems and seek solutions. Competent communicators should be better at this, and hence should reap relational rewards. As already discussed, shy people are less likely to be highly competent communicators. Therefore, we hypothesize that for a given individual *communication competence mediates the relationship between shyness and relationship quality* (H1).

Partner's communication competence is also associated with satisfaction in relationships – for instance, competent partners provide relational rewards by offering effective and appropriate communication (e.g., social support: Flora & Segrin, 1999; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998). If partners of shy people perceive them as having poor skills, they will be likely to perceive the relationship as providing insufficient rewards and therefore experience low relationship quality. Thus, we predict that *perceptions of a relational partner's communication competence will mediate the relationship between partner's shyness and self's relationship quality* (H2).

Lastly, one component of rewards in a relationship is the idea that the self is viewed positively and valued by the partner. When people become aware that their relational partners view them negatively, the relationship loses one dimension of quality. For shy people, who are already aware of their limited communication competence, being negatively evaluated by their partner in terms of communication skills will be a source of relational distress. As such, we predict that *partners' evaluations of communication competence will mediate the relationship between self's shyness and self's relational quality* (H3). Clearly such a hypothesis is premised on the idea that perceptions of communication competence are somehow visible and communicated to relational partners. We suspect that this occurs through multiple means in relationships, including explicit metacommunicative discussion of such issues.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One member of a friend dyad was recruited from undergraduate communication courses at a large U.S. university, and received extra credit in exchange for completing an online questionnaire. In order to increase diversity in shyness, this person was randomly assigned to recruit a same-sex platonic friend who was either shy or not-shy and who they had known for at least three months.

The students provided the e-mail address of the friend, who then received a link to the questionnaire. Henceforth, the undergraduate is referred to as the "student", and their recruited friend is referred to as the "friend" ($N = 310$, dyads = 155).

Most participants were young adults (friend age: $M = 22$ years old, $SD = 3.67$; student age: $M = 21$, $SD = 2.14$), female (friends and students: 77% female, 23% male), and White (friends: 83% White, 5% Black, 7% Latino, 5% Other; students: 83% White, 4% Black, 8% Latino, 6% Other). Participants reported their relationship length in months; both partners' responses were averaged to compute the relationship length for the dyad (range: 3.5 months–15.8 years; $M = 47.87$ months, $SD = 35.55$; friend–student $r = .42$, $p < .001$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Shyness

The Revised Cheek and Buss Shyness Scale (Crozier, 2005) measured affective (e.g., "I feel nervous when speaking to someone in authority"), behavioral (e.g., "I have trouble looking someone right in the eye"), and cognitive (e.g., "When in a group of people, I have trouble thinking of the right things to talk about") characteristics of shyness on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *not true of me at all* to 5 = *extremely true of me*); items were averaged, with high scores denoting high shyness (Friend: $M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.71$, $\alpha = .87$; Student: $M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.55$, $\alpha = .80$). Friends were more shy when students were asked to recruit a shy person ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.74$) than a not-shy person ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.63$; $t(153) = 3.54$, $p < .05$, $d = .57$), indicating that the friend recruitment manipulation was successful.

2.2.2. Communication competence

This was measured with a shortened version of Wiemann's, (1977) Communication Competence Scale. Friends and students filled out this measure twice; once with themselves as the target (self-perceived communication competence; e.g., "I am an effective conversationalist") and once with the other person as the target (other-perceived communication competence; e.g., "My friend is an effective conversationalist"). This seven-item scale was measured on five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*); items were averaged, with high scores denoting high communication competence (Self-perceived communication competence – Friend: $M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.62$, $\alpha = .80$; Student: $M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.52$, $\alpha = .73$; Other-perceived communication competence – Friend: $M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.58$, $\alpha = .81$; Student: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.72$, $\alpha = .82$).

2.2.3. Relationship quality

The investment model (Rusbult, 1980), based on interdependence theory, distinguishes between relational commitment (one's intent to stay in or leave the relationship) and satisfaction (the degree to which positive affect is associated with the relationship). Given the fit of these measures with our theoretical framework, they constitute the means by which we assess relational quality in this study. The Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) measured satisfaction (e.g., "I feel satisfied with our friendship") and commitment (e.g., "I am committed to maintaining my friendship with my friend"). Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *do not agree at all* to 5 = *completely agree*), and averaged, with high scores denoting higher levels of each construct (Satisfaction – Friend: $M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.61$, $\alpha = .86$; Student: $M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.74$, $\alpha = .90$; Commitment – Friend: $M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.60$, $\alpha = .78$; Student: $M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.68$, $\alpha = .82$).

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