She's Just Shy:  
A Phenomenological Study of Shyness  

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Most of us know at least one of them: a child who is talkative, attention-seeking, even tyrannical at home, but quiet and clingy at school; a toddler who tells perfect strangers intimate family history, but hides under tables or behind skirts when asked to greet a visitor; a child, adolescent, or adult who can explain any number of avoidance behaviors with the simple phrase "I'm shy."

What is shyness? One can describe it from external behaviors as has been done above, but this does not explain what shyness means to the shy person. What does the shy individual experience? Does all behavior labelled shy have the same experiential structure? The present research aims to answer this question through phenomenological analysis of protocols provided by shy people. (We are indebted to the anonymous reviewers of the paper for their provocative comments.)

METHOD

There is a personal note in this research, motivated largely by the first author's attempt to gain an understanding of the topic as a result of personal issues with shyness. The personal note is maintained in the presentation through the use of the first person singular, even though the interpretation was developed in continuous dialogue with the second author. In research of this kind dialectical monitoring is centrally important. It is certainly risky to conduct interpretive studies without interactive consultation with co-investigators, including both concerned colleagues and informants. This study includes both, but maintains the personal note in the reporting.
In order to allow the nature of shyness to emerge from the protocols, it seemed best to postpone a literature search on the subject until after the phenomenological analysis had been completed. However, I did have some preconceptions of shyness that needed to be dealt with. I articulated these for myself and wrote them down so as to bracket them and attempt to minimize their influence on the analysis. One of these preconceptions was that shyness might revolve around the initiation of interaction. My daughter reported feeling shy when she did not know someone, and her definition of "knowing someone" was that the individual had spoken to her. From my own experience, I thought shyness might also be a question of "Will people like me?", and I assumed that my daughter felt that people liked her if they spoke to her first. I therefore concluded that shyness may occur when what is at stake is one's likability. My preconception was that shyness is an unsureness of self in regard to whether one is a sufficiently likable or attractive person.

Having written a personal account of an experience with shyness, I was able to bracket a number of other assumptions that had crept into my own description of the experience. These were that: (1) there would be "an element of newness"; (2) "to be shy is to feel lost in a crowd unsure of what role to play"; (3) shyness is "a distance from myself"; and (4) "shyness is not knowing how to be in a given situation." These were elements which emerged from my own experience.

Descriptions of experiences of shyness were also solicited from two female friends, with the request: "Describe a situation in which you have felt shy, and describe what it felt like." My informants and I are in our early thirties.

I prepared my own protocol and received the others within two weeks after the request was made. One person provided a single example, but the other submitted four different experiences of shyness on the basis that she was "trying to think of a good example but all I really came up with was short episodes." Each of her episodes was analyzed separately as four different protocols. All six protocols are presented in the Appendix.

The protocols were analyzed using a phenomenological psychological method as outlined by Stones (1979), according to his understanding of some of the work conducted at Duquesne University. This consists of extracting naturally occurring units, and working through a first-order profile, a constituent profile description, and a second-order profile for each of the protocols. These analyses are combined into a categorization of themes, and an extended description of shyness is formulated and then reduced to an essential description of shyness.