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## Shame on You and others

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Shame is a painful emotion that can lead people to lie, cheat, even lash out against their victims. Because of its negative effects, some psychologists have long believed shame to be a malfunction in human evolution -- a trait we'd be better off without.

In the 1700s, a young Jean-Jacques Rousseau defiantly stole a pink and silver ribbon from the estate of his recently deceased employer, who had left him nothing in her will. When the ribbon was discovered in his room, Rousseau denied the theft and blamed a young cook.

Forty years later, the famous philosopher reflected on the event. He wrote, "I did not fear punishment, but I dreaded shame: I dreaded it more than death, more than the crime, more than all the world."

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In a study published in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#), researchers argue that shame evolved as a defense to prevent individuals from damaging important social relationships.

"When people find out negative things about you -- say, that you steal or are physically weak or sexually unfaithful -- this causes them to be less helpful and more exploitative toward you," says study author Daniel Sznycer, an evolutionary psychologist at the [University of California Santa Barbara](#).

That could be a threat to one's welfare and success in life -- especially back in early human hunter-gatherer social groups. It is possible therefore that humans evolved shame as a way to defend themselves by avoiding or concealing things that would make others devalue them.

To test this "defense" hypothesis of shame, Sznycer and colleagues recruited over 900 adults across the US, India, and Israel to answer questions about two dozen fictional scenarios. Each scenario depicted traits expected to invoke shame, such as stinginess, infidelity, and physical weakness.

They asked one set of participants to report -- on a scale of 1 to 7 -- how much shame they would feel if they themselves were committing the act in the scenario, such as stealing money from another person. People in a second group were asked to be observers, and to rate how negatively they would view the offending person. How would they feel, for example, about a person they spotted stealing money?

In similar experiments, the team gauged individuals' feelings of sadness and anxiety in response to each scenario.

If shame is, in fact, a defense against the judgment of others, the researchers expected the intensity of shame felt in the first group to match up with the intensity of negative perception, or "devaluation," of the second group. Such a match would suggest shame evolved to deal with the threat of being devalued by one's peers.

That is exactly what they found. "The shame scores in each of the three countries were very highly correlated with the magnitude of devaluation of those in the audience situation," says Sznycer. Moreover, feelings of anxiety and sadness did

not match up, supporting the idea that shame evolved as a defense against being devalued.

The findings suggest that shame is an innate emotion that evolved across different cultures, and that it is an evolved, rational trait designed to protect the individual.

That doesn't mean that acts resulting from shame are good or legitimate, says Sznycer. Rousseau, for example, shouldn't have blamed the poor cook, who subsequently lost her job.

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