

# **SHAME: CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES**

**MELVIN R. LANSKY, M.D., F.A.P.A.\***

## **THE HISTORY OF PSYCHONALYSIS**

After a long period in which shame and shame dynamics were unappreciated, there has been an explosion of interest in shame over the last 20 years (Kohut, 1971; Lansky, 1992; Lewis, 1971; Morrison, 1989; Wurmser, 1981). A heavy emphasis on shame very early in the history of psychoanalysis was followed by an almost complete eclipse of attention to shame after Freud's (1905) turn to intrapsychic fantasy, with shame conflicts poorly conceptualized and acknowledged mostly in relation to conflicts involving anality and exhibitionism. Interest in shame had a somewhat veiled reemergence in 1914 with the study of narcissism and the ego ideal. It came to be appreciated fully only following the work of Heinz Kohut and Helen Block Lewis in 1971. I will touch somewhat briefly on matters relating to the history of explicit psychoanalytic thinking about shame because I want to deal mainly with the impact of an understanding on the basic psychoanalytic concepts that are more implicit than explicit and that may even appear not to be related to shame. Because we use these concepts clinically and theoretically in doing and conceptualizing our work every day, we may form inexact and positively incorrect notions of clinical material if the role of shame is not appreciated.

Let me say at the outset that emphasis on shame is not just a matter of exchanging one affect for another. Shame is the affect that signals the threat of danger to the social bond (Scheff, 1990). Shame results from any exposure that challenges the integrity of the self before others, and the self defined as a self before others, or the sense of self resulting from a self-evaluation derived from an internalization of that view before others—that is to say, po-

---

Chief, Family Treatment Program Brentwood Division, West Los Angeles VA Medical Center, Los Angeles; Adjunct Professor of Psychiatry UCLA Medical School; Training and Supervising Analyst, Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Institute.

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, May 1993.

tentially at least, any human interaction in actuality or imagination.

The emphasis on shame, then, is not just a matter of one affect traded in for another or emphasized over another, but a reminder of what Hegel (1807) told us almost 200 years ago, namely that the self is only a self by virtue of being defined as such by the other. Selfhood, then, is always at some risk for tentativity, but in some people the sense of self is contingent not just generally but on the immediate recognition from the other. Failure to receive such a response is seen, clinically, to give rise to disruption, fragmentation, and consequent shame. Shame, then, is the affect that signals danger to the self as such, its preservation, its integrity, its standing, and its security within the social bond—the bond to the subject that makes the self a self. The problem with shame is inextricably tied to the problem of *what one needs an object for*. The word, “object,” was used originally as one of the attributes of a drive or of desire. A drive had source, aim, and object (Freud, 1905). Because our emphasis now is more on emotions concerned with regulation as a social being, both in fantasy and in actuality, we need to understand much more about the nature of object than we did in 1905. I will return to these points after I trace very briefly the relationship of shame to the evolution of psychoanalytic theory.

## SHAME IN FREUD’S WRITINGS

Shame started out with a preeminent position in Breuer’s and Freud’s writings. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1893–1895), Breuer and Freud conceptualize about defense as opposing not drive or affect, but awareness that would cause upset, especially shame. Breuer and Freud write:

*(B)y means of my psychical work, I have had to overcome a psychical force in the patients which was opposed to the pathogenic ideas becoming conscious (being remembered). From these I recognized the universal characteristic of such ideas. They were all of a distressing nature, calculated to arouse the affects of shame, of self-reproach, and a kind of psychical pain and the feeling of being harmed; they were all of a kind that one would prefer not to have experienced, that one would rather forget. From all this, there arose, as it were, automatically the thought of defense. . . . The patient’s ego had been approached by an idea which proved to be incom-*

patible, which provoked on the part of the ego a rebelling force of which the purpose was defense against this incompatible idea. (pp. 268-269)

After Freud began to appreciate the role of unconscious fantasy, sexual, and aggressive wishes, he began to develop a model of the mind that pushed anxiety and guilt into theoretical preeminence and tended to relegate shame to matters connected with anality and exhibitionism. Those concepts, although they certainly have some clinical usefulness, tend to assume without proof that a wide variety of, for example, so-called "anal" issues are in actual fact derivatives of conflicts involving anal erotism *per se* rather than as manifesting dangers of loss of control (e.g., of rage), of dirtiness or inner unlovability or emptiness, or struggles with powerful persons for approval or autonomy. In consequence, many shame conflicts over dirtiness, unlovability, and loss of control are presumed to be "anal" when they, in fact, may be so speaking only metaphorically or considered so from the point of view of a symbolic language that tends to presume that *all* such conflicts derive from and are reducible to conflicts over anal erotism *per se*. Although I in no way wish to suggest that the concept of anality is entirely symbolic or metaphoric, I maintain that the language of anality posits rhetorically a theory about the origin of shame conflicts that, despite many instances in which it is correct, serves to overlook and bypass instances in which shame conflicts have nothing to do with anal erotism, that is, in which appearing deficient, dirty, or uncontrolled before the other is the source of the sense of shame, not necessarily linked to anal erotic conflicts *per se*.

It is likewise questionable to presume that exhibitionism/voyeurism, that is, conflicts over being seen and seeing, are necessarily derived from wishes to exhibit or to see the genitals. Important though such conflicts are in childhood and adulthood, and sexual though many conflicts concerning being seen and seeing are, it would be an error to assume that every exhibitionistic conflict derives from infantile genital exhibitionism or voyeurism. As is the case with anality, such an assumption tends to beg questions about the childhood antecedents and the nature of shame conflicts without proof. Kohut's (1971) emphasis on conflicts involving the grandiose self, that is, exhibitionistic techniques to elicit mirroring from a selfobject, is only one example of a shame conflict concerning exhibitionism that cannot be presumed to arise from infantile conflicts around seeing the genitals and having them seen

by others. A great many narcissistic conflicts over exhibitionism give rise to shame or defenses against it in ways that do not involve or derive from infantile genital exhibitionism.

Freud, in his early writings about shame, referred to shame itself as a defense (Hazard, 1969). (The French have two words for shame, and we would be well served by words that distinguish the affect from the defense. The French *honte* refers to the emotion itself; *pudeur* refers to something like modesty or that comportment which would avoid shame.) Early on, Freud appreciated shame not only as an end stage of what we might now call narcissistic mortification, but also as that emotion the awareness of which would safeguard us against certain uncivilized behaviors, that is to say, as a kind of “modesty,” a kind of ethical comportment that is the obverse of shamelessness. Shame, then, in Freud’s early writings is both a motive for defense (avoidance of the emotion, shame) and a method of defense (“un-shamelessness” that keeps us on an ethical or civilized course).

After 1905, Freud’s thinkings on shame go underground until he talks about the ego ideal in his work on narcissism (1914). The ego-ideal, of course, refers to *aspirations*. Self-conscious appraisals of ourselves that are discrepant with our aspirations generate shame—the signal of danger to bonding—attachment to objects—if we do not meet our standards in the actual (or internalized) view of the other. Shame, then, is inextricably bound to the problem of narcissism, that is, lovability, acceptability, selfhood, which depends on acceptability or recognition of the other. Shame has been called the underside of narcissism (Morrison, 1989), the veiled companion of narcissism (Wurmser, 1981).

Freud’s explicit writings on shame, then, demote shame from the preeminent position that it held in his earliest works to the position of affective accompaniments of a more limited, zonally circumscribed set of conflicts or to signal anxiety from the ego ideal presaging danger to meaningful attachments because of deficiency in comparison with ideals that make the person lovable, acceptable, or worthy of bonding.

## SHAME IMPLICIT IN OTHER BASIC CONCEPTS

I want to emphasize the fact that a number of central psychoanalytic concepts not generally felt to concern shame actually have more to do with shame than is commonly realized and to explore the implications of that perspective.

Some of these concepts are:

1. *Signal anxiety*, which is put forward in the *Problem of Anxiety* (Freud, 1926). Freud sees “signal” anxiety as a signal, thus emphasizing the affect rather than the relationship to social bonding. Such a view underplays shame per se as signaling a lack of poise or composure before others or a signal of disruption in one’s status in the social order. Indeed, much of what Freud calls “anxiety” actually includes that specific type of anxiety concerning exposure as disappointing, uncontrolled, dirty, or unlovable, what in other contexts we would call shame: shame, here, is not only the emotion that signals exposure of the self as defective or unlovable, but also the signal anxiety (superego anxiety) that signals a threat to one’s standing or esteem among others. The original usage of shame as a defense (“un-shamelessness”) also applies.

2. *Castration*. It is, to me, amazing to consider the wide usage of this word applied either to a “castrating” woman or a man with excessive castration anxiety (or the other way around, of course) with the seeming absence of awareness that the speaker or writer is dealing metaphorically about social humiliation—being deprived in public of the sexual standing associated with manliness—and not as actually a concrete attack on bodily parts. Castration anxiety as seen in adults is really sexual humiliation, isn’t it? It has always been surprising to me that it is not discussed as a variation of shame and partaking of shame dynamics. Instead, it tends to be swept, so to speak, under the guilt carpet; that is to say, unacknowledged sexual or aggressive wishes carry with them an internalized anticipation of punishment (guilt). That punishment is castration, along the lines of that which is discussed in *Little Hans* (Freud, 1909). I believe the desire-castration threat catechism is oversimplified and quite highly inaccurate and tends to short-circuit an appreciation of shame.

3. *Separation*. Here again, we have a concept that is generally used without a nuanced sense of what it is that distresses patients facing separations. When we speak of separation, we usually are not talking about loss per se—when a therapist leaves on vacation, it isn’t a loss—but *the exposure of the person facing the separation as one who is unable to function without that therapist present*, and hence more needy and less autonomous than he or she would like to see himself or herself. Again, this predicament has to do with the sense of self and partakes much more of shame dynamics than it does of the dynamics of fear. Separations give rise to shame (acknowledged or not) because they uncover what it is that

we need an object for. Being exposed before others as one who experiences overwhelming fear or fragmentation in response to loss is, for most people, shameful, and analytic work that does not deal with the shame as well as the fear is incomplete. Although it is clear psychoanalytically that neurotic anxiety is never the same as external fear, it seems to me that we have made a good many errors considering separation anxiety apart from the sense of shame at loss of composure, neediness, and inability to function without the other that gives rise to shame.

4. *Envy*. I am in strong agreement with the Kleinian expansion of Freud's thinking on envy, which is that it is a much more general trait than covered by the concept penis envy. Klein also used the word to refer to destructive hate that follows self-conscious comparison with the other, and not simple covetousness. It is a serious error for, say, penis envy to be confused with the wish for a penis (it may be accompanied by that, but that is not the center of the matter), rather than envy of that which is male symbolized by the phallus. Klein's (1946) expansion of envy to include envy of the breast and envy in general has been one of the major constructive theoretical turns in the history of psychoanalysis. I do not agree, however, that envy is a manifestation of either the death instinct or of a primary aggressivity. Instead, I think that envy, like shame, is a self-conscious comparative emotion that has to do with seeing one's self as deficient as compared with the other. I see envy as the more visible concomitant to unacknowledged shame, and, in fact, as always resulting from self-conscious comparison and shame. The rage and attack come from the shame, which is bypassed or unacknowledged. Viewing envy as always "downstream" from self-consciousness and shame, no matter how rapidly or subliminally this transformation occurs, tends to balance the clinical focus to include the sense of shame and not simply to continue the analysis of envy to sadistic control and destructive rage at the powerful, complete, or prideful other.

5. *Narcissism*. I see narcissism, somewhat simply, as shame-proneness and as an attempt to correct this shame-proneness with grandiose aspirations that try to mitigate that shame and that make intense demands on others in such a way that one's real and ideal self become identical. Freud's (1914) early work on the problem of narcissism had to do with the problem of self-involvement rather than involvement with the other. He called this narcissism and related it ultimately to frustration in object love. It was at this point that Freud developed a more complex notion of

conscience than had previously been understood in his discussions of the dream, censorship, or defenses to keep repressed material from arising. In positing the ego-ideal, he became more explicit about ideals, aspirations, and standards in comparison to which one might feel prohibitions by virtue of which one might be punished for transgressions or omissions.

6. *Superego*. There remains an ambiguity in our use of the word "superego." In one sense superego is used generally to mean conscience. This covers not only prohibitions, that is to say, retribution for forbidden desire and hate, but also views of the self regarding accomplishments, comportment, and standing among others, with which actual evaluations of comportment may be compatible or incompatible; the conceptual slippage in our use that doesn't clear up even with good scholarship, which is the superego as concerns prohibitions only, and superego as conscience in its entirety. That cognitive sloppiness has allowed us to sidestep an appreciation of shame in conscience generally and to sidestep the issues involved in shame that cannot be explained by simple models or animal experiments that have to do with anticipated external punishment.

7. *The Oedipus complex*. There is also a good deal of ambiguity in our concept of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex presumes an original constellation of a family romance with a sexual attachment, usually to the opposite sex parent and consequent competitive feelings for the other parent and fear of retaliation by that person, especially if the bond with the same-sex parent is otherwise ambivalent or pathological. When we use the phrase "Oedipus complex," we presume to infer from the patient's associations a replay of that infantile family romance situation. This in my opinion is a grievous error. I don't believe that adult oedipal conflicts should be looked at as exact replays of the original family romance and that what we see clinically is merely a regression that follows fear of retaliation. This is another way of simplifying things in terms of a guilt dynamic and omitting shame. In a true oedipal conflict, we have a well-made play, not a neurosis. In a real neurosis, there is not only a *regression from* the dangers of sexual competition, but also a *fixation* of a primarily nonsexual relationship, that is to say, an *overattachment to* a parent that becomes sexualized as a result of an adult conflict, not merely a replay of an infantile one. Often, overemphasis on the regression (i.e., fear of retaliation) results in our overlooking the shame arising from the fixation—the nature of the infantile attachment or

bond to a dominant other of which the patient feels intensely ashamed.

8. *Self, Object, and Affect*. I think that the above line of thinking is tantamount to saying that our older notions of self, object, and affect need to be seriously updated. An object, of course, is not just an object of a drive. What we need people for is not just as enablers of discharge. I don't want to beat that horse to death, but it seems to me that the central vision that psychoanalytic theory has had so much trouble with until recently is the fact that a self or the sense of self is the self only by virtue of its being defined as such by another. This was pointed out by Hegel at the beginning of the nineteenth century and elaborated by many Continental philosophers, including Sartre (1945) in the mid-twentieth century. It is best said in the psychoanalytic literature—but not nearly as well as Hegel says it—by Kohut as the whole notion of selfhood being conferred by a selfobject, which emphasizes the shaky and tentative sense of self that people with self disorders or narcissistic disorders have and that we all have potentially at times of social exposure or humiliation.

## THE ANALYTIC PROCESS

In the strict sense, interpretation implies “this means this.” That is, something means something else. As we actually use the word clinically, however, we mean to say that *manifest means latent*, that *something on the surface has an underlying meaning*. That which is manifest may be a dream, a theme, or it may be an affect (anger often “means” anxiety of some sort; anxiety often “means” something to do with aggression, etc.). Shame enters in powerfully to our notions of interpretation, if one assumes that an overriding anxiety people have in the analytic situation is that *they are ashamed that they are not like others are*. When one *interprets*, one *points out an underlying struggle*. Let me emphasize at this point that I don't believe that interpretation and empathy are ever at odds; interpretation always requires empathy, and empathy always requires some means to communicate it, which speaks to something (whether word, act, or affect) below the surface. Accordingly, when the therapist of any persuasion correctly communicates that he or she *sees beneath the surface and imagines what it is like to be the patient*, what gets conveyed, along with anything else specific, is a sense of: *you are understandable, you are as*

*other people are*, and that very act of conveying such an understanding, no matter what else it does, also mitigates the sense of shame that people in treatment invariably have. If we look for this, we can see it many times in each and every hour, not just on occasion.

These thoughts, as I have put them forward, are, of course, quite condensed. I present them not as final pronouncements but as attempts to provide some specifics that convey in terms of our most basic psychoanalytic notions the scope of our newfound appreciation of shame, both theoretically and in the clinical setting.

## References

- Breuer, J., and Freud S. (1893–1895), Studies in hysteria, *Standard Edition*, Vol. II, London, Hogarth, 1955.
- Freud, S. (1905), *Three essays on sexuality*, *Standard Edition*, Vol. VII, pp. 125–243, London, Hogarth, 1953.
- Freud, S. (1909), *Analysis of a phobia in a five year old boy*, *Standard Edition*, Vol. X, pp. 3–152, London, Hogarth, 1955.
- Freud, S. (1914), *On narcissism: An introduction*, *Standard Edition*, Vol. XIV, pp. 67–104, London, Hogarth, 1967.
- Freud, S. (1926), *The problem of anxiety*, *Standard Edition*, Vol. XX, London, Hogarth, 1959.
- Hazard, P. (1969), Freud's teaching on shame. *Laval Theologique et Philosophique*, 25, 234–267.
- Hegel, G. F. W. (1807), *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Tr. A. V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Klein, M. (1946), Notes on some schizoid mechanisms, *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 27, 99–110.
- Kohut, H. (1971), *The Analysis of the Self*, International Universities Press, New York.
- Lansky, M. R. (1992), *Fathers Who Fail: Shame and Psychopathology in the Family System*, Analytic Press, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Lewis, H. B. (1971), *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*, International Universities Press, New York.
- Morrison, A. P. (1989), *Shame: The Underside of Narcissism*, Analytic Press, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Sartre, J. P. (1945), *Being and Nothingness*, H. Barnes, trans., New York, Washington Square Press, 1966.
- Scheff, T. (1990), *Microsociology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Wurmser, L. (1981), *The Mask of Shame*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore.

1100 Glendon Avenue, Suite 1527  
Los Angeles, CA 90024

## PEP-Web Copyright

**Copyright.** The PEP-Web Archive is protected by United States copyright laws and international treaty provisions.

1. All copyright (electronic and other) of the text, images, and photographs of the publications appearing on PEP-Web is retained by the original publishers of the Journals, Books, and Videos. Saving the exceptions noted below, no portion of any of the text, images, photographs, or videos may be reproduced or stored in any form without prior permission of the Copyright owners.

2. Authorized Uses. Authorized Users may make all use of the Licensed Materials as is consistent with the Fair Use Provisions of United States and international law. Nothing in this Agreement is intended to limit in any way whatsoever any Authorized User's rights under the Fair Use provisions of United States or international law to use the Licensed Materials.

3. During the term of any subscription the Licensed Materials may be used for purposes of research, education or other non-commercial use as follows:

a. Digitally Copy. Authorized Users may download and digitally copy a reasonable portion of the Licensed Materials for their own use only.

b. Print Copy. Authorized Users may print (one copy per user) reasonable portions of the Licensed Materials for their own use only.

**Copyright Warranty.** Licensor warrants that it has the right to license the rights granted under this Agreement to use Licensed Materials, that it has obtained any and all necessary permissions from third parties to license the Licensed Materials, and that use of the Licensed Materials by Authorized Users in accordance with the terms of this Agreement shall not infringe the copyright of any third party. The Licensor shall indemnify and hold Licensee and Authorized Users harmless for any losses, claims, damages, awards, penalties, or injuries incurred, including reasonable attorney's fees, which arise from any claim by any third party of an alleged infringement of copyright or any other property right arising out of the use of the Licensed Materials by the Licensee or any Authorized User in accordance with the terms of this Agreement. This indemnity shall survive the termination of this agreement. NO LIMITATION OF LIABILITY SET FORTH ELSEWHERE IN THIS AGREEMENT IS APPLICABLE TO THIS INDEMNIFICATION.

**Commercial reproduction.** No purchaser or user shall use any portion of the contents of PEP-Web in any form of commercial exploitation, including, but not limited to, commercial print or broadcast media, and no purchaser or user shall reproduce it as its own any material contained herein.