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You Should Be Ashamed — Or Maybe Not

Shame on you. These three simple words can temporarily — or, when used too often, permanently — destroy an individual’s sense of value and self-worth.

“In modernity, shame is the most obstructed and hidden emotion, and therefore the most destructive,” said Thomas Scheff, professor emeritus of sociology at UC Santa Barbara. “Emotions are like breathing — they cause trouble only when obstructed.”

When hidden, he continued, shame causes serious struggles not only for individuals but also for groups. In an article published in the current issue of the journal *Cultural Sociology*, Scheff examines the ubiquity of hidden shame and suggests it may be one of the keys to understanding contemporary society.

According to Scheff a society that fosters individualism (ours, for example) provides a ripe breeding ground for the emotion of shame because people are encouraged to “go it alone, no matter the cost to relationships,” he said. “People learn to act as if they were complete in themselves and independent of others. This feature has constructive and creative sides, but it has at least two other implications: alienation and the hiding of shame.”

Scheff noted that while shame is no less prevalent now than in previous years or decades or generations, it is more hidden. “Shame is a biological entity like other emotions, but people are more ashamed of it than they are of the others,” he said.

“The hiding of emotions is more widespread in modern societies than in traditional ones.”

In exploring the connection between shame and aggression, Scheff cites research conducted by sociologist Neil Websdale, author of “Familiocidal Hearts: The Emotional Styles of 211 Killers.” Familicide, the act of one spouse killing the other as well as their children and often himself or herself, stems from unacknowledged shame, Scheff said. “It’s about humiliation and hiding behind aggression or violence,” he explained. “The most interesting thing about the study is there’s a group of non-angry people — a minority — who lose their job and feel humiliated. So they pretend they’re going to work every day but are really planning the killing. Websdale describes them as ‘civic respectable.’

“Our society — our civilization — is civic respectable,” Scheff continued. “You’re not to be angry and you’re not to be ashamed.”

The problem with that kind of thinking, however, is that shame is, in reality, a very useful emotion. “Shame is the basis of morality,” Scheff said. “You can’t have a moral society without shame. It provides the weight for morality. There are a hundred things in your head about what you should or shouldn’t do, but the one that hits you is the one that has shame behind it.”

Scheff suggests that shame — or the reaction to it — can manifest itself in larger acts of aggression, such as wars and other military conflicts. “Especially for leaders, both shame and anger are carefully hidden behind a veil of rationality,” he writes in the article. “The Bush administration may have been deeply embarrassed by the 9/11 attack during their watch and their helplessness to punish the attackers. The invasion of Iraq on the basis of false premises might have served to hide their shame behind anger and aggression.”

While some people are more susceptible to the effects of shame, for others the emotion is more manageable. “Those lucky rascals who as children were treated with sympathetic attention from at least one of their caregivers feel more pride — accepted as they are — and, therefore, less shame and rejection,” Scheff said.

So how does one resolve hidden shame? The answer, according to Scheff, is to have a good laugh. “That is, laugh at yourself or at the universe or at your circumstances, but not at other people. Most of the laughing we do in comedy is good. No matter the actors, we are really laughing at our own selves that we see in their foolishness.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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