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Associations Between Shyness, Reluctance to Engage, and Academic Performance

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Are shy young children reluctant emergent scholars? If so, what longer-term effects might shyness have on scholastic performance? This timely Special Issue assembles an interesting set of papers reporting findings with respect to interrelationships between shyness and emergent literacy, shyness and pragmatic language, shyness and vocabulary (among preschoolers in an Arabic culture), and selective mutism and academic performance. The papers address several fascinating dimensions that can raise awareness not only of the potential vulnerabilities attendant on shyness as it relates to both normative and atypical development, and also potential strengths of shy children.

Shy children are identified by their hesitation to engage in social interactions in spite of a wish to be included in the social camaraderie surrounding them. Teachers in today's western classrooms are trained to strive to engage all students to participate fully in classroom lessons (Mercer, 2000). Activities such as 'show and tell', team-learning projects, buddy readers, group brainstorming discussions, instantiate this pedagogical strategy. Language arts classes promoting emergent literacy are designed to support not only simply reading and writing, but also listening and speaking, the cornerstones of both the comprehension and production and the oral and written aspects of academic discourse (Cameron, Hunt, & Linton, 1996; Cameron & Hutchison, in press).

This approach, however, is not without its potential pitfalls. There is an increasingly broad spectrum of student potentials in today's inclusive classrooms, and teachers are expected to help students with learning and behavioural challenges to surmount their difficulties. This may stretch the portfolios of many teachers, and the very reserved, retiring, modest, or less bold students may be in increasing danger of being overlooked. In addition, reticent children could be at risk for school challenges if they do not energetically engage in the exchanges designed to promote healthy interactive classroom learning. Who might the quiet child be who tends not to contribute to the din of a busy classroom? Shyness is a promising place to look for roots of less vocally active participation in today's inclusive classrooms.

In this Special Issue, the different contributing investigative teams, with different methodologies, different populations, and different foci produce a rather cohesive picture overall that can contribute to increased understanding of the phenomenon of shyness and its relationship to academic performance, and provoke a new round of questions for further theoretical exploration. In reading them, one might also look for lessons to be learned that could be appropriately, even if tentatively, translated into educational practice, early interventions, or teacher-training models for bringing shy children forth.

Spere and Evans' short-term longitudinal study of 89 children from the time they were four- to six-and-one-half years of age (2009) has particular merit with respect to the interstices of early shyness and subsequent literacy development, in that both longitudinal research and emergent literacy studies in the area are somewhat rare. When shyness was explored as a continuous variable, it did not discriminate participants on many literacy dimensions, either receptive or productive. However, vocabulary—both receptive (a particularly stringent test) and expressive vocabulary, verbal fluency, and phonological awareness were negatively related to some extent to shyness. The finding that syntax, word structure, and sentence structure were not associated with shyness over the period studied tentatively disconfirmed expectations that a broad spectrum of language difficulties potentially associated with shyness are either pervasive or long-lasting. These findings raise several questions about the specific pathways of influence of shyness on linguistic, and more specifically, literacy, development. If indeed relations between shyness and literacy development are not profound, what are the implications of these relatively fleeting associations? It is unclear whether Spere and Evans would advocate early interventions based upon their findings here, especially given the lack of extensive research evidence for the efficacy of a systematically designed intervention strategy. However, the data might suggest the value of examining several potential strategic instructional foci, perhaps on word decoding, word identification, letter–sound knowledge, and semantic knowledge.

Spere and Evans also highlight interesting potential implications of the effects of social stress on primary school performance. Extremely reticent children may not simply fail to engage in the practices that make for generative verbal skill development, but may also be at risk for heightened physiological stress reactions that could undermine normative biopsychosocial adaptation in the preschool years, with later consequences on not only academic functioning, but also on socio-emotional adjustment, health, and well being. School performance of members of some subcultural groups might be more deeply affected by socialized reticence or social anxiety engendered by fear of social evaluation, and underperformance. These seem to be avenues for further exploration.

Might there be positive consequences of early shyness on literacy development? It would be interesting to unearth a reliable literature on associations between oral communicative reticence and written expression. Certainly, some researchers like Rogoff and colleagues (e.g. Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2003) report the beneficial practices of cultures that induct their young into communities of practice by long periods of observation and listening, what they label intent participation. Shy children might be fine, well-informed observers within their social contexts. In addition, some professional writers report their written language skills to have been developed as compensatory channels of communication. Cynthia Ozick claimed to be 'unbearably shy' and indicated that she compensates for shyness with intellectual boldness on the printed page (Bernstein, 1989). Is there systematic evidence that some individuals compensate for shyness during *en face* interactions by channelling energy into unusually sensitive observational skills and/or well-developed mediated and distanced communications involving the written word or graphic artistic or indeed even musical expression?

Coplan and Weeks (2009) investigated the potentially protective role of psycholinguistic pragmatics on first grade children's shyness, and socio-emotional adjustment. They focused on speech restraint as a defining characteristic of shyness, indicating that expressive (performance) skills are more consistently seen as associated with shyness than are receptive (competency) skills. They stress the approach–avoidance conflicts that shyness engenders in children who desire social interactions while at the same time experiencing fear and anxiety in the face of new situations. They emphasize the potential for early shyness to develop into more debilitating social phobias and severe anxiety disorders later in life. Shyness appears to

be more socially acceptable in girls than in boys (Coplan & Armer, 2007), and in some communitarian cultures (e.g. in Asia, where displays of humility are valued) than in other more individualistic ones (e.g. North America (see Lee, Fu, Xu, Cameron, & Heyman, 2007), where self-promotion is more acceptable). Communicative competence requires appropriate responsivity to social-contextual cues as well as effective use of pragmatic language, both of which might be at risk in shy children. This might therefore implicate the potential for practice in enhancing language skill development, and in particular, pragmatic language skill, to moderate the socio-emotional challenges of shy children.

This study included the use of multiple sources of data (the researcher's observations, the teacher, parent, and the children themselves), assessing on several occasions, though not long-term longitudinally. The multiple views of shyness both lend validity to the investigation and confirm that shyness is situational or contextually determined and to some extent in the eye of the beholder and well as the experiencer. Just as heightened involvement and activity levels can reflect familial influences, so can family history be associated with reticence and slowness to warm or to engage. Shyness assessed both at beginning and at completion of the study was associated with teacher-rated peer a-sociability at year's end and pragmatic language was associated with pro-sociability. An expected gender difference emerged in an association between social anxieties with respect to fear of negative evaluation and in shyness for boys more than for girls. Shyness, loneliness, and social withdrawal behaviours were also associated with weaker pragmatic language skills. Finally, pragmatic language was associated with a reduction in shyness in boys but not girls over the course of the first grade. These findings lead one to consider whether, if not ameliorated, social anxiety might be exacerbated as shy boys develop. Infrequent social interactions could potentially intensify a cycle of decline in pragmatic skill development. Research suggests that boys engage less frequently than girls in the normative course of daily events in communications with pragmatic ramifications (Cameron & Team, 2002; Durham, 2002).

Crozier and Badawood (2009) ask whether receptive vocabulary mediates or moderates the relationship between shyness and reticence. Through observing the 'show and tell' and free play activities of high socio-economic Saudi Arabian Muslim preschoolers, Crozier and Badawood accessed different informants to examine whether verbal competence influences the link between shyness and speech reticence in the classroom. Low to moderate correlations were observed between parents' and teachers' children's shyness assessments. Given that parents and teachers may have different socialization priorities and perspectives from which to assess the children (teachers having ample peer comparators before them in their classes, but parents seeing their children in a wider range of circumstances), it was methodologically of interest that parents and teachers agreed at least modestly.

The study was designed to test whether a mediator model would reveal that vocabulary explains an association between shyness and reticence or whether a moderator model might show that a significant interaction between factors moderates the strength and the direction of the association. For example, high vocabulary shy children might be less reticent than low vocabulary shy students. Vocabulary helped explain the relationship between shyness and reticence, thus confirming a mediating effect, but no moderation effect was evidenced. However, the sample was a high socio-economic one and only receptive and not expressive language was tested, making for a restricted data set from which to draw conclusions.

Once again, shyness reports were significantly correlated with receptive vocabulary scores. 'Matched' shy children (that is, those identified as shy by both parent and teacher) were the most handicapped in receptive vocabulary performance but even shy children did not perform below the norms. Shy children underperformed in 'show & telling' and unstructured play,

showing lower MLUs, and a greater proportion of silent intervals. Tapping in to additional measures that could be compared between production situations would have been interesting.

Boys were less reticent in 'show & tell' only when parental judgment of shyness was under consideration. More attention to the import of the small gender differences that emerged would be welcome. The concern that shyness differentially affects boys and girls and that the consequences of this might be particularly of concern for the boys deserves pursuit, as does the fact that as children are in school longer, they may present as less shy.

Crosier and Badawood reported Saudi Arabia to be a relatively more communitarian community than many previously reported research sites for studies of shyness reported in the literature. Whereas North American children are socialized to see assertion as associated with desirable individual accomplishment, children raised in more collectivist communities might see reticence as enhancing communitarian goals such as self-effacement and affiliation (Chen *et al.*, 1999; Lee *et al.*, 2007). Although Crosier and Badawood mention some potential cultural divergences in Saudi views of shyness, this aspect is not dwelt upon; however, the importance of conducting emic research across cultural divides cannot be over-emphasized. Using translated rather than vocabulary scales standardized for that language population and, perhaps more importantly, evaluating a psychological construct without established cultural fidelity are risky propositions.

As the authors imply, shyness that prevents actualization of either individual or collective accomplishment, be it through enjoying social interactions or supporting others, could possibly be seen as limiting in Saudi children. In contrast, shyness that prevents them from proclaiming their own accomplishments might be seen to be debilitating in certain but not all contexts. A more thoroughgoing consideration of the possibility of the appropriateness of the concept of shyness in this Muslim context would be welcome. The implication of commonality between Western and Arabic shyness calls for more ethnographic exploration to validate the hypothetical construct in many cultures.

Nowakowski *et al.* (2009) investigated selective mutism, anxiety, and academic performance (I prefer that term to 'abilities') of slightly older school children. Selective mutism was operationalized as failing to speak in certain situations (usually in school), but not in others (perhaps at home). It is more common in girls and appears co-morbid with several anxiety disorders. Several academic skills beyond receptive language were assessed: mathematics, reading, and spelling.

Nowakowski *et al.* conducted this somewhat pioneering study to examine several aspects of performance of selectively mute children on tests, where responses could be provided orally at home with a primary caregiver or nonverbally. One hundred and three children six to ten years old, reported to exhibit selective mutism in two or more situations, and those who were rated with multiple anxiety categorizations had significantly lower receptive vocabulary and mathematics scores than community control group children. The effect of group varied by gender in that the selective mutism and anxiety groups of girls were less likely to do well on the receptive vocabulary and mathematics tests than the community sample girls, whereas there were no group differences among boys. Despite the challenges of speaking inhibitions, the children nevertheless performed on these academic indices at their expected age levels, whilst comparison children performed above grade norms. There were no other group differences in such aspects as reading and spelling. The math findings might reflect the importance of Mercer's (2000) strong claim that a classroom Intermental Development Zone, where language is used to solve mutual academic problems, enhances effective intra-mental learning.

The samples of participants were quite highly selected and income levels did not differentiate on any academic measure. It was a relatively small sample as such students are not commonly

identified, but it is difficult to recruit a large pool of selectively mute children. Nonetheless, it is regrettable that such difficulties recruiting participants who fit desired clinical categories in large and homogeneous numbers prevent interesting subgroup analyses.

In sum: Several aspects of the studies in this Special Issue elucidated factors in shyness heretofore less than completely examined. The performance deficits characteristic of shy children have some language reception costs and perhaps some socio-emotional costs, but interestingly, seem to have relatively little impact on normative academic performance. Shyness, the discomfort arising from social anxiety that results in isolation from desired social interaction creates for many individuals the potential of unsatisfactorily constricted social exchanges. Although much of the discomfort examined here seems not to be considered within a clinical range, there are potential downstream risks that include restricted opportunities to function generatively in language domains, lost opportunities to experience warm and dynamic interactions with peers and classroom teachers, and diminished opportunities to excel in certain aspects of school life.

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test carries a large burden in these studies, as it frequently does in studies of children's language development, making it an understandably appropriate comparative index for use with appropriate populations. The fact that this reception measure is very respectably standardized on many populations makes it a good index for the study of shyness, but other well-standardized indices would be welcome to round out the picture with other aspects of verbal skill development.

The question with respect to the direction of many subject variable effects is always uncertain in developmental psychological research. Does low language set a stage for high reticence that sets a stage for shyness, or do any other number of putative differently organized pathways pertain? An alternate pathway could be that shyness is a precursor to reticence that leads to reduced interaction and low verbal practice and thus efficacy with language.

Despite much experience of social alienation, shy children tend to be within the normative range with respect to many individual difference factors. However, like many other individual differences, a question arises as to what might be the accomplishments of shy individuals were they not to experience such social anxiety as they suffer. Numerous questions arise, such as, is shyness a psychological phenomenon exacerbated by a social culture that reveres self-expression and self-promotion? What about societies (such as Asian ones, *viz*, Lee *et al.*, 2007) that value reticence and humility? Would shyness be a handicap in such cultures and in what respects? Investigations are called for to answer these questions, especially as the conceptualizations and consequential measures developed to assess shyness were developed with populations in cultures noted for their individualistic strivings, like the USA, the UK, and Canada. This work would be critically in need of careful ethnographic observation before definitive methods to investigate cultural differences can be proposed. In addition, we are far from understanding in different cultures and across the life course possible gender differences in the experience of shyness and in the role of language in negotiating social landscapes.

Some commonplace observations remark on the compensatory mechanisms some individuals deploy to mask self-perceived social incompetence. Some writers, as has been mentioned, report that their dedication to their craft raised them out of extreme social withdrawal. Do some shy children compensate to become voracious readers? There is a growing literature demonstrating emergent literacy engagement to be positively associated with socio-emotional development (Cameron & Pinto, *in press*). Family focus on early literacy could serve as a buffer or prevention against feelings of scholastic inadequacy. Short-term telephone-mediated communications between young children and adult family members enriched verbal expression of identity relations as well as emotional and cognitive sophistication. Linking with the Spere

and Evans work, these distanced communications also hold potential for enhanced written as well as oral expression (Cameron & Gillen, 2008).

Developmentalists should be the first professionals to acknowledge that a deficit at age seven is not *necessarily* a harbinger for deficits later on, and to resist the danger of pathologizing reticence. However, developmentalists should also be the first to perceive the advantage of early risk detection. Efforts may be made to ameliorate shyness, to sustain a child's active involvement in home and school life, and to provide parents and teachers with appropriate intuitions such that when early warning signs emerge, children are observed, responded to, and respected; to alleviate negative consequences of experiencing the anxiety that our culture labels shyness. Complementary interventions such as those reported by Walkup *et al.* (2008) inspire pursuit of the notion of monitoring physiological stress reactivity in association with performance assessments. Primary preventative initiatives seem also to be valid intervention routes to scrutinize. It is as easy to imagine pragmatic skill deficits affecting social confidence as the reverse: Programmes for building competence in language domains could appropriately be integrated with programmes designed to build a sense of self-efficacy in these domains as well.

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