



Differentiation between low positive affectivity and behavioral inhibition in preschool-age children: A comparison of behavioral approach in novel and non-novel contexts

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Abstract

The temperament constructs of low positive affectivity (PA) and high behavioral inhibition (BI) overlap and are often not differentiated in the research literature. In particular, both constructs are characterized by low approach and engagement. However, current theoretical conceptualizations of these constructs suggest that low PA should be associated with low approach across most contexts, whereas BI should be associated with low approach only in novel situations. The present study used laboratory measures of child temperament and behavior to test these hypotheses in a sample of 100 preschool-age children. Results indicated that in novel situations, both lower positive affect and higher BI predicted low behavioral approach. However, in non-novel situations, only lower levels of positive affect predicted lower levels of approach; BI was not related to approach behavior in more familiar contexts. In conclusion, this study indicates that the overlap between the temperament traits of low PA and high BI is limited to novel contexts and that these constructs are distinguished by behavior in non-novel situations.

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Temperament has been defined as largely biologically-based individual differences in behavioral and emotional reactivity and regulation. These differences are considered to be relatively stable over time and are thought to shape the way individuals adapt to environmental circumstances (Clark & Watson, 1999; Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000). Research has explored the role of temperament in the development of personality as well as the emergence of psychopathology. However, further progress in the field requires sharpening the distinctions between several key, but overlapping, temperament constructs.

Two of the main dimensions on which major models of temperament have focused include positive affectivity (PA) and negative affectivity (NA) (Rothbart & Bates, 2006; Watson & Tellegen, 1985). In addition, Kagan (1997) and others (e.g., Fox, Henderson, Marshall, Nichols, & Ghera, 2005) have developed an influential line of research examining the origins and developmental course of the construct of behavioral inhibition (BI). Although these constructs have distinct features, they also share some common behavioral traits that can create difficulties in distinguishing among them. Specifically, low PA and high BI share the common feature of low behavioral approach/engagement (Durbin, Klein, Hayden, Buckley, & Moerk, 2005; Pfeifer, Goldsmith, Davidson, & Rickman, 2002).

The construct of PA includes positive mood states, sociability, and engagement with the environment (Clark & Watson, 1991). For the purposes of this paper, we use PA to refer to the temperament construct of positive affectivity, and we use the term “positive affect” to refer specifically to the affective component of the broader PA construct. Thus, children with low PA tend to exhibit low levels of positive affect, social interactions, and appetitive behavior when interacting with stimuli and people in their environment. The construct of BI includes high negative affect (especially fear), low approach, and high constraint (Kagan, 1997). Children with high BI tend to be wary, hesitant, and fearful in unfamiliar contexts and with unfamiliar adults and peers. Although both constructs share low approach as a core feature, the underlying motivation and eliciting contexts are presumed to differ. In low PA, approach deficits should be exhibited across contexts in that the low approach reflects chronically low levels of motivation to engage the environment. In contrast, the low approach that characterizes BI should be limited to unfamiliar situations as BI is hypothesized to emerge from a system responsible for generating responses to novelty and threat.

Other researchers have distinguished between similar sets of constructs. Putnam and Stifter (2005) recently drew on Gray’s (1982) motivational systems theory to hypothesize that low approach in infants and toddlers could be due to either an underactive behavioral approach system (BAS), which is linked to low PA, or an overactive behavioral inhibition system (BIS), which is associated with NA, especially fear/anxiety. It should be noted, however, that the role of the BIS has been revised in more recent formulations of Gray’s theory (Gray & McNaughton, 2000; McNaughton & Corr, 2004). Thus, McNaughton and Corr (2004) view the BIS as a conflict detection system associated with anxiety that modulates both the BAS in regulating approach behavior in reward-related contexts and the flight/fight system in regulating avoidance behavior in fear-eliciting contexts.

A number of investigators have distinguished between two groups of socially withdrawn children: a shy-conflicted, reticent group that wishes to engage in peer interactions but withdraws due to fear and anxiety; and a passive-solitary, disinterested group that withdraws due to a lack of desire for social interactions (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan, Prakash, O’Neil, & Armer, 2004; Coplan,

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