

Shame and Its Relationship with Guilt

Edward S. Kubany

It may be important to differentiate guilt from shame, an emotional experience closely associated with guilt and elicited by the same kinds of events or situations as guilt. In spite of a large amount of empirical research on shame and the relationship between shame and guilt, authorities have not agreed on the fundamental meaning of shame or on how shame and guilt can be readily differentiated. Wallbott and Scherer (1995) concluded that in spite of all the research on this topic, the differentiation between shame and guilt “remains fuzzy.” Part of the problem here stems from the unavailability of a precise phenomenological definition of shame. Shame theorists have characterized shame in lengthy discourses and contrasted shame and guilt along various dimensions. However, shame theorists have generally failed to provide precise or succinct operational definitions of shame that would allow one to know authoritatively or with certainty when shame is and is not being experienced and when a person is experiencing shame as opposed to guilt (or visa versa) at any particular point in time.

Most shame theorists are in agreement that the most important or “essential definitional distinction” between shame and guilt is that shame involves depreciation of the entire self whereas guilt involves depreciation of specific actions or behaviors. For example, Lewis (1971) stated that,

(t)he experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but it is not itself the focus of the experience.

Similarly, Tangney (1997) stated that, with shame the individual places an emphasis on a "bad self," whereas with guilt the emphasis is on a "bad behavior." Put still another way, shame is conceptualized as a negative emotional experience associated with beliefs that there is "something wrong with me" whereas guilt is a negative emotion associated with beliefs that there is "something wrong with what I did."¹

As a therapist specializing in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), EK has worked with more than 200 trauma survivors, many of whom experienced shame as well as guilt. This work has afforded repeated opportunities to observe directly how shame and guilt are manifested phenomenologically as emotional states. The phenomenology of guilt, which has already been discussed, involves the occurrence of unpleasant feelings plus beliefs about one's role or behavior in a negative event. (Table 1 presents the items which comprise the three guilt-cognition factors on the Trauma-Related Guilt Inventory.

Based on reviews of the shame literature and clinical observations, we propose a definition of shame that clearly delineates the phenomenological occurrence of shame and allows one to differentiate the occurrence of shame from the occurrence of guilt. Shame is defined phenomenologically as an unpleasant feeling plus a negative self evaluation of one's entire self, personality, intelligence, or character—often (but not always) expressed as an "I feel..." statement (e.g., “I feel inadequate”). With respect to the manifestation of shame, individuals can devalue themselves globally in a wide variety of linguistic ways. EK has routinely recorded clients' expressions of shame during therapy sessions, and Table 2 presents some of the various

¹ Several authors have observed that the experience of shame is often associated with tendencies to hide, shrink, feel small, or disappear and with concerns about being publicly “exposed” or “feeling naked”. Statements reflecting these tendencies are often made in the context of self-deprecating remarks. For example, one client said she felt “exposed...as a bad person” by disclosing that it “felt good” when she was molested by her father as a 4-year old child. Another client said, “Telling you what I did makes me feel like crawling up into a little ball.” However, it is not necessary or essential for cognitions reflecting “action readiness” tendencies—such as impulses to hide or to avoid public exposure—to be present for shame to be experienced, just as it is not essential for impulses to make amends to be present for guilt to be experienced. From a learning theory perspective, the experience of shame (e.g., “I feel worthless”) may act as a discriminative stimulus that exerts directive control over operant-response impulses (i.e., action readiness tendencies) to hide or “escape” (e.g., “I feel like crawling away and disappearing”).

ways clients have verbally communicated the experience of shame. (Of course, it is recognized that such expressions can also be manifested in thinking or as covert self-talk.)

The assertion that shame is often expressed as an “I feel...” statement and as a negative characterization of one’s entire self is also supported by the way shame is operationalized on two popular measures of shame—the Personal Feelings Questionnaire (PFQ) shame scale and the shame proneness scale of the Test of Self-Conscious Affect. Eight of nine items on the shame scale of the PFQ assess the experience of shame in terms of a “feeling” statement (e.g., “feeling ‘stupid’...feeling disgusting to others”). The TOSCA format calls for respondents to rate the degree to which each of 15 scenarios is likely to evoke a response characterized as an expression of shame. For example, one scenario states, “At work, you wait until the last minute to plan a project, and it turns out badly.” Using a 5-point scale, respondents rate the degree to which this scenario would be likely to evoke the following reaction: “You would feel incompetent” (emphasis added). Of 15 shame responses listed on the TOSCA, 10 are belittling of oneself, and nine are expressed as “I feel...” statements (e.g., “You would feel immature...You would feel stupid”).

The operational definition of the phenomenological experience of shame provided above takes into account the necessity that the experience of shame requires the occurrence of negative affect. When a person globally devalues himself or herself using an “I feel...” statement, the phrase “I feel” is presumptive evidence that the person is experiencing unpleasant feelings or negative affect as the value judgement is expressed. In addition, self-depreciative expressions—with or without an “I feel” phrase attached—are presumptive evidence in and of themselves that negative affect is being experienced as the negative value judgement is expressed (in thought or speech). In lower-order and higher-order language conditioning, evaluative or emotionally charged words and phrases (as conditioned stimuli) have been shown to elicit emotional responses.

Some theorists believe that guilt and shame can both be experienced at the same time. For example, Tangney et al., (1992) refer to guilt portrayed in the clinical literature as “guilt fused with shame.” From the present perspective, different emotions are often experienced in close contiguity with one another but are not ordinarily experienced simultaneously. When describing their reactions to negative experiences, individuals may switch rapidly from guilt to shame, making it appear that both emotions are being experienced simultaneously. The expression of negative affectivity may be continuous but an analysis of the words people assign to their affective states may show that guilt and shame are typically experienced sequentially. Lindsay-Hartz et al., (1995) provide a nice illustration of a woman describing her reactions to a negative event, in which the woman first expresses guilt and then expresses shame (as guilt and shame are defined in this article):

I felt guilty when my mother died...I felt it was all my fault. Like if I have paid more attention to her and helped her...I started thinking over and over of all the things I could have done... I should have been more open. [There were] things I could have done. I should have tried harder (all expressions of guilt)...I feel like a monster, and that I’m evil...an evil person (expressions of shame) (parenthetical phrases added).

Similarly, during therapy sessions with trauma survivors, clients are often observed “flip flopping” back and forth between emotions. For example, the statements below were spoken in anguish by a Japanese woman who experienced guilt and shame for getting involved in an abusive intimate relationship during which time she had three unwanted abortions (at the insistence of her boyfriend).

I should have listened to my parents (guilt). I never should have moved in with him (guilt). How stupid! (shame). All the warning signs were there, and I just ignored them (guilt). And why didn’t I leave after the first abortion? I feel dirty and ashamed just telling you about this (shame).²

² In paraphrasing the views of Tangney et al. (1995), Harder (1995) stated that,

if a person feels so terrible about doing (or not doing) something that he or she feels globally bad and/or does not attempt to (or cannot) make amends, then the person is suffering predominantly from shame, not guilt.

There is an additional important reason why it often appears that guilt and shame are experienced simultaneously. Although guilt and shame may not, by definition, be experienced simultaneously, the beliefs that underlie guilt and shame can be maintained simultaneously. That is, guilt-related cognitions or ideas (e.g., “I should have known better”) and shame-related ideas (e.g., “There’s something wrong with me”) can certainly be believed simultaneously. However, guilt or shame will not be activated as emotions unless the latent guilt or shame related beliefs are retrieved into consciousness with accompanying negative affect. Both guilt and shame are affective experiences, and the expression of guilt-related beliefs or shame-related beliefs, alone, in the absence of affect, is not an emotion.

The distinction between shame-related beliefs and proneness to experience shame may help to account for the strong relationship that exists between shame and negative self-esteem (e.g., $r = .74$ in a study by Wong and Cook, 1992). Self-esteem or self-concept is usually thought of as a cognitive construct, and self-esteem has been operationalized in terms of evaluative beliefs about the entire self that are relatively stable and pervasive and cut across situational contexts. For example, one item on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale asks respondents to rate their degree of endorsement of the statement, “At times I think I am no good at all.” Presumably, at those times that individuals think they are “no good at all,” they will also experience negative affect and the state experience of shame.

Many trauma survivors experience both guilt and shame. Kubany, Watson et al. (2001) suggested that guilt and shame tend to be yoked in trauma because when survivors implicate themselves as playing a significant role in tragic, irreparable outcomes, they are also prone to conclude that “the outcomes reflect on their entire selves, personality, or character” (p. 28) [e.g., a woman concluded that she was “evil” and a “monster” because she believed there were things she “could have done” to prevent her mother’s death from cancer.³ As another example, Kubany, Watson et al. (2001) cite the example of an acquaintance rape survivor who concluded that there was “something wrong with me” for not preventing the assault in light of the fact that she, herself, was a sex abuse counselor and “should have seen the signs.” Kubany, Watson et al. also cited the case of a Vietnam combat veteran who underwent successful cognitive therapy for war-related guilt. Even though therapy focused exclusively on the veteran’s highly specific actions in Vietnam—resulting in a sharp drop in the magnitude of guilt related beliefs—the veteran’s ratings of himself changed from “I’m a very bad person for what I did” before therapy to “I am not a bad person for what I did” after therapy. Thus, it is hypothesized that guilt and shame are often yoked in the experience of trauma survivors because distress and high-magnitude guilt cognitions can sometimes contribute causally to shame cognitions and shame.

While we do not concur with Tangney et al.’s contention that this type of situation reflects guilt “fused” with shame, the description is consistent with the proposition that guilt about tragic outcomes can lead or give rise to shame.

³ Janoff-Bulman (1985) might consider these statements to be examples of “behavioral self-blame” and “characterological self-blame”—which, according to Tangney et al. (1992), bear “some resemblance” to guilt and shame. Tangney and colleagues might also consider this a situation in which guilt has become “fused” with shame” and is, therefore, primarily shame—by definition. In paraphrasing the views of Tangney, Wagner (1995), Harder (1995) stated that,

if a person feels so terrible about doing (or not doing) something that he or she feels globally bad and/or does not attempt to (or cannot) make amends, then the person is suffering predominantly from shame, not guilt.

From our point of view, this quote reflects both guilt and shame and is consistent with our proposition that guilt about tragic outcomes can lead or give rise to shame

Table 1.

The Three Guilt-Cognition Factors of the Trauma-Related Guilt Inventory
and the Items that Load on Each of These Factors^a

Factor 1: Hindsight-Bias Linked Responsibility

1. I was responsible for causing what happened
 2. I hold myself responsible for what happened
 3. I blame myself for what happened
 4. I could have prevented what happened
 5. I should have known better
 6. I blame myself for something I did, thought, or felt
 7. I knew better than to do what I did
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Factor 3: Wrongdoing—Violation of personal standards

1. I had some thoughts or beliefs that I should not have had
 2. I had some feelings that I should not have had
 3. I did something that went against my values
 4. What I did was inconsistent with my beliefs
 5. I should have had certain feelings that I did not have
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Factor 4: Lack of Justification^b

1. I had good reasons for doing what I did
 2. What I did made sense
 3. If I knew today--only what I knew when the event
occurred--I would do exactly the same thing
 4. What I did was completely justified
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^a Factor 2, labeled Distress, is not presented.

^b All four Lack of Justification items are reverse scored.

Table 2.

Examples of Expressions of Shame

I feel like I'm a nobody	I'm feeling no self worth	There's something wrong with me
I feel so dirty and ugly	I'm ashamed of my whole life	I feel so badly about myself
I'm tainted	I feel dirty all the time	I was so stupid...an idiot
I'm damaged goods	I felt like a toy...an object	I feel like an inadequate mother
I'm an emotional mess	I feel scarred for life	I feel like a dysfunctional person
I feel like a fake person	I hate myself	I feel like a worthless piece of shit
I feel less of a person	I feel flawed as a person	I feel like an 80-year old man
I feel like a child	It makes me feel cheap	I feel dirty and ashamed just telling you
I feel like a failure	I feel unqualified	I feel mortified and humiliated
I feel selfish	I feel like an outcast	I don't deserve (to be happy, etc.)
I feel incompetent	I'm a bad person	He made me feel like a slut...a whore
I'm such a fool	I have these ugly feelings	I'm not worthy of anyone's love
I feel dispensable	I feel like I'm always wrong	I feel so beaten down...defeated
I'm not lovable	I'm a hypocrite	I'm not good enough
I feel like a bag lady	I feel like a tramp	I feel like a horrible person
I feel like a total loser	I feel like a has been	I'm an unworthy piece of shit
I don't feel normal	I'm disgusted with myself	I'm a wimp...pathetic
It makes me feel like she deserves someone better	I'm terrible! (because the (incest) "felt good"	I feel like a piece of trash that should be thrown away
I feel like all the names my Father called me	I feel like a soggy piece of cereal that somebody spit out	No man will ever <u>stay</u> with someone like me
It made me feel like I'm nothing...air	My self-esteem has been ripped away	I have an overwhelming sense of being inferior to other people
