

## SOME ASPECTS OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SHAME AND GUILT

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**Abstract.** This article is focused on the differences between shame and guilt examined through a psychological perspective. The purpose of this analysis developed here is to attain conceptual clarity about what is distinctive about shame and guilt. We claim that shame is erroneously included in the category of “moral emotions” and that, paradoxically, there is nothing moral in it. To this end, we emphasize that shame is produced by the failure to achieve a certain minimum, which is social in its nature. It is therefore connected with low demands on one’s self and low self-esteem. Guilt, on the other hand, is based on the failure to achieve a subjective maximum and an ideal, so it tends to be observed in personalities that exhibit high demands upon themselves and a high self-esteem.

**Keywords:** moral emotions; shame; guilt; narcissism

According to some theories, there are tendencies shame and guilt to be used interchangeably (Lewis 1971), because these feelings come from a concrete behavior or transgression, whereas other theories present clearly demarcated differences between them, emphasizes the immunological effects and neurobiological underpinnings of induction these two emotions. (Dickerson et al. 2004; Michl et al. 2014). We claim that shame and guilt are emotions or feelings, not thoughts, according to the cited literature on this topic. It seems that the only consensus is that these feelings are very often experienced simultaneously in the same subject. We attempt to show that there is a lot of evidence in the literature, which, when systematized and analyzed, clearly shows that shame is mistakenly subsumed under the category of moral emotions.

According to some authors shame and guilt are moral emotions, the other emotions, included in that category are pride and anxiety (Tangney 2007). One of the theses defended here is the following: Shame in its nature is *not a moral emotion* and there is nothing moral in it. There is a connection between shame and

morality only when underlying the feeling of shame there is a feeling of guilt, i.e. in those cases when shame and guilt operate simultaneously in the same individual. There are several significant examples adduced to support the thesis as well as an explanatory hypothesis. In addition, a comparative analysis of the two emotions is presented from a few different points of view related to, for instance, what types of situations ordinarily provoke these emotions, what is the attitude or disposition of the subject, what is the relationship with self-esteem, what are the consequences, possible psychopathologies, the social character of these emotions, what reactions they typically lead to, gender differences, bodily measures (body language).

### **Types of Guilt and Shame**

Shame is defined as an unpleasant feeling caused by an anticipated or actual negative evaluation of the self by the social environment with respect to differences between established norms and subjective qualities, abilities or actions. It is important to note that this phenomenon arises when the subject is exposed by others or when there is a danger of this happening, i.e. shame is emphatically social and inextricably bound with the idea of the other. Typically, its intensity strongly diminishes or it is entirely annulled when the other person disappears. In contrast with this, guilt is a negative feeling caused by the recognition of a given injustice or wrong. We stress that guilt is a subjective feeling independent of others. Guilt can be present when the subject has no involvement in the injustice or the wrong being done. The extent to which such cases should be considered pathological will be discussed below.

Leon Wurmser (2015) discusses primary shame, which arises from the Oedipal complex within which seeing and fantasies have a substantial role to play. He stresses the critical significance of others in the generation of shame. According to him, this feeling is strongly associated with different ontogenetic conflicts and traumas, which lead to masochistic and self-destructive tendencies and narcissistic conflicts. This statement could take a part in explanation of the psychopathology. In contrast with most orthodox psychoanalysts, he maintains that shame has a connection with the Super-Ego, as well as with the Ideal-Ego (Wurmser 2015).

There is also the concept of existential shame which occurs when the subject is alone. It should be noted here, however, that the idea of others is present even within the frames of social comparison. Existential shame arises not from a concrete violation and the subsequent negative evaluation of others, but it is deeply personal, non-logical and unjustified, shame from one's existence in itself. The subject feels inferior to others from birth and it is as if they don't have a right to life. The author discusses the differences in the consequences of this feeling – while ordinary shame tends to lead the subject to concealment, existential shame causes one to feel diminished and fading (Wille 2014). In its essence this type of shame is pathological and stands at the core of a negative therapeutic reaction,

heavy depressive conditions, narcissistic personal pathology and frequent suicidal ideations.

Differentiating the affective and anticipatory (cognitive) aspects, Lansky (2003) speaks of hidden shame. Shame as a feeling is ordinarily felt when there is already a negative evaluation from others with respect to some unacceptable behavior or characteristics of the personality, but it also exists on some additional, rational level when one makes attempts to minimize the chance of its occurrence. As a psychoanalyst, the author is naturally interested not so much in the manifest expressions of shame but in the latent, non-manifest ones. According to him, hidden shame is based on a defense against its conscious recognition. This happens through the splitting of the affect from the idea and in this way it leads to the impossibility of the affect's identification as such. This typically provokes aggressive and angry reactions. The conflict has a narcissistic character (Lansky 2003).

Theoreticians speak of different types of guilt as well. One of the divisions is between deontological and altruistic guilt. The first one is characterized by a feeling of responsibility with respect to a given violation, ideas of sinfulness and a drive towards the endurance of punishment or self-punishment. Deontological guilt has a close relationship with concrete behavior, thoughts and desires of the subject (Basile et al. 2011). This makes it easier to understand. Altruistic guilt, on the other hand, is based on the idea of undeserved personal benefit and feelings of empathy for those who have incurred damage. An example of this is survivor's guilt in people who have survived a plane crash or other disaster where they have survived but others have lost their lives. A similar type of guilt is felt by workers who continue to work for a given company in the aftermath of massive layoffs, even though they had no involvement in the decision of the executive team. Altruistic guilt can be felt in cases in which the subject maintains that they receive a higher award or compliment than is actually deserved. It is pathological in its core.

Mancini divides guilt between intrapsychic and interpersonal. Intrapsychic guilt has a non-adaptive function as it provokes striving towards self-punishment and heavy psychopathology. This type of guilt, according to him, is not an independent pure emotion, but a combination of anxiety and grief, which are labeled as guilt. The interpersonal one is adaptive and connected with concern for others, recognition of mistakes and apology, correction of behavior in the future and subsequently has a positive influence on a wider population (Mancini et al. 2013).

Another classification is made within the Kleinian psychoanalytical perspective. There is discussion of persecutory guilt and depressive guilt. The former is more archaic, belongs to the paranoid-schizoid position and is associated with intense fear. In it, the subject feels persecuted and attacked by the feeling that is most often projected onto others. Ordinarily, it leads to the development of heavy narcissistic pathology – paranoia. Depressive guilt, logically, is characteristic of the depressive position and is accompanied by love, genuine concern for the other and a striving

towards reparation and apology. The anticipated psychopathology is towards depression/melancholy and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Oppenheim 2008).

Some authors discuss conscious and non-conscious feelings of guilt, even though in the last few years there has been some movement towards the replacement of the former by an unconscious need for punishment (Carveth 2010). Actually, according to the author (Carveth 2010) the unconscious need for punishment or the anticipation of punishment reveals a fierce defense against the experience of real guilt and this defense attests to heavy personal pathology. It is necessary to note that he attempts to introduce a fourth element in the structural theory Id – Ego-Super-Ego, namely conscience as an independent whole construct postulated outside of the frame of operation of the Super-Ego. The thesis is that concern for others, empathetic feelings and love arise out of conscience and not out of the Super-Ego and that the Super-Ego can at its core be immoral (Carveth 2015). Howell also maintains the view that the pathologically harsh Super-Ego can cause the subject to do horrific, even unthinkable, immoral things, for example, actions aimed at self-sabotage or to intentionally hurt people towards whom they feel strong attachment (Howell 1997). In agreement with Eli Sagan (1988), Carveth (2015) maintains that the Super-Ego is motivated by hate and identification with the aggressor, while conscience is motivated by attachment, love and identification with a nurturer.

### **Activity/passivity and Social attachment**

There is consensus that shame is related to passivity, feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy, whereas in guilt the individual feels responsibility towards the situation, exercises control, tends to exhibit activity in the direction of reparation and to apologize for their action (Fontaine et al. 2004). The subject who feels guilt ordinarily seeks active ways to cope with the unpleasant situation by giving an apology, even attempting to correct the social injustice, to recognize their mistake and to guard against its repetition. Those who feel shame, on the other hand, aim to avoid exposure by others, attempt to hide and forget the personal discomfort caused to them.

Most theoreticians define shame and guilt as social and a kind of emotions that are strongly connected with the moral (Lewis 1987; Tangney 1996, 2007). We think shame is closely related to the idea of others while guilt finds room in the inner world of the subject. Guilt, however, is attended by empathetic and altruistic feelings and often produces attempts by the subject to correct the damage, so this, on the one hand, makes it a strong moral feeling, while, on the other it confirms its social character. Shame arises in social situations, but provokes escape and a drive to discontinue contact with others. In some situations the shamed subject can demonstrate aggressive and angry reactions, which contradicts the view that it belongs to a moral category. From another point of view, the subject who feels guilt can also attempt to withdraw from the social situation but the cause of this is rooted

in a genuine concern for the good of others. In the case of shame, the subject also withdraws from other people, but this is to discontinue their own discomfort, and not for pure altruistic reasons.

### **Evaluation of the whole self and concrete behavior**

Numerous authors maintain the view of Lewis (1987) that shame provokes a negative evaluation of the whole self and diffuse identity while guilt is connected with disapproval of a concrete behavior and is more specific. In the case of guilt, one can observe the tendency to isolate the affective component consequently the subject often does not recognize what they feel. Shame introduces the idea of global failure, a fiasco that is consciously recognized entirely and therefore is more painful for the subject (Lewis 1987). In reality shame carries a negative evaluation of the whole self, but at the same time it is not sufficient to drive the subject to attempt reparation and apology as in the case of guilt. On the one hand, shame devalues the personality entirely, and, on the other hand, it produces anger and aggressive reactions caused by the experienced discomfort. According to the psychoanalytic theory of Silvan Tomkins about the characteristics of the affective conditions, shame is such an oscillatory affect which is produced by the frustration of a positive emotion, missed advantages, i.e. the deprivation of anticipated joy (Frank 2006).

### **Demands, self-evaluation and Agents of Shame and Guilt**

Following the theory of Lewis (1987), shame is associated with a negative evaluation of the entire personality while guilt is associated with negative evaluation of a concrete action, we can draw the conclusion that in the case of shame the self-evaluation is low. The subject does not place high demands upon himself/ herself because they feel weak and unable to change what has happened and this is why the only thing they can do is escape and forget. The evaluation of the whole self which Lewis discusses influences the subject's whole strategy for coping with the situation. The unpleasant feeling of shame is provoked by the subject's exposure in the perpetration of a violation, but they don't feel remorse for the action itself but they feel sorry that others evaluate it negatively and they may be socially excluded. This is not the case with guilt. It is an entirely different feeling and concerns only the self-evaluation of the subject. They attempt to correct the damage which they caused because they are confident in their abilities, and from this we can conclude that they have high demands towards themselves.

There is some agreement between the different theoreticians that shame arises out of the Ideal-Ego, while guilt arises out of the Super-Ego. According to the theory of Wiska (2002) some types of pathological guilt arise out of the earlier period of the paranoid-schizoid position, according to Melanie Klein, and they belong to an immature Ego, using the energy of the death drive (Thanatos). The person is under massive projective identification which does not allow the Ego

to undertake adequate reparational action, as what is in question is not love, but survival. In contrast, depressive guilt uses the energy of the life drive (libido, Eros) and attests to a mature and well-structured Ego, able to use mature defense mechanisms, empathy and object love (Wiska 2002).

### **Consequences and factors in the development of tendencies towards shame and guilt**

Cryder and co-authors conduct a social experiment and maintain that the results confirm their hypothesis that the feeling of guilt can provoke reparative actions only when these efforts can be noticed and evaluated highly by others (Cryder et al. 2012). This claim is, however, problematic because it is not sufficiently well supported. Discussing the results, authors do not draw a clear boundary between the two feelings, which likely explain the mistaken classification of shame as guilt.

The study conducted by Chao in a corporate setting reveals that people who feel shame tend not to seek help in the resolution of difficult tasks, they are more independent, prefer to work alone and they tend to avoid communication with their colleagues in their free time (Chao et al., 2011). The tendency to experience guilt is associated with great likelihood for rebellion and insubordination to authorities in the execution of orders, which will cause damage to third parties (Baumeister et al. 2015).

There are evident some definite differences between the ways in which these emotions are experienced subjectively. Shame “burns”, while guilt ordinarily “weighs” (Fuchs 2003). The subject who experiences shame turns red, his/her pulse speeds up, he/she lowers head, as if shrinking and attempts to escape from others. Guilt can cause slight buckling, but not always and afterwards a tendency to actions meant to correct the damage is observed.

Studies on the development of tendencies to shame and guilt are consistent. The harsh, discriminatory and humiliating attitude of parents towards their children, as well maltreatment of a general and sexual nature reflect the tendency of the victims to be predisposed in the future towards shame, aggressive reactions, heavy psychopathology, deviant and delinquent behavior. The supportive parental style is associated with a tendency to develop of an affinity towards guilt, pro-social behavior and lighter psychopathology, primarily of anxious and depressive register (Stuewig et al. 2005).

### **Cultural and gender differences**

Numerous theories, predominantly anthropological, divide nations in terms of those in which guilt is primarily felt and others in which shame is more common. The former are developed western countries, led by the United States, which is characterized by an individualist culture and where sanctions are internalized and there is personal responsibility in every member. Such people tend to suffer

from obsessive neurosis and melancholy. Eastern countries (Japan, China etc.) are collectivist, more oriented towards shame and rely on external sanctions and control (Etxebarria 2000). The psychopathology is more often paranoid because there is a natural tendency towards projection (Signorini 2011). The major criticism of such theories is that they omit individual differences and ignore language and semantic characteristics, for instance, in some languages in eastern countries there are dozens of words for types of shame, which can raise the question whether all of them concern this phenomenon or they should rather be associated with guilt.

Sigmund Freud (1923) discusses the view that men are subject to the feeling of guilt, arising out of a well-structured Super-Ego, whereas women primarily experience shame, as their Super-Ego is not so strong in general and they have organic deficiency, envy because of the penis, which additionally stimulates the experience of shame, but not guilt. The basis of all neuroses, however, lies in guilt, provoked by early infantile sexual desires towards the parents, while men and women suffer from neuroses to an equal extent.

Empirical studies evidence the different relations between shame, guilt and narcissism. Narcissism and guilt have moderate positive correlation in men, but in women there is no such similar dependence. Shame and guilt are experienced equally by the two genders (Wright et al. 1989). In accordance with most psychoanalytic theories, shame has crucial significance in the genesis of narcissistic pathology. In men shame is associated most often with development of narcissistic grandiosity, while in women with a feeling of inadequacy and low self-esteem (O'Leary et al. 1986).

### **Psychopathology**

In the psychoanalytic literature, starting from Heinz Kohut (1972), guilt is primarily included within the frame of neurotic organizations, where the main psychic conflict is between sexual desires and the demands of the Super-Ego. There is anxiety present, but it is based on fear of the expression of such desires and the threat of punishment and loss of the love of the object. Shame, contrary to this, circulates in narcissistic organizations where diffuse identity, instability and danger of fragmentation are present. Anxiety here is more diffuse and the fear is of a loss of the object, which is a part object. The possibilities are two – dissociative shame or its absence can provoke fantasies for grandiosity and the excessive, conscious shame to inflict a heavy blow on one's self-esteem. In both cases the pathology is narcissistic (Sorotzkin 1985).

According to Lewis, shame-proneness is related to vulnerability to affective disorders (primarily depression), whereas the tendency to experience guilt is associated with thought disorders – paranoia and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Other authors maintain that shame is correlated positively with anxiety, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), narcissistic pathology,



alcoholism, absence of empathy, depression, suicidal attempts (Tangney 2007). Guilt is also correlated with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder according to other studies. The feeling of guilt is one of the main symptoms, necessary for the attribution of the diagnosis of major depressive episode, according to the American diagnostic classification – DSM (Blum, 2008). Exhibitionistic and voyeuristic tendencies are associated with the feeling of shame or its absence (Makogan 2013). Takanashi defines guilt as a cause of different neuroses, depressivity, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder and somatization (Takanashi et al. 2014). According to other authors, somatization is more often the result of shame (Makogan 2013).

### **Why Shame is not a Moral Emotion (author's view)**

The foregoing exposition shows that several arguments can be drawn from the popular psychological theories to support the hypothesis that shame by itself is not a moral feeling. This is not to say that guilt is a “good feeling” for “good people” and shame, the contrary. It is also clear that the two emotions are experienced by the same subject with respect to the same situation. Despite this, the view advanced here is that they differ not just phenomenologically.

First, shame arises when the subject realizes that a given behavior of theirs or characteristics are evaluated negatively by others and they are socially excluded. Shame ceases to exist as an affect when the subject leaves the social situation and do not identify with this evaluation, i.e. do not regret the violation itself, but their exposure.

The absence of empathy concern for others and a striving to correct the inflicted damage in the case of shame also make its connection with morality difficult. On the contrary, a subject disposed to feel shame often reacts aggressively and angrily towards even people who have experienced the damage. The subject is not just the cause of the latter, but they additionally punish the victims.

In shame, the negative evaluation concerns the entire personality. In light of this, the conclusion was drawn that a person disposed to feel shame would have low self-esteem, and low demands upon himself follow upon this. In other words, shame is present when the subject doesn't succeed to achieve some social minimum. This is not related to internalized values, but with external social norms. Narcissistic grandiosity, which correlates positively with the feeling of shame, can be explained as a compensatory reaction and only demonstration of a high self-esteem. Shame is produced in situations in which the subject is socially excluded and experiences deprivation of anticipated positive emotions. At the center of these emotions the subject stands and her/his losses. The fact that the shamed subjects put efforts to escape from others is explained by their egoistic and self-preserving strivings to annul the discomfort caused to them. On the basis of this, it is argued here that shame is mistakenly included in the category of moral emotions.



### III. Conclusion

In this paper, we presented an examination of the concepts of shame and guilt from different points of view. The paper addressed the psychological theories of the differences between the two emotions and our hypothesis was that in its nature shame is not a moral emotion, as it is traditionally taken to be. We adduced several observations from the psychological literature, which support the hypothesis.

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