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ScienceDirect
Children and Youth Services Review 30 (2008) 631–638
Children and Youth Services Review
www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Shame and intimate abuse: The critical missing link between cause and cure

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Available online 4 February 2008

Abstract

Intimate abuse scholars have not, in general, recognized how central shame is in motivating *perpetrators* toward violence and in overshadowing a *victim's* experience of abuse. By teasing out what I call the shameful experience, victim and offender may gain new insight into the origins of violence. Acknowledging that shame is entwined both in the precipitation and reaction to violence provides a critical missing link in understanding the phenomenon of intimate abuse. Developing new mechanisms for identifying and addressing shame may be key to interrupting violence, as well as preventing its transmission to the next generation of victims and offenders.

Keywords: Shame; Domestic violence; Intimate abuse; Victims; Perpetrators; Treatment

1. Introduction: defining shame and its differential effects

Shame is defined as "a painful feeling of having lost the respect of others because of the improper behavior, incompetence, etc., of oneself or another" (Neufeldt and Guralnik, 1986, p. 1232). Psychologically speaking, shame is a "negative and disturbing emotional experience involving feelings of self-condemnation and the desire to hide the damaged self from others" (Feiring & Taska, 2005, p. 337). One devastating aspect of this emotion is that people often blame themselves for a shameful experience even when they only passively participated (Feiring & Taska, 2005). Harper and Arias (2004) have argued that the "humiliation" and "defeat" associated with shame is often endemic to victims of child maltreatment, suggesting that the child experiencing shame need not actually be to blame, although he or she may still internalize such feelings.

How shame ultimately manifests in one's behavior varies from person to person. Some have observed distinctions by gender. Harper and Arias (2004), for example, have argued that women tend to react to shame by turning inward or getting depressed, whereas men react to shame with anger. Buchbinder and Eisikovits (2003) observe that female victims of domestic violence tend to "silence the self" (Jack, 1991), through "gendered messages of shame" from their families of origin (p. 364). Shame also affects whether, developmentally, in subsequent interactions, a person is likely

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doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.01.010

to become a perpetrator or victim of violence—or both. Examining shame's origins in childhood victimization and in the role it may play in the perpetration of violence helps illuminate how this emotion can be better identified and addressed in treatment.

1.1. Shame's origins in childhood, adult aggression and victimization—the cycle of abuse

Miriam Ehrensaft et al. (2003) conducted a study that followed 543 children over a 20-year period. This study found that children exposed to intimate abuse in their families of origin, both as witnesses to violence between parents and as recipients of physical abuse themselves, were substantially more likely to become the victims of intimate abuse as adults when compared to those people who were not exposed. It is also well documented that victimization in childhood may lead to adult aggression and violence (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Kilpatrick, 2004; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; van der Kolk, 1989). While the labels "victim" and "offender" seem to belong to opposing categories, "the same individual can move successively, or even simultaneously, from one role to the other" (Fattah, 2000, p.80). Predictably, several researchers, including Joy Osofsky (1999), have found that studies of children reveal that they react to violence differently: either by withdrawal and/or aggression, and that such reactions, as noted, can be tracked by gender (Carlson, 1991; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson & Zak, 1986). Men's shame has been most often identified with aggression and women's shame most likely to manifest in depression (Harper & Arias, 2004), although these gender reactions may be evolving as gender roles have correspondingly changed over time (Garbarino, 2006).

Jac Brown (2004) explains that violent men often experienced trauma in childhood and notes that the link between shame and violence may be "fostered by inadequate self-object experiences from growing up which may be perpetuated in intimate relationships …" (p.44). As James Gilligan (1996) has proposed, aggression is used to minimize or disguise the underlying shame of victimization in childhood, replacing the humiliation of being shamed in the first place with the power of shaming others. Michael Levy (1998), who studied victims of sexual abuse, explains that when violence begets violence, it is a "defensive stance that ensures that the terror and helplessness related to the old traumatic situation or relationship do not get reexperienced" (p. 229). In other words, people fight first to prevent the possibility of being hurt again.

Shame stemming from childhood victimization may not only motivate people to commit violence, but also may motivate a person to hide an abusive experience and turn it inward. When a victim internalizes the violence as her fault, she may be inhibited from discussing the events openly (Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2003). Hiding the abusive experience and the corresponding shame can cause a person to blame oneself for what happened; this in turn can cause life-long problems including depression, suicidal ideation, and the propensity to be attracted to self-destructive relationships, including abusive partners (Miller, 1994).

1.2. Shame's role in perpetrating violence

James Gilligan (1996) is one of the few scholars today who has written about the relationship between shame and violence from a perpetrator's point of view. Gilligan, a psychiatrist, worked for many years with criminal offenders in prison. Gilligan starts his 1996 book, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*, with his own family history and the question: What is violence? Gilligan squarely lays out how the feeling of shame motivates people to commit violent acts. He argues that the purpose of violence is to "replace shame with pride" (p. 111).

Sociologist Lonnie Athens (1989) agrees with Gilligan's assessment. Athens has studied violent criminals for more than 20 years, and draws his work from over 100 in-depth interviews with men and women of all races, classes, and religions. His samples ranged in age from 15 to 40 years old, and all were incarcerated for having committed violent crimes when he interviewed them. Athens describes how "coaching" is a key factor in creating the violent person. Coaching occurs when one individual (often an adult or parent figure) literally teaches a young person ("trainee") how to become violent. The violent coach, Athens contends, is motivated by his or her own shame, which in turn is used to encourage the trainee to use violence. Driven by the question: "How can you bring shame on 'me' by not fighting back?", the coach shames the trainee into violence in order to vindicate the coach's shame ("You have to go back and fight that person, otherwise, what are you? Nothing.") Athens believes that all violence is social by nature (involving more than one person), and a form of competition for dominance. This is where Athens and Gilligan converge most distinctly in their thinking: The violence is an effort by one party over another to replace the shame with the pride that comes by claiming a dominant position.