

Hidden Shame as a Cause of Violence

Thomas Scheff

Professor Emeritus, University of California, SantaBarbara, USA

The psychiatrist James Gilligan (1997) contended that shame is a key but completely hidden cause of violence, based on his long experience as a prison psychiatrist. He made it a practice of questioning those prisoners who had committed murder. When he asked them why they killed, their answers were often very similar: "He dissed (disrespected) me. What did you expect me to do?" On the basis of these responses, Gilligan proposed that not only murder, but all violence was caused by what he called "secret shame:"

"The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence..."

Gilligan is referring not to shame in general, but to a specific kind:

"Shame is probably the most carefully guarded secret held by violent men..."

Gilligan states that secret shame is the cause of violence. Secrecy implies that one is ashamed of being ashamed. Gilligan goes on to describe how secret shame can cause extremes of pain:

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."

Some theories of the causes of violence have proposed that in modern societies, shame is not dealt with directly because it is felt to be shameful. It is difficult to fully convey the distaste the public has for shame: it might be said that most people abhor shame, not just the emotion itself, but thinking or talking about it, especially the word itself. The intensity of this abhorrence was conveyed clearly long ago by Rousseau (1789): "I dreaded shame: I dreaded it more than death ... more than all the world." In earlier writing, I proposed that this dread turns shame into a cause of violence, including war (Scheff 1994; 2011). The idea of honor and revenge, if repeated thoughtlessly and endlessly, seem to be one of many ways of hiding shame rather than dealing with it directly.

The awesome destructive power of secret shame might be explained as a feedback chain. Being ashamed of being ashamed is the first step. Such loops can go further, being ashamed, being ashamed of that, and ashamed of that, and so on. Or shame in a loop with anger: angry that one is ashamed, ashamed that one is angry, and round and round. The idea of an unending cybernetic loop seems to explain how shame, fear, or other emotions might become too powerful to bear and/or control.

An Alternative Route

Recall that when Gilligan asked about the killers' motives, a typical response was "He dissed (disrespected) me. What did you expect me to do?" A different expectation would be negotiation, talking first rather than violence first. An answer like this might work:

"Before we get real mad, let's try talking about it." Talk might be the road to getting an apology for an insult, which could be the road for reducing shame, or at least ceasing to hide it completely.

It is clear that before most wars, even vast ones, there was little or no negotiation. As a nation, France felt humiliated by the loss of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, and the terms of settlement the Germans imposed. However, during the forty-three years before World War I, they made no attempt to meet with the German government to negotiate about the terms. One of Hitler's greatest appeals to the German people was that he would see that the settlement of WWI would be destroyed, which was taken as humiliating. There was virtually no attempt to change the terms during the twenty-one years before the outbreak of WWII. These nations fought first, rather than last.

It should be pointed out that negotiations between nations or other groups might be most effective if they involve actual meetings, rather than letters or online. Meeting could be more effective in many ways. One that might not receive mention is that actual meetings allow for emphasizing respect between the representatives of the contending groups they represent. This direct kind of communication could be more effective toward dealing directly with anger and shame. Even small details, such as the sumptuousness of meals, might help develop rapport.

It seems that if we are going to reduce the amount of violence and war, we will have to teach ourselves, our children, and our governments to talk first, fight last, and even more difficult, deal with shame rather than hide it. Where to begin? One approach would be to talk about your shame, if not to the one who shamed you, to a friend or even to yourself. Repeat a mantra such as:

I am not ashamed, I am proud of myself.

Repeat a mantra until you come face to face with the bodily shame itself, not just the thought about it. Repeat the bodily shame sensation until it no longer feels so deadly serious, so that you can even find some humor in it. That might not solve the problem completely, but can be a first step.

REFERENCES

- Gilligan, J. (1997). *Violence – reflections on a national epidemic*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Rousseau, J.J. (1789). *Confessions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1987).
- Scheff, T. (1994). *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism, and War*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview
- Scheff, T. (2011). A Theory of Multiple Killing . *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 16(6), 453-460.

*Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to: xscheff@gmail.com