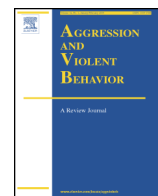




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# Aggression and Violent Behavior



## Shame and aggression: Theoretical considerations

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### ABSTRACT

Within the shame literature, anger and aggression are widely recognized as responses to shame. Recent findings on the affective neuroscience of social pain suggest multiple models by which social pain (e.g., shame) and anger/aggression may be linked. These models describe the mechanisms underlying the prominent role of shame in interpersonal aggression, a role revealed by many dozens of studies. Anger and aggression in response to shame may be viewed as emotion regulation, coping strategies, and evolutionary adaptations. Unfortunately, these attempts at coping with shame may be adaptive or maladaptive. Indeed, aggression may be an adaptive defensive response to physical pain and many physical threats that, through evolutionary processes, came to be linked to shame once social pain co-opted the affective response to physical pain. In a related article (Velotti, Elison, & Garofalo, 2014), we review the many contexts and populations in which aggression manifests, providing further evidence for the models proposed here. Thus, a more complete understanding of anger and violent behavior requires consideration of social pain, shame, and shame-regulation, for which physical pain serves as a useful model.

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### 1. Introduction

Consider the commonalities in the following three scenarios. In response to insecurity, a man with borderline personality disorder verbally abuses his partner, the very person whose love he fears losing. Following repeated bullying and exclusion, a normally meek student retaliates with fists against one of her persecutors. After being embarrassed by a comment regarding his competence, a man spreads rumors denigrating his boss via email. These scenarios illustrate a similar chain of events, a chain supported by empirical studies and

consistent with multiple theories reviewed in this paper. First, each scenario begins with a social threat: personal devaluation, a decline in relational value, status, or rank (DeWall & Bushman, 2011; Elison, 2005; Fessler, 2007; Gilbert, 1997, 2007; Leary & Guadagno, 2011; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Weisfeld & Dillon, 2012). Second, these declines threaten the basic universal need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Third, threatening this basic human need elicits negative emotional reactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DeWall & Bushman, 2011), all of which are members of the basic emotion family shame (feelings of inferiority, embarrassment, humiliation; Elison, 2005; Izard, 1977; Nathanson, 1992; Scheff, 1987; Tomkins, 1963; Weisfeld & Dillon, 2012). Fourth, shame – an alarm warning us of these threats of social exclusion – is physically painful, as well as emotionally painful (Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2009; Eisenberger, 2011; Elison, 2005; MacDonald & Leary, 2005;

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Miller & Leary, 1992). Fifth, discomfort in the form of pain is sufficient to elicit anger (Berkowitz, 2012; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Finally, anger motivates aggression in some instances (Berkowitz, 2012; Davey, Day, & Howells, 2005; Novaco, 1994, 2007). Taken together, these points of commonality represent a psychobiological chain linking shame to anger and aggression.

Research and theory on shame and exclusion support this linkage, approaching it in terms of coping/defense/emotion-regulation (Crowe, 2004; Elison, Lennon, & Pulos, 2006; Lewis, 1971; Nathanson, 1992; Scheff, 1987, 2009; Schoenleber & Berenbaum, 2012; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tomkins, 1963), evolutionarily adaptive strategies (Gilbert, 1997, 2007; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Weisfeld & Dillon, 2012), action tendencies or action readiness (Frijda, 2010), and psychobiology (Berkowitz, 2012; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Dickerson et al., 2009; Eisenberger, 2011; Eisenberger, Way, Taylor, Welch, & Lieberman, 2007; Gratz, Rosenthal, Tull, Lejuez, & Gunderson, 2010; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Indeed, our central argument is that shame and anger are so closely associated because the power of shame's social selection pressure (i.e., social exclusion) required multiple strategies (i.e., emotion-regulation or coping) that co-opted previous adaptations. These adaptations include physical pain components (Eisenberger, 2011; Elison, 2005), humans' general threat-defense mechanism (MacDonald & Leary, 2005), and dominant versus submissive displays and behaviors related to rank (Gilbert, 1997; Weisfeld & Dillon, 2012). Such adaptations are enabled by underlying neurological structures or pathways. In this article, we argue that many instances of aggression would be better understood as reactions to shame.

In a related article (Velotti, Elison, & Garofalo, 2014-in this issue), we review the shame and aggression literatures in order to explore the many contexts in which the shame–aggression link is evident. Across the board, those studies are consistent with, and provide further evidence for, the evolutionary and psychobiological links from shame to anger and aggression described here. In both articles, we stress the point that social threats are ubiquitous, taking endless forms – manifesting in intimate partner violence, bullying, antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, as well as minor occurrences of slights, embarrassments, and mistakes in everyday life.

## 2. Negative emotionality and aggression

Negative emotions are characterized by specific neural pathways (Lane, Fink, Chau, & Dolan, 1997) and neuropsychological mechanisms (Taylor, Dickerson, & Klein, 2002), and the link between negative emotions and aggression is often reported in the literature (DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2012; Elison & Harter, 2007; Gilligan, 2003; Scheff, 2011; Scheff & Retzinger, 2002; Shanahan, Jones, & Thomas-Peter, 2011; Steiner et al., 2011; Stuewig, Tangney, Heigel, Harty, & McCloskey, 2010; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezelek, 2011; Walker & Knauer, 2011). In an attempt to find a common theoretical ground underlying the emotion–aggression relationship, many authors highlight the possible causal role of traumatic experiences during childhood (Levinson & Fonagy, 2004; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Pfafflin & Adshead, 2004), as well as relative poverty and social disadvantage (Fonagy, 1999). Moreover, negative emotionality heightens dysregulation, triggering aggressive behavior (Robertson, Daffern, & Bucks, 2012). Of particular relevance to the current review, experimental results do indeed demonstrate that social exclusion and shame diminish self-regulation, increasing anger and aggression (Dansie, 2006; DeWall & Bushman, 2011; Jones & Elison, 2013; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Thomaes et al., 2011; Wright, Gudjonsson, & Young, 2008).

Due to the recent shift of attention toward discrete emotions and their specificity in the interpersonal encounter (Van Kleef, 2009; Velotti, Zavattini, & Garofalo, 2013; Walle & Campos, 2012), some authors recommend disentangling the broad concept of negative emotionality by focusing on the influences of specific emotions in predicting

aggressive behavior (Tellegen, Watson, & Clark, 1999). To date, most researchers interested in the study of the emotion–aggression link have focused their attention on the well documented role of anger (Berkowitz, 2012; Davey et al., 2005; Novaco, 1994, 2007), with few studies (e.g., Izard et al., 2008) examining other emotions. The role of these latter feelings may be more subtle and perhaps more insidious.

### 2.1. From the study of anger to the focus on shame

In this paper, we focus on neurobiological and evolutionary perspectives that help elucidate the links from shame to aggression, as well as the importance of shame-regulation in mediating these links. Shame is a painful, self-focused affect, depicted as one of the most difficult emotions to identify and to attribute to oneself (Lewis, 1971). It is conceptualized as an affect elicited by devaluation of the self, especially when the shamed is aware of having violated a standard held by others (Elison, 2005; Fessler, 2007; Gilbert, 2007; Gilligan, 2003; Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2013; Scheff, 1987, 2009). Although many theorists view shame as being exceptionally painful, even devastating to one's sense of self (e.g., Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002), we believe this to be a very Western perspective (Elison, 2005). Shame varies in intensity. It can be horribly painful at times, yet, at other times, it can be so mild that it is experienced at non-conscious levels (Elison, 2005; Scheff, 1988). Moreover, both shame and its anticipation are ubiquitous in modern societies, yet shame is largely invisible (Scheff, 1988). Within this review, we conceptualize shame as a basic emotion family, which includes embarrassment, humiliation, and mortification as members (Elison, 2005; Izard, 1977; Nathanson, 1992; Scheff, 1988; Tomkins, 1963; Weisfeld & Dillon, 2012). Therefore, our use of the term *shame* is broad, encompassing all of these painful emotional experiences, which share devaluation of the self as their common antecedent.<sup>1</sup>

According to Fonagy (2004), “the act of violence (...) is rarely one of blind rage. Rather, it is a desperate attempt to protect the fragile self against the onslaught of shame, mostly innocently triggered by another” (p. 42). In pathological cases such as borderline personality disorder, where shame may be experienced as having power to destroy the self, violence toward the other might be the only way of reducing the discomfort (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004; Nathanson, 1994). From an evolutionary perspective, shame warns of a potential threat to one's life, via impending social exclusion; violence, in turn, is best understood as a defense. While borderline personality disorder and social exclusion illustrate the extreme dynamics of shame, everyone faces negative evaluations by others and associated loss of status, rank, or reputation. We now turn to details of evolutionary and neurobiological mechanisms.

## 3. Evolutionary and psychobiological perspectives linking shame to aggression

Explanations for a fairly direct link between shame and anger/aggression can be made at two levels of analysis. At the higher, psychological level, the link between shame and anger follows from an evolutionary perspective. Shame, anger, and aggression are responses to loss of rank, status, or relational value (DeWall & Bushman, 2011; Dickerson et al., 2009; Elison, 2005; Fessler, 2007; Gilbert, 1997, 2007; Weisfeld & Dillon, 2012). In this context, shame and aggression are viewed as evolutionary adaptations in response to the demands placed on members of social species that organize themselves into rank hierarchies. Gilbert (1997) describes two types of hierarchies: dominance and attraction.

<sup>1</sup> Distinctions between shame and guilt are controversial. Some theorists would include guilt in the shame family. Others view shame as maladaptive and guilt as adaptive, with guilt being unrelated or negatively related to anger and violence (e.g., Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). We view guilt as an emotional situation with which a number of basic emotions may be associated (Elison, 2005; e.g., shame due to implications for the self versus sadness for the effects of one's actions on others). Therefore, guilt experiences fit within our definition and review only to the degree that they are laden with shame.

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