

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)		
Unit of Assessment: 27		
Title of case study: Rewriting Shyness		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1 September 2012 – 1 March 2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Joe Moran	Professor of English and Cultural History	September 1996-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2015-July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Joe Moran's writing on shyness raised public awareness and understanding of this common but often ill-defined condition. In the recent focus on mental health and wellbeing in public discourse and policy, shyness has received little attention. Moran's project made shyness part of public discussions about wellbeing and being human, and addressed unhelpful simplifications of and misconceptions about it. This work formed part of Moran's longstanding commitment to public writing and the communication of complex issues and debates beyond the academy. He has continued his interest in the relationship between creativity and mental health in more recent books, written for a wide readership, on writing (<i>First You Write a Sentence</i>, 2018) and failure (<i>If You Should Fail: A Book of Solace</i>, 2020).</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Moran conducted all the research and impact for this project whilst at LJMU. The main research output was a 95,000-word monograph, <i>Shrinking Violets: A Field Guide to Shyness</i>, published in the UK in 2016 and in the US (in extensively revised form) in 2017.</p> <p>Until Moran's book, shyness had received little scholarly attention within the humanities. As a mundane and chronic condition, it has also largely evaded psychological definition and medicalisation, although extreme versions of it have been diagnosed recently in the <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i> as 'social phobia' or 'social anxiety disorder'. The contiguous but distinct phenomenon of introversion aroused much public interest following the bestselling success of Susan Cain's book <i>Quiet</i> (2012). Moran's work, which Cain has called 'thoughtful, beautifully written and vividly detailed' (quote provided for dustjacket copy for <i>Shrinking Violets</i>), fed into the interest around these broad areas of social anxiety and introversion while offering quite different insights.</p> <p>Moran argues that shyness cannot primarily be understood through scientific categorisation or medical diagnosis. Unlike related phenomena such as introversion, shame, embarrassment, fear and timidity, it is hard to explain in terms of differing levels of brain stimulation, observable physiological manifestations, or adaptive, self-preservatory evolutionary traits.</p> <p>It is best understood, instead, as a fundamentally human condition, bound up with the uniquely human activity of meaning-making, and our capacity to construct strange, circular, self-defeating stories about ourselves. The real feelings associated with shyness are thus inseparable from how we articulate those feelings. Moran shows that shyness has been felt and thought about in countless, historically specific ways. In tracing the cultural history and shifting representation of shyness, his book makes a significant contribution to recent work in the medical humanities and the history of emotions.</p> <p>Shyness, Moran argues, is both common and complicated, existing on a continuum running from mild social awkwardness to crippling anxiety. Many outgoing people experience it, and even the</p>		

acutely shy experience it unevenly and situationally. It manifests itself in such diverse ways because it feeds on two opposing human traits: self-consciousness and sociability. Shyness, which rarely involves complete social withdrawal, reveals the human capacity to sublimate our communicative urges into oblique forms – art, music and writing, for instance – and tangential social behaviours.

Moran's work seeks to challenge the simplistic narratives of self-help and personal growth that surround shyness. Where the Victorians spoke of 'constitutional shyness', we now prefer to see shyness as a debility to be overcome, even a pathology to be treated. Moran sees it, rather, as an enduring and tenacious aspect of our personalities, part of being human. His work thus seeks to dispel misunderstandings about, and enrich our understanding of, this inescapably human condition.

Shrinking Violets achieves this not through the standard communication of research findings, but through an innovative work of scholarly non-fiction, a hybrid of memoir, biography, cultural history, textual criticism and philosophical reflection. It conveys, in writing that is rich, layered, lyrical and particularising, the many-sided and elusive nature of its subject. It aims to enable both the shy and non-shy to understand shyness better, as both an intimately felt experience and a culturally articulated one, and to see it as part of the healthy jigsaw of human diversity.

3. References to the research

Shrinking Violets: A Field Guide to Shyness. London: Profile, 2016, 280 pp [published in paperback as *Shrinking Violets: The Secret Life of Shyness* (2017)]. Listed in REF2

Shrinking Violets: The Secret Life of Shyness. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, 272 pp. (revised version of Profile edition). This may only be widely available in North America but can be supplied by the HEI on request.

Research quality evidenced by: publication by a major American university press after a process of peer review and approval by editorial board and faculty board; naming as *Sunday Times* 'Thought Book of the Year' in 2016 (CS1); positive reviews and citations (CS1).

4. Details of the impact

Moran's book, *Shrinking Violets*, received widespread attention, nationally and internationally. It was BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week in August/September 2016, attracting 3,231,000 unique listeners (Rajar figures), and was extracted in the *Independent* and *Australian Financial Review*. It was widely and favourably reviewed in the UK, Europe and America. Many reviews focused on the positive impact it would make in challenging reductionist readings of a multivalent condition. *The Daily Mail* reviewer wrote that 'to a shy person, this book is incredibly cheering. It shows us we are not alone.' *The Observer* called it 'fantastic and involving ... a feat of empathy'. Introducing *Shrinking Violets* as the *Sunday Times* 'Thought Book of the Year', the reviewer called it 'beautifully written' and 'a strange and fascinating way to think about our shared humanity'. (CS1)

Before and after publication, Moran wrote articles on shyness for the *Guardian*, the *Radio Times*, *The Conversation*, the *Daily Beast* and other media, and blogged for *Psychology Today*. Readers' comments on these pieces underline their impact: 'What an unusual and beautiful description of shyness, seeing it as just a natural trait instead of something to be eradicated.' (CS2) 'Beautifully written piece ... It struck so many chords with me.' 'I've learnt that most people are sympathetic to shyness because ... we can all relate to it as this lovely article shows.' (CS3)

Moran spoke about shyness at major literary festivals such as Words by the Water (March 2017), Ways with Words (July 2018) and Gladfest (September 2019), allowing him to engage with audiences in Q&As and book signings (CS4). 'I went to your talk about shyness,' one audience member wrote, 'and it gave me an appreciation of my own ... It has made me see my "strangenesses" in a new light.' (CS5) He was interviewed about shyness by major publications in the Netherlands (*Volkscrant*), Denmark (*Weekendavisen*), Ireland (*Irish Examiner*), Spain (*El Mundo*, *El Pais*), Poland (*Charaktery*) and Italy (*La Repubblica*). An interview for the BBC website had over 280,000 unique browsers, its author commenting that 'with Moran as its reluctant, mild-mannered cheerleader, the Shy Pride movement may have just been born'. (CS6) Moran was also interviewed on BBC Radio 4, BBC World News, BBC World Service (twice), the Irish station Newstalk (twice), RTÉ Radio 2 (twice), ABC Australian Radio National (three times) and radio stations in Spain, Melbourne, Cape Town, Montreal and Salt Lake City, often interacting with listeners in call-ins. Introducing Moran on BBC Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed*, Laurie Taylor said that 'in my insensitive, snap-out-of-it extrovert way, I've never regarded [shyness] as meriting any great degree of personal or sociological attention, but a new and quite beautifully written book has changed all that'. (CS7)

Moran reached new audiences in diverse ways. He performed a stand-up routine on shyness at the Liverpool Everyman Theatre (Liverpool Bright Club, March 2017); appeared alongside practitioners of 'shy activism' and autism awareness, Hamja Ahsan and Paul Wady, at the DIY Cultures Fair, Shoreditch (May 2017) and Writing on the Wall, Liverpool (May 2018); and contributed to Jamie Thom's book *A Quiet Education: Challenging the Extrovert Ideal in Our Schools* (John Catt, 2020).

A significant strand of this impact targeted vulnerable groups who may find it hard to articulate their shyness. Moran was interviewed by *Teen Breathe*, a magazine promoting mental wellbeing in young people (November 2018), and for the Creative Introvert Podcast (13 March 2018). He spoke about shyness and masculinity at the Being a Man festival (Southbank, November 2016) and was interviewed on this subject by joe.co.uk (18 November 2016), melmagazine.com (7 December 2016) and the podcast The Modern Mann (27 March 2017). He also spoke to the careers site The Ladders about coping with shyness at work (8 March 2017), particularly in working environments that value dialogue and collaboration, by focusing on one-to-one interactions and prepared public speaking. He was interviewed by Canvas8 (10 February 2017), a behavioural insights practice offering paywalled resources for clients including Coca-Cola and Unilever, on getting the best out of shy employees. This resulted in an internally circulated report, 'The science of shyness', in which Moran emphasised the importance of not seeing shyness as something to shake off but as a resilient and paradoxical condition. He gave talks about shyness in academia to PGR students at Birkbeck (June 2016) and LJMU (November 2019).

Web comments about *Shrinking Violets* evidence its impact on readers: 'Inspiring and reassuring to know that others ... suffer with shyness in ways similar or far more extreme than I have.' 'Shrinking Violets is not a miracle cure for shyness – it's more like a hand reaching out to take yours, a reassurance that you're not alone.' 'Anyone who is shy, or knows someone who is ought to read this book to better understand themselves or others.' (CS8) 'Being shy I'm not sure I can articulate how good this book is ... I don't think I've read anything as human as this about shyness.' 'I found this book a very positive encouragement ... given how negatively shyness can be portrayed/viewed by the world at large.' (CS9)

In the many letters and emails Moran received from readers, and comments on his own website, the positive personal impact of his work and its broadening of understanding were common themes: 'Your book helped me I think overcome some difficulties, or at least better rationalize the human relations and my stand in interacting with others.' 'The best part about reading is where you come across something, a thought or feeling you had felt peculiar to yourself, written down by someone else, and they've expressed it in a way that perfectly synthesises your thoughts ... *Shrinking Violets* gave me lots of those moments.' (CS5) 'It's definitely altered how I feel about my own shyness, which I used to see as an ugly affliction that needed to be cured.' 'I understand [my wife and daughter] a bit better after reading your excellent book.' 'A remarkable achievement ... as a shy and reserved person, I ... valued your analysis and observations.' 'Your book helped show me that I ought to go easier on myself.' (CS10) These responses evidenced a key argument of the book: that shyness is a condition that affects everyone differently but speaks to our common humanity.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

CS1. Reviews: *Daily Mail* review by Marcus Berkman, 26 August 2016 www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-3758842/How-tell-shy-d-cross-desert-avoid-small-talk-New-book-reveals-history-struggle-strangers.html ; *Observer* review by Rachel Cooke, 4 September 2016 www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/04/shrinking-violets-field-guide-shyness-joe-moran-review ; *Sunday Times* review by James McConnachie, 4 December 2016 www.thetimes.co.uk/article/books-of-the-year-thought-dhlllkrvk

CS2. *Psychology Today* blog, reader's comment, 20 December 2016 www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-secret-life-shyness/201612/the-secrets-shyness

CS3. Joe Moran, 'What lies beneath: an introvert's guide to fiction – and life'. *Guardian*, 26 October 2016, readers' comments www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/20/introvert-fiction-agatha-christie-alan-bennett-morrissey-shyness

CS4. Gladfest talk including audience Q&A, 7 September 2019 soundcloud.com/gladstones-library/gladfest-2019-joe-moran-paying-close-attention

CS5. Comments on Joe Moran's blog joemoran.net/books/ and joemoran.net/about/

CS6. David Robson, 'Why we should celebrate shyness', 31 August 2016 www.bbc.com/future/article/20160830-why-we-should-celebrate-shyness

CS7. BBC Radio 4, Thinking Allowed, 21 September 2016 www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07w94h5

CS8. Goodreads reviews of *Shrinking Violets* www.goodreads.com/book/show/25772991-shrinking-violets

CS9. Amazon reviews of *Shrinking Violets* www.amazon.co.uk/Shrinking-Violets-Field-Guide-Shyness/dp/1781252637

CS10. Letters and emails to Moran