Brief report

An exploratory study of Eastern Ugandan adolescents' descriptions of social withdrawal

Natalie D. Eggum-Wilkens[a,*], Linlin Zhang[a,b], Danming An[a]

[a] *T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics, Arizona State University, USA*
[b] *Department of Psychology at University of Toronto Mississauga, USA*

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Researchers have identified a variety of motivations for solitude and for social withdrawal. These motivations may differ across cultures. The purpose of this study was to explore Ugandan adolescents' descriptions of solitude and social withdrawal, with the aim of guiding future research on social withdrawal in Uganda.

Methods: Ugandan adolescents' ($M = 14.23$ years old, $SD = 1.63$ years) descriptions of solitude and social withdrawal were investigated in a cross-sectional, exploratory study. The sample ($N = 219$ [106 girls, 90 boys, 23 missing sex data]) was drawn from two primary schools and a secondary school in Eastern Uganda. Adolescents' responses to open-ended questionnaire items about general solitude, conflicted motivations for social withdrawal, and non-conflicted motivation for social withdrawal were coded and categorized.

Results: Some of the adolescents' descriptions were consistent with the literature. For example, they described shyness and internalizing emotions, externalizing and socially incompetent behaviors, and poor peer relationships. Some descriptions were unique and likely reflected Uganda's challenges, for instance, family or household factors such as being an orphan.

Conclusions: Results underscored the importance of exploring contextual processes (e.g., parental loss) that might affect Ugandan adolescents' solitude. More generally, the results suggested that solitude should be researched using a broad, synergistic lens that incorporates potential determinants from adolescents and their environments at multiple levels (e.g., person, peer, household, culture).

Missed social interaction opportunities may harm social and psychological adjustment (Rubin & Coplan, 2004). Reasons for children's and adolescents' solitude include *social withdrawal*– self-imposed removal from interaction opportunities, and *isolation*– peers limit one's interaction opportunities (Rubin & Coplan, 2004). Children and adolescents socially withdraw for different reasons: 1) *shyness*– wanting to socialize but being inhibited by anxiety, 2) *unsociability*– not disliking socializing but preferring solitude, and 3) *social avoidance*– disliking socializing and wanting to avoid it (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan, Ooi, & Nocita, 2015). These reasons have been identified in children's and adults' qualitative descriptions in diverse cultures (e.g., Bayram Özdemir, Cheah, & Coplan, 2015; Xu, Farver, Yang, & Zeng, 2008).

There may be societal differences in withdrawal motivations. For instance, regulated shyness (modest and restrained interactions) has been identified in cultures emphasizing obedience and social harmony (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2015; Xu, Farver, Chang, Zhang, & Yu, 2007; Xu et al., 2008). Cultural values may also influence how withdrawn individuals view themselves or how others treat them (Chen & French, 2008). The only investigations of withdrawal in Africa suggest that motivators and perceptions of solitude might be

---

influenced by culture in South Africa and Nigeria (Bowker, Ojo, & Bowker, 2016; van Zyl, Dankaert, & Guse, 2018); however, study participants were unable to freely articulate reasons for solitude. Qualitative inquiries are needed to facilitate culturally rich understandings of social withdrawal.

Furthermore, it is important to examine social withdrawal in a variety of economic and cultural contexts to supplement the global understanding of withdrawal. Uganda is on The United Nations' "least developed countries" list. Uganda has made progress, but serious environmental, economic, and human challenges remain (e.g., drought, poverty, undernutrition, epidemics). Challenges faced in the least developed countries may increase the need for emotional and material support from others, and withdrawal may limit access to it. Despite its importance, the study of withdrawal in the world's least developed countries is nascent.

We conducted the first study of adolescents' social withdrawal in Uganda. We used open-ended questionnaire items to explore adolescents' descriptions of general solitude, and conflicted and non-conflicted motivations for withdrawal. We expected the descriptions to echo literature from the global West and parts of the global East (e.g., shyness, low sociability, isolation), and to reflect Uganda's socio-economic context (e.g., poverty, health challenges) or collectivistic values (e.g., regulated shyness, disapproval of withdrawal; Chen, 2010). We expected fewer negative descriptions of withdrawal based on conflicted (relative to non-conflicted) avoidance motivations as it might be perceived as out of one's control (Chen, 2010; Coplan et al., 2015).

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Eleven-to 17-year-old ($M = 14.23$; $SD = 1.63$) students from a government primary, a private primary, and a private secondary school in Eastern Uganda participated (participation rates > 90%). Many ethnicities were reported (e.g., Iteso, Jopadhola). Data were omitted for 33 participants reporting low comprehension, leaving 219 participants in the larger study (106 girls, 90 boys, 23 missing). Many were orphaned (9 maternal, 63 paternal, 23 double).

1.2. Procedures

Questionnaires were group-administered in English (the language of school instruction). Reading skills were lower than expected at the government school; thus, items were read aloud. Schools were given a monetary donation. Participants were given pencils and notebooks.

1.3. Measures

Participants were asked three items inspired by Ladd, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Eggum, Kochel, and McConnell (2011). Items were about general solitude — "*Do you know any children your age who are alone more often than they are with other people? … write a word or phrase that describes this type of person,*" conflicted motivations to withdraw — "*Do you think some children want to play with and talk with other people, but do not because they are too afraid, nervous, or anxious? … write a word or phrase that describes this type of person,*" and non-conflicted motivation to withdraw — "*Do you think some children do NOT want to play with and talk with other people? … write a word or phrase that describes this type of person.*"

Responses were coded in two stages. First, two students coded responses into 31 categories, compared their coding (94%–100% agreement), and resolved the discrepancies. Second, two authors aggregated the coded responses into seven core themes (76%–96% agreement) based on the socio-emotional development literature and the observed data. A third author resolved the discrepancies. The themes were *shyness/internalizing*– shyness, reticence, self-consciousness, or negative internalizing affect, *low sociability*– preferring solitude or not wanting to socialize, *poor peer relationships*– victimization, isolation, or neglect, *externalizing/social incompetence*– aggressive, delinquent, criminal, or socially undesirable behaviors or characteristics, *positive attributes*– socially desirable behaviors or characteristics, *health*– physical or mental health problems, *family/household*– familial or household structure, resources, or environments, and *other*– miscellaneous responses.

2. Results and discussion

The percent of missing data per item was high (47%–55%) because: 1) of illegible handwriting, 2) a specific person was described, and 3) of missing data due to time constraints. Of 219 participants in the larger study, 63 (28.8%) had no data for solitude/withdrawal items. They did not differ in age, sex, or school from those with valid data (*t*- and χ^2-tests).

Results provided initial information regarding Ugandan adolescents' descriptions of solitude and social withdrawal (Table 1). Consistent with hypotheses and extant literature, adolescents' descriptions identified person characteristics such as "shyness/internalizing" (shy, fear/anxiety,[1] self-conscious emotions, lonely/sad/feel bad, quiet) and "low sociability" (e.g., does not want to be social or to talk, likes to be alone, does not love people; Asendorpf, 1990; Findlay, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009; Rubin & Coplan, 2004).

Adolescents also described "poor peer relationships," consistent with the literature (rejection, teased, beaten, lacking friends; e.g., Asher & McDonald, 2009; Ladd et al., 2011). In addition, they described behavioral correlates of isolation, such as "externalizing

---

[1] The wording of the conflicted motivations item may have increased salience of fear/anxiety.