

# **Thomas J. Scheff: When Shame Gets Out of Hand**

Though we may not think of it often, part of what makes humans unique is our capacity for emotion. Turner and Stets (2005) argue that “emotions are what make social structures and systems of cultural symbols viable” (p. 1); in fact, “as natural selection rewired the human brain, it not only enlarged the neocortex, enabling humans to develop culture, but it also rewired ancient emotion centers and, in essence, gave these more power as well” (p. 6). Emotions then, are a basic feature of social life. Thomas J. Scheff is especially concerned with how emotion is used to maintain social interactions and connections. But more than that, Scheff wants to know what happens inside people when social emotions aren’t properly used and disposed.

Scheff (1990) begins with an assumption about human nature and motivation. Humans are intrinsically social and as such the “most crucial human motive” is the maintenance of social bonds (p. 4). The deep seated motivation to preserve social bonds is what makes society an ongoing concern: the consistent, individual motivation to be socially connected implies that people will constantly seek out social bonds and will be stimulated to preserve them. These bonds, of course, are established in infancy but in adulthood they are constantly tested and rejuvenated, which adds a degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty implies that adults will be particularly diligent in monitoring their social bonds. Adult social connections also require a balance between closeness and distance, between social group cohesion and individuality. This need for balance provides a further catalyst for close monitoring. The proper balance between the individual and the group produces attunement, the “joint attention to thoughts, feelings, intentions, and motives between individuals but also between groups” (p. 199).

Scheff elaborates his assumption about human nature by arguing that interactions require two kinds of systems: communication systems (like language) and deference-emotion systems. The communication system involves verbal and non-verbal cues. In our text, Blumer and Goffman give us ways of understanding some of these elements of the communication system. But being able to converse isn’t all that is needed to carry off a successful interaction. The interaction must also be monitored to preserve attunement. Goffman argues that embarrassment functions in this capacity. In every situation, there are virtual and real selves. The virtual self is made up of the idealized expectations that go along with a particular self or identity. The real self is made up from the individual’s actual behaviors. Embarrassment is an interactional device that keeps these two selves from getting too far apart. In every situation and with every behavior we run the risk of not living up to the situation’s idealized expectations; embarrassment is thus a constant threat. If we fail to live up to the expectations, we will be embarrassed in front of others, something we are motivated to avoid. Goffman called the work we do to avoid and repair

embarrassment “face work.” Notice that I said that embarrassment is an *interactional* device; it is something that is done among people within an interaction. Scheff argues that there is a social psychological component to the deference-emotion system as well. Embarrassment works *among* people, shame works *within* people.

Scheff argues that because people are motivated to maintain social bonds, pride and shame are the most basic and powerful of all social emotions. Here Scheff is drawing on Charles Horton Cooley’s notion of the looking-glass self. Cooley argued that people are almost continually monitoring their behaviors. There are three phases to this monitoring. First, we imagine what we look like to other people. It isn’t enough for us to know what we look like in a physical mirror; we have to know what that image looks like to others. So, we imagine it. We put ourselves in their shoes and look back at our self. Second, we imagine how they feel about how we look. Do they like the way we look or not? Am I dressed and acting appropriately? And, then, third, we have an emotional response to their feelings. That emotional response is either pride or shame.

Pride and shame are intense emotions, because they guard the social bond. Pride is felt by the individual when the social bond is intact, and shame results when the bond is threatened or severed. And both of these are socially reflective emotions. That is, they come about almost exclusively as the result of the kind of comparisons that Cooley talked about. The pride that a football player demonstrates after he makes a touchdown is certainly pride in his own accomplishment, but it is the fact that the touchdown was accomplished in front of a crowd that generates the pride. He is proud because he maintained and strengthened the social bonds with his team and its fans. The same is true with shame. Think about a football player who drops the ball. Dropping the ball threatens the social bond with the team and the fans. Typically, the football player doesn’t shrug his shoulders after dropping the ball. He may hang his head or shake his fist in a downward movement, indicating shame and one of its companion emotions, anger. Or, he may do nothing at all—shame is often unacknowledged.

The interesting thing about pride and shame is that they act differently. Pride is usually expressed directly and cleanly. It is a joyous emotion that invites public displays, within, of course, cultural limits. Shame, on the other hand, is something dark that invites us to hide or downplay it. In order to document this tendency of shame, Scheff (1990) cites the work of research psychoanalyst Helen Lewis (pp. 15 – 19). In the cases that Lewis studied, there was a marked change in the patients’ manner when they felt they were being negatively evaluated (negative evaluation is “the central context for shame” (p. 86)). The patients became sullen, demonstrated speech interruptions (such as stammering), and there were marked decreases in the volume of the patients’ voice. The most interesting thing to both Lewis and Scheff is that the shame was never named. When feelings were named, they were called low self-esteem, feeling foolish, stupid, inadequate, awkward, exposed, vulnerable, and so forth; but they were never called shame. Lewis characterizes this type as *overt and undifferentiated shame*: the person overtly acts out the feeling but it is experienced as a diffuse negative emotion. Shame remains unacknowledged.

Shame can also be bypassed. *Bypassed shame* appears to be directly experienced as shame yet it is avoided. With undifferentiated shame, the mind seems to slow down, burdened under the inability to identify the emotion. With bypassed shame, the mind seems to be working hard at keeping away from the issue. Patients experiencing this type of shame became obsessive. Their talk sped up and they endlessly repeated a story or series of stories. These patients were intellectually active but unable to make decisions or resolve issues. Lewis characterizes this state as an “insoluble dilemma.” In this state the patient seems to “be taken up with the unresolved scene to the point that she is unable to

become effectively involved in events in the present even though there is no obvious disruption” (p. 87). The patient seems to be avoiding the emotional pain of shame before it can be completely felt.

With both bypassed and undifferentiated shame, shame is hidden, which explains why we are so rarely aware of it. Scheff, like Mead and Cooley, argues that we are almost continually evaluating our self socially, even when we are alone; this kind of monitoring implies evaluation that results in either pride or shame; thus, “adults are virtually always in a state of either pride or shame, usually of a quite unostentatious kind” (p. 82). Yet we rarely experience shame because shame tends to be hidden. Part of the reason that shame is concealed is due to our culture. Scheff argues that modern societies have developed two defenses against feeling the loss of secure social bonds: the myth of individualism and a simplistic understanding of the relationship between individuals and the social environment. Both of these give us an ideological base from which to deny shame.

Another reason that shame tends to be hidden is that shame is recursive; that is, it reacts back on itself. As I noted earlier, pride is fairly straightforward: it is felt and expressed within cultural limits. We can experience the same pride numerous times in different situations with different people. For example, you can show your new tattoo to different people who understand its meaning and each time feel a sense of strong social bonds (pride). We can thus experience pride repeatedly, but pride doesn’t act back on itself: we usually aren’t proud because we experience pride. Even saying “I’m proud of my pride” sounds intuitively odd. We can, however, experience additional shame because we feel shame: “My shame shames me.”

It is actually a bit more complex than that. Shame has accompanying emotions, the most important of which is anger. Because of shame, we become angry at our self for getting us into the situation, or we might feel anger at the situation, or we might be angry with the other person for instigating or pointing out the issue that brought us shame in the first place. But shame doesn’t stop with anger: anger destroys social bonds, even the social bond with our self, and so we feel further shame. We tend to hide shame, then, because its presence creates more shame.

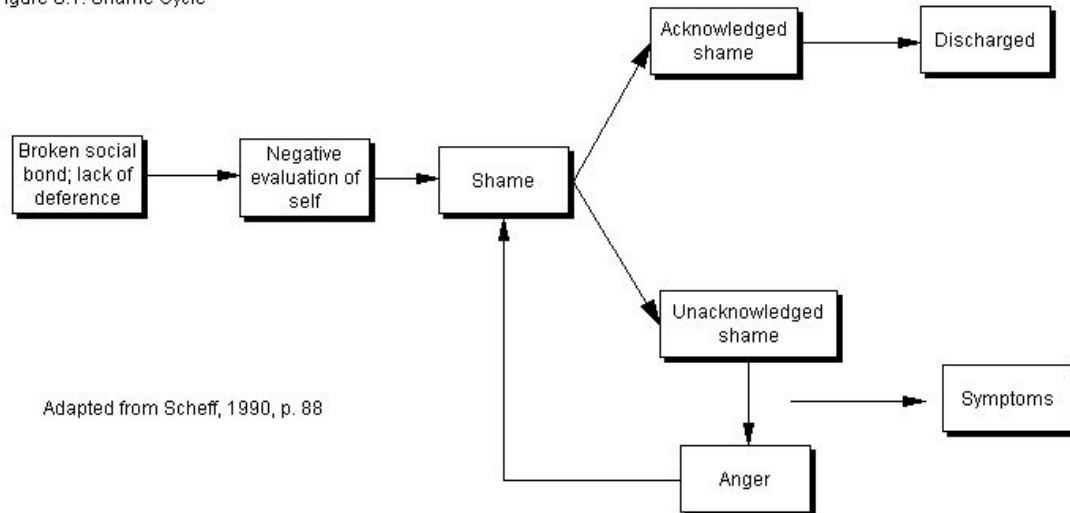
Yet, hiding a recursive process doesn’t make it go away or stop. In fact, if left unattended, recursive loops tend to cycle through almost endlessly. In this case, shame and anger cycle back and forth mutually reinforcing one another. Scheff calls this a feeling trap. A *feeling trap* is an emotional loop that is generally bound together by shame. We can experience a number of intense emotions, such as grief, fear, normal anger, and so on. These are usually felt and then discharged in the normal course of life. However, if we feel ashamed of our emotion, and the shame isn’t acknowledged, then “a repeating loop of self-perpetuating emotions may occur” (p. 199). These repeating loops can potentially take place within three locales or levels: within a person, between two people (embarrassment is contagious), or a combination of both. Scheff refers to the latter as a “triple spiral:” a loop within each of the participants and the third loop between them.

I’ve diagrammed Scheff’s idea of the shame cycle in Figure S.1. Shame begins with a feeling that the social bond has been broken. In these situations we sense a lack of deference or respect, as well as a negative evaluation of self by others and our self. The resultant shame can be acknowledged or unacknowledged. According to Scheff, acknowledging shame for what it is discharges the shame. Recognizing shame prevents anger, which is one of the triggers that begins the recursive loop. Acknowledging shame also creates a situation where it is possible to feel pride, pride at repairing or preserving the social bond. Unacknowledged shame creates the feeling trap and results in some predictable consequences and symptoms, for both the person and their social bonds. We’ve noted some of these effects already, such as decreased or rapid talking, depending

on whether the shame is undifferentiated or bypassed. But one of the more important effects of unacknowledged shame is low self-esteem.

### Figure S.1 about here

Figure S.1: Shame Cycle



Self-esteem is a diffuse feeling of how we are standing up to evaluation. Obviously, if the evaluation is high, our sense of self-admiration will be too; and the opposite is true as well. As Scheff argues, one of the most important points for self-evaluation, if not the most important point, concerns social bonds. We are constantly monitoring our self in terms of whether or not we are maintaining or breaking social connections. As we've seen, embarrassment is the outward and shame the inward expression of a broken social bond. Thus, "low self-esteem might be conceptualized as a tendency toward endlessly recursive shame, spirals of potentially limitless intensity and duration" (p. 93). Scheff argues that self-esteem feeling traps can set up explosive chain reactions, such as "explosive episodes of acute panic (a shame-fear alternation), resentment (shame-anger alternation, with anger directed out), and guilt (shame-anger sequences, with the anger directed in)" (p. 93).

Interestingly, Scheff also links self-esteem to genius. Randall Collins argues that creativity is linked to specific kinds of ritual patterns: long periods of solitude linked with short, but intense ritualized activities. This pattern allows the individual the freedom from social constraint that is necessary for creativity as well as the needed emotional energy to propose and defend new ideas. Scheff argues that two additional components are necessary for the development of genius: nurtured talent and high self-esteem. Scheff assumes a broad range of talent; that is, most people are talented in one or many fields. And Scheff takes language acquisition in the young as the archetypical nurturing of talent: quite a bit of the literature in modern linguistics indicates that language is so complex that even the simplest expressions are acts of genius.

Scheff thus asks, "If humans have the capacity for genius in all areas, not just in language, why does genius appear in everyone in language but almost never in other areas?" (p. 159) Scheff notes five qualities of language acquisition that may give provide initial guidance: 1) infants are exposed to language almost from the moment they are born; 2) language acquisition is utterly interactive; 3) training in language is given by experts (native speakers); 4) language instruction is built up using the child's own

spontaneous gestures; and 5) the pattern of reward and punishment is unique: parents generally concentrate on rewarding progress rather than punishing error, and the rewards are emotionally exuberant.

There are obvious lessons that we can glean from these points, which Scheff argues may help release creative genius. One such example is training by experts. Scheff claims that there is a general pattern among recorded geniuses: most were exposed to early training by experts, such as artists, musicians, and so on. However, Scheff's main concern is with the place that self-esteem has in enabling genius: "for genius to appear, the bearer must have extraordinarily high self-esteem, be able to catch his or her first thoughts in flight, and have the confidence to develop and express these thoughts" (173). We can see some links between the five points of language acquisition and this issue of self-esteem. One clear link is the reward and punishment pattern. Concentrating on rewards for success rather than punishment for failure will preserve social bonds and give the child or adult a sense of pride and, thus, high self-esteem.

But there is perhaps a more important point to bring out about self-esteem and genius. As I noted earlier, shame can be acknowledged or unacknowledged; if unacknowledged, a feeling trap is almost unavoidable. But once begun, how can we escape a feeling trap? Scheff tells us that most of our attempts fail. Often times we chastise our self, "you should be ashamed for doing that to your friend." Once we understand the dynamic of shame, it is obvious that tactic only worsens the trap. A frequent technique used in counseling is to get the client or patient to "act out" their feelings. This method doesn't usually work because it ignores the shame component and it often times results in the client feeling embarrassed due to the artificiality of the emotion and situation.

The one technique that "almost always dispels shame is laughter" (p. 172). It seems that Scheff includes both the direct and general features of laughter in this technique. Laughter is directly related to shame in the moment. Shame and embarrassment usually stem from specific moments of inappropriate behavior that threaten social bonds. If in those moments we laugh rather than becoming embarrassed, the incident is redefined and the social bonds are preserved in that laughter is contagious. Laughter also has general characteristics that appear to have diffuse, positive effects. In the last few years, laughter has been getting quite a bit of press as a restorative health technique. Any brief internet search will find literally hundreds of thousands of sites and news articles relating to the benefits of laughter. There are references to "laughter medicine," "laughter yoga," international laughter clubs, and such organizations as the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. Both the general effects of laughter and the situational use of laughter disrupt the shame cycle: "Good-natured laughter, if it occurs immediately when shame is evoked, avoids entry into the spiral. If it occurs when the spiral is in operation, it ends the cycle" (p. 172).

Because of the link between the shame/pride cycle and self-esteem, and the link between self-esteem and genius, Scheff argues that a defining characteristic of geniuses is that they are laughers, especially during their most creative periods. Scheff gives numerous examples, but his most compelling evidence comes from the diaries of Richard Wagner's wife. Wagner is a noted composer from the Romantic period; he is most famous for his opera, *The Ring*, which takes about 16 hours to perform. In the diaries, there are more than 300 entries about Wagner's laughter. Most of the entries come from the first part of the diaries, which correspond to Wagner's creative period, and give accounts of "prolonged, hearty, and completely involving fits of laughter" (p. 174). The use of laughter to dispel shame will require much more empirical work; but Scheff does leave us with an interesting theoretical point.

**Summary:**

Scheff focuses on the use of emotion in creating and maintaining society. However, Scheff is concerned with individual motivation rather than the situation. Scheff's specific interest is how pride and shame function to preserve social bonds. Pride is the feeling that accompanies actions that preserve social bonds and shame is the feeling that results from threatened or broken bonds. However, this function of shame is often stifled in that we typically hide shame. Hidden or unacknowledged shame results in a feeling trap wherein anger and shame mutually reinforce one another. These feeling traps can lead to a number of issues, the most noteworthy of which is poor self-esteem.

**References**

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- Turner, J. H. and J. E. Stets. (2005). *The sociology of emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.