

The Voices of the shy: The consequences, misconceptions and 'management' of shyness.

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ABSTRACT

In best efforts to ensure an environment deemed 'safe' to shy individuals, the present study employed email interviews in order to facilitate 'non-shy' interaction. An interpretative phenomenological analysis was utilised to uncover the subjective meaning and experience of shyness, and four key themes were identified. These were: 'The consequences of shyness', 'The role that other's play in shyness', "Managing' shyness' and 'Shyness is 'not such a bad thing after all'". By giving shy individuals a voice, this study highlights how shyness hinders its 'victims' and the social context in which shyness is shaped, managed and defined.

KEY WORDS:	SHYNESS	EMAIL	MANAGEMENT	MISUNDERSTOOD	POSITIVES
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Introduction

Shyness involves anxious self-preoccupation and social inhibition due to the prospect of interpersonal evaluation', and has long been referred to as a character trait, attitude or a state of inhibition (Buss, 1980). Surveys have indicated that around 40 – 45% of adults regard themselves as dispositionally shy (Carducci, 1999), however, shyness has proved difficult to assign one single definition, and instead offers many referents (Crozier, 2005). Henderson & Zimbardo (1998) argue that shyness varies from 'mild social awkwardness to totally inhibiting social phobia'; however, the boundary between various conditions of shyness remains unclear.

Previous studies have attempted to delineate individual differences in shyness, Heiser et al. (2009) investigated the relationship between shyness and 'social phobia', and concluded that a spectrum or 'continuum' exists, here it was explained that shy individuals may fall onto this at varying points. In addition to this, another study discusses an 'overlap' in behavioural features among conditions characterised by social reticence, rather than a continuum (Heiser et al. 2003). Buss (1986) also identified two separate types of shyness; 'fearful shyness' refers to one elicited by social novelty and intrusion, this usually emerges in early development and is characterised by inhibition in unfamiliar situations and a fear of strangers. 'Self-conscious shyness' is another which develops subsequently; following heightened self-awareness, one becomes concerned that they are being scrutinised and are uniquely different.

Moreover, Pilkonis (1977) distinguished between the 'publicly shy' and the 'privately shy'. Those whose shyness is expressed through more observable manifestations such as being quiet or showing awkward behaviour are regarded as 'publicly shy'. In contrast to this, 'privately shy' individuals may not appear shy, however will experience intense physiological arousal and hold a lot of negative-self thought. As shyness encompasses a network of definitions and understandings, and symptoms and features are strikingly similar, it is possible to consider shyness as an umbrella construct of which we can consider all corners of research (Rapee, 1998). It would be important to note however, that since the current study takes a phenomenological stance, the type or measurement of severity of shyness that an individual may obtain is not heavily thought upon, instead, its focus predominantly surrounds how to comprehend the lived experience of those whom shyness exists for.

The experience that shy and/or socially anxious individuals may endure has frequently been summarised, particularly by cognitive behavioural models. Such models explain the shy condition in terms of a fault in cognition, or a distortion of reality on the shy individuals part (Hoffman, 2007). Shyness is characterised by excessive self-focus during social situations (Samadi et al. 2013), which results from the desire to make positive impressions on others, yet doubting their ability to do so (Beer, 2002). This perceived requirement to publicly display ability will then induce individuals to engage in a range of safety and avoidance behaviours. Which in turn only exacerbate anxiety while individuals may begin to experience a range of psychological and physiological symptoms, such as blushing, sweating and even panic (Priyamvada et al. 2009). The shy condition is argued to be maintained as these aspects work in a cyclical

collaboration (Clark & Wells, 1995). Furthermore, individuals are said to assess their performance post-event (Dannahy & Stopa, 2007) while attributing failure and responsibility to themselves (Sabogal, 1983) and encountering shame-based emotion (Henderson, 2002). The current study recognises that this is quite a range of symptoms, which seem somewhat extensive and distressing, therefore aiming to explore the shy experience in an in-depth, phenomenological manner.

Furthermore, Izard & Hyson (1984) state that shyness can be a transitory emotional state common in everyday life for many people, however for others it can be a dispositional trait that brings significant problems throughout life. Research suggests that shy individuals heavily regard their shyness as a hinderance (Pilkonis et al. 1980), one that can interfere with the ability to pursue one's interpersonal and professional goals. It was argued that since shy individuals do not take advantage of social situations and are less adept at expressing themselves verbally and non-verbally, they are less likely to establish careers and exhibit lower levels of achievement (Samadi et al., 2013). The shy population are also found to suffer from a range of interpersonal issues such as low relationship satisfaction (Tackett et al., 2013), greater difficulty in psychosocial adjustment (Jackson & Ebnet, 2006), higher rates of loneliness (Zhao., 2013) and the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships with others generally remains a challenge (Barry et al., 2013).

Furthermore, despite the desire to pursue such interpersonal and professional goals, shy individuals are often faced with an obstacle in which anxiety and inhibition prevents them from doing so (Kan and Cares, 2006). It may therefore be understandable as to why shyness is problematic or even 'an unhealthy state of mind' for some (Scott, 2006). Shields (2004) argued that shyness can be extremely overwhelming and somewhat debilitating, concluding a higher risk of disability and dissatisfaction with life for the shy population. Additionally, Eisenberg et al. (1995) concludes that the experience of Shyness often results in mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The current research aimed to investigate the extent of these features of the experience of Shyness, and to explore these assumptions in qualitative depth.

Given the discomfort that shy individuals appear to endure, research suggests that managing shyness often include various extensive strategies. These may involve avoidance behaviours, whereby the individual will avoid potential threats in their environment in fear of any social challenge that could potentially be placed upon them (Beer, 2002), and this is often paired with excessive hypervigilance (Buckner et al., 2010). Other research implicates that alcohol and drugs are often used as a way of reducing interpersonal anxiety (Bruch et al., 1996). Which in turn can result in alcohol abuse or dependence, and various other alcohol related problems (Young et al., 2015). In another study, Carducci et al. (2009) identified self-selected strategies that shy individuals reported using to deal with their shyness, such as 'forced extraversion, cognitively induced self-reassurance, educational extraversion, and sought professional help and alcohol-assisted extraversion'. All of which were argued 'incomplete, self-defeating and potentially dangerous'. Such studies highlight the lengths that those who live with shyness go to in order to

accommodate shyness, therefore the present research aimed to gain deeper understanding of this.

Few studies have looked at general shared perceptions of shyness; however, it is argued that the phenomenon and the people who experience it are often misunderstood. Scott (2004) notes that the tendency to engage in gestures such as gaze aversion, silence and physical withdrawal result in others' mistaking this for rudeness. It has also been suggested that that shyness is understood to be a 'deviant and stigmatising' condition or 'a social handicap', since it is deemed an undesirable trait among mainstream society (Scott,2006). Furthermore, Ishiyama (1984) concludes that shy individuals have tendency to engage in self-alienation as a result of feeling shameful about their identity. If it is so that the shy individual experiences such social rejection, the current study poses the question of what the receiving end of this said 'misunderstanding' is like. Samadi et al. (2013) recognise that 'the consequences of shyness are deeply troubling', for example being subject to problems such as low self-esteem and loneliness.

Mounts (2006) argues that shy individuals experience much private unhappiness, yet their inhibited nature means the shy and their problems are easy to overlooked by others. Similarly, Harris (1984) argued there to be a 'hidden face of shyness', in that the extent of the problems that shyness presents for those experiencing it are somewhat unnoticed or ignored by others. As a result of this, shy individuals face a 'spiral of isolation and ignorance' which in turn further exacerbates their difficulties. This suggests that Shyness can often be more serious than others realise, therefore the goal in which the present study wished to achieve was to uncover this said 'hidden face of shyness'. It could be argued that reflections of this analogy are also apparent in previous research regarding the phenomenon of shyness, Guglietti-kelly & Westcott (1990) note that we can describe shyness in terms of external behaviours and symptomology; however, this does not explain what shyness means to the shy individual. Similarly, Harris (1984) argues that in employing quantitative techniques to the study of shyness, psychologists run the risk of overlooking certain aspects of the phenomenon they are investigating. Thus, resulting in the consequences of shyness not being viewed as a legitimate or serious problem.

Although the quantitative nature of such studies describe the problems that are associated with shyness, the current study aims to unveil what those consequences are, why they are 'deeply troubling', and what this means for those who endure them. It is also the goal of this research to explore the extent to which shyness is a stigmatising or unfavourable identity by asking those who are said to be overlooked and unheard, and to penetrate the 'many myths and mysteries' that surround shyness (Carducci,1999).

Methodology

Participants

Six participants in total were recruited for this research, as a suitable sample number for an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this is enough to be able to examine similarities and differences in accounts without consuming an overwhelming amount of qualitative data (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). Scott (2004) points out that 'the shy' are a 'hidden population', who are difficult to reach, as they are less inclined to be sociable and share stories. However, indication that shy individuals are likely to access online social networking services, as a popular and comfortable mode of social interaction has been given (Baker and Oswald, 2010). Therefore, participants were recruited over a 'shyness and social anxiety' online community. This sample consisted of 1 male and 5 females, all of whom confessed to dealing with problematic shyness and ranged from 20-25 in age.

Data collection

Initially, researching shyness posed a slight conundrum in recognition that the conventional and recommended face-to-face interview (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012) could be problematic in a number of ways. First, it was noted that recruiting 'shy' individuals who would be willing to take part in the research would be difficult, as Scott (2004) observed; 'shyness is both everywhere yet nowhere'. Secondly, careful consideration regarding how best to put the shy participant at ease, in order to elicit rich and detailed enough accounts which characterise the experience of shyness was needed. The research was also determined to avoid inducing any unnecessary distress upon participants. For these reasons, methodological innovation was required.

The email interview was a data collection method utilised by Dennis et al. (2013), in a phenomenological study regarding the experiences of those living with Fibromyalgia. This was done so due to an understanding that the experience of fibromyalgia is characterised by pain, fatigue and cognitive difficulties, therefore the standard face-to-face interview would prove tiring and inconvenient for participants. Furthermore, Dennis et al. (2013) concluded that email interviews helped to achieve more in-depth and coherent data, which was both credible and transferable. Scott (2004) combined a similar methodology of email-based discussion groups when exploring the social contexts in which shyness emerges. As this occupied the same phenomena as the present study, it was thought suitable to utilise certain practices previously identified.

Given the manifestations of shyness, it was believed that collecting data via email would be extremely beneficial in they provided a 'safe setting', which is conducive to shyness. Scott (2004) notes that the 'ideal' interviewee is thought of as 'articulate and reflexive', however shy individuals may not take well to being prompted and probed to tell their stories. It has previously been discussed that shy individuals are subject to inhibition and a range of psychological and physiological distress (Priyamvada et al., 2009). In the event of social interaction, it may be possible that the shy individual engages in anxious and 'excessive self-focus' (Samadi et al., 2013), in becoming encompassed with monitoring their own behaviour. This interferes with the ability to process other attentional information (Rapee and Heimberg, 1997). Email interviews adheres to reducing anxiety to ensure the participants wellbeing, but also enables the shy respondent to present more coherent and genuine accounts of their experiences

of shyness, so that the qualitative goal of rich and reflexive accounts could be achieved.

Furthermore, it was hoped that participants would take advantage of the opportunity to 'step out of the shy role' (Scott, 2004). Extensive research has provided a clear indication that the 'cyber world' facilitates 'non-shy' social interaction for shy individuals, as it 'enhances feelings of self-competence' (Saunders and Chester, 2008), decreases communication apprehension (Hammick and Lee, 2014) and acts as a 'cybershell'; a virtual barrier of which presents less pressure to 'perform correctly' (Scott, 2004). It was previously recognised that studies of shyness have predominantly employed quantitative techniques to investigate shyness, therefore in altering traditional qualitative data collection methods such as the face-to-face interview to accommodate shyness, it was hoped that the current study would be able to 'give a voice' (Scott, 2004) to those who are often overlooked (Harris, 1984; Ishiyama, 1984).

Participants were made initial contact with over a 'shyness and social anxiety' online community, whereby an informal note from the researcher invited those who confessed to experiencing problematic shyness to take part in an email based interview. If the study aimed to uncover the subjective meaning that shy individuals held about the world, they would have to be given comfortable conditions to do so. Prior to collecting formal consent and briefing, 'a kind of warm-up discussion' was initiated by the researcher, as it was also recommended that this helps participants 'get ready to discuss more sensitive or personal issues'. Again, this was in line with procedures used by Scott (2004), which helped to 'break the ice'. In addition to this, participants were told that they may respond to as many questions as they desire and in as much detail they feel is necessary, and that they need not worry about presenting a 'right or wrong' answer. It is believed that rapport was still successfully achieved in transferring these semi-structured interview techniques over to an unconventional method.

The interview process could then take place. This consisted of around 16 fixed questions initially (Appendix 3), which were designed in accordance with conducted background research on shyness and IPA methodology. Smith and Osborn (2003) advise that questions should value the category of 'experience'. When Westcott and Guglietti-Kelly (1990) took a phenomenological stance to understanding shyness, four themes were established. These were; "Experience of the situation", Experience of the self", Experience of the activity" and "Experience of aftermath". Therefore, it seemed appropriate to adopt a similar framework when designing questions. An iterative process led the researcher to then ask further questions regarding other issues that may arise (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009).

Data analysis

An Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed as an appropriate pairing for the detailed and reflexive accounts elicited from email

interviews. With a focus on how individuals make sense of their own personal and social worlds, and how they attribute meaning to experiences, events and states (Smith and Osborn, 2003), it was believed that IPA would meet the aims of this qualitative research. It has been discussed that being shy or socially anxious often involves excessive self-focus, being occupied with one's own thoughts and feelings, and physical reactions resulting in awkwardness and social inhibition (Saunders and Chester, 2008). Therefore, the embodied and subjectively real experience of a shy person could be argued to be a perfect candidate for IPA (Scott, 2007).

After the email exchanges were complete, six transcripts were at hand for analysis (Appendix 1), and this was carried out in following the theoretical foundations and processes of IPA provided by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). During the first phase, it was essential to become fully immersed in the data, in reading and re-reading in order to capture first impressions of the transcripts. Notes were then made while drawing on the descriptive, linguistic and conceptual elements of exploratory commenting. This aimed to establish an in-depth 'experientially-focussed core' (Dennis et al., 2013). Following this, emergent themes began to develop once 'interrelationships, connections and patterns' were identified across the accounts of the subjective experiences of shyness.

The second stage involved transforming and reconfiguring these emerging themes, in formulating concise phrases to refer to a more psychological conceptualisation (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). This involved various levels of interpretation to ensure deeper analyses, such as acknowledging the social comparisons which participants referred to, or metaphors used in order to express and emphasise their experiences. (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). In relation to this, a 'hermeneutic circle' was employed, whereby an attempt to make sense of the participants' world as they do so themselves was made (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Four themes were identified.

Ethical considerations

All individuals who took part in this research did so on their own accord. This study did not include those deemed vulnerable, and participants were aware that they had the right to withdraw, as they remained anonymous under a pseudonym. Participant information was also protected, as all emails were downloaded from the server before deleting upon completion of analysis. The Manchester Metropolitan University ethics committee approved all procedures (Appendix 2).

Analysis & Discussion

The consequences of shyness

While analysing the accounts of the experiences of shyness, the obstructing and trying impact that shyness has upon the life of an individual proved a consistent theme across all six transcripts, and this was for many reasons. One respondent wrote:

Bianca (Lines 4-6): "It feels like my heart is about to explode, and then I blush, a lot. If there are a lot of people around it also feels like I am unable to breathe, and close to having a panic attack."

Quite clearly these are not pleasant states that one would wish to endure, and we can conclude the striking intensity of such feelings in the language that participants choose to express them; with remarks such as 'sometimes it just takes over and becomes a purely physiological matter, then it's beyond my control' and 'my body shuts down, I feel like I am paralysed and trapped'. It would also be fair to infer that experiencing these symptoms is followed by a tiring vicious aftermath (Westcott and Guglietti-Kelly, 1990) which is encompassed by feelings of frustration, desperation and resentment of those 'normal' others, as one respondent puts it 'it's a constant cycle and I envy those who don't have to endure that'. Another wrote:

Amy (Lines 3-7): "I mostly just feel annoyed and angry with myself thinking I should have done better. In situations that I am really uncomfortable in, I feel exhausted, emotionally drained and am glad to get away. However, I always feel as if I need to go back and prove myself. I come away with negative thoughts about myself, questioning why I am the way I am and why I just can't be myself."

These findings are indeed consistent with theories that explain the nature of shyness involves the attribution of blame and responsibility to the self in social failure (Buss and Scheier, 1976; Henderson, 2000). Other participants gave similar responses, as they explained that they would often 'just feel like giving up'. A sense that these individuals were 'victims' of extensive struggle and stuck in the fixed circumstance of shyness was highlighted. This is one in which they so desperately wish to escape, in questioning why they cannot 'just' 'be that way'. At the heart of their envy and frustration was their lack of autonomy. The respondents clearly had goals and aspirations in sight, however, they felt they unable to 'just shake the shyness' and reach them. Yet for 'everyone else' this seems effortless. Two respondents sum this up succinctly:

Amy (Lines 19-22): "I feel as though trying to get a career and be successful is a constant battle. My anxiety is too intense to even function in interviews and presentations so my life has been about trying to find other ways around everything, and this often means the longer way around."

Hayley (Lines 44-51): "... life just seems a great deal simpler for them. Getting jobs and earning money is an obviously important aspect of life, it's always seemed to me that this just comes naturally to the average person. Feeling like you are unable to achieve the most basic things makes you feel inadequate and like a failure."

It was observed that shyness does indeed hinder achievement (Samadi et al., 2013). Experiencing this range of burdening and limiting features of shyness, mixed with lengthy avoidance of encountering them was explained to consist of 'serious effort and planning'. Quite clearly it would seem that shyness appears to exert rather extensive and profound consequences on its sufferers which are deeply troubling, something in which Harris (1984) termed essentially a 'handicap'. However, another issue was raised in that these were said to be somewhat unknown or unnoticed by others.

The role 'others' play in shyness

Shy participants expressed the frustration and dissatisfaction that shyness brings upon their lives, and when they were questioned on how they believe others understand their shyness, and as Scott (2004) already noted, the general consensus was that others usually 'mistake' them for being 'rude', 'boring', 'stupid', or 'weird'. The accounts suggested that shy individuals feel misunderstood, and this was because of two main factors. The first being the disheartening experience when others cannot recognise the seriousness of the consequences that shyness brings. Participants explained:

Hayley (Lines 15-24): "If ever I do decide to explain my shyness and anxiety to someone I will quickly regret doing so and become disillusioned when they either tell me that they understand as they are the same, or they will just object to it completely because they don't understand why something that seems like no big deal at all to them is a big deal for me, it will usually result in comments like 'but why?', 'why can't you just do this?' or 'that's weird'. I wish it were that simple."

Strong emphasis was put on this lack of understanding by others. Participants accentuated that they believed many people are 'shy' in some situations, however, argued that 'usually it is not an ongoing thing', 'is not preventing them from living life happily and normally' and is not 'catastrophic'. A sense of 'us and them' was demonstrated between the shy and 'average people'; often described as 'outgoing' or 'social' in these accounts, but on the other hand, they complied in acknowledgment that 'the others' misunderstanding is feasible, as one participant revealed:

Bianca (Lines 28-31): "I think the level of shyness I have experienced is incomprehensible to the average person, but I guess this is understandable as they haven't experienced it so why would they?"

These findings are in agreement with Harris's (1984) idea of a 'hidden face of shyness', and comments such as these reiterate that the aims of the current study were indeed necessary and significant, as it was contemplated that research rarely uncovers the meaning and experience of shyness. They also coincide with research that claims shy people feel they are more shy than other people (Carducci and Clark, 1996).

Although participants would often claim to feel 'shamed and regretful' that others viewed them as somebody they were not following a social situation. This quickly turned sour for other participants as feelings of anger emerged, when the attribution of blame seemed to switch from the self to the other. In response to the 'average' persons misunderstanding of their shyness, a tired respondent wrote:

Aaron (Lines 20-24): "...people have failed to understand my point of view and called me "weird", despite this not being the case. Instead I just make excuses, this sometimes seems like an easier option than trying to explain myself to people who are unable, or are unwilling to listen and understand."

This may shed light on the reason behind the tendency for the shy to conceal their problem from those around them (Zimbardo, 1977). The frustration towards others continues when we observe the second feature of this misunderstanding. A common complaint stood strong among the shy respondents:

Amy (Lines 26-30): "Others have always commented on my shyness which was always quite baffling to me. I never understood why they felt the need to comment on it as if it were a problem. I've often had people saying things like 'she's nice, nice but she is shy', or asking why I am such a quiet person, as if it were a terrible thing."

A strikingly similar account was captured:

Aaron (Lines 7-11): "On numerous occasions, people have asked me questions such as "aren't you quiet?" which infuriates me as I feel that it is an unnecessary question which does not have a correct response. If I asked someone "aren't you loud?" that would be considered rude, to me there is no difference."

This further accentuates the 'us and them' attitude previously mentioned, the shy participants seem frustrated and tired of others either misconceiving their shyness or just plainly not understanding and handling it in a 'rude' manner. In a look at literature previously reviewed, it was commonly observed that shyness can be viewed as an affective-behavioural syndrome characterised by interpersonal inhibition and social anxiety which occurs due to the prospect or presence of others' interpersonal evaluation (Leary, 1986) and as mentioned, the shy subject is likely to attribute responsibility to themselves in perceived failed social situations. Additionally, cognitive behavioural theories in particular state that these assumptions are down to the fault of the shy person, in that this belief and expectation of negative evaluation in social situations are both inaccurately interpreted with little evidence to back them up, or a distortion of reality (Hoffman, 2007). However, these accounts consider the misconceptions of others' instead. A participant goes on to express their confusion:

Amy (Lines 40-45): "After they'd say these things I'd just ask myself why they felt the need to tell me that as if I didn't already know that about myself, and what harm am I actually causing anyone by sitting there being quiet? They don't realise the impact that this has or that what they

are actually doing is rude and criticising. There is nothing wrong with being shy, however I think it is rare that people understand this.”

Pilkonis (1980) explains that the shy ‘have a lot of negative self-thought going on in their heads’ during a social situation, and that ‘when the conversation is over, they feel upset or defeated’. As previously seen, this was reflected in the accounts given in the present research, however, could this be a result of entering the like-minded view of others, in believing that their condition is both deviant and stigmatising. As one participant remarked, ‘they would rather make you less shy, and more sociable like them’ and another referred to being ‘judged’ for being less ‘socially competent’. A shy individual sums this up:

Amy (Lines 46-51): “...being shy was already something that bothered me greatly and I wished I could be more confident and outgoing but I couldn't just be something I wasn't. Having others say things like this also, and viewing my shyness as a bad thing only made it worse - it confirmed that my thoughts about myself were right and my self-esteem became even more lowered.”

Rather than the focus of a shy person's inaccurate perception, these accounts lead us to question the role of the other, as they suggest that it is rather their ‘inaccurate’ or ‘misinterpreted’ perceptions which exacerbate the difficulties experienced by shy individuals. It was noted by one individual that she consistently feels as though she has to ‘defend what kind of person she was’, as the general response received by others made her feel ‘inferior to everyone else’. Another participant expressed that these attitudes and wrongful assumptions leads him to ‘becoming frustrated and feeling even more alone in my struggles’, and in turn, reluctance to engage with others in fear that they may assume they are ‘a bit strange’ or ‘ignorant’ was reported. Indeed, echoing Harris's (1984) ‘spiral of ignorance and isolation’ in which shy individuals become trapped. In speculation of these accounts, it would seem quite reasonable that shy individuals are filled with self-doubt and negative self-view, to what extent does this really constitute as a ‘distortion of reality’ on their part?

‘Managing’ shyness

When asked about how they best deal with their shyness, participants suggested similar strategies to those previously found among research such as ‘drinking before going to any kind of social event’ (Bruch et al, 1996) and general avoidance of any social situation in which a requirement to ‘perform socially’ is presumed (Beer, 2002), for example going to certain places in which they may see somebody they know and be expected to engage in conversation. One participant noted that if avoidance is not possible and she becomes ‘trapped’, she will ‘just go into the situation and try and cope’. A sense of hopeless perseverance was alluded to, as another participant explained:

Hayley (Lines 66-72): “Unfortunately, you just have to throw yourself into difficult situations a lot of the time, sometimes these things get better with

practice but a lot of the time they stay the same, you're still uncomfortable but you just deal and persevere."

However, although the respondents emphasised that living and coping with shyness is far from easy, and that anxiety in particular situations may still remain 'completely unmanageable', for example in presentations or interviews, they began to write about a particular technique that seemed effective, and a counter-discourse began to emerge. One participant reflects upon her dealings with the issue:

Amy (Lines 75-79): "I always felt like I could show everyone that I was nice and not stupid or rude really if I could just stop being shy. But it really isn't as easy as that. Dwelling on these kinds of things really damages your self-esteem which is why you just have to accept who you are, but also ask yourself why others are so bothered about what kind of person you are anyway, I don't need to fight for their approval just as they don't mine."

Something important to note was that the participants who seemed to talk about their shyness as if it posed less of an obstacle to them in comparison to the others, were the ones who were in recognition of the latter; seeing themselves through the lens of other's negative perceptions induced their personal quarrels with their shy and 'incompetent' identity. One respondent claimed that the most effective way of 'managing' it, 'or at least cope better' is essentially to recognise that there is no 'normal' and that there is nothing inherently wrong with being shy. She continues:

Amy (Lines 83-86): "Over time my outlook changed and in turn I slowly began to focus or 'watch' myself less and less in social situations, which therefore reduced anxiety and made me more able to function better in social situations."

This finding aligns well with Carducci (1999), who wrote that the solution is not about transforming the shy person into an extrovert, it is rather to promote the 'successfully shy life'. Moreover, this is one of self-awareness, self-confidence and self-acceptance. It is also in agreement with Beer (2012) who claimed that those who believe their intense feelings of shyness are unfixable have different goals and responses than those who believe it can change.

The present study therefore suggests that it is the implicit beliefs one holds about the malleability of shyness that need to be penetrated. However, this is dependent upon a much wider construct. The majority of participants made implications that it was indeed 'their problem and not ours', suggesting that it is society deeming their conduct problematic by determining a preference of non-shyness. Other studies have mentioned the possibility that shyness has become a stigmatising concept created in order to 'manage' an identity that deviates from current Western society and its requirements (Scott, 2006), Moreover, Hickenbottom-Brawn (2013) argues that this is a consequence of the power and expertise in society, which encourage us to conceptualise shyness through negative label.

Shyness is ‘not such a bad thing after all’

The last idea to emerge from this online interaction is one of the most important. Although participants expressed their envy of the non-shy, and that they have missed many an opportunity because of shyness. Participants concluded that shyness was not the undesirable and disadvantaged condition that so many deem it to be, as for many reasons it has served them well. As one participant puts it:

Aaron (lines 54-58): “I believe being a shy person helps you to understand others as you are more observant, and that this can lead to more personal relationships with people, as they view you as more trustworthy and understanding of their issues.”

Indeed, a common issue discussed in these accounts was their struggle in ‘connecting’ or ‘feelings close’ to others, and this lies true with previous research, as generally the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships with others remain a challenge for these individuals (Barry et al., 2013). However, another respondent argued that although this is ‘not ideal and it gets me down on occasion’, she reported that the very ‘rare and few’ connections that she did make were all the more significant. It may be that shy individuals often suffer loneliness (Zhao, 2013), however these participants put emphasis on rather a small but close-knit circle of family and friends, to which they displayed a great sense of loyalty and gratitude.

Another positive that emerged frequently was the idea that shyness enables a person to become more sensitive and observant of their surroundings. These participants sum up their ‘shy pride’:

Hayley (Lines 55-58): “...you learn a lot that more than perhaps outgoing people would not necessarily learn. You actually learn to understand people and behaviour, and be more compassionate and empathetic.”

Amy (Lines 91-94): “Others who are more able to communicate effectively in large groups may be at an obvious advantage in many ways. However, the skills and learning you gain from just observing I think a far more valuable.”

These points contribute more depth to Harris’s (1984) conceptualization of ‘the hidden face of shyness’. Harris depicted ‘essentially medical terminology’ such as ‘handicap’ and ‘disability’ to describe predominantly the negative aspects of shyness that went ignored or unacknowledged by others. Similarly, the current study identified terms such as ‘suffering’ and ‘victim of shyness’, however there was a slight contradiction in that the present study was able to uncover the positive features of shyness that go unseen by most. A sense of irony was encountered as their shy vocalicity meant that these were more personal positives that these individuals could privately enjoy, while they were actually a step ahead of everyone else:

Bianca (Lines 40-44): "Shyness can make you see the world and the surroundings in a different way, compared to people who strive for being a part of everything that is going on."

Aaron (Lines 67-79): "The skills I have been able to develop due to being more observant, understanding and considerate have led me to complete a degree in psychology and pursue a career in clinical psychology."

Conclusion

It would seem that the current research aligns well with findings from Scott (2004), as these shy respondents proved to be introspectively aware and understanding of the social context in which their behaviour is 'shaped, managed and defined'. This research acknowledges that the experience of shyness is often a troubling and limiting one, however this issue may be part of a much wider construct, and this may be more difficult to alter. However, as observed, a combination of eliminating these attitudes in a process of self-awareness and empowerment, and recognising the positives that shyness brings, can lead individuals in leading the 'successfully shy life' (Carducci, 1999).

As previously reviewed, other studies have attempted to delineate a measurement of shyness, which looks at determining just how shy someone really is (Heiser et al, 2003 ; Heiser et al, 2009). However, this remains unclear. In evaluation of the current research, it could be argued that it was only the participant's relative self-definition relied upon, as there is no alternative but to take self-diagnosis at face value. Since this was a phenomenological study, with focus predominantly on how to comprehend the lived experience of those shyness exists for, concern for this was not of significant matter, as Zimbardo (1977) wrote; 'you are shy if you think you are'. However, something to note may be that the six accounts on shyness provided appeared to vary in severity upon analysis of description, suggesting that a 'spectrum' of shyness was present, this may be something future research wishes to investigate.

Future research may wish to build upon the range of findings regarding shyness uncovered in the current study. This may provide a basis for those interested in the social psychological aspect of shyness, and the roles played in social interaction. Alternatively, perhaps an extension of the wider issue presented, in questioning the relationship that shyness has with society. Another suggestion to build upon findings here might be to explore the process of how those individuals who claim to have achieved the 'positive outlook', or state of awareness and acceptance of their shyness have done so, for this proves helpful in its conduct.

Furthermore, the current research gives voice to those who are not often heard, and provides advances toward understanding how and why shyness makes a large impact on individuals lives, the relationship between this and the social world, and how recognising the positives prove a relieving tactic. Therefore, new avenues of discourse for the caring professions are provided.

Reflexive Analysis

The way in which the accounts of shy individuals were understood and interpreted in this research were in reflection of my own epistemologically shy position. As somebody who identifies with shyness and the difficulty that it brings, I believe that my biographical presence has facilitated my ability to engage in, and meet the aims of this qualitative research on a deep and connected level. Also, it was this very awareness which allowed me to stay grounded and attentive, staying local to the participants tone and speculation (Smith, 2004). Therefore, it could be argued that this has resulted in more 'legitimate' findings (Watt, 2010). On a personal note, although shyness has too hindered me rather significantly at times, the conduction of this research has actually served as a therapeutic process, in consolidating my own positive identity with shyness and an awareness of my personal conceptual processes.

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