

Alienation and Hidden Shame: Social-Emotional Causes of Conflict

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Abstract: It is possible that war and peace in modern societies are driven by social relationships and emotions, but in a way that is mostly hidden from sight. Modernity leads to alienation between individuals and nations and to disguising basic emotions, especially shame. As a result conflict can be caused by sequences in which the hiding of humiliation leads to vengeance. This essay outlines a theory of the social-emotional world implied in the work of C. H. Cooley and others. Cooley's treatment of overt shame is clear, but it only implies hidden shame and the link to alienation. Drawing also on Ervin Goffman, Norbert Elias, my own work and that of others, this essay proposes that interaction between alienation and secret shame can lead to feedback loops (spirals) with no natural limit: shame about shame is only the first step. Emotion backlogs can also feedback when emotional experiences are avoided: avoiding emotion to avoid stored pain leads to more stored pain. To the extent that these propositions are true, our civilization is in grave danger unless fundamental changes occur. The last section outlines some preliminary steps toward change.

Theories of the rise and fall of civilizations seldom consider the social-emotional world: the interplay between social relationships and basic emotions like grief, anger, fear and shame. They focus instead on the material world, behavior and thought. The sociologist Norbert Elias (1939) was a heroic exception: over hundreds of years of European history, his work shows that shame was becoming increasingly important, but, paradoxically, it was also becoming invisible. Even today, few general approaches focus directly on the social-emotional world. Many consider it only indirectly, in a way that continues to hide shame and alienation.

Apparently Elias's description of the invisibility of shame was all too accurate, even when applied to his own work. In the seventy two years since the publication of TCP, there have been few responses to his hidden shame thesis: my essays that focus on Elias, and the very powerful study of family violence by Websdale (2010), that refers to the entire literature on shame (See also Lacey 2009). Indeed, most of the hundred or so citations of TCP don't mention shame at all. Those that do make no comment about it or its significance.

All three of my essays (1992, 2001, 2004) promote Elias's shame thesis, yet there has been only one response (De Haan 2011), which, like Websdale, is quite recent. In the indexes of the two Elias readers (Salumets 2001; Quilley and Loyal 2004), except for my chapters, shame is listed in only one other chapter. The mention in the 2001 chapter is only in passing, and I could find no mention on the page (36) listed in the 2004 reader. Most scholars, like the public, continue to uphold the taboo on shame.

The taboo is also implied in the many studies of shame that do not use the forbidden word at all. Instead, the focus is on one of the many shame cognates (Retzinger 1995, lists hundreds). These substitutes serve to hide the underlying unity of the various terms. One way of hiding shame is to behaviorize it: there are many studies of feelings of rejection, loss of social status or, as in two of the titles below, search for recognition. For example, Rosen's 2005 book on the causes of war mentions anger and fear, but not pride or shame. As a substitute, "status attainment" is suggested as a cause of war.

Finally, there is a last gasp hiding that involves only the title of a volume: shame/humiliation is clearly the central thesis in the actual texts, but it does not appear in the title: Smith's 2006 study of globalization, Lindmann's 2010 study of the causes of war and his edited volume (2011, with Ringmar) on the politics of recognition. Moisi's (2009) volume has humiliation in the subtitle, but it is only one aspect of the central thesis.

I don't know why shame doesn't appear in the titles that use recognition instead, but in the first case, the publisher refused the word humiliation in the title. Although the taboo on shame may have weakened slightly in the last year, it still exerts a powerful influence. This essay will outline a theory that can be used to explain this taboo and its lethal effects.

Cooley's Contribution

The development of a general theory of alienation and shame begins with two sentences by C. H. Cooley:

- A. "We live in the minds of others without knowing it." (1922, p. 208)
- B. "[The self] seems to have three principal elements:
 1. The imagination of our appearance to the other person
 2. The imagination of his judgment of that appearance
 3. Some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or [shame]." (1922, 184)

The first seven words of the first sentence (A) propose a social theory of mind. G. H. Mead seems to have built his idea of role-taking and theory of society on this idea (Wiley 2011). However, Mead ignored the last two words ("without knowing it). In terms of a general theory of modernity, Mead's omission of this part turns out to be highly significant.

Sentence A describes the basis for all social relationships, sentence B, the idea of the looking glass self, the way in which these relationships give rise to pride and shame. Without referring to Cooley, Goffman (1967) added a further step to the looking glass self, his extensive development of the concept of impression management. We seldom passively accept shame generated by the looking glass self, but actively try to avoid it. If it can't be avoided, we try to manage the shame, rather than simply accept it as our lot. Management sometimes leads to a fifth step not developed by Goffman: the kind of complete hiding that leads to withdrawal or aggression (Scheff 1994; 2011), as will be discussed below.

Alienation in Modern Societies

There is one way in which Cooley's and Goffman's comments relevant to the looking glass self are exactly parallel. Cooley provided only a few concrete examples, yet they all concern shame rather than pride. Goffman provided many, many examples of impression management, but few if any of genuine pride. Why the omission?

Though neither Cooley nor Goffman name the kind of civilization they analyzed, it is clearly the current one, a modern, rather than a traditional society. Perhaps modernity gives rise to the single focus on shame. If relationships in modern societies are examined closely, most tend toward alienation, and therefore to the ubiquity of shame.

Modern societies are built on a base of individualism, the encouragement to go it alone, no matter the cost to relationships. Persons learn to act as if they were complete in themselves and independent of others. This feature has constructive sides, but it has at least two destructive ones: alienation and the hiding of shame. Before continuing with this point, it will be necessary to discuss the meaning of key emotion terms.

An emphasis on rationality is one of two key institutions of modern societies. The other is the suppression of the social-emotional world in favor of thought and behavior. One of the many outcomes of this suppression is that emotion vocabularies in modern languages are ambiguous and misleading, in order to hide alienation. For example, in the English language, love is defined so broadly that is often used to hide disconnection (*Women Who Love too Much*). There are also many ambiguities, confusions and obfuscations in the meanings of both shame and pride.

Pride and Shame

Ambiguity is obvious in the case of pride, since dictionaries and usage assign two contradictory meanings. The first meaning is negative: pride is interpreted as egotism. (“Pride goeth before the fall”). When we say that someone is proud, it is likely to be condemnatory: the person thinks too highly of self. This kind of attitude should be called false, rather than genuine pride.

The second meaning is positive: a favorable view of self, but one that has been earned. This kind of pride is genuine, authentic, justified. However, even adding these adjectives doesn’t completely eliminate the negative flavor. In English language usage, the word pride is often tainted by its first meaning, no matter how impressive the justification. The word pride by itself is usually taken to mean false, rather than genuine pride.

Individualism also causes confusion over shame, but it is considerably more complex than the mere confounding of opposites that occurs with pride. The primary confusion is the practice of leaving out the social component that arises from the looking glass self: viewing ourselves negatively because we are viewed that way by another person or persons.

Both in vernacular and scholarly usage, shame typically is assumed to be only an internal matter, condemning oneself. But the looking glass self contains both the internal result and the external source. The typical definition of shame in

psychological studies is being dissatisfied with self. Cooley's usage includes this part, but also the social component, imagining a negative view of self by others as the source of shame.

Cooley's idea of the social source of shame and pride suggest that these emotions are signals of the state of a relationship. Whatever the substantive issues, the general issue is the state of the bond: pride signals a secure bond (connectedness), shame a threatened one (disconnect).

Alienation in Discourse: Automation of the Ego

Before continuing with the social functions of shame it will be necessary to take up a primitive issue implied by Cooley's sentence A: how can we live in the mind of others without knowing it? Individualism has already been suggested as one cause. Perhaps we tend to ignore our voluminous role-taking activities because they are reminders that individuals are inevitably linked to others.

The dogma of individualism is probably a part of the answer. But there may also be, in addition to conscious dogma, a much more compelling and hidden reason also, one that evolved out of dialogue. In modern societies, individuals in conversation have come to expect exceedingly quick responses to each other and are apt to be unforgiving about repetition.

Understanding human languages, as opposed to the instinctive vocabularies of other mammals, is made possible by role-taking. In actual usage, human language is highly fragmented and incomplete: most commonly used words have more than one meaning and depend on context. For these reasons, understanding is virtually impossible without role-taking. One of the great advantages of living in the mind of others is being able to take their point of view momentarily during a conversation. In this way, one can imagine the meaning of their comments from their point of view and not just from one's own.

Role-taking in conversation appears to occur at lightning speed, so fast that it disappears from consciousness at an early age. How could we not know we are role-taking? Children learn so early and so well that they forget they are doing it. The more adept they become, the quicker the movement back in forth, learning through practice to reduce silences in conversation to near zero. A study of recorded conversations (Wilson and Zimmerman 1986) can help us understand how the forgetting is possible.

Their study analyzed nine minute segments of adult dialogues in seven conversations (seven pairs of different people). In these segments, the average length of silences varied from an average of .04 to .09 seconds. How can one possibly respond to the other's comment after less than a tenth of a second of silence?

Apparently one needs to begin to form a response well before the other person has stopped speaking, involving several separate channels in the mind. That is, humans are capable of multiprocessing, in this case, in perhaps five different channels: listening to the other's comment, imagining its meaning from the speaker's point of view, from own point of view, forming a response to it, and imagining the other person's interpretation of the response being formed.

Within and between each channel there are probably movements back and forth as the incoming information is considered. All channels appear to be incredibly active simultaneously.

The implication is that in modern societies, if one is to respond quickly enough, one must split one's attention into at least five parts. The length of silences is undoubtedly greater for small children learning this drill. Perhaps by early grammar school, most children have obtained sufficient speed. If a child takes long to respond, undesirable interpretations may be put upon the wait. "What are you, stupid or something?" Or "Don't you believe me?" and other taunts.

Self and Ego

Acquiring a human self depends on role-taking: the ability to see one's self as another might, as well as from the inside. There is a problem with this process in modern societies, however. In order to be instantly responsive, a dominating part of the self, the ego, may become mostly mechanized. How can one listen to a comment, imagine the others' point of view, decide one's own point of view, and produce a response that allows less than a tenth of a second silence? It seems that such facility would require an internal machine that is largely automatic. It would be based, in large part, on already prepared responses, rather than forming an exact response to the particular person and moment.

Automatized responses might call on an inner library of hundreds or even thousands of stock words, phrases, or sentences, rather than exploring all possibilities. Our inner observer, the deep self, is capable of providing a unique response to each unique situation. But such a response would require giving the other person undivided attention in order to understand their full meaning. Suppose the minimum processing in the other four channels necessary for an exact response would take at least a full minute. In taking a minute, you would be slowing down your response time by a thousand fold (60/.06 seconds).

However, it may not be possible for most people to slow down their responses even if they want to. The ego can be viewed as a machine, composed largely of ready-made elements. Ego responses, therefore, are usually as much or more about self than other or the situation. This idea implies a deep alienation arising out of discourse. Even intimates, to the extent that their discourse arises from mechanized responses, would usually find it difficult to fully understand each other.

An obvious example of a stock response would be "Well!" or "Uhh," to gain time. But since there is next to no time for the further response either, what usually occurs is also stock, perhaps a saying, or a favorite phrase, or phrases that he or she knows are the other's person favorites, or some more complex response that is still mostly constructed from available stock. Couples can often get laughs by responding to each other with puns, lines from pop songs, or punch lines from favorite jokes: "You bettah off." "Can't hurt, either." "Can I see that map again?" and so on.

No doubt most responses are more complex. They probably involve some on-the-spot construction, but still are partially tangential. Most people seem to have a line they take with particular people and situations that persist, regardless of changes in the other person or situation. My father, for example, took an authoritative line with my mother, brother and I, and we took a submissive line with him, even after my brother and I were out of his direct influence. Knowing ahead what to expect from the other person, and from ourselves, even approximately, would be considerable help in keeping silences near zero.

The ego can be envisioned as that part of the self that is mostly automated. The self is made up of the automated part and the part that can respond to situations de novo, the deep self. It appears that the ego is in charge almost all of the time, even during dreams. (Lucid dreams would be an exception). The difficulty that many people have with learning to meditate could be caused by the domination of the ego. Meditation involves restraining the administrative ego to allow time for the deep, witnessing self. Effective meditation moves toward being able to observe own ego at length, as well as acting it out. As will be discussed below, this ability seems to be the key to dealing with difficult emotions.

There are several studies of traditional societies that suggest that their discourse is not only different from that of modern societies, but might be taken as opposite to it. Here I will discuss one of them, the study of discourse by aborigines in Australia by Liberman (1985)*. Although he does not measure the structure of silences directly, it is clear from his comments and the examples of discourse in groups that the pace is much, much slower than in modern societies, and much more oriented toward mutual understanding than individual expression (p.19 ad passim).

One striking indication of the slowness of pace and orientation toward mutual understanding in group discourse is the practice of responding to a comment by merely repeating it, which occurs quite frequently. Another is what Liberman names “calls for consensus,” which also occur frequently. These practices are clear indications that social relationships are far more important than speed and also individual expression.

Another more subtle indication is that in the aboriginal language, the word for listening also means thinking (p.15). This double meaning suggests that even individual thinking in this group is social: one thinks by listening to others. Indeed, this usage comes close to Cooley’s first thesis: we live in the minds of others. Unlike the denizens of modern societies, these traditional people seem to know it.

Having compared modern and traditional dialogue in terms of alienation and solidarity, we can now move to emotion management in modernity.

Losing Control: Emotion/Alienation Loops (Spirals)

Normal emotions like grief, shame, fear or anger are not powerhouses. They are merely bodily signals that alert us to loss, disconnect, danger or frustration. They are also brief, usually a matter of seconds. A car barreling toward us on the freeway stimulates an instantaneous shock of fear, but it usually doesn’t outlast the danger. What could give rise to feelings of fear that persist, or reactions so powerful as to lead to stampedes in a theatre fire, or so painful as to lead to silence and depression?

*I am indebted to Wayne Mellinger for calling this study to my attention.

My own interest in this question began long ago in connection with teaching the social psychology of emotions. When we discussed embarrassment and blushing in the larger classes, there were usually one or two students who complained that their blushing sometimes made them miserable. They explained that when they became aware that they were blushing, they would be further embarrassed about their blushing, no matter the cause of the first blush. Often the same students implied that their blushing about their blush was not only lengthy and painful, but also often seemed out of their control.

This comment by a 20 year old female student provides an example:

I often blush when I receive a compliment. On one occasion a friend praised my smile. I immediately felt a blush. Then my friend said "Oh, you are blushing!" I said "Yes, I can feel it!" We both laughed and my blush went away. On some occasions my blush feels as if it will be eternal.

With these kinds of observations as background, I was struck by a story told by the noted actor Ian Holm. On one occasion he had muffed his lines, but when he became aware that he was blushing, he blushed more. The more he became embarrassed by his blushing, the more he blushed and the more embarrassed. This process went on, he said, until he ended paralyzed in the fetal position, requiring that he be carried off the stage.

Holm's story points to an emotion process that is mostly internal, implying that emotion about emotion loops might have no natural limit. This idea is also suggested by the student's comment above, when she states that her blushes sometime feel that they may be eternal. Audience members in a theatre fire could become afraid because they are afraid themselves, and they see other audience members afraid, resulting in loops within and between persons causing more fear, that would generate a stampede. Road rage could arise because one person feels humiliated by another driver's actions, angry that he feels humiliated, and angry that his opponent has become angry, leading to further anger, and in some cases, violence. Emotional reactions to emotional reactions, under conditions to be discussed below, may result in chain reactions.

The idea that persons can be so ashamed that they keep their shame secret suggests a shame loop, being ashamed that one is ashamed. Or, to continue with the topic of road rage, a shame/anger loop, being angry that one is ashamed, and ashamed that one is angry, and so on. One driver may experience the behavior of another driver as insulting. This driver is likely to shout "Idiot, you cut me off!" rather than say to himself and/or to the other driver: "I feel disrespected and ashamed." Rather than acknowledging, and therefore feeling shame, he hides it behind anger. Acknowledgment is usually the first step toward resolving intense emotions.

The idea of a chain reaction may help to understand Gilligan's (1997) otherwise puzzling theory of shame as the basic cause of violence, based on his experiences with violent men as a prison psychiatrist.

"The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence..." (110)

Gilligan is referring not to shame in general, but to a specific kind:

"Shame is probably the most carefully guarded secret held by violent men... (112)

Gilligan states that secret shame is the cause of violence. Secrecy implies the first loop: one is ashamed of being ashamed. Gilligan goes on to describe how secret shame can cause extremes of pain:

The degree of shame that a man needs to be experiencing in order to become homicidal is so **intense and so painful that it threatens to overwhelm him and bring about the death of the self, cause him to lose his mind, his soul, or his sacred honor.**" (112).

The awesome destructive power of secret shame might be explained by a feedback chain. Being ashamed of being ashamed is the first step. The stories about blushing above suggest that such loops can go further, being ashamed, being ashamed of that, and ashamed of that, and so on. Or shame in a loop with anger: angry that one is ashamed, ashamed that one is angry, and round and round. The idea of an unending emotion loop seems to explain how shame, fear, or other emotions might become too powerful to bear and/or control.

There are several studies that suggest that shame/anger, even when the anger component is not obvious, can be so painful and controlling as to lead to murder and suicide. The clearest examples are Websdale's (2010) cases of familicide (the killing of one's spouse and one or more of the children) in the US over the last 50 years. The study shows that most of the killers seemed driven by secret shame.

Websdale's study is large, detailed, and systematic. He found evidence of intense shame in almost all 211 cases. This type of murder is a multiple killing, but usually enclosed within a single family. (In a few of the cases, however, bystanders were also killed.)

All of Websdale's cases except the very early ones contained many, many details about each case, obtained not only from media reports, but also police records and often actual interviews with persons who knew the family. Most of these sources were available to Websdale through the Domestic Violence Fatality Review movement, a sizable group judging from the many persons acknowledged by the author.

The author patiently sifted through these materials in order to understand each case separately. Judging from my own reactions, this part of his study must have required considerable emotional fortitude on his part: a review of highly detailed material from over 150 tragedies, one after another.

Websdale's findings strongly support Gilligan's idea that violence is caused by shame. However, in addition, Websdale discovered that that most of the killings took two seemingly different forms: the livid coercive hearts, and the civil reputable hearts. The first type of violence, a majority of the cases, is clearly parallel to the commonsense idea of violence exploding out of rage.

The second type is quite different, involving killers with no history of violence whatever, and clearly and quietly premeditated, sometimes during lengthy periods of time. The idea of a type of premeditated violence turns out to be quite important in several ways, but particularly in understanding collective violence.

The theory outlined here, like Gilligan's and Websdale's, proposes shame as a causal agent, but also has a social component, alienation, equally important. When these two components interact without limit, the stage is set for either withdrawal or extreme violence. Fortunately for the survival of the human race, withdrawal seems to be by far the most frequent reaction.

Anticipation of loss of control and/or unbearable pain might lead people to avoid emotions entirely. This kind of avoidance also may have still another kind of looping effect: emotional backlogs. The more avoidance, the more the bodily buildup of emotional tension. The more backup, the greater the pain that is anticipated, which can lead to an avoidance loop.

Isolation and Feeling Traps

A theory of violence requires a way of explaining the extraordinary, indeed unlimited force and loss of moral and other inhibitions that produces violence in our civilization. In this section, two main kinds of recursive loops will be considered: a social loop of rejection/isolation on the one hand, and a shame loop, a feeling trap (Lewis 1971), on the other.

The idea of a rejection/isolation loop is straightforward. Being or even just feeling rejected by a group leads toward alienation, and the more alienated, the more likely further rejection, a spiral. This process is social rather than psychological, although it is related to shame-based loops, because rejection and isolation are the basic causes of shame.

There is one complexity about isolation that will be considered. Some multiple killings were committed by two persons, not one. We are tempted to say that in these cases, the perpetrators were not completely isolated, since they at least had each other. This issue will be discussed below by considering a second kind of alienation other than isolation, engulfment or fusion. It can be argued that the pairs of killers were just as alienated as the isolated ones, but in the engulfed mode of alienation.

The part played by emotions in violence is more complex. It seems to be based on shame, but the kind of shame that goes unnoticed and unmentioned. Helen B. Lewis, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, used a systematic method (Gottschalk and Glaser 1969) to locate emotion indicators in many transcripts of psychotherapy sessions (Lewis 1971). She found that shame/embarrassment was by far the most frequent emotion, occurring more than all the other emotions combined. Her findings suggest that shame/embarrassment, unlike pride, joy, grief, fear, or anger, was so frequent in the many sessions she studied that it almost always seemed to be unnoticed.

In addition to this study, there is another one that suggests that episodes of unacknowledged shame are frequent occurrences, yet don't result in violence. Retzinger (1991) showed that in the filmed marital quarrels of four couples, all 16 angry escalations she found were preceded by an insult that was not acknowledged. She showed that in each instance the insult generated a triple spiral of shame, anger and isolation, one spiral between the partners, and one within each of them, but there was no violence.

As indicated, Lewis (1971) found that the frequent occurrences of shame were virtually never mentioned by patient or therapist. The episodes involving other emotions, such as sadness, fear, or anger, were often referred to by either patient or therapist or both. However, in almost all of the instances of shame/embarrassment/humiliation, neither patient nor therapist referred to it. She called the unmentioned instances "unacknowledged shame."

She went on to note 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, 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 can rapidly become angry when ashamed, and ashamed that one is angry. She called the result "humiliated fury." She found many word-by-word instances of episodes in which unacknowledged shame was followed by either hostility toward the therapist or withdrawal. In her examples of the latter, withdrawal takes a form that she called depression. She refers to the shame/anger/withdrawal sequence as shame and anger "short circuited into depression" (1971, p. 431 and passim). In a later chapter (The Role of Shame in Depression over the Lifespan, 1987, pp. 29-49), Lewis reviewed many studies by other authors using various measures that showed strong correlations between shame and depression.

Lewis's references to the kind of shame that leads either to withdrawal or to anger always involved unacknowledged shame, a term quite parallel to Gilligan's secret shame. Neither Gilligan nor Lewis, however, sufficiently explained why it is this particular type of shame that leads to trouble.

The explanation, it turns out, is not simple. What their work implies is that when shame is kept secret, or unacknowledged, there is little chance that it will be resolved. How is shame ordinarily resolved? Although this question is rarely addressed explicitly, it seems to me that both authors seem to assume that normal shame is resolved through verbal means and through humor. However, in the case of intense humiliation, lengthy verbal or at least cognitive consideration might be needed before any humor can be found in the offending incident.

In many of my classes, I have asked students volunteers to tell the class about the most embarrassing moment in their lives. Invariably some of the volunteers, during the course of their story, become convulsed with laughter. Often these same students tell me afterwards that the public telling touched not only the embarrassment from the particular incident, but also shame from other incidents that apparently was also unresolved, a backlog of shame.

It appears that when shame is not resolved, it can build up a backlog of hidden shame. When there is considerable backlog, then any new incident is felt in itself, but also seems to reactivate the backlog, making the new incident, even if seemingly trivial, extremely painful. Even without the spirals to be described below, backlogs of shame can lead to trouble.

The case of John Silber, as described in Milburn and Conrad (1996), provides an example of the link between suppressed shame and anger in a public setting. Silber is the ex-president of Boston University, and was a powerful conservative force in Massachusetts politics. His approach to political issues is a prime example of the politics of rage. As Milburn and Conrad (1996) suggest, it was an outburst of rage during a TV broadcast on the eve of the election that seemed to cost him the race when he ran for governor.

In an earlier interview, Silber stated that his sixth grade teacher laughed at him for wanting to be a veterinarian, since Silber had a withered arm. When the interviewer asked him how he felt about being laughed at, Silber replied that he wasn't humiliated, it made him stronger. This episode can be interpreted to mean that Silber's rage as a person and as a politician might have arisen from the suppression of shame.

Emotion Spirals

Lewis's idea of humiliated fury as a feeling trap can be a first step toward a theory of the emotional origins of either withdrawal or extreme violence. Since none of the therapy sessions she studied contained physical aggression, she didn't consider the kind of feeling traps that could

result in violent aggression, on the one hand, or long lasting or total withdrawal (as in clinical depression).

Lewis described feeling traps as emotion sequences. The sequences described by Lewis involve at most three steps, as in the case of the shame/anger sequence short-circuited into depression. It will be necessary, however, to go beyond three steps, even as far as an endless spiral. Such a process would be a doomsday machine of interpersonal and inter-group withdrawal or violence. The combination of isolation and denial of shame can lead to self-perpetuating loops that generate either complete withdrawal or extreme violence.

Some emotion sequences may be recursive to the point that there is no natural limit to their length and intensity. As already indicated, blushers provide an everyday example: some who blush easily tend to become embarrassed that they are blushing, leading to more intense blushing, and so on. This feeling trap would not be a shame/anger spiral, but rather shame/shame: being ashamed that you are ashamed, etc.

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 to the extent that they rule out all other considerations. Collective panics such as those that take place under the threat of fire might be caused by shame/fear spirals, one's own fear and that of others reflecting back and forth can cause still more fear, leading to a triple spiral: a spiral within each person, and a spiral between them.

Although Lewis didn't consider the possibility, depression might be a result not only of a shame/anger spiral, but also shame/shame, or a combination of both. Judging from her own transcriptions, withdrawal after unacknowledged shame seems to be much more frequent than hostility toward the therapist.

The less frequent shame/anger spiral, humiliated fury, or a shame/shame spiral with the anger hidden, might be basic causes of violence to the extent that they result in self-perpetuating loops. A person or group caught up both in alienation and in a shame-based spiral might become oblivious to all else, whether moral imperatives or danger to self or to one's group. Limitless quarrels or withdrawal can be generated by a triple spiral: shame/anger and/or shame/shame spirals within each party, and an isolation spiral between them.

It is conceivable that shame spirals could be a predominant cause of violence, with shame/anger playing only a hidden part. This might be the case in killings that are carefully and lengthily premeditated. Shame spirals and shame/anger spirals could be equally involved, as will be discussed below in a consideration of collective violence.

Perhaps the idea of a spiral of social alienation might be a more general way of referring to Gilligan's second and third conditions, the absence of socially acceptable ways of avoiding shame, such as high status, and the inability to feel love, guilt or fear. Feeling completely forbidden by other persons/groups can dominate all other feelings.

Recursion of Emotions and Alienation in Killers

It has been suggested that recursive thinking is unique to human beings, differentiating their mental processes decisively from other species (Corballis 2007). The theory presented here proposes that recursion of feelings, feeling about feeling, would also differentiate humans from other species, and explain episodes of depression or rage of extraordinary intensity and /or duration.

Gilligan's explanation of the way in which secret shame leads to violence is largely metaphorical, as already indicated:

The degree of shame that a man needs to be experiencing in order to become homicidal is so **intense and so painful that it threatens to overwhelm him and bring about the death of the self, cause him to lose his mind, his soul, or his sacred honor.**

The model of recursive loops explains how laminations and spirals of shame could lead to pain so unbearable as to feel like one is dying, or losing mind or soul.

Alienation

The idea of two types of alienation, mentioned earlier, in connection with killings done by two persons jointly will be further considered here. The founder of family systems theory, Murray Bowen (1978), distinguished between two kinds of dysfunctional relationships, engulfment (fusion) when the bond is too tight, and isolation, when it is too loose. In engulfed relationships, one or both parties subordinate their own thoughts and feelings to those of the other(s). In true solidarity, each party recognizes the sovereignty of the other, but balances respect for the other's position with respect for one's own, no more and no less.

Elias's (Introduction, 1987) discussion of the "I-self" (isolation), the "we-self" (engulfment) and the "I-we balance" (true solidarity) makes the same point. Elias proposed a three-part typology: independence (too much distance), interdependence (a balance between self and other), and dependence (too little distance).

Engulfed relationships are alienated because at least one of the parties gives up vital parts of the self in order to be loyal to the other party. That is, one or both parties are alienated from self, in service to the other. In this kind of relationship, the kinds of negotiations that can be called upon by two independent parties are lost. All of the pairs of killers that I have examined seem to have been alienated in this mode. One person dominates the other. This was certainly the case of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold in Columbine. Eric completely dominated Dylan, and Dylan idolized Eric (Larkin 2007, pp. 144-148).

Clearly a majority of the cases have involved killers who were male, but female killers are not unknown. One example was mentioned above, the post office employee who killed 6 and herself. A recent school killer, Amy Bishop, a neurobiologist at the U. of Alabama, is another (NY Times, Feb. 13, 2010). In the U. S., overall women represent only a small proportion of killers. Why men? Perhaps men are less likely to acknowledge shame than women, since most men learn early that emotions other than anger are not considered manly¹. The discussion below of the difficulties in attracting male students into my class on emotions/relationships is relevant.

For the theory to be generally applicable, a further problem needs to be engaged. Why do certain people and groups end up in cybernetic loops of alienation and shame, but not others? Most individuals and groups in modern societies probably fail to fully acknowledge much of their isolation and shame/embarrassment/humiliation. The key may lie in the issue of fullness of acknowledgment.

¹ There are many studies that show men to be much less involved with emotions than women. Several books on alexithymia (emotionlessness) don't discuss gender directly, but most of the case studies are men. Salminen, et al (1999), used an alexithymia scale. They found evidence for emotionlessness in almost twice as many men as women.

Lewis (1971) and other shame researchers have considered acknowledgment only as a dichotomy, yes or no. Perhaps even a slight degree of acknowledgement avoids continuous recursion. Persons and groups that manage to stamp out acknowledgment of shame and alienation would then be on the path of endless recursion, and therefore to withdrawal or violence

Collective Violence

Multiple killings occur at the collective level also, in the form of gratuitous assaults, genocides and wars. The individual and interpersonal emotion spirals would be the same, but there would also be a recursive process between media and people, as suggested below.

The origins of World War I can serve as an example. The differences that divided the countries that fought this extraordinarily destructive war might have been negotiated, had there been last-minute negotiations to avoid war. But there weren't. Historians have so far been unable to explain the causes of this war.

My book on the politics of revenge (1994) proposed that social scientists have been looking in the wrong places. The basic cause of the war, I argued, was not economic or *real politic*, but social/emotional. The German and French people seem to have been caught up in alienation and shame spirals. The French defeat by the Germans in 1871 led to national desire for vengeance. The French leaders plotted a war for over 40 years, including a secret understanding with Russia for the purpose of defeating the Germans. (For a more recent and broader discussion of emotions, revenge, and conflict, see Frijda 2006, Ch. 7)

Media and Masses²

In France during the period 1871-1914, the role of mass media in both generating and reflecting collective humiliation and anger is quite blatant. The French public and its leaders experienced their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), and the Treaty of Frankfurt, which ended the war, as humiliating (Kennan, 1984, Sontag, 1933, Weber, 1954).

Going against Bismarck's warnings (he feared revenge), the Germans had annexed two French provinces (Alsace and Lorraine). Revenge brought about through the return of the two lost provinces, *revanchisme*, became the central issue in French politics of the whole era.

Leading political figures such as Gambetta and General Boulanger talked about revenge openly in their campaigns (Boulanger was known in the popular press as "General Revenge.") Vengeance against Germany was a popular theme in newspapers, magazines, poetry and fiction.

Revenge themes were common in the popular literature of the time. The poetry and novels of that era serve as examples. The war poems of Deroulede, *Chants du Soldat* (Songs of a Soldier, 1872) were wildly popular. Here is a sample stanza (quoted in Rutkoff, 1981, p. 161):

Revenge will come, perhaps slowly
Perhaps with fragility, yet a strength that is sure
For bitterness is already born and force will follow
And cowards only the battle will ignore.

Note that this poem not only appeals to the French to seek revenge, but also contains a coercive element. In the last line, anyone who might disagree with the poet's sentiments is labeled a

² This section summarizes part of Chapter 6 of Scheff (1994).

coward. There are many other instances of appeals to vengeance, honor, and glory in the other poems: these are the main themes. By 1890 this little book had gone through an unprecedented 83 editions, which suggests that it had a vast audience.

The extraordinary acclaim that greeted Chants du Soldat (Soldiers' Songs) prompted Deroulede to publish further books of similar thrust, most of them devoted to military glory, triumph and revenge. For example, in 1896 his Poesies Militaires (Military Poetry) continued in the same vein. The following is a representative stanza:

French blood! -- a treasure so august
And hoarded with such jealous care,
To crush oppression's strength unjust,
With all the force of right robust,
And buy us back our honor fair...

Although revenge is not mentioned explicitly, the last line implies what might be called the honor-insult-revenge cycle (Scheff and Retzinger, 1991).

Also indicative of open *revanchism* was the rash of novels about the plight of Alsace and Lorraine under German occupation, which became popular in the 15 years preceding WWI. The best-known author of this genre, Maurice Barres, published two: In the Service of Germany (1905) and Collette Baudoche (1909). These books, like many others of their ilk, were not works of art, but "works of war," to use the phrase of Barres' biographer (Boisdeffre 1962).

Websdale's idea of a type of multiple killer who not acting in a fit of rage, but carefully and with considerable planning seems to be applicable to wars like WWI. The ruling emotional spiral is not shame-anger, but shame-shame. A person or a nation can become so lost in a spiral of being ashamed of being ashamed that it becomes the dominant force in their existence, as it seems to have been in the French nation 1871-1914. The violence that results is not because of loss of control, but submerging the inhibitions that prevent killing. In an eerily prophetic letter to Ruge in 1843 about nationalism, Marx wrote: "...if a whole nation were to feel ashamed it would be like a lion recoiling in order to spring." (Tucker 1978).

The alienation loops in the case of collective violence are more complex than those of persons in two different ways. The first way has already been mentioned, the loop that develops between the media and the public. The second complexity is that a double type of alienation develops between the contending groups: isolation between the groups (too far) and engulfment within them (too close). My earlier study (1994) named this double type of alienation bimodal, and proposed that it is a necessary condition for aggressive wars, that is wars that don't involve self-defense.

The idea of bimodal alienation has already been discussed with respect to pairs of multiple killers, suggesting that just as they were isolated without, they were engulfed within. This idea might help understand the type of multiple killing that Websdale called civic respectable, a spouse calmly killing a spouse and one or more of the children. In ordinary terms, it seems difficult to understand any killing, but especially a parent who would kill his or her own children. The theory presented here suggests the possibility that the civil reputable parent who kills is so engulfed with his family, and so isolated without, that he or she projects his own unbearable emotional pain on the family members. If that were the case, the killer would think that he or she is helping by ending their pain.

The philosopher of emotions Robert Solomon suggested a parallel but much broader idea: “**emotionworlds**.” For example, he compares the loveworld to the angerworld. The **loveworld** (1981, p. 126) is “woven around a single relationship, with everything else pushed to the periphery...” By contrast, in the **angerworld** “one defines oneself in the role of the offended’ and someone else...as the offender. [It] is very much a courtroom world, a world filled with blame and emotional litigation...” Perhaps in the **shameworld** of the civic reputable killer, where the family receives nothing but insults and rejections, life is not worth living. It may be that Solomon omitted a significant part of the motivation: in social and emotional loops the pain generated can be so overwhelming that life seems worthless.

Films and Courses

This section will outline a course on emotions that could be made available to everyone: both students and non-students. The shape of this course is based on my own experience in teaching emotions. To bring attention to the new courses, films could be made for public broadcast, as discussed below.

I have been teaching emotions/relationships classes to undergraduates for many years. My intention was to help students discover their own emotions. The course uses discussion, rather than lectures. Basically we talk about the student’s real life dialogues, the most difficult of them, what they might mean in emotions terms, and how they might do better.

The first step was to get men into the course. If the course title included the word emotion or relationship, men would not enroll. So when I named the class “Communicating,” a few men would show up. The next step was to have male and female students register for different classes. They then discover that these classes meet in the same place and time. Before I hit upon this device, women, quick to enroll, would grab most of the seats. Under the new method, men can dawdle but still find a seat.

The last problem was to keep the men’s eyes from glazing over when we started discussing emotions openly. After many attempts, I finally found a solution: explain that emotions are like sex. It needs to be said only once to draw the men back in.

There are two crucial ways in which emotions are like sex. At its best, sex involves cooperation between two partners. The point can then be made that exploring emotions within and between two people is much broader than sex, since it doesn’t require a romantic relationship. It can happen between any two persons. Exploration of emotions can be done alone, but is more effective in pairs, whether in romantic, family, friendship, psychotherapy, or even educational settings.

The second way that emotions are like sex is not at all obvious. In fact, it is necessary to go out on a limb to make the point, since there is no agreement among experts. I propose that emotions are also like sex in the sense that they are bodily processes that can be resolved through a climax, parallel to the idea of orgasm. The emotion of grief can serve as an example. (As is often the case with emotion words in English, other words are also used to designate what seems to be the same emotion: sadness, sorrow, inability to mourn and so on). I try not to use the idea of catharsis, which is actually valid, because experimental psychologists have mistakenly dismissed it.

We now know that unresolved grief is quite common among adults. How does grief get resolved? Through mourning. But this answer isn't specific enough, because it doesn't explain the specifics of mourning. What is necessary in mourning if it is going to resolve grief?

Suppose that the feeling of grief arises out of bodily preparation to cry. A state of grief or sadness occurs when the body prepares to cry, but actual crying is delayed. Grief counselors are often told by their clients that they are embarrassed by crying, even in therapy. Most people have a long history of unresolved grief.

Another frequent complaint is that outside of therapy their intimates, after a week or two, become impatient with their mourning. If, as suggested here, a "good cry" resolves unresolved grief, most people don't have much opportunity for resolving grief, except in therapy. Even there, sometimes other matters are given precedent. Mourning has many components, of course, but it appears that to resolve grief, both men and women must have good cries. Men find it hard to resist the idea that crying is the orgasm of grief.

My courses based on these ideas have always been highly successful over the forty years that I have taught them. Students often comment that everyone probably needs such a course. Many of the male students learned to cry, although not necessarily in public.

Films for the Public

Films could be made to interest the public. One type of film would use actors, portraying the best and most productive episodes in actual classes. This kind of film would represent an idealized image, since real classes are apt to wander at times. But the dramatized version might interest the viewers in enrolling in a class, or at least seeing a documentary of a real class.

In schools, these courses need not begin as late as college, but could begin early in grammar and high school, then in universities and professional schools. Most of the students who enrolled in my classes were profoundly ignorant of their own emotions and the social-emotional world, but they were quick to learn.

Summary

1. Shame can be dangerous only when it is hidden, as it almost universally is in modern societies. Because it is hidden, it becomes ubiquitous.
2. Hidden shame and alienation, in conjunction, are the main causes of both withdrawal and violence.
3. Feedback loops of shame, shame/anger, and alienation give rise to the extraordinary power of violence.
4. Feedback loops are also produced by avoiding emotions: avoidance gives rise to backlogs of emotion that get larger and more frightening the larger they grow.

These four processes, in combination, are threats to the continued existence of our civilization, unless steps are taken to reduce their power. One approach would be to teach classes on emotions for both students and adults. One such class is outlined.

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