

## Responses to Elias's Work on Shame

Some scholars have argued that shame is a secret in modern life:

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 1989).

This note proposes that response to two of Norbert Elias's books (1939; 1989) needs to be linked to the idea of a taboo on shame. The index of the first book (TCP) shows hundreds of pages on which the words shame, embarrassment or closely related terms appear. Although there are well over a hundred citations of these two books, only two seriously consider Elias's shame themes (Scheff ; Lindner).

### Elias on How Shame Became Unspeakable and Invisible

The idea that shame is kept secret in modern societies was demonstrated in Elias's monumental study The Civilizing Process (1939, in German, 1978 in English). Over the last five hundreds of years of European history, Elias analyzed etiquette and education manuals in five different languages. Two of his key themes involve shame; 1. As physical punishment decreased, shame became increasingly dominant as the main agent of social control. 2. As shame became more prevalent, it also became almost invisible because of taboo.

The following excerpt gives the flavor of Elias's study. It is from a nineteenth-century work (von Raumer 1857) that advises mothers how to answer the sexual questions their daughters ask:

Children should be left for as long as possible in the belief that an angel brings babies..... If girls should later ask how children come into the world, they should be told that the good Lord gives the mother her child..."You do not need to know nor could you understand how God gives children." It is the mother's task to occupy her daughters' thoughts so incessantly with the good and beautiful that they are left no time to brood on such matters.... A mother . . . ought only once to say seriously: "It would not be good for you to know such a thing, and you should take care not to listen to anything said about it." A truly well brought-up girl will from then on feel shame at hearing things of this kind spoken of. (1978:180)

Elias first interprets the repression of sexuality in terms of hidden shame:

An aura of embarrassment...surrounds this sphere of life. Even among adults it is referred to officially only with caution and circumlocutions. And with children, particularly girls, such things are, as far as possible, not referred to at all. Von Raumer gives no reason why one ought not to speak of it with children. He could have said it is desirable to preserve the spiritual purity of girls for as long as possible. But even this reason is only another expression of how far the gradual submergence of these impulses in shame and embarrassment has advanced by this time. (1978:180)

Elias raises a host of significant questions about this excerpt, concerning its motivation and its effects. His analysis goes to what may be a key causal chain in modern

civilization: denial of shame and of the threatened social bonds that both cause and reflect that denial.

Considered rationally, the problem confronting him [von Raumer] seems unsolved, and what he says appears contradictory. He does not explain how and when the young girl should be made to understand what is happening and will happen to her. The primary concern is the necessity of instilling "modesty" (i.e., feelings of shame, fear, embarrassment, and guilt) or, more precisely, behavior conforming to the social standard. And one feels how infinitely difficult it is for the educator himself to overcome the resistance of the shame and embarrassment which surround this sphere for him. (1978:181)

Elias's study suggests a way of understanding the social transmission of taboo. The adult teacher, von Raumer, in this case, is not only ashamed of sex, he is ashamed of being ashamed. The nineteenth-century reader, in turn, probably reacted in a similar way: being ashamed, and being ashamed of being ashamed, and being ashamed of causing further shame in the daughter. Von Raumer's advice was part of a social system in which attempts at civilized delicacy resulted and continue to result in an endless chain reaction of hidden shame.

Elias understood the significance of the denial of shame to mean that shame goes underground, leading to behavior that is outside of awareness:

Neither rational motives nor practical reasons primarily determine this attitude, but rather the shame (scham) of adults themselves, which has become compulsive. It is the social prohibitions and resistances within themselves...that makes them keep silent. (1978:181; emphasis added)

Like many other passages, this one implies not only to a taboo on shame, but the actual mechanisms by which it is transmitted and maintained.

This study has been widely proclaimed as a masterpiece. However, those that praise and/or use it don't seem to have noticed that a central thesis concerns shame. In Elias's subsequent work, shame was never mentioned again. This tactic is particularly striking in his study *The Germans* (1996). One of the central ideas is that the spell that Hitler cast over the German people arose out of shame: they felt humiliated by losing WWI, particularly by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler helped them hide their shame behind anger and aggression. But in proposing this theory, Elias did not use the word shame. The index contains neither shame nor humiliation.

The index refers to the central thesis indirectly, under the heading of "the experience of defeat," which itself is found under the heading of "decivilizing processes," pp. 320-321. The word humiliation occurs only once, on page 320. Perhaps this indirectness was one of the reasons that my 1994 book's explanation of Hitler's political power in terms of shame/revenge didn't cite Elias's similar explanation.

Surely Elias wasn't surprised by the response to TCP, since he had predicted it, by implication.

Elias, Norbert. 1939. Über den Prozess der Zivilisation). Reprinted in 1979 as The Civilizing Process in two volumes: 1 The History of Manners. 2 Power and Civility. London: Blackwell.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1996. The Germans. London: Polity. (Originally published in German in 1989)

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Scheff, Thomas. 1992. Rationality and Emotion: Homage to Norbert Elias. Rationale Choice Theory, James Coleman (ed).

\_\_\_\_\_ 1994. Bloody Revenge: Emotion, Nationalism and War. Westview (Reissued by iUniverse 2000)

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| 2001 | Unpacking the Civilizing Process: Interdependence and Shame. | <u>Norbert Elias and Human Interdependencies</u> . Thomas Salumets, (Editor). McGill University Press. |
| 2004 | Freud, Elias and Goffman: Shame as the Master Emotion        | <u>Norbert Elias: Current Issues</u><br>Stephen Quilley and Steven Loyal (Editors).                    |