Shame Management and Bullying: Stability and Variability Over Time

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"…individuals who resort to crime are those insulated from shame over their wrongdoing" (Braithwaite, 1989, p. 1)

[Author's note: Using the terms 'bullies' or 'victims' is not to label such children but to simplify the text.]

This chapter examines the scope of shame management processes in understanding bullying/victimization in schools. The restorative justice literature is helpful here in that it emphasizes the building of emotional resources and social connectedness between bullies, victims and their communities. As our work shows (for details, see Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite, & Braithwaite; forthcoming), bullying/victimization in children occurs as a result of both emotional and social drift away from significant others. We have found that bullying/victimization is related to children's shame management skills. These skills are learned through processes of socialization and so can be relearned within frameworks that seek to build these skills. Moreover, within these, and other relevant channels, they can be refined over time. A child's social, emotional and behavioral functioning can suffer as a result of failing to acquire and refine these skills. The main purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate this.

Background

Our initial research in 1996 examined bullying and victimization in 32 schools (grades 4, 5, 6 and 7) in the Australian Capital Territory. This research showed that children's poor skills in managing shame could be a risk factor for bullying/victimization (see Ahmed et al., forthcoming). Bullies were less likely to acknowledge shame, and more likely to displace shame into anger; victims showed excessive shame acknowledgment (with a particular focus on self-critical thoughts) without displacement; children who were both bully and victim felt shame but showed less acknowledgment and more displacement of it; and children who are non-bully / non-victim acknowledged shame without displacement. A follow-up survey was undertaken to find out how stable the relationship between shame management and bullying status (bully, victim, bully/victim and non-bully / non-victim) was over time. This chapter aims to build on this initial research, providing a further evaluation of the relationship between shame management, bullying and victimization.

The research into bullying and victimization reviewed in chapter 1 converged on a set of variables that indicate a general pattern of poor social adjustment in both bullies and victims. Children who bully others have often been brought up under a regime typified by punitive, inconsistent discipline, and which exhibits a lack of care and concern among family members (e.g., Ahmed, et al., forthcoming; Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1992; Lowenstein, 1978; Rigby, 1993). Such children often lack academic achievement, face problems in developing friendship groups, and therefore do not enjoy school life. In addition, they are less likely to be able to control their impulses and feel empathy for others. Interestingly, they think that bullying is not well controlled at their schools (e.g., Ahmed et al., forthcoming).

Children who become the victims of bullies have also been characterized by poor social adjustment. Research shows that victimized children often have a disagreeable and insecure relationship with their family members (e.g., Komiyama, 1986; Troy & Sroufe, 1987). Such children are found to be withdrawn, anxious, depressed, and prone to low self-esteem (e.g., O'Moore & Hillery, 1991; Slee, 1995; Slee & Rigby, 1993).

In summary, research into bullying and victimization, across a range of social contexts, has established a strong link between poor social and personal adjustment and the behavioral outcomes for bullies and victims. Based on restorative justice principles, our work seeks to investigate the shame management profiles of children who bully and are victimized. The 1996 study showed a strong relationship between children's shame management and bullying status. How enduring this relationship is over time is the focus of this chapter. It aims to develop our understanding of this relationship, particularly in terms of its stability and variability over time.

Shame-management: A key concept in bullying/victimization

The inclusion of shame management skills in developing our understanding of bullying/victimization is supported by a body of clinical, developmental and criminological literature, which suggests a relationship between shame, anger and criminal behavior (Braithwaite, 1989; Lewis, 1971, 1987, 1995; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992). It was argued that shame, when unacknowledged, leads to anger and angry actions which can intimidate and/or hurt others. Support for this argument has come from investigations which document the link between unacknowledged shame and anger (Lansky, 1992; Nathanson, 1992; Retzinger, 1991; Scheff, 1987). Research has shown that shame is not only related to hostility and a tendency to blame others (Harder & Lewis, 1986; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992), but is also related to feelings of unworthiness, helplessness and depression (Lewis, 1971; Nathanson, 1987; Tangney, 1990, 1993).

While focusing on the maladaptive aspects of shame, these researchers have not denied the adaptive aspects of shame. Indeed, some have argued that shame acknowledgment plays a central role in maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships (Kaufman, 1996; Lynd, 1958; Retzinger, 1996; Schneider, 1977; Turner, 1995). The current work incorporates both the adaptive and maladaptive aspects of shame (for details see Ahmed et al., forthcoming).

What is shame management and how does it relate to bullying and victimization?

Shame management can be understood as the process we use to rationalize wrongdoing that threatens our ethical identity. Shame is what we feel when we violate a set of social and moral norms or standards. We all violate such norms (at least to some extent) at one time or another. The important question is how we rationalize our wrongdoings, and also how we manage our shame over them. There are adaptive and maladaptive ways of managing shame. Maximizing and minimizing feelings of shame are both maladaptive. What is adaptive then? There are several means of managing shame adaptively. Some of them can co-occur and some of them are more overtly recognized than others.

The first step to manage shame adaptively is to –

> !   admit "Yes, I have done wrong and I am ashamed of it".

This acknowledgment need not be a public admission; it could be completely private.

The next steps are to -

> !   take responsibility for the harm done; and

> !   make amends for the harm done, such as saying sorry or at least expressing some symbolic gesture of regret.

These three steps can be understood as an internal sanctioning mechanism. They are the key components of our conscience. The other adaptive shame management strategies that follow the mechanism are the absence of -

> !   persistent self-critical thoughts from others' rejection; and

> !   externalizing blame or anger onto others.

Through these strategies, the outcome is adaptive, both personally and socially. That is, the feeling of shame is discharged and the "self" remains free of conflict between conscience and wrongdoing. Moreover, good interpersonal relationships are maintained.

Let us now consider the maladaptive ways to manage shame. In spite of the presence of an internal sanctioning mechanism, it is possible that some of us will be unable to heal shame adaptively. In some cases, this arises from a constant fear of others' rejection. We then feel inferior, defective and helpless, and our self-esteem is deflated. So we distance our social relationships to avoid further feelings of rejection and shame because we are struggling with these unresolved feelings already.

A second maladaptive way to manage shame is when we simply fail to acknowledge such feelings and deny them instead. In this case, our feelings are not confronted and dealt with. The message to others is that we are not ashamed of the wrongdoing. Because we do not acknowledge our feelings, we feel that we have no responsibility and therefore no need to make amends. In this case, we are inclined to blame others for what went wrong. In other words, we find a "scapegoat". These maladaptive strategies may relieve the pain of shame in the short term, but they have a harmful impact upon the self and the community in the long run. The consequence of this maladaptive strategy is a feeling of unfairness, blaming others, and being angry at others to get revenge. In these circumstances, maintaining good interpersonal relationships becomes difficult.

How does adaptive and maladaptive shame management relate to bullying and victimization? Typically, children who are not bullies and are not victimized manage their shame adaptively by acknowledging shame over a wrongdoing. Acknowledging shame, along with taking responsibility and making amends, is not a very pleasant experience in the short term, primarily because we become exposed to others (the threat being real or imaginary), and see ourselves as more or less disgraced in others' eyes. However, once this painful part of the shame is discharged, it is adaptive for further self-development and also for maintaining responsible interpersonal relationships in the long run.

Acknowledged shame can on the other hand take a maladaptive path if we adopt a strategy of self-blame and dwelling on others' rejection. In spite of the presence of an internal sanctioning mechanism, these strategies are likely to play a role in feelings of alienation. They threaten the social bond between the rule violator and the rule regulator, for example, a child and his/her parent or teacher. The child may become distanced from the community to avoid further shame and is then very likely to recognize him/herself as a "scapegoat". The child constantly strives to do the right thing and not disrupt his/her fragile social world. Maintaining distance from others assists in this process and such children become ready victims to bullies. Bullies are very quick to recognize the fragile nature of such children. Victims then become the scapegoat that the bully is looking for as they are all too ready to take on responsibility, often not theirs, to curb further rejection from others. A dysfunctional co-dependency is established.

How are the bullies affected? Bullies bypass their shame, and thus, it is unacknowledged with no responsibility taken for their action. They believe that other people around them (e.g., students, teachers, siblings) are to blame for what went wrong. When

shame goes unacknowledged it is maladaptive, most markedly from the perspective of good interpersonal relationships, though it seems to be adaptive in protecting the self from an immediate sense of humiliation. A threat to the social bond comes about because they fail to acknowledge these feelings, and refrain from repairing the damage done to the relationship with other people. In this case, the ethical element of shame, the internal sanctioning mechanism, is missing, and non-compliance with rules takes place almost recklessly. Such is the case with the school bullies.

Shame undoubtedly has a central role in understanding human behavior. Shame is a very sophisticated emotion that can take either a constructive or a destructive path. Shame is constructive when it leads to adaptive activities; conversely, it is destructive when it takes the maladaptive form. The strategies we adopt following a wrongdoing are especially important. Some strategies are the key to reconciliation and reintegration, whereas others create barriers toward reconciliation and reintegration. When bullies and victims feel alienated from their social surroundings (albeit in different ways), adaptive shame management may strengthen the integrity of the self as well as the social bond.

[Details of the extensive research data and analysis have been removed form here.]

Discussion and conclusion

This 3-year follow-up study evaluated the relationship between children's shame management and bullying status. Findings provide support for the view that displacing shame is maladaptive and destructive for maintaining interpersonal relationships over time. Evidence was also presented to demonstrate that acknowledging shame is adaptive and constructive for such relationships. Interestingly, and understandably, too much acknowledgment of shame over a wrongdoing was also found to be maladaptive for maintaining social relationships. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 2.

The important theme which emerged from this study is that a child's bullying status is quite stable over time (see also Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1979, 1993; Tattum, Tattum, & Herbert, 1993), and is related to shame management skills. For example, 47% of the children who bullied others in 1996 continued to bully their peers in 1999. These children also continued to show their poor shame management skills characterized by less shame acknowledgment and more shame displacement. While there is a story of stability, there is also a story of change. That is, a child's particular bullying status can change as we see change in his/her shame management skills. Children who had moved out of the bullying category by 1999 are distinguished by decreases in shame displacement (e.g., blaming others, being angry at others). This finding is one which offers hope for future interventions.

Table 2 Summary of the obtained findings.

Bullying status		What was found	Comment
Non-bully/non-victim	Stable	Shame acknowledgement: no change Shame displacement: decreases	Stable group continues to show adaptive shame management
	Changed	Shame acknowledgement: decreases Shame displacement: increases	
Bullies	Stable	Shame acknowledgement: no change Shame displacement: no change	Stable group continues to show poor shame management
	Changed	Shame acknowledgement: no change Shame displacement: decreases	
Victims	Stable	Shame acknowledgement: increases Shame displacement: no change Number of good friends: decreases	Stable group continues to show poor shame management
	Changed	Shame acknowledgement: decreases Shame displacement: no change Number of good friends: increases	
Bully/Victims	Stable	Shame acknowledgement: decreases Shame displacement: decreases	Stable group continues to show poor shame management
	Changed	Shame acknowledgement: no change Shame displacement: decreases	

Considerable continuity in adaptive shame management skills was also found for the stable non-bully / non-victims. These children continued to show the same level of shame acknowledgment in 1999. In addition, their shame displacement scores decreased in 1999. In contrast, the changed non-bully / non-victims continued to show poor shame management skills. Their shame acknowledgment scores dropped down and their shame displacement scores went up compared to the 1996 data. These data for non-bully / non-victims suggest that decreases in shame acknowledgment (e.g., feeling shame, taking responsibility, making amends) and increases in shame displacement (e.g., blaming others, being angry at others) resulted in movement from being 'trouble-free' in 1996 to being 'more of a worry' in 1999.

For victims, it was of interest to note that those who moved out of the group showed less shame acknowledgment in 1999. In contrast, those who stayed in the group showed higher shame acknowledgment. This suggests that the stable victims perceived their problems as being their own fault. Persistent shame and self-blame for being a victim of bullying appears to be a major contributor to an increase in shame acknowledgment and to continuity in victimization. To avoid further shame and self-blame, these children appear to be setting a pattern of social isolation from their peers. This finding is important to consider in the context of research on the higher incidence of suicide among victims of bullying.

What about the bully/victims? Bully/victims who remained in this category in 1999 showed less of a tendency for both shame acknowledgment and shame displacement. Bullying peers possibly pressures them to establish a pattern of less shame acknowledgment while being victimized by peers leads them to establish a pattern of less shame displacement.

To sum up, this research demonstrates three findings which are important key points for bullying intervention:

1.   Shame management skills are related to bullying/victimization;

2.   Shame management skills change over time as does bullying status; and

3.   Children who remain in troubled categories (bullies, victims and bully/victim) have distinctive patterns of poor shame management.

The implications of the above findings for bullying interventions are as follows:

1.   Interventions should incorporate the concept of shame management skills.

2.   Interventions should focus upon exposing children-at-risk to early intervention before any maladaptive patterns become entrenched.

3.   Interventions should aim to empower children in building resilience against bullying/victimization. The concept of shame management can be used for building resilience through role modeling and skill training. Integrating shame management skills training into the school curriculum would seem worthwhile.

4.   Interventions should adopt a shame management approach within a whole school approach.

On the basis of this framework of bullying/victimization and shame management, attempts to educate children about shame management are of great importance. The Responsible Citizenship Program (see Chapter 6 of this book) is a pilot intervention designed to achieve this objective. The program is based on the assumption that shame management skills are context dependent and transient in nature. They can be shaped in a desirable way if children are given the opportunity and the role models necessary to bring about this change.