

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# The origin of shame and its vicissitudes

Recent literature has put forward several new and useful ideas concerning shame. This chapter makes use of these discoveries, while illustrating the importance of shame and shame-related phenomena in everyday life, psychopathology, and the practice of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.

In our view, shame and shame-related phenomena are Thanatos reactions, whose first manifestations appear in earliest infancy. They thwart a person's unsuccessful attempts to attain reciprocity. As such, they may have a guiding and protective influence or, possibly, an effect on reducing vitality in a permanent way and exposing the person to psychic disorders.

We postulate that the psychoanalytical concept "libido" refers to the need to receive approving reciprocity, which is observable in the very earliest stages of life. Understood like this, the concept of libido comes close to the Japanese concept "amae" (Doi, 1989, 1993).

### *Introduction*

During recent years, it has been noted that shame is a neglected area in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. Our clinical

experience has drawn our attention to the subject. We have noticed that many psychoanalyses draw considerable profit from the identification of shame and dealing with it.

We present here our own view, that shame is a reaction to the absence of approving reciprocity. The basic form of shame is the stranger anxiety of an infant. When the infant trustingly reaches his arms toward an adult, and then notices that it is not his mother, he interrupts the approach, turns his head away, hides his face, and starts to cry. As development proceeds, the demand for reciprocity has become more defined: when the infant notices that he does not meet the mother's gaze, which he had taken for granted, he is ashamed of his false expectation.

### *A literary survey*

The literature describes many psychic states and incidents which contain a particular predisposition for shame or are connected with the experience of shame. These descriptions vary, usually in accordance with the current phase of psychoanalytical thinking (Abraham, 1913; Alexander, 1938; Erikson, 1950; Fenichel, 1945; Freud, 1905a, 1926d; Jacobson, 1954, 1964; Levin, 1971; Piers & Singer, 1953, Rank (ref. Steinberg, 1991); Reich, 1960). According to traditional views, shame does not merit special attention or a theory of its own, because it is an inseparable part of the relationship between the ego and the superego and the ego ideal. Prohibition, punishment, humiliation, and shaming are used in parallel as educational methods of forming the superego. In clinical work, it has been common practice to presume that shame is removed as a side-product when the conflicts connected to infantile sexuality and narcissism are analysed. Shame has been considered a side-theme of psychosexual theory, structural theory, object relations theory, and narcissism. Attempts have been made to fit it within existing theories and its significance has been played down (Kinston, 1987). Wurmser (1981) emphasizes the omnipresence of shame and the necessity of dealing with it in clinical psychoanalytical work.

Helen Block Lewis is one of the foremost pioneers of the psychology of shame. According to Lewis, the fact that shame has been neglected in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis has been the

cause of many failures. The psychotherapist or analyst is often unknowingly guilty of making the patient feel ashamed. Shame is much more important clinically and much more common than has been understood earlier. It is often hidden, and one must know how to find it and make it conscious in order to deal with it. Shame is often difficult to recognize: it is often mislabelled guilt, which it resembles phenomenologically. The difference is that guilt refers to an act of the person, either psychic or concrete, whereas shame refers to the whole person. It is easier to perceive the secondary consequences of shame and the methods of avoiding it; some of these are bodily reactions: blushing, perspiration, tremors, depression, apathy, talkativeness, overacting, shamelessness, indifference, and cynicism. Shame generates anger, which is directed against both the self and others. The images of revenge and violence brought forth by shame-rage, on their part, give rise to guilt. Shame-anger and shame-dejection are often more primary causes of depression than is guilt (Lewis, 1987a).

Literature of the "New Wave" (e.g., Lewis, 1987a,b; Nathanson, 1987) emphasizes shame as an affect. Phenomenologically, shame is a kind of inverted explosion or implosion (Laing, cited in Lewis 1987a,b) which paralyzes and brings to a standstill. Shame is coupled with a wish to hide, "to sink underground". The phenomenology of shame also contains the temptation to give up one's identity in order to secure the acceptance of the other. According to Kinston (1987) and Lichtenstein (1963), this is the central event in shame. Shame refers to the whole self. A person can attempt to rectify a deed that gives rise to guilt, but shame seems to be irreparable and the whole self is felt to be wrong down to its very foundations; the whole self must, therefore, be changed. The ability to bear shame is important in the same way as the ability to bear depression and guilt. The avoidance of shame prevents a person from thinking and perceiving reality; it puts in motion a denial of reality that is broader than that effected by simple regression, and causes the absence of thinking (Kinston, 1987).

Steinberg (1991) has dealt with the great significance of shame in political decision-making. He presents a well-documented review of how, in the Cuban missile crisis, the leaders of both parties felt themselves threatened by intense shame, and how the situation consequently escalated almost to a nuclear war.

According to Tomkins (1987), shame, disgust, and dissmell can be construed as a variety of drive inhibitor, which prevents one from being careless despite eagerness (“stop!”), from swallowing something unsuitable despite hunger, (“don’t eat!”), and from approaching due to an interest despite danger (“stay away!”). The expression of shame is a down-turned head and gaze. Nathanson (1987) relies on Tomkins’s affect theory in his views on shame. He talks about the basic form of shame (“primary shame”), which already manifests itself in withdrawal and down-turned head and gaze at the age of three months, when the infant’s effort to approach his mother fails (Broucek, 1982). According to Nathanson, this is the drive inhibitor described by Tomkins in effect, as it paralyses inexpedient affection.

A picture of shame contains the following basic elements.

1. Being observable in conjunction with the pursuit of reciprocity. Expression and revelation on many levels of psychosexuality: for example, approach, appearance, looking, expressing oedipal or pre-oedipal sexuality. The state of being observed may also be realized as uncontrolledness and eagerness.
2. The unfitness of the self in the above-mentioned situations. Failure, for example, in the realization of approaching oedipal goals, self-ideals, and aspiration of identification.
3. Turning against the self and others connected with shame. Collapsed self-esteem, a paralysed self, narcissistic collapse, which takes place, for example, in giving up one’s identity and seeking symbiotic relationship, shame-fury, humiliation, dejection, shaming, annulling the other.

### *The origin of shame*

#### *Shame from the point of view of a dualistic drive theory*

According to what we call traditional psychoanalytical thinking, shame is a defensive event connected to the revelation of drive expressions and narcissistic aspirations and failed aspirations of realizing them. At this point, we focus on matters which we think will improve the psychoanalytical theory of shame and increase its usefulness in practical psychoanalytical work. Our view is that the

original form of shame is the paralysing, removing, and suppressing reaction connected with the failure of the striving for approving reciprocity. Stranger anxiety can be seen as its first easily perceivable and very well-known example, although the first expressions of shame are from a yet earlier stage (Nathanson, 1987).

The pursuit of reciprocity stems from the libido matrix, Eros; the shame reaction stems from the Thanatos matrix, which inhibits the pursuit of reciprocity. Shame is not a common emotion connected with all kinds of deficiencies and failure. It is an emotion linked to the Thanatos reaction, which is directed to the failure of the pursuit of approving reciprocity. In order to continue a study of the origin of shame and its metapsychology, we must give a short account of our views concerning both the libido, or Eros, and the death drive, or Thanatos.

### *The libido matrix*

The libido matrix is the home of, among others, interest, curiosity, the wish to look, the wish to approach, and enthusiasm. Studies on early childhood during recent decades (e.g., Stern, 1985) encourage one to make an assumption which puts views on the nature of the libido in focus. We suggest that *from the moment of birth onward throughout life, the libido is a need to find reciprocity*. The search for reciprocity takes place between the self and the outer world as an aspiration to find a reciprocal other person, but also between the different parts of the self as an aspiration to become whole and expand. Reciprocal surroundings first create circumstances where the infant is given an opportunity to find his emerging self. The infant needs a constantly available reciprocal other person in order to take possession of the world, find itself and the Gestalt of invariances (motorics, senses, amodal qualities, the rhythms of vital affects, categorical affects, etc.) (*ibid.*). Thus, the infant develops its functions of pursuing its surroundings. The infant and the mother attempt to attune to each other. We assume that already, at this phase, the dynamics of Thanatos begin to halt, hold apart, and remove such aspirations of reciprocity that do not work and form only a disorder.

Studies made of infants do not view or conceptualize the matter from the viewpoint we are aiming at. Stern says only that

the infant is completely a product of his surroundings, formed by it and the cues he receives (*ibid.*). We stick to our view and assume that the observer has not paid attention to the possibility we present.

Later on, sexuality becomes a central, but by no means only, manifestation of the search for reciprocity. Through sexuality, the aspiration of reciprocity is connected to the procreative Eros, which extends further than sexuality.

The Japanese psychoanalyst Takeo Doi (1989) has aroused interest with his concept of *amae*, the Japanese picture of love. The *amae* is, one is tempted to think, a kind of a libido matrix which does not differentiate between the subject and the object, between narcissism and object love; it has the same experienced quality for both adults and children. One of its manifestations is the longing for requited love; however, it is not acceptable to demand requited love or indicate a longing for it in public. "Good *amae*" is living in harmony with the longing for requited love, and aspiration towards it is a characteristic of Japanese culture. "Bad *amae*" is demanding and self-centred, a pathological narcissism from a western point of view. What makes *amae* interesting is the central position of a longing for reciprocity, which resembles our suggestion that "from the moment of birth onward throughout life, the libido is a need to find reciprocity".

### *The Thanatos matrix*

Our interpretation of Freud's text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920g) is that he is talking about striving for a state of peace and removing the disturbance in one way or another, sometimes at whatever price. The death drive directed towards the person himself strives to eliminate futile psychic endeavours, to direct it in a useful direction, either genetically given or indicated by experience, thus to achieve fulfilment. But this only happens in ideal cases. Giving form to indefinite desire, binding it, is a central event in a person's psychic energetics.

The disturbance removing action of Thanatos can be compared with the psychic heteroimmune and autoimmune reaction: The disturbing is removed, but the mechanism can also operate improperly, overreact, and it can also start to destroy the host.

Shame belongs to the Thanatos affects. It is an affect which comes to being when a person attempts to hold on to the reciprocity or gain it by aiming the Thanatos reaction at himself. Shame can alternate with other parallel Thanatos strivings. Such representations of Thanatos are, for example, withdrawal, repulsion, and rage. During the course of psychoanalysis, one can see how, for example, humiliation, withdrawal, shame, rage, and repulsion follow one another within a short period of time.

### *The psychic act of binding*

The interaction of the libido matrix and the Thanatos matrix gives form to psychic events. We call this the psychic act of binding. Furthermore, Thanatos stabilizes or solidifies the attained forms or bindings. Our interpretation assumes that the death drive acts as a removing and confining factor, which causes a standstill, a certain kind of solidification, but, in addition to this, it removes what does not fit—the gained form.

At the same time as it destroys, it also reinforces psychic structures. This interpretation differs from the traditions which emphasize only the destructive functions of the death drive. A caring and neglecting milieu is, according to our interpretation, a kind of a mould which forms the libido. The act of binding is a central representation of the death drive, but without a libido, there is nothing to be bound. [Rechardt & Ikonen, 1986a]

The goal of the act of binding is such forms of reciprocity that succeed repeatedly. Shame motivates the disbanding or weakening of the non-functioning aspiration of reciprocity, and removes those that do not reach the important others. Thus, the interaction of the libido matrix and the Thanatos matrix is something completely different from elementary hydrodynamics, which Freud's energetics is mostly understood to be.

### *The metapsychology of shame*

#### *Actualization*

The psychic starting point of shame is the striving to realize a certain wish, or, as Freud puts it, a certain gratifying perception

(Freud, 1900a). In this case, it is the perception of reciprocity. We use the concept “realization” in the same way as Sandler uses the concept actualization (Sandler, 1990).

The actualized perception can either be (a) inherited (genetically), (b) experienced by the individual during his life (including life in the womb), or (c) some combination of these (e.g., (a)+(b), (a)+(a), (b)+(b), (a)+(a)+(b)+(c)+(c), etc.).

The actualization attempt can be analysed as the action of two opposite aspirations, Eros and Thanatos, of which the former aspires to increase reciprocity and through it enrich, “enliven”, the world of experience by creating connections, whereas the latter aspires to pacify, to remove the disturbing by contracting, limiting, halting, and severing the connection.

Actualization can, on the other hand, be completely autoplasic, or both autoplasic and alloplastic. What is to be actualized, or its phylogenetic or ontogenetic “remembered model”, consists of a subject (I, the self), an object (the other), their relationship (incident, state), and affect (pleasure, displeasure, peace, restlessness). The Thanatos response can be directed at any one of these, and it, for its part, produces different consequences and different psychopathology.

Understanding the special nature of shame is obscured by the fact that in the literature, shame is connected with all kinds of failures in the pursuance of goals. We connect shame particularly with attaining reciprocity, the aspiration to transmit a message and receive the answer that is wished for. It acts as a factor that guides intercourse, as its protector (Lewis, 1987b). Shame is the intensive displeasure we typically experience when the pursued reciprocity remains unrealized, although we thought that it had been, or would be, realized; the Thanatos reaction is directed against the self at the same time as the striving for reciprocity remains.

We are in town and see a familiar figure. We hurry towards him and greet him happily. When he turns around, we see an unfamiliar face and we would like to sink into the ground with shame. “What must he have thought of me?!”

When the preverbal child expresses a striving that seeks reciprocity, he does it with his whole being and he has a deep need for resonance. When he fails in finding reciprocity, the failure has an effect on his whole being. In shame, the whole own being that has



been expressed to the other is revealed as false. Shame retains this nature of revelation in all contexts; it is a fundamental part of shame. The attempt to actualize the realization of a wish through expression or revelation threatens the experiencing of shame in all phases of development.

### *The shame collapse*

When the expressing of aspirations of reciprocity collides with a lack of reciprocity on the part of the other, the consequence is an immediate collapse, whether or not the lack of reciprocity on the part of the other was a result of indifference, lack of understanding, belittling, punishment, or the clumsiness or miscalculation on the part of the person pursuing reciprocity. As a result, the person is taken over by inner paralysis: the vitality of the self disappears and eagerness subsists; action comes to a standstill and turns into withdrawal and hiding. The emotional state of shame is clothed in the expressions "I wish I could sink into the ground"; "I'm dying of shame"; "What a fool I am"; "I'll never forgive myself". Another consequence may be rage at oneself or the other. Full-scale shame is the most unbearable of all emotions, and that is why we are inclined to think that "rather death than shame". Accentuated deficiencies in the reciprocity interaction of early childhood create circumstances which emphasize the destructive power of shame. In such circumstances, the juxtaposition of the libido and Thanatos is accentuated, the destructive forms of Thanatos take over and shame imprisons the person.

## *The psychology of shame*

### *Hints and signs*

In research studies of development during the infant age, it has been noted that, in new situations, the child observes the mother and acts on the basis of non-verbal hints received from the mother (Stern, 1985). Let us examine Winnicott's (1982, pp. 52–54) description of an infant who sits on his mother's lap and becomes interested in a spatula that gleams near the edge of the table. Winnicott describes how the child has his hand on the spatula, and, with his

body completely immobile and eyes wide open, looks at him and the mother, watches and waits, or, in some cases, draws his attention away from the spatula and buries his face in the mother's blouse.

We believe that without distorting the picture of the infant's psychic events, we can characterize his cessation of action as a Thanatos response to the libidinal desire towards the spatula. He wants to actualize something connected to the spatula, but at the same time he is afraid that it will disturb something connected to the mother and Winnicott. In some cases, the infant "is encouraged" (so we believe), follows his desire, and gives it a form and realizes it. But in some cases, the Thanatos response is emphasized and is organized in such a way that it is directed to himself, and he hides, or removes himself from the situation, which consists of himself, the spatula, and his mother and Winnicott, who are observing him. We can imagine that the infant feels that his desire towards the spatula disturbs, threatens something which he wants to prevail in his relationship with his mother and Winnicott. He wants to remove the disturbing aspect, and, as he identifies himself and his desire, he tries to hide. We can further conceptualize the matter by saying that the infant feels dependent on his mother's and Winnicott's attitude and he reacts according to how he expects them to react to his intentions.

When an older child behaves in a corresponding manner, turns his back and hides his face in his hands or presses his face against his mother, we say that he is shy or ashamed. We both see and deduce that he is experiencing such emotions. At the same time, he can, in addition to shame, express anger, hate, or even rage towards those who have brought him into this situation. We can conceptualize and describe the older child's psychic events in the same way as the infant's, but in a more organized manner and more accurately, if his self-expression is more organized. He can tell us what he expects of, and fears in, his surroundings, and in what manner he is afraid: that he will fail or feels that he has already failed or is inadequate.

In the manner of the infant, Winnicott (1982) describes that we, through our lives, listen to the voice of the other, observe the other's gaze and hints. In Dostoyevsky's book *Poor Folk*, Makar Devushkin writes his lady friend a letter where the words are timid

and shameful, filled with furtive looks and subdued challenges (Bachtin, 1984).

We were stimulated to use the texts of Bachtin, Dostoyevsky, and Winnicott in parallel by Mikael Leiman, although he does the same in a different context (Leiman, 1991, unpublished).

These furtive looks at a socially alien word do not only define Makar Devushkin's style and tone, but also his way of thinking and experiencing, seeing and understanding himself in the world around him (Bachtin, 1984). Moreover, Devushkin's mental movements can be conceptualized and described in the same manner as the infant's and older child's reactions above.

In private conversation Evstafi Ivanovitch once told me that the greatest social virtue might be considered to be an ability to get money to spend. Also, my comrades used jestingly (yes, I know only jestingly) to propound the ethical maxim that a man ought never to let himself become a burden upon any one. Well, I am a burden upon no one. It is my own crust of bread that I eat, and though that crust is but a poor one, and sometimes actually a maggoty one, it has at least been earned, and therefore is being put to a right and lawful use. What, therefore, ought I to do? I know that I can earn but little by my labours as a copyist, yet even of that little I am proud, for it has entailed work, and has wrung sweat from my brow. What harm is there in being a copyist? "He is only an amanuensis", people say of me. But what is there so disgraceful in that? I am sure that you need me, that I can be of use to you; and, since that is so, I must not allow myself to be distracted by any trifle. Even if I be likened to a rat I do not care, provided that particular rat be wanted by you, and be of use in the world, and be retained in its position, and receive its reward. But what a rat it is! Enough of this, dearest one. I ought not to have spoken of it, but I lost my temper. Still, it is pleasant to speak the truth sometimes" [Dostoyevsky, 1956 (1846)]

Makar Devushkin feels that he is dependent on the attitude of others ("Evstafi Ivanovitch once told me . . ."), he becomes hesitant ("yes, I know only jestingly . . ."), he tries to hide the demeaning or shameful part of his work ("He is only an amanuensis . . ."), with various defences and parables ("Well, I am a burden upon no one . . . it has at least been earned, and therefore is being put to a right and lawful use . . . What harm is there in being a copyist . . ."),

becomes angry at the critics he imagines (“I must not allow myself to be distracted by any trifle. Even if I be likened to a rat I do not care . . .”), and then is ashamed of his own outburst of anger and shame (“Enough of this . . .”), and tries to hide in his own reconciliations and defences (“. . . I lost my temper. Still, it is pleasant to speak the truth sometimes”). The inner act is more complex than with the infant or older child, but its basic materials are the same.

Out of the outer impression of the infant that withdraws into hiding, which is supported by an extrapolation of the inner world of older children and adults, we can assume the infant’s reaction to be a kind of basic or primal shame, or at least an emotional matrix, of which shame gradually differentiates to a clear reaction of its own.

#### *On the metamorphoses of shame*

The above-described conceptualization of the inner situation of the infant gives rise to various further thoughts. After his first Thanatos response, when he halts the giving of form (binding) to his libidinal desire concerning the spatula, the infant has an opportunity to proceed in several different ways. He can follow his desire to the spatula, give his desire a form, bind it to a certain kind of behaviour, direct it completely elsewhere, become angry with those who seem to stand in the way of his desire, stare apathetically, or hide his face in his mother’s blouse, as was the case in the example we observed. The question is how organizedly he perceives the situation, (what he wants, what he is afraid of), what psycho-economic weight different matters have (what means more, the desire of the spatula, or the relationship with his mother and Winnicott, and their assumed reactions), what is disturbing, what must be removed, and with what means.

If the original Thanatos-response is formed into shame, it means, among other things, that the infant has some kind of an idea of a conflict or possibility of a conflict between its own desire and the attitude of others towards this desire. The attitude of the others is important for him and he wants to maintain a good relationship with them. For him, his own desire and his self are the same thing and he attempts to remove or hide his own worthless self in order to retain the important others.

Thus, the hiding of the self that is connected to shame is a paradoxical expression of hope: by giving up myself or a part of myself as I am, I may be able to retain the important others and their acceptance. If the Thanatos reaction is directed primarily towards the wish for reciprocity and the self, the shame turns into depression, "I'm not good for anything"; "I'm worthless and nobody can care about me". If, on the other hand, the wish for reciprocity remains and the Thanatos reaction is directed primarily at the self, which is not good enough for reciprocity and the others, who do not accept it, the result is the shame-rage described by Lewis. This shame-rage turns into depression in direct proportion to how much the Thanatos component that is directed toward the self is stressed. The different dynamics of these depressions is usually also visible in the behaviour of people. The former is quiet and retreats to solitude, whereas the latter is more or less agitated and agonizing.

There are also at least two basic types of Thanatos reactions that correspond to shamelessness. The shameless person either rejects authentically important others and does not care what they think, or he can tie the libido even more closely to them, at the same time as he insolently repeats situations that generate shame. The former reaction is characterized by calm, almost naïve indifference, the latter by defiant or mocking impudence.

In the course of analysis, or through other psychic work, shame often turns into guilt (Anthony, cited in Paikin, 1981; Lewis, 1987b). Then the picture of the shame situation becomes more organized, either genuinely or defensively, and the Thanatos response is no longer directed indeterminately to the self, but to an act that is separate from the self and, at least to some extent, determinable by the self.

Guilt becomes differentiated as an emotion of its own from the original shame matrix as the Thanatos reaction and its target also become differentiated. The revelation of guilt can, however, awaken a new shame, a shame for the guilt. Often, the defence against guilt is more motivated by the fear of the shame produced by guilt than fear of the guilt itself. A person can escape both from shame to guilt and from guilt to shame, whichever he finds easier to bear.

#### *The shame trap or the vicious circle of shame*

The anticipation of shame can make a person delay his action, hesitate, and fumble, which often is manifested in his way of speaking.

He may also attempt to hide himself and the source of shame with increased activity and liveliness, or only circumvent the source of shame. Or he can simply become shameless. All these attitudes are accompanied by a Thanatos affect which is directed toward both the self and others, and which, in its most acute form, can be called, as Lewis does, shame-rage, and in its more undifferentiated forms, for example, shame-anger, shame-repulsion, shame-boredom, and shame-weariness. All these attitudes are also accompanied by an emotional trap which is characteristic of shame. A person who delays his action, hesitates, and fumbles, will, in addition to the fact that he is usually envious of people who are more active than he is, feel shame and shame-vexation for his own delaying. He who protects himself from shame with activity and liveliness feels ungenune and, at the same time, has sensations of repulsion, weariness, and fatigue against himself and others. The shameless person will again challenge and pester his surroundings and himself with new shameless acts. In each case, shame and the defending against it will awaken a new shame and new defending against it. If they remain unconscious and unanalysed, such circles of shame can continue for a very long time, and they may establish themselves so as to last a lifetime. Probably everybody has a certain amount of unresolved and recurrently activating circles of shame, but there are also people who experience them so intensely, or have so many of them, that they continuously live in a certain kind of general condition of shame.

### *Sexuality*

The author of Genesis imagines of Paradise that the people who lived there, Adam and Eve, were not ashamed, although they were naked. The first thing after the Fall was that their eyes were opened and they noticed that they were naked. They were ashamed in front of each other and they covered their genitalia with fig leaves, and next they were ashamed in front of God and hid from him.

Why should the relationship, particularly of sexuality, to shame be so central? When a child consciously sees the difference between male and female genitalia, it causes not only anxiety, but also shame. To some extent, the same holds true for noticing the differences between the genitalia of adults and children. The child develops a

shameful curiosity concerning who are disformed and who are real, and what the significance of these differences is. The mere existence of genitalia seems shameful. Unreceived, or received but not understood, answers only increase the shame. Sexual knowledge and ignorance, curiosity and indifference, are all equally shameful. But, most of all, the child's sexual wishes lead to shame due to incest taboos and the child's sexual insufficiency. The more the wishes seem to refer to genitalia and intercourse, the clearer this is. Furthermore, the denial of sexual wishes is often linked with shaming or denied through shaming. Thus, the sexual desire, the basic goal of which is finding pleasurable reciprocity for sensual pleasure, becomes in childhood a shameful desire, which separates the child from the ones he loves. The child's various attempts to actualize his Oedipal-sexual nuclear hopes can arouse shame in him, either immediately or when in collision with frustration or refusal, or when the child observes the shame it produces in his parents and loved ones. Such attempts of actualization are what we call the child's polymorphously perverse sexuality. While all other wishes, and the shame connected to their frustration, can usually be dealt with through psychic work, sexual, and particularly Oedipal-sexual, nuclear wishes cannot. Neither the child nor his parents can consciously perceive them, and thus they cannot be dealt with, either.

As an undifferentiated and indefinite central desire that is a part of the self, and equally indefinitely colouring others and expecting reciprocity from them, sexuality predisposes man to shame. Sexuality is a nuclear area of the self and its value is decisively bound to what kind of response it arouses in others. Whatever may be received as open or concealed sexual significance in the self and the outer world, sexuality may arouse shame in practically any kind of context. The amount of stimuli sexuality can offer to trigger a shame circle is immeasurable. The great significance of sexual shame lies in its limitless possibility to expand, its hidden forms, and the difficulty of realizing its starting points in childhood and of conscious psychic work.

### *Humour*

According to Lewis, one of the best ways of alleviating shame is humour. The claim must be adjusted by the fact that, in the case of

children, this holds true only after a certain stage of development. From the point of view of metapsychology, we can conceptualize the significance of humour in approximately the following manner. A person can benevolently laugh at his own shortcomings and failures the very moment he comprehends that, all things considered, they do not represent his whole self. A prerequisite for this is that his concept of his self is to such an extent organized that a Thanatos reaction directed at it can be limited to a part of the self or a momentary self ("Was I foolish at that moment?"). If such an inner organization of the personality has not taken place yet, there are no prerequisites for help offered by humour. The individual in question cannot find it, and, if it is offered by others, the shame is only deepened. It means an even more complete loss of the self and others. This holds true, for example, with children who do not understand humour yet, to say nothing of being able to utilize it.

The early forms of humour children use to deal with shame are illuminating. A pre-school-age child reaches out his hand to a bowl of sweets as if he were going to take a handful, observing at the same time his parents' expressions; at the last moment, he refrains from taking the sweets and bursts out laughing, requiring his parents to laugh together with him. The child indicates that he understands that he has a reprehensible, childish, and shameful part, but also another, wise part, according to which he, in the final analysis, acts, and that one can also take a benevolent attitude towards the shameful part, because it is not in a dominant position: one can laugh at it, together with others. During the next stage, the child can also speak about his real mishaps and failures in a similar spirit. His concept of himself and the adjacent psycho-economy of the libido and the Thanatos are organized and secure to such an extent that the use of humour is possible.

The psycho-economic relationship between humour and shame illuminates the relationship between shame and the psycho-economic organization of the psyche in general. The most characteristic, and, at the same time, painful, feature of shame is that it touches the whole self, and the more diffuse the Thanatos response in the shame situation is, the more dominant the shame is. Thus, children in an early stage of development are liable to feel the threat of complete abandonment for the most surprising reasons.



*The constructive significance of shame*

Shame can also be characterized as a certain kind of inborn teacher. It says: “stop this, it is futile”; “avoid this”; “don’t do this again”. The significance of this function is manifold, constructive, socializing, or insulating. Its origin is in the Thanatos matrix, which contains or also originates other Thanatos-realizing functions. It may also awaken the wish to develop the self in such a manner that a fruitless aspiration will later on find approving reciprocity. When shame operates as a conscious and understood Thanatos function that protects and directs reciprocity, it is short-lived and after it has halted one form of action, it binds the libido to new forms that function better, and then vanishes as unnecessary (cf. Matthis, 1981). It can be credited for the development of reasonableness, sociality, and consideration. When it is not understood and remains unconscious, it turns into a shame circle, which exists more or less permanently.

*Vignettes from clinical work**Hiding and bypassing shame*

The foremost characteristic of shame is that it has to be hidden. The analyst is easily led to participate in this, and he focuses his attention on the various consequences of shame and the methods of removing and mastering it. He interprets weak self-esteem, rage, guilt, omnipotence, masochism, and various other consequences and avoidances of shame without seeing shame in its psychic and physical manifestations. When shame becomes encapsulated, it halts the analytic process or inhibits its start. If shame is taken up as a subject in an atmosphere of free and calm observance in the psychoanalytic situation, it eases and opens, it offers room for manoeuvring that was not available earlier on.

*Over-compensation of shame*

The visible manifestations of shame are often the methods utilized to reject and remove it. Examples of such are certain over-compensating “manic” methods, fulfilling demanding self-ideals or

superego demands, the forced sustenance of excellence, “hunger for stimuli”, hyperactivity, addictions, and destructive behaviour. Hysteriformic brilliance, social charm, demandingness, and conceit may be ways to shelter from shame. Kohut has remarked that shame is not dependent on the strength of self-ideals; many people prone to shame have few self-ideals, and most of them are exhibitionistic and pursued by ambition (Kohut, 1972). We do wish to emphasize that shame is not so much a consequence of too demanding ego ideals and the inability to attain them; over-dimensional ego ideals, exhibitionistic behaviour, and pressing ambition are intended to repel and repair shame-paralysis; they are defensive.

### *Hiding and withdrawal as manifestations of shame*

The need for hiding and withdrawal may be one consequence of shame. Almost unnoticed, it extends to everyday life in many forms, such as realized or unrealized dreams of withdrawing to solitude and the peace of nature (Kinston, 1987). Many people who suffer from psychic problems tormentedly seek a state that would set them free from shame, without knowing what they are looking for.

A young female student had abandoned her established profession and was looking for some other career. After trying various options for a while, or already during the planning phase, she withdrew from all of them with different rationalizations. She felt ashamed of her situation; she felt she had lost her self. She also felt she had given up hope, that she had sunk into cynicism, and, at times, into self-destructive shamelessness. Her analysis was developing in a yet more chaotic direction, more difficult to understand, and her state became alarming. She knew that she had a bad mother relationship and that her mother had been extremely lacking of understanding towards her. She was aware that a conflict with her teacher had made her give up her earlier career. However, she did not know that her dominant problem was not her career, not her studies, not her femininity, but shame. Neither did she know that shame could be shared and dealt with together with someone else. The analyst pointed out to her that shame was the emotion that forced her always to withdraw, shame depressed her self, shame divested her of her ability to think, shame forced her to bluster self-destructively and cynically, shame prevented her from expressing

herself, and forced her to hide in incomprehensibility in her analysis. Shame prevented her from attempting anything in earnest. In order to liberate herself from shame, she was looking for something completely new and different, something she could take up wholeheartedly, thus liberating herself from her worthless self. In psychoanalysis, she sought a cloister to flee the world. When both the analysand and the analyst became aware of the powerful presence of shame, the analytical process was freed from the imprisonment of shame.

The story of Robin Hood is a story of a young man who became imprisoned by shame when he was humiliated as he tried to be accepted as one of the men. He went to meet the men of the Sheriff of Nottingham in order to join their ranks. The men asked him to show that he could shoot, and they fooled him into shooting a royal stag, an offence that carried the penalty of death. Robin Hood managed to escape, and lived as an outlaw hiding in the forest. He became a master of concealment, and devoted himself to humiliating the Sheriff and his men.

### *Shame paralysis*

The most central feature of shame, paralysis, may dominate the analytical situation. Instead of psychic work, the analysand may retreat to unthinking silence or use speech against the threatening paralysis. The lack of thinking in speech may manifest itself as stagnation and lack of contents. Shame can also manifest itself in clumsy sentences, grammatical errors, mixing words in a manner that resembles a reading and writing disorder (dyslexia and dysgraphia), without being one, and by repeating the analyst's expressions, and in clichés. Various attempts at compensation and reparation may conceal the paralysis and absence of thought. In order to conceal the emptiness, the analysand may display enthusiasm and attention. He pursues the experience of success, but when it fails, he immediately collapses. When the shame is discovered, the incomprehensible contents of the analytic sessions may change into real work. Shame made conscious may have the effect that it often has in everyday life: it aggravates and urges one on to strive to realize one's potential. Continuing struggle against shame may be a character neurosis that dominates life.

The analysand is a young woman who had many traumatic and humiliating experiences in her childhood. She has aroused admiration with her abilities, quickness, abundant ideas, and hypomanic speed, which often contained a certain shamelessness. When, in her analysis, she came into contact with her omnipresent shame, she recognized another side of herself: she was unable to act, helpless, paralysed by shame. "I am slow; I notice, that in fact I am stupid, I do not grasp the whole. I am sure I have a reading and writing disorder. I want to belittle others. The abilities of others remind me of my inferiority and I become envious of them."

*The manifestation of shame as conversions, compulsions, and phobias*

Shame may also be recognizable through affect equivalences which resemble conversion. When their association with the emotion of shame is demonstrated, shame takes shape more clearly and enters the sphere of analytical work.

During the final stages of the long and difficult analysis of a female patient, the significance of the shame problem started to become conscious, both to the analyst and the analysand. She had a tendency for conversion-type symptoms. When she felt that she moved in a clumsy manner, that her thoughts were disorientated, and the left side of her body was soft and weak, she was, in fact, paralysed by shame. She had a "left-sided shame paralysis", the very term used to describe the case. The contents of the conversion symptoms were primarily a rejected affect and not an unconscious fantasy.

Another female analysand "felt disgusted" during analytic sessions or on the way there. It was the affect equivalent of shame-related disgust (Tomkins, 1987), where the fantasy contents were often secondary in relation to the symptom formation. The discovery of shame and disgust makes it possible to reach the current reality of her mind, and through it several things became understandable, such as the fear of "losing face" and the "reparation of the façade" that manifested itself in dreams and symptoms.

Compulsive control and increasing obsessive-compulsive symptoms may be an attempt to use anal means to reach out to the experience of success, which is necessary for a defence against

shame and which is not possible by other means. Shame may be the central problem of an obsessive-compulsive person, and anality an effort to control shame. The function of obsessive thoughts may be that they deal with shame, while at the same time hiding it.

In addition to her other obsessions, the analysand had a recurring compulsive mental image that she slashes a cross on herself. This compulsion contains the fantasy of *hara kiri*, a final removal of shame.

Shame has often proved to be the underlying factor of phobic attacks of anxiety. A prerequisite is the inclination to shame; the collapse caused by shame, with its paralysis, absence of thinking and sense of worthlessness, may lead to a panic reaction. Traditional theory does not offer means for understanding such panic, which may be one reason that psychiatry had created a new diagnostic entity, the panic disorder, which is caused by a physiological disorder of the brain, and is beyond the reach of psychotherapy.

A seminar dealing with panic disorders takes up the case of a patient who was disappointed with her long psychotherapy and changed to drug therapy. Her attacks of panic had gradually increased in intensity to such an extent that she could not move about unless in the company of someone, or in a taxi. About one year before the start of the attacks, her first child was born with a handicap. In her therapy, she talked about the guilt the handicap arouses. She experienced her first panic attack on her way to a baptism. The mother, her relative, had given birth to her first child. When she approached their house, she was struck by panic. The assumption that, as the mother of a handicapped child, she was ashamed to go and meet her relatives at a baptism party, was supported by additional information that her own parents had displayed a humiliating attitude towards their handicapped grandchild. The shame remained unrecognized; as often happens, it went under the name of guilt.

A person who, in early childhood, has had traumatic, shaming experiences of abandonment, may be very sensitive to all kinds of rejection and the shame it brings.

A female analysand, whose symptoms at times included disabling states of panic, related a fresh panic that she had already been able to manage: she was seeing her friend, and expected that she would be able to go into town with her. Her friend said that she

had a change in her plans and that she was on her way elsewhere to meet someone else. The analysand decided to use public transport, because the bus stop was quite nearby. She says, "When I stepped outside I became quite dizzy, I looked for the bus stop, but I couldn't find it . . . I don't know where I got a taxi, I was overtaken by a terrible fear . . . My thoughts were paralysed, I was unable to make observations or plan my actions." She could, however, pull herself together and conquer her panic. She was disappointed in her expectations, ashamed of her unrealized hopes, became paralysed, helpless, and panic-stricken. She later noticed that she had not seen the bus stop, although she was standing beside it.

Shame is often recognized only after an extended period of psychoanalytic work. But if the analyst is aware of shame and its significance, recognition may take place quite rapidly.

A young woman sought psychotherapy after attacks of panic that took place during the course of a few years. The attacks often took place in vehicles, sometimes in the company of friends, in restaurants, "in almost any situation, without any clear relationship with anything". The analyst undertaking the therapy had experience of the significance of shame in psychoanalytical work. After listening to the client for a while, she posed the question: "Could it be that you feel threatened by shame?" In support of her question, she described the crushing nature of the experience of shame. The client could not relate to the suggestion, but kept thinking about it, and, during the next session, she told about three crushing experiences of shame. The most recent one of them took place before the recurring states of panic began some years ago. She received an assignment abroad, where she had an advantage of her skill in languages. The pleasure brought by the assignment changed in a few days without any external reason; she collapsed into helplessness, her thoughts ran in chaotic circles, she stayed in her hotel room in a deep state of shame and her head pulsated with thoughts about suicide. She recalls her first similar experience from her childhood. She went proudly and eagerly to her father to show him that she knew all the numbers, but when she tried to demonstrate it, everything became dim, her thoughts became chaotic, she felt that the walls were collapsing in on her, and she was struck by panic. Her fairly severe disorder in reading and writing, which she had rehabilitated without being aware of it, was discovered in

secondary school. Her third shame panic took place when she was a student and accompanied her father to a restaurant. She was unfamiliar with restaurants, and tried to act so as not to give cause for ridicule, which her father was prone to. She became panic-stricken, "everything went dim, it felt as if nothing were true".

### *The prison of shame*

The analysand must have some faith in being understood, in order that the analytical scene, the area of mutual reflection, can come into being. In the beginning of the analysis, he often tests the analyst in this respect. The greatest difficulty, and perhaps unsurmountable obstacle in many analyses, is that the analytical scene, the therapeutic alliance, cannot be forged despite the efforts of both parties. On the basis of our experience, we share Fonagy's (1990) view that the origin of shame is often the suppressive or emotionally void attitude of the parents.

In our experience, the most common cause is abusive or mentally vacuous parenting. In the former case, the child is forced to disavow, for defensive purposes, his ideas concerning his objects, thoughts or feelings about him, as these are perceived as dangerous to his psychological integrity. In the latter case, parents may so misperceive their child's affects that the child develops mental representations of the object which lack the capacity to observe, scrutinize and understand mental states. [Fonagy, 1990]

In such cases, the construction of the possibility of mutual understanding becomes the first, sometimes primary, task of psychoanalysis.

We encounter an intensive shame problem in these analysands, who have been traumatized in their early childhood. They have remained prisoners of shame, as often happens to victims of maltreatment, concentration camp inmates, victims of bullying at school, or battered spouses. They remain ashamed of their inability to achieve awakening acceptance and understanding in those they depend on. In their inner world, Thanatos has taken a cruel stance against libido.

Lack of understanding or humiliation in the parents' attitude towards the child often reflect their own tragedy. It is not

uncommon that the parent tries to solve his own shame problem through the child. The only thing worth anything in the child is what makes the parent feel successful as a mother or father, or what the father or mother can be proud of. An experience of shame from the parent's childhood, or a shameful family secret, which the analysand has been appointed to rectify, or has appointed himself to do, may lie in the background of the analysand's prison of shame. "The telescoping of the generations" described by Faimberg and Corel (1990), where the analysand has identified himself in the relationship between his parents and grandparents, is particularly clear in the case of shame.

An analysand traumatized by a childhood that has wrecked his psychic integration, or by an emotionally empty childhood, may find it of crucial importance to become conscious of the existence of shame and its various effects. "I don't have to defend myself against bottomless and irreparable inferiority. I am not incurably helpless, incapable, unable to think, dejected and lacking a self. Shame is a feeling which makes everybody feel something like that." Shame is then opened to closer inspection. Although Thanatos holds on to its positions with almost unbelievable stubbornness, the analytical process can still commence.

### *Shame produced by the psychoanalytical situation*

In everyday life, shaming is a much used weapon for the real or imaginary adjustment, suppression, paralysing or making the other party defenceless. It is used by educators and people in charge, it is a professional tool of some courtroom lawyers. It is used by élitist cliques and populist political parties, such as the Nazis or the Communists. Paralysing "arrows of shame" are much used weapons in the quarrels between spouses, and may hurt their relationship, often without the user understanding it, in a manner that is difficult to repair. Shaming is a dangerous weapon because its use brings forth in the opponent the wish to retaliate with a similar weapon, to strike at some sore point, to pursue superiority, to be annulling and suppressing.

In the case of psychoanalysis, the mere admission of the need for help may be unbearably humiliating. It reveals one's own weakness. But, in addition to this, such a wish may be revealed where



reciprocity has failed, and the existence of the wish has become a source of shame. Such a wish may lie hidden in taking up psychoanalytical co-operation, showing interest in it, or taking trouble in practical arrangements. For the same reason, all assistance on the analyst's side maybe shameful, such as granting an extra session, a change of schedule dictated by the analysand's need. The search for such another, who would fulfil the unexpressed wish and to whom it would not be necessary to ask for anything (the search for what we often call symbiotic longing), may be an attempt to avoid such shame. Nietzsche's cynical comment on gratitude (that gratitude is a milder form of revenge) concerns the humiliation and shame in connection with receiving help.

The analysand had undergone a fairly traumatic and neglected childhood; at present her social and economic situation was very awkward, and, in order to be able to continue with her analysis, she needed changes in schedule and financial arrangements. However, she neglected the analytic sessions which had become possible through the direct assistance of the analyst. She had the same attitude towards help from friends and arrangements to facilitate her studies. She could only accept such help, which came as if it were on the run, almost by mistake, without causing her shame. An intensive shame problem dominated her analysis.

The psychoanalytic situation may contain the continuing threat of a shame which, at times, differs only obscurely from everyday shameful situations. In part, this threat derives from the nature of the work required in analysis, in part from the deficiencies no psychoanalyst (or any educator or parent) can avoid. The analysand is prompted to express and reveal such things, which he has hidden, isolated, and dissociated. It is, however, seldom that the analyst is able to understand these expressions immediately and in the manner the analysand requires. It is not often that the analysand can receive such an immediate hint as a look, expression, or gesture from which he could draw the understanding or interest of the analyst. The need for a narcissistic self-object which Kohut (1971) describes can be considered from this viewpoint, and the same holds true of the eye-contact which some find necessary. The analyst can also make the analysand feel shame by being uninterested and insulting due to lack of understanding or knowledge, or as a result of countertransference. The analysand may react to the

shame produced by the analytical situation by making a counter-attack and shaming the analyst, or by striving towards yet greater obedience, or both at the same time.

When the analysand feels that his “inner voices” do not accept his associations, he takes it for granted that the analyst does not accept them, either, and he is ashamed in front of both the “inner voices” and the analyst. The Thanatos reaction is usually also directed towards the analyst and the analytical work. It is directed towards the analyst as indefinite anger, hurt feelings, and criticism, or mere cautious misgivings concerning his understanding or confidentiality. The Thanatos reaction towards analytic work is expressed as various resistances, which are generally also known in other contexts.

From the point of view of the analytic method, it is essential in such situations to reach the inner voices threatening the analysand with shame as separately as possible from the analyst and the analytical work, without immediately connecting them with transference. The best way to do this is by proceeding from the analysand’s feeling, shame, and the psychic material around it; another reason for doing this is so as not to favour such a connection in the analysand’s mind that the analyst also thinks that the analysand should be ashamed of himself.

The analyst is also always prone to shame. When he does not feel that he is succeeding in his work, when he does not receive the reciprocity he is expecting from the analysand, or when he is the target of the analysand’s shaming assault, he may feel tempted to deviate from the working atmosphere of free observation, and thus become prone to make technical mistakes. His ability to think may temporarily, or for a longer duration, be paralysed, and he may begin to theorize and make interpretations which he does not understand himself, or he can resort to veiled educational or other unanalytic measures.

### *Epilogue*

Why is it that shame has had so little attention in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis? Why has it been so difficult to recognize? The first reason may be that shame is present everywhere and

it is such an everyday matter that its existence slips the mind. Another reason may be that psychoanalysis has approached psychic phenomena from symptoms and the concept of illness, which creates a point of view: "This is illness, this is a symptom, it is not of myself". Thus, shame can be bypassed as if unnoticed, because an essential element of shame is the feeling that it concerns the whole self. A third reason may be that psychoanalytic language in general has established many expressions that favour bypassing shame. Their function has been to help the analysand accept such parts, which he has isolated and alienated from himself. Talk about the "infant", "child-part", "the needing part", "evil", etc., has been intended to ease the recognition of certain contents of the mind and their acceptance. It may be that they are of assistance in that, but, at the same time, they help in bypassing shame. Shame that is bypassed remains shapeless and, as such, it may be encountered over and over again, with all its consequences.