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# The reluctant researcher: shyness in the field

**Susie Scott, Tamsin Hinton-Smith,  
Vuokko Härmä and Karl Broome**

University of Sussex, UK

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## Abstract

Despite the attention qualitative researchers have given to the interaction context and social process of data collection, there has been scant recognition of the dramaturgical dilemmas this poses for the fieldworker. Respondents have been caricatured in an essentialist typology, ranging from the ideal to the reluctant, while the researcher has been assumed to take a relatively privileged position as director of the drama. Here we report on a study of shyness in art galleries and museums, using extracts from our fieldnotes to illustrate how researchers may themselves be prone to feelings of self-consciousness, incompetence and impostorism. Different methodologies and fieldwork scenarios can be located along a 'cringe spectrum', to the extent that they involve high levels of performance, improvisation and interactional contingency. We discuss the strategies used by shy and non-shy members of our team to manage such dramaturgical stress, and argue for more reflexive dialogue about this issue.

## Keywords

Art, dramaturgy, ideal participant, ideal researcher, interaction, performance, reflexivity, shyness

## The drama of fieldwork

Since the narrative turn, qualitative researchers have argued that it is important to recognise the impact of emotions upon fieldwork and research relationships (Kleinman, 1993; Young and Lee, 1996). A major epistemological and ethical concern is how to deal with our positions as both knowing subjects and objects of knowledge, insofar as this enables us to access shared experiences. Feminist models have addressed the power differential that characterised traditionally 'malestream' approaches, emphasising the need to build rapport with research participants through empathy, compassion and mutual disclosure (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 1999). Autoethnographic researchers such as Ellis and Bochner (2000) have argued for the need to remain

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### Corresponding author:

Susie Scott, Department of Sociology, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9SP, UK

Email: [s.scott@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:s.scott@sussex.ac.uk)

reflexively engaged in the research process, using one's own experiential knowledge as a methodological resource or interpretative device (Back, 2007) to identify points of similarity and contrast with one's participants. This has led to a flurry of reflexive, confessional tales about experiences in the field, which have emphasised its precarious and serendipitous nature, from bungled methodologies to unsavoury encounters with informants (Bell and Roberts, 1984; Van Maanen, 1988). A new contingent repertoire of tacit knowledge, social pressures and institutional politics has emerged in contrast to the empiricist repertoire that had provided formal, sanitised accounts of data collection (cf. Gilbert and Mulkay, 1985). The researcher has been rendered visible as a presence that affects every stage of the research and whose authorial voice co-constructs its emergent narrative.

Symbolic interactionist (SI) analyses have been central to this approach, focusing on the immediate, pragmatic context of knowledge production and emphasising how research is socially 'done' or accomplished through everyday routines and practices. SI models conceptualise the research interview as a social encounter whose meaning is negotiated between actors (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003; Denzin, 1970; Silverman, 2001). In particular, Goffman's (1959) influence can be felt in accounts of managing the dramaturgical aspects of fieldwork relations. Denzin (1970) refers to 'the research act' as a carefully choreographed performance that is nonetheless vulnerable to mistakes. Atkinson and Coffey (2003) and Hermanns (2004) emphasise the precarious theatricality of qualitative methods, particularly those that involve face-to-face interaction. Social research is not merely executed but self-consciously enacted as a team performance (Goffman, 1959), in which the actions of the researcher affect those of their participants and the definition of reality they create together.

One strand of this literature identifies the problem of the 'reluctant respondent' (Adler and Adler, 2003; cf. Becker and Geer, 1957), who either refuses to take part or agrees but then 'fails' to disclose much information. This is conceptualised as a frustrating barrier to data gathering, a practical obstacle, but one that the researcher can overcome through careful dramaturgical stage management. Respondents' reticence may be because they do not want to speak, feel unable to, think that they should not, or are not given the opportunity (Becker and Geer, 1957). Participants can be placed along a 'spectrum of reluctance' (Adler and Adler, 2003) according to their relation to the subject matter and perceptions of the researcher: from the secretive respondent, through the sensitive, powerful and disadvantaged, to the completely non-wary (Dean et al., 1969). These are emergent, situational identities rather than essential character types, and so participants have the potential to drift out of their reluctant state, like any other deviant role (cf. Matza, 1964).

This approach is important in challenging the idea that reticence implies a hopelessly 'difficult' individual, and emphasising instead what the researcher can do to make the situation more comfortable for them. The in-depth interview, particularly, is recognised as a meaningful social encounter through which the interviewer may put the interviewee at ease so that they 'open up'; in dramaturgical terms, this facilitates the smooth flow of interaction by ensuring that all performers share the same definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas, 1970 [1928]). Rapport may be built by emphasising shared characteristics and experiences, self-disclosing, using humour and expressing normalising attitudes towards behaviour that respondents fear will be seen as deviant (Adler and

Adler, 2003; Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). The interviewer may strategically display humility, treating the interviewee as a 'goddess' and hoping to flatter them into disclosing personal thoughts and feelings (Douglas, 1985).

In a previous article, one of the authors (Scott, 2004a) discussed the implications of this for working with self-defined 'shy' people. Despite being ostensibly the anathema of the 'ideal' research participant, who is confident, articulate and talkative, these individuals can in fact be highly rewarding interaction partners, capable of critically reflecting upon the nuances of social behaviour that they have observed whilst 'hovering on the fringes' (Scott, 2005). Normally, shy people can step out of this role within certain research settings, if they are designed to put them at ease, for example by a sensitive, self-disclosing interviewer or an anonymous online discussion. This reveals the 'paradox of shy vocalicity' (Scott, 2004a), whereby individuals can be forthcoming in accounting for their reticence. Thus the ideal participant, like the reluctant respondent, can be seen as a social role into which anybody might drift, given the appropriate support and resources. The 'problem' of avoiding shyness in the field becomes one of methodological innovation, with responsibility lying at the door of the researcher, not the 'difficult' respondent.

## The reluctant researcher

Strangely, however, scant attention has been paid to the researcher's subjective experience of this, as a social actor who is affected by the drama and directly implicated as a protagonist within it. Although much is said about how the researcher can set the scene, direct the action and manage the emotions of participants (Atkinson, 2006; Scott, 2007b), we hear little of the dramaturgical dilemmas they may privately experience in attempting to perform the role of the competent professional. For example, what happens if one feels nervous about conducting an interview, or worried that one has self-disclosed too much? Will an attempt at covert observation be thwarted by one's cover being blown, or a key informant breaking ranks? As critics of SI have observed more generally, the perspective has a tendency to depict the actor as emotionally neutral, rational and self-contained (Craib, 1994; Scheff, 2006), and to assume that his/her self-presentation unfolds relatively unproblematically. We find scant recognition of how the researcher-self is practically accomplished (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003) as a role performance, and what this entails for the actor behind the character. As Wellin and Fine (2007) argue, it is important to explore the drama of ethnography-as-work, in terms of the way fieldworkers interpret and translate their roles into micro-level practices, sometimes encountering dilemmas of occupational identity. Much of the research process involves responding to mundane pressures and 'going concerns' (Hughes, 1984) in the informal organisation of fieldwork, they argue, but this everyday 'dirty work' (Hughes, 1984) tends to be overlooked in discussions of abstract methodological principles.

Such models place the researcher in a relatively strong and powerful, even paternalistic position in relation to the researched, as someone who has no dramaturgical qualms themselves and whose emotional self (Flam, 1993) remains a 'black box' of undisputed integrity (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003: 426). There is an assumed disparity of social and emotional competence between interactants in the research relationship: the fragile, vulnerable respondent is in need of support while the researcher assumes a privileged

position of authority, expertise and professional competence. There is a complacent aspect to the researcher who defines himself or herself thus, placing their own dramaturgical capacity beyond question. Ironically, the researcher-as-person is rendered invisible once more, traceable only by the effects s/he leaves behind.

This may be a reflection of an increasing emphasis on image and accountability within the higher education sector, most notably through the rise of research assessment, disciplinary evaluation and the audit culture (Janowitz, 1972; Lucas, 2006). This places new demands upon academics to demonstrate a slick professionalism in the delivery of their teaching and research, and to aspire to a new 'cult of charisma' that celebrates individual achievement and employee presenteeism (Sparkes, 2007). The academic career is something to be performed and dramaturgically managed, as well as directly experienced; it has become difficult to 'confess' to any shortcomings, fears or insecurities about one's own professional competence without compromising one's reputation (Scott, 2007c). Consequently, researchers may experience role conflict to the extent that they perceive a discrepancy between the self-presentational work of demonstrating competence and the embarrassingly messy lived experience of managing fieldwork (Wellin and Fine, 2007).

As well as employing a concept of the ideal participant, therefore, qualitative researchers have been presuming the existence of an *ideal researcher*: someone who is brave and assertive about negotiating access, building relationships and executing methodologies. The ideal researcher is comfortable in that role, and confident that s/he can give a convincing display of professional competence. While emotions and personal values may shape their choice of topic, research design and data analysis, these are accepted – even appreciated – as an inevitable source of bias (Becker, 1967), which ultimately enriches the project. There is no question of the researcher's propensity to nervousness, shyness and stage fright, doubts about their capabilities, or dramaturgical stress about managing these private feelings. Just as scholars have bemoaned the problem of the reluctant respondent, therefore, it is important also to recognise the perils of the *reluctant researcher*, who may need some coaxing to embrace the dramatic deployment of social research. Both the ideal and reluctant researcher can be understood not as essential types but as situational role performances, into which any individual can drift.

Furthermore, what of the deeper effects of these dramaturgical dilemmas upon the researcher's sense of self and integrity? Performative identity work (Goffman, 1959) is involved to the extent that researchers strive to present themselves a certain way (rational, competent, self-contained and in control), not only to their respondents but also to themselves. We are the audiences to our own displays of personae, which constitute aspects of our subjectivities (Butler, 1999 [1990]). Entwined with this are tasks of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), a staple component of qualitative research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). The researcher may need to 'work up' feelings of confidence, assertiveness and sociability and 'play down' shyness, embarrassment and other self-conscious emotions (Tangney and Fischer, 1995). Thus we perform emotional labour not only on our participants but also on ourselves, in order to continue performing the researcher role effectively. Noble motivations to help and empower participants are equalled by self-serving desires to spare our own blushes.

Emotion work becomes even more pertinent to the extent that the actor perceives a discrepancy between the public performance they are required to give (in this case, one

of professional academic competence) and the private thoughts and feelings s/he holds. As Hochschild (1983) famously noted, service occupations demand skills of emotional labour, as the individual strives to convey sentiments in which they may not authentically believe. In Goffman's (1959) terms, the actor may experience role distance and perform only 'cynically', with a degree of detachment from the part that they are playing. Alternatively, they may believe in it 'sincerely' and seek to convince themselves that they genuinely feel like the persona they are projecting. As Hochschild (1983) observes, this kind of 'deep acting' demands a greater degree of energy and commitment, for it implicates the whole self, which can be emotionally draining. Academics are particularly prone to the Impostor Phenomenon (Clance, 1985), whereby people feel ill-equipped to perform the roles into which they are thrust and feel fraudulent, constantly worried that someone will 'find them out'. The research process then becomes a matter of managing these anxieties through further, self-reflexive dramaturgical strategies: concealing the discreditable stigma (Goffman, 1963a) of felt incompetence by 'passing' as more confident than one feels inside.

In the discussion that follows, we explore these issues in relation to researchers' experiences of shyness in the field. Scott critically revisits her previous (2004a) argument about creating non-shyness-inducing settings for participants, by considering the impact of researchers' own self-presentational motives and dramaturgical concerns. In opening this black box, we hope to encourage others to come forward with confessional tales about performing in (and messing up) their own shows. As Goffman (1959) observed, it can be socially facilitative to engage in episodic 'communication out of character', whereby actors drop their guard and acknowledge that the definition of reality they have created is only a performance. A researcher's reflexive self-awareness of his/her dramaturgical status can ultimately cultivate a more authentic, sensitive orientation to the qualitative research process.

## Context and methods

Here we report on our fieldwork experiences from an EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council) funded project, 'Supporting Shy Users in Pervasive Computing'. This interdisciplinary collaboration between colleagues in sociology and computer science aimed to explore the ways in which wireless technologies and pervasive or ubiquitous (invisible or mobile) computational devices affect shyness, whether by evoking, mediating or potentially attenuating it. The project involved three studies, of classrooms, online networking sites and interactive art exhibitions; our sociology team focused on the last of these.

We locate these issues in the context of theoretical debates about museums and galleries as contemporary heritage sites. The ideal of the 'inclusive museum' aims to increase accessibility to sectors of the public who might otherwise be excluded (Duncan, 1995; Prior, 2005). Galleries have traditionally been locations of 'high' culture (Williams, 1958), whose visual and textual contents and spatial arrangements signify sophistication; certain audiences might then perceive that they lack the cultural capital (knowledge, skills and experience) needed to participate in that field (Bourdieu, 1997 [1973]). Bourdieu suggested that the 'correct' perception of artworks was a matter of cultural

competence, acquired through socialisation and education, and therefore that those from lower social classes were systematically disadvantaged.

However, barriers to accessibility can arise from dramaturgical as well as demographic conditions. We recognise amongst the symbolically excluded those who self-define as shy, insofar as they may lack confidence in managing the performative dimensions of consuming artwork. This is particularly evident in contemporary museums and galleries that house interactive installations as opposed to the traditional 'old curiosities' in glass boxes (Hein, 2009). Museum staff, artists and curators are under increasing pressure to promote public engagement by designing exhibitions that encourage visitor participation and evoke emotional and behavioural responses. The manufacturing of experience has become a key issue in the design process, and digital technologies play an increasing role in rendering such artworks accessible to new audiences. In turn, the visitor's role has changed from one of a passive stroller, or *flâneur* (Baudelaire, 1986 [1863]), gazing at static objects, to one of an actively engaged critic. The erstwhile spectator is incorporated into the artwork, his or her responses forming part of its communicative power. In the rhetoric of relational aesthetics, objects on display in galleries are seen as incomplete without the agency of the visitor, whose active engagement brings the artwork alive.

New performative pressures confront the shy visitor as they attempt to engage with such exhibitions. Ironically, interactive artwork objectifies the visitor, by forcing them to become part of the exhibit, a spectacle to be looked at and a possession of the artist. An individual's success or otherwise in engaging with the piece is observed by other passing visitors and staff, and the individual may feel subject to evaluation and scrutiny. This may exacerbate concerns about misunderstanding the intended meanings of artworks or lacking cultural competence. Our research questions focused on whether more and less shy visitors responded to this with different strategies of self-presentation. However, alongside this emerged a growing fascination with the ways in which we were affected by dramaturgical dilemmas ourselves.

The study employs Scott's (2007a) symbolic interactionist theory of shyness as an emergent product of interaction rather than a psychological trait or individual pathology. Shyness can be defined as a situational state of dramaturgical stress (Freund, 1998; cf. Goffman, 1959), which arises from an actor's perceived relative incompetence at managing a social encounter and her or his anticipation of embarrassment resulting from the communication of an unwanted impression of oneself to others (Scott, 2007a; cf. Schlenker and Leary, 1982). S/he believes that should a faux pas occur, fellow actors will not provide the gestures of 'protective facework' (Goffman, 1955) that would spare their blushes, for example by covering up a mistake. There is a generalised perception of these team-mates as a Competent Other, who is more socially skilled and knowledgeable than oneself (Scott, 2004b, 2007a; cf. Mead, 1934). These perceptions of self in relation to others are not stable but rather negotiated anew in each social encounter. The shy self-identity is formed over time through an ongoing dialogue between the Shy 'I' (feelings of awkwardness, inhibition and self-consciousness) and the Shy 'Me' (an image of oneself as shy, seen from the perspective of the generalised other) (Scott, 2004b, cf. Mead, 1934). This means that rather than there being inherently shy or non-shy people, anyone

can drift in and out of shyness, depending on the shared definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas, 1970 [1928]) that emerges from a specific interaction context.

We examined two contrasting case studies: Fabrica, a small local contemporary art gallery in Brighton, and the V&A (Victoria and Albert), a large traditional museum in London, both of which were housing exhibitions of digital interactive art. Each case study was conducted over the two- to three-month duration of the exhibitions and involved the triangulation of a range of data collection methods, including qualitative observational fieldnotes, visitor tracking maps, self-completion visitor questionnaires, emotion maps and visitor interviews conducted face-to-face, by email and by telephone. We also conducted 'walkaround interviews', a mobile methodology (Ross et al., 2009) that involved the researcher accompanying a participant as s/he moved around the gallery and recording the participant's responses to exhibits. A third dataset focused on the perspectives of other players in this art world (Becker, 1983), such as gallery curators, digital interactive artists, teachers and others working on community-based arts projects. We held a workshop for artists, curators and community partners, conducted interviews with gallery staff and volunteers, and ran focus groups with teachers and students at a local high school who were conducting an online curating project. The quantitative data were analysed using the software program SPSS, and the qualitative data using Atlas.ti.

## The cringe spectrum

Our research team was drawn to investigating shyness by a shared personal interest, self-identifying as shy to varying extents. Reflective discussion between team members, generated by the experience of undertaking data collection, illuminated the diversity of self-definition around formation of a shy identity. While three of the researchers (SS, VH, KB) had grown up with a strong sense of themselves as shy individuals, the fourth (THS) had not done so, but could nevertheless identify with feelings of situational shyness. Even between the researchers who self-defined as shy, there was some variation in the extent to which this identity had mediated our experiences and been either normalised or pathologised in our individual biographies. VH had endured the stigma of being labelled 'the shy one' at school and feeling 'invisible' in the classroom (Härmä, 2006; Pye, 1989), but now positively embraced the identity with an attitude of Shy Pride (Scott, 2007a). KB had been cast as the 'sensitive soul' within his family amidst four extrovert brothers, but found this to be a troublesome identity. SS had not regarded her shyness as a problem except insofar as she had encountered negative social reactions to it, and this had fuelled her interest in researching it sociologically as a form of deviance. Meanwhile for THS, shyness was less of a pervasive identity and more of an infrequent, situational state. Her upbringing had taught her to compartmentalise shyness as a nuisance emotion and transient shortcoming, which she had sought to overcome.

Regardless of the extent to which we identified as shy or not-shy, however, we shared common experiences of situational shyness evoked by the research process. Implementing the range of data collection techniques created feelings of awkwardness, self-consciousness and discomfort, in different ways and for different reasons. Reflecting on our fieldwork experiences in team meetings, we surmised that the various research activities occupied different positions along a 'cringe spectrum', according to the extent to which they

evoked self-conscious emotions of shame, embarrassment or shyness, as a result of real or anticipated loss of face, compromised role performance and interactional strain. This situational mapping of shyness can be contrasted with Adler and Adler's (2003) 'spectrum of reluctance', which suggested different individual orientations on the part of the respondent.

A research setting's level of cringeworthiness depended on the levels of face-to-face interaction, on-the-spot improvisation and/or public performance it required. Amongst the least problematic were activities involved in setting up the project, which could be conducted behind the scenes: web-based searches for exhibitions, correspondence with gatekeepers over email and administering an online survey. These tasks could be performed backstage (Goffman, 1959), in the safety of the office, which provided opportunities for editing, redrafting and rehearsal (cf. Markham, 1998). Covert observation formed a second point on the continuum, as a method conducted in the field but without face-to-face encounters; as described below, we were able to move anonymously within gallery spaces, passing as visitors from the general public. Next came activities that were executed interpersonally, but with an explicit, pre-arranged agenda and clearly defined roles: corresponding with participants via email, conducting pre-arranged telephone interviews, holding meetings with gallery staff and running focus groups with invited members. Finally, there were methods that involved live interaction and spontaneity, unfolding in an unpredictable way and requiring us to improvise and adapt to the flow of interaction (Scott, 2007a). This typically involved 'cold calling' in galleries: approaching visitors whom we did not know, with the request to take part in a structured interview, fill in a questionnaire or participate in a walkaround interview.

The dramaturgical stress we experienced in situations towards the latter end of this spectrum revolved around the anticipation of embarrassment which might be caused by negative social reactions, awkward mismatches of perceived intentions, and subsequent losses of interactional script (Gross and Stone, 1964). This in turn threatened to evoke feelings of shame, through the discrediting of impressions we had been trying to create upon research participants. In particular, we were concerned to present ourselves as competent and knowledgeable, both as professional researchers and as bone fide members of this particular art world (Becker, 1983). At the same time, however, in the interests of generating rapport and equalising status, we were concerned about the risk of appearing *too* competent or removed from the participants' level of experience. Striking the delicate balance between these two presentations of self demanded a further layer of dramaturgical skill and emotional labour. Role conflict and strain inevitably resulted as we perceived discrepancies between the different aspects of identity we might potentially communicate.

In the remainder of the article, we discuss some examples of these instances of shyness in the field, and the dramaturgical strategies we employed to deal with them. We take as a premise that shyness is a situational state that emerges out of interaction contexts and can affect anybody, while shy identities are also formed over time through repeated patterns of interaction (Scott, 2007a). For the sake of brevity and analytic clarity, we make a crude distinction between 'shy' and 'non-shy' researchers in our team, focusing on one of each 'type'. However, we recognise that in reality, the differences



between us are more subtle, and we have all moved between the two positions over the course of our lives.

## The shy fieldworker

For SS, VH and KB, shyness was a residual identity that we brought with us into research settings. As it was our natural inclination to feel cautious and reticent about social interaction in general, we simply extended this to encounters in the field. Often we felt that we deviated from the ideal researcher prototype, and experienced the Impostor Phenomenon as we anticipated things going wrong. Consequently, we found ourselves 'shying away' from certain research activities at the far end of the cringe spectrum, such as walkaround interviews and telephone calls, which required live and spontaneous interaction with strangers. Here we performed as the reluctant researcher, confirming our self-perceptions of the Shy 'Me'. Despite our claims to Shy Pride, we (SS and VH) frequently berated ourselves for this, feeling somewhat cowardly and unprofessional. Sometimes we forced ourselves to attempt the dreaded activities, which helped to absolve our guilt, and moreover left us feeling an exhilarated high, like triumphant actors coming off stage after a difficult performance. This echoes Scott's (2007a, 2007c) arguments about the paradox of shy performativity, whereby those who feel shy in everyday life may find surprising enjoyment in professional theatre: a contrived stage performance can feel strangely liberating by allowing the shy actor to hide their 'real' selves behind a role, whilst satisfying their craving for sociability and recognition.

In other research settings further up the continuum, we found ourselves able to drift out of the shy role and perform closer to the image of the ideal researcher. For example, while covertly observing visitors' behaviour in galleries, we assumed a relatively safe position as detached observers, even *flâneurs*. Taking the role of the social scientist as a professional, authoritative expert, we felt empowered by being frontstage, 'where the action is' (Goffman, 1967a) without having to be protagonists in the drama: rather like understudies waiting in the wings, we were able to watch others without feeling that our own performances were under scrutiny. Scott (2007a) has argued that this is a common position for shy actors to adopt, as they (or we) enjoy 'hovering on the fringes' like Simmel's (1950 [1908]) stranger, simultaneously proximal to and distanced from social groups. Watching and listening to others can feel as meaningful a form of social interaction as talking and actively performing, and as such was a very comfortable position for us to adopt as shy researchers.

Nevertheless, such hovering could lead to feelings of frustrated sociability, when we wished to participate more actively but felt inhibited by a fear of 'not knowing the rules' and exposing our incompetence. For example, while at the V&A museum, we observed an exhibit called 'Videogrid', which required visitors to make a short film of themselves that was projected onto a screen alongside others. During a lull in the observations, one of us reflected,

It's quiet and I suddenly think I would quite like to have a go, but am too shy! Probably would if I was on my own. (SS fieldnotes, 27 February 2010)

This sense of frustrated sociability escalated throughout the observation session. Although we were of course only meant to be watching, the pull of such exhibits designed explicitly to evoke interactivity was something that even this shy researcher could not ignore. Standing before ‘Dandelion’ (a piece that invites the visitor to direct a hairdryer at a screen to make the petals of a dandelion clock fly away), SS had the following experience as she became aware of her Shy ‘Me’:

No one there, so I have a go (bored of just watching). Then realise people watching behind me, get embarrassed and stop. Thought I might have been doing it wrong because the dandelion fluff wasn’t flying very far, but then two young children and mum have a go and it’s just the same. (SS fieldnotes, 27 February 2010)

Even a detached observer cannot be entirely invisible, moreover, and may affect the dynamics of a group. The presence of a shy researcher may alter the way in which participants behave and respond to this stranger in their midst. As Scott (2007a) noted, shy actors can be conspicuous through their *absence* of behaviours that would otherwise be taken for granted, such as returning eye contact and joining in with conversations. This can evoke social reactions of irritated disapproval, but also uncertainty and self-consciousness in onlookers, which grows into a sense of collective awkwardness. The following excerpt demonstrates the mutuality of shy and non-shy roles, as well as their fluid, situational contingency:

Long pause. No one doing anything, almost contagious silence. About five of us looking at each other. Those two young men come back and look at the screen but don’t make another film. They look at me suspiciously, maybe seeing me taking notes! I break the tension by moving away, then they do too. Then young couple who had been watching from the side go up and make a film. Silence again for about five minutes. A few people standing back against the wall, pointing and talking about it, even taking photos but not ‘actively’ participating by making films. (SS fieldnotes, 20 February 2010)

When approaching participants to complete questionnaires, we felt more vulnerable, as we had to enter into the main action frontstage. By seeking to engage potential respondents in a focused encounter (Goffman, 1961), we were also aware of the risk of rejection and subsequent embarrassment. This risk arose because we presented parts of our ‘real’ selves – the actor behind the character – in order to build rapport. We sought to reduce the social distance between ourselves and our respondents by not appearing *too* professional or culturally competent. This led us to display gestures of deference and demeanour (Goffman, 1959, 1967b): by expressing humility and gratitude, we treated the participant as a ‘goddess’ (Douglas, 1985). As exponents of the interview method have argued, there are advantages in ‘playing dumb’ and assuming a position of ‘deliberate naivete’ (Bryman, 2008; Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2007) by pretending not to understand aspects of the setting, in order that respondents will explain them. This was not merely a cynical, insincere gesture of flattery, however, but rather a genuine attempt to establish a research relationship. For example, with opening lines like ‘Could you help with my project for university?’, SS realised that she was implying that she was ‘only’ a

student and relatively harmless. People seemed to respond more positively if they perceived us to be of a similar or equal status: for example, one young woman laughed and said 'I'm a student too. I know what it's like trying to get participants!'

Such responses brought relief not only pragmatically, by meeting our quota for data collection, but also dramaturgically, by facilitating the smooth flow of interaction. Acceptances meant that individuals were agreeing to participate not only in the project as a whole but also in the immediate situation as a face engagement, or encounter of 'mutually sustained involvement' (Goffman, 1967a). As team-mates in a cast of actors (Goffman, 1959), we could rely upon each other to follow the unspoken rules of polite interaction that would keep both parties in face. We shared a common stock of background knowledge or typifications (Schütz, 1972) about how these encounters normally worked, had little to negotiate and little chance of dramaturgical stress arising from uncertainty. With clearly defined, complementary roles as researchers/respondents, it was relatively unambiguous how the action would proceed (for example with question and answer turn-taking), and so we drifted out of the shy role.

Rejections, on the other hand, caused much dramaturgical stress. Here we realised that the potential participant held different motivations from ourselves, and could not be relied upon to cooperate in upholding a shared definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas, 1970 [1928]). This evoked feelings of embarrassment, as we recognised a discrepancy between the impression we had wanted to convey (of professional and social competence) and the impression we had actually given off (as rude and blunderingly intrusive) (Edelmann, 1987; Schlenker and Leary, 1982). There was also a sense of dramaturgical strain resulting from a loss of script (Miller, 1996), for a central assumption of interaction had been unexpectedly and unqualifiedly discredited, making it difficult to coordinate our role performances (Gross and Stone, 1964). Consequently, we found ourselves drifting back into our default position of the shy role.

Our responses to this involved apologies, accounts and humour (Miller, 1996). These were gestures of defensive or protective facework (Goffman, 1955) that protected the credibility of ourselves or the other party, respectively. For example, if someone declined to participate, we would apologise for bothering them, a defensive facework gesture. Apologies can be understood as remedial interchanges (Goffman, 1971) that serve to repair the damage of an awkward encounter. They communicate that one is morally aligned with the other actor and the rule that has been violated, and thus that any offence caused was out of character. As time wore on and we became more adept at reading non-verbal cues, we would sometimes detect only the merest hint of hesitation in the face of an uncomfortable 'approachee' and react immediately. One pre-emptive gesture of protective facework that SS used in this context was to start backtracking on her own request, by adding quickly, 'It's ok, you don't have to!' and laughing. Both types of facework involved role distance (Goffman, 1959), whereby we conveyed that we were not completely immersed in the performance we were giving and had some critical detachment from it.

These reparative actions usually appeased the visitor and restored interaction order. Occasionally, however, we experienced an outright rejection voiced in direct, even hostile terms, such as a frosty 'No thank you. I'm just here to enjoy myself', which made it clear that that we had imposed upon the visitor. Our confidence in our own abilities, so tentatively built up by a succession of acceptances could be rapidly undermined by just

one such cold rejection. Flight is another, less common reaction to such cases of severe embarrassment (Miller, 1996): feeling mortified, we would scuttle away red-faced to the safety of the backstage region (the darkened edges of the gallery) and seek comfort from each other as supportive team-mates. Sharing our experiences of rejection, groaning, cringing and laughing together helped to relieve the feelings of shame, and gave us the courage to persevere. These backstage conspiracies also allowed us to compare, discuss and rehearse our strategies for approaching visitors, increasing the likelihood of future success.

## The non-shy fieldworker

By contrast, the residual identity that THS brought to the research setting was one of non-shyness. Although she experienced acute self-consciousness in some social contexts – particularly those that involved public speaking in large formal groups – THS was generally confident about managing informal encounters in everyday life. To mask the situational shyness that academia evoked, THS had cultivated a ‘workplace persona’ of competent professionalism, which she incorporated into her vocational habitus (Bourdieu, 1997 [1973]). Moreover, while working on the project, THS reflected that she was exaggerating this mode of self-presentation, insofar as she was collectively defined as the least shy member of the team: her non-shy identity was emergent and relational, defined in contrast to the self-confessed shyness of SS, VH and KB. Thus THS found herself volunteering to undertake more of the tasks that the rest of us found excruciating, such as cold calling gallery visitors, networking with artists and curators and conducting walkaround interviews. In the course of her day-to-day work as the project’s Research Fellow, THS became adept at methodologies that involved elements of live performance, as these became routine to her. Additionally, in negotiating access with gatekeepers in the art world, she often encountered scepticism towards academia, and so developed the knack of presenting the project and our research team as ‘respectable’ (Wellin and Fine, 2007).

Inevitably, however, some aspects of the fieldwork process remained dramaturgically stressful to THS. Just as the ‘shy’ researchers occasionally drifted out of this role with transient experiences of bravery, THS sometimes drifted *into* the shy role. Certain situations at the far end of the cringe spectrum, such as cold calling gallery visitors, caused her acute discomfort, in common with the rest of us and for the same dramaturgical reasons. Thus as the following excerpt shows, THS found herself shrinking away from these highly performative methods and gravitating towards those that were more unobtrusive:

I came to the V&A today planning to blitz a range of data collection tasks over a several hour stint – some self-administered questionnaires, walk-around interviews, and observation of visitor–artwork interactions. Inevitably I took the soft option and decided to ease myself in to the gallery setting by completing observational fieldnotes first. But now, if I’m honest, my observations have reached saturation point and my time would be used more usefully approaching visitors for questionnaires and interviews. But the anonymity of quietly observing from the shadows is so comfortable that I am reluctant to climb out of this shell and approach visitors. (THS fieldnotes, 17 March 2010)

Indeed, cold calling was a method that we eventually discarded: mainly because it proved ineffective and resource-inefficient, but also, we bashfully confessed to each other during project meetings, because we felt deeply uncomfortable deploying it. A team of market researchers, sales executives or paparazzi would have been better equipped than we were to exercise resilience in the face of such constant rebuttal. The enthusiasm and relief we felt at making this decision led to critical reflection on our conduct, and an acknowledgement of the difference between our empiricist and contingent interpretive repertoires (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1985). That is, although we could find ostensible, justifiable reasons to reject this method, we had to admit that private, emotional and dramaturgical concerns had also played a role in our decision.

Another scenario that evoked shyness in THS was the experience of being 'stood up' by interviewees. Having abandoned the cold call approach, we began to recruit volunteers online for walkaround interviews; they agreed to meet us in the galleries at pre-arranged times. Inevitably, however, some people forgot, changed their minds or otherwise failed to turn up. The interviewer would then be left waiting alone in the gallery space, feeling conspicuous. Being stood up in any context is dramaturgically embarrassing because the actor anticipates that passers-by will infer what has happened: they have had a request for interaction rejected and suffered a loss of face. As Crozier (2006) suggests, the exposure of such private information to public scrutiny is a key factor in shyness and embarrassment. It is also unusual, Goffman (1963b) observes, for an individual to be 'caught' standing alone in a public place without an explicit focus of attention; usually we are either engaged in encounters with others or displaying self-evident pretexts for being alone, such as reading a newspaper. Actors who find themselves unexpectedly alone feel self-conscious, and may busy themselves with a 'side involvement' to distract the audience's attention: fiddling with a mobile phone, smoking or holding a drink. Being stood up, however, catches the actor off guard, because they have not brought any such items of identity equipment with them and are at a loss as to how to present themselves legitimately; suddenly they have been thrust centre stage into the spotlight of public scrutiny as someone who has shamefully lost face.

THS's strategies for dealing with this were twofold. At first, she remained frontstage and engaged in diversionary action (Felipe and Sommer, 1966), such as checking her watch and looking around. This is a common form of waiting behaviour, which conveys to spectators that the individual is not loitering suspiciously but has a legitimate reason to be there. This strategy can only work for a short period, however, as eventually those sharing the space notice that the individual has been waiting for a long time. Thus the second strategy THS used was to remove herself from the frontstage region and retreat into the wings: the kitchen and bathroom of the smaller gallery provided a safe haven away from visitors, as did the other exhibitions and public areas of the larger gallery. Indeed, this was a strategy that THS employed at other times, when she was conducting fieldwork alone and had spent hours in the field. The pressure to appear confident, professional, cheerful and so on required sustained emotion work and was dramaturgically tiring. THS periodically felt she had reached,

. . . performance/interaction/rejection saturation point. With no colleague to debrief to, a slow stroll to a distantly located toilet, a cup of tea drunk alone in the café, or a purposeless

investigation of the gift shop, provided some respite to collect thoughts away from the gallery setting in which I was recognised and observed by floor staff and visitors as the intruder with the clipboard. (THS fieldnotes, 26 February 2010)

Another set of experiences that made THS feel shy occurred in the context of her encounters with artists, curators and other members of the art world (Becker, 1983). Although negotiating access was something she could legitimately do in her role as an academic outsider, once the fieldwork began, she found herself having to play alongside these actors as an insider, frontstage in the gallery spaces. Encountering flamboyant characters and esoteric working practices, the researcher felt distinctly displaced from her dramaturgical comfort zone. The art world appeared as rather an insular, exclusive realm, based upon established networks and shared stocks of background knowledge (Schütz, 1972) about specialist subject matter.

Indeed, all four of us felt out of our depth in this world: none of us had had any formal training in art, nor much experience of galleries beyond casual tourism, and at times we felt painfully aware of lacking the requisite taste, style and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997 [1973]). The familiar feelings of fraudulence and perceived relative incompetence were evoked as we felt like impostors, moving amidst actors who were 'in the know'. Like the Simmelian stranger (1950 [1908]), we confronted the group from its margins, as would-be members who sought inclusion but remained as outsiders. Shyness was an inevitable consequence of imagining ourselves from the perspective of this Competent Other (Scott, 2004a), being judged and critically evaluated. It was not only specific subject knowledge that we felt we lacked, but also the skills artists used to display this knowledge: aspects of demeanour, self-presentation and vocational habitus that they had acquired through years of socialisation in the field. For example, there seemed to be different norms of interpersonal engagement compared to those observed in a university environment, as face-to-face encounters with colleagues were conducted in a more overtly performative, theatrical and confident manner. We felt self-conscious that our own demeanours appeared rather stiff and formal, overly polite and excessively reserved.

While curators and senior staff seemed at ease working with academic researchers, floor staff at the small gallery had different expectations of the relationship. From the outset it was made clear that in order to collect data, researchers were expected to perform the same role as the regular team of unpaid assistants. Volunteer duties involved staffing the gallery during committed sessions, approaching visitors with information and sharing administrative tasks behind the scenes, such as recording visitor numbers. THS experienced a role conflict between these obligations and her researcher tasks, finding it difficult to detach herself from the latter persona in order to immerse herself in the performance of a volunteer. This evoked self-conscious feelings of fraudulence:

From my first contact with the gallery I have become trapped on a conveyor belt toward being an exhibition volunteer. After my colleague secured fieldwork access with a gallery director, I phoned office staff to discuss arrangements, and was told to sign up for a volunteer induction. I should have been more confident in my academic role and spoken up at that point, that I needed to schedule a one to one meeting and arrange open access, not attend a group volunteer induction and be required to sign up for exhibition invigilation sessions. Instead I find myself committing

to spending my Saturdays making cups of tea for fellow volunteers and pseudo-authoritatively explaining modern art to sceptical gallery visitors. (THS fieldnotes, 24 October 2009)

This had both practical and emotional implications. In the first case, it prevented the researcher from attending fully to the tasks of data collection, by creating additional demands upon her time and occasionally removing her from the frontstage region altogether. This illustrates the notion of role entrapment (Johnson and Schulman, 1989), whereby situational pressures confine an actor to one narrowly defined status or task assignment, making it difficult for them to present other aspects of identity. For example, THS experienced the following dilemma:

For some unknown unwelcome reason (do I seem the most competent or the biggest threat to her authority amongst the other younger volunteers?), M [senior volunteer] chose me to dispatch to a far dark gallery corner to distribute explanatory leaflets to visitors. Given the low visitor numbers and gallery lay out, it seemed unlikely that I would be able to unburden myself of the stack of leaflets over an entire day. Added to that, holding them prevents me making notes, and the position to which I was banished obscures visibility of either gallery entrance, where most of the interaction takes place. Although I felt awkward doing so, after a few minutes pondering I felt I had no choice in order to fulfil my true role as researcher but to discretely deposit the leaflets onto a nearby table and return to observing interactions in the front stage region. In order to explain myself and avoid further similar situations, it seemed necessary to explain briefly to M that I am working on a university research project and need to observe gallery interactions. I had not planned to 'out' myself in this way, and the disclosure elicited a somewhat cool reaction. This information spread to other volunteers, and my worst fears were later confirmed when another volunteer enthusiastically informed exhibition visitors unsolicited that they were being watched by a university researcher. So much for leaving the field clean. (THS fieldnotes, 10 October 2009)

In the second case, volunteering at the art gallery implicated the researcher in additional emotion work (Hochschild, 1983). As part of her duties, THS was trained to approach any reticent visitors with a smile, offer them an explanation of the exhibition, and encourage them to engage more actively with it. Ethically and ideologically, this conflicted with our team's critical stance on shyness as a socially defined rather than individual problem, which people should not be made to overcome. As sociologists, we wanted to sit back and observe such 'anti-shy' interventions, not participate in them. Emotional labour was therefore required to manage and reconcile this dissonance between our privately held values and the attitudes we were expected publicly to display.

However, an unintended consequence of this was that it facilitated the building of rapport and camaraderie with fellow volunteers at the gallery. Through backstage conversations, THS discovered that she was not alone in her discomfort, for the other volunteers commiserated on the shyness-inducing experience of approaching visitors and dealing with negative responses. By joining in with these discussions and sharing her own experiences, the researcher was better able to empathise with her informants and learn more about their role. The question of staff shyness was something that we had not

hitherto considered, but which we now realised was important; this added a valuable dimension to the research and opened up new directions for analysis.

Dramaturgically, this exacerbated the feelings of misplacement and impostordom. Having to cheerfully and authoritatively introduce visitors to a form of modern art about which she felt quite ignorant made THS more aware of lacking cultural competence. A nagging fear that plagued us all was that visitors would turn out to be better informed than we were, and floor us with an incisive question. THS found herself struggling to appear confident and knowledgeable about the artwork while feeling inwardly fraudulent, and was unable to use 'deep acting' to immerse herself in the role. These performative demands created additional role strain upon the researcher-as-actor, insofar as she had to perform two sets of emotional labour simultaneously: as a volunteer and as a researcher. In both guises, she felt vulnerable to rejection by fellow participants in the field, who might cast doubts upon her right to be there:

Today I had to engage with two sets of visitors who wanted to debate the intrinsic worth of digital 'art'. The first was a couple in their late thirties/early forties. He was keen I should understand that he is a university lecturer (sciences), the implication being that his view on such matters is hence superiorly informed to those of others. I felt compelled by his manner to assert that I too am a university lecturer. His wife is studying for an MA in Art, and they clearly both enjoy heated debate. I do not enjoy this. I have never invested much thought in what constitutes art, and I find that I do not very much care whether or not they think the exhibition is art, or whether they like it, or want to prolong their visit. And yet I find that in what I had erroneously assumed would be a mere researcher's tool, the cloak of gallery volunteer, I have become unwittingly accountable for debating the philosophy of art with irate visitors if they so wish, meanwhile missing out on observing other potentially more interesting gallery observations. (THS fieldnotes, 7 November 2009)

## Conclusion

Paternalistic representations of the research relationship have blinded us to the dramaturgical complexity of role performance in the field, where emotions must be managed not only to safeguard the welfare of participants, but also to maintain the researcher's professional face. Shyness may arise if we feel out of our depth navigating unfamiliar territories or social worlds; this involves a feeling of relative incompetence combined with a fear of exposure and embarrassment. A perceived lack of cultural competence threatens to discredit the researcher's claims to knowledge and expertise, in relation to either the substantive content of a social field, as in the case of our art gallery study, or the performance of our academic identities per se. Therefore alongside the reluctant respondent, we should recognise the reluctant researcher, who anticipates fieldwork experiences along a 'cringe spectrum' of self-consciousness.

Managing these performative dilemmas creates additional demands of emotional labour, as fieldworkers struggle to reconcile the discrepancy between their private self-identities and the impressions they may have unwittingly 'given off' (Goffman, 1959), and are discomfited by feelings of fraudulence and impostordom. Our study revealed that researchers who self-define as shy in everyday life find this sensation heightened by



research settings that involve high levels of performance, improvisation and interactional contingency. Likewise, researchers who normally identify as non-shy can drift into the shy role situationally, under such dramaturgical conditions. Equally, however, there is the potential for both types of researchers to drift back *out* of the shy role and project an air of confidence, particularly when supported by participants' protective facework, and/or to retreat periodically to the backstage region to seek solace in their colleagues as supportive team-mates (Goffman, 1955, 1959).

This underlines the importance of communicating openly and honestly, not only with research participants but with each other. While there is a risk that confessional tales from the field are seen as unnecessarily self-indulgent, it can be extremely valuable to share examples of difficulties encountered and overcome. Familiar debates about reflexivity, authenticity, locating ourselves in the research and recognising the impact of emotions upon fieldwork can be usefully extended to include dramaturgical accounts of managing and performing the researcher identity. At an individual level, it can be empowering to relieve ourselves of the burden of professional and competent self-presentation, taking comfort from the universality of 'impostor' feelings. The self-awareness and humility this engenders may, paradoxically, enable us better to perform our researcher-selves to those with whom we work. It can also create an openness to unexpected findings that suggest new directions for research, as occurred with our discovery of gallery staff's shyness. Meanwhile, as colleagues, there are benefits to be gained from backstage discussions, reviews and rehearsals of best practice. By 'communicating out of character' (Goffman, 1955, 1959) to each other about how, as actors, we stage our own social research, we stand to discover new ways of reconciling the conflicting demands of role performance in the field.

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### Biographical notes

This research team is based in the Sociology Department at the University of Sussex.

Susie Scott is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology, with research expertise in shyness, Goffman, identity and interaction.

Tamsin Hinton-Smith is a Research Fellow who specialises in the sociology of gender, education and research methodology.

Vuokko Härmä is a doctoral candidate and Associate Tutor, with research interests in shyness, the sociology of art and cultural competence.

Karl Broome is a Research Fellow and Associate Tutor, whose specialisms are in anthropology, the sociology of the body and self-identity.