Social Shame vs. Private Shame: A Real Dichotomy

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Abstract

In the many studies of shame that have been carried out in several disciplines during the past years, shame has generally been understood as an emotion that bears importantly on our sense of self and has crucial implications for ethics. While most accounts of shame agree on several core aspects, notably taking shame to be an emotion of negative self-assessment, one main area of disagreement focuses on the question of whether shame is a social or a private emotion: whether it is essentially anxiety about the way others judge us, or rather about our faults or inadequacies as perceived and judged by ourselves. In my view, however, the dichotomy arises as a result of conceiving the moral self in restrictive terms, but phenomenology can offer a more adequate picture, that allows us to take into account and fully articulate both dimensions. Both the social and the private are necessary to understand this emotion and its special relevance for selfhood and ethics. My aim in this paper is therefore to challenge this dichotomy and point towards self-revelation as the essential feature of this emotion.

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This shame language creates a distinct social category, one in which we are not included and which is very difficult to exit. Brené Brown, a social work researcher at the University of Houston with a popular TED Talk on shame, explains this contrast in therapeutic terms. “Shame is highly, highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, eating disorders,” she says, while guilt is “inversely correlated with those things. What Crouch describes — a shame culture without traditional communal safeguards against the incurrence of shame — is a frightening thing. Abstract: In the many studies of shame that have been carried out in several disciplines during the past years, shame has generally been understood as an emotion that bears importantly on our sense of self and has crucial implications for ethics. While most accounts of shame agree on several core aspects, notably taking shame to be an emotion of negative self-assessment, one main area of disagreement focuses on the question of whether shame is a social or a private emotion: whether it is essentially anxiety about the way others judge us, or rather about our faults or inadequacies as perceived Shame. In a recent review... 1987), such as social control mechanisms. either real or imaginary. Piers and Singer 1953. Schneider 1977. With few exceptions. public versus private. Schneider 1987). and those of shame-relevant responses as avoiders (Barrett 1993). Lebra 1971. to shame as emblematic of a basic flaw in the self... savages. These dichotomies have been widely and justly criticized for their ethnocentric flavor and for severely reducing the complexity of affect at both cultural and individual levels (Creighton 1990. person versus culture. It implies “I am weak. and art). found that shaming. The importance of shame in Chinese culture is reflected in its emphases on face.