Why is P Afraid to Love a Woman?

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*"Man is the only animal that blushes
—or needs to."*

- Mark Twain

Many individuals suffer from social anxiety of one type or another. The dictionary defines anxiety as "a state of being uneasy, apprehensive, or worried about what may happen; concern about a possible future event" (Keans & Maloney 22). There are indefinite types of anxiety. The type of anxiety that will be discussed presently will be a sort of dating anxiety. The subject of the discussion is a young man who suffers the aforementioned affliction. He will provide us with a case study, and hopefully, as we learn about his disorder, we will help him to overcome his difficulty. He is not alone in the uneasiness he feels when a beautiful woman smiles in his direction, or when he feels someone who he cares for getting too close to him. That uneasiness is a "Generalized Social Phobia" (Scheiner & Welkowitz, 1996).

Franklin Scheiner, M.D., and Lawrence Welkowitz, Ph.D., in their book *The Hidden Face of Shyness: Understanding and Overcoming Social Anxiety* (1996), describe symptoms that characterize this most peculiar type of social anxiety disorder. The doctors relay the story of Jerry. Jerry suffered from

"Dating Anxiety" until he recognized that it was a serious problem and sought help. During his affliction, Jerry loved women but due to his "demand for a date to be perfect," as well as his thinking that a perfect woman would probably reject him, he did not dare to date (Scheiner & Welkowitz 42). We can see from looking at Jerry that persons suffering from social anxiety disorders have much more to lose from not taking their perceived risks than from taking a risk and failing at their endeavors.

Jerry's story is much like that of the subject of the present study. Our subject, whom we will term "Self P," or simply P, is suffering from dating anxiety. Self P has not suffered from much anxiety over the years. There were instances where some anxiety was present, but by and large P considered himself ready for anything. In college, P realized all at once, by a sort of concurrence of circumstances, that there was some emotional disorder present that was keeping him from healthy emotional relationships with women. He was finding that he could not feel comfortable when meeting a woman to whom he found himself attracted. He also felt awkward when trying to move forward in a situation from acquaintance to friendship, and from friendship to romance. Jerry also reported that he was concerned about seeming too interested in someone, or in sex (Scheiner & Welkowitz, 1996). P was finding that the more often this state of affairs occurred, the more he realized that there must be something inside himself that was causing this dysfunction.

At this point, before delving more into anxiety or uneasiness in social situations, some very important issues regarding the social construction of the self should be mentioned. This will be important, because without it a good understanding of the problem of dating (or of any anxiety) cannot be gained. Problems involving an uneasy feeling in given situations must be a result of a defective element in P's self-image. Though this defective self-image may

not be dominant over all areas of his life, it may control a certain element sufficiently enough to cause discontent in his life. As individuals, we have the right to solve our problems and end our discontent.

Charles Cooley was an economist who also greatly contributed to what is known today as Sociological Psychology. In his article excerpted under the title "The Self as Sentiment and Reflection," (2001) Cooley posits the theory that the self is the result of one's viewing oneself through the eyes of a fellow human being. He posits further that a person bases his/her actions, as well as his/her self opinion, on the subsequent feelings that an individual would have as a result of that judgement. He states that there are three stages to this process: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Cooley 17).

This "looking-glass self" process is an important influencing factor in the self and social interaction. It appears that this is particularly true for people suffering from social anxiety disorders. As Maloney & Kranz (1991) point out, certain attitudes that an individual holds will feed his anxiety and make it strong (33). Thoughts such as "The one person who ignores me at a party means more to me than the five who are happy to see me," or "People are more likely to remember my one failure than my twenty successes," may be illogical, but will no doubt occur in someone with a social anxiety disorder (Maloney & Kranz 34). These beliefs, coupled with an expectation of perfection from oneself (or others), or a focus on the past accompanied by worries about the future, contribute to that uneasiness and apprehension about what may occur. In a social context, the problem that the individual is concerned with is a result of a negative sentiment that has been paired with a given reflection of self.

George Herbert Mead is also instru-mental in any discussion of the social construction of self. In Mead's thinking, the social self is unique in that it is an object to itself (Mead 22). As humans we can become, through the internalization of social interactions, both speaker and audience to ourselves. According to Mead, we learn language through conversations, and interactions, and as such, we learn to shift roles with our fellows. As we learn to do this, we also internalize each and every role that we assume in the process. This can be summarized by saying that as society is composed of individuals interacting with each other, so is each individual composed of a society of interactions (Mead 2001).

Returning for a moment to P, we will look at how P may have internalized his dating anxieties. P cannot recall being rejected prior to Jr. High School, but can as of that time. In his first experience of rejection from a member of the opposite sex, he was emotionally devastated. He became infatuated with a pretty young woman, and at first, she was courteous and receptive to his attempts to make conversation with her. P wanted this girl for a girlfriend, and he decided a love note was in order. He was mistaken in his perception of her interest in him. Her reaction to the love note was to become disgusted, and to share her disgust with society at large. P had attempted an emotional contact with a member of the opposite sex for the first time, and had been publicly rejected. As his peer group laughed at his tears of humiliation, he learned two very important lessons. First, that he could not trust females with his emotions, and second, that one cannot write his thoughts down—unless he is prepared to have the eyes of the world upon them.

Jr. High School continued to be traumatic in this area. P was an overweight, smart kid with glasses and undeveloped social skills, who experienced more rejections as time passed. It was different after that first time, as he never again risked let-

ting his emotions out of the protected place he kept them in. He could not help noticing that none of the girls wanted to kiss him—not even when playing games such as "Spin the Bottle," or "Truth or Dare." Every time this happened, the love-seeking self receded a little further into its safety zone. By High School, P would not ever reach out emotionally to a young lady, unless he was sure that there was zero possibility of rejection. This too proved to be a detriment to P's emotional self. It is said that "the woman with whom one retires immediately to bed is the wrong woman for you to love." This is true. As she "retires quickly" with him, so will she with others. Whenever P considered professing his love for a woman for whom he had respect, the selves of the women who had rejected him volunteered their reflections of him, forcing him to retreat. Over time, even conscious thoughts of making himself vulnerable to possible rejection disappeared.

Sheldon Stryker (2001), in an excerpt titled "Social Structure and Experience," suggested that society, and consequently the person's self-image, is a result of patterns of organized social interaction. The identity salience, that is, the dominant characteristics of a person, is largely determined by that person's roles, and positions, which, internalized, is the self (Stryker 190). This refers to the manner in which we classify certain people and expect to interact with them, being the type of person that they are and being the type of person we are. This interaction is socially defined through the patterns that we observe and choose to participate in. This occurs both interpersonally and intrapersonally.

In P's case, at one time he was categorized as some sort of inferior human being—the type of human being that was unworthy of the love of another. Over time, the subsequent categories that he found and finds himself in could not ever change that—until now. A pattern of self degradation was formed, and a subconscious im-

print of that pattern manifested itself in P's life.

Erving Goffman lends his dramaturgical approach to microsociology when examining social constructions of the self. His approach tends to focus on actual social interactions, rather than the subjective self or inner conversations. He sees social interaction as a production (or drama) in which we as social actors play out socially defined roles. We cannot see into one another's selves. What we know about each other is limited to what we can observe in social interactions. Individuals enact a self that is designed to influence others' definition of them, and of the situation. Basically, we present ourselves to others based on how we view ourselves and how we wish others to view us. Our fellow actors can then support or oppose our definition of the situation (Goffman 2001a).

Goffman also discusses what is called "face-work." "Face" is the term used to describe the positive social value that an individual claims through the line he takes in an interactional forum. A "line" is the pattern of verbal and non-verbal actions that an individual uses to show his audience how he views the situation. His line will indicate his evaluation of the participants, especially himself. This evaluation is the face that he claims for himself, and the face that he assigns others (Goffman, 2001b: 114).

This face that we assume is sacred—according to Goffman, so very sacred that we have an entire set of interaction rituals devoted to the preservation of not only our individual faces, but also those of our fellow participants as well. Saving the interactional face of the situation, as a whole, is one way of phrasing the actions. "Face-work" is the term for these efforts to preserve the faces. People can be in wrong face, or out of face. Basically, if one professes to be of a certain face, and information becomes available to his audience that is contrary to the line that he is attempting to sustain, he is said to be in wrong face. A social actor is

said to be out of face if he does not possess the line that individuals participating in a given situation are expected to have. If people find themselves out of face, and/or in wrong face, it is typically an embarrassing situation for themselves, as well as their fellow participants (Goffman, 2001b: 116-117).

Since these situations are embarrassing, and embarrassment is emotionally negative, we have developed methods of social interaction rituals to avoid loss of face in situations. Two ways in which we typically do this are avoidance and corrections. If we don't want to end up losing face, often we avoid situations where we might potentially do so. If we do lose face, often the participants of the situation will allow us to correct our inconsistency of behavior with that expected of individuals laying claim to the line we have assumed. Face is very important in maintaining the definitions of our interactional situations (Goffman, 2001b: 117-118).

Subject P is an outstanding social actor in a variety of lines that he chooses to assume. He has acted in a customer service role for as long as he has been gainfully employed. He has served thousands of customers in that time. In thousands of brief interactions, he has been able to preserve his own face, as well as the face of his customers. He has maintained the often difficult line of an associate in a company whose main priority is the satisfaction of its customers. He maintains the line of college student of sociology, that of honored friend, that of supervisor (as well as supervised), black market consumer, and many others too numerous to mention. He could not play the lover.

By all appearances, this fear P has of taking the line of the lover of a phenomenal woman is his only anxiety. From the time P was a child, he was not afraid to speak his mind. P is opinionated, imaginative, and vocal. He is ardent and not complacent. If an observer were to see and hear P without the prior knowledge of his dating anxiety,

he would no doubt view him as quite confident and self-assured. As for P's view of himself, he would also be inclined to agree—except for the surge of tension that shoots through his body every time the woman he cares for inadvertently brushes up against his knee. He cannot understand why he feels this way. He really does love women, and judging by interactions he participates in with them, they love him too. He does not know if he is right and he allows this insecurity to govern his actions in this realm of his life.

For many years, P was able to ignore this obviously illogical fear of rejection from members of the opposite sex. The confidence and assurance that he exercised in the remaining aspects of his life made him feel that his lack of a "love life" was unimportant. The fact that he is so boisterous and outgoing takes focus off of the fact that the anxiety he feels is a personality defect. "Often, individuals exhibit their incorrigible ability to defend their self-conception from socially reflected self-images" (Snow & Anderson, 1993).

The homeless in American society are a prime example of this. They have a "stigmatized status." Society reflects images of the homeless as "spoiled" human beings. The homeless that don't succumb to this negative, socially reflected self-image succeed in countering it. To do so, often the homeless will construct identity-oriented meaning to their situation. They tend to either distance themselves from the negative self-image, embrace it, or even make up some totally fictional set of circumstances to explain it. The point is that sometimes humans are endowed with a negative, socially constructed self-image, and they can avoid it and put it away so that it does not affect their everyday activities and interactions (Snow & Anderson, 1993).

Subject P himself participates in this construction of identity-oriented meaning of his situation. The society that is reflecting the negative self-image is often he himself.

Every time P thinks: "She definitely likes you, man, ask her out," or, "Look at her, just tell her you love her—three simple words, you dope!" some self, some subconsciously seated demon, keeps him silent. This negative self-image only bares its face in these situations, and has done so for nearly a score of years. P has at times distanced himself from it, or come to view himself as this bad hombre type who must be "too tough to love." In effect, he has failed to recognize his own double self-consciousness. He has no love, just as the homeless have no material possessions, and any attempt to act, think, or feel differently is just a ploy to escape his own poor self-image. All kinds of people encounter this sort of doubling from time to time.

It may be quite chilling to note the parallel, but Nazi doctors at Auschwitz were found to undergo a similar phenomenon when confronted with the evils of their work (Lifton, 2001). The doctors both had to "care" for the residents of the work camp, and select infirm ones for the gas chamber. In this process, the doctors experienced what Lifton (1986) calls a personality "doubling"—an "Auschwitz self" who could select innocent people for genocide, and a "caring" self who helped other infirm people at the camp and loved a family of his own on the weekends. It may appear inconceivable that such a horrible historical experience would involve parallel lessons for the everyday experiences of an innocent P trying to overcome his difficulties in love life. Nevertheless, the parallel is valid, and it is these little lessons that can bring about conditions less conducive to such historical tragedies. The personality doubling is what makes it all possible.

For P, this also occurs when he is a small, scared child inside, but outwardly confronts a room full of his superiors at work about a difference of opinion. He is as emotionally vulnerable as any other person, but refuses to show the outside world that self. Instead, he puts on a fearsome face and he buries his emotional side.

All that said, P has been forced to recognize the magnitude, and reality, of his situation. He sees that he has a real social anxiety disorder, with real symptoms. It is largely based upon a fear of rejection by members of the opposite sex, as well as an illogically negative self-image. There exists a subconscious habituation of avoidance and denial. Somewhere in his subconscious self, there is one little girl holding a note and wearing a malevolent grin; in that place there is also a score of other little girls with looks of disgust and disdain. In the midst of these little girls is a little P—and he is embarrassed and humiliated. He is crying before his peers. The life of the P who is the current actor in society bears little or no resemblance to the life of the little embarrassed P. That little P is controlling P from beyond the current P's consciousness.

Subject P now assumes that his anxiety is real, and must begin to reconstruct himself into a new P. He must construct a self that is comfortable in the presence of others whom he loves. This process entails finding the little P, and convincing him that he has become a good man, worthy of love. He needs also take the line of the lover of women. He needs a suitable woman to affirm the face of P, lover of women—only then will he alleviate his affliction.

The problem as we see it is that a man/woman duality is dominating P's search for love. The idea that he is somehow different than the women he pursues is deeply rooted in his subconscious. If he could just realize that what he is looking for is a friend, someone whom he would have respect for, who would respect him as well. From childhood we are ascribed a gender role that we portray, often without giving any thought to its origins. As we interact in a way that is conducive to this duality, we perpetuate it, when we possess the power to change it if we so desire. There are many influences on our lives, some of which we are unaware.

From the time that we are born, we are known to belong to a socially constructed sex-class (Cahill 26). We are dressed, we walk, we talk, and we act the part of our ascribed gender roles. We have no choice, excepting of course the story of the transsexual. We see a baby with a penis, and it is a boy. We see a baby with none and it is a girl. The presence of a penis is the only significantly different characteristic between boy babies and girl babies. The boy baby is dressed in blue and given cars and tools to play with, whereas the girl baby is dressed in pink and given dolls and cosmetics to play with. Cahill observes further that "Sex-class related appearance management socially invests infants with sex-class identities, and, thereby, with male and female human natures" (Cahill 27). It is often these sex-roles that characterize male/female interactions, such as those encountered in love. We feel different than the people we love, and thus, are alienated from them. This alienation separates us before we can come together.

P is a man raised by a woman. The man who inseminated his mother left her when P was three years old. The woman raised her son alone for several years. Sometimes, she would work two and three jobs to support him, and she loved him. And he knew it. Eventually, she remarried and P respected and loved her new husband, his true father.

An extraordinary aspect of P's mother's biography is that as a child she was the victim of abuse. The home that she was socialized in was extremely dysfunctional emotionally. She was abused by her father and by her brothers. Her mother found sanctuary in her church, and ignored the secret evil that she knew to exist in her home. P's mother overcame her abusive childhood to raise a son in love. P still holds that love sacred, and wishes to extend it to other children like his mother. So, he has chosen a profession in which his love for humanity and his malice for abusers will be

satiated. He is ardent about his decision, and strives everyday toward his goal.

Returning once again to P's social anxiety disorder, we see that it is not so much a problem anymore as it was in the beginning of our study. Since we began observing Self P, we have become aware of his habits. Once we were able to identify the habits that were perpetuating the illness, we were able to see how they were affecting P's life. We taught him about how interaction is internalized and becomes our own self-reflection. The self-reflection that P experienced prior to our intervention in his life was almost entirely negative. Though P would never have admitted it, and often did not even realize it, it existed and he always had the ability to change it. It is strange for him to now be rid of the problem, to be in love with a most exceptional woman, with whom he has much in common.

Kenneth Gergen writes about the saturation of the self, and the sounds of many and often opposing voices, that echo through our subconscious (Gergen, 2001). In his article entitled "The Dissolution of Self," he discusses how with modern modes of transportation and communication the one unified significant group with which we were able to previously identify our selves has become fragmented. A self, which previously had been unified behind certain characteristics of the society and the individual, is now torn in a million directions by an entire society of selves internalized within each individual. Often these individuals within society are in conflict with one another, leaving the individual who is subject to their whims confused and divided.

P is also a victim of this dissolution of self. He hears the voices of all the people whom he has known in his life, many of the voices of the political and entertainment figures to whom he has attended, and he is conflicted. The voices of the little girls who were revolted by him in his youth have had

to take a back seat to the voices of the people whom he now loves, and who he now knows love him. P has a tightly knit group of friends. He is full of respect for them, for the honor they have, and for the honor that he is able to bring to them. P is also in love at this time. He has met a fellow student of social life to whom he is completely devoted. The sun shines on him and he is truly happy.

Howard Becker (2001) talks of the social nature of the drug experience. He refers to the fact that a person will have a different drug experience when socialized by and in the presence of seasoned drug users. The experienced users will help to socialize the inexperienced user to the effects of the drugs and the popular interpretations of the effects of that drug. A person will be much more likely to have a negative experience if that person is not accompanied by experienced users. This is roughly how P ceased to be afraid of love. P met his love, and she showed him that love is no different than any other life experience. P had seen movies, read books, heard reports about love, but like all else experience was the only way to truly understand what love is. The saturation of self is fine, but to think that we understand anything without actually experiencing it is ridiculous—we cannot.

That is why P's initial anxiety is completely irrational. Without a serious understanding of what is involved in love, how could he fear it? When we ask him to return to the beginning of his/our study, and to try to tell us why he was afraid, he laughs, and tells us that he does not know. He cannot understand how he allowed himself to be afraid of another side of himself, which he is so glad to have now. P has an emotional side, and it is as strong as any of his other sides. For many years he repressed it, thus causing damage to it unconsciously. The damage is not irreparable, though, and with the help of a woman, and of his family, and of his intellect, the damage to his emo-

tions has been repaired—once again restoring the balance in his life that he was missing.

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