



Sociology of Shyness: A Self Introduction

Collin E. Campbell

Only the shy know the pain of shyness, the intense inability to interact in social situations.

The shy often rationalize their shyness by saying, "I don't know these people" or "These people make me uncomfortable"—thereby laying the blame on others rather than dealing with their own problem. Shyness carries with it a fear that makes many unable to, say, ask out that girl or to seek the job promotion. Surely these opportunities would benefit us, or at least allow us to grow and learn. Shy people who may even recognize this, however, allow their perceptions of their faults, real or imagined, to prevent them from taking the chances others routinely take throughout a normal day. Their shyness, often begun during the school age (approx. 5-18 years of age), can go on to take more serious forms later in life such as depression and social anxiety disorder, to say the least. Several of the patients documented in the video viewed in class on multiple personality disorder had shy, or introverted, personalities. To compensate for this, they also developed stronger confident personalities that could accomplish what the shy personalities could not. In some instances this gave way to extreme, violent personalities bent on the destruction of the weaker ones.

Growing up, I myself suffered from

shyness. I projected negative qualities upon myself: I was too fat, too ugly, too smelly, too dumb, etc. Because of this I was unable to stick up for myself, usually falling prey to others who saw my lack of confidence as an exploitable weakness. I was unable to speak to girls for the longest time, and it has only been in my second semester as a Freshman in college that I have actually had a girlfriend. Shyness kept me isolated for much of my life, preventing me from creating meaningful interpersonal relationships throughout high school. To this day my "best friend" has never been to my house. Even today I find faults with myself. My nose is too crooked, or one eye is lower than the other, or I am too critical of others, etc. Ironically, I have even gone so far as to say I am too critical of myself. What I fear most is that I am inadequate in every way imaginable and other people know this but will not tell me. It is this sort of paranoia that disturbs me enough to make poor decisions, though fortunately I have so far manage not to.

In her essay "Honor thy Father and Mother" Nancy Chapin states, "Parents are transmitters of attitudes that the child adopts in forming a self image"(47). Of course it is true that many of our **values** are formed as children when we are most open to the experiences of the world, so it stands to reason that we would be most influenced by the people we come into contact with the most during this stage, our family being our '**primary group.**' If a child is the recipient of care from parents who have much time to spend with them, that child will most likely act in a kind and caring manner. However, if a child lived with parents who were unable to spend time with her or acted violently towards her, she would more than likely become introverted and push away people who attempted to become close to her. In "My Translucent Father" (2002) Katie J. Dubaj portrays how her father slowly removed herself from her family, first by getting a divorce and slowly by

not visiting her and later withdrawing child support. In a situation like this the child would more than likely be unsuccessful at relationships, being fearful of abandonment, driving people away from him or her.

Shyness in itself is nearly the antithesis of social interaction as it prevents people from actually interacting with one another, instead relegating them to what they can experience in their own little secluded worlds. As Newman states in his textbook, *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life* (2002), "The primary theme of sociology is that our every day thoughts and actions are the product of a complex interplay..." (Newman 15). As such, Newman says, who we are is partially determined by the people we interact with every day. As children we learn from others walking, speaking, going to the toilet, etc. To the day we die we are learning from other people. By using our **sociological imagination**, we can well imagine that not only large social forces but even the tiniest encounters with another person could affect us for the rest of our lives. However, a shy person does not experience many of these interactions, and may stagnate or, as a computer does, find himself in an endless data loop, the indefinite recirculation of information. This can corrupt a person to the level of a shut-in or a hermit, forsaking all interaction to preserve a preferred (and safe) way of life.

Newman also discusses how we humans, as social beings, require contact with other people to interpret situations so that we might know how to react or respond. The shy or introverted person, however, does not have this benefit. If confronted with a strange occurrence, he will not have the advantage of experience or the knowledge of what other people have done in similar events, so he will be prone to panic in times of crisis. Newman goes on to say, "Although society exists as an objective fact, it is also created, reaffirmed, and altered through the day to day interac-

tions..." (Newman 37). Introverted people, by not interacting with other people, in turn do not add to society. When a person takes a chance and, say, wears a new style of clothing that catches on, he or she has influenced society. From the person who wore the clothes to the person who imitated him or her, they all had a self-assurance that an introverted person does not possess. A shy man is more likely to conform to the majority more easily than someone who is more at ease with himself, seeking ways to blend into the crowd so that no matter where he goes he leaves no impression, passing as invisibly as a ghost.

Society is made up of groups of individuals, be they nations, neighborhoods, or even as small as the simple interactions between lovers. Shy people do not interact in these groups and thus do not influence them. But despite this, the introvert themselves are not to blame for this. Games such as baseball, for instance, carry certain **latent functions** with them, preparing the individual to function in larger society. While these leisure activities promote the development of teamwork and leadership abilities, a child who is not very physically developed or does not possess the necessary skills to participate is excluded from learning those crucial skills when young. Because he was not allowed to be a functional part of the team, he will not develop the interpersonal skills needed to function properly at work with people in **authority** positions or with subordinates later in his/her life. The child will not learn the norms expected of him. For example, in my senior prom, instead of kissing my date at the end of the night, I merely dropped her off and drove away, much to my **embarrassment** the next day. That incident was due to my being uncomfortable in that situation because of my earlier limited interaction with girls.

"The social construction of reality is the process by which reality is discovered, made known, reinforced and changed by

members of society” (Newman 76). What this means is that society is not just an objectively given but also a subjectively constructed reality resulting from our interactions with other people and conclusions drawn from those interactions. A shy person then will have a limited perception of reality without the presentation of new values or ideas that other people often force upon us to realize and ponder every day. We do not all have the same definition of reality and that is due to the different events each person experiences throughout their lives. For example, I had a great fear of heights resulting from a childhood accident. As a result for me heights became dangerous, while people such as window washers or acrobats may not feel as strongly as I do. A more timid person would perhaps not place himself in situations for fear of public scrutiny or of making himself appear foolish—so as a result of this he acquires a more limited view of reality. By not taking these chances an introvert’s reality becomes mainly composed of what he or she has to deal with in the day-to-day events of their own little world. Because of this he or she may end up with a skewed vision of reality, as did the suicidal man in “Patch Adams” who murdered Patch’s girlfriend. Since he had not been exposed to death outside of his books, he had no way of coping with the passing of his father and as a result ended up taking this out on himself and others.

Newman also discusses culture, the “language, values, beliefs, rules, behaviors and artifacts that characterize a society.” He states “Culture provides members of a society with a common bond” (Newman 97). It is because shy people remove themselves from society that they do not feel this “common bond” with their fellow men and women. This in turn alienates them causing them to withdraw further. As some communities (on the local level) are made up of members of similar races and ethnicities, the shy people also are led to believe that

their own culture may be the only one they can function in. This then perpetuates fears and **stereotypes** since shy people do not take the time or care to personally know others with whom they interact. Of course an introvert will have no evidence to counter these stereotypes so he and others will be unable to interact easily. I know this since my community at home consists primarily of white Catholics. In my entire school of nine hundred students there were only 3 African-American students who were actually bussed in from another school district. Cruel racist jokes were prevalent at lunchtime and some students even went so far as to verbally attack them. Arriving here at Oneonta I found myself confronted with a much larger body of students and faculty members, having a much larger range of ethnic backgrounds. Not having any experiences with people from different backgrounds, I was uncomfortable at first. But now, having spent time and learned from people of diverse backgrounds, the **prejudices** I had not even realized I had have been quickly dispelled. The hope is that in the future people will be able to learn to accept one another, but people must do their own part and overcome their own fears.

Newman goes on to discuss the importance of **socialization** with regards to the development of self. To do this we observe, mimic, and interact with other people (a behavior known as **role taking**). Children do this to understand and accomplish actions required for success later in life (such as walking). This continues through **resocialization**, leaving an old role for a new one. Shy people, though, do not or rarely socialize, stunting the growth of their sense of **self** or **identity**, delaying certain developmental stages necessary to create a fully functional member of society. As a child progresses through life to adulthood he must pass through several stages to reach his or her full potential. One such stage is the **game stage** where a child learns the

ability to take the role of a group or community and obey the rules and meet the expectations of that group. I myself was rarely, if ever, encouraged to participate in group activities and lived with few other children so I had very little interaction with other people my age with the exception of the limited contacts I had while at school.

If a person who is more timid in personality does not participate in this stage of game activities he may find hard to get along with other people. He will be more prone to breaking the social rules and norms and thereby alienating themselves as "oddbodies." This in turn could stunt that person's personal growth even further. As society is a complex grouping, from humanity as a whole to the workings of romantic couples, someone who cannot abide by the norms of these groups will find himself to be a perpetual outsider.

Newman states, "A significant portion of life is influenced by the images we form of others and the images others form of us" (Newman 159). Someone who is shy will, by a sheer matter of low self-esteem, create a superior image of other people and to project a negative image of themselves. While someone "well-adjusted" and comfortable with herself and her place in society may stand up straight and present herself in a "loud" (noticeable) fashion and manner, someone of a shyer demeanor would be prone to slouching, dressing in neutral colors and fashions, and speaking quietly with little confidence. This could, and I regret to say has, allowed others to take charge over the timid person, exploiting his or her timid nature. People without the confidence to stand up for themselves could find themselves losing promotion opportunities at work, respect from their peers, and attention from the opposite sex. When we gather information about other people we are aware that they are doing the same to us. The shy person however becomes paranoid and uncomfortable, trying to cover or draw attention away from him-

self.

In the U.S. great importance is placed on relationships. When a celebrity begins to date somebody, more often than not it becomes a highly published affair with pictures on the news and articles in the newspaper. One's happiness is frequently calculated by the apparent happiness of their relationship with a significant other. But creating a deep meaningful relationship with another person is difficult even for someone versed in the ways of courting and love, let alone someone who has great difficulty talking to his or her own friends. Obviously the shy person fears relationships for the fear of loving and losing. He questions himself, "Who could love me?" or "Would she leave me once she really gets to know me?" He or she uses other people as a symbolic representative of what life should be like and finds himself or herself lacking. He or she becomes a **deviant** in his or her own mind, disobeying what society expects from him or her. So like Will in the film *Good Will Hunting* the shy person will not pursue that which he knows could potentially be a pivotal moment that would make him happy. Like Will, the shy person fears being alone since being without a significant other is a severe social stigma.

A fear contributing to the introvert's inability to have or maintain a successful relationship is the fear of being subjected to public scrutiny. More people, including myself, would be open to seeking romantic interests if they could remain a private affair; but the fear of being ridiculed overpowers this deep biological urge for companionship. The fear of being ridiculed can thus harm a person's sexuality, preventing him from exploring his needs for fear of being ostracized by his friends. As seen in the movie *Anger Management* the main character Dave, played by Adam Sandler, is unable to kiss or show affection for his girlfriend in public due to a traumatizing event that occurred when he was very young. Only by confronting that which

caused this **stigma**, namely his feelings of inadequacy, is he able to have a full and deep relationship with the woman he loves.

Since social structure shapes social **norms**, those who cannot meet these norms can find themselves in a conflict with that society. Someone too shy to interact with people can find himself at the mercy of the system he lives in. He or she will be unable to deal with the many people he meets throughout the day. Unexpected events, such as a blown-out tire, could render that person helpless, as he would be too frightened to flag down a passing motorist to help him for fear of appearing foolish, even though this would be perfectly normal and acceptable behavior in our society.

Also, as national borders become more porous, allowing for the easy diffusion of peoples and cultures, societies will be prone to rapid cultural changes. Shy people will become increasingly unable to cope with this situation. Having limited exposure to their own cultures, introverts would be completely lost as the dynamics of their culture begin to change far too rapidly for them to follow, eventually leaving them completely lost and alienated in their own culture.

According to Newman, "Stratification is a ranking of entire groups of people, based on race, gender, or social class, that perpetuates unequal rewards and life chances in society" (Newman 320). This can be seen as early as grade school when the separation of "popular" from "unpopular" children, or the so-called "nerds" and "outcasts" from "normal" students, take place. Those who do not fit in the popular category are usually introverted youths who are apt to believe the disparaging comments others say to them. This causes the youths to introvert even more, hiding from the popular children who have harmed them, cutting them off from social interaction. Of course the popular children, who do not face the same hardships as the "outcasts," are exposed to many positive influences

that the shy child would not seek, allowing them to advance faster in the world. So, most likely, those who were introverted as children will be found in lower paying positions with less responsibility due to their less developed interpersonal skills. In this way, shyness contributes to the stratification of everyday social structure into superior and inferior groupings, with the timid children being relegated to the underclass of the hierarchy.

In extreme cases, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan can be a "safe haven" for introverted people. This organization gives members a sense of belonging to something, but still keeps the members anonymous both physically and mentally. The hoods serve to keep the members anonymous and faceless to the general public, hiding those person's shortcomings in a sea of conformity. Also the members are able to "hide" among one another using the unifying fire of hate to keep members close, though they may differ quite a bit from one another in other aspects of their lives. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of "a degenerating sense of nobodiness," that is, a sense of individual worthlessness that leads to the need to degrade other people to provide a sense of superiority and worth. An example of this cited in Newman's textbook is that of an American businessman meeting his company's counterparts in China. The businessman was fearful of having nothing to say and appearing foolish to his hosts. At a business dinner the man turned to the man closest to him and said, "Likee Soupee?" referring to the main course. The man nodded and said nothing. Later, the Chinese man rose and delivered a speech in perfect English. Seating himself again he turned to the man who had spoken to him earlier and said "Likee speechee?" Because the man had feared appearing foolish, he tried to appear superior in the eyes of the Chinese businessman and assumed he could not speak English.

Racism is a way of **social stratification**.

Racism is defined by Newman as the “belief that humans are subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behavior and innate capacities and that can be ranked as superior and inferior” (533). When one person practices **discrimination** based on another person’s race it is often due to the fact that they do not actually know any members of the race they have tagged as inferior. This is partially due to **ethnocentrism**, i.e., the belief that one’s culture is superior to another’s. But another part of this problem is the fear of the targeted race. During the early 1900s, Jewish people were targeted, not only in Germany but also throughout the world, as being the cause of the world’s ailments. Many feared the Jews were planning to conquer the world in a “Conspiracy of Zion.” As a retaliatory response people, including Adolf Hitler, called the Jews an inferior and “impure” race that had to be removed from propagating their “ill-gotten seed.” The minds of the time ‘**medicalized**’ this and attempted ‘gene-therapy’ to turn different races into the European ideal. Hitler’s so-called Aryan race had the **ascribed status** of savior of the pure race from the “dirty” races out to destroy it. This was largely due to a fear of something the people living in this era did not understand, that one’s religion does not necessarily determine one’s loyalties, and that they needed a scapegoat for the problems they were experiencing.

Similarly, **sexism** is also a major and prevalent problem in our society. Sexism is a “system of beliefs that asserts the inferiority of one sex and that justifies gender based inequality” (Newman 534). Similar is the need to place someone under you to promote a sense of power and superiority.

As earth’s population grows at an astounding rate millions of people come into the world every year, a good percentage of whom are doubtlessly afflicted with varying levels of introvertedness. With more and more people unable to cope with the norms of society coupled with the faceless

medium of the Internet—a **global** information network—we could find ourselves with an entire subculture of introverted people all acting according to the norms others have established. This would be, to a certain extent, a migration, not to another land, but to an invisible nation comprised of those who do not fit into the society of their birth. This may be seen as a positive move, allowing people who are unable to interact normally in society to meet and interact in a safe environment with other people who are similarly afflicted. However, this could also be seen as a negative move, allowing people to further withdraw into their own **virtual communities**, departing from mainstream society.

In the story *Ender’s Game* by Orson Scott Card, the author deals with a young child growing up in a society where families are only allowed to have two children. Due to a special government grant Ender’s family, the Wiggins, are allowed to have a third, Ender. Due to his ‘special’ **status** Ender is ostracized in his school and regularly beaten by his peers. Being selected for a special government project, Ender is then taken from his family, including his sister whom he loves deeply, and is forced to train at a ‘battle school’ to train for an upcoming war. At the end of the story Ender becomes a cold and emotionless killing machine unable to feel for his fellow man, even for his sister. Because all throughout his life he was not allowed to become friends with anybody he completely withdrew into himself unable to interact on any level except with those in positions of power over him.

Of course an important feature of any facet of life is change. How well one responds to change in the world is an important indicator of success. The developed adult should realize that all life is change. It is change that allows the child who is afraid of dogs to one day become an accomplished veterinarian. The shy person however will shy away from change to preserve

the comfortable microcosm they have created for themselves.

In the movie *Good Will Hunting* we find Will becoming violent over the slightest provocation (beating up his childhood bully, screaming at his girlfriend, etc.). This was caused by several traumatizing events in his life related to his being orphaned at a young age, essentially being abandoned by the people who were supposed to love him and care for him the most at that age. He was also abused by one of his foster parents, so the violence he experienced as a child was transferred to his personality as an adult. As a result of his difficult upbringing, Will had a select group of friends whom he had known since childhood while he kept all other people at a distance, including his girlfriend whom he lied to on several occasions and drove away by screaming at her when she tried to become intimate with him. Thanks to the ability of his therapist (Sean played by Robin Williams) to identify and be honest with Will, he was able to confront the person he secretly held responsible for his problems: himself. Letting go of that which had kept him from knowing people he set off into the distance to seek his love and fortune.

The only way for a person to release himself from shyness is to realize that there is nothing wrong with him other than that which he himself creates. By confronting his fear of inadequacy and loss, as I have tried to do in this paper, he will realize that there was nothing to fear in the first place.

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