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## The Sociology of Shaming

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## The Sociology of Shaming

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is dedicated to the late Dr. Mel Fein. He brought shaming to a scholarly level.

## The Sociology of Shaming

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**Abstract:** Shaming is a form of social control found in every society. It is an informal mechanism that is found in traditional societies or small, personal groups. The power of shaming is related to a person's sense of self as reflected by his or her interpretation of the acts of others. Today, in the emerging environment of the global village, shaming has evolved from an expanded from a personal to a collective mechanism of influence and social control. In fact, what was once a mechanism of social control has become a potential for social change.

**Keywords:** Shaming; Stigma; Self; Others

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### Introduction

Shame is considered a primary emotion. Biblically speaking, it was the first emotion mentioned in the Bible. "And man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Bible, Genesis 2.25). Shame has come a long way in human society. It has been the subject of extensive discussions in a variety of social sciences. In particular, psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists have commented on its origins and role in the development of the individual and society. Today, those perspectives have been broadened, as shame is now part of the political sphere and has become a significant tool in the success or failure of many social movements.

#### *Shame: A Micro-social Perspective*

As a basic emotion, shame has been considered, either directly or indirectly, by a number of psychologists. Adler and other psychoanalytic theorists discussed the role of pride and inferiority which were analogous with the concept of shame (Scheff, 2000). Erik Erikson (1950) specifically identified shame as a fundamental emotion which played an important role in the developmental stages in child development. However, because shame

is dependent upon the role of a social matrix which is external to the individual, most psychologists have avoided the role of shame and its impact on the individual.

In anthropology, shame and its role as an agent of personality development and social control have been frequently cited in studies of primitive culture. Kardiner (1939) employed a psychoanalytic perspective which stressed the role of shame and pride as key components in the development of the superego among the members of primitive societies. Firth (1936) in his study of the Trobriand Islanders illustrated the power of shame as both a deterrent and punishment in his analysis of the role of "liar's heaps."

Sociologists, however, have been the major contributors to the traditional study of shame as an interactive process between the individual and society. Focusing on the role of social solidarity, Durkheim (1997), intimated that emotions, like shame, are powerful forces which control and influence the power of social bonds within a group.

Georg Simmel (1904) briefly describes the role of shame in his essay on fashion. He suggested that people anticipate shame if they stray from the behavior and appearance of others. Thus, conformity of thought and actions within one's social group is desired and failure to do so results in shame and alienation.

Charles Horton Cooley (1922) in his introduction of the concept of the "looking-glass self" places significance on how an individual judges his/her self as a reaction to the perceived evaluation of others. George Herbert Mead (1923), likewise, stressed the interpretive understanding associated with role taking in response to the actions and expectations of others. In both instances, pride and shame play an important part in control and motivation of the individual.

Building on the works of Cooley and Mead, Erving Goffman (1963) stressed the role of emotions in shaping social behavior. In particular, the fear of social degradation shaped an individual's sense of self and significantly influenced one's behavior.

Norbert Elias, in his book *The Civilizing Process* stated that shame was a key aspect of modernity. He noted that:

"The feeling of shame is a specific excitation, a kind of anxiety which is automatically reproduced in the individual on certain occasions by forces of habit. Considered superficially, it is fear of social degradation, or more generally, of other people's gestures of superiority (1936, 414)."

Elias felt that the decreasing thresholds of shame during the transformation of communities from more rural to more urban environments had significant influence on levels of awareness and self-control.

Helen Lynd (1958), a sociologist with a strong interdisciplinary orientation, was one of the few sociologists who directly addressed the role of shame in social behavior from both sociological and psychological perspectives. In her work, she focused on shame and its role as a component of one's social

identity. Her concept of social identity reflected a sociological perspective that integrated the psychological roles of self and ego. She felt that, whereas guilt was directly tied to a specific act, shame was the impact and interpretation of that act on one's self identity.

An interesting consequence of her views on shame was that the sharing of one's sense of self-shame with others can create a bonding experience with others. As an intimate act, the sharing of shame can bring about a closeness with another individual. This concept would have a later impact among some students of the role of shame, in the study of social deviance.

The most significant modern research on the sociology of shame has been the extensive works of Thomas Scheff (2005). In his efforts to better understand the sociology of emotions, particularly shame, he has reviewed and analyzed numerous social thinkers and their perspectives. In his analysis of number of classical sociologists, he noted that emotions are intimately involved in the structure and change of whole societies. In particular, he suggested that the acknowledgement of shame can strengthen social bonds and could be the glue that holds relationships, and ultimately societies, together. Building on the works of Cooley, Mead, Elias and Goffman, Scheff looks at individualistic and collective shame on social solidarity and, in turn, alienation.

#### *Shame: A Macro-social Perspective*

The role of collective shame offers insight into the role of shame at the macro-social level and its impact on a number of social environments. Historically, in the social sciences, shame has been a primary emotion which shapes interpersonal relations. However, as the study of shame continued, it has moved from a micro to a more macro-level perspective.

A macro-social perspective of shame focuses on collective guilt as a consequence of some group act or historical event. It is the shared outcome or identity of such actions, which has both personal and group consequences, that create collective guilt. This condition influences both a personal and group identity

and shapes how others identify and act with and around them. At times, collective shame may be self-generated. Acting in some form of collective misconduct may result in one's understanding of the extreme inappropriateness of their actions, recognition of which is most often based upon their own moral standards. However, in most instances of collective shame, it is not self-actualization that labels a group's action as shameful, it is the evaluation of others that produces that label.

For example, in 1919, British General Richard Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on several thousand unarmed civilians in a walled public garden in the Sikh holy city Amritsar. They had gathered to celebrate the Sikh New Year in violation of prohibitory orders against public assembly (Collett, 2005). In what became known as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, 379 men, women and children were killed without warning. Though the British initially felt justified in their action, world opinion quickly collectively shamed the British and their role as a colonial empire. Likewise, British action in post World War II Palestine led to further collective shame (Pettigrove and Parsons, 2012).

Probably the most documented and researched example of collective shame or guilt was experienced by Germany over its World War II atrocities, especially the Holocaust. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung noted the collective guilt and shame shared by the German people (Olick and Perrin, 2010). American and British troops promoted this sense of collective guilt and shame by an active propaganda campaign which included the public showing of documentaries of the atrocities as well as requiring many civic leaders to tour the death camps. A number of leading German theologians accepted the shame of these actions in the *Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt-1945* (Issacs and Vernon, 2011).

A more recent example of collective shame, though not as prominent, is what may be called Southern Shame. Many southerners have had to deal with the stigma associated with slavery and racial discrimination in the South. Though bigotry and racial hatred knew no geographic boundaries in America, as exemplified

by race riots, anti-busing actions and open discrimination in numerous non-south communities, the former Confederate states have borne the collective stigma of racial injustice. For example, the actions of the head of the Alabama Department of Public Safety, Bull Connor in unleashing police dogs on Catholic nuns, African American veterans and others in the Selma to Birmingham civil rights march in 1968 helped to transform a protest into a symbolic moral crusade which labeled southerners as collectively shame-worthy (Kyrn, 1989). Thus, a shared sense of shame is an on-going stigma that most southerners have to address as part of their regional identity (Renki, 2019).

## Shaming

As the role of personal shaming has been examined by Cooley, Goffman, Scheff and others, more attention has been directed to the process of collective shaming. In a sense, shame as a noun has evolved into shaming as a verb. Thus the role and importance of the collective as the designator of shame has emerged as a significant social fact.

John Braithwaite (1989) noted that there were two different types of shaming, stigmatic and reintegrative. Stigmatic shaming labels the individual as not only as someone who has done something bad, but also as someone who is bad. This type of shaming denigrates the relationship between the individual and society, probably for his/her entire life. On the other hand, reintegrative shaming deplores the act, but allows the individual the opportunity to be redeemed in the eyes of society. In these instances, the offender is treated as a good person who has done a bad deed and also provides legitimate avenues for rehabilitation and acceptance back into society. The shaming process involves not only the actor, but increasingly recognizes, the collective role of others.

Historically, shaming was a social process which reflected the importance of the established social norms and was enacted in the name of the community. The public stocks in England and early America were examples of the tools of shaming. The established norms, however, were a product of significant others

who held positions of power and influence and shared public opinion in support of their (the establishment's) cherished class values (Sayer, 2005). Goffman (1963) and others have studied the processes of stigmatization and who and why certain individuals and groups are labeled and shamed into conformity or further social degradation.

Labeling theory (Becker, 1963) significantly informs our understanding of the shaming process. Deviance, according to Scarpitti and MacFarlane is defined as "any, act, attribute or belief, which when made known elicits an evaluative sanction or response from others" (1975, 8). It is in the identification and response of significant others that results in an act or sanction. Labeling can target an individual or a group and create an environment of shame. As Becker (1963) has noted, it is in the application of the perception of others that labeling and the assignment of shame is achieved.

As we seek to understand the shaming process from a sociological perspective, the theories of attitude change and collective behavior offer the greatest insights into this process. In both areas, key elements are the nature of the social environment and the existence or creation of a generalized belief that change is possible, resulting in a redefinition of a perceived moral standard.

The various social psychological theories of attitude change and social control play an important role in the shaming process. Theories such as, cognitive dissonance, neutralization, and emergent norm theory have been useful in understanding how groups and individuals address and respond to either psychological or social issues surrounding individual and collective attitude change (Wood, 2000). For example, cognitive dissonance theory focuses on the perceived need to create consistency between different beliefs and attitudes and focuses on the processes of information processing and the role and status of significant others. Sykes and Matza (1957) identified various techniques of neutralization that facilitates individual and attitude changes as a means to justify non-normative behavior, thus reducing cognitive dissonance. Turner and Killian (1957) looked at how new norms emerge and become

accepted by others in response to highly emotional, but undefined social circumstances.

Today's media is rampant with shaming as a social tool. It is found at both the micro and macro-levels and involve both reintegrative and stigmatic shaming. At the micro or individual level, teachers and school administrators have used "walls of accountability" to publicly identify and shame students who have violated some school policies (Robinson-Green, 2019). Judges, engaging in "creative sentencing", have utilized public humiliation by publishing the names of people convicted of a variety of crimes and/or misdemeanors, and have been cited as either enlightened jurists or legal tyrants. Peer shaming among adolescents has become almost epidemic with the advent of cell phones and their video capabilities with significant medical and psychological consequences (Ashland, Leppert, Starrin, et, al., 2009). Be it "perp walks" in police stations or "walks of shame" on college campuses, actual or virtual social shaming experiences are increasingly common occurrences. With advances in communicative technology, such as television, the internet and social media, the creation or perception of a shaming experience has become far easier than in previous times.

At the micro-social level of shaming, the goal of a group's action on the individual shapes whether the action is reintegrative or stigmatic. In the case of reintegrative shaming at the micro-level, reasserting a group's values or norms is the desired consequence. In sport and business, "holding a team-mate accountable" is part of a culture of compliance (Sehestal, 2018). Basketball great Joe Dumars stated that:

"On good teams, coaches hold players accountable.

On great teams, players hold players accountable (Janssen, n.d.)"

In both instances, peer to peer accountability is encouraged to better the group's performance and achieve its goals. Accountability and even some milder forms of shaming are used to

encourage a person's compliance to mutually ascribed standards. The person is still valued and thus their future contributions are desired.

However, stigmatic shaming also may be encountered in peer to peer relationships. More than a decade ago, the movie *Mean Girls* focused on the power and damage that can be inflicted on some adolescents. The power of cliques, relational aggression, backbiting, social isolation, rumor, labeling and similar actions, often can leave individual with serious concerns or understanding of the reason they are being targeted (Gordon, 2019). Stigma is being used to degrade and isolate or eliminate another from a social environment. The growth of the anti-bullying movement has been a response to the social cost of stigmatic shaming (Namie and Namie, n.d.). The emerging role of the "twitter mob" for the digital "lynching" of individuals is a clear example of stigmatic shaming at the individual or micro-level (Fontaine, 2018).

At the macro-level, in today's social and political environments, shaming has emerged as a powerful tool used by groups seeking acceptance of their perspectives of right and wrong. Classic research on attitude change and persuasion identified a variety of techniques which have been used in the past. Rationalization, displacement, projection, identification, compensation, conformity and suggestion were frequently cited practices related to attitude change and action (Brown, 1964). Today, pop psychology journals are rife with articles listing numerous techniques for persuasion. The various techniques of persuasion, however have been augmented by shaming as a force multiplier. With technological advances in public communication, shaming individuals within groups has been advanced to shaming entire groups within society.

Whereas traditional shaming was designed to reinforce existing social norms and values, modern shaming has emerged as a tool for political and

social change. In social movements such as the civil rights, women's and gender acceptance movements, astute students of attitude and social change initially challenged the traditional positions as antiquated and immoral. A constant barrage of information and examples of how the majority position violates higher standards of morality and social justice contributes to a less clearly defined and supported public standard. The tactic of non-violent protest served both Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. well by positioning their causes as the higher moral ground (Miller, 1985). The protests and the harsh reactions by agents of the status-quo further contributed to the delegitimizing of the moral standards of the dominant society.

Similar actions by the Women's and Gay Rights Movements created environments conducive of social change. Encouraging unreasonable responses by agents of social control was a vital component of shaming a control group and questioning their legitimacy in the eyes of the larger society. Selma, the Chicago Democratic Convention and the Stone Wall Bar became symbols of society's intolerance and a source of shame for the status-quo which were effectively transformed into effective means for social change.

In the case of these successful social movements, reintegrative shaming was employed as an effective mechanism of encouraging the society to largely accept new definitions morality or correctness. In these instances, the movement's actions created environments conducive to reintegrative shaming. That is, the movements sought change, but they wanted their opposition to accept the change and establish a new moral order that would shape future interactions.

The advent of the digital domain, in particular the internet, facilitates the mobilization of a transformative ideology because the channels of communication are largely unfettered (Bates and Mooney, 2014). According to Weimann (2005), the

internet has been a valuable platform for the spread of a movement's ideology and belief systems. It provided ease of access, minimal regulation, censorship, anonymity of communication, speed, low cost and the ability to influence the traditional mass media. It bypassed existing "selection thresholds" by simply posting frequent supportive statements.

Shephard (2013) notes that these types of movements utilize a variety of media management techniques. Platforms such as blogs, Twitter, YouTube, online chat rooms, open and password-protected forums, social networking sites such as Facebook and Google+, photo-sharing sites such as Instagram and Tumblr, and periodicals available in digital and print format. The asynchronous features of social media are particularly attractive because the access and dissemination of material is not limited by traditional notions of time and place (Selwyn, 2011).

More recently, however, shaming has emerged as a more polarizing tool utilized by political groups. The shaming they promote is more stigmatic than reintegrative. The underlying premise of identity politics and political shaming is if you are not one of us, or at least one who supports us, then you are a bad person and not worthy of respect or even recognition. Categories of people or specific groups are targeted for collective shaming and denigration.

Carl Sandberg once quipped, "If the law is against you, talk about the evidence. If the evidence is against you, talk about the law, and, since you ask me, if the law and the evidence are both against you, then pound on the table and yell like hell.(Conner, 313)". And while this characterization of 20<sup>th</sup> century civil discourse is not new, politicians (and their supporters) in the 21st century have expanded this adage into the political arena, spewing an explosion of accusations, unsubstantiated generalities, and unfounded conclusions, in order to give credence to their view of right and wrong (Conner, 314). But

the current devolution of civil discourse does not end with an "I'm right and you're wrong" predisposition, it takes a further leap and indicates that their opponents are not only wrong, but evil for having thought that way. The premise of what may have begun as a disagreement, very often, is not judged on the premise's merit, but is now often based on hatred and anger towards the "other side" (Conner, 315).

By eschewing merit, the door opens widely for identity politics, which in turn gives strength to stigmatic shaming. If the argument of being right versus being evil gains traction – and it has – collective shaming becomes a simple matter of identifying with a collective and villifying those who "choose" not to join, or comply.

President Trump has made name-calling, body-shaming and personal denigration of political adversaries, both foreign and domestic, a common occurrence (Allen,2018). Likewise, there are myriads of other recent examples of politically motivated shaming. In 2017, Republican Senator Ted Cruz and his wife were confronted by activists regarding his views at a local DC restaurant. They were heckling him regarding his position over Brett Kavanaugh, President Trump's nominee for Supreme Court Justice, who had been accused of sexual misconduct. The intent being to isolate those who favored Kavanaugh's nomination and brand them as gender insensitive or worse, misogynists. In June of the same year, In June, Rep. Maxine Waters, D-California, [encouraged supporters](#) to publicly confront and harass members of the Trump administration for its unpopular policies and positions (Cole, 2018). In a public California forum, Waters told crowd,

"Let's make sure we show up wherever we have to show up. If you see anybody from that cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd, and you push back on them, and you tell them they're not welcome anymore, anywhere (Calfas, 2017)."



Potentially the most damaging, if not the most obvious example of political shaming came at the hands of one of the 2016 principle candidates for President. While giving a speech at the gala supporting LGBT rights on 9 September 2016, Hillary Clinton referred to "half" of Donald Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables", branding everyone in that "basket" as having either sexist, homophobic, racist ,xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiments, or a combination thereof (Blair, 335, 2017).

But political shaming isn't reserved for just bearing down on the opposition. In recent years political parties have utilized the art of voter shaming within their own constituency (Kravitz, 2014). Recognizing that greater voter turnout can often benefit their party, letters have been sent to registered voters listing the elections that they had missed in the past. These letters have been met with mixed response, but regardless of the response, it appears that voter shaming is effectual (Farzan, 2018).

Such has been the devolution of civil discourse in the past decade. While questions still remain regarding the outcome of identity politics and shaming, there appears to be little end in sight with regard to its use.

## Conclusions

Shame and shaming play important roles in the areas of self and social control as well as various forms of collective behavior. Likewise, shame and shaming can be both stigmatic and reintegrative in their purpose and intent. These social constructs have increasingly played significant roles in today's society. The environments of shame and shaming have expanded with technological advancements in the media and public and private communications.

To better understand these concepts, the following constructive typologies can help summarize the characteristics and examples of these concepts and allow us to identify and better understand various forms of individual and social behavior (Becker, 1940).

**Table 1. Shame Construct**

	Micro (Individual)	Macro (Collective)
Stigmatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alienation</li> <li>• Suicide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Race Shame</li> </ul>
Reintegrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wall of Accountability</li> <li>• Santa's List</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective Guilt</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Shaming Construct**

	Micro (Individual)	Macro (Collective)
Stigmatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perp walks</li> <li>• Walks of shame</li> <li>• Twitter mob</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political Shaming</li> <li>• Identity politics</li> <li>• Shunning</li> </ul>
Reintegrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability</li> <li>• "You can do better"</li> <li>• Religious repentance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social movements</li> <li>• Revivals</li> <li>• Voter shaming</li> </ul>

Remember, social constructs of this type are not exclusive categories, but are symbolic markers on a more diverse continuum (Becker, 1953). They are presented to provide a basic summary of the utility of looking at the types of social behavior which reflect the potential of looking at shame and shaming through the perspectives of stigmatic and reintegrative behavior and helps to summarize the major elements of this presentation.

Finally, the role of emotion, in particular shame and its applied consequences (shaming), provides us with a foundation for understanding the potential behaviors which may be shaped by these emotions. In particular, shame is an effective form of self and social control. It supports group norms and shapes individual and group behavior.

At the group-level, however, the ethnocentric nature of shame and shaming can have serious consequences for individuals and societies, especially with the stigmatic form. In some instances, collective shaming has contributed to more extreme forms of individual and collective dehumanization. The denigration of a group and its human legitimization is a prerequisite for extreme measures, such as social isolation, slavery and even genocide.

The practitioners of shame, especially that which is stigmatic in nature, should be very cautious with their actions for "...those who sew the wind shall reap the whirlwind (Bible, Hosea 8:7)".

## Dedication

This article is dedicated to the late Dr. Mel Fein. He brought shaming to a scholarly level.

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