Characterising and Comparing Friendship Qualities of Shy and Unsociable Children

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether being socially withdrawn would have an impact on friendship qualities and whether the negative impact of being socially aloof would extend to dyadic relationships. Furthermore, the differences between shy and unsociable children in terms of friendship qualities were examined. No real data has been collected, but the current study aims to recruit 500 children aged 9-10. The predicted results were discussed in this paper, which predicts that friendship qualities of withdrawn children were lower than non-withdrawn children. This indicates that the negative impact of being withdrawn extends to dyadic relationships. We also predicted that friendship qualities of shy children were lower than unsociable children, which indicates that anxiety is also detrimental to the quality of dyadic relationships.

Keywords: Friendship quality, dyadic relationships, shy, unsociable, withdrawn

1. INTRODUCTION

Developmental psychologists have long claimed that withdrawn children may experience later adjustment problems [1]. For example, previous research has found that socially withdrawn children are less accepted by peers, have fewer friends, display lower self-esteem, greater loneliness, and depression [2]. The reason behind these adjustment problems may be that peer relationships are crucial in the development of emotional and social skills, and the lack of those crucial skills may be an important contributor to later adjustment problems [3]. Furthermore, friends are extremely important in supporting, affirming, and accompanying children, which offer a buffer to adjustment problems, including low self-worth, depression, and loneliness [4]. Previous researches have found that chronic friendlessness is correlated with multiple psychological issues, such as lower self-worth, depression, and poorer academic performances. Yet, socially withdrawn children often isolate themselves from others, and the lack of social interaction may make them miss out on the benefits of friendships [5].

However, social withdrawal may be caused by completely different reasons, and different forms of social withdrawal may not be equally malignant [6]. The conceptual model of Asendorpf has received considerable attention from developmental psychologists. According to Asendorpf, withdrawn children can be divided into two main subtypes, shy children and unsociable children. Asendorpf claimed that shy children experience an internal conflict by wishing to approach others but at the same time avoid social interaction because of anxiety of being negatively evaluated [7]. In contrast, unsociable children lack the desire for social interaction but are not repelled by interacting with others. Previous research found that compared with unsociability, shyness is a more harmful type of social withdrawal [8]. Compared with unsociable children, shy children exhibit more adjustment problems, such as having lower peer acceptance, more psychological problems, lower self-esteem, etc. A possible explanation is that the anxiety accompanied by shy children interferes with children's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, making them unable to get along well with others, which in turn exacerbates the adjustment problems associated with a lack of friendship.

While it is clear that withdrawn children, especially shy children are less popular, have fewer friends, and experience more adjustment problems, few have investigated the performances of those withdrawn children and whether there are differences between shy and unsociable children in dyadic relationship levels. It

is not known whether the disadvantages associated with withdrawal behaviors and the problems of anxiety specifically reflected in shy children would exist when in the company of just one close peer. Will the friendship quality be impacted? By further examining shy and unsociable children's friendship quality with one of their close friends, we can gain a deeper understanding of the risks accompanied by being socially withdrawn and having anxiety-driven thoughts.

Schneider (1999) found that compared with non-withdrawn kids, withdrawn children were more verbally reticent even with their best friends. Given that verbal communication and disclosure is essential for the development of intimacy, it is reasonable to speculate that the friendship quality of withdrawn children in dyadic relationships is lower than non-withdrawn children. The reserved nature of those withdrawn children may also make them appear less fun and interesting to play with. In addition, because it is more likely that socially withdrawn children have lower self-esteem and more negative feelings about themselves, they may seek more reassurances from their close friends and disclose more negative feelings, which may cause stress in dyadic relationships [9]. Thus, it is possible that withdrawn children's friendship quality will be negatively impacted.

The anxiety specifically experienced by shy children makes them focus on self-defeating thoughts and social-evaluative concerns, which discourage self-disclosure and may cause them to misinterpret friend's words. These thoughts and behaviors may restrict the development of intimacy and reduce the perception of friendship quality. Therefore, we hypothesized that shy children's friendship quality to be even lower than unsociable children.

Lastly, there may exist important gender differences in friendship qualities of shy and withdrawn children. Previous researches have demonstrated that being a shy and quiet girl would be more socially accepted than being a shy and quiet boy [10]. Researches have also found evidence that socially withdrawn boys exhibit more psychological adjustment problems than girls. That negative evaluation of shy boys may make them more vulnerable to friend's negative words and behaviors and discourage self-disclosure, which may undermine the formation of intimate dyadic relationships. Therefore, we predict that withdrawn boys experience lower friendship qualities at dyadic levels than withdrawn girls.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

500 children aged 9-10 participated recruited from 10 primary schools in China participated in this study, of which half were boys and half were girls.

All children's parents and their teachers signed informed consent and confidentiality agreement.

2.2 Procedure

The current study assessed children's shyness and unsociability using the method Revised Class Play, which is widely used to measure children's social functioning in the USA and other countries. Participants were provided with a booklet containing the names of all students in the class and a behavior descriptor. After the administrator read the behavior description, participants were asked to nominate 3 classmates that best fit this role being described. Each item score for each child was calculated based on the nominations from all his classmates. "Social withdrawn" were measured by asking participants to nominate 3 children who "play by themselves the most". Items measuring shyness (eg: "feeling afraid to talk to others", "extremely vulnerable") and unsociability (eg: "do not take an interest in interacting with others", "are not interested in participating in group activities") were also included.

The Friendship Quality Questionnaire-Revised was used to measure the friendship quality of the children. FQQ included 40 items, which yielded six subscales, including companionship, caring, help, intimate disclosure, conflict, and conflict resolution. The conflict subscale was reverse-scored. Higher scores on all other subscales indicate higher friendship quality. The total friendship quality score was calculated by adding the mean scores of all the subscales.

In the current study, participants were asked to imagine one of their best friends and were presented with The Friendship Quality Questionnaire-Revised to complete the scoring of the 40 items.

To ensure that all participants understand the items, the researchers were near them when they were completing the questionnaires. If they have any questions, they can ask the researchers at any time.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Previous research has found that withdrawn children are less accepted by peers and are more vulnerable to adjustment problems compared to nonwithdrawn children. The present study extended prior research by investigating shy and unsociable children's experiences in dyadic relationships. Results found that withdrawn

children considered their friends significantly lower in overall friendship quality than non-withdrawn children. This is in line with our hypothesis and substantially extended our knowledge in terms of the dyadic relationships that withdrawn children experienced. We gain a deeper understanding of the risks associated with being socially aloof by revealing not only quantitative (overall peer acceptance) but also qualitative (friendship quality) differences between friendships of withdrawn and non-withdrawn. Indeed, it may be more difficult to feel close to a friend who is very verbally reticent, offers few ideas and suggestions. The negative feelings and adjustment problems associated with being socially withdrawn may further preclude the formation of high-quality friendships. In addition, as predicted, girls experience higher friendship qualities than boys, which indicates that gender plays a role in intimate dyadic relationships. Cultural expectations on boys to be socially competent aggravate the negative impact of being socially withdrawn in dyadic relationship levels.

The current study also found that the overall friendship quality of shy children is significantly lower than unsociable children, which is consistent with our hypothesis. By investigating the differences in friendship quality of shy and unsociable children, we gain a deeper understanding that apart from verbal reticence and quiescence, anxiety will also harm the quality of dyadic relationships. The negative impact of low efficacy beliefs and social-evaluative concerns extend to close dyadic relationships. It may be the case that because shy children have excessive concerns over social failures, they often anticipate their close friends having negative feelings towards them, and often misinterpret their close friend's words and actions as negative, which significantly reduces their perception of friendship quality [11]. Furthermore, we gain deeper insight that different forms of social withdrawal are not equally harmful even in close dyadic relationships.

Social withdrawal is a complex social phenomenon not only in children but also in adolescents, consisting of multiple subtypes. A limitation of the current study is that it just focused on the childhood stage. It would be of great importance for future research to investigate the friendship qualities of shy and withdrawn adolescents. The adolescent years are viewed as a period when self-consciousness grows the fastest [12]. During this period, people are particularly sensitive to others' evaluations on them. Thus, adolescent years may be a time where shyness has the greatest negative impacts. It is worth examining whether the differences between shy and unsociable people would be larger in adolescent years in terms of dyadic relationships.

Another limitation of the current study is that it does not take into account cross-cultural variations. The current study only investigated Chinese children. Chinese culture traditionally emphasizes collectivism,

interdependence, and affiliation with a group [13]. Preference for being alone, demonstrating autonomy, and being self-oriented does not fit the collectivist culture [14]. Children who prefer to be alone may be viewed as strange and selfish [15]. Therefore, socially withdrawn children are likely to be less accepted by peers and develop many adjustment problems, which may in turn negatively impact their friendship qualities in dyadic relationships. However, different cultures may evaluate characteristics in social settings in completely different ways and may respond differently to children that are unsociable. For example, in western countries, children are expected to be assertive, autonomous, and having independent characters, thus being socially aloof is considered as an expression of individuality and is more accepted by others [16]. Previous researches have found that being solitary is even potentially beneficial to well-being in some cases in North America [17]. Thus unsociable children in western countries may not experience peer pressure and negative evaluations from others and may not develop negative feelings for themselves that will harm friendship qualities. It is worth investigating whether being unsociable would have a negative impact on friendship qualities in western countries and other cultures.

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