"Let Me Introduce Myself":

My Struggle with Shyness and Conformity

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Hi, my name is Sherry.

I can't believe I just introduced myself! That's because we're not standing face to face. If we were, you can rule out my talking to you—unless we've already met. I have always been wary of approaching people that I do not know, whether it is out on a street or in a classroom. I have always wondered why I have a problem opening up, while others I know can talk to strangers as if they are lifelong friends. Also, when dealing with new people, I find myself conforming to their views, a practice that I do not like.

When I was little, I would rely on my sister to meet other kids so that we could play together, or I would sit and wait until someone approached me to play. At that time I was not aware of the dilemma I was creating for myself by believing that others were responsible for my social interactions. With respect to my sister I became a **free rider,** even though my actions did not affect society as a whole. I would stand back and watch as my sister approached other kids; she became my gateway to new friends. Once we started playing tag or catch I might begin to open up, but I was never as outgoing as my sister. She wanted every-

one to do as she said, while I was always a follower.

This childhood problem has followed me throughout my life and has affected my **anticipatory socializations**. Today I have trouble establishing new relationships with others because I expect others to open the way. But I can no longer rely on my sister to talk to my classmates or the people who live down the hall. And I can also not expect others to approach me to begin a conversation, for they may also be shy themselves. I am thereby forced to begin the introduction act myself, a process that is so difficult for me to begin with.

Presently I am a junior in college and, of course, I have friends. I've allowed myself to open up to certain people. However, similar to Will in the movie ***Good Will Hunting***, I am very selective about who those people are. Will was an intelligent person who chose not to maximize his potential by working simple jobs, such as in construction. Will went to jail as a result of a fight, but was released under the supervision of a Harvard professor. In probation, Will worked with the professor to solve complex math problems, but was also required to undergo therapy. During the therapy sessions, Will refused to allow the therapists to see his real self by joking and remaining silent. Eventually, Will related to one therapist and became comfortable enough to discuss his life. Like Will, I require time to become comfortable enough to share my life with someone. While I am first getting to know someone, I will occasionally censor myself to avoid saying something that I will regret. By censoring I mean that I will debate with myself whether to express a thought or simply let it remain as a thought. However, I find that I even censor myself when talking to my best friends and to my family.

After I get over my initial fear and begin new relationships with others, I often conform to their views. Rather than having to defend my own ideas, I tell people what

I think people expect to hear from me. I do this most often when I face people I have just met. Instead of expressing myself as an individual, I conform to society, whether it concerns clothes or opinions. In a way, I tend to be the opposite of Patch as portrayed in the movie ***Patch Adams***. Patch often rejects conformity and shows how he will not be like everyone else. During one scene Patch conducts an experiment in which he walks down a street and says hello to anyone that he passes. While watching this, I envied Patch's carefree ways. To be able to even smile or say hello to a stranger would be a leap forward for me. At times I have trouble working up enough courage to acknowledge an acquaintance that I might have met the day before.

Exercising my **Sociological Imagination,** as proposed by C. Wright Mills, I intend to explore my personal troubles with shyness and conformity. The sociological imagination refers to the ability to examine the interaction between private lives and broader social forces (Newman 8). Some people believe that in order to be accepted they must share the views of society. So, to avoid being different they conform. This is where my inability to voice my own opinions occurs. Rather than being considered different and having to explain myself to people, I pretend I feel the same or I even change my views to fit those of others. As a result, I also rarely participate in class discussions. I have a fear of appearing foolish to my classmates so I will not answer a question, even if I know the answer. Instead, I use my notebook as a **prop** to indulge in the classroom drama so as to draw less attention to myself. I will act as if I am reading my notes, in hopes that the professor will not call on me. According to *shyandfree.com*, a website developed by Kevin Rhea that is devoted to overcoming shyness, shyness serves as a survival mechanism (Rhea sec. 2). A person will bring less attention to herself or himself, thereby eliminating any possible negative actions.

As a result, he or she is able to live a better life without any negative interference.

In classroom, I often assume the **role** of a quiet student. At the beginning of a new semester, I rarely speak up during class. Later on, when I do have an idea, I still remain quiet because I believe that this is what the class expects; they would not expect me to voice an opinion or answer a question. I believe that, in a sense, they form a **stereotype** about me as being a quiet studious person, even though I am usually only that way in a formal setting like the classroom. I have occupied this role from the beginning of my education career as a student. My parents would attend teacher conferences and tell me that teachers thought I was "a very good student, but very quiet in class." This role has become so familiar to me that it is now hard for me to change to an outspoken student. I realize that volunteering and participating in class may be easy tasks, but having become habituated to being the same "type" of student since kindergarten I cannot fulfill my desire to participate.

My academic behavior has been shaped in relation to my teachers through the mechanism of what Cooley calls the **looking glass self**. I have respected the power of my teachers as **authority** figures. Therefore, as a student, I always did my homework and turned it in on time. I always followed rules, and I always gave teachers my attention. As a result, my teachers treated me with respect and encouraged my work habits. They made me feel like I was a good student, but I continued to keep quiet in class because I believed teachers respected and wanted this type of behavior from me, including my shyness and classroom conformity.

I tend to be serious in the classroom because I am concerned with maximizing my educational attainment to help me in the future. As David Newman states in *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, educational competition is now a glo-

bal process (Newman 263). I could be competing with not only Americans but also foreigners when I enter the workforce. As a result, I understand that I need to receive good grades so that I appeal to employers. It may appear to other students that I only concentrate on my studies, but most of my classmates observe me only in the classroom and not in other settings.

In addition, I have always been more withdrawn in groups in which males are present. I have never experienced **sexism** nor have I ever felt **objectified,** but males intimidate me because I am more worried about the impression that I make on them than females. Newman states that some females perform worse in classes that contain both males and females, rather than a class of only females (394). When I am placed in a group of all females I am more willing to share my voice, opinions and ideas. In a group of both males and females I am more apt to listen to others instead of offering my own views.

Considering that my classmates and I are **birth cohorts**, one would think that I should have many things to discuss with them. I suppose I could start a conversation about a current event involving a common **period effect** on our lives, such as the war against Iraq, but I can't. Maybe I could begin by discussing a **cohort effect**, like our common fears concerning graduation, but I won't. I have numerous subjects and events in common with my classmates yet I still cannot begin a conversation with anyone.

Newman is right when he points out that being a member to the Millennium Generation I am likely to be proficient with computers (419). I use my computer primarily for e-mail and instant messenger, though. Much like in person, I rarely call upon another person first; I usually wait until I receive a message to respond. However, I am much more open and talkative on instant messenger than in person. For example, when I receive a message from a new person I am more apt to be responsive

than if I were to meet the individual in person. Perhaps it is because I am not aware of the facial expressions and reactions of the individual. Through the computer I cannot decipher how the individual really feels so I save myself embarrassment by not being aware.

Newman also explains how schools also serve as a bureaucracy consisting of rules that govern most aspects of a student's life (247). As students, we are told when to register, what classes to take, and when to graduate. These rules control a large part of our lives and create an environment of conformity as students become concerned with meeting requirements rather than keeping a sense of themselves. For me it becomes one more way in which I have to fit in; I have to abide by the rules without questioning the control college has over me. However, it also relieves stress because there are fewer decisions that I have to make for myself. It is easier for me to follow someone else's decision rather than make my own. In the movie ***The Matrix***, Neo learns that he is not controlling his life; rather, he is serving as a pawn in a matrix. A larger force decides every move of the individuals in the matrix and is so dominating that the individuals do not realize they are being controlled. This is similar to the bureaucracy of the school, as the students do not realize that the standards we live by are controlling and shaping our lives.

Conformity was an important issue in my life growing up with peers, and it still remains in my mind today. Most of the friends I've had have all belonged to the same **social class** as myself, so I have not felt pressure directly from them in dressing and possessing things. However, I felt the urge to be the same as the rest of my peers in order to fit. Our **middle class** standing permitted my parents to appease me at times, but they also taught me the value of having nice things. The PBS documentary ***Affluenza*** discusses how we in society tend to seek happiness by buying more and

more things but enjoying our possessions less and less. *Affluenza* also shows how our self-esteem are often based on what we own. I have felt better about myself when I was able to wear a new outfit or a new pair of sneakers to school.

I am also influenced by the stigmas attached to **gender** roles, which distinguish masculinity from femininity (Newman 119). Women were once repressed by society and discouraged from voicing their opinions. Unconsciously, I have also internalized the way women have been portrayed in the past. I believe I have to uphold the image of being withdrawn and not speaking to others. I do not support the way women were once treated, but I may have picked up on those behaviors without realizing it.

Newman also points to sexism and the media portraying an inaccurate interpretation of women (386). There are always pictures of women surrounding me, most of whom possess no physical flaws. I see these women and I feel that I have to look and act like them in order to be accepted by society. I suppress my actual desires concerning what to wear to conform to what is "popular" at the time to fit in. Even though I may not be overweight I constantly feel as if I could lose a few pounds so that I look like the celebrities portrayed in the media. **Cultural innovations** have influenced how we look. For instance, I started to wear glasses in tenth grade to correct my vision. I could not immediately wear contacts, so I selected a pair of glasses I liked at the time. By the summer I was ready to wear contacts because contacts were not visible, whereas everyone can see the glasses resting on my face. Today when I look at pictures of myself in the glasses it does not take long for me to threaten to get rid of the picture. What I liked in tenth grade no longer passes for my acceptance as I change to fit in with the changing times.

G.I. **Gurdjieff** believes that human liberation rests on developing one's master self (266). The biggest step in liberation is to become free of outside forces, through developing a strong and stable "I." I am greatly influenced by the forces that surround me, including the opinions of others and the media. I rely on other people to decide what is "popular" or "cool" so that I can follow their ways to fit in. I make sure that I am appropriately dressed when I go out in public, even though I may just feel like wearing sweats. I believe that I can never give others an opportunity to pick on me or say something degrading so I always try to be at my best. In order to overcome my fears of public scrutiny, I need to realize that the only opinion that matters is my own. I do not need to depend on others to tell me what to wear; I should wear what I am comfortable in. This liberation from the eyes of the public will be the biggest step for me to move forward, but knowing that I have people in my life who will support me no matter what I am wearing or saying will make the change easier.

As a daughter, friend, and student, I undertake many different roles. I behave differently towards my parents than towards my friends. By **role taking**, I try to lead my parents to believe that I do no wrong, while with my friends I act somewhat immature. As P. Heim writes in her article "Alien Nation," "With my friends I'm much more open, I tell them things that parents shouldn't know, I curse, and I participate in activities that normal teenagers do" (Heim 2002). I am not implying that my parents think I am a completely different person than my friends do, but there are things I tell my friends that I would never think of telling my parents.

In the documentary ***Multiple Personalities: The Search for Deadly Memories***, the subjects of the movie deal with Multiple Personality Disorder. They are faced with housing many different personalities in one body that manifest themselves in different situations. Even though I do not suffer from multiple personalities, I can relate to the

subjects, as I may appear to be a different person when confronted with different situations. I am a different person with people I know than when I am in an environment with strangers. People that I am not yet comfortable around will often ask my friends if I ever talk or laugh. This surprises my friends because I can be the loudest person in the group when I am with them. As Samara Cohen writes in her article "I only *Thought* I Knew It All: Society and the Individual," "We are different people in different situations because we have moods and behaviors that express who we are at the moment" (Cohen 2002). When I am with my friends there is rarely a serious moment, so most of our time is spent laughing and joking. On the other hand, class is a serious time for me to learn. As a result, during class I am goal-oriented and attentive to the professor.

This also relates to a topic discussed by Kevin Rhea on the "Shy and Free" website. Rhea claims that people who are shy consider themselves to be shy because that is the only part they allow themselves to see. Shy people are so consumed with being shy and trying to triumph over shyness that they do not realize there may be other parts of themselves that are open and outgoing. I relate to this theory as I realize when I am with certain people that I am outgoing without caring what people think of me. When I am around new people, I forget that I am capable of socializing well and I revert to my quiet self. This brings up the interesting question of whether in fact all of me is shy, or only some of my selves.

Gurdjieff recognizes that a person has many separate "I"s that together make up the whole person (240). The "I"s involving various parts of a personality, gravitate towards the three mental, emotional, and physical centers of the human organism. To know and change oneself may involve knowing and changing a particular self or aspect of a self in the person. In my own case, it may be that not all of my selves are shy, but only some, as I stated above with regards to how I behave differently among friends and family. I wish that I could react the same way to everyone, believing that I have known a person my entire life even though I might have just met him or her. I would like to freely talk to a stranger about anything that might cross my mind, if appropriate, instead of simply thinking about starting a simple conversation. I need to invoke and engage more with the "I" that interacts shyly with unfamiliar faces to open up so that I may interact with my whole person and selves. As Gurdjieff states, "Each day you put on a mask, and you must take it off little by little" (1991 240). Instead of veiling my real personality behind shy selves, I must try to uncover it in small steps.

This change in personalities can also be explained using Goffman's concept "**dramaturgy**" and its associated notions of **front stage** and **back stage**. Front stage is where people maintain appropriate appearances as they interact with others (Newman 144). Back stage is the area where people can knowingly violate their impression management performances (Newman 144). I act very differently towards people in public than I do with my friends in private. I am more outgoing and talkative when I am around only people that I know well. When strangers surround me I talk much less. I use **impression management** and keep quiet because I worry about the impression that I make on people when I meet them. I believe that I cannot be ridiculed or appear foolish if I am silent.

My shyness does not inhibit my personal life, but can also influence how I relate to society and social change. As a shy person, most likely I will never lead a **social movement** to change society, reformist or revolutionary. However, I admire people that can start one based on their views. For example, Michael Moore in **The Big One**, personally visits corporations to ask executives about their business practices. Corpo-

rations have been laying off employees even though they are reaping record profits. Moore even sarcastically presents the executives with "Downsizer of the Year" awards. After watching the film, I became intrigued by Moore's straightforwardness with the executives, even when they became visibly annoyed with him. If I am ever in a situation in which I feel I am offending someone I immediately cease discussion of the topic. As a result of my shy nature, it is difficult for me to obtain certain **achieved statuses**. I was accepted to college on my own efforts, but I rarely participate in clubs or groups now. It is difficult for me to join clubs on my own because it requires me to begin and to form relationships with the group members. I never find myself in the role of a club officer or as a group leader since I have trouble with **socialization**. Because I tend to avoid social situations, I occasionally have problems when I am placed in one. In college, it is difficult to know of another's background and characteristics because students are not from one distinct region. This makes it harder for me to join groups because I am unaware of their **social group memberships**. I do not know their views on topics, so I do not join groups or talk to others to protect myself from possibly being judged or ridiculed.

The **culture** surrounding me has shaped me into the person I am today. It has formed my **values**. The things that I value in life are very important to me. As a college student, I value the significance of good grades. Unlike some of my classmates, I do not go to parties every night of the week. As a result, at times I find it difficult to communicate with classmates who are very social. They talk in class about the parties or the bars they went to, while I do not have that social experience in common with them. Occasionally, I do go out with my friends, just not to the extreme that some others do. Given the reality of **institutional sexism**, I feel that I have to work hard in my endeavors because women have been discriminated against in the past. Therefore, in class I am more concerned with learning the material than socializing with all of my classmates. Good performance will give me an advantage after graduation because I will have to compete with others in the workforce.

When I do find myself at a party, my shyness overwhelms me and I am unable to approach people and begin conversations. I engage in what Robert Merton called **self-fulfilling prophecy**. I always choose not to talk to other students because I fear they would think I was weird; so, I keep to myself. In other words, my own perception of myself as a shy person makes me become and continue to be a shy person. One day, I decided to approach a classmate of mine for his opinion on a test°after an Accounting class. He was very short with me, remained distant, and ultimately left. Immediately, I told myself that I knew it was a bad idea and I berated myself for making the attempt. To this day, I fear the same thing will happen if I were to try again. To save myself from further embarrassment, I do not participate in class discussions so that I cannot be ridiculed for my thoughts. When I do engage in conversation with others I will often deliver a **disclaimer**. I do this even if I feel strongly about an idea, just in case the other person might disagree with me. I might say "This may sound crazy, but…" before I say something offensive or simply to present myself better.

As a **primary group**, my family is an important part of my life, shaping my personality and behaviors. My immediate family consists of my mother, my father, my sister, and myself. Growing up, when I did not have friends to play with during the day, my sister was always there. Being younger, I usually succumbed to her ideas for activities and I rarely spoke up a different idea. This may account for my reactions today as I will "go with the flow" and join in even if I don't like the selected activity. I

am usually never the one to suggest or begin an activity for fear that no one will want to join in, so I rely on others to start the process.

In her article "Banana or Bridge? How Capitalism Impacts My Racial Identity," YuhTyng Tsuei writes while comparing herself to her sister, "How did two sisters who grew up in the same house at the same time be so different?" (Tsuei 2002). The difference between my sister and I also forces me to think about the debates on **nature vs. nurture** as factors shaping human personality and behavior. Those who favor the nature argument state that genetics is responsible for a person being who he or she is, while those favoring nurture state that the social environment surrounding a person is responsible for her or his behavior (Newman 105). My sister and I were raised the same way by the same parents. Today, she is more outgoing and is more comfortable in front of a group of people, while public speaking is my worst nightmare. Before a presentation, I always tell myself that I have nothing to fear and that I am capable of a good job; I give myself a "pep" talk. However, once I am placed in front of a group, my words of wisdom fade. My voice becomes very soft and it is difficult for me to make eye contact with others as I am speaking.

It is hard for me to decide whether nature is more of a factor in personality than nurture, or vice versa, as my sister and I are different despite our upbringing. According to Goff (par. 7) shyness may not be determined by biology; shyness may just simply be based on a person's life experiences. Negative experiences during childhood may lead to a person's being more introverted when placed in a situation similar to the childhood event. My parents have not exhibited signs of the same shyness that I possess and they were both active in high school. Therefore, I tend to favor the nurture argument, emphasizing life experiences as the cause of my shyness.

Although I cannot recall one distinct experience that was so negative to cause me to feel the way I do, many small factors have accumulated to account for my shyness.

My parents have instilled a sense of **competitive individualism** in me. This also makes me want to work hard in school. Neither of my parents went to college right after high school, although my mother later went on to get an Associate's Degree. From kindergarten on, my parents have challenged me to succeed so that I could go on to college to establish a comfortable life for myself. Even though we always had sufficient funds growing up, they want me to take advantage of opportunities for **social mobility** so that I can be even better off financially. They have always taken great pride in the **socioeconomic status** they have achieved, starting out with very little and being able to live comfortably today. As a result, this makes me want to work hard so that I can make them proud.

After almost completing a semester in sociology and analyzing this issue that is present in my life, I finally see that an end of my shyness may be in sight. Although not immediately, small steps can change the ways in which I live and curb my fears of not being accepted because of what I think or the way I look. My inner dilemmas concerning whether to participate in class or start a conversation with a stranger can be tackled by realizing that I am not entirely shy; only certain parts of me are. If I can learn to adopt similar behaviors with strangers as I do with the people I know, I might be able to make a friend anywhere I go. My outer dilemmas have shown me that opinions formed by outside forces should not weigh as heavily on my mind as my own views. I need to relinquish the hold that others have on me in order to liberate my "real" self.

After much reflection on my issues of shyness and conformity, I know that they can be resolved, but for me it will take time. It will take some time for me to become

more comfortable in social situations, to gain courage to share my thoughts with classmates, and to realize that being different is worth defending. I look forward to the day that I can stand in front of a group of people and give a presentation without wondering if I can make it through without a shaky voice and unsteady hand. I think time and practice in these situations are the keys to my issue.

Let me end by saying, "It was nice to meet you and I look forward to talking to you again."

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