

RAMPAGE SHOOTING: EMOTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS AS CAUSES

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Abstract: There are by now several studies of shooting sprees, and a larger literature on gratuitous and/or random violence. But both are almost entirely descriptive. So far there have been few proposals for a theory that might be worth testing, or reasonable hints at what might be done. Developing theories that involve emotion in modern societies faces a barrier: the absence of single-meaning concepts of emotion. This difficulty is illustrated by the chaos of vernacular and expert meanings for love, shame and pride, and for two emotions sometimes linked to shame, anger and fear. The first step toward explaining runaway violence might be to provide a single meaning for the word shame. Based on such a definition, this note outlines a theory that focuses on recursive, interactive processes of isolation and shame, and some possible remedial actions. An attempt to apply these ideas to collective violence is also described.

Cho Seung-hui was the 23-year old shooter in the recent rampage at Virginia Tech. Like all the other earlier school shooters in this country, he was an isolated male loner who felt rejected. Many of his written complaints imply that he was rejecting those that he felt had rejected him, a strong indication of shame. There are also plentiful indications of isolation. One of his teachers reported, "He was the loneliest person I have ever known." His roommate commented that often he didn't respond at all when spoken to, or with only one word.

This note outlines a causal process that may lead to rampages, and preliminary steps that might help avoid future ones. First I outline a social-emotional theory: how interactive isolation and shame can lead to feedback loops that have no limit. In the US, the shooters have all been loners who were harassed and ostracized. But most people treated that way don't shoot anyone or even make trouble. What could be special about the shooters?

The theory proposed here involves a social component, alienation, and an emotion one, unacknowledged shame. The inclusion of shame makes it necessary to first consider the difficulties in dealing with an emotion component.

Emotions: Vernacular Words vs. Concepts

In modern societies, emotions are not taken seriously, even by most experts in human behavior. Like the population at large, most scholars assume that the emotional/relational world that we all live in is not quite real. Specifically, scholars usually assume that human motives concern the material world, on the one hand, and thoughts and beliefs, on the other.

Emotions and interpersonal relations are seldom mentioned by name, or if mentioned, only abstractly, avoiding specifics. The last stage of defense is that even when specific emotions or relationship terms are used, the words are extremely loose and ambiguous,

both in expert and vernacular usage. Although the emotional/relational world is mostly denied and ignored in all modern languages, English is by far the worst case, as will be described below.

One obvious example is the emotion of love. In current usage in English, love is so broad as to include everything but the kitchen sink. Most unabridged dictionaries of English provide some twenty-four meanings, some of which are contradictory. No other language comes anywhere near such confusion. For example, current usage confounds genuine love, which surely means loving someone that we know well, warts and all, with infatuation, which deletes warts and any other blemishes in favor of an idealized fantasy.

Infatuation is often based on appearance alone, rather than knowledge and understanding of the other person. In this way, the word love may be used to hide a failure to connect. The broad use of love may be an attempt to hide and deny widespread alienation. As will be indicated below, the current usage with respect to the emotion of shame confuses in the opposite way, by using the word shame only very narrowly: a crisis of disgrace. Just as love is used to include infatuation, shame is used to exclude embarrassment and many other everyday feelings, such as shyness and modesty.

In the case of the word pride, there is one ambiguity that is overwhelmingly obvious. This word has two distinct and opposite meanings in current usage, one positive, the other negative. The dominant one is negative, as in the Biblical “Pride goeth before the fall.” This usage confounds the positive meaning, authentic or justified pride, with arrogance, egotism or self-centeredness. However, it is possible that negative “pride” might be the opposite of genuine pride, since it could be a defense against shame. This basic contradiction creates problems of many kinds. There is a vast research literature using self-esteem scales with no results, probably because of this issue (Scheff and Fearon 2004).

Before Freud, fear meant the emotional signal of physical danger to life or limb, and anxiety was just a more diffuse kind of fear. But after Freud, the meaning of these words began to expand, a la love. Anxiety became broader, enough to include many kinds of diffuse emotion. Current vernacular usage is so enlarged that fear/anxiety can be used to mask other emotions, especially shame and humiliation. “I fear rejection” has nothing to do with danger of bodily harm, nor does “social fear” or “social anxiety.” These terms refer rather to the anticipation of shame or humiliation. (When I explain this nicety to my students, their eyes glaze over.) Anxiety and fear seem to be moving toward becoming abstract, pliable words like love, or still more pliable, emotional arousal.

Anger: the confusion over the meaning of this word seems to be different than those discussed above. It involves confounding feelings with actions. We don’t confuse the feeling of fear with running away, the feeling of shame with hiding one’s face, or the feeling of grief with crying. But anger is thought to be destructive, even though it is only a feeling.

The feeling of anger is an internal signal, like any other emotion. It is one of the many pain signals that alert us to the state of the world inside and around us. In itself, if not acted out, it is instructive, not destructive. The condemnation of emotions as negative in Western societies is another aspect of the chaos of emotion words.

Normal emotions are neither negative nor positive, since they are brief and instructive. As will be discussed below, emotions may become triggers for withdrawal or violence when they generate limitless feedback loops (recursion). Under these conditions, there is a parallel with chaos theory. If it is in the wrong place, a single molecule of air or water can start a recursive process that ultimately produces a hurricane. Similarly, instances of shame and alienation can interact to generative a recursive process that can end in either complete withdrawal or lethal violence. (For a theory of the way that recursive loops of alienation and unacknowledged shame may take a different path, ending in clinical depression, see Scheff 2007).

When anger is expressed as verbal explanation, rather than acted out as screaming or aggression, it is constructive. It explains to self and other where one is, how one is frustrated, and why. Both self and other need to know this information. The confounding of anger expression with acting out can be seen as a way of justifying acting out, rather than expressing anger, and the prevalence of acting out, as in spousal abuse and road rage. “I couldn’t help myself.”

Shame: In contrast to the pliability of the meaning of love and fear, current usage of shame in English usually involves only one meaning, and an extremely narrow one at that: a crisis feeling of intense disgrace. In this usage, a clear distinction is made between embarrassment and shame. Embarrassment can happen to anyone, but shame is conceived as horrible. Embarrassment is speakable, shame is unspeakable. This usage avoids everyday shame such as embarrassment and modesty, and in this way sweeps most such emotion episodes under the rug.

Other languages, even those of some modern societies, treat embarrassment as a milder version of shame. In Spanish, for example, the same word (*verguenza*) is used for both. Most languages also have an everyday shame that is considered to belong to the shame/embarrassment family. For example, the French *pudeur*, which can be translated as modesty, or better yet, a sense of shame, is differentiated from *honte*, disgrace shame. If you ask an English speaker is shame distinct from embarrassment, they will answer with an impassioned yes. But a French speaker might ask “Which kind of shame?”

Even making a strict distinction between shame and humiliation serves to hide everyday shame. Humiliation is not only a narrow crisis emotion, it is also seen as coming entirely from outside. “It is not about my shame contribution to the crisis, but entirely about those that humiliated me.” In this respect it is much like embarrassment, even though embarrassment is seen as light and humiliation as heavy punishment. But both are deflected from self on to the outside world, which makes them speakable.

Referring to all kinds of slightly positive or even negative relationships with the positive word love helps disguise the miasma of alienation and disconnection in modern societies. Similarly, defining shame narrowly, as only disgrace shame, helps mask disconnection. Since this latter idea is not obvious, it requires elaboration.

Suppose that just as fear signals danger of bodily harm, and grief signals loss, shame signals apartness, the opposite of empathic union. In modern societies, since empathic union is infrequent, we can hide that fact. Instead of saying that we were embarrassed, we say “It was an awkward moment for me.” It was the moment that was awkward (projection), not me that was embarrassed (denial). There are literally hundreds of ways of disappearing emotions like this.

As already indicated, to discuss emotions in a way that doesn’t further confuse the issue, it is first necessary to define the ones that you use. Following Helen Lewis, I propose a single meaning definition of both shame and pride. Pride is the feeling that is generated by closeness (empathic union), and shame is a signal of threat to the bond (Lewis 1971), a threat to empathic union. This definition broadens the meaning of shame to include everyday feelings of apartness, not just crises of disgrace.

A definition of shame this broad suggests that it is an everyday presence in almost all social situations, or at least those involved anticipate its possibility. Schooling, for example, is a vale of shame. The student who does poorly may be thought of by self and others as stupid. But it’s a no-win situation, because the student who does well may shame the other students, or at least threaten his/her bond with them. Schools and most other gatherings are haunted by shame or the anticipation of shame. This idea allows us to understand how anyone who is alienated and shamed for a long period of their life may be driven to complete withdrawal or extreme violence. The current usage that hides alienation and shame keeps us from understanding this process.

In English especially, there is a vast supply of words that can be used as alternatives to the s-word (Retzinger 1995). She lists more than a hundred euphemisms that may stand for shame, under six headings:

Alienated: rejected, dumped, deserted, etc.

Confused: blank, empty, hollow, etc.

Ridiculous: foolish, silly, funny, etc.

Inadequate: powerless, weak, insecure, etc.

Uncomfortable: restless, tense, anxious, etc.

Hurt: offended, upset, wounded, etc.

The broadening use of fear and anxiety seems to be another way of disguising shame. To say that one fears rejection or to use a term like social anxiety is to mask the common everyday occurrence of shame and embarrassment.

We can also disguise the shameful pain of rejection by masking it with anger or withdrawal and silence, as suggested below. Similarly, the negative version of pride can

be used to mask a defense against shame as too much pride. Studies of stigma and of indignities, even though these words signify shame, seldom take note of the underlying emotion, concentrating instead on thoughts and behavior.

Apologies suggest another instance of the masking of shame with another emotion. The ritual formula for an apology in the English language is to say that you are sorry. But the word sorry (grief) serves to mask the more crucial emotion of shame. "I'm ashamed of what I did" is a more potent apology than the conventional "I'm sorry." (Miller 1996).

The process of industrialization and urbanization has been influencing spoken English longer than any other language, since it began first in England. It seems that modernization has led to the downplaying of emotions and relationships in spoken English to a greater degree than in any other language, in favor of emphasis on thought and individualism. As this process continues, the emotional/relational world seems to be vanishing from awareness in English speaking countries, and to a somewhat lesser degree, in other Western societies. It seems to me that this banishment is the main reason that we have not yet discovered the origins of individual and collective violence, and the means to conquer it.

Isolation and Feeling Traps

A theory of violence might require a way of explaining the extraordinary, indeed unlimited energy that goes into violence in modern societies. In this section, two kinds of recursive loops will be considered: a loop of rejection/isolation on the one hand, and a shame/anger loop, a feeling trap (Lewis 1971), on the other. The idea of a rejection/isolation loop is a much simpler matter than feeling traps. It seems obvious that being rejected by a group leads toward isolation, and that the more isolated, the more likely further rejection. This process is more social than psychological, although it is related to the shame-based loop, because both rejection and isolation are causes of shame in themselves.

There is one complexity about isolation that needs to be considered. Some of the shootings discussed below were committed by two persons, not one. One might fairly say that in these cases, the perpetrators were not completely isolated, since they at least had each other. This issue will be discussed below by considering a second kind of alienation other than isolation that has been called engulfment or fusion. It can be argued that the pairs of shooters were just as alienated as the isolated ones, but in the engulfed mode of alienation.

The part played by emotions in violence may be much more complex. Here I propose that it is based on shame, but the kind of shame that goes unnoticed and unmentioned. Helen B. Lewis, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, used a systematic method (Gottschalk and Glaser 1969) to locate emotion indicators in transcripts of psychotherapy sessions (Lewis 1971). She found that shame/embarrassment was by far the most frequent emotion, occurring more than all the other emotions together.

Lewis also found that these frequent occurrences were virtually never mentioned by patient or therapist. In the transcripts when other emotions occur, such as sadness, fear, or anger, they may be referred to by either patient or therapist or both. But in the many, many instances of shame/embarrassment/humiliation, this emotion was referred to only a few times. She called the instances that were not referred to "unacknowledged shame."

She went on to note that when shame occurs but is not acknowledged, it can lead to an intense response, a "feeling trap:" one becomes ashamed of one's feelings in such a way that leads to further emotion. Since normal emotions are extremely brief in duration, a few seconds, Lewis's idea of a feeling trap opens up a whole new area of exploration. Emotions that persist over time have been a puzzle for researchers, since normal emotions function only as brief signals.

The particular trap that Lewis described in great detail involved shame/anger sequences. One becomes instantly angry when ashamed, and ashamed that one is angry. She called the result "humiliated fury." She shows many word-by-word instances of episodes in which unacknowledged shame is followed by either hostility toward the therapist or withdrawal. In her examples of the latter, withdrawal takes the form of depression. She refers to the shame/anger/withdrawal sequence as shame and anger "short circuited into depression" (1971, p. 431 and passim). In a later chapter (The Role of Shame in Depression over the Lifespan, 1987, pp. 29-49), Lewis reviewed many studies by other authors using various measures that showed strong correlations between shame and depression.

Emotion Spirals

Lewis's idea of humiliated fury as a feeling trap might be a first step toward a theory of the emotional origins of extreme violence. Since none of the therapy sessions she studied contained even a hint of physical aggression, she didn't consider the kind of feeling traps that could result in violent aggression, on the one hand, or long lasting total withdrawal (as in clinical depression).

Lewis described feeling traps as emotion sequences. They involve at most three steps, as in the case of the shame/anger sequence short-circuited into depression. It will be necessary, however, to develop a model of feeling traps that can go beyond three steps, toward infinity. Such a process would be a doomsday machine of interpersonal and inter-group withdrawal or violence. It is possible that like nuclear fission, the combination of isolation and denial of shame can lead to self-perpetuating loops that generate either complete withdrawal or extreme violence.

It may be that there are some emotion sequences that are recursive to the point that there is no natural limit to their length and intensity. People who blush easily have told me that they tend to become embarrassed that they are blushing, leading to more intense blushing, and so on. The actor Ian Holm reported that at one point during a live performance when he forgot his lines, he became embarrassed, realized he was blushing, which embarrassed him further, ending up paralyzed in the fetal position. He had to be carried from the stage.

This feeling trap would not be a shame/anger sequence, but rather shame/shame: being ashamed that you are ashamed, etc.

Recursive shame-based sequences, whether shame about anger, shame about fear, or shame about shame, need not stop after a few steps. They can spiral out of control. Perhaps collective panics such as those that take place under the threat of fire or other emergencies are caused by shame/fear spirals, one's own fear and that of others reflecting back and forth can cause still more fear, leading to a recursive loop. Although Lewis didn't consider the possibility, depression might be a result not only of a shame/anger spiral, but also shame/shame. Judging from her own transcriptions, withdrawal after unacknowledged shame seems to be much more frequent than hostility toward the therapist.

It is possible that the shame/anger spiral, humiliated fury, might be a basic cause of violence to the extent that it loops back upon itself without limit. A person or group caught up both in an alienation loop and in a shame/anger spiral might be so out of control as to be oblivious to all else, whether moral imperatives or danger to self or to one's group.

Feeling Traps and Alienation in Shooters

The idea of isolation and shame/anger spirals seems to fit most of the recorded cases of shooting sprees: the shooters were not only isolated but also may have been in unacknowledged shame states. In her book Rampage (2004), the social scientist Katherine Newman analyzed 25 school shootings that took place in the U.S. between 1974 and 2002. The 27 shooters all had been marginalized in their schools. That is, they had been harassed and ostracized to the point that they were completely alienated. Although Newman did not often mention shame or shaming, her descriptions suggest that the shooters may have been in a state of unacknowledged shame prior to their rampage.

A rampage that occurred after the publication of Newman's book (Santa Barbara News-Press, March 25, 2005), suggests both reasons and clues for unacknowledged shame. At the Red Lake Senior High School, in Minnesota, Jeff Weise killed 7 people and himself. He was a very obese (6 feet, 250 lbs.) 16-year-old, whose father had committed suicide ten years earlier. His mother, driving drunk, was brain damaged in an accident in 1999. According to Jeff's online postings, since her accident, she had been beating him mercilessly, but he never stood up to her.

In another posting, he stated "I have friends, but I'm basically a loner in a group of loners. Most of my friends don't know the real me. I've never shared my past with anyone, and I've never talked about it with anyone. I'm excluded from anything and everything they do, I'm never invited, I don't even know why they consider me a friend or I them..."

This boy seems to have been without a single bond, rejected continually and relentlessly by everyone around him, including his mother and his so-called friends. It is little wonder

that his writing contains many clear indications of shame; for example, "I really must be fucking worthless..."

Alienation

The idea of two types of alienation, mentioned earlier, in connection with shootings done by two persons jointly will be further considered here. The founder of family systems theory, Murray Bowen (1978), distinguished between two kinds of dysfunctional relationships, engulfment or fusion when the bond is too tight, and isolation when it is too loose. In engulfed relationships, one or both parties subordinate their own thoughts and feelings to those of the other(s). In true solidarity, each party recognizes the sovereignty of the other, but balances respect for the other's position with respect for one's own.

Elias's (Introduction, 1987) discussion of the "I-self" (isolation), the "we-self" (engulfment) and the "I-we balance" (true solidarity) makes the same point. Elias proposed a three-part typology of relationships: independence (too much social distance), interdependence (a balance between self and other), and dependence (too little social distance).

Engulfed relationships are alienated because at least one of the parties gives up vital parts of the self in order to be completely loyal to the other party. In doing so, the kinds of checks and balances that can be called upon by two independent parties are lost. My guess is that all of the pairs of shooters are alienated in this mode. One person dominates the other completely. There is little evidence one way or another to test this idea. For one thing, there are very few cases of pairs of shooters. If more evidence becomes available, this idea could be tested.

All of the school cases so far have involved shooters who were male. Female shooters are so rare that there are only a few examples, all outside of schools. Last year an employee who had been fired from the Goleta, California post office came back on a shooting spree, killing 6 employees and herself. In the U. S. overall women represent only a tiny proportion of shooters, perhaps one or two out of a hundred. Why men? Perhaps men are less likely to acknowledge shame than women, since most men learn early that emotions other than anger are not considered manly¹. In this connection, below I discuss the difficulties in attracting male students into my class on emotions/relationships.

Remedies

If the ideas of isolation/rejection and of shame/anger spirals are true, what remedy? I will mention two, one concerning emotions, the other, isolation. The first possible remedy would be to offer classes to children and young adults that encourage them to notice and

¹ There are many studies that show men to be much less involved with emotions than women. Several books on alexthymia (emotionlessness) don't discuss gender directly, but most of the case studies are men. Salminen, et al (1999), used an alexthymia scale. They found evidence for emotionlessness in almost twice as many men as women.

acknowledge their emotions. The most effective location would probably be high schools, a vale of cliques and rejection for a substantial part of the student body.

In seminars with varying titles, I have taught college freshmen in this kind of class for many years. Because my intention was to help male students particularly, I noticed early on that if the seminar title had the word emotion and/or relationship in it, male students wouldn't enroll. So I call it "Communicating." The new title picked up a few males, but not nearly enough for gender balance. Because this problem touches on central issues, I will describe two further steps I have had to take to get male involvement.

Some time after the title change, a colleague suggested a more drastic step: for registration, divide the class into two, one for men, the other for women. But arrange that the two classes meet at the same time and place. This step proved to be effective. It apparently corrects for the different amount of interest in the seminar between men and women. It might be a first option for many women, but a last option for many men.

The splitting of class registration keeps places open for the slow moving males, because the fast moving females cannot take their slots. Actually, it doesn't work perfectly, because some women sign on in the men's section. I am complaining to the registrar that this practice shouldn't be allowed, but so far to no avail. Even so, with the system as it is, the gender balance is close enough, some 8 men and 12 women or thereabouts.

The last problem I have solved in teaching the seminar concerned differences in continuing involvement in the class. Most of the men in the class liked it so long as we were discussing the student's real life dialogues. In the language that students use, emotions are seldom referred to directly. References that are made are usually indirect. As already indicated above, there are many metaphors that refer to embarrassment, such as "It was an awkward moment for me." As long as the discussion of emotions is absent or indirect, the men are involved as much as the women. The class discussions are obviously linked to learning communication skills that the men seem to appreciate.

However, when discussion turns to open references to emotions, such as anger, grief, fear, or shame/embarrassment, most of the men slow down. Although the women are vitally interested, at least half of the men grow silent. Occasionally one of the more vocal dropouts complains about what seems to him excessive attention to emotions. Most of them just withdraw. What to do to get this group involved again?

Recently I found a way. The first time a dialogue leads to direct discussion of emotion, usually almost halfway through the quarter, I give a five-minute talk about "How Emotions are Like Sex" (See, under a different title, Scheff 2006a). This sentence alone seems to remove the glaze from men's eyes. I say that the major emotions are not only signals, but also states of bodily arousal. Each of these states, I continue, has a climax or orgasm. For example, crying can be the orgasm for grief. In the two classes where I have tried this tactic, it has drawn the recalcitrant men back into discussion. I believe that these classes are now as beneficial to men as they are to women.

Alienated Students

Learning to identify and acknowledge one's emotions is only half the problem. The other half concerns the extreme alienation, especially in high school, of those who are not accepted and may be ridiculed and/or bullied by mainstream students. One approach would be to encourage these students to organize their own club, an anti-clique clique. Students who feel rejected by mainstream students could join forces. Perhaps they could use a name like The Outrider Club, or some less revealing title. To the extent that such clubs were organized, extreme isolation of marginal students might be lessened.

A possible effect of the emotion classes might also help in two different ways, if only indirectly. The mainstream students who benefit from the class learn to identify and acknowledge their own shame and humiliation, as well as other vulnerable emotions, like grief and fear. This change might make them more hesitant to humiliate others. Another way is that a few students make new friends the class. I know only because it is a question asked in the official course evaluation form. From past experience with other mainstream courses, and from complaints I hear from students, making new friends at college seems almost impossible. Most students who complete 4 years still have friends only from high school.

However, to actually change the atmosphere in schools, many mainstream students would have to take the classes, a tall order. I have been teaching such a class for many years at UCSB; it always gets rave reviews from students. But being quite small (20-30), it reaches only a tiny proportion of the student body. The suggestions made here are only a first step to what might be a long struggle.

Conclusion

This note has described an emotional/relational process that might be the cause of individual rampages. Shooters seem to be persons that are both extremely alienated and also have completely suppressed their experience of shame/embarrassment/humiliation. This combination may generate a machine of self-perpetuating loops of social isolation and of shame/anger. This process could be the doomsday machine referred to above, the social-emotional equivalent of nuclear fission. If there is no intervention, this process can lead to complete withdrawal or acts of violent aggression against others and/or self.

Two suggestions were made that might decrease violent aggression. On the one hand, a high school class could teach students how to identify and acknowledge their emotions, and on the other, encouraging outcast students to form a club of their own, to decrease their extreme isolation. Even if these two steps in combination led to fewer rampages, further ideas will be needed.

One last thought. It seems to me that rampages occur at the collective level also, in the form of gratuitous assaults, genocides and wars. The differences that divided the countries that fought World War I might have been easily negotiated, had there been last

minute negotiations to avoid war. But there weren't. Historians have so far been unable to explain the causes of that war.

In my book on the politics of revenge (1994), I proposed that social scientists have been looking in the wrong places. The basic cause of the war, I argued, was not economic or about *real politic*, but emotional/relational. The German and French people were caught up in alienation and shame/anger spirals. The French people, particularly, had experienced their defeat by the Germans in 1871 as a humiliation that must be avenged. The French leaders plotted a war for over 40 years, including a secret understanding with Russia for the purpose of exacting revenge on the Germans.

With only a few exceptions, my book has not been received graciously by the WWI experts in history and political science. It seems to me that they are caught up in the denial of the importance of the emotional/relational world, assuming that causes lie in the material world, or in thoughts and beliefs. They share this denial with most of the members of modern societies, lay and expert alike, as already discussed above (see also Scheff 1990; 1994; 1997; 2006; Scheff and Retzinger 1991).

The current Iraq war also seems like a rampage occasioned, at least in part, by humiliation. The motivation of the leaders who launched the war is more complex than that, but even for them the war can be seen as partly motivated by revenge. Rather than acknowledge the shame caused by 9/11 happening on their watch, and apologize, they masked it with an attack on a nation that played no part. Like all rampage shooters, their victims are mere bystanders.

Perhaps the crucial question is not about the leaders, but the public. Why have they been completely passive about a war that is obviously fraudulent, and for which they must pay with their earnings, and some with their lives? It is possible that the only thing they have to gain is continuing to mask their fear, grief, and humiliation with anger and violent aggression committed in their name. Needless to say, this is only a hypothesis, like all the others proposed here. Given the current world situation, further exploration and study is urgently needed.

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