

Some thoughts on shame and the cross-cultural study of emotion

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I want to start with a problem of definition: ‘emotion’. In a recent issue of *Emotion Review*, the journal’s editor, James A. Russell, drew attention to the ‘scandal’ that ‘We [emotion researchers] have no agreed upon definition of the term – *emotion* – that defines our field’ [**handout 1**]. This is a scandal that reverberates periodically through the ISRE e-mail list, where it is not uncommon to hear calls for the redefinition or even the abolition not only of the term ‘emotion’, but also of the specific emotion words of (esp.) the English language. I’ll just quote one of many recent examples. On 31 January, Ross Buck (author of a 2014 volume entitled, *Emotion, A Biosocial Synthesis*) posted the thought that emotions are natural kinds at the biological (neurophysiological) and ecological (display) levels, but ‘Emotion names are cultural phenomena: interesting but largely irrelevant in understanding emotions per se’.

I’m one of those humanities scholars who thinks that we need to take as much account as possible of the work of colleagues in social and natural sciences if we’re going to make headway in discussing subjects, such as emotion, that span our disciplines. But statements of the above sort are, to say the least, not helpful in pursuing that aim. Let’s think a little about ‘emotions per se’.

The proposal that emotions can be studied without reference to their categorization in language seems to me to misunderstand how it is that any human being, even a scientist, comes to want to understand emotion in the first place. Buck’s remark has an affinity with Paul Griffiths’ 1997 project of arriving at an account of emotion that would reflect ‘how concepts would evolve if the only aim of those using them were scientific understanding’ [**2**]. This is a project that dispenses with the ordinary language concept of emotion: according to Griffiths, that concept encompasses at least two heterogeneous categories – ‘affect programme responses’ of the sort that P. Ekman and others have called ‘basic emotions’ and ‘higher cognitive emotions’; these, according to Griffiths, ‘have different phylogenies’; the former constitute a natural kind, but the latter do not, and so they do not form a single category.

Inventories of ‘basic emotions’ vary from researcher to researcher; those that Griffiths takes from the work of Paul Ekman and calls ‘affect programme responses’ are anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, contempt, and happiness. The list was first established on the basis of allegedly universal or near-universal recognition of stereotypical (posed) facial expressions, but has been supported subsequently with reference to other criteria and mechanisms. Even if these phenomena do constitute a distinct category of responses, this is a category that differs markedly from that of ‘emotion’. If nothing else, it contains ‘surprise’, which is not by any means an automatic choice for inclusion in the latter category [3]. Surprise belongs in this list not because it is prototypically an emotion, but because it has, at least in the eyes of some observers in some cultures, a characteristic facial expression. The scientific study of surprise as a member of the category of basic emotions is constructed by the discursive practice, the culture, of a section of the scientific community in making facial expression a criterion for basicness and for emotion.

Griffiths readily accepts that the category of affect programme responses is not a category of emotion as we know it. It is a category in which membership depends on specific scientific criteria; yet the names of its members are everyday English-language terms. This raises issues that we need to explore.

A response that is likely to make most people’s lists of basic emotions or emotions *tout court* is fear. Suddenly confronted with a snake, I’ll go through the gamut of ‘affect programme’ responses. But I can be so afraid of snakes that I never go anywhere where I might see one, and thus hardly ever manifest the affect programme response. My fear might be pathologically or culturally conditioned, e.g. by the role of snakes in my religious world-view. I can also be afraid that I won’t have enough money to feed my family. I can be afraid of losing my job; of the Conservatives winning the next election [PS June 2015: they did – now I feel a whole set of different emotions]; that the UK may leave the EU. I can be afraid that you’re mistaken. I can be afraid that I’m too busy to stop for a chat. So only some fear is basic. But the relation between the non-basic forms and the prototypical, ‘affect programme’ case is not arbitrary. Even if the non-basic forms of fear do not belong to the same natural kind as ‘affect programme’ fear, the labelling of members of both groups as members of the same English-language category is motivated and explicable. There is a family resemblance between them. In Aristotelian terms, what

unites all these cases as examples of fear lies on the side of emotion investigated by the dialectician, not that investigated by the natural scientist; it is part of the λόγος of the πάθος in question (DA 403a3-b19). Affect programme responses may constitute a category in so far as they are suitable objects of certain kinds of scientific research. But in studying that category we had better not say that we are studying ‘emotion’ as such; and if we label the members of that category using the emotion-terms of natural languages (such as ‘fear’) we need to be clear that we are restricting the application of those terms, appropriating them from their ordinary range of meaning. Though the affect-programme response associated with fear may antedate the development of language, every human being who has ever felt, thought about, and labelled this response (using the relevant token in his or her native language) has thereby made it a member of a wider category, an element in an inter-related system. If we call it fear, then language, not biology, has priority. Categories just *are* functions of language, thought, and culture. Emotions are not *just* features of language and culture; but among all the other things they are, they are features of language and culture *as well*. The inclusion of more and less prototypical members in a given category, the fuzziness of category boundaries, and a lack of precision over which items do and do not belong are not special but rather everyday features of category formation [4]. What fear is, as a psychological and social category, is inevitably shaped by how it is represented in language and thought. Even as a so-called basic emotion its nature is fundamentally affected by such representations. Representations of fear as a human emotion are inextricably enmeshed in human cognition, language, and culture. This is true all the way up.

We must question the assumption that psychological categories *should* isolate only those phenomena that are amenable to scientific investigation as natural kinds. The fact that those we use on a daily basis do not do so is cause for embarrassment only if we demand something different. The absence of a single and definitive set of criteria for membership of the category ‘emotion’ is a significant feature of the phenomena under investigation, not something to be eliminated through redefinition of the phenomena and remodelling of the categories to which they belong. All the problems with the definition of ‘emotion’ in English, as well as those that are associated with the difference in extension of English ‘emotion’ and the various categories of other languages are inherent in the enterprise of studying phenomena of

this type. It is important that ‘emotion’ cannot be essentialized; the answer is not to redefine it until it can.

If we were to replace our folk categories of emotion with others more conducive to scientific understanding we should have to give up our work as students of ancient emotions, for in investigating these cultures we have no unmediated access to raw scientific data. Everything we have – even the data on body language and expression provided by the visual arts – must be interpreted in the light of the categories and representations for which our only evidence is textual and linguistic. But this is not a project that we pursue merely because we cannot treat the ancients as experimental subjects. Our concentration on linguistic categories and cultural models can stand as a reminder to researchers in other fields of the extent to which emotion research would be impoverished if it ignored historical and cultural differences in the conceptualization and categorization of the phenomena that we currently regard, with all the imprecision that the term implies, as emotions. If we can study only genuinely scientific categories then we cannot do emotion history; if we can do emotion history, then complexity of categorization within a culture and divergence of categorization among cultures is not noise to be filtered out, but an integral and important aspect of the phenomena under investigation.

II

We often find the worry that the emotion terms of language A are untranslatable into language B [5]. But this is not a problem of translation, only of definition, a recognition that words have more than one sense. The most interesting words often have many senses; but the lack of a one-word equivalent in another language doesn’t make them untranslatable. This is the issue I now want to explore, using the topic of my 1987 PhD thesis, the Greek concept of αἰδώς (shame, respect).

In the case of αἰδώς, not only do αἰδώς-terms exhibit distinct patterns of usage that correlate with distinct scripts or behavioural scenarios [6], but the distinctions that these patterns capture are often explicitly recognized by native users of the language. The verb αἰδέομαι is, from its earliest appearances in the Homeric poems, used with two kinds of personal object – people whose negative judgements you want to avoid (where we translate the verb as ‘I feel shame before’) and those whose special claim to deference you want to recognize (where it is translated ‘I

respect’). It is not the case that people always respect those whose criticisms they fear, nor is it the case that their respect for others is simply an indirect by-product of a sense of their own inferiority caused by the prospect of the other’s criticism. In other words, the ‘I respect’ sense can exclude the ‘I feel shame before’ sense and *vice versa*.

We see this quite clearly in a passage such as *Il.* 22. 104-10 [7]. Here, Hector is reflecting upon his parents’ pleas that he should come back within the walls to escape the coming confrontation with Achilles. He feels that he can’t, because of the criticism that he will face for not ordering a retreat earlier, before Achilles returned to battle and devastated the Trojan army. Though Hector endorses the criticism (he himself reflects that his recklessness has ruined his people), he certainly doesn’t respect its source – it is especially criticism of people who are of no account in his eyes that undermines his sense of himself as a good leader, precisely because those people, though ‘bad’, are also right.

We can contrast *Il.* 10. 234-9 [8]. Here, Agamemnon urges Diomedes to choose an accomplice (for a dangerous mission) on grounds of ability alone. The focus of αἰδῶς and αἰδέομαι in this passage is not the potential of the other to criticize, but the claim of the other to special status (in this case, birth and rank). The verb regularly functions in this way, denoting the positive response to the special status that another person enjoys or should enjoy in one’s own eyes; so that (e.g.) Odysseus can say that singers, on account of their gift, *deserve* the honour (τιμή) and the αἰδῶς of others (*Od.* 8. 480), Tyrtaeus can comment on the honour and αἰδῶς of which no citizen would wish to deprive a war hero (12. 39-40 W), and Theognis (253-4) can talk about receiving αἰδῶς (or not, as it happens) from his young protégé, Cynus.

So, in the way that the denominative verb, αἰδέομαι, governs two distinct kinds of accusative, the single concept, αἰδῶς, covers two distinct scenarios, one in which the subject is primarily concerned about his/her own honour and one in which he or she is primarily concerned about the honour and status of another. These are scenarios that English marks by using two distinct concepts, shame and respect, but the distinction is not just an artefact of our translations – it is there in the original Greek. It is not an admission of failure to be forced to translate αἰδῶς in two distinct ways; it would, in fact, be a failure to do otherwise, to try to maintain a univocity that

the Greek term does not possess or to maintain that the single term, αἰδώς, encompassed both ‘shame’ and ‘respect’ across the whole range of its usage.

On the other hand, though αἰδώς is a multivalent term whose usage encompasses a range of different scripts, it is nonetheless important also to see the conceptual coherence that underpins this diversity, to try to understand what it was about this family of scripts or scenarios that led the Greeks to group them under the head of one concept where we understand them in terms of several.

We see something of both the unity and the diversity of the concept of αἰδώς in an important passage of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (4. 9, 1128b10-35) [9]. By Aristotle’s time, αἰδώς not only retains all its early poetic senses and connotations – as prospective shame that inhibits discreditable conduct, as positive respect for another person, and (in a non-occurrent sense) as a valued disposition of character (a sense of honour, shame, or modesty) – it also (like its near-synonym, αἰσχύνη) has come to be used in occurrent, retrospective senses, to express shame over actions in the past. Since Aristotle’s *Ethics* is all about the established dispositions of character that develop our emotional responses in the right ways and in accordance with reason, we might expect him to find room for αἰδώς in his account. But there is a problem with this: though he recognizes that αἰδώς is regarded as a positive disposition of character, even (according to others) a virtue, he is concerned that it is also the name of an affect, a πάθος rather than a ἔξις; and though (for Aristotle) the virtues require the training and actualization of a person’s emotions, none of them is itself an emotion. Similarly, though Aristotle sees that a kind of shame that prevents a person doing wrong is a valuable emotion to have, he also recognizes that the same disposition to feel shame will kick in retrospectively as well as prospectively – and while it might be salutary to possess a disposition that can prevent us doing wrong, a disposition that causes us to feel shame when we already have done wrong is no candidate for consideration as an Aristotelian virtue – for the virtuous person does not do wrong. This is why he says that αἰδώς would be decent only on a hypothesis (‘if he were to do it, he would be ashamed’); a virtue, on the other hand, must not only be possessed, it must also be used – a disposition which, in one respect at least, must always be potential rather than actual cannot be a virtue. Aristotle, then, sees and accounts for both the whole and the parts of αἰδώς: it is dispositional, but also occurrent; prospective, but also retrospective; and it is precisely because he sees the

parts as elements of a single overarching concept that he denies that concept the status of virtue.

In combining prospective and retrospective shame, occurrent and dispositional senses, shame and respect, αἰδώς remains a single category which has no equivalent in English. But this does not make it unique or even unfamiliar. Emotion-terms which similarly unite concern for one's own honour with concern for the honour of others are reported for other languages, including Arabic [10]; and this dual focus on the status of self and other answers to something real about the interdependence of esteem and self-esteem in social interaction. In what may be a (conscious or unconscious) echo of Aristotle, the psychologist, Klaus Scherer, remarks [11]: 'Respect is a form of anticipatory shame – if I did that, I would feel ashamed, so I don't do it.' The expression needs a little unpacking, but it is correct: a proper sense of *my* worth entails a sense of the limits of my own claims to others' esteem; and the limits to those claims are in part constituted by the claims of others to *my* esteem. This is the thrust of Erving Goffman's classic account of social interaction in terms of 'face', a notion which encompasses both (a) demeanour (involving projection and protection of one's own self-image) and (b) deference (regard for the self-image of others). The Janus-like bi-directionality of 'face' is similarly recognized in Brown and Levinson's well-known development of Goffman's thesis in terms of *positive face*, i.e. the projection of the self-image that we want to see endorsed by others (and which is damaged by excessive encroachment upon the face of others), and *negative face*, i.e. freedom from others' encroachments. In this way, we see how the inextricable interdependence of self-esteem and esteem for others that is recognized in the conceptual unity of αἰδώς is also salient in sociological and sociolinguistic analyses which, while they draw their data primarily from Anglophone societies, claim wider, even universal validity.

We can pursue these questions by turning to the same general semantic field in Latin, as surveyed by Robert Kaster [12]. In Latin there are at least four terms that we would need to capture the full range of meanings of Greek αἰδώς: *reverentia* is perhaps the nearest thing to αἰδώς *qua* 'respect'; but unlike αἰδώς and like English 'respect' its focus is exclusively on the other. *Pudicitia* in a way resembles dispositional αἰδώς, but its focus is almost exclusively sexual. *Verecundia* and *pudor*, on the other hand, are more interesting. Each encompasses both self- and other-

concern; but neither is quite like αἰδώς. In *De officiis* 1. 99 [13], Cicero observes first that it is a mark of the person who cares about his own honour also to show respect (*reverentia*) towards others, before going on to distinguish two motives for limiting our own claims in the face of others'. These are justice, which restrains us from doing others harm, and *verecundia*, which is a function of a person's own concern for honour and prevents us insulting the honour of others. But copious other examples make it clear that *verecundia* is also fundamentally a matter of modesty and self-restraint, of recognizing the limits that honour and decency set upon the pursuit of self-assertion (as in Cicero's observation that you have to show more *verecundia* in praising yourself than in praising others, *Fam.* 5. 12. 8). *Verecundia*, then, is concerned with the intersection of one's own and others' honour, and it polices the limits at which an excessively self-assertive demeanour would prove insufficiently deferential; but unlike αἰδώς it does not encompass a general awareness of one's exposure to the judgements of others or a general protectiveness of one's self image; and though, like αἰδώς, it is concerned with the balance of demeanour and deference, its response to the honour of others is less direct – it *entails* a concern for others' honour, but it does not as such *express* it. Though it is possible to use locutions such as 'bound by *verecundia* towards (another person, dat.)' [14], there is no verb analogous to αἰδέομαι which means 'I feel *verecundia* towards, i.e. I respect'; and *verecundia* is not conceived of as a commodity that one can receive from others (unlike the αἰδώς that Theognis wants to get from Cynrus [8]).

Pudor (as Kaster shows with copious examples and detailed analysis) involves the prospect of seeing one's cherished self-image discredited. Because pushing one's own claims is something that *pudor* should prevent, *pudor* is also concerned with both self and others: claiming too much for oneself is disrespectful to others and dishonourable for oneself (such behaviour is prototypically *impudens*). Hence if *verecundia* covers αἰδώς (both dispositionally and occurrently) as modesty and self-restraint, *pudor* would serve to render αἰδώς as shame (both prospective and retrospective, occurrent and dispositional). The differences between *verecundia* and *pudor* lie in the fact that *verecundia* applies only to the individual's own behaviour, to what is in one's own power; *pudor* (like αἰδώς and like English 'shame') can refer to how others' behaviour reflects on us and to actions, circumstances, or states of affairs over which we have no control at all. Like αἰδώς and like shame, but unlike

verecundia, *pudor* can also be retrospective; and similarly like αἰδώς and shame, but unlike *verecundia*, *pudor* can be about discreditable failures to act or about action that is unworthy or demeaning without necessarily encroaching upon the honour of others. Thus *verecundia*'s overlap with *pudor* is restricted to circumstances in which a person might discredit him- or herself by the kind of illegitimate self-assertion which explicitly or implicitly impinges upon the honour of other people. In this area too *pudor* can also entail a sense of the balance between demeanour and deference, self- and other-concern. And so both *verecundia* and *pudor* recognize the sociological truth that my sense of my own worth is inextricably bound up both with others' recognition of my claims and with their claims to my recognition; but (unlike αἰδώς in Greek) neither encapsulates that insight within a single concept. *Verecundia* and *pudor* imply the complementarity of shame and respect, but αἰδώς instantiates that complementarity.

The relevant Greek and Latin terms here capture aspects of social and emotional interaction that are fundamental in more cultures than just Greece or Rome; but each culture represents these processes in different ways. The situation is not one of opposition between raw, unmediated phenomena and the linguistic labels that different cultures apply to those phenomena. In dealing with the interaction ritual of acculturated users of language the phenomena are thoroughly and inextricably enmeshed in the linguistic and conceptual categories of the culture in question. Though there will be many aspects of any relevant scenario that do not wholly depend on the application of linguistic categories, still there is no question of a simple process of applying 'label' to 'experience'. At this level of social interaction, the label is a structural element of the experience.

Our understanding, therefore, of αἰδώς, *reverentia*, *pudor*, *verecundia*, and so on is doubly perspectival: our concepts (esteem, self-esteem, shame, respect, etc.) represent a way of seeing the world through which we understand, among other things, the concepts of other societies. In each case, each of these concepts is, for those who use the language concerned, a lived reality, an element in itself of the intersubjectivity of the experiential concepts in question. When we attain the fullest inductive understanding of another culture's categories of which we are capable, we achieve a perspective on others' perspectives that has the potential to change our own perspectives on our own concepts and categories. But that understanding always

remains conditioned by our own vantage point: despite all the possibilities for other-understanding and perspective shifting that there are (both in inter-personal and in cross-cultural terms), we never entirely live the other culture's reality, just as we never live another person's reality. This is one of the things that makes cross-cultural and historical studies of emotion so important. Our reliance, as students of the ancient world, on language allows us to see how important language, and the cognitive and cultural categories that it encodes, are to the concept of emotion. This does not mean that we look *only* at the semantics of category-terms, or that we should be interested *only* in the language of emotion *qua* language. But our understanding of the multidimensionality of emotion in the cultures that we study, and of the differences and shifts in the representation of emotion across cultures and sub-cultures, from one period to another, puts us in an excellent position to demonstrate to emotion researchers in other fields the utility of cross-cultural and historical studies to the enterprise of emotion research in general.