

A GESTALT PERSPECTIVE ON HUMILIATION AND SHAME

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We speak about the humiliation of making a social faux pas, and we refer to the humiliation suffered by a whole people from a century of brutal colonial rule. Intuitively we know that these two situations are tapping into the same human emotion, but it is not altogether clear that we have a way of understanding this emotion that encompasses such extremes. I am going to use the word **shame** to refer to the family of emotions that includes humiliation, along with embarrassment, chagrin, and mortification. Gestalt theory has a way of understanding shame which I find particularly useful for work with people in groups and work organizations (this is the main arena of my practice). According to this perspective, shame is the experience of not being received or treated as we would like to be by the social field. That field can range in size from one other person to the global community. There are two conditions that need to be present for this experience to register as shame:

- The people/group/institution need to be important to me. The more important, the more potential for my shame to be activated.
- At some level, which may be out of full awareness, I need to see the not-being-received as my fault, as a statement about my fundamental lack of worth.

I feel shame when I put some part of myself forward – an actual request for something, a point of view or belief, a wish to be included and liked, or the simple desire to be acknowledged and treated as an inherently valuable human being – and what I put out is ignored, belittled or punished, particularly by others who are important to me. But only if I then believe that the inadequacy of the response – the shortfall in support coming from others--is my fault. There is a critical step in meaning-making here – seeing the insufficient support as a statement about my own self-worth – as contrasted with seeing the shortfall as a function of the social field with which I am engaged.

Shame is such an unpleasant emotion that we go to great lengths to avoid it. Indeed, the strength of its impact makes it a prime regulator of the social field. Much of our inter-active life is orchestrated to avoid shame (prompted by so-

called shame anxiety or the "dread" of shame). Indeed the anger and impulse to retaliate and strike back that is so closely associated with humiliation can be seen as a defense against experiencing (or continuing to experience) this devastating emotion. At the same time, in many cultures it is shameful to feel shame, so it is one of the least acknowledged emotions. Because we don't speak about it, we often don't even recognize it as the emotion we are experiencing, and we have no established discourse that would help us to see how much influence it is having in our domestic, workplace and civic lives. One thing that gets in the way is the conflation of shame and guilt, which are closely related emotions and can feed one into the other. From a Gestalt perspective, guilt is about something I do. Shame is a statement about fundamentally who I am.

Shame is closely related to power and the greatest potential for shaming is at a place of power difference or across a hierarchical boundary. Gestalt understands both shame and power as relational phenomena and as ever-present ground conditions in all human relations. Their potential to get activated is always there.