The Social Mechanism of Guilt and Shame: The Japanese Case

A social mechanism is delineated which is considered as useful for distinguishing guilt and shame. Guilt is defined on the basis of the rule of reciprocity, and shame is characterized in conjunction with status occupancy. It is suggested in conclusion that in a monotheistic culture guilt is generalized and shame is specific whereas in a 'sociocultic' culture the reverse is true. Japan is considered to represent a sociocult.

INTRODUCTION

Among many dichotomous typologies which have been anthropologically stigmatized as ethnocentric is the typology of guilt and shame. Ausubel (1955), among others, refutes the dichotomous characterizations of guilt and shame as proposed by Benedict (1946), Leighton and Kluckhohn (1947), and Mead (1949, 1950). Specifically, he invalidates the popularized association of guilt with such factors as superego, parental authority, hierarchical control, and internal sanction, and the association of shame with either the lack of these factors or the opposite of them. These associations can be exactly reversed, he claims. De Vos (1960) presents the Japanese case to show that striving toward goal achievement is motivated by guilt rather than shame, and thus brings into question Piers’ and Singer’s (1953: 11) point of view that shame corresponds with living up to ego-ideal while guilt corresponds with submission to superego. Most critics agree as to the untenability of the guilt-shame distinction in terms of internal vs. external sanction, and argue that internalization of norms is necessary for both (Isenberg 1949; Lynd 1961; Moriguchi 1965; Piers and Singer 1953; Sakuda 1967; Spiro 1961). Lynd (1961: 49-56), especially, emphasizes the deeply inner experience of shame involving ‘the whole self.’ It has become tabooed to characterize a total culture as either a shame or a guilt culture. We are, instead, advised to pay more attention to the overlap or mutual substitution between shame and guilt within a single culture, or to look at them as different phases of the individual’s psycho-social development.

These critics did shed light upon the naiveté of some postulates underlying the guilt-shame typology. Nevertheless, it seems that confusion has reached such a point that we would rather dismiss the concepts of guilt and shame as either useless or dangerous.
While accepting the critics’ contention that no culture can be characterized exclusively in terms of guilt or shame, I want to argue that these terms are conceptually distinguishable, and that there is cultural variation in the usage of them. In this paper I shall attempt to delineate a mechanism which conceptually differentiates guilt from shame. The mechanism I am suggesting is strictly ‘social,’ unlike past studies which have approached this subject primarily with a psychoanalytic or culture-personality frame of reference.

In order to illustrate the social mechanism to be presented below, reference will be made to the Japanese case. In addition to information from literature, I shall use, where relevant, a part of the TAT material obtained from 130 Japanese respondents, residents of a provincial city in central Japan, ranging from high school children to adults of between thirty and sixty.

The TAT was meant to be a pre-test to elicit a variety of responses with regard to shame and guilt rather than to yield frequency distributions.

The subjects who were organized in five separate groups – three classrooms, a PTA meeting, and a women’s association meeting – were requested to write three stories in response to three pictures arbitrarily selected from a Japanese version of TAT (Togawa 1953). They were given instructions to use three expressions equivalent to guilt, shame, and pride respectively in making up these stories. The guilt-eliciting stimulus consisted of a picture depicting an old man and a young person (Togawa TAT 10), plus the instruction to use one of the three commonly used expressions which I considered closest to ‘guilty,’ sumanai, moshiwakenai, and kigatogameru. The noun tsumi was avoided because it is closer to ‘sin’ or ‘crime’ than ‘guilt.’ The shame-eliciting stimulus was a combination of a picture of a man and a woman, the latter placing her arm over the man’s shoulder (Togawa TAT 6), with one of the words, haji, hajiru, hazukashii, which stand for the noun, verb, and adjective forms of ‘shame.’ Finally, pride-responses were elicited to supplement the information on the shame complex. The subjects were presented with a picture of a man standing alone downcast (Togawa TAT 16) and told to use menboku, meiyo, or taimen, which roughly correspond with ‘pride,’ ‘honor,’ and ‘face.’ Some examples taken from the result of this pre-test are expected, first, to clarify the social mechanism to be proposed below, as a general tool, and secondly, to elucidate a cultural bias involved in differentiating guilt and shame.

This paper will examine shame more closely than guilt because shame is a more ‘socially’ complex phenomenon, the reason for which will be understood from the text.

RECIROCITY AND GUILT

The following analysis is derived from the distinction of two types of social structure in both of which we get involved in every society. One is identified as ‘reciprocal’ and the other as ‘asymmetric.’ I postulate that this distinction offers a social mechanism to distinguish shame from guilt. Guilt relates to reciprocity, I argue, while shame involves asymmetry.

By reciprocity I mean the rule by which two actors in interaction, Ego and Alter, expect of each other to maintain a balance between mutual rights and