

Shame *vs.* Guilt: Is there a difference?

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that guilt and shame are not distinctive emotions. Instead, guilt is best seen as a kind of shame. I will present three reasons for this view: First, guilt cannot merely arise as a consequence of how we evaluate our behaviour, since how we act implicates the whole self (Section 1). Second, guilt cannot be relieved by taking responsibility, apologising and making amends unless it is a kind of shame (Section 2). Third, the empirical research that *seems* to show that ‘shame’ and ‘guilt’ are distinct can be explained by re-interpreting the data (Section 3).¹

1. ACTIONS IMPLICATE THE SELF

Many theorists in social psychology and philosophy make a distinction between shame and guilt. Shame, they argue, is an emotion that carries with it a negative evaluation about what kind of *person* you are (e.g. ‘I am a bad person’). The feeling of guilt, by contrast, is focused on a negative evaluation of a particular *action* you have done (‘I did a bad thing’). To give a few examples of this view:

“Currently, the most dominant basis for distinguishing between shame and guilt centers on the object of negative evaluation and disapproval. Shame involves a negative evaluation of the global self; guilt involves a negative evaluation of a specific behaviour.”²

“What arouses guilt in an agent is an act or omission of a sort that typically elicits from other people anger, resentment, or indignation. . . . What arouses shame, on the other hand, is something that typically elicits from others contempt or derision or avoidance.”³

“[Shame] pertains to the whole self, rather than to a specific act of the self [but guilt] takes an act, rather than the whole person, as its primary object.”⁴

However, there are good reasons to think that shame and guilt are more intimately connected than this. If I have done a bad thing, that has implications for what kind of person I am (‘If I did a bad thing, then I am a bad person’). And we

¹ This article is an adapted extract from Brookes (2019): pp. 143-51.

² Tangney et.al. (2007a): p. 26.

³ Williams (1993): pp. 89-90.

⁴ Nussbaum (2004): p. 184.

are not immune to *feeling* this implication. When I do something wrong, I will feel ashamed of myself. Indeed, if I feel no shame over a wrong that I have done, this would suggest that I have yet to admit responsibility for my actions. There is something not quite right about someone who says: ‘I agree that what I did was wrong. But that wasn’t really me. I’m not that kind of person’. Such a person has not yet come to terms with the fact that, if they did commit the wrong, then, logically, they *must* have been the kind of person who could do such a thing. The only way they can distinguish so neatly between what they have done and who they are is by splitting their ‘good self’ from their ‘bad self’.¹ As others have put it:

“People are highly motivated to maintain their sense of self-worth and integrity . . . , but the act of harming another person can threaten one’s identity as a good and appropriate person Because of this threat, transgressors are likely motivated to avoid associating themselves with wrongful actions.”²

“If someone feels guilt about having hurt another person it would seem odd if they did not also feel some shame because their actions had threatened their perception of the kind of person they are and their perception of how others judge them.”³

“[I]n our typical experiences of guilt and shame the two are so intimately intertwined that they cannot be distinguished from one another. We routinely experience our transgressive acts as wrongdoing and, simultaneously, as failures of character. We see not only our acts but also ourselves as open to blame.”⁴

For these reasons, it seems more accurate to say that guilt is a kind of shame. It is the type of shame that we feel *when we have done something wrong*. To clarify, I am not suggesting here that shame is *nothing but* guilt. There are, I would argue, species of shame other than guilt. For instance, there is the kind of shame we feel when we are put down, disrespected or insulted. We call this ‘humiliation’. Then there is ‘embarrassment’, which is the type of shame we experience when we feel socially out of place, for example, by a breach of etiquette.

Of course, in the heat of the moment, it may not be easy to ‘tease apart’ which of these types of shame one might be experiencing. In more complex scenarios, all three could easily co-occur or ‘bleed’ into each other. And they cannot necessarily be identified by how long the emotion endures or its level of intensity. We can experience a fleeting pinch of disrespect (e.g. from a curt email), and yet the embarrassment of a very public social blunder can be acutely painful and persist for months. But these varieties of shame are nevertheless distinguishable insofar as they involve quite different perceptions of what has happened: ‘I have been insulted’ *vs.* ‘I have done something morally wrong’ *vs.* ‘I have breached a social convention’. What is common to all three is that the self believes, as a consequence, that it is flawed or has a defect.

¹ In other words, by resorting to the shame-reaction of *withdrawing from themselves*. See Brookes (2019): Section 5.

² Schumann (2014): p. 90.

³ Harris (2001): p. 124.

⁴ Pettigrove and Collins (2011): p. 143.

2. GUILT AND MORAL REPAIR

2.1 *Guilt can only be legitimately relieved if it is a kind of shame*

Theorists who distinguish between shame and guilt argue that whilst we can relieve our guilt by taking responsibility, apologising and making amends, we cannot relieve our shame in this way. Tangney et. al., for example, argue as follows:

“Shame — and, shame-fused guilt — offers little opportunity for redemption. It is a daunting challenge to transform a self that is defective at its core. . . [But] there are typically a multitude of paths to redemption in the case of uncomplicated guilt focused on a specific behavior. A person (a) often has the option of changing the objectionable behavior; (b) or even better yet, has an opportunity to repair the negative consequences; (c) or at the very least, can extend a heartfelt apology. And when it is not possible to make these external amends, one can resolve to do better in the future.”¹

Taylor puts forward a similar view:

“If feelings of guilt concentrate on the deed or the omission then the thought that some repayment is due is in place here as it is not in the case of shame. If I have done wrong then there is some way in which I can ‘make up’ for it, if only by suffering punishment. . . . [But] how can I possibly make up for what I now see I am? There are no steps that suggest themselves here. Therefore is nothing to be done, and it is best to withdraw and not to be seen. This is the typical reaction when feeling shame. Neither punishment nor forgiveness can here perform a function.”²

However, if ‘uncomplicated’ guilt is merely about a specific behaviour, then it is hard to see how an apology *could* free me from my feelings of guilt. To explain: My feeling of guilt depends upon my *belief* that I have done a bad thing. But I cannot erase the past. It will always be true of me that I did something wrong. Since I cannot therefore change *what I have done*, the only way I can relieve my guilt is to change my *belief* about what I have done. I will need to somehow reconstrue or re-think the morality of what I have done or just deny that I did anything at all. In short, to relieve my guilt I will need to find a reason for thinking that what I did was either morally acceptable, or that I was somehow not responsible for it, or that it didn’t happen at all.

There are, of course, well-known ways of achieving this end, none of which could be classified as morally praiseworthy or ‘redemptive’. They are called ‘cognitive distortions’, and include strategies such as denial, minimising, excusing, justifying, and so on. But here is the point: what could *never* work as a strategy to relieve my guilt are the “paths to redemption” suggested by Tangney et. al.. If I offer an apology, take responsibility and make amends, I am thereby admitting to the fact that I was responsible for what happened, and that what I did was morally wrong. Far from divesting myself of the belief that ‘I have done a bad thing’, an

¹ Tangney et.al. (2007b): p. 353.

² Taylor (1985): p. 90.

apology would only *affirm* such a belief. It follows that if guilt is solely about *having done a bad thing* — without any implications for the kind of person that I am — there could be no morally legitimate way of relieving this emotion.

By contrast, if guilt is in fact a kind of shame, then an apology is the perfect solution. If I feel guilty over having done a bad thing, then the solution is not to try and get rid of the belief that what I did was wrong (e.g. by distorting the facts). I cannot undo the past, so I need to accept that this is a fact about my life history that will remain fixed. But what I *can* change is how I now stand in relation to what I have done. I can condemn what I did, withdraw the messages that it conveyed to the person who I harmed, express my remorse to them in a sincere apology, and commit to never doing that kind of thing again. I can, in other words, do the work that is required to *repair my social self*. This work effectively removes the legitimacy of the inference from ‘I did a bad thing’ to ‘I am a bad person’. Since shame, in general, is about our social self, it follows that guilt can only be legitimately relieved if it is a kind of shame.

2.2 Distinct kinds of shame are ‘overcome’ in different ways

John Rawls is one author who is more optimistic about our ability to overcome shame. But he also argues that guilt and shame should be distinguished insofar as each is ‘undone’ or relieved in a different way:

“Feelings of guilt and shame have different settings and are overcome in different ways, and these variations reflect the defining principles with which they are connected and their peculiar psychological bases. Thus for example, guilt is relieved by reparation and the forgiveness that permits reconciliation; whereas shame is undone by proofs of defects made good, by a renewed confidence in the excellence of one’s person.”¹

But this analysis assumes that reparation is something other than a ‘proof of defects made good’; or that being forgiven is something other than experiencing a ‘renewed confidence in the excellence of one’s person’ from the one you have wronged. In other words, reparation and forgiveness can only relieve our feelings of guilt insofar as they ‘undo’ our shame over having done something wrong. And that connection only makes sense if guilt is seen as a kind of shame.

Rawls is right to say that shame *in general* can only be ‘undone’ by addressing apparent ‘defects’ and gaining a ‘renewed confidence in the excellence of one’s person’. But there are specific kinds of shame, each of which can be distinguished by the kind of ‘defect’ that we think others have seen in us; and each requires a different approach to ‘undoing’ this threat to our social self. Undoing the kind of shame we call ‘guilt’ requires that we apologise and make amends to those we have wronged. Undoing the kind of shame we call ‘humiliation’ may require that we stand up for ourselves and demand justice.

¹ Rawls (1999): p. 424.

2.3 *'Maladaptive guilt' is shame released through moral repair*

We can further reinforce this taxonomy by exploring why it is that the clinical literature has found that feelings of guilt often cause psychological distress. Tangney et. al. explain this phenomenon by arguing that:

“guilt is most likely to be maladaptive when it becomes fused with shame . . . guilt with an overlay of shame is most likely the source of the painful self-castigation and rumination so often described in the clinical literature. . . . Ultimately, it’s the shame component of this sequence — not the guilt component — that poses the problem, as the person becomes saddled with feelings of contempt and disgust for a bad, defective self.”¹

A better explanation for maladaptive guilt is not the presence of shame, which, as argued above, is inevitable in any case. Rather the problem is that a person who believes they have done wrong — and that they are therefore ‘bad’ or ‘defective’ — has not yet carried out the work of moral repair. They have not accepted responsibility for their part in what happened, apologised to those they have harmed and made amends. In other words, a ‘bad, defective self’ *can* be redeemed, repaired and healed.

2.4 *'False guilt' is shame that can only be released by the truth*

This remedy only applies to those who truly *are* responsible for wrongdoing. False guilt requires a different solution. Tangney et. al. describes false guilt as arising:

“when people develop an exaggerated or distorted sense of responsibility for events beyond their control or for which they have no personal involvement. . . . Survivor guilt is a prime example of such a problematic guilt response that has been consistently linked to psychological maladjustment.”²

But if guilt is a kind of shame, then we not only have a good explanation for why false guilt is so problematic. We can also offer a way out for those who are suffering from this phenomenon. The ‘psychological maladjustment’ of those who are suffering from ‘false guilt’ does not merely consist in the fact that they have made a mistake about the wrongness of their actions. Their suffering is due to the fact that they now see themselves as having a damaged ‘social self’. They believe that, as a consequence of their ‘wrongful’ behaviour, they are regarded by those around them as ‘bad’ or ‘defective’. The only remedy for this situation is to convince them that they were not responsible for any wrongdoing in the first place, and that their ‘social self’ is therefore not in need of redemption or repair. But this solution is not available to those who distinguish between shame and guilt. On their view, how we evaluate our *actions* has no bearing on how we evaluate our *global self*. So even if we manage to persuade someone that their guilt is false, this would not dislodge their sense of having a ‘defective’ self.

¹ Tangney, et. al. (2007b): p. 352-53.

² Tangney, et. al. (2007a): p. 353.

3. RE-INTERPRETING THE DATA

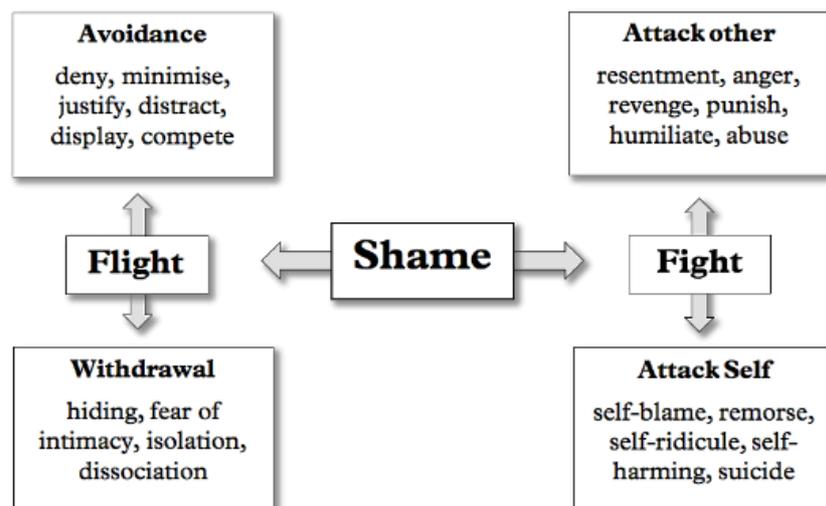
3.1 The research identifies distinct shame-reactions, not emotions

Researchers in the field have defended the distinction between shame and guilt by appealing to a large body of empirical evidence. This includes:

“experimental and correlational studies employing a range of methods, qualitative case studies analyses, content analyses of shame and guilt narratives, participants’ quantitative ratings of personal shame and guilt experiences, analyses of attributions associated with shame and guilt, and analyses of participants’ counterfactual thinking.”¹

It seems clear that these studies are identifying distinct phenomena when they apply the terms ‘shame’ and ‘guilt’. If not, it would be hard to account for the results. However, it is possible to explain this evidence without accepting the conclusion that ‘shame’ and ‘guilt’ refer to two different emotions. If one looks closely at the research findings, the terms ‘shame’ and ‘guilt’ can be interpreted as referring instead to two kinds of emotional and behavioural *reactions* to shame.²

To explain: We can broadly categorise our reactions to shame as falling into either a ‘Fight’ or ‘Flight’ response. Adapting Donald Nathanson’s ‘shame compass’, we can then locate two main types of shame-reactions within each category. The types of shame-reactions that Nathanson calls ‘Avoidance’ and ‘Withdrawal’ naturally fall into the ‘flight’ category; whilst the types called ‘Attack Other’ and ‘Attack Self’ can be seen as ‘fight’ reactions.³ Under each of these four reactions-types, there is a wide range of emotional and behavioural responses, as illustrated in the diagram below.⁴



¹ Tangney, et. al. (2007a): p. 26.

² For more detail on shame-reactions, see Brookes, D. (2019).

³ Nathanson (1992): p. 312.

⁴ From Brookes (2019): p. 23.

So, take the finding reported in Tangney, et. al. below:

“Research shows that shame and guilt lead to contrasting motivations, or ‘action tendencies’ Shame often motivates efforts to deny, hide from, or escape the shame-inducing situation. Guilt often motivates reparative action (e.g. confession, apology, efforts to undo the harm done.).”¹

As it is used here, the term ‘shame’ can be re-interpreted as referring to those situations in which shame gives rise to the kind of shame-reactions we have called ‘Avoidance’ and ‘Withdrawal’. The term ‘guilt’ (which would include false ‘guilt’) can be seen as referring to those situations in which shame gives rise to the kind of behaviours that, if authentic, only emerge in the context of certain ‘Attack Self’ shame-reactions, namely, self-blame and remorse. A similar analysis can be applied to the following research:

“In an effort to escape painful feelings of shame, shamed individuals are apt to defensively ‘turn the tables,’ externalizing blame and anger outward onto a convenient scapegoat. . . . Guilt-proneness, in contrast, is consistently associated with more constructive responses to anger (e.g., nonhostile discussion, direct corrective action and a disinclination toward aggression).”²

Here the term ‘shame’ can be understood as referring to those situations in which shame gives rise to the ‘Attack Other’ response, that is, shame-reactions that try to suppress or displace shame-feelings (anger, scapegoating, etc.). What is referred to as ‘guilt’ corresponds to situations in which shame gives rise to behaviours that are associated with the morally appropriate ‘Attack Self’ shame-reactions (self-blame, remorse, etc.).

3.2 The feelings of ‘shame’ are identical with how guilt can feel

Perhaps the most common finding used to distinguish ‘shame’ from ‘guilt’ is the reported differences between how each ‘feels’:

“On balance, shame is the more painful emotion because one’s core self — not simply one’s behaviour — is at stake. Feelings of shame are typically accompanied by a sense of shrinking or of feeling ‘small,’ and by a sense of worthlessness and powerlessness. Guilt, on the other hand, is typically a less devastating, less painful experience because the object of condemnation is a specific behaviour, not the entire self. Rather than needing to defend the exposed core of their identity, people in the throes of guilt are drawn to consider their behaviour and its consequences. This focus leads to tension, remorse, and regret over the ‘bad thing done.’”³

The problem with this reading of the data is that, as we will see, the feelings that are exclusively associated with ‘shame’ here can, in certain contexts, be

¹ Tangney, et. al. (2007a): p. 26.

² Tangney, et. al. (2007a): p. 27.

³ Tangney, et. al. (2007a): p. 26.

appropriately ascribed to guilt as well — and *vice versa*. If so, this ‘finding’ can be explained without assuming that guilt and shame are distinct emotions. To begin, we need some background.

First, there is a range of different situations or encounters that can trigger the emotion of shame. Each of these triggers works because they attack or condemn something about us that has a bearing on our social self, or how people see us. This can include our behaviour, our appearance, our abilities, our character, and so on. In other words, virtually everything about us can be a source of shame. This means that *our core identity is always ‘at stake’* — regardless of what it is about us that happens to be the target of a negative evaluation or condemnation.

Second, the painfulness of shame (when it is not being suppressed) *comes in degrees*: sometimes it will be utterly crushing, dramatically affecting our entire sense of the kind of person we thought we were. At the other extreme, a feeling of shame can be so slight as to make us merely wince or blush.

Third, the painfulness of any shame-trigger *depends on the social context from which it arises*. For instance, professional models will tend to feel far more devastated by a negative evaluation of their attractiveness, than, say, computer software programmers. Or again, suppose the underlying message ‘you are stupid’ is conveyed by something your partner or your parents say to you. This shame-trigger will be far more painful than it would have been if it had come from a complete stranger. The former will feel like an excruciating attack on your core identity; the latter will still hurt, but you won’t feel quite so distressed. Shame-triggers that arise from people who matter to you will have a greater impact on the degree of shame that you feel. To give a more pertinent example: Different types of wrongdoing will tend to have a greater or lesser bearing on our social self. If you are found guilty of child abuse, for instance, you are likely to believe that most, if not all of the people around you will see your core identity — who you are as a person — as being profoundly flawed or defective. Unless you manage to suppress your shame entirely, it is very likely that you will, as a result, experience the most extreme or ‘upper-level’ degrees of this emotion. Wrongs that are seen as less serious will still be shameful, but the pain will not be nearly as devastating. The *painfulness* of being condemned for a specific wrongful behaviour is directly linked to *how badly it makes you feel about yourself*. That, in turn, depends on how your wrongdoing is viewed by your social group and the people who matter to you the most.

What follows from the three points made above, is that there are significant problems with the way that the research above has interpreted its own findings. First, the feelings that are taken to be the distinguishing hallmark of ‘shame’ are in fact associated with only the most extreme or ‘upper-level’ degrees of shame. Second, what triggers off an experience of this higher level of shame *could* be a specific wrongful behaviour that we have committed. That depends on how negatively we think our behaviour has been (or will be) evaluated by the social group in which we are embedded and the individuals who matter to us the most. In other words, depending on our social context, engaging in a certain kind of wrongful

behaviour can result in our experiencing exactly those feelings of ‘devastation’ that the research has identified as ‘shame’. Now, even the research accepts that ‘guilt’ is the emotion we feel “when the object of condemnation is a specific [wrongful] behaviour”. If that is true, then ‘how guilt feels’ *can*, in certain situations, be identical to ‘how shame feels’, according to the research. But then it follows that the research ‘findings’ can be explained without assuming that guilt and shame are distinct emotions.

How then do we explain the apparent finding that the experience of ‘guilt’ *feels less painful* than ‘shame’? There are two possible reasons for this:

1. *What is identified as ‘guilt’ is in fact shame relieved by moral repair.* The research reports that “people in the throes of guilt” were “drawn to consider their behaviour and its consequences” — a focus that leads to “tension, remorse, and regret over the ‘bad thing done’.” This suggests that what the researchers have identified are situations in which people have done something wrong, but have made significant progress toward defeating the shame-inducing message of ‘I am a bad person’— that is, by accepting responsibility, considering the impact of their behaviour, and feeling remorse. But if that is the case, then they will, as a consequence, have released much of their shame; and so, for that reason, they will feel better about themselves. In other words, what the researchers have identified as ‘people in the throes of guilt’ are, in fact, people who have significantly relieved their shame by having made good progress toward the goal of moral repair. If they had asked people to describe how they felt *prior* to these redemptive activities, then they are very likely to have heard responses like: ‘I felt bad about myself’, ‘I felt like a monster’, ‘I just wanted to run and hide’, and so on. In other words, they would have described the core elements of what it is like to feel the terrible pain of *un-released* shame. Thus we have a good explanation for why the research found that the experience of ‘guilt’ felt less painful than ‘shame’.

2. *What is identified as ‘guilt’ is in fact the shame of minor wrongdoing.* We know that it is shameful even to talk about, let alone admit to feeling shame — especially if it is caused by having done something wrong. We have also just seen how the painfulness of shame is determined by our social context. Putting these two points together, it seems likely that research participants will, in general, be more willing to talk about how they feel about wrongful behaviour that is seen as *relatively minor* by their social group or the people who matter to them most. But then it is no surprise to learn that most participants describe their feelings of ‘guilt’ as being less painful or devastating than their feelings of ‘shame’. What they are likely to be identifying here is the difference between the ‘low-level’ shame they felt after committing what their social group regarded as relatively minor wrongs, and the far more ‘devastating’ degree of shame they felt as a result of some other kind of shame-trigger. So, once again, we do not need to assume that ‘guilt’ and ‘shame’ are two different emotions in order to explain why the former was found to be ‘less painful’ than the latter.

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