

The dynamics of shaming in an e-mail discussion group

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"Creating a false impression is the modern nightmare. Reputation is the modern purgatory. The more a society thinks of itself as democratic, the more reputation matters in it and the more fear of other people's criticism, however petty, becomes obsessive..."

Theodore Zeldin (1994), *An Intimate History of Humanity*.

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Shame and guilt

Guilt has been extensively theorised in the literature of analysis and psychotherapy, but shame was largely ignored until about twenty years ago, since when a substantial body of writing has emerged. It takes time for such work to enter the general theoretical understanding of practitioners, and I suggest that most practitioners have a better theoretical understanding of guilt and its phenomena than they have of shame.

However, in common with the general public, most therapists have an excellent practical understanding of shame. By way of illustration, consider the attempts to impeach the American presidents, Nixon and Clinton. Nixon was forced to resign when it became clear that there was sufficient evidence to convict him of serious wrongdoing. The central question was not Nixon's character, but his actions. He was guilty of acts which the public would not tolerate, and at the 1976 presidential elections the electorate punished his party and his successor, who had pardoned him.

Clinton was certainly guilty of lying and therefore technically impeachable, but the public judgement was that he lied, unsuccessfully, to avoid public humiliation and not to conceal criminal actions. It was accepted as appropriate that his character flaws should be publicly revealed, exposing him to deep shame, but in the 1998 mid-term elections the electorate made a remarkably sophisticated judgement. They punished the Republicans for trying to use impeachment against a man who was, at worst, a sleaze, but no criminal.

Public discussion of social control tends to focus on guilt – offence, accusation, justice, punishment. But shame is a more pervasive and potent vehicle of social control than guilt ever can be. Nixon never acknowledged his guilt, even though punished and pardoned. One can't help but think that, doing it over again, he would act as before but take greater care to destroy the evidence. Viewing Clinton's pained and painful apology to his family – painful because it is so easy to identify with shame – it is not hard to believe he truly regretted his affair with Lewinsky, and not just getting caught. Whether he might do it again is less clear.

Shame is a powerful vehicle for social control because it is an affect generated and modified in our interactions with others. It is associated with judgements of inferiority, and is aroused when we are reminded that the embodied self does not measure up to a socially-negotiated ideal self. This can be quite unassociated with any judgement of moral worth – one can be ashamed of bed-wetting, of a bald patch, of cellulite or sagging breasts or an erection, and take whatever steps one can to conceal them from the gaze of others.

We are deeply sensitised to the occasions of shame, for ourselves and others, and the rules of etiquette and face-saving work to preserve our social systems against the disruptive effects of shame when the gap between embodied and ideal selves threatens to be revealed inadvertently. Conversely, the threat to reveal this gap and subject the other to shame is a powerful tool in expert hands; and we are all experts.

Threats to the public face can arise so swiftly and be handled so automatically that they pass in a moment, almost unnoticed, and only a careful record of gestures, glances, phrasing and vocal inflections allows us to interpret an interaction as an

instance of social control based on shaming. In this paper I will analyse a shaming interaction in an e-mail group, partly because it is inherently interesting to discover familiar group processes in a novel setting, and partly because the text medium of the email group is so congenial to the hermeneutic endeavour; generating an interpretable text from a face-to-face group is intensely laborious and subject to serious error and omissions, even when one has the best audio-visual equipment available. With e-mail, the work is done for you.

The e-mail group

In some respects, WebGroup is a typical e-mail group. A new member joins by sending a “subscribe” message to a server address. They receive an automatic message requesting confirmation and upon confirming they receive the “masthead”, an introductory message outlining the goals of the group and explaining the mechanics of sending messages, or “posts”, accessing archives, cancelling one’s subscription, getting technical help etc.

From that time, any message the new member sends to the group address will be automatically distributed to all members and they will receive copies of all messages sent to the group. Every message bears the sender’s e-mail address and the name under which they choose to post, so it is possible for members to post directly to each other (“back-channel”) without the group’s knowledge. Every message also bears a subject heading, and it is normal to reply to a message using the same heading, using a new heading to initiate a new topic. A series of messages bearing the same heading is called a “thread”.

WebGroup’s masthead states that:

“This is a list dedicated to an examination of online group dynamics: the purpose will be to examine the process itself of writing through listservers -- perceptions of the other participants, the dynamics of flame wars, power and persuasion, what is effective communication and why....

This will ideally be done in an atmosphere of mutual support and trust but it -- emphatically -- will not be group psychotherapy.

The purpose of the list will be the search for dynamic principles of online mailing lists in general.”

Membership fluctuates over time, but normally WebGroup has about 80 subscribers, about a dozen of whom post messages regularly, and about seven of these would be long-term members, active in the group for most of its life. It had been operating for four years when this incident occurred. I had been an active member for over a year at the time, although I did not post during this exchange.

The group had experienced repeated outbreaks of conflict over the previous year. Mostly this involved new members who became very active in the group immediately upon joining, sending many posts – sometimes several per day – and getting into conflict with older members. These conflict would become more and more intense and entangled, ending when the new member abruptly unsubscribed. More recently, a disagreement had broken out between two long-term members in which each accused the other of misrepresentation and hostility. Other members had intervened in the attempt to resolve the conflict, unsuccessfully, and this dispute and the attempts at resolution were continuing in a thread under the subject heading of “Estrangement”.

In the midst of this, the following post arrived:

“Re: Estrangement

Hello All,

I'm new to this List. I subscribed several days ago, and am just now getting the chance to post. I've read some posts, through the threads, but seems I'm coming in on the middle of a conversation well into the discussion.

Without having to verbally "reinvent the wheel" for me -- can anyone give me a 1-3 sentence summary or abstract about what you're are talking about? I know the Subject heading says "Estrangement", but more specifically than that....?

Looking forward to this List and hope to be an asset.

Regards,

Fergus”

The post was innocuous enough, although the request was perhaps irritating to members engaged in a running dispute about who said that and what they meant by it. But a response came immediately:

“Subject: Re: Estrangement

Fergus,

Just a suggestion but, trying to join the discussion on WEBGROUP without first spending a few months reading the posts can be dangerous to ones health. Sometimes they can make mince meat out of newbies.

Consider yourself warned!

Adios amigo,

Bob Carter”

A couple of definitions put this in context. “Newbie” refers either to someone new to an e-mail list or , more generally, new to the Internet. Although it can be a simple descriptor, it frequently has pejorative connotations of naivety or ignorance. “Lurking” is the practice of subscribing to a list without posting; despite its common language connotations, only a newbie would object to being called a lurker, since it is accepted that people active on some lists would lurk on several others. At this stage Bob was practically a lurker himself, having sent only a couple of very brief posts in the preceding months, and he is advising Fergus to lurk for a bit longer. Sent back-channel, this could be construed as an attempt at deviance reduction – a genuine friendly warning – but sent publicly it can be read as the “friendly warning” of dramaturgic convention, a barely-disguised threat. The public “friendly warning” is also an attack on face, and the recipient may be goaded into deviance amplification to save face.

Fergus replied to Bob within the hour:

Subject: Re: Estrangement

Bob,

Oh, I don't know about that. Been a PhD in the profession since 1967 -- about ready to retire. Have reputation of eating for breakfast and spitting out for lunch any body who assumes I'm a "newbie".

Since you told me that, I could just jump in like I always do, make verbal mincemeat and do a little "genital-surgery" to make sure everybody measures the same.

Can do it in my sleep by now. People scatter like ants after a lawnmower just plowed over 'em.

Thanks for the warning. I'm assuming you're referring to "them" and not you.

LOL

Regards,

Fergus

"LOL" is e-mail jargon for "Laughing Out Loud". Fergus is dismissing Bob's warning with amusement, while showing that he can talk the talk. However, the violent, hyper-masculine imagery of his text is well outside the norms of the group. Rapid, aggressive response to any potential slight had been a feature of the behaviour of the series of new members who had battled with the group in the previous year, and the group had pondered the best way to respond to these newcomers; in net jargon they were referred to as "gators", being likened to an alligator walking into a room, chomping on everything in sight, and then walking out.. Gators are common on the internet, heartily disliked but little understood, and now old WebGroup members suspected they had another gator.

Lucille, a long-term member, posted a response to Fergus' request for a summary, saying "Hey, someone has set us a task." Subsequently she wrote that her feeling towards Fergus was mildly contemptuous, which was also true for other long-termers, but she was not inclined to intervene. Harold, the list-owner (member charged with managing list business) was the first established member to address Fergus directly:

"Subject: Re: Estrangement

Fergus:

Actually, our reputation for violence is overblown. [*Reproving Bob*]

> Oh, I don't know about that. Been a PhD in the
> profession since 1967

What profession might that be?

BTW, I'm Harold. I drive a fork lift. [*Ironic response to Fergus' status claims*]

> -- about ready to retire. Have reputation of eating for
> breakfast and spitting out for lunch any body who
> assumes I'm a "newbie".

Do you do that often? [*The implication is that Fergus' violent language is unacceptable*]

- > Without having to verbally "reinvent the wheel" for me
- > -- can anyone give me a 1-3 sentence summary or
- > abstract about what you're are talking about? I know
- > the Subject heading says "Estrangement", but more
- > specifically than that....?

The subject line "Estrangement" refers to an earlier post in which one member of the group was feeling separated

from the mood and ambience of the group. (Because this list concerns interaction more than information, we seldom use meaningful subject lines.)

Currently the thread concerns the nature of obstacles that stand in the way of the group examining its own processes, and whether use of a facilitator is necessary, advisable and possible.

--

Harold

This is a sophisticated intervention, recalling and responding to Fergus' initial request, mildly shaming him for his intemperate response to Bob, signalling to the rest of the group that Fergus will not be permitted to disrupt it.

The next post is from another long-termer, Geoffrey, and is a lengthy historical piece about the relations between computer technicians and computer users. Fergus is now in something of a posting frenzy, and responds to both Harold and Geoffrey, but even before these responses are sent another from Bob arrives:

“Subject: Re: Estrangement

Fergus,

You've been warned!

Bob”

Fergus responds to Harold and Geoffrey:

“Subject: Re: Estrangement

Harold,

Thanks much for the reply to bring me 'up to speed' so the speak, with the group discussion.

I appreciate it.

I got a chuckle out of parts of your reply - you've got a great sense of humor!

...re my comment on' eating for breakfast, and spitting out at lunch'- was just a tongue- in-cheek old saying from my old neighborhood. (*Minimising the possible offence.*)

Thanks again. Have a great day.

Fergus”

“Subject: Re: historical perspective

Geoffrey,

Boy, that's quite a good page of important info. I ran off several copies -- hope you don't mind if I give copy to couple of other folks. Just yesterday, the tech who works at my server asked me (when I phoned him with a question about my email pref's acting up) he asked me about my 'client'. Didn't have the foggiest idea what he was talking about. He emailed me back and said "client" would be say, Outlook Express" in my case.

I thought the last part of your Historical Perspective piece was so interesting. ..ie: Slave/Master and the Client/Server. I'm glad somebody explained it that way!

Thanks again.

Kindest regards,

Fergus”

He suspects that his violent response to “newbie” has gone down badly, and is attempting to regain lost ground. He attempts to pass off Bob’s renewed warning, but by now he doesn’t know whether to ingratiate, play it cool or go on the attack:

“Subject: Re: Estrangement

Bob,

uh-oh.

[NOW what have I gotten myself into...??]

heh, heh ;-)

Thanks for reply,

Fergus”

Then comes a post from Rex, a long-termer who regularly re-posts the masthead information as a service to members, usually under the subject heading of “Masthead”, accompanied by the date. This time he uses the heading “Some newbies may wonder what the masthead looks like.” Of this change he later writes:

... as I examine the memory of my motives for including "newbie" in the subject line, I don't recall any intention to demean Fergus or anyone else. I only recall trying to select an appropriate term to describe someone who has not been here long enough to have seen a masthead.

Having said that, I suppose I'm fully capable of using an emotionally laden term to probe the mettle of someone who decries it.

Seeing the word "newbie", Fergus explodes:

Subject: Re: Some newbies may wonder what the masthead looks like.

Webgroup List,

I have a personal requirement I go by (this is speaking just for myself, only) that I never join, nor remain a member of any List which fails to include in it's expected Netiquette, the fact that "Newbie" is considered worse than flaming.

I belong to many, many Lists. A lot of them are professional, some allow anyone to join, etc. But one thing almost 99percent of them have in common, is they do **not** allow (at least not for long) anyone referring to "Newbies".

I am unsubscribing from WEBGROUP for this reason.

Fergus”

Fergus’ first post was sent at 2:53 pm on a Thursday and the final one at 9:58 am the following day. This is a remarkably short time, and it appears there was no backchannel discussion between other members although this normally occurred when an aggressive deviant became prominent in the group. On those earlier occasions the angry departure of the deviant usually led to some self-questioning within the group; Fergus’ departure was quickly dismissed with a few contemptuous comments and some mild puzzlement at the intensity of his response to being called a newbie. One member hinted at a script-like quality in the decision to leave, adding a quote: “balanced like this, a feather pushed me off...”

After Fergus’ departure, the conflict between the two long-term members flared up again and ended shortly after when one of them left the group.

Interpretations:

Scapegoating or shaming?

The role of the scapegoat is to attract and absorb group hostility into a stable configuration. Group and scapegoat cooperate to divert hostility from a less stable configuration, for example hostility towards the leader, which is felt to threaten the continued existence of the group. The departure of earlier gator-scapegoats left WebGroup wearied but united by a successful defence of the group.

Fergus’ first post, asking for explanation of the “Estrangement” subject heading, was in response to and quoted from a post from Lucille which ended with the following paragraph:

“My disturbance is probably due to what someone (?who) pointed out is the first time there has been prolonged conflict within the 'inner circle', rather than us ganging up against an incomer.”

Seen as a response to this comparatively plain statement about group scapegoating, the interplay between Fergus and Bob has a script-like quality, as if they are colluding in establishing Fergus as a scapegoat. But scapegoating operates through a guilt/ hostility /punishment nexus, and the nexus in this instance is shame/ contempt/ rejection. Fergus' threats are directed against anyone who might look down on him, who might act as if their genitals are bigger or their tenure in the group more valuable. There are many other examples in WebGroup's history of scapegoating; this not one, simply because the threatened group hostility does not eventuate.

The offence of the scapegoat is against the group's object-seeking. The scapegoat is installed as the obstacle, fit for attack because he stands in the way of the group's desire. The shamed one offends the group's narcissism; he does not represent the impossibility of getting what one wants in this world, but the impossibility of being whom one wants to be. He represents the failure of the project to construct an ideal self, and the inevitability of a spoiled identity for the embodied self. It is to this question of identity that I now turn.

Constructed identity, spoiled identity

Group membership serves many purposes, psychological, physical, economic and so on; but a critical psychological function of membership is the maintenance of a stable, livable self-representation through the mirroring provided by the group. Reading each post as a self-presentation seeking some kind of confirmation from the group, Fergus' posts follow a coherent line: polite, wanting to be informed, wanting to be an asset. But if a stranger walks in on an intra-group conflict and publicly asks to be told what's going on, no amount of politeness will make the inquiry welcome. Bob's response implicitly claims the status of old hand, and warns Fergus against naively provoking the wrath of the group. Fergus promptly demands to be seen as an experienced traveller of the Net, a man who can take care of himself and who is not to be trifled with. His patronising tone to Bob, especially when contrasted to his respectful, even sycophantic response to Harold and Geoffrey, suggests that he has quickly recognised Bob as a low-status member.

Narcissistic rage and the attempt to maintain face through a joking tone struggle together in the "PhD in the profession" post. It is a revealing post, and Harold's response, together with later comments by other members, suggests that from this point Fergus is seen as one who talks the talk but can't walk the walk. Fergus has unintentionally advertised himself as vulnerable to a shaming attack – all the group have to do is make it plain they don't take him at his own valuation, that he will not be accorded the group identity he seeks but a spoiled one.

New members of e-mail groups habitually look for prompt and personal responses to their posts, and often express disappointment when this does not happen. Absence of response may be interpreted as being ignored, and taken as a slight, even when no slight is intended. The non-response of Geoffrey and Harold to Fergus' overtures is hard to see as a slight in the context of WebGroup's norms and the short time-frame involved, but if indeed Fergus is seeking acceptance from the group and has become anxious about it, the sequence of friendly overtures, no direct response and another post referring to newbies may have been the feather that pushed him off.

Whether one calls it shame-proneness or hypersensitivity to narcissistic injury, an alertness to the possibility of slight or of being awarded a spoiled identity is partly a product of one's own history, above all to an early-formed sense of bodily inferiority, but it is also heightened in particular circumstances, appearing amongst other guises as stage fright and unusual anxiety about joining groups. In the present instance, a relatively mild shaming, aimed at toning down a newcomer's response, led instead to rage and flight, which are both common consequences of high-intensity shame.

Concerning methodology

To what extent can insights generated from text-based groups be reapplied in face-to-face groups? Some differences which one would expect to make a difference include:

Indistinct group boundaries – in WebGroup and many other e-mail groups the exact size and composition of the group is not known to most members, and a large,

unknown proportion of the group will normally not post. We might expect to find some of the phenomena which distinguish large groups from small groups to occur in an exaggerated form.

Interaction is drastically slowed down and most communications are far more carefully worded than is the case face-to-face. The opportunity for self-censoring is far greater.

Communication operates in limited channels – latency and frequency of response communicate something, but the face-to-face group's rich array of channels – paralinguistic, kinesic, proxemic, facial etc. – are reduced only to the verbal. This substantially increases uncertainty, for example, as to how one's actions are being received and evaluated.

If we can make allowances for these factors and satisfy ourselves that test-based groups do in many respects develop the same dynamics as face-to-face groups, then group dynamic research has acquired a remarkable and powerful new tool. In principle, the researcher can gather a complete record of the group's interaction with very little effort, a real-world limitation which has hampered group research in the past. This will particularly assist in the development of more sophisticated and transparent hermeneutic methodologies for developing group theory.