

The Politics of Shyness

An Uninhibited Review

Sheila Koren

In 1973, Philip Zimbardo and three colleagues reported in the *New York Times Magazine* on an experiment they conducted at Stanford University. Their article, entitled "The Mind is a Formidable Jailor: A Pirandellian Prison," described how student volunteers, arbitrarily divided into two groups (mock prisoners and mock guards) were placed in a simulated prison environment in order to study the effects of such a social situation on the way people think, feel and act. The experiment which was intended to span several weeks, could only be sustained, however, for under six days: the mock guards had, in this time, progressed from being initially just domineering to acting in brutal, senseless and sadistic ways. The mock prisoners had reacted to their display of power, not with objections or revolt, but by becoming sheepishly compliant with all the rules.

In response to these results, Zimbardo has been focusing his energies over the past few years on people he considers to possess these two described mentalities in one head (prisoner and guard)—shy people (in *Shyness* [Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1977]).

"They are inhibited from acting because of the inner commands from the guard-self... and the prisoner-within decides not to risk the dangerous freedom of a spontaneous life and meekly complies."

At a time when the vehicles of social control in our

society are becoming less overt but nonetheless more pervasive and effective in their subtleties, Zimbardo's investigation into shyness is of great social and political relevance. American society encourages, he says, personalities that do not resist oppression and injustice, that are self-controlling and self-preoccupied, that are, in essence, shy. Zimbardo has, in his analysis of shyness, clearly not fallen into a typical "blame the victim" approach but sees shyness rather as "a consequence of cultural norms that over-emphasize competition, individual success and personal responsibility for failure." As examples, he reports that the Communist Chinese and Israeli Kibbutz social experiments, seem to have eliminated shyness in children altogether.

Shyness is also, according to *Psychology Today* critic Sam Keen (in the March, 1978 issue) "a personality construct that is styled and conforms to the demands of our market economy—one that will not be relieved by the mere presence of shyness clinics." Keen's statement was made in response to Zimbardo's efforts to establish such clinics. Zimbardo, however, does not describe these clinics as an end-all or even major solution to the problems of shyness. His book strongly indicates that he believes that social change will be the greatest contribution to the elimination of the painful aspects of shyness but that there are skills that individual shy people can learn and practice so as to undo a lifetime of

other learned and less free and expressive behaviors and actions. Social change can only be accomplished by people able to speak out, express anger and act directly.

"Shyness," says Zimbardo, "is the fodder of Fascism." Shyness represents an abhorrence of freedom, with all its uncertainty, and individual responsibility. In its place, many shy people opt for structure, rules, regulations. The conservative backbone of the prevailing status quo is most likely to be constituted by a silent majority of shys, not by chance, but by design of our agents of social control: parents, teachers, politicians, employers. Those authorities would make us more manageable by encouraging the virtues of passivity, reticence, submissiveness, obedience—in a word, shyness.

We must all be able to demand back our expressiveness, our rights to be fallible and changing people, to not be submissive and appropriate conformists in this market economy Keen describes. That ability can at least partially be acquired through practice and skill sharing.

Unfortunately, Zimbardo's work coincides with a growing attempt by psychiatry to perceive and define shyness as a mental illness, with tendencies toward just such a blame-the-victim approach that the presence of shyness clinics might suggest.

"It's too bad," says Dr. Michel Girodo in her recent mass market book *SHY? (You Don't Have to Be)* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), "that shyness isn't a medical problem. When you think that more than one hundred million people in North America suffer from one form of social anxiety or another, you could be pretty sure that a vaccine to counteract it would have been developed long ago. But shyness is not taxable, crucial to our economy or traceable to biological conditions [yet]. Its forms are too readily camouflaged by vanity. It can be described as being 'reserved,' or 'modest,' or being a 'loner'."

Those in authority would make us more manageable by encouraging the virtues of passivity, reticence, submissiveness, and obedience—in a word—shyness.

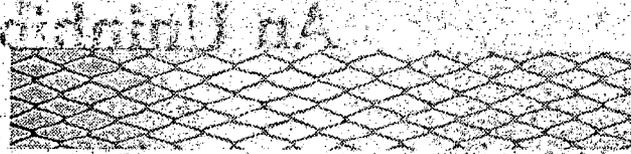
But like Zimbardo and Keen, I believe that shyness is indeed crucial to our economy and it is because of this that the vanity camouflage is encouraged. Reserved and polite workers who quietly drop constructive criticisms into a suggestion box at the factory or office (if there is one) are far more desirable to owners and managers than those who get angry, organize and strike.

In addition, the camouflage of painful shyness by that vanity of gentility, politeness and good taste, is another form of social control that keeps the people most likely to become angry and outraged by economic and other oppressions from doing so because

the personality of anger and outrage is one that does not easily acquire economic reward or social acceptance.

The double-bind inherent in the attempt to make shyness a mental illness is classic:

Our cultural norms tell us that it is refined to be quiet and reserved, the sign of a good upbringing, of upper class behavior and gentility. A lady or gentleman is extremely self-conscious, speaks only in the kindest and most tactful manner, and even when incensed, tries to always remain calm. To be otherwise is to be crass and exhibiting of lower class, i.e., offensive, inappropriate behavior. That it is a symptom of one's personality flaws to get angry, to speak



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out against injustice, to explode in outrage, is the kind of psychological justification that underpins all kinds of oppression in our society. It becomes then "good character," to quietly accept one's lot (however rotten it may be) and preferable to get angry, if you must, in some unobtrusive way, i.e., that needn't be listened to.

Shyness is likely to be a major psychopathological disorder, however, in the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM III) proposed to take effect in 1980.

The shortcomings of Zimbardo's book, as well as those of creating a mental illness out of shyness, overlap in relation to the subject of Women and Shyness.



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Just as hysteria (which will be eliminated from the DSM III) is a word that literally derives from the Greek, meaning "of the womb" and a concept that made being a woman synonymous with psychopathology, so, in a similar sense, does shyness in more modern language.

Shyness means, by a compilation of various dictionary definitions: self-conscious, shrinking from self-assertion, wary in speech and action, retiring or reserved from diffidence. Being shy implies worrying so much what others will think of you that spontaneous actions and behaviors are impossible.

Though Zimbardo contends that shyness is equally prevalent among men and women, shyness in women has never (outside of feminist thinking) been considered irregular, abnormal or worrisome. On the contrary, shyness is by definition what an appropriately feminine woman is supposed to be. It is far less likely, perhaps, that women define themselves as shy, because they are living normally as they were taught.

Women are socialized to be reserved, soft-spoken and above all, self-conscious. Women are encouraged to be so sensitive to the needs of others that they must learn much better than men what the feelings and reactions of others to them are. Women have largely been, by sex-role definition, very much in touch with their effect on others and thus very much self-conscious about their behavior. Being

shy is being nice, polite and sweet—everything that little girls are proverbially made of.

When Zimbardo discusses the consequences of having the prisoner/guard mentality in one head, he is reacting and responding to behaviors he has witnessed in men. (In fact, all the student participants in his experiment were men.)

He emphasizes the potential for seemingly senseless violence to be perpetuated by people (he means men) who have been marginalized because of their inappropriate, i.e., non-masculine shyness. Most or many of the people that are considered freak killers, ax murderers, and snipers, were usually, he contends, shy, introverted, gentle and reserved before the incidents in which they turned violent: "Resentment builds, but is held in check. Then one day a minor provocation pushes it over the threshold. Impulse turns into action."

But women are not outcast for being shy. Because shyness has been an acceptable and encouraged mode of behavior for women, shy women are not marginalized in the same way. I do believe, however, that the shy woman's acceptedness and veneer of social connectedness is just that—a veneer, and because it is not based on her real, honest expression of herself, does take its repression toll—though in a very different manner than for men.

The built-up resentments of the shy men described by Zimbardo are typically unleashed in the most extreme forms of masculine behavior imaginable: in violence, with guns, axes, etc. The very behavior they have been outcast for not possessing is used as their weapon of revenge.

By a somewhat analogous logic (though obviously with the above-mentioned differences) women often use the extremes of their own prescribed behavior subversively.

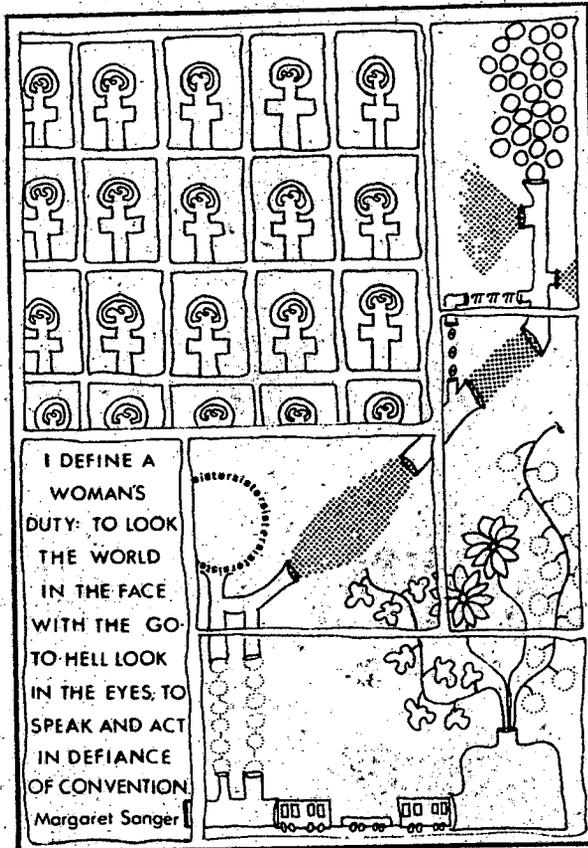
Jean Baker Miller writes extensively in her book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) about women's conditioned passivity in the role of subordinates to men even when subversive (or especially so).

A subordinate group has to concentrate on basic survival. Accordingly, direct, honest reaction to destructive treatment is avoided. Open, self-initiated action in its own self interest must also be avoided. Such actions can, and still do, literally result in death for some subordinate groups. In our own society, a woman's direct action can result in a combination of economic hardship, social ostracism, and psychological isolation—and even the diagnosis of a personality disorder. . . . It is not surprising then that a subordinate group resorts to disguised and indirect ways of acting and reacting. While these actions are designed to accommodate and please the dominant group, they often in fact contain hidden defiance and 'put-ons.' Folk tales, black jokes and women stories are often based on how the wily peasant or sharecropper outwitted the rich landowner, boss or husband. The essence of the story rests on the fact that the overlord does not even know that he has been made a fool of.

Women's anger and subversions are far more likely than men's to be expressed in indirect ways. Criticisms hidden within positive statements, gossip and secrecy all contribute to giving the "myth of feminine wiles" some validity. By having to resort to indirect action and expression, women are often deprived of the sense of meaning that comes from experiencing the direct consequences of direct action and expression. Such deprivation alienates women both from themselves and from each other and is often the basis for mistrust among women. The repression toll of shyness, then, is more likely to be manifested in seemingly "crazy" or "irrational" behavior in women, rather than in violence as with men.

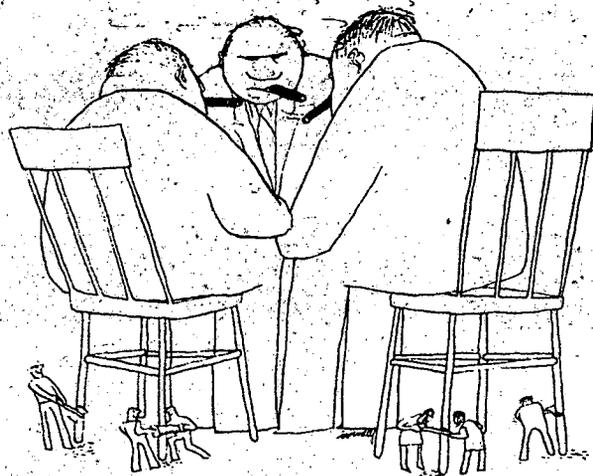
"To the extent that subordinates move toward freer expression and action," says Miller, "they will expose the inequality and throw into question the basis for its existence. And they will make the inherent conflict an open conflict. They will then have to bear the burden and take the risks that go with being defined as 'troublemakers.'" Since this role flies in the face of their conditioning, subordinates, especially women, do not come to it with ease."

Women today are both encouraged to be shy and condemned for it. We are caught in a double-bind situation which contains conflicting messages about how to deal with our feelings. Women, instead of being Freud's pathological hysterics, are now modern psychiatry's inadequate personalities. If we are passive we are accused of not "asserting" enough and if we are too assertive we are inappropriate. Third World and working class women are especially caught in this bind when they are on the one hand taught that economic rewards come from both emulating the gentle, reserved and polite characteristics of "upper class behavior" and asserting one's rights for better paid work and other equalities.



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The women's movement has been challenging the passive conditioning of women for many years, and in many different ways much validation has come from the women's community for expressions of direct anger and open attacks against oppression. But many feminists have also been discovering that women are perhaps more dependent than we'd imagined on each other for quiet, passive, nurturing support and are often threatened by other women who are more openly angry or critical. Phyllis Chesler talked about the difficulties she's had as "a successful woman taking that great leap forward into freedom and being tripped by others from the harem on her way out the door." The word "tripped" is significant in its "less-than-direct" implications. However positively motivated by the egalitarian principles of feminism and a desire that there be no hierarchies in the women's movement, such indirect subversive metaphors can only serve to increase mistrust and divisions among women.

By ignoring the special implications of shyness in women, Zimbardo has equally ignored the positive aspects of being shy. Quietness and gentility needn't be always suspect as repressive shyness. When they are real expressions, cultivated in all people (male and female) and part of an egalitarian social structure, much of what he considers dangerously shy might be more value and positive characteristics in a broad range of human behaviors.

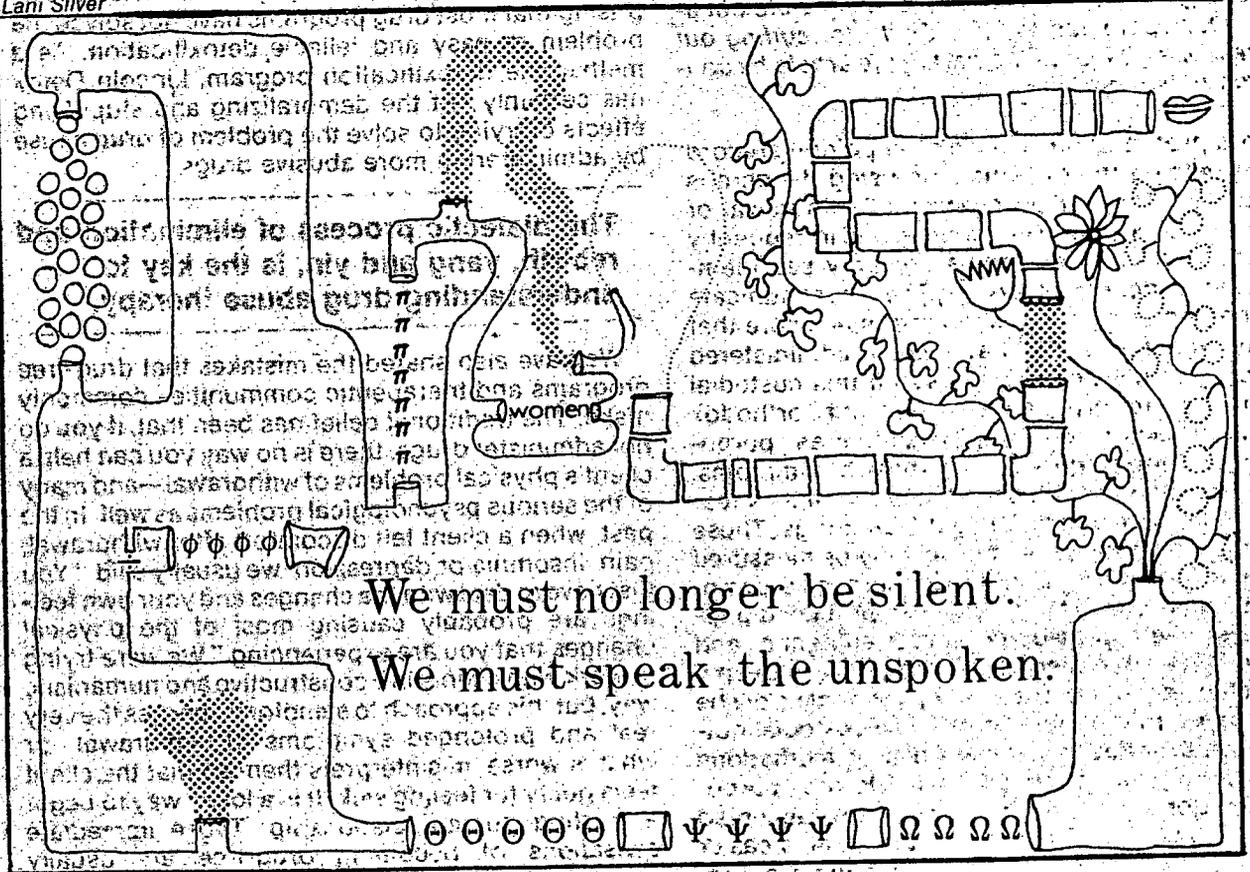
In the Spring of 1978, I initiated a mutual-help group for shy women at the Somerville Women's Center. We met one night a week for two hours in a predominantly informal fashion. Because of the nature of the center and because new women heard of and joined the group at various times, it became not so much of an ongoing therapy or problem-solving group, but rather a kind of shy women's drop-in, to which some women came regularly and others only once or twice for a one-night discussion. Our only ongoing procedure was that women who did come regularly made weekly contracts with one another to take some specific new risks during the week between groups. Other than that, group discussions were free floating ones in which our histories, personal lives, work, etc., were talked about openly.

The makeup of the group itself helped to reinforce my belief that shyness and women's role are virtually synonymous. It was perhaps more typical in the cross-section of women it attracted than many more expectedly typical or regular women's groups I've been a part of. There were women of different ages (19 to 55), different lifestyles (housewives, students, pink collar workers and professionals) and different social classes and ethnic backgrounds. Some women talked a great deal, others were quieter but no one was extremely quiet or speechless. What ev-

ryone had in common was a belief that something was wrong within ourselves because we "felt" so self-conscious all the time and not as spontaneous as we'd like to be. Many women felt that the idea of a group for shy women helped release many inhibitions that normally exist when among other people who are not presumed to be shy themselves. This phenomenon illustrates Zimbardo's discussion of the competitive nature of the social values placed on "appearing self-confident" and "hiding fears." Pretending to others that we are perfectly at ease, even when we're not, serves only to make others less confident in themselves and unwilling to take the risks that they think we're not taking. If people who are self-conscious and who take risks anyway were to do so with more honesty about those fears, other people, even less confident would probably be more motivated themselves.

All in all, Zimbardo's *Shyness* is a valuable book, worthy of admiration for its political rather than personal diagnoses and practical suggestions for change. It inspires shy people to come out and talk about what he admits we are experts about—our shyness. If his book also inspires criticism as it does (and should), especially among more "shys" like myself and the other women in the group, that, too, is a merit to its worthiness.

Lani Silver



We must no longer be silent.
We must speak the unspoken.