

SHAME AS THE MASTER EMOTION: EXAMPLES FROM POP SONGS

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It is difficult to understand the importance of shame in modern societies because we live inside an ethos that is highly individualistic and focused on exterior matters. In the interior, thought and perception are recognized, but hardly a thought is given to emotions and relationships. This essay attempts an explanation of why shame should be considered the master emotion. The idea will be illustrated by song lyrics chosen from the most popular, the Top40 over the last eighty years. Finally, a brief discussion of steps toward managing shame in a way that might change the direction that our civilization is moving.

Taking the Role of the Other

Humans, like other mammals, are social creatures first. Not even a close second, they are also stand alone, self-reliant individuals. There is a deep, virtually automatic link between humans, but it is more or less invisible. As C.H. Cooley, a Protestant minister and early American sociologist, put it: "...we live in the minds of others, without knowing it." (Cooley 1922, p. 11, emphasis added).

The literal content of ordinary speech and gesture is so fragmented and contextual as to be confusing if not completely incomprehensible. A whole school of thought, deconstructionism, has been built on this fact. However, their analysis is misleading, since it leaves out a key ingredient in social transactions, role-taking (Mead 1934). By an early age, most children have learned to understand speech not only from own point of view, but also from the point of view of the speaker. Comprehension depends on success in taking the role of the other, in reading their minds, so to speak.

Although there are many misses, some not even close, modern societies depend on a high rate of successful mind-reading. Considerable success must occur not only in conversation, but in most other settings as well. A bank, for example, depends on it in making loans, and an automobile driver for getting through traffic without collisions.

Gradually the child gets so apt at guessing the other's viewpoint and at going back and forth between the two points of view as to forget what he/she is doing. In forgetting, the child becomes the kind of adult that modern societies imagine us all to be, a self-contained individual.

Connectedness

Various degrees of connect and disconnect may be both cause and effect of most emotions. Human beings need to be connected with others as much as they need air to breathe, a social oxygen. Disconnected from others, one is alone in the universe. Deep connection, even if only momentary, can feel like union, not only with the other(s) but also with groups, even large groups. Varying degrees of disconnect at the level of individuals and of groups lead to a vast array of problems, large and small.

An example that implies disconnect at all three levels is provided by Bush's comment after an Iraqi reporter threw his shoes at him in Bagdad: "I don't know what his beef is." This response suggests the failure of connection by one individual with another individual and with another group. It further implies the same lack by one group (the U.S government) toward another group (the people of Iraq).

Being overconnected can be a problem also. One can be so engulfed with the other(s) as to give up vital aspects of one's self, such as one's creativity. The stasis of traditional societies may be largely due to engulfment. The rabid nationalism that occurs in modern societies has similar results in the long run.

I will treat degree of connectedness and emotion as the main dimensions of the social-emotional world (SEW). Although these domains are closely linked, they are separate entities. The first dimension is harder to envision than the emotions, because it is usually taken for granted.

The idea of an intersubjective component in consciousness has come up frequently in philosophy and the social sciences, but the implications are seldom explored. As Cooley (1922) suggested, mind-reading is so primitive that we usually take it for granted, to the point of invisibility.

Cooley's idea is profoundly significant. We have many, many names for connectedness: intersubjectivity, and shared or mutual awareness, are examples from a long list. The term joint attention was used by the psychologist Bruner (1983, p. 71), when he explained how an infant learns to read the mind of its caretaker. The mother, he says, is only trying to teach a new word. She places an object (such as a doll) in her own and the baby's line of sight, shakes it to make sure of the baby's attention, saying "See the pretty DOLLY." In this situation, the baby is encouraged to learn not only the meaning of a word, but also, since both parties are looking at the same object, how to have, jointly with the mother, a single focus of thought and attention, to use Goffman's phrase.

John Dewey used still another term, shared experience. He proposed that it formed the core of communication and therefore of humanness:

Shared experience is the greatest of human goods. In communication, such conjunction and contact as is characteristic of animals become endearments capable of infinite idealization; they become symbols of the very culmination of nature (Dewey 1925, p. 202)

This formulation by Dewey, because of its expansive reach, reminds us of the individualist ethos of modern societies, with its emphasis not only on solitary individuals, but also on thought and the material world, rather than the social-emotional one.

Shame is Social and Individual in Equal Measure

Shame, like most emotions, is more or less hidden in modern societies. It is too shameful to even think about, much less discuss. When shame is addressed, even by experts, it is usually considered to be completely internal. However, a brilliant psychoanalyst, Helen Block Lewis (1971), has provided a conception of shame that is equally social and individual. She proposed that shame is a signal of threat to the bond. This idea would give shame a social dimension as well as an internal one. Similarly, genuine pride (as contrasted with false pride, egotism) is a signal of a secure bond (connectedness). This idea includes the individualist one, since most of our positive feelings about ourselves involves reaching goals that are also held by others.

Shame can be considered to be the master emotion for several reasons. First, it is probably ubiquitous in human experience and conduct. Cooley (1922, 184) suggested why: "[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 mortification."

In this passage he restricts self-feelings to the two emotions he thought the most significant, pride and shame (considering "mortification" to be a shame variant). To make sure we understand, he mentions shame three more times in the passage that follows (184-85, emphasis added):

"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.”

The way in which Cooley linked intersubjective connectedness, on the one hand, with pride and shame, on the other, suggests ubiquity of both pride and shame. However, his examples, many of which are not included above, all involve shame rather than pride.

Modern societies, built as they are upon a foundation of the mobile, self-reliant individual, rather than the group, are highly alienated, and therefore rife with shame or its anticipation:

“...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.” (Goffman, 1959, p. 243, emphasis added).

If this sentence is taken literally, it means that shame and/or the anticipation of shame haunts ALL social interaction. Avoidance of shame is the driving force behind Goffman’s central idea of impression management: much of our life is spent anticipating, experiencing, and /or managing shame. That would mean that genuine pride, the signal of connection with the other, would be rare.

In addition to its haunting presence, shame can be considered the master emotion for other reasons as well. One is that shame could be the driving force in our moral lives: it is a sense of shame that propels conscience. Moral thoughts not backed up by a sense of shame have little weight because they are mere thoughts, lost in the galaxy of other thoughts.

Finally, shame can be considered to be the master emotion because it controls the expression and even our recognition of our other emotions, and surprisingly, of shame itself. This idea with respect to other emotions will be illustrated in the discussion of pop song lyrics that touch on the taboo against men crying, below. The idea of shame about shame turns out to be important for understanding violence, which will also be discussed below.

To sum up, I will treat shame as the master emotion because of its ubiquity in human experience, its role as the force behind conscience, and as the regulator of all of our emotions, including shame itself.

Shame Implied in Pop Song Lyrics

The lyrics of the most popular of all pop songs, the Top40, are designed to elicit emotions, but usually don’t name them. The emotion of love is obviously crucial, and almost as visible, the grief and/or anger resulting from what I call heartbreak, the loss of a lover (Scheff, 2010, 68-77).

Although the word shame is seldom mentioned, pop lyrics also often convey the private and public shame, embarrassment, and humiliation of being rejected. Usually heartbreak songs imply shame indirectly, *sub rosa*.

... I thought that bein' strong meant never losin' your self-control
But I'm just drunk enough to let go of my pain, To hell with my pride, let it fall like rain

...
(Tonight I Wanna Cry, 2004)

The phrase about pride is a common way of implying shame indirectly. It refers to the embarrassment most men experience if they cry or even feel like crying. Men are trained to believe that crying is unmanly, as is the expression of fear, shame, and even anger. More anger is expressed by men than other emotions because it is least shameful. Even so, for most men, most of their anger is probably suppressed.

In this lyric, shame is implied more strongly:

I pretended I'm glad you went away, these four walls closin' more every day
And I'm dying inside, and nobody knows it but me
(Nobody Knows 1996).

The phrase “dying inside” is one of many ways to refer to shame without naming it. The pain of rejection is so shameful that it must be hidden from others. One is ashamed both of being rejected and of being ashamed.

An early (1968) Beatles song is a virtual workshop on implying shame without actually mentioning it:

Here I stand head in hand
Turn my face to the wall
If she's gone I can't go on
Feeling two foot small
Everywhere people stare
each and every day
I can see them laugh at me
And I hear them say
Hey, you've got to hide your love away... (You've Got to Hide Your Love Away)

Since the actual word shame sometimes occurs in Top40 lyrics, even in titles, one might think the emotion of shame is being represented. However, “Ain't It a Shame” and similar phrases do not actually refer to emotion. A similar phrase “What a shame!” occurs in everyday conversation, but it is without specific emotional content, since the same meaning can be conveyed by “What a pity!” In modern societies, direct references to the emotional meaning of shame are infrequent.

The song “Shame is the Shadow of Love” (2004) is a rare exception, written and performed by the English punk-rock singer P.J. Harvey:

I don't need no rising moon
I don't need no ball and chain
I don't need anything with you
Such a shame, shame, shame
Shame, shame, shame
Shame is the shadow of love

You changed my life
We were as green as grass
And I was hypnotized
From the first 'til the last
Kiss of shame, shame, shame
Shame is the shadow of love

I'd jump for you into the fire
I'd jump for you into the flame
Tried to go forward with my life
I just feel shame, shame, shame
Shame, shame, shame
Shame is the shadow of love

If you tell a lie
I still would take the blame
If you pass me by
It's such a shame, shame, shame

Although shrewd and attractive, this song never made it to the Top40, even in England, and probably never will, since it is explicit about shame. It implies that feelings of shame inevitably accompany genuine love. This song names the emotion that so many songs hide, and hints at its close association with love.

Shame as the Shadow of Love

This lyric refers to heartbreak, the pain of being left by one's lover. But unlike other heartbreak lyrics, this one does not suggest grief or anger. Rather it openly refers to shame as the emotion that is causing suffering. Cleverly, the song also uses the word shame in a vernacular way, "It's a shame."

The main emotional risk of loving may be not only the desperate grief of dramatic loss. The song by Harvey recognizes shame, as well as grief, as the main emotions in romantic relationships. Shame is the shadow of love. This observation may point to the answer to a difficult question concerning emotional pain. How can it be experienced as unbearable?

This quotation provides a hint.

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 (Kaufman 1996, p. 46). Italics added; see also Kaufman and Raphael 1984; Scheff 1984.)

Although Kaufman didn't expand on the idea of "shame about shame," it suggests an explanation of unbearable emotional pain. The idea that one can be ashamed of being ashamed implies that shame, particularly, can loop back on itself, amplifying the original feeling with no natural limit, a chain reaction.

The predicament of persons who blush easily provides an illustration. Students who blush easily when they are embarrassed have told me that whatever the source of the original feeling, their blush further embarrasses them; they become acutely self-conscious. Although the reaction may stop after only one loop, some of them have experienced lengthy cycles of continuing self-amplification. Indeed, I once heard the actor Ian Holm recounting an incident that got out of hand. During a rehearsal, he began blushing because of mistakes he was making in his lines. The more self-conscious he became, the more he blushed, ending in paralysis to the point he had to be carried off stage.

A shame-shame loop can become a doomsday machine, leading also to lethal endings as well as paralysis or other types of withdrawal and silence. The psychiatrist James Gilligan (1997) spent many years as a prison psychiatrist. He noted that all of the most violent of the prisoners were also imprisoned in shame:

The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence... The different forms of violence, whether toward individuals or entire populations, are motivated (caused) by shame. (pp. 110-111).

It is important to know that in all his writing, Gilligan was referring to a certain kind of shame as causing violence. He called it secret shame: the violent prisoners were ashamed of being ashamed, it was unmanly. Helen B. Lewis introduced a similar idea (1971) based on her study of emotion episodes in psychotherapy sessions: shame caused trouble when it went unacknowledged. A recent study of 211 cases of family killings (Websdale 2010) strongly supports Gilligan's theory.

Managing Shame

To end this discussion, I will very briefly indicate what I consider to be the steps toward managing shame so that it doesn't cause disaster. It follows from the discussion of secret or unacknowledged shame above that the first step would be to reveal one's shame, rather than hiding it. This one step would probably avert the recursive loops of shame about shame.

The second step is less obvious. Once shame has been acknowledged to self or self and other, what would be the best way of resolving it? This idea has two parts (Scheff 1979, 183-203). The first is freely talking about the feeling of shame, sometimes at great length. The second step, which may come quickly or only after much talk, is laughing about the incident. Deep humiliation, particularly, often requires a great deal of talk about the shameful events before one can see the humor in them.

It is important to note that a particular kind of laughter is required to resolve shame. I call it a good laugh, parallel to a good cry. It must be involuntary, and directed at self (Silly me!). Laughing at others is usually an expression of ridicule and anger, rather than a resolution of shame. I have seen many instances of good laughs in my classes on emotion, by asking students to tell the group about their most embarrassing moments. Many of the students get so convulsed with laughter that they can hardly finish the story.

Unfortunately, the hiding of shame in song lyrics provides a language for the listeners that can help them deny their own shame and that of others in real life. This practice seems to both reflect and reinforce the denial of emotion in the larger society.

In pop song lyrics, emphasis on extreme situations and disguising shame ignores the many subtle emotional risks that accompany even requited love. For example, whether the relationship is short or long, loving someone more, even slightly more, than they love you can give rise to shame. Another possibility is that in loving another person, one becomes more susceptible to their disdain.

Jealousy is one obvious example of the risks involved in loving. The slightest hints of detachment can trigger it. For example, you and your lover are talking to your friend at a party about a film all three of you have seen. For a few seconds, you notice that your lover and your friend are making eye contact with each other as they excitedly talk about the film, more than with you. You feel excluded, if only briefly, but enough to trigger your jealousy. For that brief period, you feel intense pains of betrayal by your lover, and anger, even hatred, toward the friend.

In the same situation, if you are very secure in your relationship, you probably wouldn't feel jealousy. However, it might still be painful. Being excluded from eye contact can evoke momentary shame, no matter how secure the relationship.

Close relationships can be much more comforting, but also much more upsetting than other relationships. Most Top40 pop songs provide an idealized and therefore unrealistic picture of love. It is portrayed as a safe haven from all pain, which it is not. It both protects from and generates emotional pain.

Conclusion

This essay has briefly explored the shame world in modern societies, with examples from the lyrics of pop songs. It seems that shame is largely hidden, and that the act of hiding is profoundly damaging to individuals, groups, and our whole civilization. Some suggestions for bringing shame into the open are briefly discussed.

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