Beyond social withdrawal:

Shyness, unsociability, and peer avoidance

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Abstract. Theoretical considerations regarding the significance of early peer interaction for later development suggest that socially withdrawn children may represent an 'at risk' population. An analysis of behavioral, cognitive, and motivational correlates of intra-individual differences in social involvement suggests that social involvement should be treated as a multidimensional concept. I conceive social involvement as the result of two opposing motivational tendencies, social approach and social avoidance, which I assume to be largely independent of each other. Application of this approach to interindividual differences results in at least three subgroups of socially withdrawn children (unsociable, shy, and avoidant ones). Results of the Munich Longitudinal Study on the Genesis of Individual Competencies show that socially withdrawn children indeed represent a heterogeneous group. Among preschool and kindergarten children, unsociable, shy, and avoidant children, as well as children characterized by a high rate of constructive solitary activity, appear to differ considerably in various social-cognitive characteristics.

One focal concept in the last decade of research on children's peer relationships and social skills has been social withdrawal. From a Piagetian perspective, the reciprocal nature of peer relations and their inherent interpersonal conflicts stimulate the development of perspective-taking abilities, moral judgment, and negotiation skills [Youniss, 1980]. From a social learning view. children gain social knowledge and develop social skills through peer reinforcement. imitating peers during parallel or interactive play, or peer tutoring [Hartup, 1983]. Both theoretical approaches stress the significance of peer interaction for mastering major developmental tasks. Thus. children who do not interact often with their peers may be at risk in their later cognitive and social development. Insufficient social-cognitive skills may, in turn, lead to a negative self-concept via social comparison processes and feedback from peers (e.g.. neglect or rejection). and hence may cause emotional problems [Dodge. 1986; Rubin et al., 1989].

Intra-individual Differences in Social Involvement

Although most of the research on social withdrawal has pertained to interindividual differences and their change over time, the differential psychological question regarding outcomes can be properly answered, in my view, only on the basis of an understanding of the nature of intra-individual differences in social withdrawal.

Parten [1932] proposed 6 behavioral categories of increasing *social participation:* unoccupied, solitary play, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative play. Her approach became well integrated into the social development literature because of her empirical finding that assessments of social participation appeared to reflect teachers' impressions about children, as well as an important dimension of age-related change. However, close inspection of her data reveals that most of the age difference was attributable to a few children below 3 years of age. More important in the present context is the problem that Parten's operationalization of social participation does not adequately reflect a continuum of nonsocial to social involvement. Why should solitary play be more social than being unoccupied? Alternatively, Parten's system may be seen as reflecting the 'maturity of play'. But why, then, is onlooking more mature than solitary play? Parten's [1932] construct of social participation seems to reflect three implicit assumptions: (a) social play is more mature than nonsocial play; (b) more mature play involves cognitive processes of a higher level; and (c) degree of social involvement is more important for the maturity of play than is cognitive involvement. In order to make these implicit assumptions explicit and testable, social and cognitive involvement should be distinguished, enabling their interaction to be studied empirically.

Smilansky [1968] elaborated the original Piagetian distinction between sensorimotor, preoperational, and concrete operational play by categorizing play into functional, constructive, and dramatic play, and games with rules. She thought that these cognitive types of play would develop in this sequence. Empirical studies have shown that this is true for the sequence (a) functional play, (b) constructive/dramatic play, and (c) games with rules. However, there is no evidence that dramatic play develops later than constructive play. Also, no evidence exists for a close relation between social and cognitive types of play during development [Rubin et al., 1983].

This conclusion also applies to unoccupied and onlooking behavior. The Piagetian perspective stresses the role of action in cognitive development; both unoccupied and onlooking behavior thus may be assumed to indicate a rather low cognitive level. However, it is unknown what levels of cognitive processing may occur when children carefully watch the activities of peers, or whether unoccupied children may be engaged in rich fantasies. Caution should be exercised in making assumptions concerning the cognitive correlates of children's behavioral states.

I am currently involved in a longitudinal study of children's emerging social-cognitive competencies in which a sample of 126 children is being followed from the beginning of preschool at age 3–4 through elementary school [Asendorpf, 1986a]. This study is part of the Munich Longitudinal Study on the Genesis of Individual Competencies (LOGIC) [Weinert and Schneider, 1986].

Within this part of LOGIC. we analyze children's dyadic free play in a controlled situation. among other assessments [Asendorpf, 1987]. The design allows for evaluating the role of partner familiarity, as well as developmental trends in children's social-cognitive behavior.

Between ages 5 and 6, nonconstructive solitary and parallel play decreased, whereas solitary-constructive and social-interactive behavior increased. The presence of an unfamiliar peer inhibited social interaction and parallel-constructive play, and increased solitary-constructive and particularly all forms of solitary-nonconstructive activity. Thus, unfamiliarity with the peer appeared to cause children to regress to less mature forms of play. Doyle et al. [1980] have reported similar findings. Analyses of changes in the proportion of these behavioral categories over time revealed three strong changes, but only in the presence of an unfamiliar peer. Onlooking peaked in the 2nd min and decreased steadily afterwards; parallel play increased until the 8th min and then decreased, and social interaction increased steadily until the end of the play session. These changes reflect the long process of contact initiation with the unknown partner. Children appeared to be motivated to interact but were too inhibited to do so in the beginning.

The Motivation for Social Involvement

Presently, little is known about what motivates children to play with peers. But it seems clear that intra-individual changes in social involvement cannot be explained by a single dimension such as affiliation motivation. Research on the motivational bases of infants' reactions to adult strangers [Sroufe, 1977], or of the interaction of attachment and exploratory behavior [Jones, 1985], suggests that a behavioral systems perspective. which assumes that many different motivational systems contribute to social involvement, is more appropriate. When being aroused, some of these motivational systems increase the tendency to *approach* peers, others increase the tendency to *ignore* peers, and still others increase the tendency to *avoid* peers. Yet, very little is known about why children approach peers [Hartup, 1983], and not much more is known about why children sometimes avoid playing with peers. Thus, it seems rather fruitless today to formulate elaborate theoretical models of all the possible motivational systems that must be considered.

Instead, a less ambitious endeavor may be more appropriate. I have suggested [Asendorpf, 1986a, b] conceiving of intra-individual changes in social involvement as resulting from two different behavioral tendencies that are regarded as *independent* of each other: social approach and social avoidance. Each tendency may be considered the result of different motivational tendencies contributing to approach or avoidance, respectively. This simple scheme allows us to distinguish among four motivational states (table 1). Children may simply ignore peers because they are immersed in nonsocial activities such as playing with toys. They may be motivated to play with peers or to avoid them. And they may be trapped in an *approach-avoidance conflict* because different motivational systems are aroused, resulting in contrary behavioral tendencies. This conflict can be resolved behaviorally by a compromise, or it can remain unresolved, in which case ambivalent behavior results. This no-

tion of a motivational conflict leads beyond a unidimensional concept of social involvement.

Three lines of evidence indicate that such a motivational conflict plays an important role in certain situations. First, research on fear of adult strangers indicates a developmental trend. Whereas infants show either sociable or wary behavior, after the first year of life, ambivalent, 'coy' reactions increase. These consist of a mixture of approach (e.g., smiling) and avoidance behavior [e.g., gaze aversion; Bretherton and Ainsworth, 1974]. Greenberg and Marvin [1982] found that the *majority* of 3- to 4-year-olds reacted with this characteristic coy expression, at least for a short time. Second, the timing of preschool children's behavior toward unfamiliar peers (see above) suggests that most children go through an approach-avoidance conflict at the beginning, resulting in prolonged onlooking from a distance, then become engaged in parallel play as a compromise between approach and avoidance, and, finally, begin to interact. [See Bakeman and Brownlee, 1980, for a similar result concerning the role of parallel play as an intermediate stage between solitary activity and interaction.] Third, studies on children's entry behavior into *groups* of peers suggest that a similar conflict arises. The best evidence stems from a sequential analysis of the tactics second graders (age 7) use when they try to enter groups of unfamiliar peers [Dodge et al., 1983]. The typical sequence found was (a) inhibited approach ['wait-and-hover'; Gottmann, 1977], (b) parallel play, and then (c) a group-oriented verbal statement. Very seldom did children directly involve themselves in the group's activity. In the LOGIC study, we found a similar pattern when children tried to enter groups of *familiar* peers

Table 1. Four social-motivational states

| | | Approach tendency | |
		−	+
Avoidance tendency	−	ignore	approach
	+	avoid	ambivalent compromise

during regular free play in preschool. The type and timing of the behavior observed in the preceding situations suggest that an approach-avoidance conflict is fairly common when children are confronted with unfamiliar adults or peers, or have to enter groups of peers, even if these groups consist of familiar children.

Interindividual Differences in Social Withdrawal

If the motivational scheme shown in table 1 is applied to interindividual differences, three types of socially withdrawn children may be distinguished: unsociable, avoidant, and shy. *Unsociable* children are assumed to be less involved with peers because of a low approach motive, not because of a high avoidance motive. These children may be more interested in playing with objects than peers. This type of social withdrawal has seldom been studied; one reason for this neglect may be that folk notions suggest that children are sociable 'by nature' and that social withdrawal hence always indicates a problem. (In Germany this notion is strongly endorsed by both parents and teachers.) Jennings [1975] did one of the few studies on

preschool children's preference for nonsocial constructive activity versus peers interaction ('object versus people orientation'). The more children played constructively alone, the higher they scored on tests of physical knowledge; no deficit in social knowledge was found among the more object-oriented children.

Rubin [1982a] found that after controlling for mental age, the relative amount of time preschoolers spent in classroom free play of a solitary-constructive type was not related to teacher ratings of social competence, whereas unoccupied, solitary-functional, and solitary-dramatic play was negatively related to these ratings. Roper and Hinde [1978] did a factor analysis of interindividual differences in various observational measures of social activities (including Parten's categories) for 3- to 5-year-olds. A three-factor solution emerged: a parallel-to-group dimension indicating how interactively a child played when with peers, a self-to-other dimension reflecting how much children played on their own, and an unoccupied-occupied dimension. Thus, high amounts of solitary play *and* interactive play are not mutually exclusive. On the whole, these findings suggest that a high amount of solitary or parallel play is 'not necessarily evil' [Rubin, 1982a] if the play is constructive. However, this conclusion is based on findings for preschoolers and kindergarteners; for older children, it is unwarranted, as I argue below.

Shy children are assumed to be less involved with peers because they are often trapped in an approach-avoidance conflict. Depending on the resolution of this conflict, they should show more inhibited approach behavior (e.g., wait-and-hover and onlooking), more behavior indicating a compromise between approach and avoidance (e.g.,

parallel play), and less social-interactive behavior (conversation and group play). In the LOGIC study, we target this group each year by an unweighted composite z-score consisting of a parental rating, a teacher score based on the California Child Q-Set [Block and Block, 1980], and two behavioral measures (e.g., the rate of wait-and-hover behavior observed during regular free play in school and the latency for the first spontaneous utterance directed toward an unfamiliar adult or peer). These composite scores showed a considerable 2-year stability of 0.62 between age 3-4 and age 5-6 for our *unselected* sample of children. Also, statistically significant concurrent and predictive relations to other measures of shyness were found. For example, the aggregated shyness score at age 4-5 correlated with (a) observer ratings of shy behavior in interactions with adult strangers in the same year (0.73), as well as 2 years later (0.62); (b) the duration of silence during the first 2 min of conversation with the stranger in the same year (0.61), as well as 2 years later (0.41); (c) observer ratings of shy behavior in an interview conducted by an unfamiliar adult 2 years later (0.50); (d) the rate of *nonconstructive* solitary activity in dyadic free play with an unknown peer 1 year later (0.34), but not the rate of *constructive* solitary activity, and (e) the rate of social interaction with an *unknown* peer (-0.35), but not with a familiar playmate.

Kagan and associates [Kagan et al., 1987; Reznick et al., 1986] found a similar longitudinal stability and cross-situational consistency in shyness for similar settings. Their correlations are somewhat inflated, however, because they worked with groups of extremely inhibited or noninhibited children. These and our data provide strong evidence that shyness is a rather stable dimension of

interindividual differences in social behavior toward unfamiliar peers and adults and toward groups of peers even if they consist of familiar children. It seems not accidental that these social settings also appear to arouse approach-avoidance conflicts among children in general.

The third assumed type of social withdrawal, *avoidance*, is the least studied. Certainly some children clearly avoid peers, with little sign of ambivalence. Some preliminary data from the LOGIC study suggest that peer avoidance is related predominantly to aggressiveness. When the children in the LOGIC study were 4–5 years old we asked each of their two preschool teachers to independently nominate up to 3 children (including children not in the LOGIC sample) as representative of each of 5 extreme types: sociable, aggressive, unsociable, shy, and avoidant. We did not provide these labels but defined each type in terms of a short behavioral description. Teachers across multiple schools nominated a total of 241 children for the 5 types. Generally, teacher agreement was satisfactory, although there were difficulties in distinguishing between unsociable and shy children. Figure 1 shows the profile of the group means on various concurrent social-cognitive measures for children who were consensually nominated by pairs of teachers for the unsociable, shy, or avoidant groups.

Only a few children were nominated as avoidant. Figure 1 shows that these children had extremely high scores on all three measures of aggressiveness, the observed rate of wait-and-hover behavior in their preschool group, and nonconstructive solitary play in two controlled play sessions, as well as low cognitive level of play. Since this group was so small, these strong deviations from aver-

age could have been due to only 1 or 2 children. However, individual analyses revealed that the 3 avoidant boys were each more than one standard deviation above average in observed shy contact initiations and in either onlooking or being unoccupied. The one avoidant girl had the highest aggressiveness score of all girls in the LOGIC sample on each of the three measures of aggressiveness and an average score on observed shy contact initiations. Since overall the measures of shyness and aggressiveness were negatively correlated, in all 4 cases shyness was unusually high relative to aggressiveness. (The below-average teacher score of shyness for the avoidant group does not contradict this finding because this score was a correlation between children's Q-sort and a prototype Q-sort for a 'typical shy child' characterized by low ranks for aggressiveness-related items.) Thus, the avoidant group was characterized by a pattern of high aggressiveness and *relatively* high shyness. This group seems to be very similar to the group called 'active isolates' by Rubin and Mills [1988] and the 'withdrawn-aggressive children' studied by Ledingham and Schwartzman [1984].

The profile of the children nominated as shy fully confirmed the expectation of high shyness, low aggressiveness, and inhibited social interaction in dyadic play. This inhibition led to a high rate of *constructive* parallel play, and not to much onlooking or being unoccupied. Thus, these children appear to have often resolved their approach-avoidance conflict by compromise (table 1).

The profile of the children nominated as unsociable did not show strong deviations from average. Either the teachers had failed to identify this group reliably, or interindividual differences in unsociable behavior are
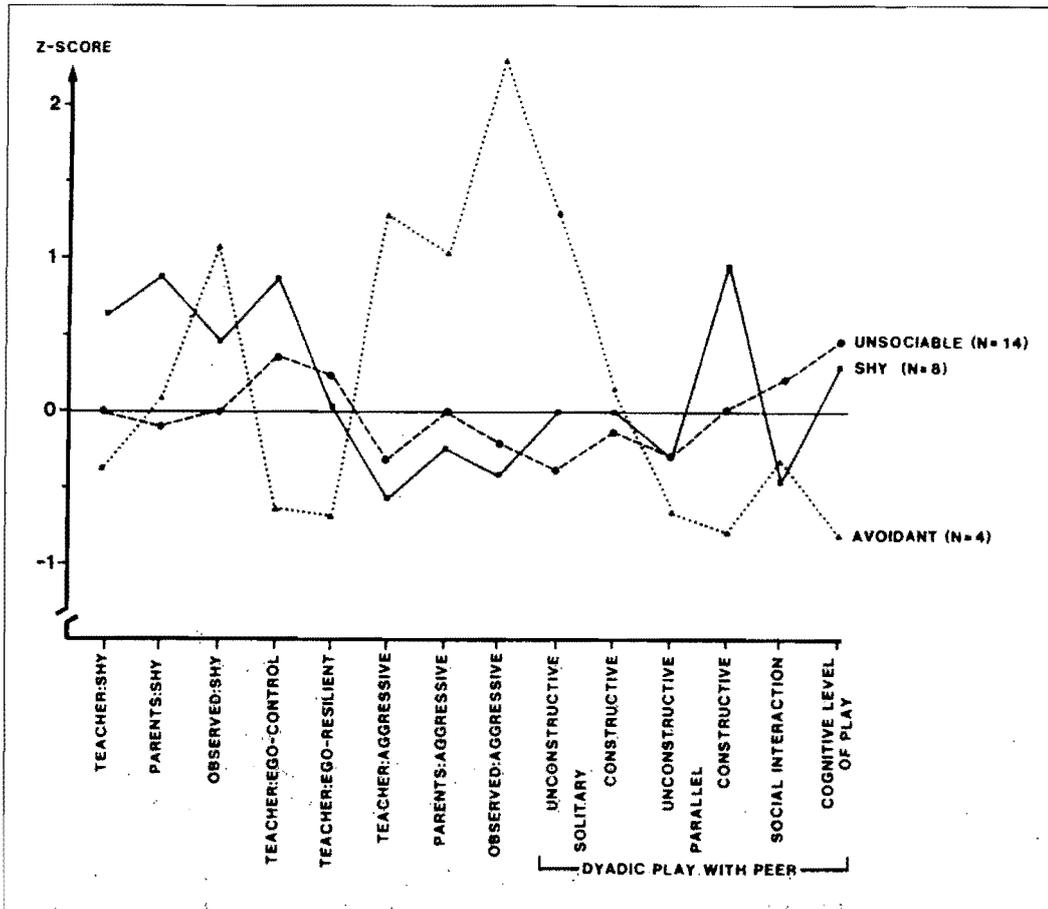
Fig. 1. Profiles of z-score means of unsociable, shy, and avoidant children. Teacher scores refer to correlations between Q-sort profiles and prototypic Q-sort profiles for a typical shy, ego-controlled, ego-resilient, and aggressive child. Parental scores refer to parental scales. Observed scores refer to codings of children's behavior during regular free play in their preschool. Dyadic play scores are aggregated for free-play sessions with unfamiliar and familiar peers: 'unconstructive' refers to unoccupied, onlooking, and functional and dramatic play, and 'constructive' refers to constructive and exploratory play: the cognitive level of play is a weighted mean of rough-and-tumble and functional play (weight 0), exploratory play (weight 1), and constructive and dramatic play (weight 2).

not stable over time and across situations. In order to examine these two possibilities more closely, I conducted an analysis of two extreme groups of children who were all below average in their rate of social interaction in the two dyadic play sessions (fig. 1), and additionally (a) one standard deviation above average in solitary-constructive activity (including exploratory play) and one standard deviation below average in solitary-

Table 2. Some item ranks in a Teacher Q-sort for two groups of unsociable children (mean ± SD)[a]

Item	Nonconstructive (n = 5)	Constructive (n = 12)
Overreacts to minor frustrations	0.92 ± 0.86	−0.29 ± 1.01
Expresses negative feelings directly	0.81 ± 0.72	0.00 ± 1.06
Tends to be sulky or whiny	0.80 ± 1.11	−0.28 ± 0.53
Seeks physical contact with others	0.78 ± 0.83	−0.10 ± 0.66
Has rapid shifts in mood	0.69 ± 0.95	−0.38 ± 0.79
Is vital, energetic, lively	−0.68 ± 1.01	0.00 ± 1.00
Is admired and sought out by other children	−0.70 ± 1.16	0.45 ± 0.63
Seeks to be independent	−0.77 ± 0.52	0.44 ± 1.08
Is curious and exploring	−0.82 ± 1.15	0.24 ± 0.72
Pushes and tries to stretch limits	−0.94 ± 0.45	−0.26 ± 1.24
Cries easily	0.22 ± 1.08	−0.71 ± 0.47

[a] In terms of z-scores determined for the whole sample (n = 210).

nonconstructive activity (including dramatic play), or (b) vice versa. Thus, group A represents 'constructive-unsociables' and group B 'nonconstructive-unsociables'. Group A is *identical* to the group called 'passive isolates' by Rubin and Mills [1989]; group B is similar but not identical to Rubin and Mill's 'active isolates'. Table 2 shows for the nonconstructive-unsociable group the 5 highest and the 5 lowest z-score means of the 54 Q-sort items, and their standard deviations. For comparison, the means and standard deviations of these items are also presented for the constructive-unsociable group, and in addition the only item that was comparably extreme for this group. (For all other items, the means were below ¦0.52¦.)

The pattern of differences suggests that unsociable preschool children represent a heterogeneous group. It seems essential to distinguish nonconstructive- and constructive-unsociables; nonconstructive-unsociables tend to be emotionally unstable and dependent, whereas constructive-unsocia-

bles tend to show the opposite pattern. Confounding both groups (which has been common practice in studies of social withdrawal until recently [Furman et al.,1979; Rubin, 1982b]) hence appears problematic. Together, the teacher nomination and the observational approach revealed clear differences within the group of children commonly called 'socially withdrawn'.

Conclusion

Intra- and interindividual analyses of social involvement have shown that social participation is not a homogeneous dimension, and that socially withdrawn children do not represent a homogeneous group during the preschool and kindergarten years. Instead, different types of social withdrawal can be distinguished that differ both in the motivation underlying social noninvolvement and in the cognitive correlates of the characteristic behavior. It seems unlikely that a low rate

of interaction as such is a problem in early childhood, given the heterogeneity of these children. Unconstructive-unsociable children appear to be emotionally unstable and dependent, whereas constructive-unsociable children tend to show the opposite pattern. Furthermore, if social withdrawal appears to be problematic at this age, different withdrawn children differ greatly in the type of problem they have. (Compare, for example, the shy and the avoidant groups in fig. 1.)

However, this view of social noninvolvement among young children cannot be extended to older children. Rubin and Mills [1989] and Strauss et al. [1986] have found some evidence that constructive unsociability *does* present a problem after age 6. Thus, social withdrawal appears to change its meaning between age 7 and the beginning of puberty. The more we begin to understand the meaning of the many facets of social withdrawal in childhood, the more differentiated our view of this phenomenon becomes.

Acknowledgement

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