

Shame, Guilt, and Violence

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Introduction

During the past 35 years I have used prisons and prison mental hospitals as "laboratories" in which to investigate the causes and prevention of the various forms of violence and the relationships between these forms and to what I will call (with a nod to William James) "the varieties of moral experience." In the course of that work, I have been struck by the frequency with which I received the same answer when I asked prisoners, or mental patients, why they assaulted or even killed someone. Time after time, they would reply "because he disrespected me" or "he disrespected my visitor [or wife, mother, sister, girl-friend, daughter, etc.]." In fact, they used that phrase so often that they abbreviated it into the slang phrase, "He dissed me."

Whenever people use a word so often that they abbreviate it, it is clearly central to their moral and emotional vocabulary. But even when they did not abbreviate it, references to the desire for respect as the motive for violence kept recurring. For example, I used to think that people committed armed robberies in order to get money; and indeed, that is the superficial explanation that they would often prefer to give, to themselves and to us. But when I actually sat down and spoke at length with men who had repeatedly committed such crimes, I would start to hear comments like "I never got so much respect before in my life as I did when I pointed a gun at some dude's face."

On one occasion, the officers in a prison had become involved in a running battle with a prisoner in which he would assault them and they would punish him. The more they punished him the more violent he became, and the more violent he became the more they punished him. They placed him in solitary confinement, deprived him of even the last few privileges and possessions a prison inmate has; there was no further punishment to which they could subject him without becoming subject to punishment themselves, and yet he continued to assault them whenever they opened his door. At that point they gave up and asked me to see if I could help them understand what was going on so they could extricate themselves from a situation that was only harming both parties to the conflict. (Incidentally, one can observe this same mutually self-defeating vicious cycle on a national and international scale and throughout history, both in this country and elsewhere, as in Chechnya, Israel-Palestine, and Iraq; and historically, as in the punitive peace settlement following the First World War that strengthened the revanchist political

movements that culminated in the second World War-to choose just a few among many possible examples).

When I saw this prisoner I asked him, "What do you want so badly that you are willing to give up everything else in order to get it?" It seemed to me that this was exactly what he was doing. In response, this man, who was usually so inarticulate that it was difficult to get a clear answer to any question, astonished me by standing up tall, looking me in the eye, and replying with perfect clarity and a kind of simple eloquence: "Pride. Dignity. Self Esteem." And then, speaking more in his usual manner, he added "And I'll kill every motherfucker in that cell block if I have to in order to get it." He went on to describe how the officers were, he felt, attempting to strip away his last shred of dignity and self esteem by disrespecting him, and said, "I still have my pride and I won't let them take that away from me. If you ain't got pride, you got nothin'." He made it clear to me that he would die before he would humble himself to the officers by submitting to their demands.

Nor was that true just of this man. One of the most common fantasies I have heard from many of the most violent prison inmates is the scenario of going to their deaths in a hail of gunfire while killing as many people as possible before they themselves die. In fact, several hundred violent criminals in this country provoke their own deaths at the hands of the police in exactly that way every year. Indeed, this phenomenon is so common that police forces around the country (whose members often hate having to deal with these situations and are themselves traumatized by the outcome) have given it a nickname: "suicide by cop." In World War II, *mutatis mutandis*, Japan's kamikaze pilots behaved in a way that had much the same result, as do contemporary suicide bombers in the Middle East and elsewhere, except that it is the means by which they kill their enemies that kills them too. In the prisons and on the streets of the United States, such behavior appears to be committed by people who are so tormented by feelings of being shamed and disrespected by their enemies that they are willing to sacrifice their bodies and their physical existence to replace those intolerable feelings with the opposite feelings of pride and self-respect, and of being honored and admired by their allies and at least respected by their enemies. Such people experience the fear that they provoke in their victims as a kind of ersatz form of respect, the only type they are capable of achieving.

That these are the same feelings that motivate the forms of collective violence just referred to has been documented by the social scientists who have studied them. Many students of traditional (pre-1945) Japanese culture, violence, nationalism, and warfare have commented on the centrality of both shame and violence in that culture. Ruth Benedict (1970 [1946]) used Japan as her primary example of what she meant by the concept of a "shame culture," a conclusion subsequently supported by Reischauer (1965) and many other experts on Japanese culture; and the Japanese traditionally referred to themselves as a "nation of warriors." Resort to suicide when

no other means of avoiding or escaping from a situation of unavoidable shame is seen as possible (as in the seppuku or ritual suicide by means of which defeated samurai were able to minimize the shame of defeat and execution by dying honorably rather than dishonorably) was another well-recognized method of mitigating shame. And those who have interviewed contemporary terrorists and suicide bombers, such as Jessica Stern (2003), have concluded that a primary motive for such behavior is humiliation-not necessarily personal or individual humiliation, but rather the sense of collective or national humiliation that is felt when the religion or culture at the center of their collective identity has been seen as inferior and subjected to insult and contempt.

Why would they regard rescuing or restoring their individual or collective self-esteem as more important than prolonging their biological lives? What many of these men have told me is that they themselves had died-meaning that their personalities had died-long before they began killing other people. What they mean by that is that they felt dead inside: empty, numb, without the capacity to feel anything, neither emotions (such as love, fear, or remorse) nor even physical sensations. Many described committing the most horrific atrocities in order to see if they could feel anything, and were surprised and disappointed to see that even that did not restore a capacity to have feelings and feel alive. Once in prison, they would mutilate themselves as viciously as they mutilated their victims, which means very viciously indeed, not because they felt guilty for their crimes and wanted to punish themselves, but because they found the feeling of deadness and numbness more intolerable than anything, even pain, and they wanted to see if they could make themselves feel anything. And then they would be surprised to find that they could commit even the most terrible self-mutilations-tearing out their toenails, blinding themselves, swallowing razor blades, inserting screws into their urethra-without experiencing physical pain at the time. They would cut themselves because only when they saw blood could they be reassured that they were still alive. Many referred to themselves by one of the many synonyms for the living dead-zombie, vampire, robot.

The "Death of the Self"

If I call this the "death of the self," I am only paraphrasing what these men have told me. And they made it clear that they experienced the death of that fragile, vulnerable psychological construct, the self, as more tormenting than the death of the body could possibly be, with the implication that any act of violence by means of which they could attempt to resurrect their dead self, and bring it back to life-to become "born again," so to speak, through an act of apocalyptic violence-would be more than worth the sacrifice of their body.

What had caused the death of the self? The word that means overwhelming humiliation, namely, mortification, comes from Latin roots that mean "to make dead" (mortis, dead, and facere, to

make)-a psychological truth exemplified by the fact that one after another of the most violent men I have worked with over the years have described to me how they had been humiliated repeatedly throughout their childhoods, verbally, emotionally, and psychologically (taunted, teased, ridiculed, rejected, insulted). They had also been physically humiliated by means of violent physical abuse, sexual abuse, and life-threatening degrees of neglect (such as being starved by their parents, or simply and totally abandoned, as in coming home to find that their parents had absconded from the family's apartment, leaving them behind). And I am far from being alone in noticing this: Frazier (1974), Menninger (1969), and many other psychiatrists who have studied murderers have reported the repeated and overwhelming shame and humiliation in their childhood experiences.

Why is child abuse humiliating and shame-inducing to the child? Because it is the clearest possible way of communicating to the child that the parent does not love him (or her). Just as pride means self-love (and its various synonyms, such as self-esteem, self-respect, or feelings of self-worth), shame means the lack or deficiency of self-love. There are only two possible sources of love for the self—from oneself and from others. While the self-esteem of adults who have attained internalized sources of pride can survive the withdrawal of love from others, up to a point, it appears to be difficult if not impossible for a child to gain the capacity for self-love without first having been loved by at least one parent, or parent-substitute. And when the self is not loved, by itself or by another, it dies, just as surely as the body dies without oxygen.

In my experience, the men who had been most rejected and humiliated and abused, and were therefore most lacking in self-love, behaved as if they could not emotionally afford to love others, as if they needed to conserve whatever limited amounts of love they were capable of for themselves. For that reason, and others, it was hardly surprising to find that the most frequently and extremely violent men appeared to be remarkably incapable of love for, or empathy with, other people; after all, how else could they have hurt them with so little inhibition? What was equally striking was the complete lack of feelings of guilt and remorse for the pain and loss they had inflicted on others. It almost seemed as if the more extreme the degree of cruelty and atrocity, the less the feeling of guilt and remorse. Again, this is hardly surprising, in the sense that one would almost have to be lacking in the capacity to feel guilt and remorse about hurting others in order to be capable of hurting them with so little inhibition. And since the capacity to love others appears to be a prerequisite for the capacity to feel guilty about hurting them, the person who is overwhelmed by feelings of shame is incapable both of the feelings of guilt and remorse and of love and empathy that would inhibit most of us from injuring others no matter how egregiously they had insulted us.

These observations, and many others like them, convinced me that the basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behavior is the wish to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame

and humiliation—a feeling that is painful and can even be intolerable and overwhelming—and replace it with its opposite, the feeling of pride. I will use these two terms—shame and pride—as generic terms to refer to two whole families of feelings, in the same way that we use the term "flower" as a generic term to refer to a wide variety of different but related plants—roses and daffodils, for example. I have already mentioned several synonyms for pride, to which I could add the feeling of dignity, and the sense of having maintained one's honor intact. But pride must be in much shorter supply than shame, because there are literally dozens of synonyms for the latter feeling, a partial listing of which would include feelings of being slighted, insulted, disrespected, dishonored, disgraced, disdained, demeaned, slandered, treated with contempt, ridiculed, teased, taunted, mocked, rejected, defeated, subjected to indignity or ignominy; feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, incompetence; feelings of being weak, ugly, ignorant, or poor; of being a failure, "losing face," and being treated as if you were insignificant, unimportant, or worthless, or any of the numerous other forms of what psychoanalysts call "narcissistic injuries." Envy and jealousy are members of this same family of feelings: people feel inferior to those whom they envy, or of whom they are jealous, with respect to whatever it is they feel envious or jealous about.

When people suffer an indignity, they become indignant (and may become violent); our language itself reveals the link between shame and rage. In an earlier publication (Gilligan, 1996), I spoke of shame as the pathogen that causes violence just as specifically as the tubercle bacillus causes tuberculosis, except that in the case of violence it is an emotion, not a microbe—the emotion of shame and humiliation. It is because this emotion is so powerful and pervasive, and so central to the experience of many people, especially those who are predisposed to violence, that there are so many synonyms for it, just as the Inuit were reputed to have 40 words for snow because of its centrality in their culture and experience.

When I first realized what I was hearing from the violent men I was working with, I began to think that I had discovered something original—something previously unknown. Then I happened to reread a passage in the Bible, the story of the first recorded murder in Western history. It was a story that I had read many times before without ever feeling that I understood why Cain killed Abel. But after having the experience for the first time in my life of sitting down and talking with people who had actually committed murders, and asking them why they had, I was at last able to "hear" what the story of Cain and Abel was saying. And I had to admit to myself that the Bible had arrived at the same psychological insight I had, but a long time earlier. For the Bible makes it very clear why Cain killed Abel: "The Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain . . . he had not respect." In other words, God "dissed" Cain! Or rather, Cain was "dissed" because of Abel—and he acted out his anger over this insult in exactly the same way as the murderers I was working with.

The first recorded wars in Western history reveal the same motivation. The Trojan war described in the Iliad was fought over the issue of shame: Menelaus was shamed when Paris seduced his wife and absconded with her, and the only means his culture provided for wiping out the shame was virtually unlimited violence-going to war, burning Troy to the ground, killing all the men, and raping and/or enslaving the women and children. In fact, sensitivity to shame, and the wish to eradicate it even at the risk of one's own death, was such a central determinant of the action of the characters in the Homeric epics that the great classics scholar Eric Dodds (1957), drawing on Ruth Benedict's (1946) anthropological concept, described the society depicted in them as a "shame culture." A virtually identical motivation is described as the cause of the first war described in the Bible. The thirty-fourth chapter of the book of Genesis tells how the sons of Jacob killed all the men of a neighboring tribe, the Hivites, because one of their princes had sex with their sister Dinah. When Jacob rebukes them for thus provoking other tribes to attack them, his sons make it clear that was much less important to them than wiping out the dishonor done to them in the only way in which it could be, namely, by means of violence. What was intolerable to them was that otherwise their sister could be considered a common whore - which in that "shame culture" would destroy their honor.

As I read further, I began to realize that this insight about shame as the psychological cause of violence had been expressed centuries and even millennia ago, not only in the great myths of our tradition, but also in the writings of the great philosophers and theologians. Both Aristotle (Rhetoric, 1378-80) and Aquinas (Summa Theologica, I-II Q. 47, II-II Q. 41), for example, clearly stated that the cause of the desire to assault or injure others is the anger that is caused by feeling that they have been "slighted" by them, and therefore feel justified in gaining revenge for the slight. Both of these thinkers make it clear that what they mean by "slighting" is exactly what I am describing here: insulting, ridiculing, disdain, dishonoring; in short, any behavior that shames people by treating them with contempt and disrespect, as though they are unimportant or insignificant. Hegel went so far as to consider the desire for recognition to be the motor (that is, the motivator) of history, which is itself largely a story of recurrent violence.

Recognition-re-cognition-is both etymologically and psychologically related to re-spect; the former derives from Latin words meaning to "know again," to "re-know," so to speak, and the latter from words meaning to "see again," to take a second look. Both words imply that the person is important enough to be worthy of a second look, and well-known enough-renowned enough-to be worthy of being re-known, ac-knowledged, re-cognized. We have all read in the newspapers about obscure, unknown individuals who committed horrific acts of violence just so that we would read about them in the newspapers, and they would thus be recognized. But on the larger scale of world history, Hegel's principle reminds us that those who did not have the talent, the opportunity, or the temperament to gain recognition for constructive cultural achievements in the arts or sciences can gain it from engaging in the most violent and destructive behavior, as the

apparently unending series of mass murderers shows-Alexander, Caesar, Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and on and on. Indeed, the more widespread the violence, the wider the recognition. Violent people know that violence is an effective means of getting other people's attention: you have to pay attention to someone who is coming to kill you (the German word for attention, *Achtung*, also means respect).

In other words, the hypothesis regarding the psychological cause or motivation of violence that I thought I had originated has been around in one form or another for a very long time. On the other hand, if it is a valid hypothesis, it would be surprising if earlier thinkers had not also discovered the same thing; for after all, violence has been with us since the dawn of history, and it would be surprising if the greatest minds and the most perceptive observers in history had not also noticed the same regularities in human behavior.

The View from Other Fields

The same conclusion regarding the psychological cause of violence has been reached in more recent times by scholars from the whole range of the behavioral sciences: clinical psychoanalysis, experimental psychology, social learning theory, sociology, anthropology, criminology, even law-enforcement. The psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1977: 116), for example, wrote that "The deepest level to which psychoanalysis can penetrate when it traces destructiveness [is to] the presence of a serious narcissistic injury, an injury that threatened the cohesion of the self." Another analyst, Gregory Rochlin (1973: via), made the same point when he emphasized "the relation of injured narcissism to aggression [and of] humiliation to violence," and concluded that "The question . . . is . . . what makes people . . . so prone to feeling vulnerable and humiliated, and therefore ultimately what causes violence." The forensic psychiatrist Herbert Thomas (1995) schematized the steps leading up to an act of violence as beginning with a rejection, which elicits intensely painful feelings of shame, to which the person responds with anger, which he then acts out with an act of violence.

Experimental psychologists have reached the same conclusion. Many individual studies and several reviews of the published research literature have been devoted to the study of aggressive behavior and simulated violence elicited under experimental conditions in psychological laboratories. These concerns, for example, experiments in which an attempt is made to induce the subject to press a button that he is told will administer painful and potentially injurious or even lethal electrical shocks to another person. The consensus that has emerged from this work is that the most potent stimulus of aggression and violence, and the one that is most reliable in eliciting this response, is not frustration per se (as the "frustration-aggression" hypothesis had claimed), but rather, insult and humiliation. In other words, the most effective way, and often the

only way, to provoke someone to become violent is to insult him. Feshbach (1971: 285), for example, after reviewing the literature on this subject, concluded that "violations to self-esteem through insult, humiliation or coercion are . . . probably the most important source of anger and aggressive drive in humans." (It should be stressed that coercion, as a violation of autonomy, also produces feelings of shame, as Erik Erikson stressed; that is, pride is dependent on being independent, and coercion is the direct negation of autonomy.) Geen (1968) concluded that personal insult was more powerful in provoking aggressive behavior than frustration. Sabini (1978: 347), in another review of the literature, generalized that frustration per se does not lead to anger. If frustration is not the cause of anger, what is? According to Aristotle, the perception that one has been insulted leads to anger. . . . Curiously, when psychologists have tried to produce anger in the laboratory, even when they have written about their results in terms of the consequences of frustration, they have not relied very much on frustrating people but have much more commonly insulted people-possibly because it is very difficult to make adults angry just by frustrating them.

A number of sociologists have arrived at the same explanation of the psychological roots of human violence. Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger (1991: 3) wrote that "a particular sequence of emotions underlies all destructive aggression: shame is first evoked, which leads to rage and then violence." The criminologist David Luckenbill (1977) analyzed the step-by-step escalation of the confrontations between victim and perpetrator that led to all 70 murders that occurred in one California county over a 10-year period between 1963 and 1972 and found that in all cases the murderer had interpreted his violence as the only means by which to save or maintain "face" and reputation and demonstrate that his character was strong rather than weak, in a situation that he interpreted as casting doubt on that assessment of himself. The opening move that started this process was some behavior by the victim that the perpetrator interpreted as insulting or disparaging to him and that would cause him to "lose face" if he "backed down" rather than responding with violence-even when the victim was only a child who refused to stop crying when ordered to.

The sociologist Elijah Anderson (1999) has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in ghetto areas of Philadelphia for many years in order to study the "social and cultural dynamics of the interpersonal violence that is currently undermining the quality of life of too many urban neighborhoods" (11). He discovered that the street culture has evolved a "code of the street," which amounts to a set of informal rules . . . of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect, that governs public social relations, especially violence (33, 9). . . . At the heart of the code is the issue of respect-loosely defined as being treated "right" or being granted one's . . . proper due, or the deference one deserves. . . . [R]espect is viewed as almost an external entity, one that is hard-won but easily lost-and so must constantly be guarded. . . (33).

[S]omething extremely valuable on the street-respect-is at stake in every interaction. . . . For people unfamiliar with the code . . . this concern with respect in the most ordinary interactions can be frightening and incomprehensible . . . Many feel that it is acceptable to risk dying over issues of respect. . .(92).

There is a general sense that very little respect is to be had, and therefore everyone competes to get what affirmation he can from what is available. The resulting craving for respect gives people thin skins and short fuses (75).

All this occurs against the background of life among the ghetto poor, who suffer the absence of jobs that pay a living wage, and the stigma of racial discrimination. Anderson adds that "in a society where so much economic inequality exists, for the severely alienated and desperate a gun can become like a bank card-an equalizer" in the contest for respect, and for the material status symbols that are among the main bases of respect (119).

Nor is it only behavioral scientists and academicians who have reached these conclusions. The same findings have been reported by law-enforcement officers who have investigated the motives of murderers and other violent criminals. John Douglas was a " profiler" with the FBI whose career was devoted to studying the personalities and attempting to discern the motives of the most violent and dangerous criminals in the United States. What he concluded was that any ultimate violent act "is the result of a deep-seated feeling of inadequacy," and that these men attempt to diminish their low self-esteem by blaming others for their own real or imagined shortcomings, which were often caused, he discovered, by the way they were treated by overly authoritarian fathers (Douglas and Okshaker, 1999).

That shame is the central motive for collective as well as individual violence can also be documented throughout history, culminating in the twentieth century when Hitler was elected to power on the campaign promise to wipe out the "shame of Versailles"; and in the twenty-first century, when Osama bin Laden (2001), in his first public statement after the terror attacks of September 11, explained the meaning or motive of that act of terrorism: "What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted. Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than 80 years, of humiliation and disgrace [contempt]."

Since then, more evidence of the same motives for terrorism has been documented. Dr. Eyad Sarraj (2002), a psychiatrist and founder of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights, has given a similar interpretation of the psychopathological motives of the Palestinian suicide bombers:

What propels . . . Palestinian men, and now women [to blow] themselves up in Israeli restaurants and buses . . . is a long history of humiliation and a desire for revenge that every Arab harbors. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the resultant uprooting of Palestinians, a deep seated feeling of shame has taken root in the Arab psyche. Shame is the most painful emotion in the Arab culture, producing the feeling that one is unworthy to live. The honorable Arab is the one who refuses to suffer shame and dies in dignity.

I have always felt that if any social-scientific theory were correct, it could be illustrated and exemplified by a story in any given day's newspapers. With that in mind, let me quote from a recent article by Thomas Friedman (2003) in which he analyzed a speech by Malaysia's departing prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, to a conclave of Muslim leaders:

Five times he referred to Muslims as humiliated. If I've learned one thing covering world affairs, it's this: The single most underappreciated force in international relations is humiliation. "I will not enumerate the instances of our humiliation," Mr. Mahathir said. "We are all Muslims . . . We are all being humiliated. . . . Today we, the whole Muslim [community], are treated with contempt and dishonor . . . the Muslim countries and their people . . . feel that they can do nothing right . . . Our only reaction is to become more and more angry. Angry people cannot think properly."

Friedman goes on to say that "the Arab-Israeli conflict is . . . about the humiliation that comes from one side succeeding at modernity and the other not. As Mr. Mahathir says in his speech, 'We sacrifice lives unnecessarily, achieving nothing more than to attract more massive retaliation and humiliation.'"

Friedman concludes with a coda that my own work with violent criminals in this country only confirms: "Never, ever underestimate a people's pride, no matter how broken they might be. . . . Tap into people's dignity and they will do anything for you. Ignore it, and they won't lift a finger. Which is why a Pakistani friend tells me that what the U.S. needs most in Iraq is a strategy of 'de-humiliation and re-dignification.'"

Pain and Punishment

All of these examples follow the same logic: that people resort to violence when they feel that they can wipe out shame only by shaming those who they feel shamed them. The most powerful

way to shame anyone is by means of violence, just as the most powerful way to provoke anyone into committing violence is by shaming him. Our language itself tells us this. For example, two of the words we use to refer to violence are assault and injury. The Latin root of assault is the same as that of insult, and even in English insult means a physical as well as emotional assault (as when surgeons refer to an incision as the surgical insult), just as a physical assault is experienced emotionally as the most powerful form of insult. And the Latin root of injury, *iniuria*, means insult as well as injury. One does not have to add insult to injury-it is already there, in the word as well as in the emotional/psychological experience. *Iniuria* also means injustice, which also links it to shame, since people experience feelings of shame when they perceive themselves to be victims of injustice (because they were too passive and weak to prevent themselves from being victimized). This is the opposite of the feeling of guilt, which occurs when people perceive themselves to be the perpetrators of injustice.

In a more general sense, we could say that pain and punishment increase feelings of shame but decrease feelings of guilt. That is the basic psychological reason why punishment-that is, revenge-far from deterring or preventing violence, is the most powerful stimulant or cause of violence that we have yet discovered. To put it another way, the most effective way to provoke someone into committing acts of violence (if that is what we wish to do) is to punish him. The story of the prisoner recounted earlier is only one illustration of a phenomenon I saw repeated several times a day in the prisons in which I worked. But even in non-prison settings the same truth holds. D.H. Lawrence (1922), for example, saw this when he had one of his characters say, "I don't want to suffer. . . . I should be ashamed. I think it is degrading."

Conversely, the fact that pain and punishment relieve or diminish feelings of guilt is a psychological truth that the Catholic Church institutionalized centuries ago in the sacrament and rituals of confession and penance. Confession is self-exposure or self-shaming. And penance is self-punishment; it comes from the same Greek and Latin roots as pain and punishment. What the Church discovered was that these are means by which a person can experience the feeling of no longer being guilty (which the Church calls the absolution of sins). But violence is most likely to occur when shame is maximized and guilt is minimized. That is among the reasons why the punishment of criminals (or children, or anyone else) is the most effective way to ensure that they will not only continue to be violent, but will even become more violent, both while in prison (or at home, or in school) and after returning to, or entering into, the community at large. This is exactly the effect that both punitive prison conditions and punitive childrearing have been demonstrated to have, as I and many other observers have documented repeatedly (Gilligan, 2000).

The Preconditions Underlying Shame and Violence

But if shame causes violence, then why isn't everyone violent? After all, everyone experiences feelings of shame at one time, and to some degree. And yet most people never commit a serious act of violence. What, then, distinguishes those who become violent from those who do not? The answer to that question that I will propose here is that while shame is a necessary condition for the causation of violence, it is not a sufficient condition. In that sense, shame bears much the same relation to the causation of violence that the tubercle bacillus does to the etiology of tuberculosis. (That is, only a minority of those exposed to the bacillus come down with the disease, and yet no one develops the disease unless they have been exposed to the bacillus.)

For shame to produce violence several other preconditions have to be in place. First, either the individual has not yet developed the capacity for the emotion that inhibits violence toward others—namely, guilt and remorse—or the situational circumstances present at the time diminished or neutralized whatever guilt feelings the person would otherwise have felt. Second, the degree of shame and humiliation the person is experiencing is so intense that it is overwhelming, to the point that it threatens the cohesion and viability of the self (that is, it threatens to bring about the death of the self). Third, the individual perceives himself as not having sufficient nonviolent means by which to save or restore his self-esteem. Most of us, when shamed or insulted either by others or by some mistake we have made that we ourselves feel was foolish, have sufficient other sources of self-esteem—some degree of knowledge or skills or achievements, some standing in the community or esteem in the eyes of our friends, family, or colleagues, or just material status symbols—that ourselves and our self-esteem are not wiped out even by a severe humiliation. But the violent criminals with whom I worked for the most part lacked all of these barriers against violence: most were uneducated or even illiterate, unskilled or unemployed, poor or even homeless, or members of ethnic or demographic groups that are subjected to systematic shaming by the rest of society; in short, they were almost all of the lowest social and economic status. I am not saying that one has to be poor or discriminated against to become violent, but it helps; and being wealthy or belonging to the upper middle class does not absolutely prevent one from becoming violent, but that also helps—as statistics on the epidemiology of violence make clear.

A fourth precondition that enormously increases the chance that shame will lead to violence exists when the individual has been socialized into the male gender role that, in our patriarchal culture, means he has been taught that there are many circumstances and situations in which one has to be violent in order to maintain one's masculinity or sense of masculine sexual identity and adequacy, and in which a nonviolent man would be seen as impotent and emasculated, a coward, wimp, eunuch, boy, homosexual, or woman, a man who has "no balls." For men in a patriarchy, there are many situations in which violence is honored and nonviolence is shamed. For example, in wartime (which means most of the time) we have for millennia given Medals of Honor or even dukedoms to men who killed sufficient numbers of other men, or elected them president,

and ridiculed, imprisoned, or even executed men who refused to kill other men, shaming them with names like coward or deserter or traitor. Those who are socialized into the gender role of women under conditions of patriarchy, by contrast, are not allowed to be violent, nor are they shamed and considered sexually inadequate as women for being nonviolent; rather, they are more likely to be shamed and considered "unfeminine" if they attempt to assume the male prerogative-and duty and obligation-to engage in violent behavior, whether on the football field or the field of combat. That is why for men violence can diminish feelings of shame, temporarily if not permanently, whereas for women it is, with rare exceptions, only likely to increase them. Thus, it is not surprising that men, in general, commit much more lethal and life-threatening violence than women do. In all cultures and all eras of history, most homicides, suicides, wars, and even so-called unintentional injuries and deaths (those caused by careless, reckless, daredevil risk taking, or by engaging in violent sports or hazardous occupations) are committed by, and suffered by, men.

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