Shame and guilt feelings: 
What is there to be learnt from psychological research?

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The material that I am going to present in this paper is part of a research project (or rather of its preparatory stages) which I am planning to do. The guiding question that I want to pursue in it is: how does conscience “function”, how does it express itself in our ordinary dealings in everyday life, and how does it guide our behavior? “Conscience” does not seem to be a concept sociologists like to apply or deal with; they prefer to talk about ‘morals’, moral thinking, moral behavior, moral consciousness, moral communication, moral rules, and how they contribute to the integration (or, occasionally, disintegration) of society. Sociologists (and anthropologists) also talk about shame and guilt cultures, and about shame or shaming as important mechanisms of social control.

In this paper I will not deal with these broader sociological issues. I will instead concentrate on the experience of shame and guilt, which are generally – often indiscriminately – interpreted as the key emotional manifestations of conscience, i.e., “moral emotions”. In contemporary work sociologists apparently talk about shame more often than about guilt; shame still seems to be more of a social phenomenon than guilt, despite all the critique that has been directed against earlier attempts to separate shame from guilt cultures along this dimension. Anthony Giddens is perhaps the most prominent advocate of the thesis that in late modern societies “mechanisms of shame rather than guilt come to the fore” (Giddens 1992, p. 8, see also pp. 64-9, 150-5). He argues that this phenomenon should be understood “in terms of a repression of moral questions which day-to-day life poses” implying a form of “existential isolation”, which in his view “is not so much a separation of individuals from others as a separation from the moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying existence” (ibid., p. 9). Giddens’ thesis becomes particularly relevant when we connect it with

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1 A particularly thoughtful study, with special emphasis on shame, is provided by Sighard Neckel (1991).
2 With regard to social psychology Baumeister et al. (1994, p. 243) offer a similar observation: “Social psychology’s neglect of guilt is especially ironic in that guilt may be a pervasively and essentially social emotion.”
3 This critique should not lead us into thinking that cultures do not differ with regard to their conceptions on shame and guilt. “(A)lthough early anthropological efforts to dichotomize ‘shame cultures’ and ‘guilt cultures’ (…) were rightly abandoned as overly simplistic, cultures nevertheless appear to differ substantially in the extent to which they attend to shame versus guilt and the roles played by these two emotions in regulating social behavior” (Fessler 2007, p. 186).
4 This contrasts with Simmels (and many other scholars’) assumption that in modern societies the probability to experience shame has declined (cf. Neckel, 1991, p. 93). It concurs with Riesman’s thesis about a shift from the inner to the outer directed personality (Riesman et al. 1950). On the pervasive role of shame also in contemporary societies see Scheff (1995). Another view is advanced by Fessler (2007, p. 189): “the era of shame may be passing.” Giddens’ understanding of guilt feelings is based on Freudian theory, the introjections of extrinsically imposed moral rules. Shame instead is more closely associated with self-identity. So he speaks of “the increasing prominence of shame, in relation to self-identity, as compared to guilt. Guilt essentially depends on mechanisms extrinsic to the internally referential systems of modernity … The more self-identity becomes internally referential, the more shame comes to play a fundamental role in the adult personality. The individual no longer lives primarily by extrinsic moral precepts but by means of the reflexive organization of the self” (Giddens 1992, p. 153). It is noteworthy that in this book Giddens makes no reference at all to Kohlberg’s theory of moral development (see below).
a (putative) insight provided by behavioral psychology stating that shame regularly entails socially mal-adaptive functions, like withdrawal or aggressive behavior, while guilt apparently tends to be the more adaptive emotion, for example, by motivating people to engage in reparative behavior. (I will return to this later on.)

Sociologists who talk about “moral consciousness” usually give two references or sources which they draw upon most heavily: One is Kohlberg, the other Freud (both with numerous disciples, followers or successors). I have been looking instead for other or additional sources, particularly in clinical and behavioral psychology, which might offer further or divergent insights or suggestions regarding shame and guilt experiences. The most often quoted source in this field seems to be a book by Helen B. Lewis, “Shame and Guilt in Neurosis”, published in 1971; next to it, on the list of referenced work, is probably a long series of articles and books produced by June Price Tangney and her collaborators, published since the late 1980s. I will first deal with major aspects of their conceptualizations and, in the second part, present some of the results produced by their (and others’) empirical research on the behavioral consequences of shame and guilt.

I.

Helen Lewis starts with a study of dictionary definitions of the terms “shame” and “guilt”, and of their synonyms. This study alone fills 20 pages, so I have to leave out quite a number of aspects and facets. Like Lewis, I will start with shame. Lewis identifies “six principal meanings” listed for the term “shame”, only two of them are considered to have “direct psychological implications”: the first one defines shame as an affect or emotion; the second defines it as a motive of behavior.

The affect component is summarized in the following way: “(Shame) is a painful affect, with the source of negative affect both in the ‘other’ and in the self, or in their relationship. It can [also] be felt for another. The source of negative affect is ambiguous; its direction is ambiguous; the extent of personal responsibility involved in shame is unclear. … Shame feeling also varies in extent and quality of painfulness. The multiple meanings of the term also indicate that shame has both a moral and nonmoral meaning” (Lewis 1971, pp. 65-6; lots of ambiguities, indeed.)

After looking at various synonyms for shame (like disgrace, ridicule, humiliation, embarrassment) Lewis concludes “that the common properties which characterize the different members of the shame family of feeling are of three main kinds. The first involves
the self in a loss of dignity or status. The second involves the self in failure of functioning … the third common property involves a characteristic event in the field, namely, disappointment or frustration” (ibid., p. 68)

I will return to this shortly, but first let me briefly turn to the second component in the meaning of shame, i.e., its motivational thrust. Here, Lewis notes the following: “(Shame is) fear of offence against propriety and decency – operating as a restraint on behavior” (ibid., p. 66). She adds the following comment: “In this motivational meaning, the notion of the ‘other-directed’ or ‘other-determined’ standard of behavior is apparent. This is the shame motive which is often contrasted with the guilt motive, and as a lower order of morality than guilt …” (ibid.).

Helen Lewis works within a framework still informed by Freudian theory. Her “heuristic assumption” is “that both shame and guilt are superego states … When the ego-ideal, or positive identification figure, is stirred, shame of failure results; this shame may be moral or nonmoral. When the negative or castrating identification figure is stirred, the sense of guilt for transgression results” (ibid., pp. 82-3). This is reminiscent of an earlier article by Piers, published in 1953, in which Piers offers the following shorthand definition of guilt and shame: “Whereas guilt is generated whenever a boundary (set by the superego) is touched or transgressed, shame occurs when a goal (presented by the ego ideal) is not being reached. It thus indicates a real ‘shortcoming’. Guilt anxiety accompanies transgression; shame, failure” (Piers/Singer 1971 [1953], p. 24)]. The problem with this proposal is its lack of definiteness. Aronfreed (1968, p. 252), for example, points to situations where a “failure” to achieve something may have harmful consequences for someone else. Depending on the severity of these consequences, a person may experience guilt even though he has done his best, has not transgressed on any rules, at least not purposely, and receives no blame from anybody. But Aronfreed still wants to define guilt as a negative feeling state which arises from the moral evaluation of an act of transgression (ibid., p. 245). The “core meaning of the term moral”, in his view, “can be abstracted both from common usage and from certain traditional distinctions which have been made in moral philosophy. The abstraction is one that designates evaluative cognition as moral when it makes reference to the consequences of an act for others.” The consequences that are to be avoided – passively or actively, by action or inaction – are those that are, in a very broad sense, harmful to others. At this point one may bring in an article by Baumeister and his colleagues (Baumeister et al., 1994) who note that the “harm” perceived may reach beyond any specific physical or psychic injury or pain to include inequities or disadvantages on the side of the other person or seemingly undeserved benefits for oneself. A
person may feel guilty without having willingly contributed to such a state of affairs; it may be sufficient to see oneself as just being part of a collectivity or system which works that way. This could carry us to the notion of “existential” or “survivor guilt” (cf. Hoffman 1976, pp. 140-2), which I however do not want to pursue here. Instead I want to point to another observation introduced by Baumeister et al. (1994, p. 246): “In some cases a person may feel guilty over a violated standard even when no one is harmed or disappointed and no one knows about the incident.” In fact, in any culture or sub-culture there are moral standards, i.e. standards associated with notions of the “good” and the “bad” (or “evil”), which do not focus on the infliction or attenuation of “harm”, but on other complexes of symbolic meaning – just think of rules regulating sexual behavior and cleanliness. A potent indicator for the moral nature of a behavioral rule is the indignation or outrage it may elicit in persons who have witnessed the transgression. So, a short-hand definition of “guilt” as a feeling state (not as an externally imposed judgment) may read as follows: *Guilt is an aversive emotional state associated with an individual’s action or inaction, or his active or passive participation in circumstances, by which (a) another person has (presumably) been harmed (in the very broad sense just outlined) and/or (b) some other kind of moral rule, subscribed to by the individual, has been violated.*

Shame, in contrast to this, and according to Aronfreed, is not bound to moral evaluation, and defined as follows: “The aversive state that follows a transgression may be described as shame to the extent that its qualitative experience is determined by a cognitive orientation toward the visibility of the transgression” (Aronfreed 1968, p. 249). Regarding “visibility” he explains: “Common self-observation suggests that some of our actions result in the experience of shame even when they are unknown to others, because they expose to us what we feel ought not to be visible ... Of course, the experience of shame in the absence of surveillance still requires that salience of the visibility of transgression, either to ourselves or to imagined significant others” (ibid.). Aronfreed here applies the term “transgression” in such a way as to include instances of what Piers calls “failure”, i.e., actions or characteristics which do not violate moral norms but which the person still wishes to keep invisible. So, any violation of moral norms may evoke not only guilt, but also shame. On the other hand, there are many more instances which evoke shame without guilt: any act which displays a personal deficit or inability beyond moral shortcomings, e.g., not meeting some criteria of professional competence or not behaving according to the rules of good manners. According to Aronfreed’s conception, neither intentionality nor high levels of internalization are included
within the criteria that define either shame or guilt, but they both may stir up awareness and salience of the problematic character of a transgression or failure.

Though Lewis agrees with these latter points regarding intentionality and internalization she has quite a different idea on how shame and guilt should be distinguished. She develops differential working concepts of shame and guilt along six dimensions, but I will pick up only four of them:
The first refers to the stimulus situation which evokes shame and guilt, the second refers to the content of consciousness in the two states, the third relates to the position of the self in the field and, finally, the fourth considers characteristic defenses in connection with shame and guilt

(1) **Stimulus Situation**

On this point Lewis concurs with Aronfreed and others: “(T)he stimuli which evoke shame are multiple in kind, whereas the stimuli which evoke guilt are of one sort. Both one’s own aggressions, and a defeat, disappointment, or failure can evoke shame. Only one’s own aggression (transgression) can evoke guilt” (Lewis 1971, p. 84), in short: “There is both moral and nonmoral shame. There is only one kind of (…) guilt” (ibid.), i.e., guilt is always moral. Tangney, however, reports that “analyses of narrative accounts of personal shame and guilt experiences … indicate that there are very few ‘classic’ shame-inducing or guilt-inducing situations … Although events generally regarded as moral transgressions were about equally likely to elicit shame and guilt, there was some evidence that nonmoral failures and shortcoming (e.g., socially inappropriate behavior or dress) were more likely to elicit shame. Even so, failures in work, school, or sports settings and violations of social conventions were cited by a significant number of children and adults in connection with guilt” (Tangney 1995a, pp. 115-6). But in another paper, Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski (1994, p. 587, n. 1) observe the following: “… when people are asked to describe personal shame and guilt experiences (…), they clearly describe different experiences. In several studies … such subject-generated narrative accounts of personal shame and guilt experiences varied systematically in a theoretically consistent manner along a broad range of phenomenological dimensions.” And based on these accounts, the authors “wrote four scenarios that were thought, a priori, to elicit greater shame than guilt and four that were thought to elicit greater guilt than shame” (ibid., p. 588).\(^5\)

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\(^5\) This is in striking contrast to the TOSCA instrument, also developed by Tangney (more to this later).
The problem here might be that by departing from a conventional rule or expectation some person (for example one’s parents or partner) might also get hurt, thereby transforming a non-moral failure into a moral transgression. Besides, social conventions which as such do not have moral content may still have moral significance on a meta-level: they may symbolize community spirit and collective membership; they may be viewed as part of a common social praxis which is the seedbed of all morality. It probably is the case that situations which primarily elicit shame differ systematically from those which primarily elicit guilt, but there is always ample room for subjective interpretations shifting the balance between these two feeling states across situations.

Returning to Lewis’ account, we note that she departs from the conventional view which emphasized public versus private and internal versus external dimensions. Tangney (1995a: 136, n. 2) refers to Ruth Benedict, e.g., who “conceptualized shame as a reaction to public exposure of some personal shortcoming, whereas she saw guilt as more of a private affair between one’s self and “one’s internalized conscience.” Disconfirming this view, Tangney again reports from one of her own studies showing that for both children and adults “solitary shame experiences [occurring when the person was alone, H.T.] were just as common as solitary guilt experiences” (ibid.). But, once again, I should like to add that this common empirical characteristic of the stimulus situation does not countermand the importance of a similar distinction in the psychological states implied in the semantic meanings of shame and guilt. Tangney herself observes that “shame experiences were more likely to involve a sense of exposure and a preoccupation with others’ opinions … whereas guilt experiences were more likely to involve a concern with one’s effect on others” (Tangney 1995b, pp. 1135-36). This, after all, is not as far apart from conventional interpretations as it seemed to be at first glance. The shame evoking exposure to others does not have to be “real”, it can also be imagined. The crucial point is that shame involves – by definition – a sense of exposure, guilt not. There is always ample room for subjective interpretations shifting the balance between these two feeling states across situations. All the complexities involved in the constative or performative definition of a situation and the interplay between cognition and emotion apply here as well.

With respect to the stimulus situation, Lewis calls attention to yet another important feature: “Shame of failure is for an involuntary event. It results from incapacity … Guilt for transgression is, by implication, guilt for a voluntary act or act of choice. The proximal stimulus to shame is thus deficiency of the self; while the proximal stimulus of guilt is some
action (omission) by the self” (Lewis 1971, p. 84). This again concurs or seems to be commensurate with Piers’ and Aronfreed’s views. I should like to add that the sense of failure or incapacity may also arise from low social status, an observation that has often been emphasized by sociologists (cf. Neckel 1991); one might refer to this as “existential shame” (echoing the notion of “existential” guilt).  

With regard to the situational context, not only shame but also guilt has to be understood as “an essentially social phenomenon” as Baumeister et al. note: “Although feelings of guilt may occur in the privacy of an individual psyche, they appear to be pervasively and multiply related to interpersonal motivations and attachment, particularly involving communal bonds between significant others” (Baumeister et al. 1994, pp. 259-60). In contrast to these communal relationships, instrumentally motivated “exchange-relationships” less often occasion experiences of guilt.

(2) Content of consciousness (affectivity and cognitions)

With regard to the intensity of the negative affect, Lewis notes that shame “involves more of an affective component in awareness than guilt. Moreover, since it does have a heavier affective component than guilt, shame is likely to involve autonomic reactions and awareness of the body [just think of blushing, H.T.] Shame’s affective component also permits more communication via looking, gestures and other nonverbal activities than does guilt. In this respect, the connections between shame and primitive feeling states of the past may be more profound than those of guilt” (Lewis 1971, p. 85).

With regard to the cognitive content of shame and guilt Lewis observes: “Although there are many variants of affective state in shame, the cognitive content of shame is monothematic: the varieties of deficiencies of the self. In guilt, the cognitive content can be as varied as the varieties of transgression and accompanying circumstances. The self remains focal in awareness in shame; specific awareness of the self as an entity in experience may be absent in guilt as the person’s thought about the events for which he is guilty carry him into many areas of life” (ibid., p. 86). This formulation is still sufficiently cautious: “… the self as an entity in experience may be absent in guilt …” [emphasis added, H.T.]. But in other statements – and followed by Tangney and many others (like Baumeister et al. 1994, p. 245) – the focus on either the global self or rather on the specific act is no longer conceived as a variable (which may have different distributions in shame versus guilt experience) but is elevated to serve as

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6 Fessler (2007) notes that in the history of evolution this hierarchy-based shame was the earlier one to develop. He differentiates between dominance hierarchies (where dominant positions are taken from others, based on force or power) and prestige hierarchies, given by others (p. 178).
the decisive definitional criteria that distinguishes shame from guilt: “The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but is not itself the focus of the experience” (Lewis, quoted from Tangney 1995b, p. 1134).

As a definition, this proposal does not look convincing to me. It may well be that shame feelings generally are more diffuse than guilt feelings; it may also be the case that guilt feelings generally are more clearly focused on the specific act of transgression. But why isn’t it in guilt too that a specific act of transgression points back to its originator to revealing his/her moral deficit, just as in the case of shame, when a specific act reveals some other kind of deficit? The extent to which the entire self becomes the focus of negative evaluations associated with guilt feelings may depend, first, on the severity of the damage or harm inflicted upon another person and, second, on the possibility or impossibility of making good for it by engaging oneself in reparative action. This, however, is an empirical question; it should not be made a matter of definition.7 Answering this question presupposes a definition based on other criteria – those suggested above (focusing on exposure of failure or/and transgression on moral rules or principles).

When Lewis talks about the

(3) Position of the self in the field,

I can more easily agree with her, for example, when she notes: “(T)he relation of the self to the internalized ‘other’ is different. In shame, the ‘other’ is personified, while in guilt the ‘other’ is not apparent as the instigator and may or may not be apparent as the object to whom guilt refers” (Lewis 1971, p. 87). A sociologist might say that in shame we tend to look at “significant others”, while in guilt our point of reference is more likely to be the “generalized

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7 In another paper, Tangney, Wagner et al. (1996: p. 798) surmise: “(b)ecause shame involves this sense of exposure and disapproval from sources outside of the self, self-directed hostility is easily redirected out toward others involved in the shame-eliciting situation. Observing others may be held in part responsible for the ugly feeling of shame.” So it seems that the imagined or acutely experienced disapproval of others is likely to shift the focus of one’s own negative appraisal from the “thing done” to the entire self – and thereby incites aggressive reactions or, in other cases, withdrawal (a point taken up later). Lewis offers a whole series of statements on this topic which are quite puzzling to me, for example: “Another result of the fact that shame is about the self is that the content or consciousness is likely to be about the sense of identity … The content of consciousness in guilt is not directly about the sense of identity; as a result, this aspect of the self functions more smoothly in guilt” (1971, p. 86). As for me, it is hard to see how this statement concurs with another one she also offers, namely: “Guilt consists of righteous anger directed against the self by the self” (p. 87). Somewhat cryptic to me is also the following remark: “Although the object of anger [in guilt experience, H.T.] is clear and specific (i.e., the self), the self is not the focus of guilt experience. The self is rather the source and director of hostility applied in connection with specific transgressions” (p. 87).
other”. But the significant other, too, does not have to be present, he can be imagined (as already mentioned). And the standards he is perceived to apply are also those adhered to by the person who feels shamed (but I am not sure, if this always has to be the case).

(4) Characteristic defenses in connection with shame and guilt

“Since shame is a painful affect, its characteristic defense is turning away from the stimulus situation. Denial is thus a characteristic defense against shame” (ibid., p. 89) Apart from denial or withdrawal, “shame tends to evoke restitutions within the domain of the self, i.e., some narcissistic affirmation” (ibid.). Or, with respect to symptom formation, it may “evolve affect disorder, principally, depression”, whereas “undischarged guilt tends to evoke thought disorder, particularly, obsessive and compulsive symptoms, and paranoia” (ibid., p. 89). [Again, how could this happen without the entire self being the focus of evaluation?] On the other hand, guilt may “evolve discharge in the field (by) some ethical or moral affirmation” (ibid.), i.e., by reparative action, “good deeds” (ibid., p. 91). To this Lewis adds the very interesting remark that “Guilt can also be a defense against the feeling of inadequacy in shame” (ibid.). This is confirmed by a statement made by Eric Harris, the Columbine High School student who killed (together with his fellow student Dylan Klebold) 13 people in a rampage shooting. In his diary the following note was found (re-translated from a German newspaper report in Süddeutsche Zeitung, April 27, 2009, p. 14): “It is MY fault! Not that of my parents, not that of my brothers, my friends … or the computer shooting games, not that of the media. IT is MINE” [emphasis in the original].

II.

The last paragraph has already indicated some of the motivational or behavioral consequences spawned by shame or guilt. In this section now, this topic will be carried on a (little) bit further. For sociologists, the contrasting motivations and behavioral consequences that arise from shame and guilt experiences are particularly important. Based on her own research and drawing upon numerous other studies, Tangney (1995a: 120) arrives at the conclusion that “shame and guilt lead to contrasting motives relevant to interpersonal relationship. Whereas guilt tends to motivate reparative action, shame tends to motivate escapist responses” and to sever interpersonal contacts. ”But shame does not only motivate avoidant behavior, it can also motivate retaliative anger … Because shame involves the sense of exposure and disapproval from sources outside of the self, self-directed hostility is easily redirected toward others
involved in the shame-eliciting situation … In redirecting anger outside the self, shamed individuals may be attempting to regain a sense of agency and control, which is so often impaired in the shame experience … This link between shame and anger or aggression is evident at a dispositional level as well” (ibid., p. 121).

To assess individual differences in shame-proneness and guilt-proneness a series of scenario-based paper-and-pencil measures has been developed, among them the famous TOSCA-scale, a Test Of Self-Conscious Affect, worked out in three variants – for adults (TOSCA), adolescents (TOSCA-A) and children (TOSCA-C). These scales not only measure the disposition toward the arousal of affective anger per se, but also help to assess the externalization of blame as a cognitive attributional dimension (ibid., p. 123).

Generally, verbal or physical aggression is not the only and not necessarily the dominant response to anger. (Tangney 1995a offers a long list of anger-related processes on p. 126). But Tangney’s findings “indicate that shame-prone individuals are not only more prone to anger in general; they are also more likely to do unconstructive things with their anger, compared to their less shame-prone peers”, including direct physical aggression and self-directed hostility … In contrast, guilt-proneness was generally associated with constructive means of handling anger – including … attempts to take direct corrective action” (ibid., p. 126), and it was “negatively correlated with all indices of direct, indirect, and displaced aggression” (ibid., p. 127). In a more recent paper, Tangney has modified these generalizations and offered more differentiated hypotheses by pointing, for example, to various situational or personality characteristics (like self-control or stable versus unstable work-histories) that might moderate or mediate the association between shame and guilt on the one hand and risky or antisocial behavior on the other (Stuewig & Tangney 2007).

Lewis’ and Tangney’s conception of the role of the self contrasts with much of the philosophical literature which generally sees morality and self as inextricably intertwined; in this view, moral identities become almost fused with self-identities (cf. Nunner-Winkler 2004). Thus, breaking a moral rule or violating a moral principle which the person is committed to (a “second-order volition” in Henry Frankfurt’s terms) amounts to no less than a betrayal of one’s self. That guilt generally fosters reparative action instead of anger or aggression does not imply that the act rather than the self were the focus of negative

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8 The differential degree of shame-proneness or guilt-proneness is rooted in differences of cognitive style, in particular: field dependence vs. field independence. Lewis assumes that field-dependent individuals possess a less differentiated self (Tangney 1995b: 347).
evaluation; rather, since guilt feelings are evoked by acts of moral transgression they cannot be relieved by committing yet another immoral act (unless shame dominated guilt).

When Tangney talks about guilt she implicitly seems to be talking about a specific type of conscience which proponents of the cognitive-developmental approach (Kohlberg and others) refer to as “autonomous conscience” that needs to be contrasted with the “heteronomous conscience” (In Tangney’s articles that appeared in the 1990s, I have found no reference to this school at all. In a more recent paper (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek 2007) such a reference appears, but only in passing.)

Scholars following the cognitivistic approach apply this distinction to set apart guilt feelings from “remorse” or “regret” (for the following, see specifically Nunner-Winkler 2004). The heteronomous conscience demands literal obedience to preordained rules. By not following these prescriptions the person incurs severe punishment executed by the “warm glow” of his pangs of conscience; and this obviously involves a severely negative evaluation of one’s self (to the point of being a sinner). In contrast, the autonomous type of conscience commands regard for underlying (universalized) principles that need to be interpreted by the actor and applied specifically in given situations that typically pose conflicting demands upon the actor. A person who has advanced to the autonomous type of conscience is able reflectively to distance himself both from the pressure of his impulsive desires and from pre-ordained rules commanding specific actions or non-actions. According to this conception, morality and self are still closely intertwined, but the essence of morality is volitional commitment to principles and not (or lesser so) to rules demanding specific actions. Therefore, a specific transgression is less likely to be followed by a devastating judgment passed upon one’s global self. For that reason these scholars tend to apply the term “guilt feelings” with reference to the heteronomous variant of conscience while talking about “remorse” and “regret” in connection with autonomous conscience. 9 It is noteworthy in this context that Tangney in her writings often rephrases “guilt as a sense of remorse or regret” (e.g., in Tangney, Burggraf, & Wagner 1995, p. 349).

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9 A. Gibbard (1992, p. 296) expressly notes that he does not distinguish guilt and remorse. He refers however to another author (Gabrielle Taylor) who “insists there is a crucial difference: that guilt is an emotion of self-assessment, whereas remorse is not. Guilt concentrates on oneself, and involves feeling disfigured by a transgression. In remorse, the thought concentrates on the deed, seen as one’s own action”.

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It would be interesting to raise the question of how much of an overlap or agreement there is between the cognitivists’ concept of heteronomous conscience and Tangney’s ideas about guilt “with an overlay of shame”. If shame is absent from guilt, then, in her view “guilt is a hopeful future-oriented moral affective experience” which is not only positively related to interpersonal behavior but also unrelated to negative psychological symptoms (ibid., p. 349). In contrast with shame-free guilt, shame has, as already mentioned, a high potential for maladaptive psychological reactions like depression or paranoid ideation (ibid., p. 354).

Tangney acknowledges that “clinical theory and clinical case studies make frequent reference to maladaptive guilt characterized by chronic self-blame and an obsessive rumination over some objectionable or harmful behavior”. Her interpretation is “that guilt becomes maladaptive most typically when it becomes fused with shame, and that the component of shame sets the stage for a pathogenic sequence of affect and cognitions. A guilt experience that begins with the notion of ‘Oh, look at what a horrible thing I have done,’ but that is then magnified and generalized to the self (‘… and aren’t I a horrible person’), represents a sequence leading from tension and remorse over a specific behavior to much more global feelings of self-contempt and disgust. And the shame component of this sequence, not the guilt component, is more likely to present an insoluble dilemma” (ibid., pp. 358-9). In my view, this statement reveals the problematic nature of connecting by definition shame with a focus on the global self in contrast to guilt with its focus on action. This provokes tautological statements of the kind: If guilt appears to elicit mal-adaptive behavior, it is not guilt doing this, it rather is the shame component associated with it.

The issues of definition carry over into the construction of the measurement instrument. Luyten et al. (2002) note that “(s)everal authors have suggested that the TOSCA guilt scale perhaps measures only constructive forms of guilt, but not more chronic, idiosyncratic, irrational and potentially destructive forms or aspects of guilt” (p. 1375). And they refer to quantitative and qualitative studies that “clearly show that self-awareness in general …, and negative self-evaluations, self-aggression and self-criticism in particular, are an important aspect in descriptions of guilt experiences” (ibid.). In their own “judgmental and logical analysis” of the TOSCA, Luyten and his collaborators detected a twofold bias: in the set of descriptors specifically designed to capture reactions induced by shame, those representing mal-adaptive functions were clearly overrepresented, while in the set of descriptors assigned

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10 See also Baumeister et al. (1994).
to capture guilt reactions mal-adaptive functions were largely underrepresented. Statistical analyses using a reconstructed scale confirmed this assessment.

From a somewhat different angle, Ferguson et al. (2007) also take issue with the TOSCA measurement approach. They particularly emphasize the conceptual distinction between (guilt or shame) *feelings* and *behavior*: “Although a tall order, it is unclear whether the TOSCA-based distinctions between guilt as approach/repair *versus* shame as avoid/self-criticize do validly reflect differences between the two states as ‘feelings’ … We stress the need to measure *feelings* of guilt and shame, in addition to related behaviors or cognitions” (p. 333). In their own work they present evidence showing that both shame and guilt have more adaptive than mal-adaptive functions and that they differ little as to the extent that they have either one. “They both encourage exploration of whether and how the person can take responsibility for upholding or achieving cherished standards. Although they can compete as mutual liabilities, together they serve as useful goads to responsibly promote the self’s integrity while also fulfilling one’s duties” (p. 345). From a different perspective – that of evolutionary history – Fessler (2007) also emphasizes the adaptive functions of shame: “The key to understanding our obsession with watching one another’s behaviour lies in the fact that ours is a cooperative species” (p. 177). He further suggests that the balance of adaptive versus mal-adaptive functions, risky or conforming behavior, may be different for acutely felt shame on the one hand and shame proneness on the other, with the latter promoting more conformism (p. 190).

**Concluding remarks**

Shame and guilt constitute a highly contentious multi-faceted topic. Scholars take different views on how to define these two concepts with reference to feeling states, personality traits, and cultural standards. They also give different assessments regarding their socially adaptive or maladaptive consequences. There seems to be general agreement, however, that shame and guilt experiences comprise an amalgam of negatively tuned self-conscious emotions and cognitions that arise either from enduring personality characteristics considered to be deficient in some respect (including low status positions) or from specific acts of misconduct interpreted as a failure or transgression. Most scholars link *shame* to a person’s sense of real or imagined exposure of his personal deficit or misconduct to significant others, whereas the specific quality of *guilt* feelings is generally thought to result from the interior recognition (which may be helped by other peoples’ presence or judgment) that one is in the wrong in a more specific way: by having done something morally “bad”, most generally by inflicting
harm upon another person or by not intervening effectively to attenuate other people’s suffering. But exterior and interior judgment, visibility and privacy are no longer viewed as contradictory constituents; they may reinforce each other, shame and guilt may overlap and become blended. Many scholars differentiate shame and guilt by noting that in shame the entire self is the focal point of negative evaluation, while in guilt the focus is placed on the specific act of transgression. I would agree that shame is more clearly focused on the self, but I also assume that the negative evaluations associated with guilt may affect the entire self as well, depending, e.g., on the severity of the harm that has been inflicted and the extent to which it can possibly be amended. It should be helpful, I think, to differentiate various types of shame and guilt along certain analytical dimensions – like the severity of the failure or transgression, the kind of social relationship that links the digressing actor with his audience or victims (for example, relatives, friends, community members, strangers, competitors). Such a typology might help, among other things, to better clarify and answer such questions as to the motivational or behavioural consequences of shame and guilt, which might be different depending on the given type of shame and guilt.

To make further conceptual advancements it may be helpful for scholars and researchers to pass beyond the lines demarcating their own field of research or the theoretical approaches linked to specific academic traditions and disciplines. I found it quite surprising, for example, to see how little notice behavioural psychologists and proponents of the cognitive-developmental approach have taken from each other – despite sharing the same interest in studying moral behaviour and moral emotions (not to speak of the many sociologists who shun any contact with behavioural psychology). Psychologists and sociologists alike should also take a closer look at contemporary philosophy, where moral emotions have become a thoroughly discussed subject matter (see, for example, the inspiring work offered by Hilge Landweer 2001; 2007).

References


