

Case Study: Shyness

At Cardiff University, Susie Scott has been conducting a doctoral research project on the *sociology of shyness*, an innovative topic for the sociological imagination. The study involved in-depth interviews and an email discussion group, both with people who saw themselves as shy. Some of the questions Scott has been exploring are: What exactly is shyness, and how does it affect everyday interaction? Why is shyness seen as a problem, and why are individuals pressurised to overcome it? How does being seen as 'shy' affect a person's self-identity? These issues reflect many of the ideas from the Symbolic Interactionist tradition: the data from the project showed how shyness as a social identity is created in everyday situations and becomes real to the actors involved. When somebody is recognised by others as shy, this is because of the impressions they have given off through their body, gestures and language: it is a definition of reality that emerges from the interaction. It can often be seen as a form of deviance, because shy behaviour breaks some of the unspoken rules about 'pulling your weight' in a conversation. Furthermore, being labelled as a shy person can have a significant effect upon the person's sense of identity, not least because it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy: "I am a shy person, so I must act in this way". This in turn can affect the way shy people relate to others they perceive as non-shy. The way in which shyness is recognised and responded to is therefore a social problem as well as an individual one: the condition arises from social interaction and is not just 'in the mind'.

Questions:

- 1) How might shyness be explained as a secondary identity that develops out of socialization?
- 2) What kind of social rules do you think a 'shy' person might break in everyday situations?
- 3) Why do you think 'non-shy' people might encourage 'shy' people to change? (Think about the effects of deviant behaviour upon social order)
- 4) Is shyness a fixed role that some people take on, or a creative performance that anybody can drift in to?
- 5) To what extent can we see shyness as a socially constructed reality?