



Prologue: Shame: Sources and Trajectories

At that first signal of shame, I know that something is very wrong in my world, and I have a sinking feeling that that something is me. As the “most deeply personal of emotional experiences” (Nathanson, 1992, p. 21), shame makes its claim to the “whole self” (Lewis, 1971, p. 40) while at the same time depending for its existence on the gaze of the other. Shame in its most extreme form is marked by an “implosion of the self” (Laing, 1960, p. 46): one physiologically collapses. One becomes as small as is possible. One bows one’s head. One turns one’s body in on itself. One averts one’s eye. One longs to evaporate and yearns “not, as people say, to sink through the floor, but rather . . . that the space occupied by me should be instantaneously empty” (Williams, 1993, p. 89).

Shame can double in on itself. One feels that familiar sting of shame, only to then feel ashamed of feeling ashamed, then, of course, ashamed of feeling ashamed of feeling ashamed (Morrison, 2011). A patient lost in such recursions can stir the analyst’s lurking fear that they too are fundamentally not up to the task, primarily a charlatan and certainly a fraud, and now, as is evident, in the throes of their very own shameful experience of shame (Harris, 2011, p. 725). Even as it is hard to imagine an analytic session in which some element of shame – be it embarrassment, disgrace, shyness, defensive grandiosity, contempt, or rage – does not make its appearance, the contagious and transmittable elements of shame explain why it is so often evaded and avoided, even dissociated (Bromberg, 2006). Some have suggested that this means shame belongs neither to patient nor analyst, but is intersubjectively created and sustained, exacerbated surely, processed, even held, perhaps, by and through that relational context (Orange, 2008). Others, also noticing the propensity to evade, have rooted shame in the pernicious complementarity of doer/done-to dynamics (Benjamin, 2022). Irrespective of its relational form, the feature that comes out most starkly, perhaps more than any other, perhaps more than its marked intensity and its social contagion, is this: shame engenders hiding and thrives in concealment. What makes the theorizing of shame so thorny is not only that it elicits a rather wide range of always unpleasant affects (e.g., mortification, emptiness, embarrassment, humiliation, powerlessness, worthlessness, etc.), but that behind all those affects is a single message: hide yourself, avoid, cover up, conceal. That feature explains why shame remains “the Cinderella of the unpleasant emotions” (Rycroft, 1968). And that feature is the reason it is so remarkable that theorists have ventured again and again to cut a clearing for us through shame’s covering.

Our issue opens with an article by Daniel Goldin and Daniel Posner, which provides a kind of origin story of shame by describing how shame evolves through early childhood development. According to Goldin and Posner, shame in infancy comes about when the child falls out of state of participatory belonging with caregivers and companions. The authors trace how this shame experience changes its tenor as the infant gathers language and become initiated into a narrative practice with family members. Shame in the pre-verbal mode comes exclusively out of a loss of connection with a present other in the here-and-now. Shame in the verbal, or narrative mode may in addition entail a split between a self in the present and a self in the past that failed to live up to the expectations of others or to its own ideals. In both modes, Goldin and Posner see shame operating on a continuum; on one pole, as a signal to seek reconnection through action or explanation; at the other extreme, as a condemnation to exile.

Alexandra Murray Harrison focuses on situations in which children experience shame around “unacceptable” aggression. She provides a wonderful clinical example of working through a shame/aggression spiral in her work with 5 year-old “Sean,” who acts aggressively with Harrison perhaps out of shame at missing her after a short break in treatment. Through a complicated dance of block-destruction and doll-destruction and block-and-doll-reconstruction, Harrison lets Sean know that she isn’t afraid of his “big feelings” and that she doesn’t see them as “bad,” understanding them as somewhat separate from his modes of expression.

Daniel Shaw sees self-alienation, not only as a primary reason that many seek out psychotherapy, but as an expression of deeply internalized shame. Shaw’s paper brings together contemporary traumatology and his previous work on the traumatizing narcissist’s relational system of subjection to clarify shame’s role in self-alienation. By way of rich and textured clinical examples, Shaw lays bare the features of self-alienation – the shaming parts that attack and dominate the individual’s sense of self that keep out of view the parts that hold the drive to live and grow – and the ways that the therapeutic process can engender a compassionate curiosity. Such compassionate curiosity, Shaw shows, can lessen the grip of shame, and thereby allow the patient’s vulnerable parts to stand alongside the parts that long for expansion.

Aileen Alleyne also exposes what has been left out, certainly marginalized, and too often excluded from view and from discussions of shame. Through considerations of shame that emerge in Black and white relational dynamics, Alleyne illustrates the profound impact racialized shame can have on racial identity formation and development. After specifying key therapeutic issues and themes that require attention, Alleyne concludes with a consideration of sublimation, particularly spontaneous artistic expression, as a way of redirecting the impacts of racialized shame.

Allison Merrick asks what shame’s unremitting and global assessments – I am a failure, or I am worthless – can tell us about its moral value – and, more particularly, whether shame can serve noble socio-political or educational ends. In other words, Merrick asks: is shame instrumentally valuable? By remaining steadfastly close to the clinical descriptions of shame, Merrick shows the limits of shame as an emotion of moral and social reform by noticing that shame functions as if it has universal value. If this is so, if shame assumes for itself a universal value, if shame is a condition of being held captive by a totalizing vantagepoint, then working clinically with shame requires the introduction of alternative points of view.

Sally R. Munt’s piece is in the form of an interview with Goldin and Merrick. It is as brilliant as it is discursive and thus nearly impossible to summarize. The following are few excerpts – bread-crumbs we hope the reader will follow to read this fascinating piece in its entirety.

I’ve spent at least 30 years thinking about shame and its vicissitudes, for myself, and for the othered others who could never be wholly comfortable with brightly waving the flag of Pride.

Shame can usefully produce disidentifications, and this has the potential for creativity, and for new attachments, alliances, connections to form, as attention and energy is redirected ... Shame can inaugurate the relinquishment of painful attachments.

Key to understanding shame is to see it as an e-motion, a feeling that produces movements both intrapsychically and between people, and across human cultures, and these vacillations cause disattachments, re-attachments, and new attachments to form.

Drawing from infant research, David Shaddock sees shame as most frequently emerging from negating responses to grandiose excitement or, more generally, to mirroring failures. “Shame,” Shaddock writes, “often is a component of the dynamic of hopeful engagement and painful withdrawal that so many couples engage in.” He describes his work with a couple whose proneness toward shame prevented them from imagining their way into the other’s experience. By being attentive to his own shame-based states as well as to the shame behind the

couple's responses to each other, Shaddock was able to provide a clearing for the couple to experience each other with more breadth and depth.

Sandra Buechler takes a fresh look at the analyst's shame. More particularly, Buechler explores how shame manifests differently at various stages of a clinical career. Though a moving and deeply personal account, Buechler discusses each career phase – from analytic training, through the early, middle, and late – noticing and describing not only where shame tends to accumulate and pool but methods of coping with, even draining, those states.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Allison Merrick, Ph.D., Psy.D., is Associate Professor of Philosophy at California State University, San Marcos, and a trained Research Psychoanalyst with a clinical private practice. Merrick's research focuses in on how moral values shape self-understanding, particularly how those values can empower and enliven or constrain and deaden us. Her work has been published in the *European Journal of Philosophy*, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, *Psychoanalysis: Self and Context*, the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, and elsewhere.

Daniel Goldin, MFT, Psy.D., currently serves as editor of *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*. He has published numerous articles and co-hosts the podcast *The Conversation* with Daniel Posner. Daniel's book *Storying in Psychoanalysis and the Everyday World* will be published by Routledge early next year. Daniel is a training and supervising analyst affiliated with the Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis in California.

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