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Communication competence mediates the link between shyness and relational quality

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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 (Asendorf, 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 shy people’s 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 (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...
To increase diversity in shyness, this person was randomly
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communication

2.1. Participants

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 com-
pute 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) mea-
sure 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 ($1 = \text{not true of me at all to}
5 = \text{extremely true of me}$); items were averaged, with high scores
denoting high shyness (Friend: $M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.71$, $x = .87$; Stud-
ent: $M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.55$, $x = .80$). 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,
(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
communication partner”) and once with the other person as the target
(other-perceived communication competence; e.g., “My friend is
an effective communication partner”). This seven-item scale was mea-
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petence – Friend: $M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.62$, $x = .80$; Student: $M = 4.14$
$SD = 0.52$, $x = .73$; Other-perceived communication competence –
Friend: $M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.58$, $x = .81$; Student: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.72$
$x = .82$).

2.2.3. Relationship quality

The investment model (Rusbult, 1980), based on interdepen-
dence theory, distinguishes between relational commitment (one’s
intent to stay in or leave the relationship) and satisfaction (the de-
gree 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 main-
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$M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.74$, $x = .90$; Commitment – Friend: $M = 4.48$
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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 ex-
tra 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).

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Table 1

Individual correlations of friends' ratings of self, partner, and relationship.

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<td>-.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
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<td>.34</td>
<td>.64</td>
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</table>

Note: CC = communication competence; correlations of Friend are below the diagonal and correlations above the diagonal are in reference to Student. 
p < .05.
*p < .01.

Table 2

Intradyadic correlations of friend by student ratings of self, partner, and relationship.

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
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<td>.18</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CC = communication competence; there are no differences in the correlations above and below the diagonal – they all indicate Friend by Student ratings of self, partner, and relationship. 
p < .05.
*p < .01.

3. Results

The intradyadic correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1 and intradyadic correlations appear in Table 2. Independent sample t-tests revealed that there were no gender differences in shyness for friends (females: M = 2.12, SE = .05, males: M = 2.33, SE = .58, t (153) = 1.96, ns) or students (females: M = 2.27, SE = .06, males: M = 2.35, SE = .12, t (153) = -.60, ns). Similarly, there were no gender differences in self-perceptions of communication competence for friends (females: M = 4.25, SE = .06, males: M = 4.05, SE = .10, t (153) = -.19, ns) or students (females: M = 4.16, SE = .05, males: M = 4.12, SE = .08, t (153) = -.19, ns). Among the friends, there was no gender difference in other-perceptions of communication competence (females: M = 4.10, SE = .06, males: M = 3.70, SE = .11, t (153) = –.06, ns); however, among the students, women (M = 4.08, SE = .06) had significantly higher other-perceptions than men (M = 3.70, SE = .11, t (153) = –.06, p < .05). Given the preponderance of nonsignificant sex differences, gender was dropped from subsequent analyses.

To test our hypotheses that communication competence mediated the relationship between shyness and relational quality, we used bootstrapped tests of indirect effects (Hayes, 2009). The models used 5000 bootstrapped resamples that generated 95% bias corrected and adjusted confidence intervals (Bca CI); CI's not including zero demonstrate a statistically significant indirect effect. Each hypothesis was tested for friends and students (see Table 3).

H1 predicted that self-perceived communication competence mediates the relationship between one's shyness and relationship quality. H1 was partially supported, as communication competence was not a significant mediator for friends' satisfaction or commitment but was for students (Table 3: top panel). H2 predicted that other-perceived communication competence mediates the relationship between the other's shyness and one's own relationship quality. H2 was supported for both friends' and students' satisfaction and commitment (Table 3: middle panel). H3 predicted that others' perception of communication competence would mediate the relationship between self-perceived shyness and self-perceived relationship quality. This effect held only for students' commitment (Table 3: bottom panel).

4. Discussion

We predicted that self-perceived and other-perceived communication competence are mechanisms that explain why shy people and their relational partners have lower levels of relationship quality than the non-shy and their partners. Self- and other-perceived communication competence were shown to be important mechanisms mediating the relationship between shyness and relational quality, such that people report lower levels of satisfaction and commitment when perceptions of communication competence are low. Overall, through the mediating role of perceived communication competence, the findings support the idea that shy people have lower quality in long-term personal relationships.
H1 and H3 were concerned with the mediating role of perceived communication competence in the effects of shyness on one's own relational quality. In contrast, H2 examined the effects of perceived communication competence on partners' relational quality. Our results suggest that our predictions are most strongly supported for partners, such that shyness influences partners' satisfaction and commitment through competence more than it influences one's own satisfaction and commitment through competence. This supports previous research suggesting that communication skills are related to partners' relational outcomes (Flora & Segrin, 1999). Considering competence as the external manifestation of shyness, it is sensible that the partner effects should be stronger than the self-effects. For shy people, aware as they are of their own shyness, the impact of shyness on their relational outcomes may be relatively direct. On the other hand, a partner will be affected by the behavioral and relational manifestations of shyness (communication competence, perhaps among others), and hence it serves as a more logical mediator in that context. Nonetheless, the fact that competence mediates in at least some instances for one's self indicates that such indirect effects do persist, and that shy people's relational success is partially affected by the extent to which they can control the behavioral manifestations of their trait.

Limitations of our study point to directions for future research. Future studies should explore longevity outcomes for these relationships by employing longitudinal designs. Exploring such outcomes could elucidate shy individuals' attributions for relationship decline. Future research should also consider ways of targeting shy respondents more directly, given that our sample did not include a large number of people who are shy by past researchers' standards (Cheek & Buss, 1981). We also only looked at same-sex platonic friendships among college students. Further examination of other relationships and age groups would allow us to investigate, for instance, whether shyness affects relationship quality in later life friendships, where individuals are more focused on creating relationships that are emotionally meaningful (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999).

People's (in)ability to communicate effectively influences their relationships. The current study shows that trait shyness influences communication competence, which in turn affects relational quality, hence providing improved understanding of the mechanisms through which shyness influences interpersonal relationships. Moreover, it shows that the effects of shyness extend to both the shy person, and to their partner's evaluations. Our findings concerning communication competence suggest that communication training might be valuable for shy people to buffer the link between shyness and relational outcomes. We also extended previous shy research into the domain of longer term relationships, demonstrating that shyness' negative effects extend beyond initial interactions.

References


