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SHYNESS, LONELINESS, AND ATTITUDE TOWARD CELEBRITIES

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ABSTRACT

Measures of shyness, loneliness and attitudes toward a favorite celebrity were administered to 150 participants. We hypothesized that shyness and loneliness would be linked to the strength of one's "parasocial" relationship with celebrities, and to "highly visible" celebrities in particular. Of the 16 correlation coefficients we obtained, 15 were in the predicted direction, but none exceeded .24. Either shy and lonely people are not predisposed to seek strong parasocial bonds with celebrities or the hypothesized relationships are so weak that they account for very little variance.

[124]

[125]

INTRODUCTION

The term "parasocial interaction" was coined to describe one-sided relationships in which one party knows a great deal about the other, but the relationship is not reciprocal (Horton and Wohl 1956; Rubin, Perse, and Powell 1985). Such relationships are typified in the one-sided link between most celebrity performers and their fans (McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran, in press), and have become increasingly common during the latter half of the Twentieth Century and the concomitant rise in television and motion picture popularity (Giles 2000). Television executives have actively promoted parasocial relationships. By design, television news has increasingly come to resemble celebrity gossip. Events that would not be newsworthy if they happened to "ordinary" people have become newsworthy when they happened to celebrities (McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran, in press). Television executives have also promoted parasocial relations by insisting that celebrities use a conversational style (Rubin, Perse and Powell 1985), and by choosing personnel less for their skill than their ability to project warmth and develop a pseudo-

friendship with the audience (Bogart 1980; Powers 1978). The opportunity to form a parasocial relationship might be especially appealing to those who experience loneliness and shyness.

Shyness has been defined as discomfort and inhibition while in the presence of others (Cheek and Buss 1981). Shy persons tend to have less satisfactory interpersonal involvements and fewer friends (Jones and Russell 1982). They also tend to talk less and be described by others as unfriendly (Cheek and Buss 1981).

Although shyness and loneliness are distinct constructs, they tend to overlap, inasmuch as measures of each typically correlate in the .40 to .50 range (Jones, Rose, and Russell 1990). Both are linked to unsatisfactory social interaction (Jones, Rose, and Russell 1990). Loneliness has been defined as "a sense of isolation that persists over time" (Perse and Rubin 1990, p. 37). Lonely persons tend to be deficient in communication skills (Spitzberg and Canary 1985). In turn, these deficiencies isolate people from the very social activities that might reduce loneliness (Perse and Rubin 1990). According to media uses and gratification theory, when needs cannot be met in more "natural" ways, people often turn to media (Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas 1973; Rosengran and Windahl 1972; Rubin and Rubin, 1985).

Shy and lonely persons might be especially attracted to parasocial relationships because these relationships make few social demands. Shy persons do not need to be friendly toward and lonely persons are not required to communicate with the celebrities they encounter regularly on television and in the movie theater. Parasocial relationships with celebrities do not force shy and lonely people to experience the discomfort that typifies their interactions with "ordinary" people.

[125]

[126]

However, previous studies that have attempted to link parasocial attraction with reduced opportunities and skills for social interaction have not always yielded strong relationships (Levy 1979; Miyazaki 1982; Nordlund 1978; Perse and Rubin 1990; Rosengran, Windahl, Hokansson, and Johnsson-Smaragdi 1976; Rubin, Perse, and Powell 1985). Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985, p. 157) have attributed these weak relationships to sociological orientations characterized by "considering only the number and availability of functional alternatives to satisfy social interaction needs." However, their own research revealed a weak (.18) relationship between loneliness and reliance on television when lonely, and a weaker one (.15) between parasocial interaction with a favorite local TV news personality and reliance on TV when lonely.

Psychometric improvement leads to greater accuracy in our ability to detect small but real relationships. We felt that the combination of improvements described here would reveal that the link between social anxiety and parasocial interaction is stronger than that shown by Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985). First, we used a different measure of parasocial interaction, the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS; McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran, in press; Maltby, Houran, Lange, and McCutcheon 2000; Maltby and McCutcheon 2001). The CAS has excellent psychometric properties, and the added advantage of having three factors; each of which can be correlated with measures of unsatisfactory social interaction.

Second, we used version three of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell and Cutrone 1988), instead of the second version used by Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985). Version three has the advantage of having a lower reading level (Shaver and Brennan 1991).

Third, participants in their study were forced to choose among a limited number of local, minor celebrity broadcasters. In our study, participants were free to choose their favorite celebrity from any profession of their choice. It may be that in their study many participants did not feel a strong parasocial attraction to any of the newscasters from which they were forced to choose.

Fourth, we widened our net, so to speak, by including a measure of shyness. Perhaps shyness is more closely related to parasocial attraction than loneliness. Our study was conducted partially for the purpose of finding out.

[126]

[127]

Because shyness and loneliness are overlapping constructs we hypothesized that both would be positively related to the strength of one's attitude toward a favorite celebrity. Additionally, we hypothesized that this positive relationship would be stronger for participants whose favorite celebrity was highly visible (a media talk show host or a person otherwise prominently heard or seen frequently on television). Our reasoning was that a highly visible person would be "available" to meet the needs of the shy and lonely more frequently than the those celebrities who are rarely visible to the public. Rubin and McHugh (1987) have pointed out that in parasocial relationships amount of exposure to the other person (a celebrity, in this case) leads to a greater attraction and a resulting sense that the relationship is important. We further hypothesized that scores on the "intense personal" (factor 2) of the CAS would be most closely related to shyness and loneliness measures because "intense personal" comes closer to capturing the parasocial flavor than do the other two factors. "Intense-personal" seems to be concerned with one's emotional state, just as shyness and loneliness have strong emotional components.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 150 persons (93 females, mean age = 24.6 years, SD = 10.6 years; 57 males, mean age = 26.0 years, SD = 12.5 years) recruited from metropolitan Orlando. Of these, 99 were community college students. The remaining 51 were either undergraduate college students or individuals recruited by a small group of undergraduate students. Four of the participants had earned at least a masters degree, 13 were college graduates, and 11 were high school graduates. None of the participants knew in advance that they would be asked questions either about attitudes toward celebrities or about shyness and loneliness. An additional nine persons either failed to complete large portions of one or more scales or they declined to participate.

Measures

Shyness was operationalized as scores on the Revised Cheek and Buss Shyness Scale (Cheek 1983), a 13-item, Likert-type scale favorably reviewed by Leary (1991). Four items are reverse-

scored, and the range is 13 to 65 (highest shyness). Cronbach's alpha was found to be .90 and test-retest reliability was .88 with a 45-day interval. Shyness Scale scores have been found to correlate as expected with other scales that attempt to assess social anxiety (Leary 1991).

[127]

[128]

Loneliness was measured by scores on version three of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell and Cutrona 1988). This is a 20-item, Likert-type scale, favorably described by Shaver and Brennan (1991). Nine items are reverse-scored, and the range is 20 to 80 (highest loneliness). Cronbach's alphas ranging from .89 to .94 and a one-year test-retest correlation of .73 have been reported by the authors (Russell and Cutrona 1988). Reviewers gave high marks to this scale for its discriminative validity and its successful attempts to reduce social desirability (Shaver and Brennan 1991).

The Celebrity Attitude Scale, in the present form, consists of 23 Likert-type items, an item range of 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree), and a total range of 23 to 115 (highest favorable attitude). Cronbach's alpha for this version was .86. Factor analysis has provided support for using a three-factor solution. Factor one, "entertainment/social," consists of items like "My friends and I like to discuss what my favorite celebrity has done." Factor two, "intense personal," consists of items such as "I am obsessed by details of my favorite celebrity's life." Factor three, "mild pathological," contains items like "If I were lucky enough to meet my favorite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it" (Maltby, Houran, Lange, Ashe, and McCutcheon 2000).

A similar, 33-item version of the CAS correlated as expected with a number of single-item scales. For example, high scorers on the CAS described themselves as "interested in the lives of many celebrities," and disagreed that too much media coverage had been given to the deaths of Lady Diana and John Kennedy, Jr. (McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran, in press).

Procedure

The three scales described above, along with brief demographic questions, were administered in one session to all participants. One of the questions asked participants to select from 13 categories (acting, artist, author, medicine, modeling, music, news politics, religion, royalty, radio or TV talk show, science, sports) the category for which their favorite celebrity was best known. For the purpose of this study, those participants who selected either an actor or a talk show host were designated as "highly visible." The order of the scales was counterbalanced to reduce the possibility of a systematic order effect. Participants completed the questionnaire before or after psychology classes, or in a few instances in their homes or workplaces. Participants were told nothing about the purposes of the study until all materials were completed.

[128]

[129]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cronbach's alpha for the CAS was .92. The correlation between shyness and loneliness was .44, $p < .001$. The mean for the Shyness Scale was 32.67 (SD = 9.2). The mean for UCLA Loneliness was 42.09 (SD = 10.5), and the CAS mean was 50.06 (SD = 16.2). CAS factor means were 26.03 (SD = 8.5), 16.30 (SD = 6.7), and 7.73 (SD = 3.2), respectively. CAS scores were inversely related to age, $r = -.20$, $p < .01$. Scores on the CAS also correlated significantly with self-reported number of movies watched per week, $r = .22$, $p < .01$, and with self-reports of the amount of general interest in celebrities, $r = .40$, $p < .001$. All of these measures are either consistent with previous research or reasonable expectations. Taken together they suggest that: our participants were similar to participants in earlier studies; our participants were reasonably careful in filling out the materials; we scored them accurately; and, there is additional reason to be confident about the validity of the CAS.

Shyness scores correlated .13 with total CAS scores, and .11, .13, and .15 with the three factor scores, respectively. UCLA Loneliness scores correlated .05 with total CAS scores, and .05, -.02, and .13 with the three factor scores, respectively. The largest of these correlation coefficients narrowly failed to make the .05 alpha level.

For the participants who made "highly visible" favorite celebrity choices ($n = 75$), shyness was correlated .17 with total CAS, and .12, .16, and .21 with the three factor scores, respectively. Loneliness scores correlated .17 with total CAS, and .12, .13, and .24 with the three factor scores, respectively. All eight of these correlation coefficients are larger than their counterparts based on the entire sample and the largest was significant at .05. However, these coefficients are still weak, and even the one significant finding should be interpreted cautiously in light of the large number of coefficients presented here.

For 36 participants whose favorite celebrities were chosen from "lower visibility" categories (author, model, politics, religion, sports) shyness was correlated .11 with total CAS, and .02, .16, and .21 with the three factor scores, respectively. Loneliness scores correlated -.03 with total CAS, and -.13, -.09, and .26 with the three factor scores, respectively. In comparison to their "high visibility" counterparts the trend was in the predicted direction (scores for "lower visibility" participants were generally closer to .00), but so weak that we cannot rule out chance as an explanation for our results. With the wisdom of hindsight it could be argued that some sports heroes, some models, and some politicians are highly visible. Indeed it may be difficult to become a celebrity without becoming highly visible.

Perse and Rubin (1990) found that lonely people made frequent use of highly visible media, specifically movies and television. However, their data suggested that lonely people did this primarily to pass the time rather than form or deepen any parasocial attachments.

[129]

[130]

Our results, in conjunction with those of Perse and Rubin (1990) and Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985), suggest that the link between two measures of social anxiety and the strength of a parasocial interaction to a celebrity is either very weak or non-existent. There may be a few persons who pursue parasocial relationships with celebrities in an attempt to alleviate shyness or

loneliness. It may even be true that parasocial relationships with highly visible celebrities are appealing to some persons with mild behavioral disorders. However, these appear to be weak trends, at best. Further research is needed to determine if these weak trends are illusory or real.

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[130]

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[132]

[133]