



# FOR SHAME

Psychologists have long seen shaming as destructive, but new science suggests we can harness it to motivate positive change **By Diana Kwon**

**W**hen Valerie Starks, a mother from Denver, found out that her 13-year-old daughter was posing as an older teenager to post raunchy photographs to the Web, she took to social media to teach her a lesson. She berated her child in a Facebook video that spread like wildfire in May 2015—in less than a week it had more than 11 million views. Starks was not alone. In the past year numerous parents have used social media to punish their kids.

Throughout history communities have used public humiliation to discourage rule breakers from further bad behavior. And today those of us who commit moral misdeeds can be exposed on the Internet and subject to chastising from all over the world. From the Twitter storm that raged over multiple accounts of Bill Cosby's alleged sexual predations to the #droughtshaming campaign in California, social-media shaming has become a common occurrence. A digitally smeared reputation is like a permanent scarlet letter, displayed for all to see in the grand and timeless expanse of the Web.

Shaming is one of many forms of punishment, and psychologists puzzle over what kind of penalties encourage reform. Studies have shown that inducing shame might not be the best choice, as it often leads to counterproductive reactions, such as avoidance and aggression, and can be destructive to one's well-being.

Recent evidence has brought about a surprising revelation, however. Under certain circumstances, shame may spur positive change, including cooperation and a desire to make amends.

Psychologists are finding that there are many shades of shame—some better than others in promoting constructive behavior—and that the way we communicate disapproval to a wrongdoer can lead to drastically different outcomes. This new research could transform the way we handle crime and punishment, whether in the courtroom or at home.

## The Blame Game

Shame and its close relative, guilt, are both negative feelings associated with wrongdoing. Guilt is linked to a specific action or behavior, whereas shame is focused on the self. Given this distinction, it should be no surprise that shame has long been associated with negative outcomes. After all, concluding you are a bad person is more disturbing than just acknowledging that you have done something wrong. Public shaming shakes not only one's self-respect but also the respect of others.

Decades of research have confirmed that shame hurts. The emotion is associated with a wide range of psychological problems, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as physiological changes, including an increase in harmful cytokines, proteins that promote inflammation, and cortisol, the primary stress hormone.

The message from this research seemed clear: feeling shame triggers a deluge of painful consequences that in no way ensures people will mend their ways. If anything, studies found that shame led individuals to become angry, aggressive and self-defensive. It provoked them to deny accusations, try to hide or even lash back against an accuser. Consequently, many

psychologists adopted the rule of thumb that “guilt is good, shame is bad.”

Yet psychologists and criminologists have also uncovered instances where shame *is* effective in motivating good behavior. In 2008 a group of psychologists at Tilburg University in the Netherlands reported that when people felt shame after imagining, recalling or experiencing a failure, they acted more cooperatively in

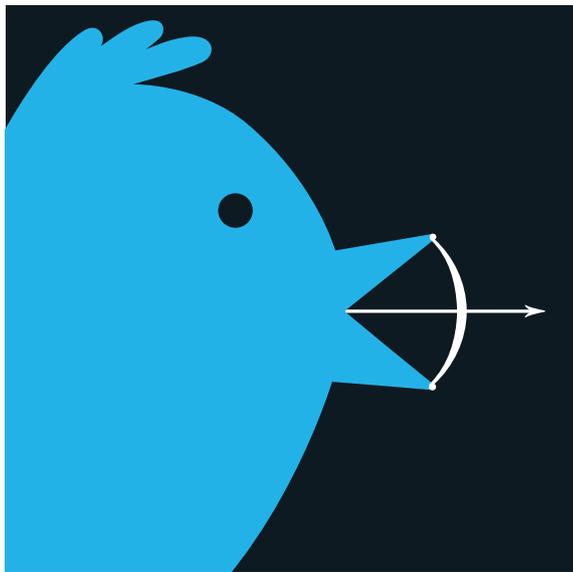
a past offense than those who blamed a scapegoat. “There may be some situations and some people for whom shame is a vehicle for making really substantial change in the self,” Tangney says. There is a well-established path from shaming to blaming to further criminal behavior, according to Tangney. But the factors leading to the opposite outcome are not yet fully understood.

tions. According to the researchers, the feelings of rejection and inferiority that come with a tarnished reputation are what lead to the negative outcomes traditionally attributed to shame.

They later confirmed this observation in a 2012 study in which they reminded 379 Norwegians of their country’s past persecution of ethnic minorities. Using a detailed questionnaire, the team found that concern for condemnation and feelings of rejection prompted self-defensive inclinations, whereas a sense of personal shame led to remorse and the desire to offer restitution. They uncovered similar effects at the level of an individual’s wrongdoing in a 2015 study that assessed how 197 participants reacted to moral failures such as mistreating a family member or failing to keep a secret.

A comparable idea emerges from the work of psychologist Rupert Brown of the University of Sussex in England and his colleagues. In a 2014 study of British people’s attitudes toward the atrocities committed by their country during the Iraq war, they proposed that people will respond differently to shame depending on whether it relates to their personal morality or simply hurts their public image.

Across three studies, the researchers recruited hundreds of people and had them read articles in British media outlets (the BBC and the *Guardian*) that gave accounts of prisoner abuse carried out by British soldiers in Iraq. Participants then rated how much they agreed with a series of statements about their attitude toward their country’s actions. Some of these declarations involved personal morality—for example, “Our treatment of Iraqi people makes me feel somewhat ashamed about what it *means* to be British.” Other statements, such as “To think how Britain is *seen* for this treatment of Iraqi people makes me feel ashamed,” related more to reputation. People who felt morally ashamed were more likely to support restoring the country’s relationship with Iraq with an official apology or financial assistance, whereas those who principally felt their image was at risk exhibited more defensive strategies, such as avoidance, anger



Public shaming on social media such as Twitter is a powerful punishment, but it risks making the wrongdoer defensive rather than repentant.

social dilemmas. A subsequent 2010 study revealed that when individuals recalled or experienced shame about an achievement-related failure, such as poor athletic performance or failing a test, they were motivated to restore a positive self-image and exert greater efforts to achieve.

In a longitudinal study of 476 inmates, published in 2014, George Mason University clinical psychologist June Tangney and her colleagues found that among inmates who felt shame, those who did not seek to pin their wrongdoing on someone else were less likely to repeat

### Shades of Shame

If shame applies to the “self,” an important and long-overlooked question is just how the self is maligned when a person does something shameful. “You can either think, ‘Who am I as a person who has done this?’ or ‘What will other people think of me?’” says psychologist Nicolay Gausel of Østfold University College in Norway. In other words, you can reevaluate yourself or become preoccupied by how others see you.

In 2011 Gausel and psychologist Colin Leach of the University of Connecticut suggested that people who think in the former manner will conclude that they have failed to live up to their own expectations, which in turn can lead to efforts to improve themselves and repair social relationships. But the latter option, which is tied to others’ evaluations, might encourage self-defensive motiva-

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and the desire to cover up the mistake.

These distinctions can help make sense of the way people respond to shaming on social media. After Cosby's exposure on Twitter, he denied all allegations and filed a defamation lawsuit against seven of the women who had accused him of sexual assault. Public shaming is a double-edged sword. Tweets are very effective in spreading the word and changing the public perception of the accused. But widespread defamation may also slow a perpetrator's acceptance and repentance.

## The Power to Change

Shame, however, is often tied to reputation. Fortunately, a second set of findings suggests that the resulting damage to one's public image need not inexorably lead to Cosby-like defensiveness and retaliation.

In a meta-analysis of 71 shame studies published last December, Leach and Atilla Cidam, a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut, found that even when shame tarnishes a person's social image, it can prompt constructive choices, provided the individual has an opportunity to make amends.

According to Leach, because shame affects our self-evaluation, it is most damaging when there is nothing the person implicated can do to change the situation. But when we believe change is possible, it can be a strong motivator for good behavior. In fact, a 2014 study in *Emotion* revealed that feeling shame was more likely than guilt to motivate the desire to change oneself for the better. Along these lines, water authorities in areas plagued by drought notify their most wasteful citizens that their names will be publicly listed unless they mend their ways and offer support to help reduce consumption. The tactic works. Last November the *Guardian* reported that this method "often proved an effective way of changing water-use habits" for the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

Even if a specific error cannot be fixed, people can redeem their image. For example, emphasizing the fact that prisoners can change despite their past crimes may help prevent them from re-

offending. "Some people think [their moral identity] is more flexible and believe it can be improved and developed, like a skill. Some people feel that it's fixed," Leach says. His findings suggest the former group is more likely than the latter to mend its ways.

Therapists, loved ones and society as a whole can shape these attitudes. "What's nice about [reparability] is that the belief is malleable—it's a point of intervention," Tangney says. She suggests that counselors can help people "come up with a creative, reparative plan. It may not be possible to undo the harm done, but there are other ways to have a positive effect."

Similar ideas are well established among researchers who study criminal behavior. In 1989 criminologist John Braithwaite of the Australian National University introduced the idea of reintegrative shaming, in which the community helps a wrongdoer return to society after confronting his or her crime. He linked societies that use this combination of punishment and compassion to lower rates of crime than communities that use more stigmatizing forms of shaming.

Certain cultures apply reintegrative shaming by viewing a transgressor as someone in need of repair rather than an irreversibly damaged criminal. For example, the Native American Navajo people believe that *nayéé* ("monsters") act as obstacles to living fulfilled lives. They organize healing ceremonies to help rid themselves of these beasts. In Japan there is a concept of a *musubi* ("bug" or "worm") that infects people, leading them to commit atrocities. Community support can help cure this sickness.

Shame has the potential for good, but people need to believe they can

change. Leaving people who have been shamed feeling "irredeemably bad about themselves," Braithwaite says, "is what we want to avoid."

## Making Good

Researchers are only beginning to understand how to induce the constructive forms of shame. Most studies to date have focused on motivation rather than action; whether the desire to become better will consistently result in better behavior remains unclear.

In the interim, there are a few basic rules of thumb that could help our society and communities reap the benefits of shame. For example, we can emphasize positive growth and avoid degradation and disrespect. "It's not rocket science what we do need to do—it's taking wrongdoing and shame seriously because we don't want to live in a society where rape and violence are not shameful," Braithwaite says. "But we want to be careful about how we communicate it."

To do that, we need to create safe spaces for those who have experienced moral failures and avoid tactics that make them pariahs. Soon after Starks shamed her daughter online, Wayman Gresham, a father in Florida, posted his own video to Facebook. The clip starts like other shaming videos, with Gresham standing over his child wielding an electric razor, about to shave his son's head as a punishment, saying, "When it's time to do the right thing, I expect for my son to not forget what he has learned."

But there is a twist. Instead of proceeding with a punishment, Gresham gives his son a hug and says, "There's no way in the world I would ever embarrass my son like that." **M**

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### MORE TO EXPLORE

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