THE MEANING OF SHAME:
TOWARD A SELF-AFFIRMING IDENTITY

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Shame becomes inevitably bound up with the process of identity forma-
tion which underlies man's striving for self, for valuing, and for meaning.
The experience of shame is a fundamental sense of being defective as a
person, accompanied by fear of exposure and self-protective rage. The
shame-inducing process involves one significant person breaking the inter-
personal bridge with another. Original shame inducement occurs prior to
language development; it is precipitated by parental failure to respond ap-
propriately to a child's needs and by parental anger toward the child. The
process of restoring the severed interpersonal bridge enables one to tran-
scend shame and begin to develop a self-affirming identity.

The first time I encountered the concept
of shame, it seemed an enigma. Only gradu-
ally has it come to hold much meaning for
me, and this partly grew out of the work of
other writers (Lynd, 1958; Tomkins, 1963),
as an outgrowth of therapeutic work with
clients, out of collaboration with colleagues
(Bassos & Kaufman, 1973), and through
deepening awareness of the shame dynamic
which operates ever so subtly in even the
healthiest of human interactions.

The experience of shame is inseparable
from man's search for himself. The search
for true relatedness with others and for
answers to the question "Who am I?" is
central to our experience as human beings.
The need for a secure, self-affirming identity
that provides both continuity and meaning
to the paths we travel lies at the core of each
of us. Identity is a sense of self, of who one

is and who one is not, and of where one
belongs. It is a sense of inner centeredness
and valuing.

All too frequently the search for identity
becomes embattled and may lead a person
to struggle on hopelessly, to assume a
partial identity, or to give up entirely. We
might conceive of our life task as human
beings in terms of a process, a process of
becoming a separate person. By separate, I
mean separate from parents' expectations,
peer norms, and societal pressures. Admit-
tedly, the task of evolving a uniquely per-
sonal identity remains a difficult one. The
process begins early in life and probably
never ceases. It either is facilitated or inter-
fered with by others.

The Inner Experience of Shame: Defective-
ness and Fear of Exposure

Shame has been one of the least known
and understood dimensions of human experi-
ence and is paradoxically one of great
significance (Erikson, 1963; Lewis, 1971;
Lynd, 1958; Piers & Singer, 1953; Tomkins,
1963). Part of the reason for this stems from
the lack of words in our language that
clearly identify shame experiences. Various
clinicians, theorists, and writers have hold of
some aspect or other of shame, but few have
been able to apprehend it fully. Concepts

[1] The author is indebted to B. Sue Jennings,
and especially to Bill L. Kell (Personal communi-
cation, 1972, 1973) whose understanding of shame
has enabled me to grasp most fully its significance
in both human development and the counseling
process. Since Kell died before publishing his own
ideas, I have incorporated some of them in this
paper in order that his important contribution to
the understanding of shame not be lost.

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such as feeling inadequate, inferiority feeling, or worthlessness are well known, for these frequently embrace the core conflict for many individuals who experience problems in living. The concept of shame provides a way of integrating and understanding many such related phenomena.

Experiences of shame must be differentiated from feelings of guilt, since the two concepts are so frequently confused. Guilt is a feeling you have when you have done something wrong. You know *what* you have done, and you know what to do to make up for it. Feeling guilty can be a way of doing penance with the fantasy of magically bringing about something hoped for. "If I punish myself and suffer, then I'll get what I want." Feeling guilty also can be a way of seeking to control the actions of others. "If I show how much I suffer, then they'll feel badly and do what I want." Shame, however, is not a feeling in the way anger, sadness, joy, or guilt are feelings. Neither is it a magical hope nor an attempt to control others. Shame is the experience of being fundamentally bad as a person. Nothing you have done is wrong, and nothing you can do will make up for it. It is a total experience that forbids communication with words.

Tomkins (1963) described the shame experience this way:

If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation. Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes of the world a vale of tears, yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man. While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul. It does not matter whether the humiliated one has been shamed by derisive laughter or whether he mocks himself. In either event he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth [p. 118].

Individuals are uniquely different and so their own internal experience of shame differs as well. One bright fellow I worked with always had experienced himself as a stupid person. For him the word "stupid" expressed most fully his distorted sense of self and uniquely captured his experience of shame,

of being somehow defective. While this underlying sense of defectiveness usually remains unconscious and all too frequently accompanies repeated shame experiences, the resulting discomfort to the person is painfully conscious.

Yet another dimension of shame is an intense fear of exposure, of having one's badness seen by others. Such exposure of self is intolerable because of the underlying sense of being irreparably and unspeakably defective which somehow separates one from the rest of humanity. This fear of exposure prevents escape from the loneliness of the shame experience, because one cannot express the inner pain and need.

I am reminded of an incident from my youth. I had just returned from visiting a nearby county fair. Filled with eagerness and desire to share my adventures, I ran across the street to a friend's home. I was told that my friends were playing in their bedroom. I grasped the door and pushed it open, even more expectant as I approached. Before I could get out the words, "Guess where I have just been?," I was met with hard stares and words that still echo inside: "Don't you know you should knock before you come in!" The door was slammed shut in my face. I stood there for a few moments, stunned, paralyzed by my sudden exposure. I remember turning about and blindly rushing out of the house. I waited outside and refused to come back in or talk about it later.

Even opening oneself up to joy and wanting to share it can, by another's response, somehow leave one absorbed with self-doubt. To have our basic expectations about the world suddenly exposed as wrong induces both shame and fear of further exposure. In the incident just described, I had opened myself to needing another's response to my joy but was unexpectedly met with blame for something tangential to my need.

Who we are internally is a deeply private experience. Risking exposure of self can leave us feeling enlarged or lessened, stronger or self-doubting, and on the path either toward a self-affirming identity or toward a shameful one.

The Shame-Inducing Process: Breaking the Interpersonal Bridge

Shame experiences usually begin with sudden self-consciousness, evolve into painful scrutiny of oneself, and culminate in deep inner feelings of torment which generally remain private and uncommunicable. While shame, whether in childhood or adulthood, disrupts both intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning, the cumulative impact of shame depends on the nature of such experiences over time. At the most disruptive extreme, shame interferes with the ongoing process of identity formation to the extent that the individual fails to establish a secure, inner base. He feels himself to be a shameful person, which becomes his identity, albeit a fragmented and unsatisfying one. At the least disruptive extreme with respect to shame's impact, shame may become an inevitable experience whenever one's needs are not responded to appropriately by a significant other. Whenever someone else's caring and respect begin to matter to us, the possibility for generating shame emerges. In saying this, I am aware that I am linking shame dynamically to interpersonal interactions—to a specific kind of interpersonal interaction.

The basic way in which shame is generated involves one significant person breaking the interpersonal bridge with another. This notion of interpersonal bridges may be at first confusing and unclear. Yet I consider this concept central to an understanding of the workings of shame, as well as of other psychological processes.

Relationships form when one person actively reaches out to another and establishes emotional ties. The process is one of creating a bond. The emotional bond that ties two individuals together is the interpersonal bridge between them. Such a bridge involves trust and makes possible experiences of vulnerability and openness between individuals. The bridge becomes a vehicle to facilitate mutual understanding, growth, and change. These processes are disrupted whenever that bridge is broken.

The interpersonal bond between individuals can be severed emotionally and the bridge broken without ever seeking actually to end the relationship. This emotional severing between people in an ongoing relationship is dynamically most relevant for inducing shame. The impact of shame increases profoundly when the relationship between the individuals concerned is of central importance to them. The potential for disruptive consequences of shame is greatest in the early childhood years, especially so when shame is experienced in relation to the persons who are most important in the young child's world, the parents.

If two individuals become bonded together, how and why would one of them sever that bond in such a way as to leave the other with a sense of being somehow not quite good enough? People do not necessarily behave consciously or maliciously in such a manner to one another. Well meaning people, however psychologically sophisticated they may be, nevertheless behave in ways that have unintended impact. Parents frequently seek to shame their children into good behavior without full awareness of the potential consequences of their actions. More often, shame is an unsought by-product of human interactions that are at times so subtle as to go unnoticed; yet the aftermath can be profound.

Shame and Rage: The Need That Went Unnoticed

I would like to further elucidate the shame-inducing process by way of example. A sequence of events, originally discerned by Bill Kell (Personal communication, 1972), takes place whenever a need is not responded to appropriately. To make this process most applicable, consider a truly sound relationship between a father and his son. The father has come home from work, is tired, and wants some time for himself. His son rushes up expectantly, wanting to show his dad something new he has mastered. Dad is too tired to attend and fails to notice. This is by no means an uncommon occurrence, nor should it be otherwise. However, let us enter the child's experience for a moment. The boy needed recognition of his achievement, and his father neither provided

for that need nor responded in a way that acknowledged it while also communicating that father's needs had to come first. Responding appropriately does not necessarily mean gratification of the need, but it does mean openly acknowledging it in some way. Failure to respond appropriately to a need breaks the interpersonal bridge and starts a chain of events that produces shame.

In the boy's experience, his need went ignored and then began to convert into a bad feeling. Since the father, as all parents, is seen as infallible, the son is left feeling that he is bad. "If I'm not bad, then my need would have been met"; or "If there wasn't something wrong with my need, it would have been responded to." Five minutes later, the father realizes that his son must have needed something, perhaps since he's gone off to his room alone. The father now tries to approach his son, but the child reacts with rage. Because the interpersonal bridge is broken, the child now fears both exposure of his badness and exposure to yet another occurrence of shame. Thus, he is trapped into remaining in his shame, unable to approach on his own. He must be approached first, yet he reacts with rage to any approach, an impossible situation for both father and son.

Rage is different from anger. Rage protects the self against further exposure and further experiences of shame by both insulating the self and actively keeping others away. Anger directly invites contact in order to get one's needs met. The boy's rage is likely to induce shame in his father through the same process. A pattern of escalating rage can result, with each participant blaming the other as a way of protecting himself against exposure. What started out as a seemingly innocuous interchange ends up in a raging battle that neither person wants yet feels helpless to stop.

The vicious cycle of shame and rage can be avoided. In approaching the boy, the father has to acknowledge being late, thereby saying, "*I* was late in recognizing what you needed. I'm *not* infallible, it wasn't all *your* fault." Simply saying to the boy, "Son, I guess you needed something from me and I was too wrapped up to notice then; sorry I'm late" would accomplish what is needed. Through openly acknowledging that he also had something to do with it, the father can restore the interpersonal bridge between them and thereby enable the boy to move beyond his shame. Certainly, he will harbor some resentment and hurt feelings but will no longer feel that something is wrong with him as a person.

Failure to respond appropriately to another's need can occur in a variety of ways. Not attending to the need obviously is a most innocuous one. More pernicious ways are at our disposal, and these all seem to involve disparagement, humiliation, or some transfer of blame. In our story, the father might have heard the child's need but, feeling badly himself about being so exhausted, jumped back at the boy with something like, "You always pester me just when I get home! Can't you wait till later!" An even more disparaging message would have been, "When are you going to grow up and stop asking me to look at everything you do!"

Degrees of hurtfulness and the consequences in terms of shame vary accordingly. One shame-inducing experience does not launch a child on a path toward a fragmented identity; the pattern of experiences within a significant relationship over time carries deepest impact. Parents do not have to be perfect, to respond appropriately always, and to live in fear of what might otherwise result. Relationships are restorable, however impaired they may have become. Mistakes in a relationship need not be feared and, in fact, can become growth experiences for the persons involved.

Early Parental Anger: Severing the Emotional Bond

In exploring the role anger plays in shame inducement, let us again consider the parent–child relationship. Assuming at least some degree of adequate early mothering, the first occurrences of parental anger inevitably and powerfully must disrupt the child's sense of security and well-being. Such expressions of anger sever the interper-

sonal bridge. Parental failure to restore that bridge following expressions of anger toward a child is a primary generator of shame. In particular, failure to respond to requests for holding in the midst of parental anger can lead to direct association of the need for physical contact with shame and later to eventual repression of the need altogether.

Asking to be held at such a cataclysmic moment in the young child's life is the only way he has to affirm himself, to find out for certain through his own actions that he is still loved and wanted, to affirm his own value and well-being. That knowledge and security can come only through physical contact for the preverbal child. Repeated denials of the request for holding gradually confirm one's defectiveness and may result in a complete cessation of the child's asking to have his needs met.

Asking to be Held: The Self-Affirming Capacity

Asking to be held serves a fundamental biological need, the need for touching (Montagu, 1972). Gradually, beliefs and feelings about oneself begin to emerge from experiences of physical contact. The kind and quality of that holding form the earliest sense of self and lay the groundwork for a later secure, self-affirming identity. But much happens between those first experiences of holding and the time of mature adulthood.

When a parent is angry yet responds directly to the child's spontaneous request for holding, howevermuch it goes against the grain, this powerfully reinforces the self-affirming capacity within the child which lies at the heart of a secure identity. This capacity enables a child or any psychologically dependent individual to become autonomous, separate, and no longer dependent on the evaluations of others for his own sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

If shame lies at one extreme of the process of identity formation, a sense of inner well-being and open self-acceptance that embraces both pride in oneself and humbleness in relation to the world lies at the other (Lynd, 1958). Even more important than pride is the capacity to affirm oneself. Pride

and belief in oneself can be shaken by blame, judging, or criticism from significant others. Such messages, however well-intentioned, nevertheless convey the sense that one is not quite good enough as a person. And when such external messages are absent, they can be generated from within. One is always susceptible to shame.

Being able to affirm oneself especially in the face of significant defeat, failure, or rejection enables one to continue feeling whole, worthwhile, and valued from within. Only the realization of this self-affirming capacity, latent within all of us, can prevent internalization of shame and ensure a separate identity.

Striving for Perfection: Compensating for Being Defective

Related to the self-affirming capacity is a basic valuing of individual differentness and uniqueness. Much that transpires between people frequently has a contagious quality. Feelings transfer interpersonally from one to another (Kell & Burow, 1970; Sullivan, 1953). We have all had experiences of coming into contact with a friend who is excited and joyful; the contact makes us feel more elated and happy than we were previously. The same process occurs for other affects, especially anxiety.

In a similar fashion, beliefs, values, and thinking that are appropriate for one individual may transfer to another without that person ever considering their appropriateness for him. This happens through a series of internal processes that go something like, "He thinks it's important to have lots of friends. I don't have lots of friends. Maybe I should."

Shamefulness requires that awareness of difference between self and other become translated automatically into a comparison of good versus bad, better versus worse, and so on. Rather than valuing that difference, we feel obliged to stamp it out and strive instead for perfection, that last hope of making up for our basic underlying sense of being defective.

Through having our own unique differences valued by significant others, we begin to value them in ourselves. Once we do so,

not only do we come to know who we are, but we also, and equally importantly, come to know who we are *not*. An open recognition and acceptance of who we are not is essential to withstand interpersonal contagion and to continue to experience ourselves as fully separate individuals. Separate implies different; separate also implies valuing in ourselves and others those things about us which make us different. Only when we can stop trying to be all things do we become free to be who we are, and only as we move beyond shame and toward self-affirmation can we begin to relinquish this striving for perfection.

Restoring the Interpersonal Bridge: Beyond Shame and toward a Self-Affirming Identity

How then to facilitate the growth process? How to enable an individual to work through a core belief of not being good enough as a person, to emerge from an imprisoning identity infused with doubt, shame, and fear to one that is freeing? Attempts at either ignoring those core beliefs, convincing him otherwise, or trying to rid the person of them backfire. Such attempts deny the reality of those feelings and thereby engender shame about having them in the first place.

If denial of the validity of shame feelings is not helpful (saying "There's nothing wrong with you"), then what is? What needs to happen in approaching a person who carries much shame is an open validation of those feelings. Shame has to be approached, not avoided, denied, or tampered with. When the young man who came to me for counseling began describing himself as stupid, I said to him, "You are stupid." He looked at me quizzically for a moment, wondering if I really believed he was stupid or if I was understanding that his core belief was real for him. Then he said, realizing my meaning, "All my life, people have been telling me I'm not stupid when I knew I was. You're the first person not to do that." In effect I was saying to him, "Yes, I see your shame, your feelings of stupidness and worthlessness, and I'm neither afraid

nor ashamed to approach." In this way, I began restoring the interpersonal bridge.

Shame generates out of visual experiences (Erikson, 1963, pp. 251–254). When a person suddenly is enmeshed in shame, the eyes turn inward and the experience becomes totally internal, frequently with visual imagery present. The shame feelings and thoughts flow in a circle, endlessly triggering each other off. The precipitating event is relived internally over and over, causing the sense of shame to deepen, to absorb other neutral experiences that happened before as well as those that come later (Tomkins, 1963), until finally the self is engulfed. In this way, shame becomes paralyzing. Attempts to understand or work through the experience while it is yet active serve only to embroil one deeper into shame. One solution is to deliberately, consciously stop focusing outwardly, in particular, to become visually involved in the world. This breaks the shame cycle and allows those feelings and thoughts to gradually subside. Later, the shame experience can be explored in order to understand more fully what had happened.

From Shame to Self-Affirmation: The Process in Summary

The shame-inducing process involves severing the interpersonal bridge. Etiologically, the primary shame-inducing experiences occur within parent–child relationships and typically prior to language development. Hence, shame experiences lie at the core of the self and are usually inaccessible to verbal description. We lack the words for shame as adults precisely because we never had those words in the earliest shame-inducing experiences. In this regard, the handling of the first occurrences of parental anger is crucial to whether the child is launched on the path toward shame. What happens in subsequent parent–child interactions continues to either confirm or disconfirm the shameful self.

Shame is generated in children mainly about those aspects of self that the parent continues to experience shame for in himself or herself. If a father was rejected by his own dad and experiences being defective as

a result, he will very likely and unconsciously behave in ways toward his son that repeat the pattern. Even if nothing overt is done, the father's sense of shame itself may transfer. If a mother felt unwanted by her parents, she may subtly prohibit her son from getting close to her father; the interference induces shame and thereby reenacts the drama. In such ways, shame is recycled and passed on from generation to generation.

Even though the aftermath of shame can be severe, the way to a self-affirming identity yet lies in the deeply human capacity to be fully restored, in the knowledge that one individual can restore the interpersonal bridge with another however late it may be and in the awareness that human relationships are reparable. Through such restoring of the bridge, shame is transcended. The significant other who was involved in the original shame-inducing experiences need not be the one who must restore the bridge. Someone new who later becomes significant, friend, colleague, or therapist, can become that person.

We carry with us always the deep emotional impact of shame, and yet when someone deeply valued risks his own exposure to become vulnerable and openly acknowledge his imperfect humanness, his part in making us feel shame, we are carried beyond shame. The growth impact of having someone take that risk with us is far greater than if he or she had never triggered off a shame experience in the first place. Severing the interpersonal bridge when it is followed by restoring that bridge is the healing process itself, the growth process. This is the process that helps someone go beyond shame and move toward a self-affirming identity.

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