



The Overdose of Shame: **A Sociological and Historical** **Self-Exploration**

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INTRODUCTION

Status order plays a pivotal role in shaping identity and experiences. Max Weber described status order as a “way in which social honor is distributed in a community between typical groups participating in this distribution” (Weber 1978, in Farganis pg. 116). Communities, for example, can include ethnic and familial relationships. Social honor is prestige and a certain level of power granted (Weber 1978, in Farganis). At a macro-level, they can determine esteem, contempt, differences, and solidarity in society—distinctions that have often existed as cross sectors. On a micro-level, looking at the conditions of the self, multiple selves, and more immediate social relationships such as the family, the experience is equally complex.

The social categories and identities (Goffman 1971, pg. 188-9) to which I belong can serve as an example here: heterosexual male, brother, son, American, Chinese, and Cambodian. This bears some consequence however. Under this circumstance, I am abiding by a multitude of social norms and

roles and assume different hierarchies that can change with environment. The variety of expectations from multiple social categories has been, oftentimes, a source of the emotion known as shame.

Shame is an emotion that has been used to enforce sincere and not-so sincere forms of discipline, without consideration for how the variety of its sources intersect in a single, in this case my own personal, life. However, like medicine, I believe shame is something beneficial if administered properly. I would compare the circumstance to having a multitude of doctors—oblivious about sharing the same patient—who prescribe the same dosage of medicine and thus further worsen the condition of the patient. This paper will examine the role shame has played in reinforcing social norms and roles, consequently how extreme differences among affiliations have led to an unhealthy environment aggravated by shame. I will also examine possible ways this situation can be corrected.

DEFINITION OF SHAME

Shame is best defined through its contrast and comparison with *guilt*, an emotion that is often confused with shame. This is detailed in a paper entitled, “Shame and Guilt and Their Relationship to Positive Expectations and Anger Expressiveness”:

In contrast, shame typically involves an acutely painful experience that is overwhelmingly self-focused and more diffuse than guilt ... Individuals experiencing shame might feel a sense of worthlessness, incompetence, or a generalized feeling of contempt for themselves, thereby demonstrating a reflection of overly harsh self-evaluations.

...

Consequently, repeated experiences of shame have been found to be associated with a number of negative cognitive behavioral experiences, including depression, self-derogation, shyness, interpersonal anxiety, perfectionism, and a diffuse-oriented identity (Lutwak et al., 2001)

The first quote summarizes the immediate and internal feelings related to shame, which inevitably leads to the feelings summarized in the second. External expressions most likely come afterwards that can either be passive, passive-aggressive, or aggressive. It should be noted, however, that the feelings and actions arise in numerous combinations and different environments and communities. Before acting, people will most likely attempt to identify each other's social position or mutual belonging to a community with identifiers such as a tie-sign, "all such evidence about relationships, that is, about ties between persons, whether involving objects, acts, expressions, and only excluding the literal aspects of explicit documentary statements" (Goffman 1971; pg. 194). Racial distinctions such as skin color is an example of tie-sign. Also, private and public environments assert different social norms as well as different hierarchies that assign people with specific social roles. For example, I am an older brother at home and thus my responsibility includes disciplining and guiding my sister. But at the university, I am a student who is disciplined and administered by the faculty. Multiple social roles can exist in one environment of course: I am a brother and a son in a household I share with my sister and parents. The combinations reflect adaptations that can be demonstrated in my experiences. My family can serve as an example of how one may be exposed to shame associated with multiple social roles.

FAMILY AND CULTURAL SHAME

Some of the most haunting memories I have are of verbal and physical fights between my parents. The earliest account remains the most emotionally vivid. I don't remember the physical fighting that occurred, but I recount being in a corner of our old house where I was in tears, stuttering, and wheezing. I remember my father yelling at the top of his lungs from another room. I don't see my mother, but I remember my grandmother coming to comfort me. I felt horrible and didn't know what to do. I felt alone and wanting to intervene—feelings that would repeat every time another fight happened. Why did I feel so alone? There had been times when I attempted to contact members of my extended family for help, but many of them were dealing with similar marital problems. I had hopes for professional help, but my parents repeatedly resisted. They followed a popular and serious philosophy among certain Asian ethnicities where *disputes that happen within the family stay within the family*. No exceptions. Our own heritage and cultures include American, Teochiu, and Cambodian. But in terms of a framework for family-related shame, Teochiu culture first and foremost dictates our relationships.

In her article "The Effect of Immigrant Experiences on the Bifurcation of Women's Consciousness" (2003/4), Guadalupe Paz also dealt with a multicultural identity and discussed how she dealt with cultural differences. Paz cites conflicting values, in this case between Guatemalan and American: "When I'm with the Hispanic community many people ask me, 'When are you having a baby?' You have been married for a year and a half by now? But when I'm in the American community, I'm encouraged to stay in school as long as possible because I'm young and it's not time to have children yet" (Paz 2003/4, pg. 31). While certain aspects of culture fuse rather easily, others

conflict, and one must either preserve practices specific to each community or completely abandon one. If abandonment is chosen, shame may occur in the community whose value was abandoned. Paz decided to “accept that [she is] influenced by two cultures and to try to keep the positive aspects of each culture” (Paz 2004, pg. 31). I wholly agree with Paz, but it should be noted that this is easier said than done if one considers the consequence of choosing one over the other and the subjective nature of determining the “positive aspects of each culture.” Does one choose to benefit individually? Does one choose to challenge the status quo in a culture war (which can be either macro or within the self) of sorts? Does one’s choice to assimilate stand without challenge? The preservation of culture to be made in lieu of shame and to change the definition of public and private matters is especially difficult, though not impossible. I am advocating carefulness in the situation because of the delicate nature of shame. In terms of Teochiu culture, I discredit it for promoting exclusiveness when it comes to even the most extreme disputes and emotions, but it has been a mixed blessing in that it is collectivist and highly discourages abandonment or ignorance of familial problems. In my experience, mediation is encouraged and wanted when a trusted and competent figure intervenes. My own experience as an older and college educated son allows me the greatest access to the shame and disputes between my parents.

Teochiu is a Chinese dialect and subculture group that originates from Southern China with influences from Chinese Confucian culture.¹ This Chinese subculture is built upon acceptance of certain “social facts”—which is defined by Emile

1. There is little research I know of that explains the experience of shame among Teochiu Chinese, but research on Chinese Confucianism and Asian American frameworks of shame are sufficient enough to explain my familial relationships.

Durkheim as that “which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations” (Wallace 1999; Wolf 1999, pg. 21). In the United States, however, Teochiu social facts are frequently at odds with those of traditional American values. For example, my family significantly differs from my white peers and their familial relationships. When my parents fought, I firmly believed that I had some responsibility in preventing it and invested a great deal of time thinking about it and mediated. I had discussions frequently with white peers while growing up about our families and it was revealed to me that their level of investment was much less than mine. To them, marital strife was a conflict strictly between their parents that they could easily detach from, whereas I became more attached when conflicts intensified. Chinese have generally been documented as being collectivists, where peer-to-peer social responsibility is imperative, while the individualistic nature of American society emphasizes the opposite. Olwen Bedford and Kwang-Kuo Hwang, co-authors of *Guilt and Shame in Chinese Culture: A Cross-cultural Framework from the Perspective of Morality and Identity*, elaborate:

Americans do not see themselves as automatically involved in social relationships that impose obligations not of their choosing. With less sense of responsibility for others, and little stimulus for emphasis on the common good or community occurs, there is less basis for shame due to the state or actions of others. Individual identity for Americans is connected to use of guilt and objective morality as methods of social control. It is not similarly compatible with use of situational morality of shame.

In contrast, shame is a more effective

tive means of social control in a system where maintaining harmony in relationships is valued over maintaining behavior according to an objectively defined right or wrong. One is liable to lose group status when judged by the group as having failed to fulfill a group requirement... (Bedford and Hwang 2003)

When I was in middle and high schools, I felt that my failures and successes were significant to the stability of the family and my parents' marriage. I had difficulties in school and was often participating in extracurricular activities, and I often assumed that if these issues were to improve, so would my parents' marriage. Unfortunately, even with impressive academic improvements and an improved sense of responsibility, the marriage continued to be hostile. This influenced me to investigate my parents' family history before their marriage and conflicts they had experienced. What I ended up realizing is that my father's ultimate *Umwelt*, "the region around him from within which signs of alarm can come" (Goffman 1971, pg. 252), is the family. He puts most of his pride into it and thus, it is his most valuable "prize piece," the most monitored, and the most of his concern. If anything negative happens to the family, he sincerely reacts with care, but he will put up a front (such as faux cheerfulness or silence) if necessary to "maintain normal experiences" by "involving the ability to come up quickly with the kind of accountings that allow a disturbing event to be assimilated to the normal" (Goffman 1971, pg. 263). Thomas Scheff gives another possible perspective:

If social monitoring of self is almost continuous, and if it gives rise to pride or shame, why do we see so few manifestations of either emotion in adult life? Among possible

answers is that the pride or shame is there but has such low visibility that we do not notice it" (Scheff 1988, pg. 399)

INTERGENERATIONAL VARIANCES, AND CYCLES OF SHAME

In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the recurring memory of Morrie's father haunts him, distinctively because of his loveless behavior and distance. Morrie's father wasn't a heartless man—far from it in my opinion. His behavior began after the death of his wife and as it seemed, life was still to be continued in the "slum." He worked in factories and believed that this would be the only possible future for Morrie. He cared for his family, but lived a life of struggle and poverty. Morrie nevertheless succeeded in life, both emotionally and in scholarship, avoiding damaging shame.

Morrie's story is similar to the distancing experience and relationship between my father and the rest of the family. My parents were born and raised in Cambodia, and while both of them experienced the devastation of the Khmer Rouge genocide, my father had experienced abuse previous to it. His mother was addicted to gambling and he was verbally and physically abused when he challenged her addiction. His father was bed-ridden most of the time, which forced him to be financially responsible for his mother and eight siblings. As a son, compared to Morrie, my father has developed unhealthy reactions to neglect. Similarly to Morrie's father, unfortunately, my father's reaction to struggle would not be one of emotional triumph.

My father has become quite wary of his current and anticipatory socializations and built emotional walls to protect him in a variety of relationship. He has a high level of pride that reflects in his craftsmanship (he's a jeweler) and the way in which he describes his life to others. He is careful to de-

	Agency	
	Self	Other
External default	Situational shame	Aggressive shame
Internal default	Narcissistic shame	Deferential shame

Table 1 / Social Typology of Shame (Barbalet 1998, pg. 124)

scribe his life to strangers without revealing the abuse he experienced as a youth, his near-death experiences during the Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia, the spontaneous temper he struggles with, suicide attempts, and his marital troubles. As a matter of fact, he revels in the complete opposite, sometimes over-exaggerating his successes. At social gatherings, he prides himself in the fact that he does not frequently drink and smoke like other male members of the Cambodian community, and tends to avoid men and women of his age. He prefers the company of younger people to act as a mentor, and the company of older people because they represent the upper echelon of our community. He takes advantage of such hierarchy as his primary means for impression management, resulting in high selectiveness when it comes to associations, with preference for roles in higher authority. Charles Horton Cooley would describe my father's self-image as an exemplar of the looking-glass self, "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Cooley 1902, pg. 184).

J.M. Barbalet's Kemper-influenced social typology of shame differentiates and analyzes the different reactions to shame people project. In my father's case, his reaction would be categorized as a product of narcissistic shame. This is shame that caus-

es one's insecurity of not feeling 'good enough' coupled with a sense of fear (Barbalet 1998). Furthermore, it leads to "social withdrawal, so that the reflexive project of self-making may continue to remain unimpeded by unwanted external influence" (Barbalet 1998). The consequence is an "inadequate self-concept" (Barbalet 1998, pg. 124) where unrealistic thoughts about one's self dictates, thus leading to harmful reactions to one's self.

An additional consequence of narcissistic shame, in the case of my father, has also been its projection onto my sister and I. Because we are both products of my parents' union, he puts considerable investment into our lives and successes. Hoping to prevent his abused childhood from being repeated in ours, the majority of his emotional and financial investment is onto us. This includes both positive and negative emotional attentiveness. Alarms are feelings of abnormality or instability in an environment, and I would assert that my father often has intense alarms. Goffman gives an excellent example that reflects a repeated occurrence in our lives:

Note that although one ordinarily thinks of alarming signs as occurrences, the absence of an expected sign can serve the same function. A parent who fails to receive a telephone call from a child can be alarmed by the non-ringing of the

bell. (Goffman 1971, pg. 241)

He is especially dependent on our academic and social successes as a means of measuring his own success and puts us in a position of deferential shame. This is recognized when an actor “receives an excess of status because another entertains exaggerated expectations of their abilities... the resulting shame is associated with a feeling hostility and possibly also a feeling of guilt” (Barbalet 1998, pg. 124).

For one to receive status or expectations from another, as in the case of my father and I, there must be monitoring to survey one’s actions and progress. The most intense deferential shame I have experienced was caused by persistent and unwelcome surveillance, especially in the area of academic progress and non-familial relationships. This occurred chiefly when I was in my adolescence, and though I realize it has been greatly reduced, surveillance persists as a feeling in my internalized self and a cyclical projection onto others such as my younger sister. I can empathize with Deborah D’Isabel, who recounts her experience with the surveillance of her blushing during pre-adolescence, consequently leading to tremendous embarrassment and introversion thereafter. She had a teacher who encouraged other students to stare at her as a means of humor, which on his behalf, indicated an abuse of his social position. Goffman describes schoolteachers as agents of social control who are there to “protect the setting and its users and to maintain the proprieties—at least certain proprieties” (Goffman 1971, pg. 240). The teacher should have been there to monitor misconduct, not to cause it. D’Isabel gives a perspective on childhood, authority, and cyclical shaming I am much akin to:

... the adage ‘best seen but not heard’ underscores just how society views the opinions of children... As a parent, I can testify

that there are too many times when I should have listened to my son and did not. Worse, when I did ‘listen,’ I sided with authority: ‘You need to listen to the teacher. Don’t speak out in class. It is no wonder you missed recess.’ This repeated discounting of a child’s experience and opinion has the enormous and unfortunate consequence of effectively silencing them. (D’Isabel 2004/5, pg. 3)¹

In this case, D’Isabel describes muting the perspective of her child and projecting a chief reinforcement of shame, even though she was a victim of shame herself. Shame alone is already a powerful social enforcement of complacency, but when co-opted with a sense of loneliness in midst of allied authorities, it can be quite damaging. Here, she immediately agreed with an authority from another status order with little discretion, which is the very dilemma I have dedicated this paper to, in addition to reinforcing shame onto the self and others.

RACE, COMPARATIVE HISTORIES, AND SHAME

Karl Marx described class as being a set of economic characteristics that are “the sole crucial determinant of both social structure and people’s chances in life” (Wallace and Wolf, 1999, pg. 74). Max Weber agreed that class was an important determinant, but he opposed the idea that it was the *sole* determinant. Throughout this paper I have referred to Weber’s argument and via examples to suggest that, in addition to class, micro-level status groups (and

1.Editor’s Note: See the article by Deborah D’Isabel published in the present issue of *Human Architecture*. Pre-publication copy of D’Isabel’s article, presented at a Social Theory Forum conference held in April 2005 at UMass Boston, was obtained upon request by the author.

parties) influence one's social position. D'Isabel's 'child vs. adult' model and familial status orders are two examples I have cited. Status group is defined as groups who have a "shared mode of life—often found on a common education—or in the prestige attached to their birth and family" (Wallace and Wolf, 1999, pg. 74), and parties are defined as associations that "secure power within a corporate group for its leaders in order to attain ideal or material advantages for its active members" (*Ibid.*, pg. 74). In this paper, my analysis so far has been more or less phenomenological, which involves the study of things that "can be directly apprehended by one's senses" (Wallace 1999; Wolf 1999, pg. 254). However, it is important to understand shame from a conflict theory standpoint, and more specifically, with respect to the problem of race.

Conflict theorists see society as one in which groups are constantly fighting for power, and when peace occurs, it is merely one group's ability to suppress another (Wallace 1999, Wolf 1999). Race is a social construct that illustrates such a theory, emphasizing skin color and culture—among other things—as a means to categorize and differentiate people. This sort of oppression prevents equality, preserves a superiority/inferiority dichotomy, and resorts to racial stereotypes that reinforce misconstrued beliefs. Race has been very much part of my life, and I would consider my deferential shame as the primary reason for developing the habits I use to manage racial issues.

I discussed earlier my father's habit of monitoring and the reasons why he did so. Living through me and my sister and being able to give us a better life, he feels, will enable him to achieve things invoked by his shame and pride. In the United States, a 'better life' is often defined in economic terms such as property ownership, material wealth, and power. Racially it means assimilation into white suburban America often associated with wealth and status, and

disassociation from predominately black and other communities of color often related to poverty and denigration. I can cite numerous examples where he acted upon such prejudices. For example, I remember when a few of my black friends came over during the evening to drop something off. My father would answer the door and if he saw that they were black, he would speak to them in a fierce tone of voice. Other than that, he would not allow me to have contact with them, though I did so when he was not around. Asian and white friends, on the other hand, were treated with more respect and allowed to come into the house more freely. There was more specificity to the hierarchy, however, Chinese and Cambodian friends were treated for having the greatest privileges over other racial and ethnic groups. We would have a number of arguments about this issue over the years and he would repeatedly cite issues of trust and familiarity. I was dumbfounded about his reasoning, especially considering the fact that my white friends were more criminally minded than my black friends. The white friends heavily involved themselves in drugs and sex at an early age, while my closest black friends were mostly involved in education and sports. I felt great shame and even guilt at times, feeling as if I was responsible for not taking greater strides to rebel against his prejudices. My father's pride and shame only enhanced his prejudices and distrust.

YuhTyng Tsuei, in "Banana or Bridge? How Capitalism Impacts my Racial Identity" (2002), provides details of her experiences with class and race consciousness, some of which are similar to me. For example, her parents expressed a strong sense of pride for their Chinese culture and had the most familiarity and trust with other Chinese (Tsuei 2002, pg. 63). They strived to live among the Chinese elite in certain parts of Long Island, but couldn't attain residence in such areas. My parents made their greatest preference to be among other

Asians and have no resistance to the idea of living in predominately white neighborhoods. Tsuei describes how and why she moved to Franklin Square, Long Island:

If one is from Long Island, one would be aware that north shore towns such as Syosset, Great Neck, and Manhasset have significant numbers of Asian residents... Because of my parents' inability to acquire more income, they were not able to move into the more affluent towns of Long Island and had to settle in Franklin Square. If my parents were able to move to the more affluent towns, I would have been surrounded by more Asians and not have had as prominent a racial boundary as I experienced at school in Franklin Square. (Tsuei 2002, pg. 70)

Interestingly, we come from different social standpoints in the Asian American community that determine the goals our families have set and our shames.

My father was educated until the age of 14 in Cambodia, while my mother was able to obtain her high school diploma in the United States. They came as refugees who ran from a genocide that took over one million lives. Generally, based on multiple conversations with Cambodian Americans young and old, I have noted a predominant sentiment of shame because the genocide occurred as both an international and civil war. Thus, many Cambodians feel that we are to primarily blame ourselves for the atrocities, discounting the origins of its politicization and division: the Cold War. Many of the ethnic Chinese and mixed Chinese-Cambodians settled in Cambodia for hundreds of years, while the more recent are children of Southern Chinese who escaped impoverished and oppressive conditions before Communist intervention in China—like my mother's father. Statistical-

ly, Cambodians and other Southeast Asians like Laotians are the most impoverished and least college educated Asian communities in the United States.

Taiwanese-Chinese Americans, such as YuhTyng Tsuei, are generally of middle to upper class standing in the United States. Historically, college educated Taiwanese are part of an immigrant wave called the Asian "brain drain" that were favored by the United States in order to fulfill positions in a growing science and technology industry. Another aspect that contributes to the community's excessive wealth is the fact that many Taiwanese Americans are of Kuo Ming Tang (KMT) heritage, a political party exiled to Taiwan who were vehemently opposed to the Communists and whose members were once China's economic elite. Tsuei's paper describes her family's experience and their tendency to gravitate towards whites and wealthier Asians, but does not make an analysis of their distance from blacks and other generally denigrated communities. Maybe it was something they never needed to consider or discuss much.

Living in and around large communities of color, while seeing what kind of Asians my family *could be* (like Tsuei's educated family and relative kinship to the wealthy Asian communities) further irritates my parents into deeper shame which—again—gets projected onto me. This want for particular status has put immense pressure onto me and competition among the people around us. My parents' abhorrence for impoverished and working class communities, contrary to some beliefs, is not the result of unfamiliarity with their plight but rather a shame caused by living within and near these communities. While Tsuei describes her family's goal to be *like* people of certain status, my family also struggles with that, in addition to efforts to be *unlike* the people in our lower status groups. Tsuei's family was unable to reside in an upper-class neighborhood, but I believe other distinctions such as their ed-

educational attainment (e.g. Tsuei being able to attend Cornell and her parents having Master's degrees) and being acculturated and accepted in a predominately white middle-class residence may have reduced class and race-influenced shame. Quite possibly, if our family had a higher degree of educational attainment (only one uncle and one cousin in the U.S. have attained a bachelor's degree) and felt they had made other achievements of status, our goals would transform as well as the type of shames we would be dealing with.

SHAME AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Throughout this paper, I have cited numerous times and situations where shame has been of negative consequence. As much as it has caused trouble, I also credit shame for emphasizing social responsibility in my life. (In the preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, I recall Sartre citing Marx as one who believed that shame was a "revolutionary sentiment" (1968, pg. 14)). Similarly, I would have not investigated the multi-generational history of war and conflict my family experienced, nor would I have seen racism and stratification as such a pertinent issue. In an ironic twist of things, my introversion and shyness from deferential shame transformed from an unhealthy 'me against the world' mentality to a more moderate and healthy mindset that recognizes the need for individual self-determination. Earlier in the paper, I mentioned how shame plus a collectivist value initiated my persistence to continually work on family issues—especially my father, who seems to be deeply involved at each cross sector of communities and their associated shame. Rather than blaming him for his own shame and mine, I realize he is quite unconscious of his feelings and "absent of feeling" which Scheff describes as the reason why people have depression. In a clini-

cal study Scheff had done on depression he made an important discovery I have learned from:

Probably the dominant source of shame, however, was one that may have been characteristic of all of these men: none of them seemed to have a single secure bond with another human being. Referring to the two case histories above, it was clear at the time that Harold Sanders had no secure bonds. His conflict-ridden relationship with his wife and her family was one of the causes of his hospitalization. The case of William Kelly is not as clear, since I don't have notes on his relationship with his children. But his relationship with his wife was clearly dysfunctional. (Scheff 2000)

Unhealthy shame (and depression) will continue in my family if I abandon my father, any other member, and even my self. That is something I can't allow, especially if I am blessed with academic skills and resources that will allow me to understand emotions less educated family members fail to see as manageable.

Shame can be put under emotional management, which Hochschild defines as "the management of feeling to create a publicly [or privately] observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild, in Farganis, pg. 242), Managing it, I have learned from it, especially humbleness and discipline. Sociological consciousness and historical investigation continue to reveal to me that shame is neither purely positive nor purely negative, but an emotion that has value in society and works with other conditions that determine its positive or negative nature. Shame is much akin to secrets and a lack of communication. In some situations, I think there's an easy step to deal with it: let's open up and talk to each other.

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