

# The Two Faces of Shame

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Twenty-four year old Shawn Gementera was caught red-handed pilfering letters from private mailboxes along San Francisco's Fulton Street. Mail theft is a serious crime, and it was not Gementera's first run-in with the law. Even so, the judge opted for a lenient sentence—just two months in jail and three years of supervised release. But the supervised release came with an unusual condition.

Gementera's sentence required him to stand in front of a San Francisco post office, wearing a sandwich board with these words in large letters: "I stole mail. This is my punishment." The convicted thief fought this provision, arguing that such public humiliation was cruel and unusual punishment, but he lost his appeal. The court argued that public humiliation was the point—not humiliation for the sake of humiliation, but as a deterrent against future crime.

This case took place a few years ago, but the idea of public shaming has a long history, dating back at least to the stockades of colonial times. This moral and legal sanction was immortalized in the fictional case of Hester Prynne, the main character of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, who was condemned to wear the prominent 'A' for her crime of adultery. Such shaming punishments—sometimes called Scarlet Letter sentences—are making something of a comeback in recent years, raising not only legal but psychological questions as well, most notably: Do they work? Does forced public humiliation contribute to rehabilitation of criminal minds—and diminish the chances of repeat offenses?

The answers to these questions are unknown, and indeed the questions have not been well studied—at least not in the most relevant population, convicted criminals. Until now, that is. George Mason University clinical psychologist June Tangney recently conducted a study of shame in jail inmates, following them from soon after incarceration to about a year after their release. She wanted to see if inmates who experienced shame were more or less likely to commit more crimes later on. More specifically, she wanted to compare the effects of shame and another self-conscious emotion, guilt, in rehabilitating criminals.

The distinction between shame and guilt may seem at first like semantic hair-splitting, but it's actually very important in studying punishment and rehabilitation. Feelings of guilt are focused on a particular act: "I did a bad thing by stealing other people's mail." By contrast, feelings of shame focus painfully on the self: "I am a bad person because I stole others' letters." When people are guilty—as proclaimed by a judge, for example—they experience remorse and regret, and they want to make reparations. But people who are shamed feel generally diminished, worthless—and defensive. Humiliated people want to slink into hiding, deny responsibility and, most important, blame others for what they did.

For this reason, Tangney expected that shame would be less effective than guilt in deterring future crime. That's because a bad, defective person is much worse—and harder to fix—than a bad behavior. She recruited more than 400 inmates at a local jail, all recently incarcerated on felony charges. She administered a standard assessment to identify which inmates were prone to guilt feelings and which to

feelings of shame. It also identified those who most likely to blame others for their problems.

The in-mates then served their time and were released. About a year after release, Tangney and her colleagues followed up, to see how they were doing. They used several different measures, including self-reports and public records, to come up with a recidivism score for each inmate. She predicted that the shame-prone inmates—because of their tendency to assign blame rather than accept responsibility—would be more likely to return to crime after their release.

And that's what they found—at least when they first looked at the data. Shame did indeed cause former inmates to blame others for their misfortune, which in turn kept them from learning from their mistakes—and led to repeat crimes. By contrast, those who felt guilty at incarceration were much less likely to have relapsed a year later.

But further analysis revealed a much more nuanced view of shame. As reported in an article to appear in the journal *Psychological Science*, shame led to recidivism *only* when the humiliated inmates blamed others. When they did not—when they were humiliated yet accepted blame—inmates were no more likely to return to crime. In other words, the experience of shame is in some ways a liability, but in other ways it is adaptive, perhaps even a strength.

Here's the most intriguing finding. Apparently it's the powerful desire to hide away that determines shame's effects. People who are experiencing shame want to avoid others, and it may be that shame-prone ex-offenders do just that—withdraw from everyone, including their partners in crime, and thus stay clean. Or they might use their jail time to hunker down and think; they anticipate future shame, which has a deterrent effect on criminal activity. So shame might cause some people to blame others, but it could lead others toward rehabilitation and a brighter future. Shame, it seems, has two faces, both of which must be considered in attempts at restorative justice.

*Follow Wray Herbert's writing on psychological science on Twitter at @wrayherbert.*