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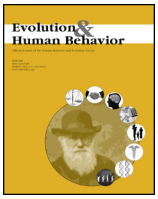

The true trigger of shame: social devaluation is sufficient, wrongdoing is unnecessary

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ABSTRACT

What is the trigger of shame? The information threat theory holds that shame is an evolved adaptation that is designed to limit the likelihood and costs of others forming negative beliefs about the self. By contrast, attributional theories posit that concerns over others' evaluations are irrelevant to shame. Instead, shame is triggered when a person attributes a negative outcome to their *self*, rather than to a particular act or circumstance. We conduct a strong test of the information threat hypothesis. In Study 1, participants imagined taking an action that, though morally unimpeachable, could be interpreted unfavorably by others. As predicted by the information threat theory, shame increased with the publicity of this act. In Study 2, participants played a public good game and then learned that the other participants either chose to keep interacting with them (inclusion) or not (exclusion)—ostensibly because of their contributions, but in fact randomly determined by the experimenter. Exclusion increased shame. Under-contribution did not. In fact, even the highest contributors tended to feel shame when excluded. These findings strongly suggest that the true trigger of shame is the prospect or actuality of being devalued by others.

1. Introduction

In 1998, Joseph Dick, a Navy seaman on the USS Saipan, was accused of the rape and murder of Michelle Bosko (Bikel, 2010). He confessed. He was tried and convicted. He served 12 years in prison. Eventually, he expressed how ashamed he was over this act by publicly apologizing to the victim's family.

It seems at first there is no mystery here. No one is surprised when a person found guilty of a crime feels ashamed of what they have done. Such a person has been forced to face his own moral shortcoming and realize his personal failure. Most people would probably feel ashamed in that situation.

The problem? Dick could not have committed the crimes he professed shame over. At the time, he was on duty aboard his ship and could not have left. No physical evidence linked him to the crime. And DNA evidence matched another man, who testified to acting alone. Yet after a great deal of aggressive interrogation by police, who insisted that he was responsible, he gave in and confessed. In the face of so many people insisting he was guilty, he came to feel responsible and ashamed for something he had not actually done.

Joseph Dick was eventually convinced to confess, but even people who maintain their innocence in the face of a wrongful accusation or conviction often feel ashamed. They feel shame merely "because the system has declared [them] publicly guilty" (Wilson, 2002)—even though there is no moral shortcoming or personal failure. Why do people feel shame when others falsely believe they have done something wrong?

1.1. Why do the innocent sometimes feel shame?

One type of explanation for shame comes from *attributional theories of shame*: On this view, shame is activated when two conditions are met: (a) there is an event or outcome that is incongruent with one's representations of one's current or ideal self (e.g., failing an exam, if one aspires to be a good student), and (b) one attributes that event or outcome to one's stable, global self (e.g. blaming that failure on one's low intelligence) (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Thus, shame is driven by failure to live up to one's own standards or aspirations, with one's acts reflecting negatively on oneself (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007).

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Discussions of shame often contrast it with guilt. In a common view, shame is a public emotion and guilt is a private one. Attributional theories deny this claim (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2006). This denial is based on content analyses of personal accounts of naturally occurring shame and guilt episodes showing that people are no more likely to feel shame rather than guilt when other people are present during the emotional experience, compared to when a person is alone (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996; see also Tracy & Robins, 2006). Instead, according to attributional theories, whereas shame is activated by attributions of negative events to one's *stable, global* self, guilt is activated by attributions of negative events to *unstable, specific* aspects of the self (e.g. blaming the failure on an exam on not having studied enough, rather than not being smart enough) (Tracy & Robins, 2004).

When ashamed, the global self is seen as defective, and this, according to attributional theories, is why the experience of shame is so ugly. The pain of seeing one's self as tainted is so aversive and debilitating that various defensive measures are deployed *in order to avoid the feeling of shame*. These defenses include blaming others, anger, and aggression (Tangney, 1991; Tracy & Robins, 2006), which are reliably correlated with shame (e.g., Fessler, 2001; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). Other debilitating correlates of shame include anxiety, depression, and paranoid ideations (Gilbert, 2000; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992).

Attributional theories have been used to explain many of shame's observed qualities. However, those theories cannot explain why shame would arise in the absence of wrongdoing—when no personal failure has occurred. That is, they cannot explain our opening puzzle: shame in the innocent.

We suggest that the solution to this puzzle lies in the evolved function of shame. Recent research suggests this emotion is a cognitive system designed by natural selection to limit the likelihood and costs of being devalued due to the spread of negative information about the actor (Sznycer et al., 2016). This threat involves the transient or permanent loss of social attention, socially-derived benefits, or status. People who are not highly valued may fail to receive necessary help or even be active targets of exploitation (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Ancestrally, being socially devalued would have entailed major fitness costs.

According to the *information threat theory of shame* (Sznycer, 2010; Sznycer et al., 2012, 2016, under review; Sznycer, Schniter, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2015; Sznycer, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2017; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008; see also Gilbert, 1997, 1998; Fessler, 1999, 2007; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), shame will be activated in a person's mind when others learn (or might learn) negative information about that person. By hypothesis, this emotion program is designed to (a) motivate a person to be especially cautious about taking actions that might exacerbate devaluation in an already precarious social situation, (b) limit the spread of potentially damaging information to more people than already know, and (c) limit the costs of any ensuing social devaluation. On this view, the innocent can feel shame if they simply know or suspect that others view them negatively. This is because it is primarily others' beliefs—and not the facts of the matter—that determine a person's reputation and value to others.

1.2. *The problem of devaluation*

People are selective in whom they associate with and aid, and not all social partners are valued equally (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). In small-scale subsistence societies, as prevailed during human evolution, the potential consequences of losing social benefits are severe. For instance, consider a cross-sectional study of lifetime health problems among the Shiwiar, a hunter-horticulturalist group in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Sixty-five percent of the Shiwiar studied had experienced long-term incapacitating injury or illness at some point in their lives, and had required provisioning from family and friends to survive. If their families and friends had not valued them enough to provide this aid, all these people would have died (Sugiyama, 2004). However, our zoologically rare abilities and motivations to engage in mutual aid (Ackerman & Kenrick, 2008; Barclay & Willer, 2007) allowed these disabled Shiwiar to recover.

Given the fitness benefits of being valued and the corresponding fitness costs of being devalued, natural selection would have equipped the human mind with a suite of mechanisms for making oneself valuable (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996) and for selectively associating with valuable others. This includes motivations to pursue, acquire, and advertise valued skills (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; Sznycer et al., 2017; Tracy, Shariff, & Cheng, 2010), cognitive abilities to seek out especially valuable cooperative partners (Delton & Robertson, 2012; Smith, Pedersen, Forster, McCullough, & Lieberman, 2017), and emotional mechanisms, such as gratitude, for cementing valuable relationships (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Forster, Pedersen, Smith, McCullough, & Lieberman, 2017; Lim, 2010; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008; Sznycer, under review). The information threat theory suggests that shame, too, is part of this suite, because it is designed to solve the adaptive problem of being devalued.

Devaluation often happens when a transgression is witnessed or an unwanted personal quality is discovered. However, as we see from the example of the shame experienced by the wrongfully convicted (and the generally poor treatment experienced by the wrongfully convicted, even when their sentences have been overturned; Wilson, 2002), wrongdoing is not necessary for an audience to devalue an individual. For example, noise in the transmission of information or maliciousness may make an audience devalue a person even in the absence of wrongdoing.

1.3. *How shame protects against devaluation*

How would an evolved mind respond to the threat of devaluation? Being socially devalued entails receiving fewer benefits and incurring more costs from others—a reduction in the prospects of survival and reproduction. Moreover, social devaluation was an ancestrally recurrent situation (e.g., Boehm, 1992; Goodall, 1986; Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Given this adaptive problem, natural selection is expected to have built countermeasures for detecting (and anticipating) social devaluation and for limiting its likelihood and costs. These would include, among others, mechanisms for minimizing the leakage and spread of discrediting information, for improving one's standing on whatever socially valued quality was compromised (e.g. gaining physical strength to make up for the loss of formidability), for bargaining for better treatment, and for acknowledging and tolerating a reduction in status. Besides behavior, the theory also predicts a suite of cognitive, motivational, physiological, and affective responses tailored to the demands of buffering devaluation and coping with the grimmer social landscape resulting from devaluation.

The behaviors shame motivates suggest this emotion is designed to minimize reputational damage. Several different tactics appear to be at work. For instance, shame causes people to avoid eye contact and speaking, and to withdraw from social situations, all of which can prevent damaging common knowledge from forming in others' minds (cf. Thomas, DeScioli, & Pinker, 2018). In the characteristic display of shame, the head is tilted downward and the posture is slumped, which conveys submission and acknowledgement that one's reputation has been impaired (Fessler, 1999; Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Tracy, Robins, & Schriber, 2009). These are potential first steps in being forgiven for perceived transgressions (McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013; McCullough, Pedersen, Tabak, & Carter, 2014). Shame also causes people to proactively curry favor with others, by providing costly benefits to those who observed a shameful act (De Hooge, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2008). Together, these tactics work to lower the probability that others will learn damaging information about a person, and

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