CHAPTER ONE

Shame and jealousy

Panic in the classroom

A homosexual man in psychoanalytic psychotherapy was reflecting upon his residual feelings of anxiety about revealing his sexual orientation. He suddenly recalled an incident at school when he was age twelve. At that time, he had begun to notice a good-looking boy in another class and would often steal a secret glance at him. One day he found himself in the same class as this boy and suddenly believed he overheard him making some reference to his looking. Overwhelmed with shame and panic, and terrified the whole class would discover his secret, he fled from the room.

An anxious manager

A middle manager was required periodically to make business presentations to groups of staff. Mostly he managed this reasonably competently. However, during a period when he was feeling quite depressed he failed to make adequate preparations and also, to his

horror, found that he was unable to ad lib and think on his feet in the way he usually had been able to. On one disastrous occasion he found himself completely lost for words, panicking, unable to think, sweating profusely, feeling about to faint—and basically suffering all the features of a panic attack. He felt profoundly humiliated and devastatingly shamed by his own failure and his vision of the surprised and concerned looks on the faces of his audience. Following this, he felt increasingly anxious about any prospect of having to make any kind of public presentation. Eventually he became completely disabled by shame anxiety.

A sexual assault

A young adolescent girl was cornered by a gang of slightly older teenagers. A youth in the group raped her in front of the others. None attempted to help her. Some laughed and jeered and encouraged the rapist. Following this, the girl became increasingly withdrawn, rarely leaving her house. She was haunted, not only by the horror of the assault itself, but also by the image of all the faces looking on at her without concern or empathy and by the thought of the story of her humiliation being spread maliciously around amongst all the youth of the small town. Some months later she had a psychotic breakdown, believing that she had been impregnated by the devil. The accumulating shame had reached intolerable levels. Eventually she made a serious suicide attempt. Shame can be lethal.

Violent responses to shame

A man who had experienced repeated scorn and humiliation from his mother, involving physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, was frequently in danger of falling into states of severely toxic shame. With his girlfriend he would often insist that she reassure him about the quality of his physical, mental, and sexual attributes, becoming enraged if she did not successfully support his fragile self-esteem and sense of masculinity. Sometimes, he would speak scornfully of other people, particularly older women, describing them as "pathetic" and would demand that his girlfriend agree with him. If she hesitated, he would launch into a tirade about how *she* was "pathetic", and on some occasions would terrify her with his violence. It was clear that this shame-ridden man was continually projecting his own self-image as "pathetic" into women representing his abusive mother (i.e. trying to send the shame back where it came from) and demanding his girlfriend's support in this projection. If she failed to comply, then he would attempt to force *her*, through his violence and intimidation to represent and experience the quality of "pathetic". Shame can be very dangerous.

The Hungarian psychoanalyst, Grunberger, gives the following example:

> Some years ago there was an account in Canadian and other newspapers of how a drunkard behaved badly in a pub, and the owner asked him to leave; in other words, he was "treated like dirt". Afterwards he came back armed with a Molotov cocktail and "blew up the joint". There were no survivors. This can be explained as his desire to make his narcissistic injury null and void by causing all those who were witnesses to disappear. [Grunberger, 1989, p. 37]

A vision of shame

A male student visited the flat of his new girlfriend, with whom he was very much in love, clutching a bunch of flowers for his beloved. Finding the door open, he ventured in. Through the open door to the bedroom, he saw her having sex with an old boyfriend. Engrossed in their pleasure, neither of the lovers were aware of his presence as he stood transfixed in horrified fascination. After a few seconds, he quickly but quietly retreated, feeling utterly mortified with shame and embarrassment. Later feelings of humiliation and anger developed. All that night his heart was pounding with such force that he feared his chest would burst. Because of these violent feelings of shame he could not bring himself to contact her. Indeed he wished, in part, that he might never see her again since he could not imagine how he could confront her with his observations without the two of them being consumed with shame and embarrassment. Shame can powerfully inhibit communication of what is most important in a relationship.

Pedro and Natalie

Some years ago I had the interesting opportunity to work with two people, Pedro and Natalie, who sought help as a couple, presenting with particular problems of shame and jealousy. Pedro clearly loved Natalie deeply, enjoying all forms of contact and interaction with her. He delighted in hearing her talk of her experiences, her thoughts, and feelings. In turn he found joy in sharing with her his most vulnerable hopes and dreams. She clearly loved him too. However, for reasons of fears of feeling trapped and suffocated in relationships, derived from her childhood experiences with an invasive and controlling mother, she would be compulsively promiscuous. She felt shame and guilt about this, but was convinced that her sexual adventures were necessary for her psychic survival—representing for her an affirmation of her autonomy and sense of agency and efficacy. In order not to hurt Pedro, she would try to conceal these from him—but they would usually emerge, partly because Pedro was very perceptive and attuned to her, and partly because her feelings of guilt would lead her to betray herself and reveal her deceit.

Pedro described his feelings and reactions at such times of discovery of her infidelities. He would experience a violent visceral response—pain in his stomach, his heart pounding, shivering and sweating—as his body was clearly flooded with adrenalin. He would also experience a sense of shock, accompanied by anxiety, anger, and panic. He would feel confused and disoriented. In addition he would feel shame. His sense of shame would be to do with feeling inadequate as a man, feeling humiliated by the thought of another man having penetrated the woman he loved, perhaps giving her more pleasure than he managed to, feeling weak and in need of reassurance that he was still loved—and, above all, shame to do with having these strong reactions.[1] This constellation of shame, jealousy, and panic would be exacerbated by Natalie's tendency to attempt to ward off Pedro's suspicions of her infidelities by denying and invalidating his intuitions and dismissing them as his jealous *fantasies*. Her well-meaning effort to avoid his encounter with a painful reality would add to the shocking impact of his eventual discoveries of the truth. Pedro would then feel utterly betrayed and tricked. Their previous intimacy would suddenly

appear to him quite fraudulent. The love she had appeared to give him would seem devalued, since Pedro now imagined that she would give the same affection to any of her lovers. Natalie would become distraught at his reactions, feeling terribly guilty at his distress. She would endeavour to reassure him of her love in every way she could. Usually, after a week or two of experiencing her devoted affection and care, Pedro would forgive her again and begin once more to enjoy their time with each other—until the next episode of her infidelity. This painful cycle would repeat endlessly.

Another feature of Pedro's reactions would be that when he learned of her unfaithfulness he would have an odd sensation that she had suddenly become a stranger to him. He would feel that somehow he did not know her. It seems to be a fundamental human need to feel special and chosen—and much of the time this was indeed how Pedro felt in relation to Natalie. However, on discovering her extra-relational sexual liaisons, he would each time feel suddenly in the position of the excluded one—barred access to her intimacy that she experienced with an other—and barred from knowledge of it.

At times Natalie's involvements with other men would go further than brief sexual encounters. She would occasionally develop preoccupations with particular men, wanting continuing contact and, for a limited period, feeling she was in love. After a few weeks this would pass and her affections would again return to Pedro. During such times Pedro would sense her preoccupation and would feel intense anguish because he knew her mind was not open to his emotional communications. Although Natalie would not entirely ignore him, he would experience a subtle blankness in her response to him, as if his messages did not quite penetrate her mind but bounced off its surface. He would complain she was like a brick wall. Such remarks would puzzle her. Pedro would himself withdraw when he found Natalie in such a state, feeling a combination of shame and despair. His attempts to communicate with her seemed to him futile.

The painful cycle of interaction would be further driven by Natalie's experience of feeling her inner privacy to be agonizingly violated by Pedro's wishes to know of both her desires and her behaviour in relation to other men. This led Natalie to feel even more strongly that the integrity of her core self required that she be

free to pursue other liaisons outside her main relationship with Pedro, which she would otherwise experience as unbearably suffocating. She would become even more withdrawn in response to his inquiries. Whilst Pedro tried his best to understand her need for inner space, privacy, and freedom, he experienced difficulty in containing his jealousy, further fuelled by Natalie's resistance to disclosing her extra-relational fantasies and behaviours. Moreover, he felt shame over his jealousy, no matter how inevitable and understandable this might be. He felt that his possessiveness drove Natalie to her promiscuity. When in the grip of this spiralling negative interaction, Pedro began to feel very inadequate. Natalie, in turn, felt immense shame and guilt that her compulsive behaviour caused Pedro such distress. It was in their despair at this repeating pattern of pain that this couple, who clearly loved each other dearly, sought psychotherapeutic help. Fortunately, their commitment to communication and their increasing empathy with each other's experience and position provided considerable relief and the negative interaction gradually decreased in intensity; Natalie began to experience less of a threat to her core self, and consequently was less driven to secret promiscuity, with the result that Pedro's jealousy and shame were less and less provoked.

Natalie's mother appeared to have been highly invasive and controlling, insisting that her daughter have no secrets from her. She would frequently demand to know Natalie's thoughts and feelings. Natalie's father was ejected by her mother when Natalie was aged five. This added to Natalie's image of her mother as terrifyingly controlling and powerful. Her fundamental "internal working model" of attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1980) was that she could be controlled and suffocated. Whilst she longed for intimacy and reliable love, she also desperately needed to feel free. This was a matter of the protection of her core sense of self and its need for autonomy. Pedro's mother had not been so invasive, but he had experienced her, at times, as alarmingly distant and withdrawn. He recalled how she would often appear deeply preoccupied, such that she would be physically but not emotionally present. During such periods Pedro's attempts to communicate his emotional needs would seem to be ignored or misunderstood by his mother. However, Pedro learned as a child that his mother's responsiveness to him would return after a period of time. The nature of her preoccupation and withdrawal was not clear to Pedro. He wondered whether she had experienced episodes of depression or whether she had had an affair during part of his childhood. Although his father had been present, he had, affectively, not been very available to Pedro, tending to spend his leisure hours at the pub or slumped in front of the television.

Themes of shame and jealousy with "Natalie and Pedro"

Jealousy and shame are intimately entwined in the tragic interaction between Pedro and Natalie. She was defending against the threat of violation of her core self—a catastrophe involving ultimate exposure of her inner privacy and surrender to control by an other. Such violation of the core self can be experienced as a rape of the mind—indeed of the soul—and as damaging, potentially, as a physical rape. The emotional response to violation is shame. Natalie's ensuing promiscuity evoked jealousy in Pedro, also giving rise to his feelings of shame associated with a sense of inadequacy. His spiral of shame gathered its own momentum as he then felt shame about his own reactions of jealousy, anger, and shame (i.e. shame about shame). As Natalie withdrew from him and he experienced her as an emotional "brick wall", he felt his attempts at communication of his feelings were unwelcome—and again his response was shame. An associated experience was his perception of Natalie as a "stranger" when her infidelities became apparent; at such times he felt he did not know how to relate to her—he felt he did not *know* her and felt awkward, as one might with a stranger. During periods of loving intimacy with Natalie, Pedro would experience a joyful sense of being special to her, of being her "chosen one" and he would bask in the warmth of her affection. Then each time one of her infidelities became apparent, Pedro would feel violently ejected from his place of intimacy with her—thrown into a profoundly painful place of exclusion and shame—and would feel that *he* was the stranger, looking on with anguished envy at the union of his beloved with an other. In turn, Natalie would feel shamefully exposed whenever her sexual adventures and affairs came to light. As each struggled with their particular forms of shame, they found the only relief lay in communication,

whereby they could again and again re-find their empathy for one another. They found that the cure for shame is empathy.

Some of Natalie's shame was to do with feeling violated. Pedro's was associated with feeling excluded or rejected, and ejected from his place of feeling "special" and "chosen". Both of them experienced shame about certain feelings and behaviours being exposed to the anticipated disapproval of the other. What do these various forms of shame have in common? They are all to do with vulnerability in the expression of emotional need in relation to the other person. In each instance the bond of empathy is breached—the experience is of falling out of attunement and into a place of affective loneliness. The experience of subject relating to subject is lost, perhaps abruptly and with emotional violence. In its place is the sense of being dismissed as a subject and of becoming an object to the other.

The positive function of the lie

As Natalie revealed more about her way of being and relating, it became apparent that in many ways she had tended to structure her life around lies and deception. Despite her clear wish to be truthful, and her professed valuing of honesty, she was in certain respects a compulsive liar. Although lies and lying have, in general, highly negative connotations, being seen as forms of manic manipulation and exploitation of others, it was possible to discern a more benign meaning in Natalie's case. For her, the capacity to lie was an expression of her autonomy and privacy. Having experienced her mother as so invasive and controlling, the discovery that it was possible to lie and conceal truth from her mother was of vital significance. It was an affirmation of her separateness from her mother and an indication of her own sense of agency. If she could lie successfully, it must mean that she had a private core self—wherein she could discover her own hidden desire, fantasy, and direction. In her lies, Natalie would feel triumphant, celebrating her secret freedom. Conversely, when her lies were exposed she would feel shame, her inner privacy violated; she would feel deflated and depressed. However, Natalie's lies also caused her great anxiety in her adult relationships. Her wish to be able to have a relationship of

honest intimacy with Pedro conflicted fundamentally with the fact that her pervasive pattern was to structure her life on lies and concealment. Each person in her life would know an aspect of her, but none would know all of her—although each would tend to feel she was presenting a truthful account of herself. She was terrified of the leakage between the compartmentalized areas of her life—although she also longed to be released from her self-imposed web of lies. The more that Natalie sought honesty in her relationship with Pedro the greater her anxiety and sense of crisis. Part of the therapeutic work was for Natalie to discover that honesty did not have to mean violation of her core self—and to realize that whilst she certainly had the capacity to lie and conceal successfully, she could *choose* to be truthful.

Whilst for Natalie the lie had a positive function, of affirming privacy and autonomy, its negative aspect is often more apparent. Through the lie, the child discovers his or her separateness from the mother. Whilst facilitating the child's process of separation–individuation, this also evokes a sense of being cut off from mother's love, according to the formula, "if mother finds out about my lie she will not love me". The proliferation of the lie means a continual anxiety of being "found out". Moreover, the compulsive liar also fails to be truthful to him/herself—and ultimately the authentic expression of the core self is fundamentally compromised. The lie is, paradoxically, a failed attempt at preservation of truth—the truth of the core self.

It begins with a smile

> Wouldn't it be awful if the child looked into the mirror and saw nothing! [a patient quoted by Winnicott, 1967, p. 136]

In the beginning, mother and baby are normally exquisitely attuned to one another, engaging in highly synchronized "conversations" of voice and facial expression. Analysis of videorecorded material shows that the speed of communicative mirroring of facial expression is extremely fast—responsiveness at fractions of a second—indicating that mother and baby are processing each other's emotional messages far faster than conscious awareness

makes possible (Hietanen *et al.*, 1998; Schore, 2000). However, if the mother deliberately presents a blank expression, her baby becomes distressed and withdraws in a manner that gives every impression of being a precursor of shame (Broucek, 1982).

If the baby smiles and the mother smiles back, the baby feels recognized and responded to. The baby finds itself in the warmth of the mother's smile.[2] Her smile means that he or she has the capacity to evoke a response—to evoke her love. This is the beginning of the baby's sense of efficacy, which I suggest is based upon the capacity to evoke an emotional response in the other (Broucek, 1979; Mollon, 1993). If there is no response—a blank face—or a response that contains no comprehension of the baby's state, then he or she feels fundamentally impotent, ineffectual, having no emotional significance.

Winnicott described the mirror role of the mother in terms of her enabling the baby to see herself. When the mother looks into the baby's eyes, what the mother "looks like is related to what she sees there", and because the mother from the beginning holds her baby in mind as a whole person, the baby who looks into the mother's face "sees himself or herself" (Winnicott, 1967, p. 131). When this necessary mirroring communication does not take place, however, such babies "look and they do not see themselves" (p. 131). Whilst there are various aspects of the structure and experience of self (Mollon, 1993), one crucial component concerns the sense of who one is for the other (originally the mother). If the early experience is of not existing as a real person for the mother, then a feeling of unreality will be inherent in the sense of self.

It is the same in adult life too. A person smiles at us—a smile of genuine affection and friendship—and we feel warmed by the energy of their love. We feel recognized and valued. If we fail to elicit a smile when we anticipate or hope for one, then we feel rejected, diminished, and aware of a drop in our emotional temperature. Our self-esteem momentarily falls. Whereas in response to the smile, we feel confident about moving forward, expecting acceptance, with the absence of the smile, or the blank face, we feel uncertain, hesitant—and in the grip of a background state of shame. Whilst we might try to ignore such subtleties of experience as we press on with the day to day tasks of life, nevertheless they are there making their mark on our emotions and

behaviour. In the case of Pedro and Natalie, Pedro would feel painfully uncertain and hesitant when Natalie was in one of her withdrawn and unresponsive states of mind.

For the baby who experiences the mother's face as responsive not to the baby, but as reflecting only her own moods and preoccupations, the consequences can be serious. Winnicott described how some babies will learn to, "study the maternal visage in an attempt to predict the mother's mood, just exactly as we all study the weather", and will draw emotional conclusions from the observations:

> The baby quickly learns to make a forecast: "Just now it is safe to forget the mother's mood and to be spontaneous, but any minute the mother's face will become fixed or her mood will dominate and my own personal needs must then be withdrawn otherwise my central self will suffer insult." [Winnicott, 1967]

In optimum early life, the small child will experience many episodes of pleasurable attunement with his or her mother. These have a very important function in regulating the child's self-esteem and reducing the propensity for shame (Schore, 1991). Inevitably, however, reality presents elements that disrupt the child's sense of oneness with the mother. Included amongst these disruptive elements are the child's own wishes to separate from the mother and assert autonomy—themes which Erikson (1950) linked with the stage of development concerned with establishing control over the anal sphincter and the discovery of a choice over whether to comply with mother's will or not during "potty training". Erikson described this phase as characterized by a tension between autonomy, on the one hand, and shame and doubt, on the other hand.

Seidler (2000) notes that situations of shame are always "envisaged", i.e. involve exposure to the gaze of others. Since our sense of self is formed in the context of relationship with others, involving the capacity to envisage oneself in the eyes of the other (G. H. Mead, 1934), it follows that shame is inherent in the formation of the self. According to Winnicott's formula, the baby's experience of self rests upon the principle "I am seen, therefore I exist." However, the gaze of the other (primarily mother) will not always be approving and loving; as well as at times not seeing the child's subjectivity, her look may be disapproving and hostile,

generating other global feelings in the small child of being "bad". The problem is that the gaze of the other, even if dysphoria-inducing, is necessary for the development of the self. Seidler (2000) comments as follows:

> If the gaze of the other is experienced not only as judgemental but as censorious, and thus as ascribing to the self bad characteristics ... the result will be an identification of the self as "bad". The urge to eliminate an other experienced as a disruptive force will then recursively weaken the self or the subject because it needs the gaze of the other as a condition of its existence. [p. 179]

The stranger, the father, and the primal scene

From the age of about eight months, the child becomes aware of "strangers" and displays withdrawal and gaze aversion (just like the "shy" adult). For the child who wishes to retain all the good elements of experience in relation to the mother and project the bad elements into the outer world, the stranger will be felt to embody all that is threatening to the oneness with mother. When it is the mother's smiling face that is sought, the unrecognized and alien face of the stranger will represent the bogey man who will destroy the child's paradise with the mother. The small child sees that the mother has some kind of relationship with the stranger, from which the child is excluded. At the same time, under the pressure of the drive for separation–individuation, the stranger may take on a fascination because he also represents the possibility of separation from the mother.

Perhaps the original stranger is the father. Certainly, as Seidler (2000) argues, the child's perception of the mother's relationship with the stranger may be a precursor of the encounter with the primal scene of the parental relationship and intercourse, from which the child is excluded. Seidler describes the child's changing desires as the perception or fantasy of the primal scene is apprehended:

> Whereas previously, unconscious union with the mother was "happiness", that happiness is now located in the "primal scene", in accordance with the logic directing that "happiness is where I am not allowed to be". [Seidler, 2000, p. 191]

With the advent of the primal scene and the Oedipal position, the child is placed in the position of the outsider:

> a stranger debarred from the union of two others permitted access to a forbidden sphere. [Seidler, 2000, p. 191]

At an earlier stage the child's concern lies with the face, the attunement of the mother's face and the unfamiliar face of the stranger, but in the Oedipal position and the fantasy of the parental primal scene the father's penis represents the "ticket of admission" to fulfilment of the wish for union with the mother. Neither gender of child will feel adequately equipped anatomically nor psychologically to engage in sexual union with the mother—a narcissistic trauma emphasized particularly by Grunberger (1989). Whilst the small child can competently engage in visual facial communication of love and desire for union or affectionate contact with the mother, the impact of the primal scene and the Oedipal situation confronts him or her with a domain of intimacy that is foreign and bewildering—and from which he or she is inherently excluded. The pain of this narcissistic injury can be profound and is universally repressed—its impact revealed only through psychoanalysis. As Grunberger notes, it is "infinitely more difficult to grasp [than oedipal rivalry] and has a tendency to resist analysis until the end" (Grunberger, 1989, p. 37). This deep injury to self-esteem and the sense of adequacy is re-evoked in later situations of adult life when a lover turns to another—as experienced by Pedro in relation to Natalie's infidelities. A novel insight by Grunberger is that the classically conceived Oedipal situation of rivalry can function as a defence against the child's deeper narcissistic injury of sexual inadequacy:

> ... I have insisted many times on the role of the Oedipal interdiction as a defence against the narcissistic injury expressed in the thought: "I am not impotent; it is the other person who is blocking the road (but when I am like him, I shall be able to marry Mother without exposing myself to the repetition of the same narcissistic injury, since I shall be an adult myself)." ... things introduce themselves differently to the girl and to the boy, if only because the narcissistic injury of the girl is less dramatic and more profound: on the one hand she can hide her inadequacy from herself or transform it into a fear of penetration; on the other hand, her injury in the form of penis

> envy may stretch across her psychosexual life in general. [Grunberger, 1989, p. 37]

Seidler notes, that from this perspective, the fear of castration, originally emphasized by Freud, can be understood as anxiety about loss of the organ that allows the participants of the primal scene to engage in a union. Sexuality, both that of the child and that of the parents is a highly disturbing and disruptive factor destroying the child's dream of endless union with the mother. Seidler summarizes the situation as follows:

> ... the oedipal situation stage of development proper is characterised by the fact that the previously intended aim of union with a person is ousted by the awareness of that person's connections with what was hitherto a stranger; this finds its symbolisation in the imago of the primal scene. The effect of this is that the child takes the place of the stranger hitherto thwarting its efforts at establishing union, and thus excluding it from the state of felicity that has obviously been realised between the other two. The child thus relates to the primal scene as a stranger. The perception of its own sexual need finds its correspondence in body shame, which through the compounding with the recognition of its own relative sexual inadequacy takes on a quality approximating that of an "experience of inferiority". [Seidler, 2000, pp. 198–199]

The child's encounter with sexuality, his or her own and that of the parents, is inherently disturbing. *Sexuality is traumatic*, as Bollas (2000) argues in his discussion of hysteria:

> ... sexuality destroys the innocence of a self and mother, transforming the prelapsarian utopia of "baba" and "mama" into the world of self and sex object, contaminating the simplicity of dependence with desire ... Sexuality-in-itself, intensified ... by the child's auto-erotic stimulations, is the agency of trauma, all by its fearsome self. [Bollas, 2000, p. 14]

Bollas argues that whilst we cannot remember directly the "sexual epiphany" at age three, it is relatively easy to remember analogous disturbance some years later. Although sexual states of mind do occur at ages seven, eight, or nine, many people tend to remember these years as relatively idyllic. Bollas describes the disturbance as puberty arrives:

> Then sometime around 10—earlier for some, later for others—bodies start changing again. With the changing shape of the body, which—however anticipated and partly welcomed—is to some extent disconcerting, comes another increase in sexual excitation. The adolescent feels assaulted by sexual ideas. Sitting in a classroom with childhood friends of old, suddenly a 13-year-old is deeply excited by another student, and finds it very hard to think about the lesson. That other student need not be in the classroom. The instinct is provocation enough for the adolescent to feel its disruptiveness whilst furtively daydreaming his or her sex objects. [Bollas, 2000, p. 17]

We might add to Bollas' account here, the considerable alarm and shame that pubertal boys can experience when erections and nocturnal emissions become frequent and unpredictable. The penis can seem literally to have taken on a life of its own, asserting its presence all too visibly even when the boy is not consciously entertaining sexual thoughts.

A woman with anorexia nervosa described the impact on her of the precocious arrival of puberty. She felt utterly confused and filled with shame at the changes in her body. None of her peers had started menstruating and developing breasts as she had. She felt overwhelmingly self-conscious and out of control. A deep sense of rage accompanied her feeling that she had been prematurely deprived of childhood. Later she completely repudiated her role as an adult sexual woman, welcoming with considerable relief the cessation of her periods and loss of her curvy body as she discovered the "time-reversing" effects of starvation. She took to reading books and magazines written for girls in early adolescence, finding comfort and reassurance in their explanations and preparations for teenage years.

Shame and the false self

Shame and false self developments are intimately entwined.

False self and failure of the Oedipal position

Many psychological problems arise from a failure to negotiate the Oedipal position as a result of the mother's gratification of the

child's fantasy of successfully excluding the rival father (Mollon, 1993). Although the child may wish to claim triumphant possession of the mother, gratification of this desire can be disastrous developmentally—resulting not only in fears of being revealed as an impostor, a child pretending to be grown-up, but also in a failure to establish secure boundaries from the mother, and consequently a continual dread of re-engulfment and loss of self-demarcation. The Oedipal "Law of the Father" (Lacan, 1977), that prohibits both mother and child from consuming each other, has been eluded. This can form part of the basis of a "false self" development since the child will be forever trying to be what the mother wants.

Seidler puts this as follows:

> Here the subject is concerned to please the vis-à-vis with a view to gratifying the regressive wish for total attunement. It will thus behave in such a way as to correspond to what it takes to be the other's preferences. The clinical situation in the treatment of such patients confirms this supposition. What is most difficult is the separation from the wish to attune and to be accepted without reserve. Such a phase of treatment is normally characterised not only by the experience of loneliness but also by despair and the irruption of the feeling of being at fault that has been so carefully fended off hitherto. Therapist and patient will come into contact with shame at a primary level, i.e. when the shame-specific wish to be recognised becomes susceptible of experience. In such cases, the incipient capacity for feeling shame is equivalent to the advent of a new dawn. Perception by the other (or in an internalised form as the subject's own judgemental function) has then reached a tolerable stage and no longer demands (subjective) self-abandonment. [Seidler, 2000, p. 180]

What Seidler seems to be pointing to here is the way in which the emergence of a more authentic self, from a position of false self concealment, is associated with shame. It is precisely the true elements of self that are felt to elicit disapproval or non-recognition. Without the Oedipal ejection from the dyadic entanglement with the mother, and the projection into the triadic space, the child may be unable to proceed along the line of separation–individuation. He or she continues to try to be the child the mother wants—the mother's phallus—rather than following his or her own developmental initiatives. This can be a fulfilment of the mother's grandiosity, where her child's function is to cast her in a favourable light. What may appear as an air of superiority in some patients with significant degrees of false self development may actually be this kind of expression of the mother's narcissism. In such a person, their own desires and initiatives, and natural exhibitionism, may be associated with much shame and anxiety, and as a result may be repressed—emerging only against great resistance in the process of analysis or psychotherapy. These difficulties are described in detail in Kohut (1971).

The shame associated with emergence from a false self position is to do with the expectation that the more authentic feelings and aspirations (the "true self") will not be recognized, understood or accepted. It is akin to emerging from behind a mask, or taking off a costume, or exposing oneself as having been a fraud or impostor. The fear is that this will be an *embarrassing* shock to the other. In general, situations of embarrassment always involve some kind of disruption of the expectations one person has of another. It follows, then, that for the person who has developed an extensive false self the more authentic aspects of self will be felt as an embarrassment. There will tend to be a continual monitoring of the presentation of "self", so as to fit in with the expectations and desires of the other. This is the basis of embarrassed self-consciousness. Shame and embarrassment arise in the jarring cracks between the expectation of the other and the actual feelings and behaviour of the self.

The person with an extensive false self development has become trapped in an image—the image of the child the mother wanted him or her to be. Instead of having felt recognized and accepted as himself, his own potential being nurtured, the child has become inhabited by the mother's fantasy. Whilst to some extent all human identities are false, insofar as we have to construct a "self" on the basis of the roles and images available in the pre-existing culture into which we are born, this process becomes more tilted in the direction of pathology when the mother's narcissism takes precedence over her concern to recognize and nurture her particular child. The more authentic self then becomes a potential embarrassment and a source of anxiety, along the lines of, "What if my mother/the world in general discovers that I am not what they assume I am—I will be greeted with horrified shock and rejection—this possibility is so terrible that I must make absolutely sure that my real self does not emerge—I must conceal it from myself".

Short trousers

A twelve-year-old boy in Britain in the 1960s, when short trousers were the norm for younger schoolboys, became increasingly embarrassed because he was the only one left in his class who had not graduated to long trousers. His mother expressed reluctance to buy him long trousers on the grounds that she did not like to see children looking too grown-up. The message from this, and other aspects of his mother's behaviour, was that she wanted her son to remain a child, without regard for his own experience, desire, and developmental need. About four-years later, the young man had managed to acquire long trousers, but he became extremely worried and embarrassed because he was increasingly needing to shave but did not have a razor or other equipment. He did not know how to bring this to his parents' attention, fearing again that his developing adult body would be a shocking disruption of his mother's image of him as a child. On the other hand he was afraid that there would come a point when the whiskers on his face would suddenly evoke an expression of horrified surprise from his mother. He did not feel he could confide in his father, who was a rather passive and distant figure, frequently the butt of his mother's criticism and scorn. In such a situation, pervaded by potential embarrassment, the embarrassment that is feared is the embarrassment of the other when their expectation is disrupted.

An alarming dream

A man in psychoanalysis was always smartly dressed and clearly concerned with his appearance and impression on others. He presented an image of a polite, intelligent and cultured gentleman. It was apparent that this very much reflected his mother's desires to have such a child. During the early stages of analysis he would tend to speak quietly and without much emotion, always listening carefully to what the analyst had to say. However, during one session he reported with some anxiety a dream in which a classical music concert was interrupted by the intrusion of a violent and scruffy vagabond who belligerently stormed the stage. This presaged an anxious period in the analysis when his more aggressive and less polite aspects began to emerge. As this process developed he experienced much shame and embarrassment.

The entertainer

Another patient, a woman, had been brought up to perform—her mother having taken every opportunity to put her on stage, despite the patient's natural shyness and dislike of excessive attention. She had developed the beginnings of a career as a dancer and singer. In the analysis she tended to present herself in entertaining ways, telling colourful narratives of her life. However, in her career she displayed a pattern of sabotaging her opportunities, initially without insight into her active and motivated role in this. It was apparent that unconsciously she wished to overthrow the role and image that her mother had foisted upon her. Later in the analysis, she began to present herself in a much more subdued way and the lively stories disappeared. Her motivation to pursue her career as a performer began to diminish. She disclosed, with some shame and embarrassment, that she was writing a novel, but was extremely anxious about the potential reactions of others if she were to show them the content. The patient's overtly "exhibitionistic" performing self was a "false self", based on her mother's desire. Behind this was a repressed "true self", expressed in the private writing—and the tentative emergence of this was associated with much shame and anxiety.

Shame emerges at moments of our deepest psychological vulnerability. Exposure to the risk of shame is inherent in one person's offer of intimacy with an other—and is a measure of the value placed upon that other. Thus the adolescent boy must balance his fear of shame, and the risk of humiliation and rejection, against the strength of his desire when he considers approaching a girl, stuttering and blushing, as he awkwardly asks her out. This is true also of the child who is willing to communicate his or her feelings and needs to the mother or father. Such willingness is not to be taken for granted. Repeated rejection, scorn or gross empathic failure, may lead to an entrenched reluctance to communicate emotional need and a persisting avoidance of intimacy in later life. Too much shame results in an unconscious decision not to risk further exposure. The "true self" goes into hiding.

Summary and conclusion

Shame and the fear of shame are amongst the most powerful of

human aversive experiences, precipitating panic, rage, and the wish to disappear—and, in extreme cases, homicide, suicide, and even psychosis. The integrity and preservation of the core self is crucial to shame. Shame arises both from violation of the self, *and* from exposure of the self when this is not met with the expected or hoped for empathy. In a context of empathy, the self and its needs can safely be exposed and expressed—but without empathy the self feels threatened. The presence of shame signals a lack of empathy—either an actual lack, or a fear of such a lack. Similarly, the cure for states of shame and humiliation is empathy—but in its absence, shame expands unchecked, becoming increasingly toxic. When in the grip of shame, the person has no empathy with him/herself—and, without the soothing words or touch of an other—hatred of the self may grow without limit.

By analogy, we might picture the core self as like a flower that can be tightly furled (withdrawn and protected), but under the impact of the warm sunlight (empathy) will unfold, radiating its colour to other living forms and inviting intercourse and fertilization. If the emotional weather is cold, unexpected or inappropriate in some way (the risk of shame), then the flower may become again enclosed upon itself.

As Seidler comments:

> Shame manifests itself when a subject in quest of attunement encounters something–someone "strange", causing it to recoil back onto itself. [Seidler, 2000, p. 320]

The young child's wishes for attunement with the mother, the enjoyment of basking in mutual love and the mirroring gaze and smile—Kohut's "gleam in the mother's eye"—is disrupted by sexuality (as well as other components of mental life that propel the child towards separation–individuation). The child's sexual desire, and his or her recognition of that of the parents, brings a disturbing and "strange" element into the infantile world. The mother is recognized as having a relationship with the father, from which the child is excluded. It is a relationship that the child does not understand, however much he or she may try to conceptualize this in terms of his own desires and phantasies. In this respect it is unlike the rivalry felt with other siblings (Mitchell, 2000). Through entry into the Oedipal position and the encounter with the primal scene, the child is cast into the place of the stranger, the outsider, the one who is excluded from the paradise of union with the mother.

However, the failure to be cast out of the dyad with the mother—a bypassing of the Oedipal position—can have a catastrophic impact on development. The child has not then been liberated by the "Law of the Father" (Lacan, 1977) and remains imprisoned in an image reflecting the mother's desire. Such derailment of the required trajectory into the triadic space may contribute considerably to pathological degrees of false self development. Aspects of self that do not fit the required image will be associated with shame because of the anticipation that these will be met with disapproval, non-recognition, or bewilderment. Only the prospect of understanding and acceptance—perhaps in psychoanalysis or in a loving relationship—can enable these to emerge and the threat of shame be faced.

Notes

1. The field of evolutionary psychology offers perspectives on both promiscuity and jealousy, showing how both may have been selected for their reproductive advantages (e.g. Buss, 2000).
2. Schore (1994, 1998) presents much developmental and neurobiological evidence that the early interactions with the mother directly affect the young child's developing brain, regulating the levels of dopamine and noradrenaline. Part of the function of the visual facial interaction between mother and infant appears to be to stimulate the child's brain and to regulate arousal. Synchronised gaze interactions generate highly pleasurable states in the infant's brain and these facilitate attachment.