Shyness and awkwardness in everyday encounters psychology essay

Maybe at the bus, or the lobby of a dental clinic, or even while waiting for that delicious fill of coffee, those are some of the times that you find yourself looking at the ceiling, checking your phone for that unread message or even noticing how exceptionally elegant are the wrinkles of your hands. In less than ten minutes, you have already analyzed all the posters glued to the metal stool, and you can name " by heart" every one of the magazines sitting on the lobby table. That is when you try to start a nonchalant conversation with the stranger standing next to you, but suddenly you feel uncomfortable as you are preoccupied with concerns about your self-presentation. This discomfort or inhibition in interpersonal situations is defined as " shyness". It can be described as a form of excessive self-focus, and preoccupation of one's thoughts, feelings and even physical reactions. Shy people tend to feel uncomfortable and awkward in social situations. They try to abide to the " rules" of social interactions, but emotional and physical inhibitions prevent them from doing so.

Shy individuals, contrary to the common belief, are not " introverts". Introverts prefer being alone and enjoy the lack of human interaction. On the other hand, shy individuals crave for human interaction and social recognition as a part of a group. However, their self-consciousness and often the lack of assertiveness prompt them to give up opportunities to socialize. They are extroverts, but they handicap themselves by not entering social groups or speaking to strangers, and subsequently pass up the chances to practice the social skills necessary for a " social rehabilitation".

Being shy can be painful to watch, and even more disturbing to experience. Shyness can lead to the most awkward situations. American adolescents

have hard-won expertise in this issue with their unadorned exclamation "Awkward!", trying to ease the tension of the most uncomfortable situations. Furthermore, there are tons of self-help books to deal with awkward co-workers, and also on weekends or holidays we must face the awkwardness of the family gatherings, where people connected by blood kinship cannot share the most innocuous opinions without risking emotional or physical tension. Men are uncomfortable at seduction, knowing that an unwelcoming approach will result to rejection- a discomforting situation- and women never know if making the first move will be considered as a welcome relief or a manifestation of castrating pushiness. Our lives are all filled with examples of awkwardness, which we avoid by individualizing ourselves. Socially "awkward" or shy individuals often withhold their objective opinions in the pursuit of avoiding a potential discomfort, further building the barrier between them and other participants in social interactions.

We so much despise the feeling of " awkwardness" that we develop techniques or rituals to avoid the aforementioned situations. These techniques are often executed subconsciously and are interconnected with the self-reflection process which hinders socially-awkward people from being socially active in a group of people. Avoiding eye contact followed by texting or calling from a cell phone, or intentionally revealing the cable of your headphones are some of the techniques used to create a barrier between human interactions. Other techniques like slightly leaning towards someone, grunting or laughing aloud while reading a joke in the newspaper are examples of indirect approach of shy individuals, who on the other hand try to participate in social occasions.

In general, it is believed that most people aren't comfortable being observed or approached. This is connected to the insecurity and low self-esteem that embodies a lot of " socially awkward" individuals, and also to the upbringing or culture of others. Some cultures of the East do not allow unmarried women to interact with men, and others even prohibit women from being in public without a spousal or blood-related male companion. On the other hand, western cultures raise their children to be more independent and support social interactions between them and their peers. It can be inferred that responses to shyness are not universal, for example shyness is negatively associated with peer acceptance in the United States of America, but positively in China. Leaving aside the cultural factors, even small things, such as the directions of the chairs in an auditorium or in a bus – facing towards the front of the stage or the vehicle respectively, with no overlapping visual field between the people seated- play a substantial role in forming, or preventing social connections.

Although the research of shyness is relative new, researchers have been able to discover the social behaviors and the factors that influence the phenomenon of social " awkwardness" and shyness. Shyness seems to be a form of " social anxiety", where the shy individual may experience a range of feelings from mild anxiety in the presence of unfamiliar individuals to panic attacks with more serious symptoms for the individual. Additional research shows that there are different kinds of shyness. Buss, writer of the book " Personality: temperament, social behavior and the self' (1995), argues that there are only two of this phenomena: anxious shyness and self- conscious shyness. The differences between these two can be summarized to the time

of appearance, type of emotion or feelings generated, and the immediate or enduring causes. Buss states that the events that evoke the two kinds of shyness are different. The primary causes of anxious shyness can be grouped into two categories. The first is novelty of persons, environment and social role. The second is evaluation, which occurs because the situation is structured that way or because of failed self-presentation. He further reiterates that the immediate causes of self-conscious shyness are more complex, involving conspicuousness, breach of privacy, other's actions and one's own social mistakes.

Although it is almost unbelievable to think that shyness is genetically inherited, Buss states that anxiously shy people are most probably born that way. The inheritance may be a direct inheritance of a certain gene or the combination of inherited traits that are genetically expressions of low sociability. Also, he argues that attachment in the infancy causes low self-confidence and renders anxiously shy people sensitive to evaluation. Children from the moment of birth, tend to be curious " beings". From the early stages of their lives, they express curiosity towards the human body and the environment surrounding them: babies try to reach and touch their parent's face, are caught at staring at certain individuals, et cetera. These practices, however, are slowly suppressed, while the social norms trample over the so-called children's curiosity as the children grow up. On the other hand, overly attached children show signs of anxious shyness from the very beginning of their lives: certain babies cry when strangers touch them or when they are taken away from their parents, children of ages 1-2 hide behind their parent when a stranger is approaching, et cetera.

In the attempt of researching in depth the phenomenon of shyness Pilkonis, a researcher from Stanford University, designed an examination to investigate the differences between shy and non-shy individuals. To assess possible gender differences in the manifestation of shyness, both males and females were included as subjects. In a research by Pilkonis, shy people often report that their anxiety is evoked by ambivalent situations in which they are unsure about how to behave. In addition, one would anticipate the presence of a stranger during an anxiety-arousing task to hamper the performance of a shy person; therefore, the presence or absence of a confederated during the delivery of the speech was also varied (Pilkonis, 1977). In the research, differences among shy subjects themselves were also explored. A shy individual has yielded two major types: those persons who are privately shy and focus on internal events in describing their shyness, and those who are publicly shy and regard their behavioral deficiencies as more critical aspects of their shyness (Pilkonis, 1977).

For research purposes, students enrolled in a psychology course at Stanford University participated in the experiment. Subjects were selected from opposite extrema of the shyness continuum on the basis of responses to a short form of the " Stanford Shyness Survey" that had been administered during a class hour. The procedures for this study were confederates, opposite-sex interaction, interaction with the experimenter, and development and delivery of speech.

One of the inferences of the research was that one of the major differences between shy and not shy people is the ability of the latter to initiate and build conversations. During the opposite-sex interaction, people who were

not shy showed a shorter latency to their first utterance, spoke more frequently, and spoke for a larger percentage of the time. They allowed fewer silences to develop and were willing to break a larger percentage of the silences which did occur. (Pilkonis, 1977). Shy objects reported themselves to be more nervous when delivering their speeches and also to be more nervous when doing their speeches. Despite their greater anxiety, shy participants delivered speeches which were not judged to be poorer on any of the evaluative dimensions (Pilkonis, 1977). According to the experiment, shyness seemed to be less relevant in the structure of preparing and delivering the speech than unstructured interpersonal encounter.

An experiment of self-reported shy and not shy persons revealed huge differences between the two groups in verbal behavior. Both situational factors and sex of participant influenced the expression of shyness. But also within the realms of the shy group, behavioral and affective differences between publicly and privately shy subjects emerged, providing further evidence for the validity of this distinction.

But when are shy people going to resort, where their craving for human interaction reaches its climax? The answer is the internet. Social networking, and tons of other free means of online communication such as chat rooms, have given the opportunity to shy individuals to socialize without the limits of social inhibitions present in the real life. Research shows that shy people feel much less inhibited in social interaction online than they do offline, and consequently they are able to form a number of online relationships. Clark and Leung indicated that the higher the tendency of being addicted to the Internet, the shyer the person is. This correlation of internet addiction and

social shyness is statistically correct, but the reliability of the inferences of the study regarding these distinctions is not very high. However, nobody can deny that the internet has hindered social inhibitions but instead of closing the gap of communication between shy and non-shy individuals, it has actually widened it through " fake" personas of the internet scene.