The role and meaning of shame in the process of abandoning crime

[…] The most closely guarded secret of men prone to violent behavior, a secret which took me many years to learn, because it is so well guarded. They would rather die than reveal it. There is no exaggeration in this statement, since many of them actually choose death so that it remains a secret. They hide their secret so intensely because it is very embarrassing for them, and shame makes it all the more necessary for them to keep it. The secret is that they are ashamed of themselves, ashamed constantly and invariably in such trivial matters that this triviality alone makes them even more ashamed of the fact that it fills them with shame, so that they never admit what is the source of this shame. And why are they so ashamed of being ashamed? Because nothing is as embarrassing to them as admitting to feeling shame. They often conceal this secret behind a defensive mask of audacity, boastfulness, arrogance, “masculinity”, self-satisfaction or calculated indifference […]

(Gilligan, 2001, p. 122).

Abstract: In psychology, it is assumed that shame is an emotion that plays an important role in the social development of the individual, the development of self-control mechanisms and the shaping of self-image. As Kurtz emphasizes, experiencing shame is an experience of revealing itself not only to others, but also to yourself. Therefore, conscious shame has the characteristics of reintegrating and restoring ties. He draws attention to this in his theory of crime, shame and reintegration of J. Braithwaite, where he argues that the lowest crime is where shame and guilt play the greatest role. In order for shame to work, a special kind is needed: a reintegration shame. It makes it possible to understand evil, but it does not exclude people from the community and does not exclude people – thus creates a much better perspective for criminal justice as well as for the quality of life of individuals and the
whole community. Thus, shame can become an important factor in the process of abandoning crime.

**Keywords:** Shame, the process of abandoning crime.

The process of “renunciation of criminality” refers to the abandonment of actions as a result of some external or internal circumstances, therefore it is defined as a kind of “end point” in which criminal behavior is put to an end. M. Muskala reviewed the definition of “desistance”. Meisenhelder treats this approach as a successful break with a previously developed and consistently recognized pattern of criminal behavior. Whereas J.H. Laub and R.J. Sampson treat it as a causal process that supports the abandonment of criminal behavior. Referring to D. Matza’s considerations, they emphasize that instead of treating crime as a constant feature of an individual and thinking in the category of criminal vs. non-criminal, it would be worthwhile to perceive deviation as something to which an individual simply sometimes returns at certain times in life. R. LeBlanc and M. Loeber presented a fuller picture of the process of renunciation of criminal behavior, who depicted it as a result of four subprocesses:

1. Exemption in which there is a reduction in the frequency of offences committed before abandonment of crime.
2. De-escalation – criminal behavior ceases but is replaced by other anti-social activities.
3. Reaching the upper limit, which means to remain at or below a certain level of criminal behavior without escalating into more serious crimes.
4. Specialization, which is an expression of the limitation of the types of crime committed.

Increasingly, the process of renunciation is defined as a dynamic, multi-faceted process experienced by those working towards a return to normality. In view of the fact that it is difficult to completely renounce crime, this renunciation, as a specific state (the absence of crime), may replace the progress made by an individual at different stages of the process. This progress is understood as a kind of transition from high to lower rate of activity or from more harmful forms of anti-social behavior to less harmful. According to S. Marun, this processual context of withdrawal can be seen at the moment of maintaining behaviors free from crime, even at the moment of difficult life experiences. J. Fagan was the first to see the need for a dynamic approach to the process of abandoning crime, distinguishing two components, which include the process of re-education of the frequency and brutality of violent behaviors, after which the “abandonment of crime” appears. This is an approach that emphasizes the importance of a “transition” and not the state of noncompliance itself, also emphasized by the aforementioned J.H. Laub and R.J. Sampson. They distinguished between cessation and withdrawal. Ces-
sation is the moment when the individual stops the activity and withdrawal is a causal process supporting the cessation of crime (as cited in: Muskała, 2016, p. 135–163).

Of course, there are many different theories attempting to explain the process of renunciation of crime, but in this paper the author bases her analysis on one of the three adopted perspectives—narrative/internal perspective. It emphasizes first and foremost the “person—that is, the whole and subjectivity of the individual”, which means that the experience leading up to the withdrawal is not necessarily universal and can often be controlled by the individual. As S. Marun emphasizes, in order to understand a criminal (and not only crime), one needs to know their personal history, as the way in which each of us perceives our own history is not only important and interesting because of what it says about our personality and background, but also because this subjective autobiography shapes our future choices and behaviors. It is worth mentioning what J.H. Laub and RJ. Sampson emphasize in their analysis that a full explanation should cover both structural and subjective factors. But first of all, one should concentrate on the fact that the withdrawal is not necessarily conscious or intentional—it is rather a result of a specific “secondary system”. In the publications showing the process of renunciation of crime at the subjective level, the most frequently discussed issues are those related to the feeling of hope, self-efficacy, alternative identity, as well as the sense of shame, whose role and significance in the process of renouncing crime I shall try to present in the further part of the paper.

**Shame – review of definitions**

In Polish, the term “shame” is defined as an unpleasant, humiliating feeling caused by the awareness of one’s own or others’ shortcomings […] combined with the fear of the opinion of others (Danube, 1996, p. 1253). Psychology assumes that it is an emotion that plays an important role in the social development of the individual, the development of self-control mechanisms, as well as in the shaping of the self-image, which at the same time shows the enormous potential of the category of shame in explaining the process of upbringing, especially since the tendency to experience this emotion is largely dependent on the quality of the social interactions in which the individual participated, especially before reaching maturity. If we assume that upbringing is a conscious, targeted pedagogical activity—aimed at achieving relatively constant effects in the personality of the pupil (Rubacha, 2011, p. 21–23), then even more so these upbringing activities should influence the individual’s tendency to experience shame¹ (Gilbert, 2007, p. 283–309), and

¹ An equally important emotion that is of significance in the process of upbringing is guilt, but in modern psychology the terms: “shame” and “guilt” are considered separate emotions. However,
consequently the development of the pupil’s social competences, self-control mechanisms and self-image.

In psychology, shame is described as a strong emotion, focusing attention on the self and the “others”, assuming that the self is rejected by the “others” (Adamczyk, 2017, pp. 420–434). Shame is therefore a highly aversive experience, and its specific feature is a lack of self-respect, a general sense of incompetence, a lack of self-esteem, a sense of being degraded, denigrated and humiliated. S. Tomkins (Tomkins, 1963, p. 118), referring to shame, used terms such as: “soul disease:” or “inner torment” to emphasize its character. H. Lewis (Lewis, 1971, p. 198), on the other hand, emphasized that a person experiencing shame feels as if their “self was about to die”.

What is shame and how does it occur?

In psychology, several concepts have been developed to explain the functions of shame, stressing that shame is a social emotion, strongly connected with the realization of the aspiration to accept and maintain a positive attitude towards oneself (Barrett, 1995, pp. 25–63; Gilbert, 2007; Lewis, 1981). According to the aforementioned H. Lewis, the primary function of shame is to repair strained or broken emotional bonds. Blushing as a component of the shame reaction is a peculiar sign informing others that we want to regain emotional connection with them. Therefore, the category of primary shame triggering stimuli includes all circumstances (real or imagined) indicating a threat to the existing emotional bonds. Signs of disapproval and criticism on the part of a loved one, a temporary break of emotional contact, a permanent break of an emotional relationship or a diversion of attention from the jointly performed action by a person with whom we feel emotionally connected, are natural shame-inducing factors. P. Gilbert (Gilbert, 2007, pp. 283–309) draws attention to the universal need of man to belong, to be valued by others, elected as a friend or member of a group, be a valued authority. In his opinion, shame should help to meet these needs, because it is an emotion the function of which is to warn us that we are perceived by others as negative and, as a consequence, we are threatened by rejection, exclusion or persecution. Shame is caused by information indicating that we are unattractive to others, it may arise in response to various manifestations of others’ disapproval of behavior or traits of an individual. Such a negative assessment can be expressed in the form of verbal criticism, facial expression of negative emotions or laughter. Verbal or physical aggression can be an extreme form of expressing rejection. 

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A signal of unattractiveness may also be the devotion of more attention or even favoring other people. Also, the sudden disappearance of the positive emotions that had previously been directed towards a given person is, according to P. Gilbert, a stimulus that activates shame. From each of these circumstances, this aversive experience of shame is a signal that we may be acting in an unacceptable manner, and so a continuation of this action may lead to the creation of lasting convictions in the minds of others that we are unattractive.

In psychology, shame is divided into external and internal shame. External shame is caused by the reactions of other people to an individual. It is most likely that only this kind of shame occurs in very young children (Tomkins, 1963, p. 118). In the course of the child's development and acquisition of new experiences, mental representations of shameful situations and social interactions are created. Children also acquire knowledge of a set of social criteria for acceptance of behaviors, which allows them to assess themselves, while at the same time these processes allow for the activation of shame without the participation of other people. This kind of shame, in turn, is called internal shame and occurs in two different forms. The first is the anticipative shame. Recorded information on what kind of behavior is associated with experiencing shame allows to anticipate the experience of this emotion and to stop or correct one's own actions in such a way as to minimize the risk of experiencing this emotion again. Internalized shame is the internalization of social requirements, the respect of which allows to maintain acceptance on the part of others and acceptance of oneself. Shame, as a motivation to refrain from certain behaviors that may result in loss of acceptance, becomes an important factor mediating in the process of assimilation and respect for social norms, rules and regulations in the group in which an individual operates.

The second type of internal shame is secondary shame. It can be based on mental records of previous interactions that led to the experience of the feeling of shame. Shame can be provoked as a result of associating the current behavior with the content of the memory recording of previous situations in which shame was provoked. This kind of shame can also be provoked in another way—by the previously learnt standards of social acceptance of behavior. This mechanism of internal shame activation is more complex and its key element is the attribution of the reasons for failure to implement the adopted standards (Lewis, 2005, pp. 780–797).

The adaptability of the shame response can be considered in at least two dimensions. The first one is the content aspect of the shame reaction and in this case the repertoire of shame reactions of a given individual is analyzed in terms of the type of stimuli, situation and conditions provoking this emotion. The criterion of adaptability is the adjustment of the shame reaction repertoire to the socio-cultural conditions in which the individual functions. Adaptive shame is experienced in situations where the behavior of an individual may indeed expose them to non-acceptance and rejection by others. On the other hand, reacting with shame
in situations which do not carry the risk of disapproval on the part of others and lack of shame reaction in situations when an individual violates social acceptance criteria with their behavior should be considered maladaptive.

Another dimension in which the adaptability of shame reactions can be analyzed is the quantitative aspect of experiences in this area. When analyzing the meaning of shame in the process of upbringing, one should pay attention to its aversiveness. Experiencing shame is painful, it can even be seen as a form of “punishment”, which provides the motivation to overcome such a state. If an individual has the ability to limit the intensity and duration of shame, then their aversive experience becomes a warning signal and encourages the choice of behavior that will allow the individual to maintain satisfactory and acceptance-based interpersonal relationships. Effective regulation of this emotion “builds” resistance, defined as the ability to experience shame, which in turn allows the individual to continue to act despite experiencing shame. At the same time, it is a condition for the adaptive value of this emotion in the functioning of an individual. M. Lewis stresses that overly prolonged, frequent and unregulated feeling of shame can lead to a loss of tolerance. And such intolerable shame ceases to be a warning signal, and thus interferes with the functioning of an individual. It may block various forms of individual activity (maladaptive anticipative shame) and result in excessive self-criticism (maladaptive secondary shame). Such intolerable shame is also treated as a kind of hazard to the individual, which results in building defense strategies— isolation oneself, becoming intoxicated or attacking others.

J. Gilligan in his book *Violence: Reflections on a national epidemic* presents a link between the intensity of experiencing intolerable shame and attacking other people. Intolerable shame can be the cause of violence, which becomes a way of neutralizing shame experiences.

According to H.B. Lewis, there is another very important consequence of the intolerance of this emotion, namely the limitation of the ability to consciously recognize shame. She distinguished two forms of defense against conscious experience of shame. The first is denial, which consists in the fact that the person who starts feeling shame has a difficulty with conscious identification, feeling and adequate naming of this emotion. The second form is distancing oneself. This means that in a situation when a person feels shame, they look at oneself “from the outside”, i.e. adapts various external points of view. Therefore, shame is not felt by the individual, and in the case of denial, it is not consciously recognized. The use of these mechanisms contributes to the fact that individuals lose the ability to freely experience shame and thus lose the ability to freely experience shame, thereby losing access to information that enables them to regulate their behavior in such a way as to effectively avoid losing acceptance by others.

Thus, such an unrecognized shame, whose influence on the individual’s behavior remains beyond the reach of their consciousness, is the most disruptive form. This means that shame is most destructive when we do not feel it.
The issue of shame and social control

The social control approach is one of the oldest in the field of sociology. Since its inception, the category of control has been used in attempts to describe the existence of the social order, its normative contexts and the conditions in which social life takes place. E. Durkheim, who was particularly interested in the issue of the permanence and integration of social systems, is considered the creator of this notion. Therefore, a large area of his considerations concerned the issues of social order and socially shared norms that ensure this “permanence”. Man is a creature equipped with animal instincts that contradict the requirements of social life, the function of social norms that enable the integration of social groups. With this assumption, socially needed conformism can be ensured by the existence of social control institutions, which means that where social control is stronger, conformism is stronger. Disintegration, on the other hand, is conducive to the violation of norms. In this respect, crime is the result of weakened control and man is seen as a rational being calculating profit and loss (Siemaszko 1993, pp. 202–206).

Later researchers who developed this thread stressed that very often people in a situation of weakened control do not choose to break the norms, even if this could benefit them. It turns out that the so-called internal control plays a very important role, it implies taking into account what is happening at the micro-level, which entails emphasizing the importance of emotions.

One such position was proposed by J. Braithwaite in his theory of crime, shame and reintegration. In his opinion, internal control is a social product of external control. Self-regulation can replace social control of an external factor when control is internalized due to the presence of external control in culture (Braithwaite, 1989, p. 74). Therefore, for the control to be effective, two conditions must be met: the presence of control institutions in society and their internalization by the individual. J. Braithwaite’s reflections on the importance of internalizing the principles of social control brought him closer to the problem of socialization and emotion and thus confirmed his belief that criminals could internalize the principles of social control, however those regulating different social realities. This theory seems to explain well the functioning of criminal subcultures, in which young criminals assume their criminal order as normatively binding. The combination of this observation with the theories of social stigmatization allowed us to discover the meaning and central share of shame.

Society stigmatizes an individual committing a reprehensible act and this branding— the stigma becomes gradually internalized, and the distance between a “healthy” society and the stigmatized person increases and becomes more difficult to overcome. J. Braithwaite (Braithwaite, 2004, pp. 83–99) emphasizes that emotions, especially the mechanism of feeling shame, play an extremely important role in the process of abandoning crime.
role in the processes of such stigmatization, which encourages individuals who break norms to identify with the criminal order. The stigmatizing society, however, reaches to the mechanism of the so-called disintegrating shame, which “hits” the person’s self, not the act committed. The threatened self is therefore inclined to accept a criminal identity and identification with a subculture that provides it with a positive self-image (Czykwin, 2013, p. 48).

Stigmatization provokes us to treat people as bad and it is almost eternal condemnation with all its consequences: social rejection, suspicion, difficulties with re-adaptation, breaking old bonds, lack of new ones. Meanwhile, there is a mechanism of reintegrative shaming. J. Braithwaite juxtaposes this mechanism with stigmatization, which specializes in traditional justice. Theoretically one is convicted for an act, but with the condemnation accompanying the establishment of guilt is not of the act, but the person who committed it (Platek, 2005, pp. 101–103).

As a consequence, it is more likely that a person’s self is not violated, thus making it more difficult for a person to assume a criminal identity. In this sense, there is also a positive function of shame: those shamed in this way might not feel threatened in their central definition of self, and therefore more inclined to change and adapt their behavior to the generally accepted norms, since society continues to accept and include them as its full members.

Thus J. Braithwaite emphasizes that the shame that makes it possible to understand wrongdoing, but does not exclude a person from society, therefore it creates much better prospects for both the criminal justice system and the quality of life of individuals and the whole society. And yet exclusion, marginalizing of an individual, results in a break with the system of values and norms that the observance of which we would like to encourage.

References


