

# Shyness, Friendship Quality and Depression: The Moderating Role of Friend Shyness

Hemapriya Navaindran & Julie Bowker  
University at Buffalo, The State University of New York



## INTRODUCTION

- Shyness is a temperamental trait characterized by social fear, anxieties, negative cognitions, and social withdrawal (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009).
- During early adolescence (10-14 years), shyness is consistently associated with a number of different psychological and social difficulties (i.e., loneliness, peer rejection; e.g., Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; Rubin & Mills, 1988).
- However, findings on shyness in relation to *friendship quality* are mixed, and the reported links between shyness and *depressive symptoms* are small in magnitude.
- Thus, not all shy youth appear to struggle socially and psychologically, but very little attention has been paid to understanding the sources of this variability.
- The characteristics of adolescents' *friends*, such as the degree to which friends are aggressive or prosocial, have been shown to contribute to adolescents' adjustment (Barry & Wentzel, 2006).
- It has been suggested that a *misery-love-company* scenario might exist for many shy adolescents such that they befriend similarly shy peers, who reinforce their anxious behaviors, thoughts, and emotions, and undermine relationship qualities (Oh et al., 2008; Rubin et al., 2009).
- The current study considers, for the first time, whether the degree to which a young adolescents' friend is shy (or *friend shyness*) moderates the associations between shyness and friendship quality and depressive symptoms concurrently and longitudinally.
- Gender is also examined as an exploratory moderator.

## HYPOTHESES

- Shyness will be associated negatively to friendship quality and positively to depressive symptoms concurrently and longitudinally.
- Friend shyness will moderate these associations such that the associations will be stronger for young adolescents with highly shy friends relative to average and low shy friends.

## METHODS

- N = 271 young adolescents (6<sup>th</sup> Grade, 49% boys; *Mage* = 11.79 years)
- 40% ethnic minority
- Data was collected at two time-points (Time 1, T1: November, Time 2, T2: May) during Grade 6 in two Buffalo, New York middle schools

## MEASURES

**Shyness** (T1 & 2): four unlimited peer nomination items: “*Very shy*”, “*Rarely starts up conversation*”, “*Gets nervous about participating in group discussions*”, and “*Rarely talks.*”

**Friendship** (T1 & 2): participants wrote the names of their “very best friend”, their “second best friend” and three good friends; mutual or reciprocated friendships were determined.

**Friend shyness**: the shyness scores of the first mutual friend were used.

**Friendship quality** (T1 & 2): participants completed the Friendship Quality Scale; 23-items; e.g., “*My friend and I spend all our free time together*”

**Depressive symptoms** (Time 1 & 2): Children’s Depression Inventory: Short Version; 10-items; e.g., choose among the options: “I like myself”, “I do not like myself”, and “I hate myself”

Table 1: Friend Shyness as a Moderator of the Associations between Shyness and Depressive Symptoms

|        |                        | Concurrent Time 1 |              | Concurrent Time 2 |               | Longitudinal Time 2 |       |
|--------|------------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|---------------------|-------|
|        |                        | B                 | β            | B                 | β             | B                   | β     |
| Step 1 | C Shy<br>Depressive Sx | -0.06             | -0.12        | <b>0.12*</b>      | <b>0.34*</b>  | 0.01                | 0.03  |
| Step 2 | F Shy<br>Sex           | <b>0.13*</b>      | <b>0.25*</b> | <b>0.25*</b>      | <b>0.34*</b>  | -0.02               | -0.05 |
|        |                        | -0.01             | -0.01        | <b>-0.18*</b>     | <b>-0.26*</b> | -0.05               | -0.08 |
| Step 3 | C Shy x F Shy          | 0.31              | 0.21         | -0.15             | -0.13         | -0.12               | -0.09 |
|        | C Shy x Sex            | -0.07             | -0.11        | 0.16              | 0.43          | 0.20                | 0.37  |
|        | F Shy x Sex            | 0.02              | 0.03         | <b>-0.45*</b>     | <b>-0.53*</b> | 0.20                | 0.36  |
| Step 4 | C Shy x F Shy<br>x Sex | 0.16              | 0.09         | 0.90              | 0.75          | -1.26               | -0.81 |

Table 2: Friend Shyness as a Moderator of the Associations between Shyness and Friendship Quality

|        |                        | Concurrent Time 1 |               | Concurrent Time 2 |               | Longitudinal Time 2 |              |
|--------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------|---------------------|--------------|
|        |                        | B                 | β             | B                 | β             | B                   | β            |
| Step 1 | C Shy<br>FQ            | 0.08              | 0.07          | -0.05             | -0.06         | -0.05               | -0.04        |
| Step 2 | F Shy<br>Sex           | 0.16              | 0.14          | 0.04              | 0.03          | 0.07                | 0.06         |
|        |                        | <b>0.36*</b>      | <b>0.26*</b>  | <b>0.68*</b>      | <b>0.50*</b>  | <b>0.38*</b>        | <b>0.29*</b> |
| Step 3 | C Shy x F Shy          | <b>-1.33*</b>     | <b>-0.42*</b> | 0.44              | 0.17          | -0.22               | -0.07        |
|        | C Shy x Sex            | 0.24              | 0.19          | 0.13              | 0.16          | 0.01                | 0.01         |
|        | F Shy x Sex            | -0.07             | -0.05         | -0.29             | -0.16         | -0.20               | -0.16        |
| Step 4 | C Shy x F Shy<br>x Sex | 1.23              | 0.34          | <b>-5.88*</b>     | <b>-2.23*</b> | 3.23                | 0.90         |

## RESULTS

### Depressive Symptoms (Table 1)

- **Concurrent model (T1):** Hierarchical linear regression analyses revealed that T1 shyness was a significant predictor of T1 depressive symptoms.
- **Concurrent model (T2):** Child and friend shyness at T2 predicted T2 depressive symptoms. In addition, there was a significant interaction involving T2 friend shyness and sex, with simple slope analyses showing that friend shyness was a positive predictor of depressive symptoms for boys ( $\beta = 0.81, p = .003$ ), but not for girls ( $\beta = 0.20, p = .08$ ).
- **Longitudinal model:** T1 depressive symptoms was a significant predictor of T2 depressive symptoms.

### Friendship quality (Table 2)

- **Concurrent model (T1):** Sex predicted T1 friendship quality. There was a significant interaction involving child and friend shyness. Simple slope analyses revealed that shyness was negative predictor of friendship quality only for young adolescents with highly shy friends ( $\beta = -1.02, p = .02$ ) but not for those with average ( $\beta = -0.36, p = .17$ ) or low shy friends ( $\beta = 0.29, p = .23$ ).
- **Concurrent model (T2):** Sex predicted T2 friendship quality. There was a significant interaction involving child shyness, friend shyness and sex. Simple slope analyses revealed that shyness was a positive predictor of friendship quality for boys with highly shy friends ( $\beta = 5.21, p = 0.05$ ) and a negative predictor of friendship quality for boys with low shy friends ( $\beta = -1.79, p = 0.03$ ). All other slopes were not significant.
- **Longitudinal model:** Sex predicted T2 friendship quality. T1 friendship quality predicted T2 friendship quality.

## CONCLUSION

- This study contributes to the existing literature on shyness by revealing evidence that friend shyness helps to explain variability in the degree to which shyness is related to depressive symptoms and friendship quality during early adolescence.
- For *boys*, the results suggest that having a highly shy friend might foster depressive symptoms as well as poor friendships. This may be because shyness interferes with competition and companionship, which are critical to boys', but not girls', friendships during early adolescence.
- That said, this study also shows, for the first time, that highly shy boys with highly shy friends may enjoy each other's company and have high quality friendships. Given that shyness is less accepted in boys, it may be that two highly shy boys are accepting of each other and together help to make a positive relationship experience.
- Future studies should test these proposed mechanisms and further investigate why the effects of having a shy friend emerged in concurrent but not longitudinal analyses.