Shyness and Relationship Satisfaction:  
Evaluating the Associations Between Shyness, Self-Esteem, and Relationship Satisfaction in Couples

SARAH L. TACKETT, LARRY J. NELSON, and DEAN M. BUSBY  
School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, USA

In the present study we explored the relationship between personality characteristics and relationship satisfaction in couples. Using a sample of 14,807 couples from the RELATE dataset, a model was tested examining the direct and indirect (via self-esteem) associations between personality traits (i.e., shyness) and relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the model assessed shyness, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction for both partners in the relationship. The results indicated that higher levels of shyness were associated with lower self-esteem in individuals, as well as lower relationship satisfaction. Implications of results and the use of partner ratings of personality indicators are discussed.

There is a significant body of work showing the important role that personality plays in couple relationships (Malouff et al., 2010). One personality characteristic that is receiving a growing amount of attention in the study of adult development is shyness. In studies of emerging adults and adults, shyness has been found to be negatively related to variables such as cognitive, social, and communication competence (Arroyo & Harwood, 2010; Cowden, 2005), as well as self-esteem (Cowden, 2005). Additionally, there is growing evidence that shyness may be problematic in the building and maintaining of relationships (e.g., Arroyo & Harwood, 2010; Nelson et al., 2008). Likewise, self-esteem has been linked with relational variables as well (e.g., relationship satisfaction; Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008). However, few researchers have attempted to examine how self-esteem might mediate the relationship between shyness and relationship quality. Finally,
few studies have included both partners when examining the links between shyness, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the direct and indirect (via self-esteem) links between shyness and relationship satisfaction for both members in the relationship.

SHYNESS

There are multiple reasons why individuals may withdraw from social interactions and a variety of terms employed to describe the various forms of solitude (see Rubin, Coplan, Bowker, & Menzer, 2011). In attempting to deal with the conceptual complexity of solitude, Rubin and colleagues used “social withdrawal” as an umbrella term to capture multiple reasons why an individual may choose to withdraw. For example, some individuals may withdraw from social interaction due to fear, others due to simple disinterest in social interactions and contexts, and still others because they are self-conscious. Therefore, while we acknowledge the distinctions that may possibly exist in the reasons (i.e., motivations) leading to why a person is shy, for our purposes we focus more on the behavioral manifestations of shyness (i.e., quiet, less talkative, less outgoing) and will simply use the term “shyness” to refer to less social behavior as has been done in previous work in this area (e.g., Nelson et al., 2008).

SHYNESS AND COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

As noted previously, there are a growing number of studies that have examined linkages between shyness and relationship satisfaction with the majority finding shyness to be a risk factor in relationship quality. For example, anxious-shyness has been linked to lower quality romantic relationships (Nelson et al., 2008), lower levels of intimacy (Wenzel, 2001), less marital stability for men (Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1988), and lower levels of satisfaction and higher levels of problems/distress in their marriages (Baker & McNulty, 2010; Filsinger & Wilson, 1983). While these studies demonstrate that shyness is associated with lower relationship quality, few of them examined the ways in which shyness may influence relationship satisfaction.

Indeed, just as there are different reasons for being shy, there may then be different reasons for how and why shyness may be linked to poor relationships. For example, Cowden (2005) postulated that shy individuals may lack social skills, have self-doubts, be preoccupied with their anxiety, or have high expectations of negative evaluation, all of which may potentially impede their satisfaction in their partner relationships. Similarly, in a study of relationships among friends, Arroyo and Harwood (2010) found that shy
individuals are less competent communicators in social interactions than individuals who are not shy. Finally, Baker and McNulty (2010) discovered that shy individuals have low levels of self-efficacy in their relationships, which in turn leads to more marital problems. Taken together, emerging explanations as to why shyness may be linked to lower relationship satisfaction may include a lack of skills (e.g., communication and social competence) and an abundance of self-doubt. However, the latter (self-doubt) is especially deserving of further attention given that shy individuals tend to evaluate themselves negatively and hold a low sense of self-worth (e.g., Koydemir-Özden, & Demir, 2009). Hence, it is possible that the link between shyness and poorer relationship quality may be partly due to low self-esteem.

SELF-ESTEEM AND COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Like shyness, self-esteem (the overall worth or value a person places on him or herself; Harter, 1999) has been negatively linked with relationship satisfaction (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). It has been proposed that when a person feels validated, cared for, and understood by his or her partner, self-esteem is increased, leading to greater satisfaction in the partner relationship (Knee et al., 2008). Knee and colleagues have proposed several ways by which the self might influence close relationships including via perspectives of an individual’s security in a relationship, or his or her partner’s regard and rejection. In sum, the feelings individuals have about themselves may influence their perceptions of others as well as events in their personal relationships.

Taken together, there is significant evidence documenting the associations between (a) shyness and relationship satisfaction, (b) shyness and self-esteem, and (c) self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. However, few if any studies have examined the three variables simultaneously. Specifically, no study has examined the ways in which self-esteem might mediate the relation between shyness and relationship satisfaction. Thus, in addition to examining the direct link between shyness and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships, in this study we also examine the indirect association between shyness and relationship satisfaction via the possible mediating role of self-esteem.

One final question targeted in this study was how the links between shyness and relationship satisfaction may differ depending on the partner. Not only is the literature limited that examines possible mediators in the association between shyness and relationship satisfaction, the work that has been done focuses on individual perspectives rather than perspectives from both members in the couple relationship. It has been suggested that it is not only a person’s own personality that contributes to the quality of the
relationship (i.e., actor effect), but there exists a partner effect (Barellds, 2005; Robins et al., 2000). Partner effects refer to the ways that couples influence one another. In other words, a person’s personality traits may bring out beliefs and behaviors in a partner that contribute to the overall relationship satisfaction.

Concerning the use of partner-rated personality traits little is known in regard to relationship satisfaction, due to the fact that past research has mostly examined associations between self-ratings and relationship satisfaction (Luo et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2000). The addition of partner-ratings strengthens the evaluation (Busby & Gardner, 2008) and enables researchers to evaluate a new aspect of the relationship. Partner-ratings also allow for a more accurate rating of couple satisfaction based on data from both the self and the partner in the dyad (Luo et al., 2008). Furthermore, including partner-ratings enhances the ability to obtain “multiple perspectives of the same” variable (Busby & Gardner, 2008, p. 231). Therefore, a final purpose of the study was to examine the direct and indirect (via self-esteem) links between shyness and relationship satisfaction for both members in the relationship.

METHOD

Participants for this study were drawn from a sample of nearly 15,000 couples. Each individual completed the RELATionship Evaluation Questionnaire (RELATE; Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001), after being introduced to it through a variety of settings (e.g., as part of a class, as part of a workshop for couples, after finding it on the internet, or as part of the assessment package given by a professional therapist or clergy member). The RELATE is a 300+ item questionnaire designed to evaluate the relationship between romantically linked partners (dating, engaged, or married). The specific variables of interest used from the RELATE instrument for the current study were the partner-ratings of personality traits (specifically the extraversion scale), self-ratings of self-esteem, and self-ratings of relationship satisfaction. Partner-ratings provide more accurate measures of couple data (Busby & Gardner, 2008; Luo et al., 2008); therefore, in order to strengthen the measurement of shyness of individuals and capture the influence of partner perceptions in romantic relationships, partner-ratings were used to measure shyness in this study. Because self-esteem is an individual’s own perception of one’s worth as a person, self-ratings (as opposed to partner ratings) were utilized for measuring individual perceptions of self-esteem for males and females in romantic relationships. Any participant with missing values on any of the variables used in this study was removed in order to more appropriately evaluate the model without resorting to any type of substitution process for missing values. These eliminations resulted in a final sample size in this study...
of 4,192 heterosexual couples (or 8,384 individuals). Additional information and details about the instrument, the theory underlying the domains, and validity and reliability information can be gleaned from referring to Busby, Holman, and Taniguchi (2001).

The sample was evenly split between men and women. The mean age of the respondents was 29.65 years ($SD = 9.49$). Eighty-eight percent of the sample was Caucasian (including Latino), 3% African American, 5% Asian, 2% mixed/biracial, and 2% “other.” In terms of education, 10% of the participants had completed some college but were not currently enrolled, 28% were currently enrolled in college, 6% had received an associate’s degree, 51% had received a bachelor’s degree or more education, and 5% completed a high school education or less. In terms of relationship status, 30% of the participants were in a serious or steady relationship, 42% were engaged or committed to marry, and 29% were married.

**Measures**

**Shyness**

For this study, shyness was assessed by reversing the extraversion subscale from the RELATE instrument. The RELATE measures of personality consist of questions evaluating traits of the participants and their partners. These items originally came from Goldberg’s work on markers for major personality dimensions (Goldberg, 1992). The extraversion scale included four adjectives, “talkative, quiet, shy, and outgoing.” Thus, for each of these items, individuals were asked to indicate how much the words or phrases described them and their partners, respectively, on a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from (1) *never* to (5) *very often*. Shyness was modeled with separate latent variables for males and females. Male shyness was represented by ratings of his shyness levels according to his female partner. Likewise, female shyness was represented by her male partner’s ratings of her shyness levels. Internal consistency estimates of reliability were computed separately for male and female personality (shyness). Omega reliability, which is generally superior to Cronbach’s alpha, was utilized as the reliability measure in this study, and is similarly interpreted in the 0 to 1 range (McDonald, 1999). Omega is a coefficient measuring “generalizability from a given set of items to a behavior domain” (McDonald, 1999, p. 119). The Omega reliability for male shyness was $\omega = .67$. The Omega reliability for female shyness was $\omega = .61$.

**Self-esteem**

Self-esteem was assessed using the self-esteem scale from RELATE. These items were adapted from Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (1965). The self-esteem scale included four phrases, “I take a positive attitude toward myself,”
“I think I am no good at all,” “I feel I am a person of worth” and “I am inclined to think I am a failure.” Individuals were asked to indicate how much the phrases described them or their partners on a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from (1) never to (5) very often. Self-esteem was modeled with separate latent variables for males and females and was represented by self-ratings of individuals. The Omega reliability for male self-esteem was $\omega = .68$. The Omega reliability for female self-esteem was $\omega = .69$.

**Relationship Satisfaction**

Relationship satisfaction was defined as the amount of satisfaction the individual reported in his or her relationship. Individuals were asked to indicate how satisfied they are on a 5-point Likert response scale ranging from (1) very satisfied to (5) very dissatisfied. The seven items for this scale ranged from, “The physical intimacy you experience,” to the “The quality of your communication.” Relationship satisfaction was modeled with separate latent variables for males and females. The Omega reliability for male relationship satisfaction was $\omega = .72$. The Omega reliability for female relationship satisfaction was $\omega = .74$.

**Analytic Strategy**

Structural equation modeling software (AMOS version 18.0) was used to evaluate how the path model (see Figure 1) fit the data sample. This study specifically focused on the associations between shyness, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction. Nevertheless, there is more to relationship satisfaction and couple relationships than personality and self-esteem. Therefore, correlated errors were expected between the self-ratings of the partners in the couple. It was anticipated that male and female personality (shyness) variables would be correlated due to similarity in questions and the cross-sectional nature of the study. Additionally, it was expected that relationships satisfaction variables and indicators for males and females would be correlated as well.

**RESULTS**

**Relationships Among Variables**

We controlled for relationship length and found that it was significant. Multicollinearity was evaluated by investigating the correlation matrix, which is available by contacting the first author. All correlation coefficients were less than the recommended cutoff of .85 (Kline, 2005).
FIGURE 1 Model 1: Estimated path coefficients evaluating shyness, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction in couples. Note. Controlled for relationship length. *Significant at $p < .001$. (color figure available online)

Direct and Indirect Effects

Table 1 includes the direct and indirect path coefficients of partner-ratings of shyness and self-ratings of self-esteem on relationship satisfaction for males and females. Female’s self-ratings of self-esteem did not have direct effects on male’s satisfaction, and male’s self-ratings of self-esteem did not have direct effects on female’s satisfaction. Therefore, these variables were not included in the table. For both males and females, individuals’ perceptions of their partners’ shyness had the largest total effect on individual satisfaction (e.g., the greatest impact on male’s satisfaction was his individual perception

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects on Male’s Satisfaction</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male’s Shyness</td>
<td>-.110</td>
<td>-.034</td>
<td>-.144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male’s Self esteem</td>
<td>.170</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female’s Shyness</td>
<td>-.183</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>-.183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects on Female’s Satisfaction</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female’s Shyness</td>
<td>-.081</td>
<td>-.034</td>
<td>-.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female’s Self esteem</td>
<td>.171</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male’s Shyness</td>
<td>-.175</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>-.175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shyness and Relationship Satisfaction

of his female partners’ shyness). Self-ratings of self-esteem did not have any indirect impact on individual relationship satisfaction for neither males nor females. However, partner-ratings of shyness directly impacted satisfaction for individuals, regardless of gender. The variable of female’s shyness had a greater total effect on male’s satisfaction than male’s shyness had on female satisfaction, suggesting gender differences between indicators of relational outcomes.

Model Analyses

Structural equation-modeling (SEM) was done using AMOS 18.0. Several fit measures are reported to assist in the evaluation of how well the hypothesized model replicated the sample data by following the recommendations of Hoyle and Panter (1995). The initial analyses of Model 1 (see Figure 1) indicated that the model was a good fit to the data. The sample size for the SEM analyses was 4,192 couples. The \( \chi^2 \) with 405 degrees of freedom was 10188.273 and was significant (\( p = .000 \)). The TLI was .943, the CFI was .953, and the RMSEA was .04 (see Appendix). The statistical results for Model 1 from AMOS are presented in Figure 1 with the standardized coefficients. Upon close inspection of each of the path coefficients in the initial model, all of the paths were significant at \( p < .05 \). The results in Figure 1 also demonstrated that the model was somewhat effective in predicting male’s relationship satisfaction \( (R^2 = .19) \) and just slightly less effective for predicting female’s relationship satisfaction \( (R^2 = .20) \).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the influences of partner-ratings of personality (in particular, shyness) on satisfaction in couple relationships. Results showed that for men and women, individuals who were perceived as shy by their partners had lower self-esteem, as well as lower satisfaction in their romantic relationship.

Shyness and Satisfaction Variables

The results in Figure 1 address the first research question of this study regarding the direct pathways between shyness and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, regardless of gender, partner-ratings of shyness were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. For both men and women, when individuals rated their partner as shy, their partner’s relationship satisfaction was lower, as well as their own satisfaction. The influence was much stronger for individual satisfaction. These results support previous evidence of strong associations between personality traits and relationship
measures (e.g., Robins et al., 2000; Watson et al., 2004). In regard to shyness specifically, the findings contribute to the growing body of research suggesting that individuals who are perceived to be shy by their partners are more likely to struggle with their personal relationships, especially in the form of lower quality relationships with their romantic partners. The results extend previous work by showing that shyness is related to lower relationship satisfaction for both partners. For example, if a woman is perceived to be shy by her partner, not only does her own satisfaction with the relationship diminish, but her partner’s satisfaction decreases even more so.

These findings raise questions pertaining to why shyness may be so harmful to a relationship for both partners. Shyness may be a risk factor at various stages of the relationship that then affects the subsequent overall satisfaction with the relationship. For instance, shyness may influence the relationship in its early stages as, “shy individuals may be more likely to ‘settle’ in terms of their romantic partners” (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 612). Nelson and colleagues (2008) added that shy individuals may “fear the coupling process to such an extent that they would rather remain in a low-quality relationship than start the dating process over again... As a result, shyness may serve as a risk factor in the formation of satisfying, positive romantic relationships” (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 612).

It is likewise possible that challenges occur in maintaining a relationship with a shy individual. Watson and colleagues (2004) found evidence of complementarity in mate selection for individuals with extraverted qualities. For instance, extraverts (e.g., outgoing individuals) were likely to be coupled with introverts, rather than other extraverted partners (Watson et al., 2004). Shiota and Levenson (2007) posited that disparate personalities in couples, particularly when one partner is highly extraverted, pose a threat to the relationship. Researchers have found that similarity in partners’ personalities increases the likelihood that they will have similar emotional experiences, which in turn, fosters more fulfilling relationships (Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007). Therefore, it is conversely possible that personality differences would begin to affect the relationship via such factors as the expression of different emotions, variability in the approaches to conflict resolution, disparate levels of emotional availability, or the lack of skills on the part of the shy individual. It should be noted that it is not possible to say from the current study that shy individuals were indeed in relationships with individuals of different personalities, but this line of thinking provides possibilities for future work that is needed to help further explain the direct link found in the present study between perceived levels of partner’s shyness and both partners’ assessment of the relationship.

Self-Esteem as a Mediator

The second purpose of our study was to examine the possible mediating role of self-esteem in the links between shyness and relationship satisfaction.
Results show that the higher levels of shyness males or females perceive their partner to have, the lower self-esteem the individuals report of themselves. So, if a female perceives her male partner to be very shy her male partner will reportedly have lower self-esteem (the same holds for males’ perceptions of their partners’ shyness being negatively linked to females’ self-esteem). Furthermore, the positive coefficients for the pathways between self-esteem and satisfaction suggest that higher self-esteem is associated with reports of greater relationship satisfaction. Conversely, lower self-esteem is associated with lower reports of satisfaction.

These results expand current research and particularly raise questions regarding the role of self-esteem in the evaluation of shyness and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, these findings further our understanding of the reasons why shyness may serve to be a possible risk factor in relationships. While the amount of evidence pointing to a negative link between shyness and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2010; Nelson et al., 2008; Wenzel, 2001) has been growing, there have been few attempts made to explain the processes or mechanisms via which shyness may influence relationships. Results of the current study make a significant contribution to the literature by underscoring the harmful mediating role that self-esteem may play in the association between perceived partner shyness and lower quality relationships.

Furthermore, it is important to note that another contribution of this study is that ratings of shyness were made by partners in romantic relationships. Thus, it seems possible that partner perceptions of shyness in couple relationships influence their partners’ self-esteem. In other words, when a male perceives his female partner as being shy, her self-esteem may be negatively influenced by his perception. This would suggest the possibility that the association between shyness and self-esteem becomes particularly complex in relationships as self-esteem is not only impacted by one’s own feelings about being shy but what he or she perceives others may think of it. For example, according to Cooley (1902), significant others, such as intimate partners, play a role in determining the concept of the self. For instance, if individuals think they are shy and their partners validate this perception, it may have even a greater negative influence in how they feel about themselves and their estimation of self-worth. In turn, this complex process linking perceptions of shyness and self-esteem then affects the satisfaction felt by both individuals within the partner relationship.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study is not without its limitations. For instance, the sample included couples that were mostly homogeneous. Studies with larger representations of ethnicity, age, education, and relationship status are needed. Second, the cross-sectional nature of this study precludes the ability to support causal
inferences made in this study (i.e., the supposition that shyness predicts self-esteem and thereby relationship quality). Longitudinal work is needed in order to accurately evaluate the direction of the relations between shyness, self-esteem and satisfaction in couple relationships. Third, the use of RELATE's sociability/extraversion items as a proxy measure for shyness may not have fully captured the internal feelings as well as external experiences of the individuals. Therefore, additional studies using a more comprehensive measure of shyness is needed. Next, preferences in mate selection may have led to the pairing of couples used in this particular study. Individuals most likely couple with those who have socially desirable characteristics, potentially leading to greater overall satisfaction with the partner relationship. Finally, only overall relationship satisfaction was measured in this study. In the future, researchers may also benefit from examining the associations between personality traits (specifically shyness) and specific aspects of relationship satisfaction (e.g., physical intimacy, love, conflict resolution, equality, communication, etc.).

Despite these limitations, the present study makes several significant contributions and lays the foundation for future work in this area. Specifically, the large sample size of this study allowed for the examination of specific influences of shyness on couple satisfaction and demonstrated that when individuals perceived their partners as being shy, it negatively influenced individual overall relationship satisfaction. Further, it adds to the growing body of work pointing to shyness as a possible risk factor in relationship. By doing so, it is hoped that attention will be given to the need to help shy individuals and their partners in order to foster positive relationships.

REFERENCES


