



## Brief report: Perceptions of social withdrawal during emerging adulthood in Lagos, Nigeria



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### ABSTRACT

The study of social withdrawal subtypes is no longer limited to Western societies but has extended to non-Western countries, such as China. This study considers, for the first time, social withdrawal subtypes in an African country (Nigeria) by examining emerging adults' ( $N = 151$ ; 54% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.92$  years,  $SD = 2.54$ ) perceptions, attitudes, and responses to shy, unsociable, and socially competent behaviors. Results revealed that Nigerian emerging adults perceived significant differences between shy, unsociable, and socially competent behavior in several ways incommensurate with participants of previous studies conducted in North America, Europe, and China. Findings highlight the diversity of social meanings attached to social withdrawal in non-Western societies, and point to the need for additional research on social withdrawal and its perception in Africa.

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Once studied as a unitary construct, *shyness* (withdrawal motivated by anxiety and fear) and *unsociability* (withdrawal motivated by non-fearful preference for solitude) are now understood as related but distinct subtypes of withdrawal, with differing psychosocial concomitants, during childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). In general, the risks (e.g., anxiety) associated with shyness tend to be greater. Nevertheless, unsociability may be more problematic in societies typified by highly interdependent cultural norms and values (e.g., China) than in societies that emphasize individualism and independence (e.g., Canada, see e.g., Liu et al., 2014), perhaps due to how culturally-specific perceptions of withdrawn behavior determine its psychosocial impacts.

Limited data exist concerning emerging adults' perceptions of withdrawal in different cultures, as all past work having been conducted in North America, Europe, and China with children (e.g., Coplan, Girardi, Findlay, & Frohlick, 2007; Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004; Coplan, Zheng, Weeks, & Chen, 2012; Ozdemir, Cheah, & Coplan, 2015). The goal of this study was to evaluate perceptions of shy and unsociable behavior among emerging adults in Lagos, the most populous city in Nigeria, the seventh most populous country in the world. Africa's population is estimated to include 200 million youth aged 15–24, about whom relatively little psychosocial research has been conducted. Of interest was whether emerging adults in Lagos hold distinct perceptions of intentionality, motivation, liking, negative impact, and sympathy associated with shy and unsociable behavior, as is the case with non-African younger participants.

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There have been no studies of withdrawal subtypes in any African country. We could locate only four studies of *shyness* conducted in African countries, three in Nigeria (Erinosho & Ayonrinde, 1978; Umeh, 2009, 2013). Of these three, adults were found to use the word “shy” to describe individuals suffering from psychological difficulties such as anxiety, while highly shy adolescents in Lagos reported greater psychological stress relative to less shy adolescents. Although additional research is needed, results suggest that in Nigeria (and specifically, in the urban context of Lagos), shyness is viewed by adolescents and adults as atypical, and as a possible sign of psychopathology, perceptions that accord well with those of younger respondents outside of Africa.

Due to the dearth of research, no specific hypotheses were developed. While it is impossible to generalize about an entire country, Nigerian cultures have been characterized as emphasizing psychological interdependence, group harmony, and physical closeness, and as discouraging forms of self-advancement that are thought to involve destructive behavior directed against the self or others. These values may be thought to have developed from Nigeria's history of colonial occupation and civil conflict, as well as its extraordinary ethnic diversity. Thus, it was expected that unsociable behavior (expressing a preference for solitude) would be viewed as more threatening to respected norms, and would be perceived more negatively than shy behavior (rooted in a conflict between the desire for social interaction and debilitating fears). However, Nigerian youth report stronger preferences for introversion than their peers in the US (Oakland, Mogaji, & Dempsey, 2006), raising the possibility that both withdrawal types may be perceived less negatively than found in past research. We focused on emerging adults (19–23 year-olds) to answer recent calls for research on withdrawal during this developmental period, when the “costs” of withdrawal increasingly interfere with successful completion of stage-salient developmental tasks (i.e., obtaining employment; Nelson, 2013).

## Method

Participants were 151 emerging adults (54% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.92$  years,  $SD = 2.54$ ) enrolled at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. Most participants self-identified as being of Yoruba descent (61.30%) and as being Christian (82.10%). Approximately 70% lived at home with their married biological mother and father, and 97% were born in Nigeria. Participants completed questionnaires during one undergraduate psychology class period. All participants were volunteers and were not compensated.

Participants completed a hypothetical vignette measure adapted from the Interview Attributions for Aggressive and Withdrawn Behavior (IAAWB; Graham & Hoehn, 1995). Originally designed to assess youths' attitudes and responses to aggressive versus withdrawn peers, the reliable and valid IAAWB was revised to include a socially competent peer (Goossens, Bokhorst, Bruinsma, & van Boxtel, 2002) and a shy versus unsociable peer (Coplan et al., 2007). Our measure was identical to that used by Coplan et al. (2007) with three variations: (1) the scenario depicting an aggressive peer was not included; (2) each vignette did not specify the gender of the peer (so that the gender of the hypothetical peer was not confounded with the gender of the rater); and (3) the vignettes and question were modified slightly to be age-appropriate for college students (see Table 1). Additional changes were not necessary due to significant similarities between shy and unsociable university students in behavior and functioning to their younger counterparts (Nelson, 2013). Like Coplan et al. (2007), the vignette presentation order was varied using a Latin square design, and seven questions on a three point scale (“no”, “maybe”, “yes”) followed each vignette. Responses to two questions assessing affiliative preferences were averaged due to strong correlations for each vignette;  $r_s = .60-.65$ ,  $p_s < .001$ .

## Results

Study hypotheses were evaluated with a repeated measures MANOVA, with the vignette type (shy, unsociable, socially competent) as the within-subjects variable and gender as a between-subjects variable (Table 2). A significant multivariate

**Table 1**

Hypothetical vignettes depicting shy, unsociable, and socially competent peers, and assessment questions.

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### Vignettes:

#### Shy

There is another student who is afraid to talk to other students. When other students are hanging out, the student just watches them.

#### Unsociable

There is another student who likes to spend time alone. When other students are hanging out, the student engages in an activity alone (e.g., reading a book, working on classwork).

#### Socially competent

There is a student who is really nice. When the student hangs out with others, they all have lots of fun.

### Questions:

*Behavioral intentionality:* Do you think that the student acts that way on purpose?

*Social motivation:* Does the student want to hang out with the other students?

*Affiliative preferences:* Would you want to hang out with the student?, Would you want to be the student's friend?

*Social standing:* Would other students want to hang out with this student?

*Negative impact:* Do students who act like this cause a problem in your class?

*Sympathy:* Do you feel sorry for the student?"

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