

Affect and Emotion in Restorative Practice; July 2011

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Shame or Guilt or Both?

Much confusion surrounds the distinction between shame and guilt. Restorative practitioners are keen to know the answers to such questions as: Are they the same thing? Are they different? How can I tell them apart? And, is the distinction really important in my daily work?

Since the pioneering work of Braithwaite[1] in the late 1980's, the significance of shame in restorative practices is indisputable. Offenders caught in legal or other processes that shame them beyond certain limits, disconnect them from the community, and thereby create what Braithwaite labeled "stigmatization," are more likely to re-offend. Whereas, processes that keep shame to a minimum and provide offenders with the opportunity for reintegration into the community lower recidivism rates. The effect of these different processes on individuals and a theory of how they produce such disparate outcomes will be topics in upcoming columns. For now, we return to the question at hand: how is guilt different from shame or is it?

One method of examining the distinction is to consider the differential use of the words shame and guilt in everyday language. For instance, one is more likely to say, "I feel guilty about what I did to you," than they are to say, "I feel shame about what I did to you." While, you might never hear someone say, "I feel guilty that I'm so ugly or stupid or unlovable." Instead, they say, "I'm ashamed that I'm so ugly or stupid or unlovable." This highlights the most common distinction people make between shame and guilt. Shame is more about perceived defects in the self and where one's emotions about those defects reside on what Nathanson[2] called the "shame-pride axis." Guilt, on the other hand, is more about what one experiences in relation to deeds done (or not done) to an agency outside of the self—be it another person, the standards of a community or the values set by a religious or other organisation.

The distinction between whether one is experiencing shame or guilt made in the preceding paragraph is clearest when it comes to shame related to perceptions about the self in such matters as size, strength, intelligence, helplessness, physical appearance, sexual functioning, and competence[3]. Clearly, people feel shame when they are defective in one of these areas more than they feel guilt. The distinction blurs, however, when it comes to guilt about deeds done that violate others or community and/or religious values. This is because even though one is likely to express guilt when it comes to such actions, one might also say they felt "ashamed" of their actions once these actions become known to others. In other words, in these situations people feel both shame and guilt simultaneously, and they experience the two feelings as somewhat similar but also different somehow. Yet another complication in understanding the "difference" between shame and guilt arises when theorists add feelings of "embarrassment" into the mix and endeavor to distinguish it from both shame and guilt.

Traditional attempts to define shame, guilt and embarrassment by sociologists, psychologists, criminologists and other professionals suffer because they lack a foundation based on a comprehensive theory of human emotion. The emotions of each individual arise from a complex interplay between the inherited biological traits of one's central nervous system (CNS) interacting with the emotions, beliefs and morals of their caregivers and further impacted by a person's physical health, nutritional status, and luck. Affect script psychology is a comprehensive theory of human emotion that, amongst many other things, permits one to develop a clear understanding of emotions such as shame, guilt and embarrassment.

The originator of affect script psychology, Silvan Tomkins, based his theory on human biology and the evolutionary concepts put forth by Charles Darwin[4]. Tomkins unpacked the complex structure of human emotion and uncovered the basic building blocks of emotion and their evolutionary significance. Our CNS, he argued, evolved in such a way that it provides us with the capacity to rapidly process **that** information about the world around us most necessary to guarantee the survival of the species without us having to "think" about it. The brain system responsible for the gathering of such information, he labeled the *affect system*.

Each of nine separate programs within the affect system has a specific, evolved function and responds differently to different information entering the brain. Tomkins called these programs *affects*. The affects, which become feelings once we are aware of them, are the most basic biologic units of human emotion and motivation. No thought is necessary for an affect to be motivating. For instance, from the earliest moments after birth, the positive affects of *interest* and *enjoyment* motivate us to want more of whatever causes them; and the negative affects of *fear*, *distress*, *anger*, *disgust*, *dissmell* (response to foul smells), and *shame* motivate us to want less of them and do whatever it takes to make them stop. The neutral affect *surprise* simply resets the system, it is an alerting mechanism more than a motivating one. (For those interested in a more detailed, and I hope readable, discussion of affect script psychology, please click on the link to access a downloadable copy of my *Primer of Affect Psychology*.)

As each affect repeats daily in the life of the infant, it develops a history based on learning and memory. That history is replete with interactions with caregivers, with a person's response to those caregivers, and with a person's response to their own self and their emerging cognitive and physical abilities. Through these development processes, the nine affects become a complex array of emotions. Emotion is unique within each individual based on the interplay between their biologically inherited affects and their personal biography. In other words, in affect script psychology, an affect is a pre-programmed biological event, whereas an emotion is a composite of affects and past history of affects in relation to others. We are all, therefore, very similar when it comes to our affects and very different when it comes to our emotions.

The biological function of each of the nine affects can be loosely analogized to the little tone my computer just made. The computer received a piece of information—the arrival of an e-mail in my inbox—and through an interaction between hardware, firmware and software, the computer became "aware" of that new information. In this analogy, the tone is the computer's expression of the affect as a feeling. My conscious awareness of the tone came because the tone triggered an affect in me. The noise it made entered my central nervous system as a piece of new information. The hardware, firmware and software in my brain[5] interacted to trigger the affect of *interest* in me. It was this interest that directed my consciousness away from what I was writing to the computer's message. When I became aware of my interest, the feeling caused me to switch into my e-mail program to look at the new message. (Technical note: the pattern of the incoming information—what Tomkins referred to as the "stimulus"—is what determines which specific affect is triggered. For instance, the e-mail tone of my computer is soft and mellow creating a gently increasing pattern. If I set it to be loud and sharp, it would trigger the affect surprise instead of interest because the pattern would be sharply increasing in nature; likewise, if I set it to be a longer, noisy tone, it would trigger the affect of distress. Please refer to the *Primer of Affect Psychology* for a more detailed description of these processes.)

The primary evolutionary purpose of the affect system is to aid in the survival of our species. It does so by directing conscious

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- * That when crime (or wrongdoing) occurs, the focus is on the harm that has been done to people and relationships
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awareness—attention—to the most important event happening at each instant in time. In other words, the affect system gives us vital information about the here and now. The function of **fear**, for instance, is to notify us that too much is happening too fast. **Distress** lets us know that too much has been going on for too long. **Disgust** tells us that what we just ate was rotten. **Interest** contains the message that what is happening is just right. **Enjoyment** indicates satisfaction with whatever is happening.

The function of **shame-humiliation** is less easy to describe.

Tomkins proposed that shame was the last affect mechanism to evolve. It filled a gap in information management not satisfied by the eight other affects. Because our brains evolved the ability to remember and store patterns of information, and because positive affect is inherently rewarding and negative affect inherently punishing, a central blueprint of motivation emerged. This blueprint motivates us to maximise positive affect and minimise negative affect. Minimising negative affect is in some respects simple. When we feel bad, we automatically want it to stop and take action in that direction. Maximising positive affect is easy because it feels good. We take action to continue it as long as there are no interruptions. The information mechanism that was missing—and eventually prompted the evolution of shame—was something to notify us whenever our positive affects of interest or enjoyment were blocked.

Let me be very clear here: the affect mechanism Tomkins called shame-humiliation is activated only when our interest or enjoyment is ongoing when those feelings are blocked or impeded. Shame is not activated if we are no longer interested in or enjoying what we were just doing. I need to mention something else about shame before providing you with examples of this mechanism. When people hear or read the word *shame*, the first thought they usually associate with it is “feeling ashamed.” Indeed, feeling ashamed is one of the most common *emotions* experienced when the affect mechanism shame-humiliation is triggered. We feel ashamed, for instance, in all those situations where we put our foot in our mouth and say something stupid in front of people whom we want to think of us as intelligent. Shame is triggered, in this case, because our interest in appearing intelligent is blocked by the stupid thing we said. While the emotion of “feeling ashamed” can and does happen many times and around many people in our lives, it is only one of an entire family of emotions that arise because we have the affect mechanism of shame-humiliation wired into our brains.

Below, I share with you an excerpt from the chapter my upcoming book about shame in relationships, a chapter entitled “The Shame Family of Emotions,” in order to challenge you to stretch your understanding about this very interesting affect mechanism and to show how it relates to guilt:

The combination of how shame is triggered and the thoughts that follow—thoughts uniquely related to each person’s life experiences—leads to the variety of emotions found in the shame family of emotions. Here follows a very incomplete list, including a brief explanation of the dynamics, of some of the members of that family:

Shame emotion from parent-child relationships: children become highly interested in their parents interest in them. Disapproval of the child by the parent occurs normally and is the impediment that triggers the earliest shame in children, shame that leads to the normal appearance of the capacity we all have to feel *ashamed*.

Shame emotions from relationships ending: if we are interested in a person and interested in that person being interested in us, then anything that blocks that interest will trigger shame. If that person leaves us or communicates they are no longer interested in us, our interest is blocked and we feel *abandoned* or *rejected*. There is a very strong connection between feeling ashamed and fears of abandonment.

Shame emotions from relationships floundering: when two people still have an interest in their relationship succeeding, if there is much discord (anger), this is an impediment that usually leads to *hurt* feelings; if there is more disconnection than discord, the impediment it creates leads to feelings of *distance* and *loneliness* even though the two people are still together.

Shame emotions from not wanting to be seen: feeling *shy* has at its core the vulnerability—greater in some people than others—to experience shame. Very shy people avoid being seen because of their fear that others will see their imperfections—real or imagined. All of us, even those who are not shy, however, feel *exposed* when something that we were interested in keeping private is revealed to others. In this case, it is the revelation that acts as the impediment to interest.

Shame emotions from everyday impediments: if our interest in getting to an appointment on time is blocked by traffic or our interest in opening one of those modern day plastic wrapped packages that totally resist almost all attempts is blocked by the demonic wrapping or our interest in watching a TV show is blocked by the cable being down or any one of a million other things like this happens, we feel *frustrated* or *disappointed*. (If the level of frustration or disappointment gets too great, we feel angry—a defense against shame that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.)

Shame emotions from more severe life impediments: if we have been fired from our job (an obvious trigger for shame), and our interest in finding a new job is impeded for a long time by an economic downturn, and our interest in supporting ourselves and our family is impeded by the lack of a job, we feel a sense of *helplessness* that over time can turn into *despair*. Or if we encounter an injury or illness that seems to be a permanent impediment to our interest in our former ability to perform physically, we will feel also helpless and perhaps despair.

Shame emotions from attacks on our character or race or religion or political beliefs: if our interest and enjoyment in who we are and what we believe is impeded by the words, written or spoken, of others, we feel *discriminated* against and *disrespected*.

Shame emotions related to competition: I, like too many other Americans, grew up in a family that too often overvalued winning and being “number one” over the true spirit and fun of competition. Such families create too strong a connection between the sense of one’s value and winning. This leads to a distorted interest in winning competitions rather than simply enjoying them for what they are. If one’s interest in winning is too great, then the impediment created by not winning can engender deep feelings of be a *weak, incompetent loser*.

Guilt is generally thought of as being distinctly different from shame. One sees written or hears the phrase “shame and guilt” as if they were completely separate phenomena. Guilt is, however, a near cousin of the shame family of emotions. We experience guilt when we have *shame* about something we have done, either because we remember it or because we have been caught and exposed, and then the *fear* of punishment, by either worldly or divine forces, makes the emotion powerfully unpleasant. In other words, guilt results from a combination of the two affects fear and shame.

I hope it is now clearer to you that shame, simply because of its natural function, is at the root of many emotions, the vast majority of which have nothing whatsoever to do with feeling *ashamed*. That premise is critical to understanding how relationships work and how learning to monitor shame in whatever form it takes can be a vital tool in the successful maintenance of relationships.

Although I may have raised more questions in your mind than provided answers about the differences between shame and guilt, I’ll stop this edition of my Newsletter column here and look forward to any questions or comments to help further the understanding of these important emotions. (If you would like to be notified by e-mail when my book on shame and relationships is available for purchase, please visit my website at www.shameandmarriage.com and register by clicking the link on the bottom right of the home page.)

Vick Kelly

[1] Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, shame and reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Nathanson D.L. (1987). The shame/pride axis. In H.B. Lewis (ed.), *The Role of Shame in Symptom Formation*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[3] See Table 5, p. 327, The Cognitive Phase of Shame, in Nathanson D.L. (1992). *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*. New York: Norton.

[4] Darwin, C. (1998). *The expression of the emotions in man and animals*. Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[5] See Table 1, p. 27, Computer Model for the Human Emotional System, in Nathanson D.L. (1992). *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*. New York: Norton.

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