Shame Societies & Guilt Societies

Abstract 1010   Shame societies/guilt societies

Criteria to identify a shame society

- The highest value to respect in someone is purity and piety; ideological leaders and pious politicians are greatly honored.
- There is an emphasis on life after death and suspicion of fun in this life.
- There is a strong need for the society to be perceived as morally superior, to the point of projecting and blaming other groups for its own faults. Thus, there often is a strong drive to impose its values and its ideology on other groups.
- The society is extremely hierarchical; men have the economic, political, and religious power and enforce their privileges to the detriment of women. The natural beauty of women often is considered threatening.
- The majority of women agree to rules set by men and help men enforce them; their role is often limited to being mistresses, servants and incubators of men's children.
- Class structure is pronounced. There can be *de jure* or *de facto* slavery in such societies.
- In spite of a tradition of hospitality to strangers, members of other groups who live among them are kept separate and never really accepted. Prejudice toward members of minorities is considered a natural way of thinking.
- Power based on violence is seen as a normal way for political problem-solving.
- The political leadership, particularly during times of war, may arise from the criminal element of the society.
- The state feels free to commit sadism from time to time.
- The sacrificial quotient includes more violence and war and less altruism.

<u>Criteria to identify a guilt society</u>

- Feelings of moral superiority arise from real-life group altruism rather than theoretical religious or ideological precepts.
- The majority agree to keep church and state separate.
- There is an emphasis on achievement in this world rather than in the next. Artists who push limits, while upsetting many, nevertheless are protected and valued.
- The presence of hierarchy everywhere in the society is diminished.
- Women become independent or full partners rather than servants and incubators.
- The drive of a guilt society to impose its values on other societies is blunted
- Toleration of people and values from alternate lifestyles within the community is a goal. Toleration of people and values from other completely separate communities is another goal. To be prejudiced is considered a fault.
- The society struggles to take responsibility for its actions and not project the blame too unfairly.
- Violence is the last, not the first, method for political problem- solving.
- There is such abhorrence of sadism that the society can not use torture.
- The sacrificial quotient includes less violence and war and more altruism.

Leslie - (sigh) I haven't yet fully digested the concept from the last lecture of *depersonalization of the impure.* Now there are these twin lectures on shame societies and guilt societies during primitive times; I could think of so many examples as I was listening.

Irene – You know your history!

Leslie – But I can tell you one thing I didn't understand at all in that lecture – it was the statement that, although the feelings of shame and guilt are based on social norms shaped by each distinct culture, they can be consistently characterized across cultures.

Irene – Yes, that has been shown by many studies; feeling shame and guilt are primary normal human emotions that evolved from prototypes found in other primates and can be characterized in individuals no matter what society they belong to. This has been demonstrated both historically and cross-culturally.

Incidentally, it is not just emotions that can be identified across cultures, certain aberrant human behavior patterns that are clearly abnormal, such as sociopathy or psychopathy, have core manifestations that are stable and can be recognized with a combination of clinical and laboratory studies [3,7]

Leslie – Wait a minute -- I thought you didn't like the theories, philosophical or scientific that tried to identify universal principles of human behavior based on deductive observations. That you thought morality was a set of customs and values slightly different for each cultural group. This negates the idea of absolute moral values! Isn't that what you told me?

Irene – Yes, but ...

Leslie – And furthermore I remember that you pointed out to me that killing was a good example of this lack of absolutes, since, although our modern society abhors all killing, in primitive times entire communities went around imitating the bizarre people who are the killers -- creating wars at regular intervals and practicing capital punishment.

Irene – So?

Leslie – Look. I already know a lot about shame (the feeling of public exposure) and guilt (the private, internal emotion). I admit that what I didn't know was what the twentieth century primitives had already discovered that these two emotions, they had <u>opposite effects</u> on violence, as shown by studies in criminals [2]. It was fascinating that increasing shame and public humiliation are the conditions most likely to turn a person toward violent acting out while increasing guilt had the opposite effect.

Increase the shame and violence increases; increase the guilt and violence diminishes!

Irene – Right; this was such an important finding back then; it has led to our contemporary approach in curtailing killing. Because with certain caveats, this insight about individuals is of value in understanding the behavior of groups; Sigmund Freud, who invented psychohistory in the twentieth century, wrote that the heightening of a sense of guilt was most important in the evolution of a culture.

Leslie – Wait a minute; this is a question I had – if guilt is a private feeling, how can it be relevant to the group?

Irene – In the right political hands, it can be a technique to make the members of the opposing group feel guilty as their own group behaves badly toward another group. The great leaders of the twentieth century, like Mahatma Gandhi of India and Nelson Mandela of South Africa, avoided bloodshed by using guilt-inducing tactics against their imperialist enemies.

Leslie – Just a minute; I thought the twentieth century was an unusually bloody century convulsed by a number of extreme shame societies of the fascist type.

Irene – You are touching on a sore point for the theorists of shame societies and guilt societies. The ones who first proposed these concepts were so blinded by incredible color prejudice that what they proposed was backward – that the nations of white people, many of which had become fascistic in the first half of the twentieth century, were the guilt societies while the nations of dark-skinned people where Gandhi and Mandela worked were shame societies [6].

Leslie – But during the twentieth century, societies weren't fixed; didn't they swing back and forth between these two styles?

Irene – Yes, states had an internal mixture of the two types and could shift in balance between them as a dominant theme. For the twentieth century, Denmark was a good example of this fluidity. During World War II, the people of Denmark as a group saved their minority Jewish citizens from the Nazi death camps – using the cover of night, they shipped the Jews to nearby Sweden under the very noses of the Nazis. This was truly a splendid guilt-society action! Yet by the end of the century, during the prelude to the second Gulf War, the Danes were the only group of people in the European Union who favored a war in Iraq; even the British whose leaders had taken them into the war rejected the violence by majorities in opinion polls. The descendants of the noble Danes of the twentieth century moved toward a shame society in the twenty-first.

Leslie – I'm not clear about a lot of this; let's go back to the basics. Please explain how an individual feeling shame can be translated into a whole society of shame. I know for the individual it is about being seen by others as impure, tainted in some way, and that primitive men sometimes fought bloody duels between each other to wash away that shame.

Irene – Both twentieth century French and the classical Greek language had two words for shame, connoting respectively a more private or a more public sense. The word *pudeur* in French was associated with a personal covering up of sexual matters; *honte* referred to the loss of honor in the eyes of others. It is in the latter sense that shame is applied here to the concept of shame societies.

You are right that impurity is the underlying feeling that drives shame societies. "Saving face", that is avoiding shame, has been found as a major theme in those societies. They were obsessed with moral superiority/purity as an ideal that required constant vigilance against impurity. It was indeed hard to ward off all the threats to purity that the natural ambiguous reality of life presented! This produced the need for continuous rituals controlling as much of life as possible.

Leslie – The lecturer said that they were particularly hard on women.

Irene – That's an understatement. In the twentieth century, in states catering to religious extremism, there were many examples of men interfering with women's rights, even their bodies. In Pakistan, in 1979, a law was passed called the Hudood ordinance; if a woman reported being raped, she could end up being prosecuted for adultery. This law led to the punishment of thousands of innocent women. In the twentieth century in the United States, in the states dominated by the religious right, both men and women, needing to feel morally superior, wanted to interfere when a girl needed to make the unfortunate decision to have an abortion.

Leslie – It is hard to imagine the personality of people who lived in such kill-joy societies, and put up with such an intrusive group ritualistic life as the lecturer described today. Is it true that the Taliban of Afghanistan didn't even allow children to play by flying kites?   *Irene* – Alas, yes. The rigidity of such societies is based on absolutes, including attempts to exclude the inevitable movement of ideas and people. Shame societies are cultures where people are not allowed to experience their own anger directly, but get it out in group packaging as moral, righteous indignation – that is, by feeling morally superior.

Leslie – So if shame societies were so focused on being superior and perfect, why were they so prone to violence? To bloodletting? To war?

Irene – It might be because it is impossible to maintain a homeostasis of perfect morality, leaving such societies in constant need of being "purified." Prewar maneuvers, the Dance of Death, would begin by two such communities focusing exclusively on each other and verbally attacking and shaming each other. They were helping each other dance toward the inevitable blood sacrifice that both societies needed in order to become "pure" again [1]. Preparing for war, the group became a wonderful sponge absorbing the misery and anger and hatred of its members as it prepared to squeeze them out again in community-directed focused lethal form.

Leslie – What about the people in the guilt societies of the twentieth century; didn't they have wars too?

Irene – Avoidance of war was much more likely to occur in guilt societies, where societies had moved forward, giving up enough purity and moral superiority to leave behind the shame society model. These were communities which could tolerate ambiguity and differences rather than focusing on homogenous purity. It was not that they had given up bad feelings; whole societies felt guilty together; they had a "guilty groupthink". But they tended to handle their group negative feelings in a different way – by developing other ways of meeting their sacrificial needs in forms other than blood sacrifice.

For individuals, guilt or self-reproach is the inner experience of a bad conscience over breaking one's own rules. But humans are very social mammals, and it is not just what we do ourselves that induces guilt. We can suffer guilt through an act of identification with other people, even those we never knew. For example, a specific effect of catastrophes like war or genocide is *survivor guilt* suffered by the surviving individuals even though they had absolutely no responsibility for the deaths of their fellow victims [4].

These people feel guilty for merely being alive; this is an example of how many humans feel profoundly group-identified, even in the most unlikely of situations.

Leslie – Give me an example of a group of people meeting their sacrificial needs in a form other than blood sacrifice?

Irene – If you didn't fall asleep this afternoon, you might have heard the lecturer give the example of Serbia and the Netherlands as a shame-guilt society interaction. Although the Serbians, then a shame society, organized and massacred more than 6,000 unarmed Moslem men and boys of Srebrenica in 1995, apparently it was the people of the Netherlands who suffered the guilt. At the time of the massacre, the Dutch undermanned and lightly armed UN peacekeepers were taken hostage by the Serbian army, leaving the Moslems in the misnamed "safe area" to their fate. This haunted the country of the Netherlands and eventually led to the resignation of the Prime Minister Wim Kok and his cabinet; when resigning he said "The Netherlands has to take its share of that responsibility." By personally assuming some of the guilt and resigning because of it, prime minister Kok performed the nonlethal sacrifice of the leader for his guilt-oriented society.

Leslie – Are you implying that guilt societies take responsibilities for their actions, even if the apparent evil doing of their group was totally inadvertent?

Irene – Yes, just like *survivor guilt*, there can be no exact responsibility. It's a human group identity issue. Guilt societies struggle over the full meaning of their inadvertent yet unacceptable actions and try to fathom their own possible motives. They are suffering and need to be purged by a sacrifice. But, because blood sacrifice has become unacceptable to them (usually including a ban on capital punishment), nonlethal forms of sacrifice were developed – often economic or sometimes political, as in the Dutch case.

Leslie – I admit I fell asleep. And I know I missed the end of the lecture which discussed "good wars", so I'll ask you now where that puzzling concept of "goodness" came from in situations where people were deliberately murdering each other.

Irene – In primitive times, the idea that war could be positive, a "good" war or a "just" war, was discussed from St. Augustine to the writers of the United Nations Charter. It is interesting that shame societies and guilt societies had quite different approaches, yet both could call war good. You must have missed the declaration of an Italian artistic movement called the Futurists at the beginning of the twentieth century. These were an example of extreme shame society types of groups. They said "We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women. We will destroy the museums, libraries and academies of every kind, we'll fight feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice. We will sing of great crowds excited by their work, by pleasure and by riot".[5] These Italians really were futurists; they correctly anticipated the important elements of fascism about to engulf Italy, including its glorification of war.

Leslie – Wow! What sick shame societies there were back then! Are you sure that guilt societies also called war good?

Irene – Yes, but for guilt societies, there was not the open embrace of war as a good thing in advance. Religious leaders and diplomats would work sincerely trying to stop the coming war during the Dance of Death phrase. For guilt societies, the concept of self-defense often was the ideological justification for a "good" war: war leaders often needed to start up the hostilities at the climax of the Dance of Death phase by fake attacks and outright lies, as Johnson did at the Gulf of Tonkin starting the Vietnam war.

Leslie – If I got my history right, World War II resulted in a total of up to a hundred million people being killed, if you count the Japanese excursion throughout Asia. The war was a terrible calamity to every group involved, including the Germans; one out of every four of them was killed or wounded. Surely no one called that a "good" war.

Irene – Even that was called a good war by some. It's time for supper; let's go.