



*Author response*

## Starting small: Revisiting young children's perceptions of social withdrawal in China

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In this reply to the commentaries by Xinyin Chen, Charissa Cheah, Yiyuan Xu, and Dawn Watling, we further discuss the conceptual and methodological challenges that arise when attempting to study beliefs about social withdrawal (1) in the unique cultural context of China and (2) in the unique developmental age period of early childhood.

We thank Xinyin Chen (2015), Charissa Cheah and Yiyuan Xu (2015), and Dawn Watling (2015) for their insightful essays in response to our paper. We are thrilled to see this topic area receives such (long overdue) attention. In the limited space provided, we briefly address some of the issues raised in these commentaries.

All three commentaries highlighted the unique societal issues that must be considered when examining the meaning of different forms of social withdrawal in the cultural context of mainland China. Seminal work by Chen, Cen, Li, and He (2005) over the last 20 years has provided compelling evidence of how historical changes to societal values in China have resulted in the traditionally positively valued behaviour of shyness becoming increasingly negatively viewed. In his essay, Xinyin Chen wondered whether these ongoing societal changes may also come to alter perceptions of *unsociability* in Chinese culture. In the west, unsociability is considered to be a comparatively benign form of social withdrawal (Coplan & Weeks, 2010).

In contrast, results from recent studies in China have indicated links between unsociability and indexes of social, emotional, and school difficulties (e.g., Liu *et al.*, 2014, 2015). It has been argued that because interdependence and group affiliation are still highly emphasized in China, children who display a diminished interest in group interaction may be viewed as selfish and deviant (Chen, 2010). It remains to be seen as to whether the cohort effects previously demonstrated in the meaning and implications of shyness may also become evident with regard to unsociability. It is possible that increased

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focus on competition and endorsement of individualistic values in China (particularly in urban settings) may serve to attenuate negative views of unsociable behaviours over time.

All three commentaries also touched upon methodological issues pertaining to our use of hypothetical vignettes. For example, Charissa Cheah and Yiyuan Xu astutely suggested that the descriptions of shyness, unsociability, and social avoidance depicted in the vignettes might be better characterized as *prototypes* of these behaviours (i.e., perfectly corresponded to the theoretical definitions). We would not disagree with this assertion, although we would suggest that this issue is not unique to the use of hypothetical vignettes. It could be argued that the items from almost any other scale used to assess social withdrawal (including self-reports, peer nominations, and parent/teacher ratings) also almost always represent 'prototypical representations' of these behaviours. The exception to this might be naturalistic observations. Xinyin Chen highlighted the need for subsequent study of multiple forms of social withdrawal using alternative methodological approaches. Taking this into account, it would be of particular interest to conduct further observational studies of young children's direct responses to socially withdrawn behaviours (e.g., Chen, DeSouza, Chen, & Wang, 2006).

Charissa Cheah, Yiyuan Xu, and Dawn Watling also suggested that it might be advantageous to ask children *open-ended* questions so that they could generate their own natural responses. A recent study of Turkish children was cited as an exemplar of this approach (Bayram Özdemir, Cheah, & Coplan, 2015). It is important to note that Bayram Özdemir *et al.*'s study as a sample comprised of children aged 10–11 years, whereas the children in our study were aged 5–6 years. Children in this younger age group may not have the adequate cognitive or linguistic skills to elucidate such complex and nuanced responses. Indeed, it has been previously argued that young children had a poorly developed cognitive schema for social withdrawal and were thus incapable of reliably describing socially withdrawn behaviours into consideration (e.g., Younger, Gentile, & Burgess, 1993). Thus, from a developmental perspective, it would seem quite noteworthy that Chinese children as young as 5 years old in our sample did appear to take internal processes (e.g., emotional states, social motivations) into account when considering the consequences of different forms of social withdrawal. Of course, it must be acknowledged that the methodological approach used in our study (e.g., use of images, explicit depictions of these internal processes) was designed to facilitate these distinctions for young children.

Notwithstanding, it bears repeating that the wording of the shyness and unsociability vignettes employed in our study was actually derived from a previous 'best attempt' (using open-ended questions) to get young children to describe 'real peers' in their class who frequently 'played alone' (Gavinski-Molina, Coplan, & Younger, 2003). However, given the scarcity of previous empirical studies of social avoidance in childhood, the wording for this vignette was newly derived on a conceptual basis. Dawn Watling wondered whether this form of social withdrawal might have been uniquely identified by Chinese children if it was not explicitly presented in a vignette, noting that social avoidance did not appear to be uniquely identified by Turkish children in the Bayram Özdemir *et al.* (2015) study. As noted by Charissa Cheah in her essay, additional items were added to the measure of unsociability in this Turkish study based on children's initial responses in semi-structured interviews. We would note that these additional items (e.g., 'I turn down my peers' invitations because I prefer playing alone') share some conceptual overlap with the construct of social avoidance. This may also help to account for the somewhat unexpected finding that this adapted measure of unsociability was associated with child self-reports of loneliness and depression.

Finally, all three commentaries raised questions about the implications of social avoidance across cultures. As we noted earlier, the empirical study of childhood social avoidance is at its very earliest stages. Critical issues remain regarding the conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement of this phenomenon. Notwithstanding, from our perspective, it would seem difficult to attribute positive value and desirable outcomes to behaviours that actively and consistently isolate an individual from their social group. From an evolutionary perspective, there are longstanding arguments in support of the adaptive advantage of social groups in the survival of the human species (Hamilton, 1964). With this in mind, as future studies explore the implications of social avoidance across cultures, we would not be surprised if the negative consequences of this phenomenon displayed cultural invariance.

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