



Shyness and Self-Preoccupation: Effects on Conversation Partners

Lynne Henderson
Leonard Horowitz
Deborah Tatar
Kirsty Bortnik

May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

1



Attentional Engagement

- **Successful interpersonal interaction involves attentional engagement (Tronick and Gianino, 1986; Stern, 1977).**
- **Shy people are “naturally preoccupied” (Zimbardo, 1977).**

May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

2

Successful interpersonal interaction involves accurate listening and attentional engagement.. (Tronick and Gianino, 1986; Stern, 1977)

Shy people are “naturally preoccupied” because attentional resources are focused on adequacy concerns (Zimbardo, 1977).

Avoidance May Ensnue



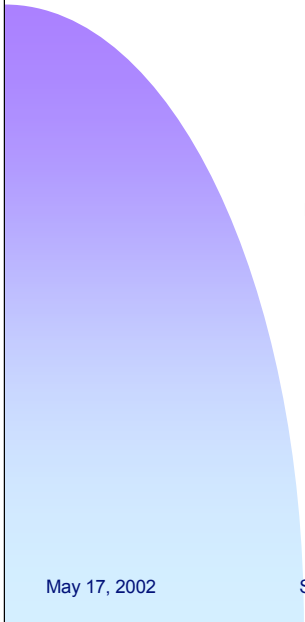
May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

3

Avoidance may ensue. Some shy people become isolated, even alienated.

In the words of this cartoon, the staff member says, "The staff feels that calling your office "the bunker" sends the wrong message."



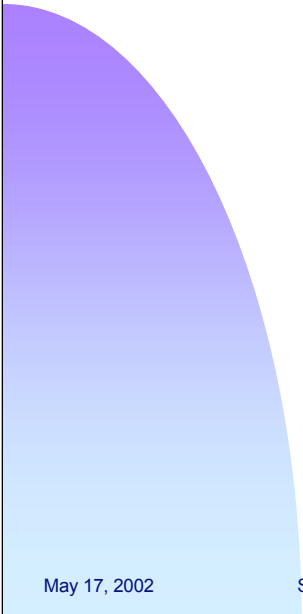
Shyness

- **Critical self-consciousness, inhibition, and avoidance in interpersonal situations.**

✦ (Arnold & Cheek, 1986; Melchior & Cheek, 1990; Henderson, 1992; Zimbardo, 1977).

May 17, 2002 Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research 4

Preoccupation and critical self-consciousness are hallmarks of problematic shyness and are extreme in shyness clinic clients (Arnold & Cheek, 1986; Melchior & Cheek, 1990; Henderson, 1994; Zimbardo, 1977).



Preoccupation

- Preoccupation interferes with social interaction and self-expression.
 - (Arnold & Cheek, 1986; Cheek & Hogan, 1983 ; Henderson, 1992; Melchior & Cheek, 1990; Zimbardo, 1977).
- Clinical observation:
 - ◆ Shy clients become distracted.
 - ◆ Most do not have skill deficits.

May 17, 2002 Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research 5

A large body of research has demonstrated that self-preoccupation interferes with attentional focus and social interaction. Shy people want to connect, but become distracted by worry and concern about how others are perceiving them. As a result they have trouble concentrating and perceiving others accurately.

Self-preoccupation also interferes with self expression, even creative expression in writing, but only when shys are under evaluative threat according to a 1986 study by Cheek & Stahl.

(Cheek, J. M., & Stahl, S. S. (1986). Shyness and verbal creativity. Journal of Research in Personality, 20, 51-61.)

Furthermore,

Clinical observation suggests that shy clients do NOT have skill deficits, and when they feel accepted they show adequate, sometimes superior social skills.

Conversations with Herself by Mary Hatch



May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

6

This painting by Mary Hatch illustrates the internal dialogue. Shy people may sometimes talk to themselves more than to others.



Interpersonal Motives

- Shy people desire inclusion and acceptance.
- Social evaluation threatens the desired state.
- Satisfying the motive may reduce concern and improve performance.

May 17, 2002

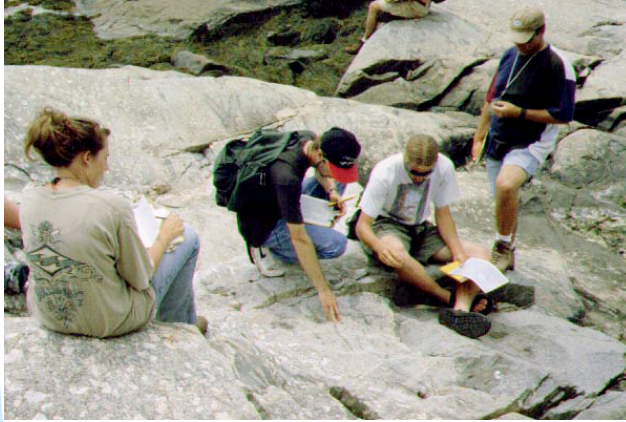
Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

7

Concern about adequacy may interfere with satisfying a communal motive, such as a need for inclusion or acceptance. Evaluation threatens getting the need met and triggers anxiety and self-preoccupation.

Because shy people want to connect with others, satisfying the need may reduce their concern. Therefore, removing the threat of failure should lead to increased attentional focus and improved social performance.

Interpersonal Interaction

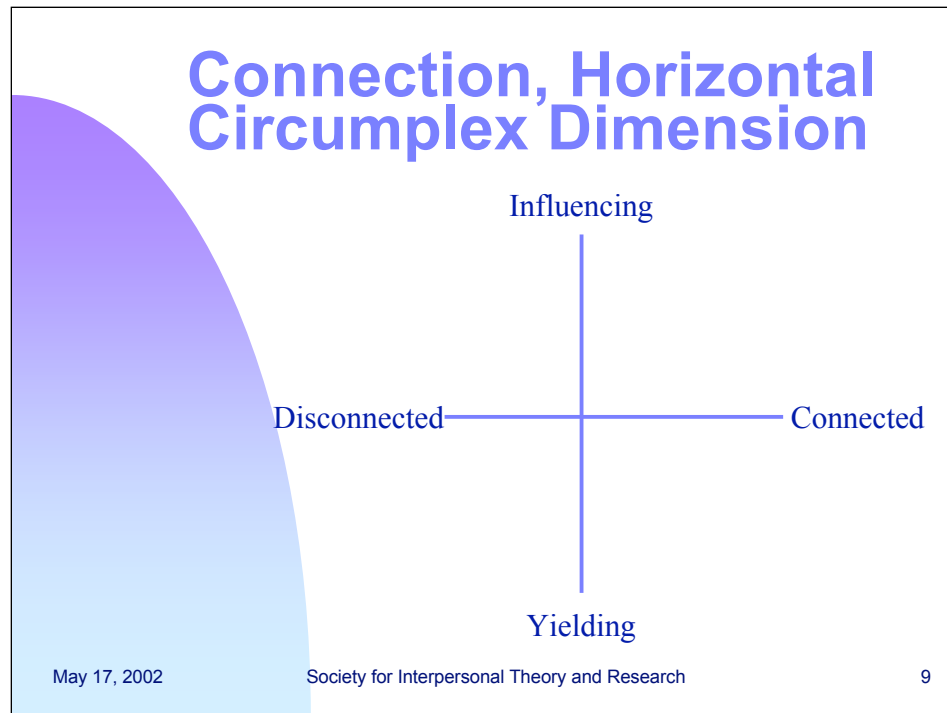


May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

8

Because shy people are motivated to satisfy communal needs, we therefore hypothesized that shy listeners in a dyadic listening task who anticipated evaluation would become preoccupied and would have a negative impact on speakers. We thought that removing evaluative threat would reduce the anticipation of failure and increase effective listening behavior.



This study is one in a series of studies of attentional engagement.

The research paradigm involves manipulating a listener's responsiveness. We are interested in the effect on the speaker.

In this study we examine speakers' reactions to listeners who are focusing on "just listening" vs. focusing on their performance which is being evaluated.



Hypotheses

- Speakers will find preoccupied shy listeners aversive.
- Speakers will be more comfortable with shy listeners in the reduced threat condition.
- Speakers will rate non-shy listeners higher in the evaluation condition than in the reduced threat condition.

May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

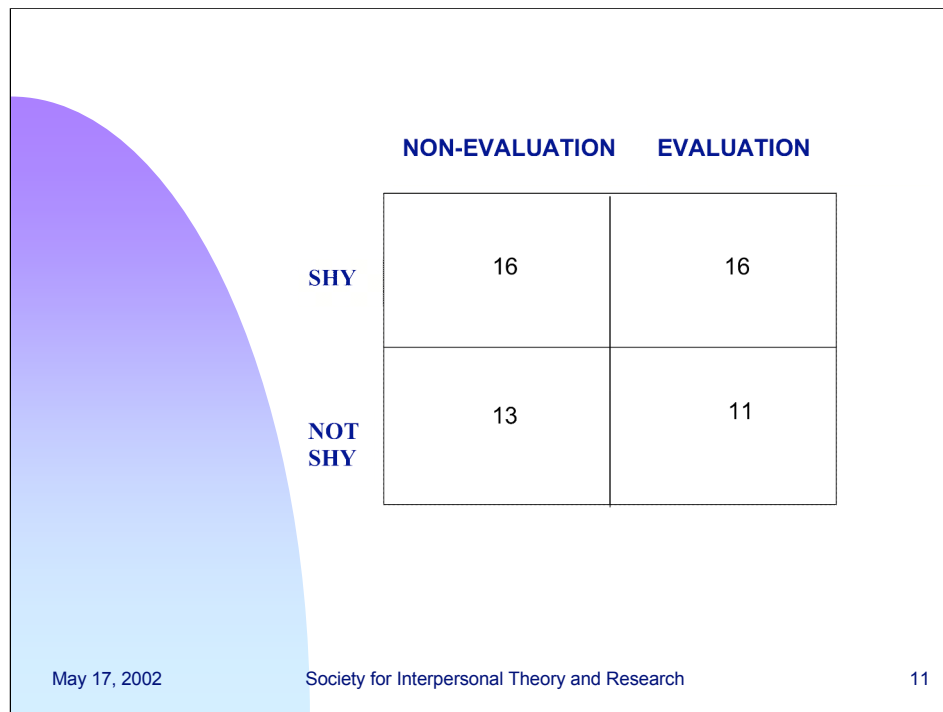
10

Given that shy listeners under evaluative threat become preoccupied with their social performance, we hypothesized that

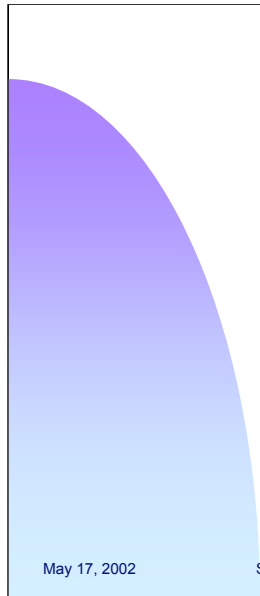
Speakers would find them aversive as listeners, particularly if speakers were telling about an experience in which they felt vulnerable.

However, speakers would be more comfortable with shy listeners in the reduced threat condition.

Speakers would also rate non-shy listeners higher in the evaluation condition than in the reduced threat condition because non-shy listeners would not be threatened by evaluation and would concentrate on being good listeners.



Here are the four conditions. There are 56 speaker-listener dyads. Shy and non-shy individuals are listening to Speakers' stories about experiences in which they felt ashamed. In one condition they are told to "just listen". In the other condition they are told they are being evaluated. Instructions for the speakers were the same in all conditions.



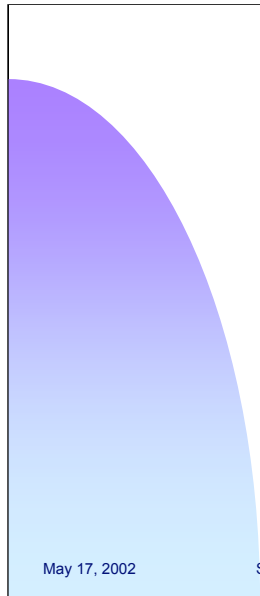
Manipulation

- **Speakers: Talk about an experience in which you felt ashamed.**
- **Describe the circumstance, exactly what happened, and also how you felt during the experience.**

May 17, 2002 Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research 12

SPEAKERS IN ALL CONDITIONS ARE TOLD:

Social interaction is a very important aspect of life, and in this experiment, we are interested in how people tell stories. You are going to be the story teller and your partner is going to be the listener or audience. Your job is to talk about a personal experience that you have had where you have felt ashamed. Some things that you might include would be to describe the circumstance, exactly what happened, and also how you felt during the experience and any consequences that arose to either you or to the others involved.



Manipulation

- **Listeners: Evaluation**
 - Focused on Performance
 - Preoccupation

- ◆ We are evaluating people's listening skills as one important aspect of social competence.
- ◆ We'll be recording you on videotape so expert judges can evaluate your performance.
- ◆ Following the conversation, we'll ask you to give a short talk describing what you did to be an active listener.

May 17, 2002 Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research 13

Listeners in the evaluation condition were told:

As you know, social interaction is an extremely important part of life: Socially skillful people are generally more successful than other people. In this experiment we are evaluating people's listening skills as one important aspect of a person's social competence.

Your partner will be asked to tell you about a personal experience that he/she recently had, and your job is to be an active listener. Be engaged—the way you would want a listener to be. You may wonder about the reason for the video camera. We'll be recording your performance on videotape so expert judges can watch you, examine your listening skills, and evaluate your performance. Most people find that they are able to ignore the camera if they try.

Following the conversation, we'll ask you to give a short talk describing what you did to be an active listener. Our judges will then evaluate your performance. Afterwards, one of our judges will be able to give you feedback about your success with social competence and active listening skills.

Really do your best to be an active listener. Do whatever needs to be done to promote and facilitate an engaging social interaction.

Manipulation

■ Listeners: Non-Evaluation

- “Off the hook”
- Do “what comes naturally”

- ◆ Your job is just to be there as the listener. Even though you don’t have to do much, it helps the speaker clarify his or her thoughts and feelings about the experience.
- ◆ There are no right or wrong ways to listen.

May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

14

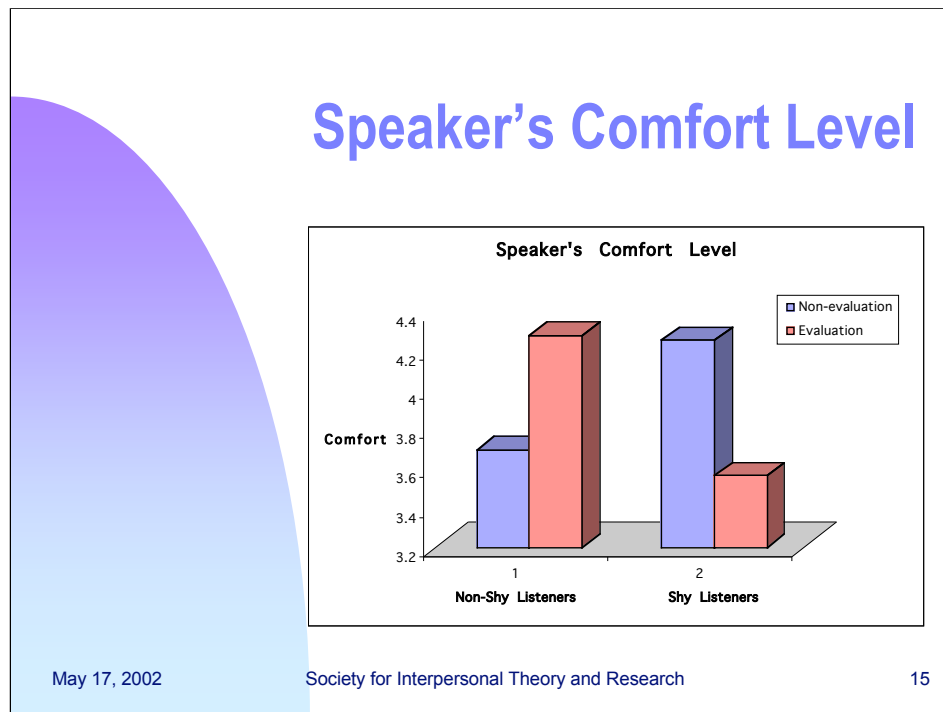
Listeners in the Non- Evaluation Condition are “let off the hook” and are told:

Social interaction is one aspect of life, and one part of social interaction is telling people about experiences we’ve had—telling a story. In this experiment we are interested in how your partner tells a story to you about his/her experiences.

Your partner will be asked to tell you a story about a personal experience that he/she recently had. Your job is just to be there as the listener. Even though you don’t have to do much, your being there and being interested is important since it helps the speaker clarify his or her thoughts and feelings about the experience.

There are no right or wrong ways to listen. If you feel like saying something, do; if you don’t feel like saying anything, that’s OK, too—do whatever seems easy, natural, and comfortable to you.

Here’s what we found:

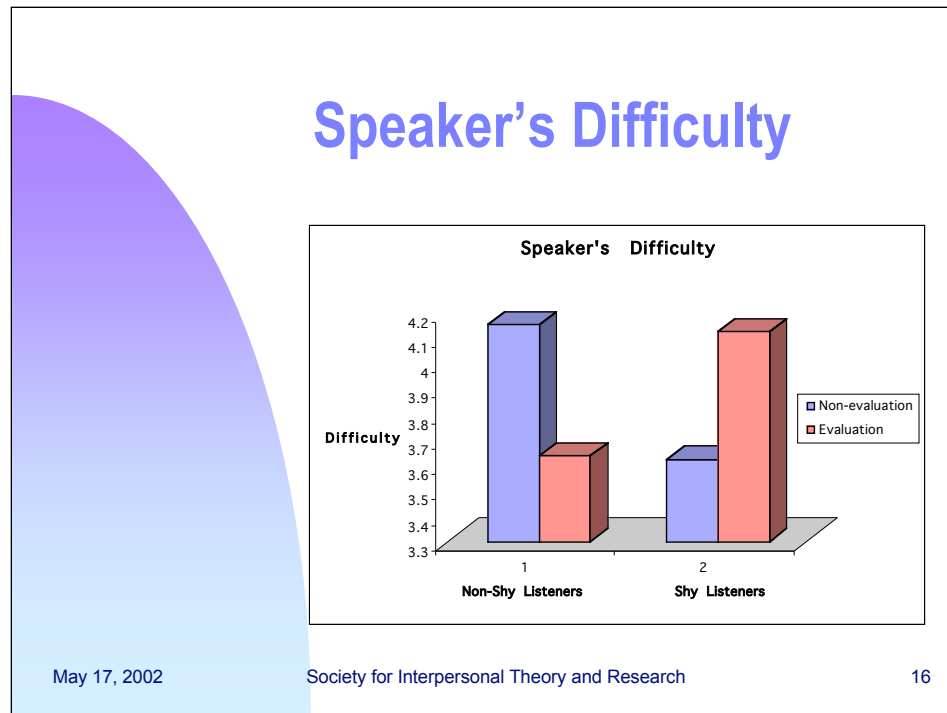


All these ratings are from the speaker's point of view. The **SPEAKERS** are rating the listeners.

This graph shows the comfort level of the speaker. On the horizontal axis we have two kinds of listeners, the shy and not-shy. The blue bars represent the reduced threat condition and the maroon bars represent the evaluation condition.

As you can see, speakers were less comfortable with shy listeners in the evaluation condition, consistent with previous findings that preoccupation interferes with social interaction.

Importantly, however, speakers were more comfortable with a shy listener than a non-shy listener when they were “just listening” as they would naturally.



This graph is the same, but, in contrast to comfort level, represents speakers' level of difficulty in telling about their experience.

Speakers had less difficulty telling shy listeners than non-shy listeners about experiences where they experienced shame when the listeners were just listening naturally and were not focused on their social performance.

In contrast, speakers had less difficulty doing the task with non-shy listeners who were focused on performing well as listeners in the evaluation condition.



Suggesting:

- That shy individuals may be more empathic than non-shy listeners when a communal motive is satisfied.
- These results are consistent with previous results with shyness and creativity (Cheek & Stahl, 1986).

May 17, 2002

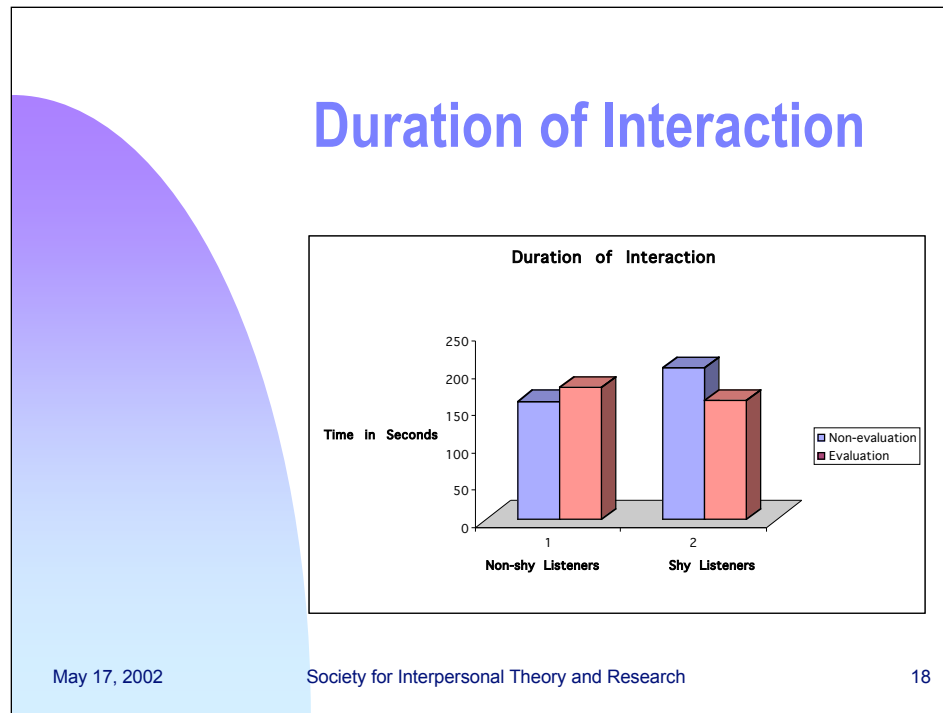
Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

17

Our results suggest that shy individuals may be more socially skilled and empathic than non-shy listeners when a communal motive is satisfied; that is, when they are not being evaluated and are just being themselves.

These results are consistent with Cheek and Stahl's results with shyness and creative self-expression (Cheek & Stahl, 1986). When there is no evaluative threat, their natural talents and abilities are expressed.

Tolman's theory of latent learning (1932) would suggest that shy people have skills, they simply do not express them.



In fact, the duration of the interaction was longest with shy listeners in the attentive condition, $F(1, 46)=53.188$ $p. <.09$. (this analysis with gender in anova).

To summarize, the major findings, which are preliminary because we are still gathering data, are 1. speakers' were more comfortable and found their task least onerous when they were telling a story about a shame experience to shy listeners who were not under evaluative threat, and with non-shy listeners who were.

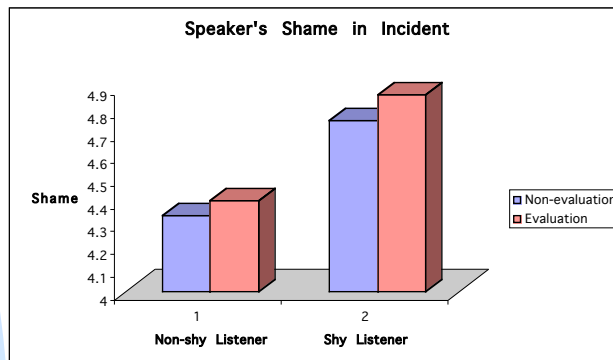
2. The duration of the interaction was longest with shy listeners in the non-evaluative condition.



Results to Examine

- Other intriguing results that we'll examine further by using independent raters to make judgments:

Speaker's Shame in Incident



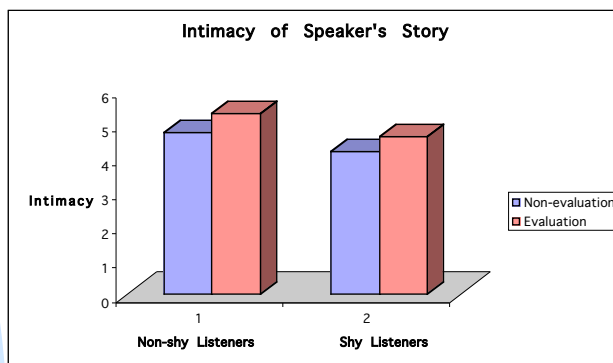
May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

20

The first thing of interest is that it appears that shy listeners got the speaker to expose more shameful material. Is that due to an ability, such as skillful listening or empathy when shy listeners are not under evaluative threat?

Intimacy of Speaker's Story



May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

21

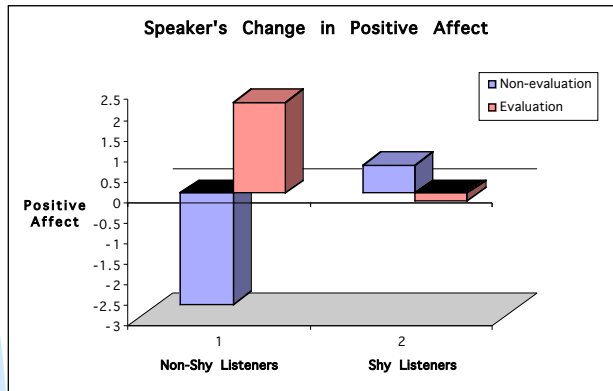
On the other hand, when you ask the speaker how intimate the story was, they reported that they told a more intimate story to non-shy listeners $F(1, 46)=84.3, p. <.07$.

They also said they told more intimate stories in the evaluation condition $F(1, 46)=49.0, p. <.09$.

Perhaps these findings reflect the effort listeners were making to be good listeners, particularly the non-shy listeners who were not preoccupied.

Our early observations of the video-tapes suggest that non-shy listeners talked more and gave more advice. We'll know more when we code the tapes.

Speaker's Change in Positive Affect



May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

22

In fact, speakers showed a significant reduction in positive affect with non-shy listeners who were just listening.

Perhaps these non-shy listeners talked too much when they weren't focused on being good listeners. When they were, speakers' positive affect increased.

There was a small increase in speakers' positive affect when shy listeners were "just listening" and no overall decrease.

Questions and Implications

- What can be done to make shy people more comfortable?
 - ◆ Focus on experimentation in safety of group, and finding one's OWN style.
 - ◆ Help clients develop accurate perspective taking.
 - ◆ Educate. Extraversion is not "the only game in town".

May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

23

Interpersonal interaction is about satisfying communal and agentic goals.

Methods need to be found that enable a shy person to feel less threatened.

Focusing on experimentation, and finding one's OWN style may help, particularly in treatment. Interaction skills are different with different people in different settings.

Clinical observation suggests that it is important to acknowledge natural strengths, like listening skills, and to help clients develop and practice accurate perspective taking, rather than seeing others as a critical audience.

It may also be important to counter stereotypes of Hyper-extraverted media images, particularly for males, that undermine self-confidence. These images do not accurately reflect the population, 40% of population is introverted.

Explore gender differences. Preliminary analyses suggest that shy males may be more empathic.



Thank you

- Contact:
- Lynne Henderson
- lynne@psych.stanford.edu
- 650-814-9210

May 17, 2002

Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research

24