

## SHAME AND SOCIAL CONTROL

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In *Childhood and Society* Erik Erikson lists stages of emotional development from birth on by naming attitudes that are acquired at each stage. For each stage he lists the most positive attitude in contrast to the most negative one, showing that as we grow up we maintain an underlying layer of attitudes according to the emotional outlook we have developed at each stage. For instance the first stage is "trust versus mistrust." In TA terms we would say that if an infant is adequately stroked and cared for, his Child will have an underlying tendency to trust -- a basic OKness about self and others in contrast to an underlying layer of mistrust.

Actually, of course, most individuals develop with a certain proportion of both tendencies in accordance with the early stroking they have received. In other words, most of us trust ourselves and others under certain circumstances, and we are mistrustful under other circumstances; but the point is still that each one of us operates in accordance with a certain basic underlying attitude on the trust/mistrust continuum, and that this basic attitude gets established very early in childhood.

The same is true about the next stage, which Erikson calls "Autonomy versus Shame or Self-Doubt." This stage occurs approximately at age two and, again, a child proceeds on to the next stage either with a basic sense of autonomy (I prefer to call it self-confidence in this context) or with basic

self-doubt and a tendency to feel ashamed about all kinds of feelings and behaviors. This would then establish a propensity for over-adaptation. Here again there is a continuum: when grown, we might have self-confidence in some areas, and feelings of self-doubt and shame in others.

The phenomenon of shame -- that is, the human capacity to *experience* shame -- deserves further attention. First, it may be useful to distinguish between shame and guilt. As is implied by Erikson's stages, developmentally shame is a much more primitive emotion than guilt, and, as such, it has physiologically built-in components that guilt does not have. The experience of guilt is often a racket that hides resentment. Even when the guilty feeling is not rackety, it can be articulated by means of intellectual and verbal explanations. When someone feels "guilty" he is usually ready to talk at length about *what* he feels guilty about. Not so with shame. When he feels ashamed, the first reaction is physiological. He blushes, he perspires, his heart beats faster, his breathing changes, he has circulatory and other bodily changes that temporarily *inhibit* speech and/or action or explanation. To feel ashamed is to have a psychosomatic reaction.

A simple experiment will prove this point. Just use your Parent ego stage and suddenly yell, "Shame on you!" at a group of people who are listening to you. A large proportion will immediately experience

physical reactions, even though you will not have named a cause for shame, nor will anyone be able to specify *what* they suddenly felt shamed about! These reactions occur because the capacity to feel shame exists physiologically from the age of one to two years — i.e., from a period in life that pre-dates reason and the operation of the Adult ego state. After age two, the Spooky part of the Child ego state continues to carry a receptiveness to shaming; it can be activated more or less according to how much shaming occurred in early childhood. Responsiveness to shaming exists in all of us. It is the degree and the *content* that differ with each individual and with each culture. It is through our capacity for experiencing shame, even more than through our capacity for fear or our need for stroking that we adapt to Parents, the Higher-Ups, and all of their taboos.

An interesting aspect of shame is that even though it is a primitive reaction, like fear, it is only human children who respond to shaming, whereas fear is a response that all animals share in relation to the instinct for survival.\*

Why is it that human children, in particular, respond to shaming even more than to realistic danger? For a possible explanation we must look at still another human tendency, and that is the insatiable curiosity and adventuresomeness of the Spunky Child.

As has been shown elsewhere<sup>1,2</sup> the Spunky Child takes dangerous risks in the service of exuberant creative explorations, risks no young animal would take. A human

child will wander off and might get hurt or lost unless controlled. Nowadays, chances are parental control is exerted by supervision or physical limitation such as keeping the child in a playpen, etc. But what of earlier times when humans roamed about as tribes with many small children in tow?

The Eskimos offer a clue: The very first time a young child's foot slips through thin ice, the family gathers around him, pointing, laughing, teasing — in effect, shaming him at this very young age for an innocent mishap. Thereby, long before he is old enough to recognize the realistic danger of crossing a lake with thin ice, the Eskimo child learns absolutely not to do so; to dare risk slipping through ice is bad, shameful, the worst thing that can happen, regardless of whether the slip is big or small, and the child is effectively prevented from so doing for the rest of his life. Instant perception about whether the ice on a lake will hold him or not becomes "second nature." It begins to operate with a power comparable to an inborn instinct for survival.

In effect, the process of shaming instills a special fear — a fear sometimes facetiously referred to as "the fear of God" — and it functions alongside, or sometimes instead of, the instinct for self-preservation possessed by other animals. The items to potentially feel ashamed about are experienced as threatening to survival at a time when the individual's Adult is not yet capable of accurate assessment of realistic danger. It is no coincidence that figures of speech in our language reflect the imagined connection between shame and death: "I was so ashamed, I thought I'd die." "I thought I'd sink underground from embarrassment." (Embarrassment is a euphemism for shame.) For the Eskimo child the fear of shame lest he slip through the ice may have a life preserving function and may indeed be the only way in which a total tribe can develop

\*Dogs and some higher primates are possible exceptions. And even in these cases it may be argued that the typical "tail between the legs" behavior following wrongdoing is more representative of a fear of punishment by a human master than of an inherent capacity for shame, as is discussed in this paper.

the capacity for all the necessary travel. But even in this example, it is at the price of the child's having internalized a specific message of *control* from his family and culture. So shaming has the function of adapting the child to the family's civilization, for better or worse.

In our culture, a two-year-old might be shamed for wanting to play with faeces or wanting to urinate on the livingroom carpet. (This would be called an "accident," the same word used in a deathly occurrence.) Worse, a two-year-old might be shamed for ways of behaving that might later on be most appropriate — for instance, talking to a stranger or to a kid from across the tracks, playing with the "wrong toy" (a doll for a boy, a toy engine for a girl), and so on. So a grown American might feel, rather irrationally, that "I'd rather die" than function in ways that his Adult might otherwise actually endorse. What we have been shamed about sits in the Spooky Child with *the force of an instinct about life and death*.

The more a young child is shamed, the more adaptive he becomes to the rational and irrational expectations of his caretakers. Also, the more items and areas he is ashamed about, the more the Spunky Child's general creative drive will be inhibited. We must remember that the Spunky Child operates with expansive curiosity, and that shaming operates as a way of inhibiting, limiting and controlling this expansiveness. If a person has had much shaming as a child, then later, when he is grown-up, his Child ego state will respond with physical panic to overt or covert shaming in here-and-now transactions. When this panic occurs he may turn to his internal Parent. In one individual the result may be excessive functioning out of a Critical Parent ego state; in another individual, the Parent might clobber the internal Child and the result might then be

excessive inhibition of the individual, almost to the point of paralysis. In the case of someone who has experienced intensive shaming the latter reaction is the most likely, and this individual thereby becomes extremely vulnerable to here-and-now control by other people's Parents or by society's standards, however arbitrary they may be.

The above has enormous implications for treatment. Shame messages are internalized in  $P_1$  (the Spooky Child) and they operate in addition to and in combination with injunctions and attributions. It is the "shame" messages that often represent cultural scripting, sometimes very harmful cultural scripting, even from parents who are otherwise basically benevolent to the growing child. The harm is that "shame" messages get absorbed within the physiology of the child's "total being" and they operate even more compellingly because they are internalized so early in life.

For instance, many harmful sexual inhibitions behind frigidity or impotence have their roots in "shame" messages regarding bodily functions, nudity, and explorative curiosity that were internalized at the two-year-old level.

I will elaborate elsewhere on diagnostic techniques related to identifying an individual's "shame button" as I call it — i.e., the area where each one of us can be blackmailed and controlled into over-adaptation — and I will also discuss treatment techniques that operate to offset the response to "shame pressure." For now let us note that often simply identifying the feelings and behaviors we feel most ashamed about and confronting them with Adult examination — our own and that of others — can reduce much of the inner agony and incapacity to develop self-confidence/autonomy and, ultimately, intimacy. The modern liberation movements seem to have

arrived at comparable insights in regard to oppressed groups.

*Psychological acceptance of oppression occurs because of vulnerability to shame.* Find what I'm ashamed about, and you can control me! And this can be done non-verbally, by innuendo or by ulterior transaction.

"What, you want *charity*?" (You should be ashamed of being poor or needy; be "poor but proud," i.e., ashamed of poverty, and hide it so I can feel smug and comfortable.) "I've met some nice . . . er . . . colored . . . people." (I'm sure you're ashamed of not being White.) "Fairy!" (Be ashamed of being different from me) And last, but not least: "Shameless hussy!" (How dare a woman be sexual, only men are entitled to sexual wants. — see Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.)

Liberation movements have intuitively recognized that they must confront culturally transmitted shame messages, and thereby their members are becoming less vulnerable to subtle negative social control. Nowadays, good slogans have been developed that are antidotes to shame. "Black is beautiful!" (Let's stop avoiding the word black as though black is "bad" and "shameful" in contrast to white.) "Wear a Gay Liberation button!" (Come out of the shame closet!) Even by ridicule, such as bra-burning, liberation movements announce that their members now want to look at the "cover-ups" they were using before in deference to certain archaic "accepted" standards of social control.

As a woman, I am becoming more and more aware of the manner in which women have been shamed into submission throughout the centuries and the manner in which shame is still controlling many of us internally and externally, myself included. Example: It is shameful for a woman to be aggressive or competitive, which are fine

attributes for a man in our society, and I try to tone myself down in such areas lest I be shamed by a man calling me too aggressive or competitive or whatnot. Not only have women been shamed in a manner comparable to other low-power groups; their oppression has been compounded by their being taught, often by well meaning parents, that shame is a particularly fitting attribute for girls and women. The synonyms used have been words like "coy," "demure," "modest," or "shy." To blush with embarrassment is "cute" and "pretty." Individual women have been shamed whenever they rejected a "woman's role" although the definition of this role was modified, often in opposite directions, with each class and society. In fact, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English<sup>4</sup> have demonstrated that even within the same period and in the same society the appropriate identity for a lower class woman was to be an 18-hour-a-day work-horse, whereas the right identity for an upper class woman was to be a useless toy. Thus, in the same household, a maid might feel ashamed of "giving in" to exhaustion, while her mistress might feel equally ashamed of the opposite — i.e., feeling listless with inaction.

Shaming has even operated around the most important normal female biological functions. In most societies women hide when they are pregnant and until recently even in America a pregnant woman would not have shown herself in a swimsuit. Few women dare nurse their babies in public for shame of baring their breasts. The Spanish word for pregnancy is "embararazo" — a word that is also used to signify "embarrassment"; so a pregnant woman is in an embarrassing, shameful condition.

In summary: The capacity to feel shame is built into human beings, and it has a "civilizing" effect in adapting a child to his

family and culture. The trouble is that this capacity gets exploited — knowingly and unknowingly — by family and culture, so that certain individuals and groups can be controlled to their disadvantage and sometimes senselessly, even in terms of the up-to-date purposes of the particular society they live in. Shame binds, like chains, to archaic values of ancient masters. Autonomy can be achieved when secret “shames” are brought to light and when the Adult can ask, in each instance: “Is this shame necessary?” Berne said: “Think sphincter!” I would add: “Think shame — and *cancel* it!” or, to paraphrase a social action slogan:

“Intimidated ones of the world, look in:  
You have nothing to lose but your shame!”

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#### REFERENCES

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