

Shame as Social Pain

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Abstract: *This paper offers a sociological discussion of shame elaborating on Norbert Elias's theory of human beings and their emotions. Successively examined are the manifestations by which shame is recognised, the occasions at which it occurs, its functions, and the possibility that those manifestations, occasions, and functions have changed over time. The central thesis is based on the observation that the manifestations of shame are contradictory: in showing shame people voluntarily or involuntarily draw attention to themselves by gestures indicating a wish to hide themselves. In order to explain this contradiction shame is regarded as a signal of 'social pain'. It is suggested that all normal children are born with a natural capacity for learning to experience shame, to express shame, and to inflict shame upon others.*

Keywords: shame; emotions; Norbert Elias; social psychology; guilt.

Introduction

In April 2007 a symposium was organised in Campinas, Sao Paulo, on emotions and violence in the light of Norbert Elias's theory of the civilising process. Invited to open the symposium with a keynote speech, I thought of two possible themes: 'shame', and 'encounters with Norbert Elias'. Both themes would allow me to mix sociology and autobiography. As it turned out, the two themes lent themselves very well to a combined discussion in one paper.

My first encounter with Elias was not a random discovery. As a student of social psychology in the early 1950s I came across his name through two different channels – both Dutch, but running through separate social networks: one was sociology as taught at the university, the other was literary criticism that I read for pleasure. Since in both contexts Elias's book was highly recommended by persons whom I respected, I decided to borrow it from the library, and started reading. It did not take me long to realise that I had made an excellent choice. I was hooked for a lifetime.

When I first read *The Civilizing Process* I was particularly struck by the passages on shame and embarrassment. I already knew shame all too well from personal experience. I now discovered that it was an emotion with a history. People in different periods (say, the Middle Ages or the nineteenth century) had experienced shame in different ways. Moreover, the way shame was experienced within each period varied between social classes.

As a student of social psychology I was deeply impressed by some experiments in that field that had been carried out in the United States. The results of those experiments all pointed to one undeniable conclusion: human beings are sensitive to group pressures. Often unwittingly, they let their own judgments and actions be influenced by what other people, their peers or their superiors, say and do.

This was a very interesting finding, and it was confirmed again and again. But it was always confirmed in the same setting: a psychological laboratory where students were given tasks to perform under experimental conditions which were, inevitably, somewhat artificial. Nevertheless, the results were presented as if they were valid for all human beings, under all conceivable conditions, at all times.

After a while I began to sense that, while the experimental design had yielded some intriguing and irrefutable insights, there was something thoroughly unsatisfactory about its universalistic claims. What I found lacking was the real world, with situations that have a history – whereas the experimental situations seemed to have no history at all: people without common group experiences were brought together for the duration of one experiment, and then went their own separate ways again. The experimental groups had neither a past nor, for that matter, a future. Moreover, if the experiment triggered emotions, those emotions usually fell beyond the experimental design and were not reported.

Shame and ‘The Civilizing Process’

Among the emotions that were rarely mentioned in the literature of social psychology was shame. I knew shame as a strong emotion – that made me regret things I had done and even prevented me from doing things that I very much wanted to do, like talking to a girl with whom I was in love.

My studies did not help me much in understanding this awkward emotion. I cannot remember having come across the subject of shame in the literature of social psychology. (When preparing this paper I checked it again in my textbook, *Readings in Social Psychology*, edited by Newcomb and Hartley, and found that the Index makes no reference to shame. Shamanism is mentioned, and sibling rivalry; but not shame.) Only much later, in the famous Milgram experiments about obedience, did shame clearly emerge; but those experiments were not published until the late 1960s, long after I finished my studies at the University of Amsterdam in 1958.

But then, in my second year as a student, I read *The Civilizing Process* and found to my great surprise some very perceptive and illuminating passages about shame. They helped me to gain a better understanding of this strange, unpleasant and seemingly unfathomable feeling that inhibited me from doing and saying some of the things I would secretly love to say and do.

At the same time, those passages about shame also helped me toward a better understanding of sociology. They showed me that the divide between sociology and psychology is largely artificial. Both deal with human beings as social individuals; the fact that sociologists and psychologists usually work in separate departments at our universities should not blind us to the fact that they are actually concerned with the same human world. (The separation between sociology and psychology is just as artificial and fundamentally misleading as the separation of sociology and history. Both separations occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century when the major boundaries between academic disciplines were drawn and consolidated. One of the charms of the subject of shame is that it invites us to transgress those boundaries.)

‘On Human Beings and Their Emotions’

When I first read *On the Process of Civilization* in the original German edition, I was not fully aware of its far-reaching theoretical implications. Even Elias himself had not yet fully elaborated those implications. Thus, it was only in 1987 (almost 50 years after the original publication of *The Civilizing Process*) that he published

his essay 'On Human Beings and Their Emotions', which contains the most explicit discussion of his ideas about emotions at a very high level of synthesis.

Although the essay does not refer to shame as such, the general model developed there by Elias is highly relevant to that subject. It can also serve as a backdrop to many other discussions on emotions and violence, because it clearly states the basic principles of a processual sociological approach to the human psyche. In the natural sciences Elias observes a strong tendency to regard human beings from a viewpoint that is monistic and reductionist: everything that humans do, say, feel or think is seen as part of one and the same natural world that we share with all other things, living and non-living; no allowance is made for anything that may be distinctly human. In the humanities, on the other hand, there are strong tendencies in the opposite direction: to concentrate on that which is uniquely human and to regard ourselves and our culture from a viewpoint that is dualistic and isolationist, as if there is a sphere of human thought and feeling that is utterly beyond the pale of the natural world. According to Elias, a processual sociological approach can overcome this stale opposition because it brings out both the continuities and the innovations in the processes of human evolution and socio-cultural development.

Two points made by Elias in 'On Human Beings and Their Emotions' are particularly important for a better understanding of shame. The first point concerns learning. Human beings can and must learn more than the members of any other species. Other animals also learn; maybe even plants have some capacity for learning. But there is no other animal that has to rely on learning so heavily as a human being. This clearly pertains to our cognitive capacities, to what we know and how we think. But it also pertains to our emotions. As Elias says, no emotion of a grown up human person is ever an entirely unlearned, genetically fixed reaction pattern.

A second point in 'On Human Beings and Their Emotions' to which I wish to draw your attention is that human emotions have a behavioural, a physiological, and an affective component. All three components are clearly present in shame. Together, they can serve to define the manifestations of shame.

Four questions

So let me now focus on shame. One of the many things I have learned from Elias is always to start out with a problem. In this paper I shall address a set of four interrelated problems.

The first problem concerns the question how we recognise shame. Shame is a common word. Intuitively we assume that we know how to recognise what the word stands for – even though we are aware that no two shame experiences are exactly the same and each experience is in its own way unique. We may even acknowledge that the words for shame in different languages may carry slightly different connotations, like *vergonha* in Portuguese and *schaamte* in Dutch. The very fact that there are so many variations makes it all the more imperative to begin with the problem: how do we recognise shame, what are its distinctive manifestations?

The second problem I shall raise is: when does shame occur? What sorts of occasions are causes for shame?

Thirdly, as we all know shame is unpleasant. Yet most people have experiences of shame. Why can that be? What are the functions of shame?

All these questions are framed in the present tense, in a seemingly timeless fashion. But we shall have to address, certainly in a symposium dedicated to the work of Norbert Elias, another question as well: have the manifestations of shame, and the occasions that cause it, and the functions it may serve always been the same? Or have there been changes? If so, how are these changes related to processes of civilisation?

These are four basic problems underlying the rest of my paper. They are closely interrelated, and I shall not be able to keep them neatly apart all the time. But bearing them in mind may be helpful in following my argument which, again, is an attempt to apply the general ideas developed by Elias in 'On Human Beings and Their Emotions' to one specific emotion, shame.

Manifestations

Before entering into a description of the manifestations of shame I must make one preliminary remark. My time is limited, and so is my knowledge. I shall therefore restrict myself to those manifestations of shame that may be called 'normal', and refrain from discussing those extreme 'pathological' cases, where shame is truly paralysing, leading to chronic apathy and depression. My subject is 'normal' shame, felt and expressed by people who actively participate in routines of social life, and who are occasionally overcome by momentary flashes of shame. In a word, the shame that is familiar to all of us.

One of the reasons that makes shame such an interesting topic is the variety of ways in which it is manifested. It can be observed in involuntary bodily changes – the most spectacular of which is blushing. This is an almost completely uncontrolled and unlearned reaction at the level of physiology; I am not sure whether even professional stage actors can learn to make it occur at will. Then, there are a number of behavioural reactions such as hiding one's face behind one's hand, or bowing one's head down, which may be highly spontaneous, but which are also susceptible of learning, controlling, ritualising. Thomas Scheff has recorded many of such reactions displayed by persons who had been fooled in candid camera shows on television. The reactions turned out to be highly stereotyped; they probably represented a mixture of largely unlearned biogenetically programmed behavioural patterns and culturally moulded gestures.

In addition to the visible clues by which we are able to recognise shame most of us (if not all of us) also know it through introspection. We have all been there, in shameland. We carry the memories with us, as long as we live. And we can share other people's memories, by interviewing them and by reading autobiographical and even fictional reports.

From these written accounts, and especially from the psychiatric literature, we can also learn that shame can be so painful to persons who suffer from it that they hide it from themselves. If unacknowledged and hidden shame grows rampant, it may have enormous consequences at the levels both of the individual personality and society at large. In this paper, however, I shall confine myself to the directly visible manifestations of shame.

An intriguing aspect of those manifestations is their ambiguity. People who express shame, whether they do so involuntarily or voluntarily, apparently emit contradictory messages. On the one hand, their gestures convey that they do not want to be seen any more, they make themselves small, they bow to the ground, they hide their faces. But then, on the other hand, all these bodily gestures are made in a conspicuous manner; in expressing their shame people are not just trying to hide but are at the same time drawing attention to themselves. This is most evident in what is usually regarded as the surest sign of shame: blushing. (Blushing is a typical double bind signal: look at me, and don't look at me. It also occurs when a person is praised, or in love. The stakes are high when someone blushes. And the stakes are always social.)

Before entering into the problem of what may be the functions of this contradictory display of feeling miserable, let us take a closer look at the occasions that give rise to shame.

Occasions

As I said, my subject is 'normal' shame, experienced by all of us occasionally. What then are the specific occasions that make us blush, that give cause to shame?

I shall address this question too at a high level of generality, to see how it fits into the theoretical model sketched by Elias in his essay.

Generally speaking, occasions for shame are situations of social interaction to which one looks back with regret, because one feels one has been 'caught' doing (or not doing) something that one should not have done. In such instances, the individual in question feels that he or she has lived not up to his or her reputation as a normal or a superior person.

There is always a social dimension to occasions for shame. Even if people report that they feel most ashamed when they are all alone, it is the memory of something they have done, or failed to do, in a previous situation of social interaction, that makes them feel so disturbingly ashamed that it keeps them awake at night.

Thomas Scheff calls shame the master emotion. He is an expert, but I think here he is exaggerating. I don't think shame is more fundamental than love or fear, than joy or sorrow. It is derived from fear – fear for loss of the two most precious premiums of social life, respect and affection. (And as I shall suggest toward the end of my paper, it is even arguable that anger may be more basic than shame.)

In any case, shame is more than almost any other emotion an exclusively social emotion. It arises in social interaction. And it functions in social interaction, even if the person who is ashamed is not aware of either the social origins or the social meanings of his shame.

In this respect shame resembles envy or jealousy. These are also exclusively social emotions, aroused by and directed at other people. A person is not envious or jealous of a dog or a cat, even if the dog and the cat can do things we cannot do. Nor do we feel ashamed toward our pets; if we feel ashamed about what we do to them, the shame is felt by ourselves, toward ourselves, and toward other people of whom we hope they did not see what we did to our dog.

It is people, and especially people who matter to us, who make us ashamed because we feel we have damaged their respect or affection for us. By doing something untoward we have put our social position in jeopardy. We feel that we deserve humiliation or perhaps even exclusion, and we show how we feel: small and not worth seeing – but we show it. Here again we meet the ambiguity of shame; and this leads us to a discussion of its

Functions

There is only one way in which human beings can grow up and survive: in groups. From the earliest times on, groups have been for humans, as Elias noted, their survival units.

In all human groups we can distinguish two dimensions which may be represented as a horizontal and a vertical axis: solidarity and hierarchy. Hierarchy is the dimension of respect and contempt, while solidarity is the dimension of affection and enmity. Understanding the links with solidarity and hierarchy clarifies the functions of shame, from an evolutionary viewpoint.

Neither 'solidarity' nor 'hierarchy' is a wholly neutral term; both words can evoke strong positive or negative feelings. They strike at the heart of all social relations, and all social relations are by their very nature emotive, just as most individual emotions are intrinsically social.

Shame occurs when ties of solidarity and hierarchy are impaired. This is always unpleasant, painful. Physical pain occurs when there is something wrong with the body; it is a signal (a warning) that the body is hurt. In a similar sense, shame is a signal that there is something wrong in a social figuration.

Social pain differs from physical pain in that it involves a two-way traffic. In the act of shaming, messages of pain are exchanged. When others catch someone in the act of doing something unseemly, they may actively 'shame' that person. Victims realise that they have harmed their own position; they are in danger of humiliation and expulsion, and let it be known to the others that they acknowledge this. The inner awareness is as it were the 'domestic policy' of shame, the outward display its 'foreign policy' aspect.

Social pain is social in a double sense: it is inflicted socially by the people who 'shame' (as punishment) and it is demonstrated socially by the person who is ashamed (as atonement).

Changes

Until now my discussion of shame has been rather limited in scope. Limited in two respects: thus far, the emphasis has been on social situations where one individual is ashamed by a number of others. This is the sort of situation that we find most convenient to imagine and discuss. However, a sociological discussion of shame – and in fact any discussion of shame – would be badly incomplete if it failed to consider the fact that shame often occurs as a collective phenomenon. Groups of people, social classes, religious communities, nations, may suffer from social pain, from lack of affection and respect.

A second limitation in the scope of my argument until now has been that I have spoken almost exclusively in the present tense: as if there is no need to distinguish between shame in the past and shame in our present world.

Even in the individual life histories of people, the manifestations and the occasions for shame vary. Undoubtedly children are born with a natural capacity for learning to feel shame, to express shame, and to inflict shame upon others. In each of these three respects, they go through a learning process in the course of which they acquire a certain standard of shame, they learn to adapt to the 'shame regime' prevailing in the social world of which they take part. They cannot easily go through life shamelessly, nor with an excessive proclivity toward shame. The balance of absence and excess has to be found by learning.

Many young children take pleasure in teasing and shaming other children. If left to themselves, they may go to extremes in mocking and humiliating some of their playmates. Here, too, training and learning are indispensable in restraining these tendencies.

Children in our societies today can be quite cruel by adult standards. They exhibit forms of shaming that are banned from public life among grownups. They can refuse to let other children join in play. If they give reasons for their rejection, insult is added to injury.

A similar harshness in comparison to conventional public adult standards today is exhibited when shaming is practised as a crude mechanism of social control. Physical harassment and ridiculing used to be a part of the initiation rites by which a boy's manliness was tested in many societies, and they still occur in modern armies and other settings marked by great differences in power.

Clearly, shame and shaming have a history. I have never seen a book titled *The History of Shame*, but it could be fascinating to trace the long history of shaming and shame, ever since our early ancestors began to organise their lives with the aid of communication by means of symbols (i.e. when they became, not as it is

sometimes called a 'symbolic species', but a symbol-making and symbol-using species). Interestingly, the importance of the differentiation between humans and other animals is reflected in the fact that some of the most commonly used invectives by which people scold and deride other people are the names of certain domesticated animals such as cow, pig, goat, or dog.

In his book *On the Process of Civilization*, Elias discussed a specific episode in the history of shame and showed its relevance for the European elites in the early-modern and modern era. In the royal courts that emerged in the newly arising monarchic states, the non-violent competition for the favour of the king among nobles generated an increasing concern for matters of etiquette and, inevitably, infringements upon etiquette. In this context, Elias said, the 'thresholds' or 'frontiers' of shame and embarrassment 'shifted' and 'advanced'.

The word threshold has caused confusion among some readers who thought that those thresholds were 'rising'. That, however, is a misunderstanding. Elias meant that there was a process of extension in which increasingly more spheres of action became social 'danger zones' in which one could lapse into gestures or expressions that were liable to give cause to shame.

Actually Elias was more explicit about changes in the causes for shame than in its manifestations. In later writings he added more elaborate concepts to explain the increasing preoccupations with etiquette. Among those concepts is the pair of 'Group Charisma and Group Disgrace'. The court nobility at the palace of Versailles was engaged in maintaining its share in the collective charisma of a ruling stratum. Breaches of etiquette undermined this symbolic mainstay of distinction and power and were causes for shame.

The counterpart to group charisma is group disgrace. Falling into disgrace may be experienced more poignantly as a painful social fate than living in disgrace from generation to generation. Such a fall may happen to a family, an ethnic group, a social stratum, a nation.

In its most brutish form, group disgrace can lead beyond humiliation and expulsion, to complete annihilation – known nowadays as ethnic cleansing or genocide. You may find this a bridge too far, from shame to mass murder. But I think Norbert Elias also knew that there is a connection, and that both shaming as a social activity, and shame as an individual experience are potentially destructive.

Shame is an emotion that is not to be treated light-heartedly, even if we do not regard it as the master emotion. To return once more to blushing: according to psychological experts, this is still an unexplained and enigmatic reaction pattern. Why should a person turn red when he or she wants to make him- or herself unseen? But then we have to remember that there is a very differently classified emotion that can also make people's faces turn red (except that we do not call this blushing any more), and that emotion is anger. Helen Lewis and Thomas Scheff have shown that hidden shame may turn into terrible anger; but it may well be that the connection goes even deeper, and even further back into evolutionary history: just as there is an immediate link between fear and aggression, as two possible responses to danger, there is a link between shame and anger as alternative responses to social threats. (Following this line of reasoning, we might even conclude that the origins of shame lie in repressed anger; but for the moment this is mere speculation.)

There are many aspects of shame that I have had to leave untouched in this survey of its manifestations, causes and functions. One such aspect is the relationship between shame and guilt. I think that this relationship has too often been made into an object of mystification. If we consider it from a developmental sociological perspective, we can see that a process of differentiation has taken place, in the course of which a number of causes for shame were gradually brought under the control of more centralised specific institutions, the state and the church. Part of the burden of shame was converted into guilt by virtue of those institutions which developed special branches for meting out their own kinds of punishment. Other institutions, especially the family, adjusted to this penal pattern. In society at large, it was the state and the

church that created guilt-generating forms of punishment. In doing so, both state and church have strengthened the processes of conscience formation. The confessional and the courtroom were the material reflections of the effort to replace shaming rituals by more rational forms of accusation, allowing the victims (be they 'sinners' or 'culprits') the possibility of appeal according to written rules.

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Biography

Johan (Joop) Goudsblom, a Dutch sociologist, first read Norbert Elias's book *On the Process of Civilization* in German in 1952. He met Elias in person at a conference in 1956. Over the years, he has been actively propagating Elias's work. Most of his own work is in Dutch. His publications in English include *Dutch Society* (1967), *Sociology in the Balance* (1977), *Nihilism and Culture* (1980), *Fire and Civilization* (1992) and (with Bert de Vries) *Mappae Mund: Humans and their Habitats in a Long-term Socio-ecological Perspective* (2002). While in his earliest work the biological theory of evolution is rarely mentioned, over the years it has come increasingly more to the foreground as an integral part of his sociological perspective on human history and human ecology.

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