



Social–emotional origins of violence: A theory of multiple killing

Thomas J. Scheff*

Dept of Sociology, UCSB, 3009 Lomita Road, Santa Barbara, CA, 93105, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 November 2008
Received in revised form 8 November 2010
Accepted 4 March 2011
Available online 26 March 2011

Keywords:

Violence
Recursion
Alienation
Unacknowledged shame
Anger
Social–emotional world

ABSTRACT

This essay outlines a cybernetic theory of violence, supporting and extending earlier studies, particularly Gilligan and Websdale. It spells out recursive, interactive processes of alienation and emotion. The theory proposes that most violence is caused by the interaction between alienation and what Gilligan called secret shame, shame about shame. Recursion need not stop in one round: there may be no natural limit for the resultant spirals. A chain reaction of vengefulness, a shame/anger derivative, can be produced in this way. Two spirals are described: shame/rage and shame/shame. Studies and accounts of multiple killings offer preliminary support. The idea may be applicable to collective behavior also, such as gratuitous wars. Websdale's cases of calmly planned familicide seem particularly relevant to the origins of wars, such as WWI, in which vengeance seems to have played a major part. It would appear that the humiliation–revenge cycle is the most dangerous element in human existence. The last section offers some tentative first steps toward decreasing violence. To the extent that the theory proposed here is true, we face the dilemma of how to present it to a civilization in which the social–emotional world is virtually invisible.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Contents

1. How much shame?	454
2. Case studies	454
3. Shame and violence	454
4. Isolation and feeling traps	455
5. Emotion spirals	456
6. Recursion of emotions and alienation in killers	456
7. Alienation	457
8. Collective violence	457
9. Media and masses	457
10. Response of historians	458
11. Remedies	458
12. Alienated students	459
13. Conclusion.	459
14. Summary	459
References	459

This article describes social–emotional processes leading to killings, and preliminary steps that might help avoid future ones.¹ Because there is a large amount of background information about

multiple killers, and several empirical studies, their cases are used to illustrate the theory. To suggest the possibility that the theory may also apply on a larger scale, some historical materials related to the origins of World War I are also included.

The most useful steps toward a general theory of the emotional causes of violence were suggested by Gilligan (1997), based on his experiences with violent men as a prison psychiatrist.

The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence... Shame is a necessary but not a sufficient cause of

* Tel.: +1 805 687 6145.

E-mail address: scheff@soc.ucsb.edu.

¹ This article uses the term multiple killing, rather than spree, rampage, mass, or serial killing. I am indebted to Robert Fuller for his comments on an earlier draft, to Chris Poulsen for his help with the large literature on multiple killings, and to Suzanne Retzinger for her support and encouragement.

violence, just as the tubercle bacillus is necessary but not sufficient for the development of tuberculosis. The different forms of violence, whether toward individuals or entire populations, are motivated (caused) by shame. (pp. 110–111)

[There are three preconditions under which shame leads to violence.] The first precondition is that the shame is a secret probably the most carefully guarded secret held by violent men... The degree of shame that a man needs to be experiencing in order to become homicidal is so intense and so painful that it threatens to overwhelm him and bring about the death of the self, cause him to lose his mind, his soul, or his sacred honor.

The idea that secret shame is the prime cause of violence is very important, but needs to be elaborated. Normal emotions are hardly overwhelming because they are brief and instructive. Fear is a signal of imminent danger, but usually comes and goes in a few seconds, like other normal emotions. Similarly, normal shame and embarrassment are brief signals of actual or potential rejection by other(s). What kind of dynamic can result in feeling overwhelmed by painful emotions to the point of losing all inhibition? We will return to this question below, after considering Gilligan's other two conditions.

...The second precondition for violence is met when these men perceive themselves as having no nonviolent means of warding off or diminishing their feelings of shame, ...such as socially rewarded economic or cultural achievement, or high social status, position, and prestige. (p. 112)

The third precondition ...is that the person lacks feelings that inhibit the violent impulses that are stimulated by shame. The most important are love and guilt toward others, and fear for the self. ... (p. 113)

Finally, there is a fourth issue implied: Since Gilligan worked only in male prisons, his perpetrators are all men. As discussed below, the majority of multiple killers are men, but there is also a small minority of women.

1. How much shame?

The question of conditions in which secret shame leads to violence turns out to be important, because it seems reasonable to assume that shame, or the anticipation of shame, is virtually omnipresent in most people, especially secret shame. The idea that people spend much of their time and energy involved in or avoiding shame or embarrassment, if possible, and managing it if not, was central to much of the writing of Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1959). One example:

"...there is no interaction in which participants do not take an appreciable chance of being slightly embarrassed or a slight chance of being deeply humiliated." (1959, p. 243, emphasis added).

If this sentence is taken literally, it means that shame and/or the anticipation of shame haunts ALL social interaction. Avoidance of shame/embarrassment/humiliation is the driving force behind Goffman's central idea of impression management. Two studies that suggest a very high frequency of shame-related episodes in ordinary life will be discussed below.

The idea that shame issues are a virtually continuous presence in human affairs seems odd in modern societies because they foster the doctrine of individualism. We are taught that each person is a sovereign entity, self-reliant, standing alone. This emphasis is just a pipedream, since flourishing and even surviving is completely dependent upon recognition and help from others.

Finally, there is an issue of secret shame that makes trouble, but no violence. Many years ago Cressey's (1953), study of persons jailed for embezzlement shows that every case involved what he called a "non-

shareable financial problem," in Gilligan's terminology, a secret (see also Braithwaite, 1989). Similarly, many studies have suggested that bullying, which usually involves only threats of violence, are linked to secret shame (Ahmed, et al., 2001). This essay will propose that it is not just secret shame, but endlessly recursive shame that leads to violence.

2. Case studies

In the US, at least, many of the multiple killers have been loners who were harassed and ostracized. Yet most people treated that way don't shoot anyone or even make trouble. What could be special about the killers? It may be that shame might be the problem. Although they use the word rejection, rather than shame, Leary et al's (2003) review of school shootings come to a similar conclusion. Again, they don't use the term isolation, but it is implied in their analysis.

Before developing the theory further, first some examples are offered to illustrate the theory. Tyler Peterson was a 19 year old who killed six in Crandon, Wisconsin (Oct. 8, 2007 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel). He had gone to his on-again, off-again girlfriend's house in the middle of the night and instead of patching up their relationship, argued with her. One of the persons gathered at her home for a party called him a "worthless pig". He went home, got his AR-17 machine gun, and returned to kill all of the gathering but one. According to one of his friends, Peterson had been picked on in high school because he was not originally from Crandon, and not an athlete.

Cho Seung-Hui was the 23-year old killer in the spree at Virginia Tech in 2007. Like Peterson and all of the other school killers, he was an isolated male loner who felt rejected. Many of his written complaints imply that he was rejecting those that he felt had rejected him, a strong indication of shame. There are also plentiful indications of isolation. One of his teachers reported, "He was the loneliest person I have ever known." His roommate commented that often he didn't respond at all when spoken to, or with only one word.

In Cho's writings, there are many indications of shame and humiliation. He often mentioned others' disrespect for him and those like him. In one instance he referred directly to humiliation: "Kill yourselves or you will never know how the dorky kid that [you] publicly humiliated and spat on will come behind you and slash your throats." (Washington Post, August 29, 2007).

His claim to being publicly humiliated could be either true or imagined, since there is at this writing no outside support for it. However, there is such support in the case of Jennifer San Marcos. She was the 44-year-old killer in the Goleta, California post office spree in 2006, killing 7 persons and herself. An investigator who requested anonymity spoke with many of Jennifer's co-workers for several weeks after the spree.

The investigator was surprised to find that with only one exception, the 18 co-workers interviewed expressed deep sympathy not only for the victims, but also for Jennifer. They all told roughly the same story. She was fired because of her mental illness, which had led to periodic misbehavior on the job. On the night she was fired after her latest outburst, she was handcuffed to a mail cart by the management, awaiting the arrival of the police. During the extended period of waiting, she was in full view of her co-workers, as if she were in stocks. Because this part of the story shows management in a bad light, it has not been mentioned in the media. Perhaps anyone, mentally ill, or not, would feel intense humiliation under these circumstances.

3. Shame and violence

The role of humiliation in multiple killing was suggested by Gaylin (2003, p. 60) in his analysis of hatred:

The rampage of an ex-employee at the workplace is often the product of ...a perceived public humiliation, where the "public" may be only his fellow employees at the post office.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/94650>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/94650>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)