

## Hidden Shame in Depression and Violence.

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**Abstract:** This paper outlines a study by Helen Lewis (1971) on shame and guilt in psychotherapy. First her method, then four of her findings are described: the large number of shame episodes, the seeming unawareness of them by both client and therapist, and finally the way that shame events can sequence into either withdrawal or anger. If the idea of sequences from shame is expanded to the point of continuing loops, it may explain the causation of overwhelming depression, on the one hand, or anger and violence on the other. If Lewis's study is so promising, why has it received so little attention? To attempt to answer this question, the presentation of her study is compared with that of three earlier ones in which shame played a crucial part, by C. H. Cooley, Ervin Goffman, and James Gilligan.

In 1971, Helen Lewis published Shame and Guilt in Neurosis, a book that reported the results of her systematic study of psychotherapy sessions. There were a hundred and fifty sessions recorded by ten different therapists (she was not one of them). She used the Gottschalk-Gleser (1969) technique to locate emotion episodes in the transcriptions, and then analyzed the reactions of both client and therapist to each episode.

The Gottschalk-Gleser method concerned words and phrases that are commonly understood to indicate emotions, such as "getting hot under the collar" as a way of referring to anger, or "feeling rejected" to shame. Her analysis of the results led to two surprises. First, shame episodes were by far the most frequent, outnumbering all the other emotions combined. Secondly, unlike the other episodes, such as anger and grief, the moments marked by shame were hardly ever commented on. Neither therapist nor client seemed to notice them.

In the book, she referred to these seemingly unnoticed emotions as unacknowledged, since she couldn't tell whether the therapists and clients were unaware of the emotions, or whether they were aware but not mentioning them. Since Lewis was a practicing psychoanalyst as well as a researcher, she later questioned her own clients when they used words that seem to indicate shame. She found them to be unaware of the shame that their wording implied.

In the 1971 book, Lewis made two further discoveries in connection with the sequences that occurred after the client's shame episodes. The most frequent event was what seemed to be varying degrees of withdrawal by the client. Lewis called this a sequence from shame to depression. The client would begin to speak less and more slowly. There was, however, also another response, a sequence from shame to anger, sometimes at the therapist. The anger reaction was less frequent than withdrawal. These two sequences may turn out to be quite important.

As indicated, shame episodes never led into discussion of the episode by client and/or therapist. For example, if something the therapist had said embarrassed the client, he or she might have responded with "That remark you just made me feel ashamed," or even "You hurt my feelings." Such a statement could have then led the discussion toward working through the client's shame, a therapeutic sequence. Such a sequence did not occur in any of the 150 sessions.

### Hiding Shame

Lewis found that shame goes unacknowledged in two different ways. The first way she called "overt, undifferentiated shame" (OU). The client is in pain, but it is referred to indirectly, at best.

There are hundreds of words and phrases in English that can be used to refer to shame without naming it. For example, one can say “I fear rejection,” or “This is an awkward moment for me,” and so on. Many of these cognates have been listed by Retzinger (1995.)

OU shame is usually marked not only by pain, but often by confusion and bodily reactions: blushing, sweating, and/or rapid heartbeat. One may be at a loss for words, with fluster or disorganization of thought or behavior, as in states of embarrassment. Many of the common terms for painful feelings appear to refer to this type of shame, or combinations with anger: feeling hurt, peculiar, shy, bashful, awkward, funny, bothered, or miserable; in adolescent vernacular, being freaked, bummed, or weirded out. The phrases “I feel like a fool,” or “a perfect idiot” are prototypic.

Even indirect reference may be avoided when shame is labeled erroneously. One error is to misname the feeling as a physical symptom: “I must be tired” (or hungry or sleepy, or pregnant, etc.). Although Lewis found this kind of shame occurring with both women and men, it was predominantly used by women.

The usual style of men, she called “bypassed.” Bypassed shame is mostly manifested as a brief painful feeling, just a flicker, followed by obsessive and rapid thought or speech. A common example: one feels insulted or criticized. At that moment (or later in recalling it), one might experience a jab of painful feeling (even producing a groan or wince, although not necessarily), followed immediately by imagined replays of the offending scene.

Many of the replays are variations on a theme: how one might have behaved differently, avoiding the incident, or responding with better effect. The scene may be replayed involuntarily through meals and keep one awake at night. One is obsessed.

However, there is also a form of bypassed shame in which the indications are weaker. Apparently it is possible to further bypass bypassed shame to the point where it is noticeable only through extremely close examination. One may feel blank or empty in a context of embarrassment or shame.

Two further steps beyond Lewis’s approach may be necessary. Lewis uses a simple dichotomy: shame is either acknowledged or unacknowledged. Since Elias (1939) and others have suggested that virtually all shame in modern societies is secret, we probably need to envision various DEGREES of hiding in order to understand why secret shame sometimes causes depression or violence.

Suppose that hiding shame is usually not complete. When the shame is only partially hidden, at least some of it may be resolved, at least partially. It was James (1983) who first suggested that emotions are at core bodily tensions that can be resolved through physical expression. This idea was taken up by both Dewey and Mead, who called it “the attitude theory of emotions.” This theory was explained more completely by Nina Bull (1951). She proposed that grief, for example, is bodily preparation to cry that has been delayed. To the extent that emotions are bodily states of arousal, then limitless shame-based spirals occur only when shame is COMPLETELY unresolved. For our purposes, we therefore need at least a trichotomy: acknowledgement, partial hiding, and complete hiding.

Lewis’s finding regarding hidden shame collides with a taken for granted belief in modern societies, that all emotions are felt, confounding emotion, a bodily state, with awareness of that state. If questioned closely, most people will admit of knowing of one emotion that might not be

felt: anger. They can remember times when they themselves and/or other persons were obviously angry but were completely unaware of it. Yet they draw the line with other emotions, particularly shame. In English, particularly, it is difficult to conceive of such a situation: when someone is ashamed, the word itself implies awareness, rather than the more unassuming wording of “being in a state of shame.”

### Cultural Assumptions about Emotions

As indicated, Lewis’s treatment of shame brings up a delicate issue, because it implies an utterly different conception of emotion than the one held in modern societies, especially English-speaking ones. Most people believe that emotions are feelings. That is, like feeling fatigue or affection, emotions are always felt. Lewis’s work on unacknowledged shame suggests, however, that the emotion of shame is not mainly a feeling, but a bodily state, one that might not be felt.

In Lewis’s description of OU shame, it is clear that there is a feeling, but it is misnamed or misinterpreted. In the case of bypassed shame, there seems to be mostly no feeling of any kind. This finding, since it runs against a central cultural assumption, is a hard sell. Although widely praised, this aspect of Lewis’s study has been little cited.

Another implication of Lewis’s approach is that it widens the definition of shame to include sibling, embarrassment and humiliation. Sedgwick and Frank (1995) also make this point, even though their approach is based on the work of another emotion pioneer, Sylvan Tomkins.

In English-speaking cultures, the conception of shame is extremely narrow: a crisis emotion involving disgrace. But in all other languages, there is also an everyday shame that is more or less present in ordinary social occasions, especially as an anticipation of the risk of shame. In French, for example, there is the idea of *pudeur*. In English, this kind of emotion would be called modesty or shyness, and not considered as a type of shame.

Another example is embarrassment, which in English seems to be a separate emotion because it is seen as inflicted by others and is brief and weaker than shame. But in other languages, embarrassment is considered to be a member of the shame family. For example, in Spanish, the same word, *verguenza*, is used for both emotions.

In Lewis’s conception, guilt is also a member of the family, if only a cousin. That is, shame is a shame-anger sequence, with the anger directed at self. Similarly, resentment is the opposite cousin, being a shame-anger sequence, but with the anger directed at other.

Lewis goes on to take up another problem, the meaning of the opposite of shame, the word pride. Without inflection (genuine, justified, authentic, etc.), pride is usually taken as negative: arrogant, self-centered, “pride goeth before the fall”. The Christian bible also states that pride is a deadly sin. I call this kind of “pride” false pride, because it can be seen as a defense against shame. People who say too much about how great they are might be hiding shame.

These difficulties with emotion arise in all modern languages because they have evolved in societies that are individualistic and oriented toward the visible outer world of material things and behavior, and only recently shown any interest in the interior world of emotion. Since English was the language of the nation that modernized earliest, through industrialization and urbanization, the emotional/relational world in English speaking cultures has become the most hidden.

### Emotion Spirals

Lewis' idea of emotion sequences can be expanded to include unending spirals of emotion. She noted that when shame occurs but is not acknowledged, it can lead to an intense response, a "feeling trap:" one becomes ashamed of one's feelings in such a way that leads to further emotion. Since normal emotions are extremely brief in duration, a few seconds, Lewis's idea of a feeling trap opens up a whole new area of exploration. Emotions that persist over time have long been a puzzle for researchers, since normal emotions function only as brief signals.

The particular trap that Lewis described in detail involved shame/anger sequences. One becomes instantly angry when insulted, and ashamed that one is angry. One trap, when the anger is directed out, she called "humiliated fury." The other path she noted, when the anger is directed in, results in depression. This idea is hinted at in psychoanalytic approaches to depression. Busch et al (2004), for example, devote Chapter 7 to "Addressing Angry Reactions to Narcissistic Vulnerability." As is usually the case in modern societies, they avoid using the s-word by encoding it: "narcissistic vulnerability."

Lewis presented many word-by-word instances of episodes in which unacknowledged shame is followed by either hostility toward the therapist or withdrawal. In her examples of the latter, withdrawal takes the form of depression. She refers to the shame/anger/withdrawal sequence as shame and anger "short circuited into depression" (1971, p. 458-59 and passim):

[The patient] opened the hour by reproaching herself for being "too detached during intercourse." She had had a satisfactory orgasm, as had her husband, but she noticed that she was not totally absorbed in the experience and then reproached herself for having been detached enough to make this observation. She now observed that she was scolding herself and immediately located a source of humiliated anger at her husband. He had criticized her that same day for having been so "drained" by caring for the children that she had no energy left for him when he came home, and she had at the time thoroughly agreed with him. She had also agreed with his criticism over irritable behavior with the children. (She was normally in agreement with him about her faults.)

A careful analysis of her experience at the time her husband reproached her unearthed the fact that she had had a fleeting feeling something like resentment accompanied by thoughts which ran approximately: "I wonder how he can be so 'detached' that he has no feeling for me. You'd think he was lecturing in class." (Her husband is a teacher.) That night she readily agreed to intercourse, partly to placate her husband. A short time afterward she was scolding herself for being "too detached," and too observant.

Lewis's idea of emotions short-circuited into depression might be used as a first step toward a theory of the emotional origins of all depression. Since none of the therapy sessions she studied involved depression to the point of complete silence, she didn't consider that possibility. The aftermath of unacknowledged shame that she noted involved slight hostility toward the therapist or the kind of momentary withdrawal and/or self-blame that might be indicators of incipient depression.

The sequences Lewis referred to involve at most three steps, as in the case of the shame/anger sequence short-circuited into depression: shame-anger-withdrawal. A model of feeling traps that can go far beyond a few steps may be necessary. How could such a process lead to a doomsday machine of interpersonal and inter-group withdrawal?

Some emotion sequences may be recursive to the point that there is no natural limit to their length and intensity. People who blush easily become embarrassed when they know they are blushing, leading to more intense blushing, and so on. The actor Ian Holm reported that at one point during a live performance, he became embarrassed about forgetting his lines, then realized he was blushing, which embarrassed him further, ending up paralyzed in the fetal position. This feeling trap would not be a shame/anger sequence, but rather shame/shame: being ashamed that you are ashamed, etc. Lewis did not note the possibility of shame/shame sequences.

Recursive shame-based sequences, whether shame about anger, shame about fear, or shame about shame, need not stop after a few steps. They can spiral out of control. Perhaps collective panics such as those that take place under the threat of fire or other emergencies are caused by shame/fear spirals, one's own fear is not acknowledged, the obvious fear of others cause still more fear in a recursive loop. Depression might be a result not only of a shame/anger spiral, but also shame/shame alone.

Judging from her transcriptions, withdrawal after unacknowledged shame seems to be much more frequent than hostility toward the therapist. A shame/shame spiral of unlimited duration would be a blockbuster of repression, covering over not only all shame and other emotions but also all of the evidence of its existence. This level might correspond to the blankness, emptiness and hollowness of complete depression or alexithymia (emotionlessness; Krystal 1988, Taylor et al, 1997).

Whether recursive shame-based loops lead to depression/withdrawal or to violent aggression seems to depend on whether the anger in the shame/anger sequences point inward (guilt) or outward (resentment). In intergroup process, a scapegoat group seems to provide cognitive help that directs the anger outward into violence. Scape-goating can occur at the interpersonal level also, in the case of rage directed toward a woman by a man or toward a black person by a white. If, as suggested here, the direction of anger in or out determines depressive or violent outcomes, it would be fair to say that violence serves as a defense against depression.

Suppose that if the bodily tensions of shame are only partially hidden, they will be mostly resolved over time. But if they are completely hidden, the laminas of tension can build up to the point that they feel utterly unbearable, leading to violence or depression.

In a review of the research literature (1987, pp. 29-49), Lewis reviewed studies by other authors using a variety of measures that showed strong correlations between shame and depression. This finding currently continues. Reporting on 25 years of quantitative research, Shohar (2001) found strong links between shame and depression. Future research might determine that shame/shame spirals are the basis of the withdrawn type of depression, and that shame/anger spirals might lead to other types, such as agitated depression.

#### Response to Lewis's Study

The book has never come anywhere near being a bestseller, and has not received adequate attention, even though Lewis was well known in the psychoanalytic and psychotherapy worlds. At one point during her presidency of the American Psychoanalytic Psychology Association, many years after the book was published, she complained to me that everybody praises her book but no one reads it.

My recent survey of books and articles on shame upholds her complaint. Many of them on shame, even recent ones, don't cite her book at all. The clearest example is Gilligan's well

known book on violence (1997). Gilligan, an eminent psychiatrist, proposed that all violence is caused by secret shame. When he was a prison psychiatrist, he asked the killers among the convicts why they did it. Their answers were mostly quite similar: “No one can get away with dissing (disrespecting) me.” His findings clearly imply that violence is a way of hiding insult and humiliation. Like the books on shame by Cooley and Goffman, to be discussed below, Gilligan’s doesn’t use the s-word in his title.

The Effron’s (1999) book, The Secret Message of Shame, is very much in agreement with Lewis’s finding that shame is hidden, doesn’t cite it. A rare exception is the citation by Lansky and Morrison (1997) in their book. They not only cite it, but in doing so, pick up an important thread in it, the shame anger sequence (p. 32, 1997). But basically, the Lewis book remains virtually unknown, 43 years after publication. Even the books and articles that do cite it usually don’t seem to understand its importance.

This article has suggested some of the most important implications of Lewis’s findings about shame, and also to explain why it has received so little attention. For the latter purpose it will be useful to compare her approach to shame with that of two earlier writers, the sociologists C. H. Cooley and Ervin Goffman.

#### Cooley on Shame

In his book on human nature, Cooley makes two particularly relevant comments on the origins of pride and shame. The first is:

“(We live) in the minds of others without knowing it.” (P. 208, 1922).

In the second comment, he explained his idea of the looking glass self:

"[The self] seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; ...the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or shame." (1922, 184)

Although this sentence gives the impression that there may be emotions other than pride and shame generated, his further discussion of the looking glass self focuses entirely on pride and shame.

Cooley did offer some brief explication, as in this passage that introduces his thesis that we usually don’t know that we are living in the minds of others. We only realize it, he states, in extreme or unusual situations:

Many people of balanced mind...scarcely know that they care what others think of them, and will deny, perhaps with indignation, that such care is an important factor in what they are and do. But this is an illusion. If failure or disgrace arrives, if one suddenly finds that the faces of men show coldness or contempt instead of the kindness and deference that he is used to, he will perceive from the shock, the fear, and the sense of being outcast and helpless, that he was living in the minds of others without knowing it, just as we daily walk the solid ground without thinking how it bears us up. (1922, 208).

In the following passage, Cooley explains how the looking glass self generates shame:

The comparison with a looking-glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to *pride or shame* is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this

reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling. We are *ashamed* to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one and so on. We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind. A man will boast to one person of an action—say some sharp transaction in trade—which he would be *ashamed* to own to another. (1922, 184-85, emphasis added).

This discussion suggests less abstract situations a few steps down the part/whole ladder. In the following passage, Cooley refers to particular, though fictional, events in novels, but without quoting any of them in detail:

In most of [George Eliot's] novels there is some character like Mr. Bulstrode in Middlemarch....whose respectable and long established social image of himself is shattered by the coming to light of hidden truth (1922, 208).

Cooley's statement, since it is abstract, gives only a slight sense of how catastrophic the shattering of the social image is, and how far it reaches. In this novel, Bulstrode's wife, Dorothea, although blameless, stands by her disgraced husband. The novel provides detailed particulars so that the reader is alerted to the full force of public humiliation. Using Bulstrode's instance to make his point is somewhat of a departure from Cooley's tendency to abstain from description. However, he doesn't go so far as to quote the passage and comment on how the details in it relate to his thesis, as Goffman does<sup>1</sup>.

Here for example, is a quotation showing that Bulstrode's disgrace reaches to his wife. Cooley could have used to illustrate the particulars of his thesis:

When she had resolved to [stand by her husband], she prepared herself by some little acts which might seem mere folly to a hard onlooker; they were her way of expressing to all spectators visible or invisible that she had begun a new life in which she embraced humiliation. She took off all her ornaments and put on a plain black gown, and instead of wearing her much-adorned cap and large bows of hair, she brushed her hair down and put on a plain bonnet... (Eliot, 1900, 338).

Dorothea prepares for a public stripping of her dignity by discarding her socially acceptable appearance, replacing it with what might have been prison or funeral clothing. By only referring to events like this one, rather than quoting them, Cooley used too few words to be able to describe particulars.

#### Goffman's Approach to Shame

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erving Goffman's 1959 book, perhaps the most popular sociological book ever, has sold well over a million copies, and is still selling today. It presents, for the most part, brief but very detailed social transactions, word for word and moment for moment. The whole book is organized around a single metaphor of dramaturgy: people are actors on the stage of life, mostly concerned with the impression they are making on others.

When I was Goffman's TA in Berkeley I noticed that most of his lectures were also taken up with concrete examples. The students seemed to love them, but I was puzzled: what are they

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examples OF? More specifically, I looked for an instance where he related a large number of his examples to a single abstract idea or proposition.

Reading his book raised this same question for me. After many years of searching, I found a sentence that seemed to answer my question:

There is no interaction in which participants do not take an appreciable chance of being slightly embarrassed or a slight chance of being deeply humiliated. (1959, p. 243).

This statement occurs only in passing toward the end of the book. It asserts unmistakably that ALL interaction carries the risk of embarrassment/humiliation. This generalization helps explain not only Chapter 6 (Impression Management), but the whole book. The reason we spend such time and care managing our impressions, (our appearance, talk, lifestyle, and so on) Goffman suggests, is to avoid shame in the form of embarrassment or humiliation as best we can. Perhaps he hit upon this proposition when reading his own book, after the fact, so to speak. “Aha, that’s what all those examples that I recorded were about!”

Another possibility: he was shrewd enough to avoid putting off possible readers by the use of a forbidden word. For example, suppose the title he chose has been: Presenting Self to Avoid Shame. The use of the s-word is at least as taboo as the f-word, or maybe more. Instead of being one of the most popular sociology books ever written, it might have vanished into the oblivion inhabited by most scholarly books, particularly those that use forbidden words openly and early. So far as I have been able to find, I am the only one that noticed that his book was about shame. The metaphor of dramaturgy is an acceptable envelope for his examples, just as shame is not.

My recent Google Ngram study (2014) of the frequency of the s-word in millions of published books between 1800 and 2000 supports the idea that the s-word is taboo in modern societies. In three languages (US English, British English, and French), the decline has been quite steady. There has also been decline of a similar size in German and Spanish, but not as steadily.

The psychologist Gershen Kaufman is one of several writers who have argued that shame is taboo in our society:

American society is a shame-based culture, but ...shame remains hidden. Since there is shame about shame, it remains under taboo. ....The taboo on shame is so strict ...that we behave as if shame does not exist (1989).

The taboo is not on all uses of the word shame, since there are speakable usages, such as “What a shame” or the jokey “Shame on you.” What is taboo is the central meaning of shame, the emotion of being excluded and perhaps worthless for that reason. The phrase “What a shame” does not refer to a specific feeling, since “What a pity” means exactly the same thing. Just as the f-word was once completely taboo before the 1960’s, the s-word, when used to mean the emotion of shame, is still taboo.

## Conclusion

Of course Cooley didn’t use the s-word in the title of his 1922 book because his approach to understanding human behavior is very broad. Even so, the fact that the many sociologists who appreciated his idea of the looking glass self failed to notice that it always ended in either pride or shame. Goffman’s 1959 book has a much narrower focus; he could have easily named it Presenting Self to Avoid Shame. But would it still have been widely read and appreciated?



The fate of Lewis's 1971 book, with the s-word in the title, suggests that it wouldn't have. Her title, unlike those of Cooley and Goffman, revealed a key feature of her study to be the s-word, shame. This single feature may explain the failure of the book to receive attention.

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