

Evolution, social roles, and the differences in shame and guilt.

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## Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

THE fear of shame and ridicule can be so strong that people will risk serious physical injury or even death to avoid it. One of the reasons for this is because shame can indicate serious damage to social acceptance and a breakdown in a variety of social relationships. The evolutionary root of shame is in a self-focused, social threat system related to competitive behavior and the need to prove oneself acceptable/desirable to others (Gilbert, 1989; 2002a). Guilt, however, evolved from a care-giving and “avoiding doing harm to others” system (Gilbert, 1998; Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Guilt will be explored here primarily to offer a contrast with shame and thus clarify the self-focused nature of shame. The evolutionary precursors for shame can be traced back to the way all animals must be able to detect and cope with social threats (Gilbert and McGuire, 1998). For many animals, attentiveness to conspecifics that could inflict harm, and are threats to them, is highly adaptive, and social anxiety, flight, or submission/appeasement are salient

defenses (Gilbert, 2001). Social threats (unlike nonsocial threats) often involve communicating signals that impact on the state of mind of the threatening other(s); for example, a submissive display may be sufficient to stop a more dominant from seriously attacking a subordinate. Although shame requires a symbolic sense of self (Lewis, 1992), it too is regulated by social threats and automatic defenses to protect the self from threats posed by others (Gilbert, 2002a). Indeed, there is now evidence that shame can act as an inner warning signal of threats and challenges to the self, with a trigger.

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gearing of automatic defenses—especially desires to escape (flight) and submissive behavior (Keltner and Harker, 1998), anger (Tangney et al., 1996), and concealment (MacDonald, and Morley, 2001). Guilt is not rooted in “threat to the self” or needs for rapid defenses of the self. Rather, for guilt there must first be some concern with the welfare of others, such that the (distress) experiences of others matter. One archetypal origin of caring and responsiveness to distress is probably in the parent-infant/kin care system (MacLean, 1985). Concern for others matures in children as they become aware of distress in others (including awareness of being a source for others’ distress), develop empathy and sympathy, and wish to help others (Eisenberg, 2002). Unlike shame, guilt is not associated with anger at others (Tangney et al., 1996) and reparation is chosen over concealment (Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Further, unlike shame, guilt is not associated with feeling inferior to others (for example, making negative social comparisons), or submissive behavior, social anxiety, or (nonpsychotic) depression (Gilbert, 2000b; Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Although never tested, it is possible that guilt may require a capacity to tolerate sadness. For example, while driving home, a cat suddenly rushes out in front of your car and you hit it. One could drive on and think “stupid cat”; feel shame by blaming oneself for not driving with due care (or think others will accuse one of such), or one can feel sadness-linked guilt, stop the car, and see if there is anything that can be done. Clinical experience suggests that guilt/remorse is often associated with sorrow/sadness. Thus, although some researchers distinguish guilt and shame on the basis of evaluations of self (a bad/flawed self is a shamed self) or behavior (guilt is about actions and not a judgment of the self), my own view is that this is only part of the story since there are also major differences in a whole suite of evolved motives, emotions, competencies, beliefs, and attentional focus that underpin these two social emotions. However,

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they can often be “fused” together in that, for example, causing harm to others might activate both guilt and shame (Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Cognitive Competencies in Shame and Guilt Although many animals may have the precursors for shame (for example, sensitivity to dominant others and submissive behavior) and guilt (care-giving for others), it is doubtful they feel shame or guilt as such...

# Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt

PAUL GILBERT

**T**HE fear of shame and ridicule can be so strong that people will risk serious physical injury or even death to avoid it. One of the reasons for this is because shame can indicate serious damage to social acceptance and a breakdown in a variety of social relationships. The evolutionary root of shame is in a self-focused, social threat system related to competitive behavior and the need to prove oneself acceptable/desirable to others (Gilbert, 1989; 2002a). Guilt, however, evolved from a care-giving and "avoiding doing harm to others" system (Gilbert, 1998; Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Guilt will be explored here primarily to offer a contrast with shame and thus clarify the self-focused nature of shame.

The evolutionary precursors for shame can be traced back to the way all animals must be able to detect and cope with social threats (Gilbert and McGuire, 1998). For many animals, attentiveness to conspecifics that could inflict harm, and are threats to them, is highly adaptive, and social anxiety, flight, or submission/appeasement are salient defenses (Gilbert, 2001). Social threats (unlike nonsocial threats) often involve communicating signals that impact on the state of mind of the threatening other(s); for example, a submissive display may be sufficient to stop a more dominant from seriously attacking a subordinate. Although shame requires a symbolic sense of self (Lewis, 1992), it too is regulated by social threats and automatic defenses to protect the self from threats posed by others (Gilbert, 2002a). Indeed, there is now evidence that shame can act as an inner warning signal of threats and challenges to the self, with a trig-

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