

A THEORY OF SHAME: FROM TRAUMA TO SELF DEVELOPMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis draws upon a wide range of psychoanalytic, evolutionary, functional, developmental and social perspectives in order to present an integrated theory of shame. From within the body of shame literature, uniformities, disagreements and conflicts are identified and reviewed. By theoretically and empirically distinguishing shame from its close relative, guilt, the defining characteristics of shame are identified; most notably its intimate relationship to the global self. By then identifying those aspects of the self most pertinent to the phenomenology of shame, this theory is both theoretically and empirically extended to include perspectives from within trauma, neurobiology, self psychological, defense mechanism, and developmental fields of study.

The impact of shame on the self in terms of bodily experience and the doubling of consciousness is argued to be highly detrimental. Theoretical analyses identify a pattern of dissolution to lower levels of experience and functioning, such that the highest levels of both consciousness and autonomic nervous system functioning are replaced by the engagement of evolutionarily more primitive operational levels. Empirical studies also identified shame as having a similarly regressive impact on the senses of self-cohesion and continuity in time, as well as disrupting attachment bonds and eliciting the engagement of primitive defense mechanisms.

In contrast, in spite of its immediate detrimental impact, shame was also found to hold the potential, over time, to facilitate important developmental enhancements; promoting self-awareness and self-knowledge, as well as contributing to the development of a range of both intrapersonal and interpersonal functions.

Throughout the thesis, an important distinction is made between state shame (the actual affect) and shame-proneness (a characterological disposition), with particular emphasis on the ubiquity of shame as a normal, healthy human experience which is independent of dispositional shame-proneness. Moreover, it is argued that the distinction between immature, dysfunctional shame and mature, healthy shame forms the foundation for the elucidation of a developmental theory of shame. Specifically, this theory identifies the points of divergence in the developmental trajectories of healthy shame and the two most extreme forms of shame-based psychopathology; shame-proneness and shamelessness. The thesis concludes with the identification of a range of clinical and research implications based on the theoretical and empirical data presented.

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work, and that to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma at a university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.



Deborah Judith Thomas

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