Children's judgements of social withdrawal behaviours

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Abstract

Ding et al. (2015) demonstrated that Chinese children discriminate between the three subtypes of social withdrawal: shyness, unsociability, and social avoidance. This commentary on the Ding et al. paper highlights the need to further explore: 1) children's understanding of the implications of being shy, unsociable, or socially avoidant, including assessing these which we know are associated with outcomes for socially withdrawn children; 2) what additional subtypes might exist naturally within the Chinese culture; 3) consider the implications of social withdrawal on children's developing social skills.

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Exploring the construct of social withdrawal and how children understand this is important in understanding how different types of social withdrawal may influence peer relations. Ding et al. (2015) have explored young Chinese children's understanding of three subtypes of social withdrawal and the children's beliefs about the implications of being a socially withdrawn child within each subtype. In the paper Ding and colleagues have demonstrated that children do discriminate between shyness, unsociability, and social avoidance; however, it would be interesting to take this a step further with a closer look at the potential implications of these social withdrawal behaviours.

Evidence clearly suggests that for shyness and social avoidance there are relationships with social and academic competence, internalizing problems, and peer relationships (Ding et al., 2015). Given this, it would have been interesting to focus more directly on these factors when assessing children's understanding of the implications of being shy, unsociable, or social avoidant. For instance, asking children about the number of friends each socially withdrawn character may have to assess their understanding of wider peer relations (e.g., popularity and rejection), and about how happy, sad, or lonely the child might feel, would add to the evidence that children do understand the implications of being socially withdrawn.

Further to focusing on children's understanding of the implications, this study was exploring the construct of social withdrawal in China, and highlighted that Chinese children may see being socially withdrawn as having different implications on judgements made about the individual. This is consistent with the expectation that cultural values may influence how social behaviours are interpreted and responded to (Chen, Chung, & Hsiao, 2008). It therefore would have been interesting to have drawn on some of the implications that have been identified cross-culturally as being linked to social withdrawal. For instance, Chen and colleagues (2004) demonstrated that while

being prone to greater levels of shyness was related to greater levels of loneliness for Brazilian and Italian children and for Canadian children who also had poor peer relations, this relationship did not exist for Chinese children. This would have highlighted if children's understanding was consistent with the cross-cultural findings for relationships that exist.

What was particularly novel about Ding et al. (2015) was the focus on the socially avoidant subtype of social withdrawal. Socially avoidant children were perceived to be at particular risk for friendship difficulties, difficult behaviour in the class, poor relations with the teacher, and low perceived intelligence. In their paper, Ding and colleagues linked the findings to Chinese culture and values, which is one explanation. However, given the findings of other researchers that socially avoidant children, in comparison to shy and unsociable children, were particularly at risk for social and emotional difficulties (Coplan, Rose-Krasnor, Weeks, Kingsbury, Kingsbury, & Bullock, 2013), it may be possible that the findings in this study are not limited to within the Chinese culture. It may be that across cultures socially avoidant individuals will be viewed similarly.

There is clear evidence that the Chinese children did make different judgements for the socially avoidant child in comparison to the shy and unsociable child. However, we could question if this subtype would have been identified as a subtype of a socially withdrawn child. In very recent work by Özdemir, Cheah, and Coplan (2015) they did not find a social withdrawal category for social avoidance in Turkey. Özdemir and colleagues used open ended questions to assess children's understanding of social withdrawal behaviour and to define categories of behaviour. Through the descriptions and answers to the questions, they found that there were three subtypes of social withdrawal: shyness, unsociability, and regulated withdrawal (passive participant). They did not find a social avoidance subtype. This study used semi-structured interviews to understand how children themselves understood the behaviour of a socially withdrawn peer. This is a very different methodology to that used by Ding et al. (2015), but clearly demonstrated how in Turkey a novel

subtype of social withdrawal existed (regulated withdrawal), which fit with their cultural values and norms. It would be interesting to further the work of Ding et al. to allow children in China the opportunity to identify a socially withdrawn peer and to assess the implications of this using open-ended questioning.

The work of Ding and colleagues (2015) provides an important avenue for future research. It is important to understand how children view their socially withdrawn peers to understand what behaviours socially withdrawn children may be participating in that results in poor peer relationships. Children develop and hone their social skills in the peer context, and it is known that children who have better social skills have more positive peer relations. In fact, there is a reciprocal relationship between peer relations and the development of social skills, where children who have more positive peer relations will also have better social skills (Merrell, 1999). Children who are shy or social avoidant may not experience the social interaction with peers that provides the opportunities to develop necessary social skills and could lead to being perceived more negatively by their peers. In contrast, researchers have demonstrated that unsociable children will participate in peer interactions (Coplan et al., 2013; Ding et al., 2015) which will provide opportunities to enhance their skills. Ding et al. assessed children's perception of how smart the social withdrawn child is, it would be interesting to also assess their social competence.

Throughout my commentary, I have raised a number of ideas that could be used for future directions. The Ding et al. (2015) study provides a good framework to build on what is known about children's understanding of social withdrawal, yet there are many questions that still need to be answered. Looking at this construct within non-Western societies is important, but it will also be important to explore these questions more cross-culturally to compare children's understanding across cultures and evaluate the role of culture in defining social withdrawal.

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