

The Battered Woman and Shame: An Emotional and Physical Experience

What kind of an emotion of fear would be left if the feeling neither of quickened heart-beats nor of shallow breathing, neither of trembling lips nor of weakened limbs, neither of goose-flesh or visceral stirrings, were present, it is quite impossible for me to think. Can one fancy the state of rage and picture no ebullition in the chest, no flushing of the face, no dilation of the nostrils, no clenching of the teeth, no impulse to vigorous action, but in their stead limp muscles, calm breathing, and a placid face? (William James qtd. in Damasio 129)

The contention that the brain and body are separate has long been contested. Theorists such as Antonio Damasio and Michel Foucault postulate that the relationship between the mind and the body are connected rather than separate. This close connection results in an intimate relationship between the external environment and internal environment, reason and emotion, pain and the soul. Damasio states that “the body, as represented by the brain, may constitute the indispensable frame of reference for the neural processes that we experience as the mind” (xvi). This paper will first discuss how the brain and body are related and cannot be separated. Taking this theory into consideration, the second part of this paper will explore how physical beatings cause the battered woman to experience various emotions including the emotion of shame. I will argue that shame is a particularly painful emotion which causes the battered woman to blame herself and label herself as “stupid” and “foolish.” I will also argue that shame is actually a very social emotion in the sense that it doesn’t only cause the battered woman to think of herself as stupid and foolish, but causes her to believe that others see her in this light as well. Finally, I will contend that viewing herself as stupid and foolish and believing that others view her in this light causes the abused woman to hide and conceal herself proving that “the body...is an essential part of the

circuitry of thought and social judgment” (Lakritz 2). In other words, proving that the body and the mind are more connected than we may believe.

In *Kits, Cats, Sacks, and Uncertainty: How the Brain's Basic Structure Poses Problems for Love*, Lewis, Amini, and Lannon examine the evolution of the human brain which they argue is comprised of three distinct sub-brains: the oldest or reptilian brain responsible for basic bodily functions such as breathing and swallowing; the limbic brain which houses emotions; and the neocortex, the “newest” brain which has “ballooned in to massive proportions” in humans. The neocortex houses abilities such as the ability to speak, write, plan, abstract, perceive, and reason (20-27). The authors postulate that while the reptilian, limbic, and neocortex differ in function, the separation between the three is not clear cut; rather, “the lines between them, like dust and dawn, are more shaded transitions than surgical demarcations” (31). In other words, Lewis and his colleagues argue that there is a deep connection between feeling, emotion, and reasoning:

The scientist and the artist both speak to the turmoil that comes from having a triune brain. A person cannot direct his emotional life in the way he bids his motor system to reach for a cup. He cannot will himself to *want* the right thing, or to *love* the right person, or to *be* happy after a disappointment, or even to be happy in happy times...Emotional life can be influenced, but it cannot be commanded (33).

The contention that a person cannot will himself to feel a certain way is important as it demonstrates the deep connectedness of the body and the mind.

Antonio Damasio in *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* also contends that the body and the brain are not separate. Rather, he believes that “a feeling is the momentary view of that body landscape” (xv). Damasio continues by theorizing that:

Emotion is the combination of *mental evaluative process*, simple or complex, with *dispositional responses to that process*, mostly toward the body proper, resulting in an emotional body state, but also toward the brain itself (neurotransmitter nuclei in brain stem), resulting in additional mental change (139).

Damasio believes that the body is used as a yardstick, a frame of reference for emotions. He believes that “our most refined thoughts and best actions, our greatest joys and deepest sorrows, use the body as a yardstick” (xvi). In other words, the experience of emotion and feeling is rooted in what your body experiences (145).

Michael Foucault in *The Spectacle of the Scaffold* examines medieval torture practices and argues that the process of torturing someone wasn't so much about harming that person's body. Instead, Foucault argues that the process of torturing was actually a process of obtaining truth and consequently, displaying guilt:

Beneath an apparently determined, impatient search for truth, one finds in classical torture the regulated mechanism of an ordeal: a physical challenge that must define the truth; if the patient is guilty, the pains that it imposes are not unjust; but it is also a mark of exculpation if he is innocent. In the practice of torture, pain, confrontation and truth were bound together: they worked together on the patient's body. The search for truth through judicial torture was certainly a way of obtaining evidence, the most serious of all—the confession of the guilty person; but it was also the battle, and this victory of one adversary over the other, that ‘produced’ truth according to ritual (41).

The ritualistic manner in which torture was inflicted on a man was not only a practice of causing pain; it was a practice in revealing the truth. The body, therefore, was a vehicle for obtaining a confession.

Later, in Foucault's *The Body of the Condemned*, he examines the "disappearance of torture as public spectacle" (7) and how the penal system has now moved from torturing the body to torturing the soul (16). David Morgan concurs with Foucault's assessment of pain. He believes that pain cannot simply be defined as physical punishment on the body. Rather, pain that is inflicted on the body is experienced by the mind and soul as well:

Pain is always more than a sensory signal of injury, dysfunction or disease. The intensity and significance of what we feel is affected by emotion and memory, by the anticipation of continuing distress, by anxiety, anger and resentment, by ominous fears and future hopes. Severe and persistent pain assaults not just the integrity of the body; it disrupts relations with others and the self. In Elaine Scarry's apt phrase, the 'sheer aversiveness' of pain chaotically violates language, identity and coherent thought: pain, as she says, 'unmakes our world.' (314).

Similarly, Lynne Arnault postulates that torture is not just about pain, but about the victim losing their identity, their sense of self:

What is transpiring when torture takes place...is not just a torturer producing blood and gore, but a victim undergoing the destruction (or near destruction) of meaning, the loss of dignity and agency, and the fragmentation and disintegration of subjectivity. The torture victim's agony, in other words, encompasses much more than the sensations or materiality of physical pain: a blow is not just a blow (160).

In other words, physical pain is not just about the pain *per say*; it's about disintegrating the soul, disintegrating the person.

Lewis and his colleagues theorize that there is a deep connection between the reptilian brain and the newer neocortex via the limbic brain. Antonio Damasio believes that changes in

your body are connected with emotional changes while Foucault, Morgan, and Arnault all argue that when pain is inflicted on the body, the brain is affected as well. What all these theories have in common is the contention that the body and mind are deeply connected; that it's highly improbable that someone who is experiencing physical pain isn't also experiencing emotional pain. It's also important to note that one who experiences emotional pain can experience physical pain. Helen Baker argues that "it has been show [that]...emotions can produce effects of power on and through the bodies of individuals" (abstract). The argument that the body and the brain are interconnected is important and brings me to the second part of this paper - the plight of the battered woman.

The abused woman, I believe, is not suffering so much due to her physical pain but is suffering because of the effects these physical beatings have on her soul, on her sense of self.

Arnault touches upon this when she theorizes that:

Severe, chronic battering produces profound deformations in consciousness, identity, agency, and connection with others [and that] during a beating, almost by definition, the battered women's point of view, interests, and needs count for nothing: she does not do, she is done to [and eventually] she loses a sense of having a meaningful world (161).

Thus, an abuser isn't only inflicting physical pain, but he is taking away a part of the woman's identity. Arnault concludes that "battering has the power to annihilate the victim's self as well as the world" (161).

The deep connection between the body and mind, reason and emotion, pain and soul, only partially explains the emotional state of the battered woman. I believe we need to examine this emotional state to really understand the plight of an abused woman - the state of shame.

Ben-Ze'ev believes that "in shame one thinks of oneself, as a bad person, not simply as someone

who did a bad thing" (512) and that "more than other emotions, shame expresses our deepest values and commitments" (514). Buchbinder believes that "shame...traps the individual in a feeling of irreversible failure and worthlessness" (3) and that:

Shame has also been described as a major factor in maintaining the secret of being abused. The victim's sense of shame is enhanced by a sense of inadequacy aroused on the realization that abuse symbolizes the victim's public failure in achieving intimate, romantic, and familial deals and dreams (4).

In other words, shame is an immensely powerful emotion that when felt, can make a person feel inadequate, worthless, and like a failure. Indeed, Ben-Ze'ev postulates that "shame is an intensely painful experience" (516). He contends that shame is often associated with fear and anxiety and that sometimes, those who experience shame often lose their integrity and their ability to function properly (525). Eli Buchbinder in *Battered Women's Entrapment in Shame: A Phenomenological Study* postulates that shame is viewed as one of the most "profound and long-lasting adverse effects of physical and emotional abuse" (4).

One such adverse effect is the battered woman's tendency to self-blame and to label herself as "stupid" and "foolish. In a *Fool to Keep Staying: Battered Women Labeling Themselves Stupid as an Expression of Gendered Shame*, Viveka Enander postulates that:

Shame is of special interest in the analysis of battered women's sense of stupidity, as abuse, subordination, and stigmatization have been described as shame inducing, and the sense of stupidity has been conceptualized as a shame marker (19).

I believe the tendency for the battered woman to label herself as stupid is related to Ben-Ze'ev's theory that "the basic situations eliciting shame among women are those related to physical attractiveness and failure in interpersonal relationships" (514). In other words, the failed

romantic relationship has elicited a sense shame and failure for the battered woman. The battered woman blames this failure on herself; she also judges herself and deems herself worthless and stupid (Enander 7). Enander contends that “stupid is a word with profoundly negative meaning and connotations; it implied being at fault, blameworthy, irrational, or simply unintelligent” (7).

Not only does the battered woman label herself as stupid, but she believes that others view her in this light as well. Enander contends that “shame reveals truth of oneself” (19). Enander believes that in the end, shame is an extremely social emotion because “shame feeling” is extremely social. In other words, shame isn’t so much about what you think of yourself, but what you believe others think of you (19). Indeed, Ben-Ze’ev believes that one can experience shame even if there is no audience and that “the audience can be oneself” (513). Shame causes the woman to self-reject herself which often leads to her feeling rejected by others. This sense of rejection then leads to the battered woman feeling helpless, defeated, inferior, vulnerable, lost, and paralyzed (Buchpinder 3-4). Shame becomes a very social emotion because it eats at a woman’s sense of security and her self-esteem, making it hard for her to maintain her other relationships (Buchpinder 14).

Finally, shame is an emotion that the battered woman experiences both emotionally and physically. For example, when an abused woman experiences shame, she tends to go into hiding. Ben-Ze’ev believes that one way to cope with shame is to remove oneself from the shaming situation:

In light of the global negative evaluation of the self in shame, there is a need to hide or cover oneself – to avoid others seeing us...Indeed, hiding is a very typical behavior in shame which is often expressed in a shrinking of the body, as though to disappear from the eyes of the self or the other (512).

Baker also believes that the effects of shame on the battered woman include:

Isolation, hiding, and embarrassment, concealment of violence, humiliation and low self-esteem [and that] typically the women experienced themselves physically hiding themselves and their bodies in their homes away from public view, due to fear of violent reprisals (159).

Baker concludes that “secrecy and concealment therefore were tangible effects of the self-regulatory practice of shame for many of the women” (159). What happens is that the battered woman is alone with her shame – she hides herself emotionally and physically – concealing herself from others; embarrassed by her stupidity and foolishness.

This need to hide and conceal oneself is one of the more interesting effects of shame as it harkens back to the assertion that the body and brain are connected. One can see how Damasio’s theory that “the essence of a feeling may not be elusive mental quality attached to an object, but rather the direct perception of a specific landscape: that of the body” (xiv) can be applicable here. In other words, when the battered woman is abused physically, she is affected emotionally, experiencing the painful emotion of shame. Shame, in turn, causes her to feel worthless, humiliated, and stupid. So embarrassed by her situation, the battered woman sees no way out so she ends up concealing her body, hiding herself from others, from the world. In summary, the battering on a woman’s body causes the woman to not only feel physical pain but emotional pain as well. This emotional pain usually manifests itself in the form of shame and this experience with shame, in turn, causes the abused woman to hide her body. It’s fitting that the cycle of battering begins and ends with the body.

One cannot speak about physical pain without taking into consideration emotional pain. Damasio theorizes that feeling is what happens when the body experiences changes (145). He

explains that one cannot fool oneself more than we can fool others when we only smile politely (149). In other words, one cannot “trick” the mind into feeling something when the body is feeling something entirely different. This close connection between the body and the mind is evident in the case of the battered woman. The emotional ramifications the abused woman experiences due to her physical beatings manifest itself in the form of shame. Baker’s abstract in *The Significance of Shame in the Lives of Women Who Experience Male Violence* includes the following thesis:

Recently there has been recognition of the cultural politics of emotion, that is, the ways in which emotions might impact upon individual life experiences. Significantly, it has been shown how emotions can produce effects of power on and through the bodies of individuals... This article... argues that the lives of women who experience male violence cannot be fully understood without reference to the ways in which shame effects those experiences.

In other words, the emotion of shame is so powerful; it ends up influencing a battered woman’s entire life experience.

Shame is an immensely painful emotion, influencing the battered women’s self-image (Buchpinder 5); causing the battered woman to feel self-conscious, insecure, and ashamed. As a result “they become unable to define themselves to others and focus instead on their yearning to overcome shame” (Buchpinder 14). Yet, the battered woman cannot overcome it. She negatively judges herself, labeling herself as stupid. Stupid is an extremely powerful word – profoundly negative and blameworthy (Enander 7) and has social ramifications as the battered woman also believes that the outside world also sees her as a “fool.” Socially, therefore, the battered women cannot cope. Arnault argues that:

As she grows increasingly silent or as language ceases to have meaning for her, her world contracts...because a voice is an important-sometimes source of self-extension, nearly losing the ability to speak or having one's voice silenced or appropriated by the batterer means that the perimeter of the severely battered women's world shrinks until it becomes coterminous with the edges of her body (161).

Taking Arnault's argument into consideration, one can see how the emotion of shame manifests itself physically - causing the battered woman to hide and conceal herself. Baker supports this argument, adding that shame has both physical and emotional repercussions:

The battered woman is alone with her shame, usually concealed from others; yet, it often leaks beyond the boundaries of the self and violates her inner sense of security. In this sense, shame is a hostile emotion on home grounds (13).

Foucault believed that "the soul is the effect and instruction of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (30). The battered woman, therefore, doesn't just have a battered body, she has a battered soul.

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