SHAME IN SPORT

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ABSTRACT

To date, there has been little philosophical consideration of the concept of shame in sport, yet sport seems to be an environment conducive to the experience of shame due to its public and unequivocal nature demonstrating failure and success. Whilst much of the philosophical commentary of shame in sport suggests it acts as a quasi-virtue that holds the spirit of sport together and prevents cheating and other bad behaviour, I will argue that the real experience of shame (in contrast to embarrassment or guilt) is an adverse emotion, that undermines athlete well-being and a good sports experience.

This paper will provide an analysis of the concept of shame and its relation to other similar emotions, consider its ethical function, and evaluate its effect upon elite athletes in sport. I will conclude by arguing that those involved in sport need to recognise the destructive effect that shame can have upon individuals, how it can manifest itself in other negative emotions such as anger and depression and how sports authorities need to work harder to counter the pervasive and negative effects of shame in sport.

KEYWORDS Shame; emotions; failure; well-being; humiliation

Bang, the gun goes off and I dive into the water. The lead out girls from the other countries are so quick, much quicker than I anticipated and are well ahead of me at the fifty-metre mark. I swim faster than I should in the third 25 metres, trying to make up lost ground which is not part of my race plan. I hang on in the last 25 metres as my body succumbs to the heaviness of lactic acid. I touch the wall in fifth. The second Australian girl dives in and swims her leg. As my third team mate dives in to swim her leg, I try to work out the split time of my team mate who swam second. I do the same with my team mate who is swimming third but get lost doing the calculations. All I know is that my lead out time was not that great… At the end of the race, we all walk through the tunnel to the warm down pool. The coaches and team managers are waiting there… I wonder why [they] are avoiding talking to me. I dive into the warm down pool and do my usual post-race session to remove the lactic acid… I realise that I was the slowest. The coaches and managers still avoid me and say nothing about my swim. I feel like a failure because I know I have just failed to meet their

expectations in the pool. I just want to hide. I don't feel worthy of being part of this Australian team… (McMahon *et al.*, 2017, 10)

The above vignette is part of an auto-ethnography by an elite swimmer exploring the role of stigma in competitive sport. Yet clearly it elucidates the internal and often hidden emotion of shame. To date, there has been little philosophical consideration of the concept of shame in sport. Yet sport seems to be an environment which is conducive to the experience of shame due to its public and unequivocal nature demonstrating failure and success. Sport is a public arena whereby the failures of athletes to achieve or perform as expected is evidently clear and is made all the more so through the ever-increasing quantification of minutiae areas of athletic performance. Yet, most of the philosophical commentary that mentions shame does so in the suggestion it acts as a quasi-virtue that holds the spirit of sport together and prevents cheating and other bad behaviour (e.g. McNamee, 2002; McNamee, 2008; Taylor and Johnson, 2014). However, whilst it might be argued that the fear of shame can act as a restraint against rule-breaking and a motivator for sporting excellence, I will argue that the experience of shame can be severely detrimental to individuals by undermining athlete well-being and a good sports experience. This paper will provide an analysis of the concept of shame and its relation to other similar emotions, consider its ethical function, and evaluate its effect upon elite athletes in sport. I will conclude by arguing that although shame and the fear of shame may provide some moral and performance benefits for sport, those involved in sports organisation and performance need to recognise the destructive effect that shame can have upon individuals, how it can manifest itself in other negative emotions such as anger and depression and how sports authorities need to work harder to counter the pervasive and negative effects of shame in sport.

CONCEPTUALISING SHAME

Shame has traditionally been characterised as a publicly induced emotion that is an affective reaction to public disapproval or shortcoming. This can be illustrated by Sartre's (2003 [1957], 305) depiction of shame, whereby we are aware that we are judged in the eyes of others:

> if we happen to appear 'in public' to act in a play or to give a lecture, we never lose sight of the fact that we are looked at, and we execute the ensemble of acts which we have come to perform *in the presence of* the look.

Shame is a self-conscious and reflective emotion. It requires a stable self-representation ('me'), a reflection on those self-representations, and an ability to put these together to generate a self-evaluation (Tracy and Robins, 2004). Shame, at the very least, requires both self-awareness and a theory of mind in that we recognise that others see us in a way that is different from the way we see our self. However, the concept is slippery and tends to elude

any firm definition. Moreover, there are differences in the way the term is used in different languages. The English notion of shame is fairly narrow, whilst other languages use a broader label which encompass the English concepts of embarrassment and modesty (Scheff, 2009). In English, shame is often contrasted with other family-resemblance emotions such as embarrassment, guilt and humiliation although these are often conflated and overlap in the literature. Nevertheless, there have been some attempts to distinguish between these concepts. Whilst shame is seen as a highly unpleasant, deep-seated emotional response, embarrassment is much more trivial and short-lived, demonstrated by the fact that people are generally more willing to recount embarrassing experiences than shameful ones (Tangney *et al*., 1996; Sabini *et al.*, 2001). Embarrassment is also often accompanied by physiological reactions, such as reddening of the cheeks, perspiration and increased heart rate (Tangney *et al.,* 1996) whereas shame can be inconspicuous with no external physiological cues. A further distinction suggested by Buss (1980) and Tangney *et al.* (1996) is that shame stems from a perception of serious moral failures (about what kind of person I am) whilst embarrassment is a result of misfortune or trivial social transgression.

The distinction between moral failures and non-moral failures is an important one that needs further consideration since the evidence is perhaps counter-intuitive. Consider the following examples: a sprinter is found guilty of a doping offence and receives a ban; and a soccer player misses the penalty kick that loses the championship. We might want to argue that the first example is one of a moral failure, and as such is deserving of shame, since it says something about a person's moral character. Equally, we might want to say that the second example is a non-moral failure that is less deserving of shame since it is a result of other non-moral flaws, e.g. flaws in technical ability, concentration or the ability to deal with pressure. Yet, the literature indicates that this is not necessarily the case. The shame we feel about non-moral failings can often be more intense than those we feel at moral failings (i.e. we feel more shame about things that have happened *to* us rather than things that we have done) (Sabini *et al.*, 2001). For instance, a child may feel morally responsible (and shame) for her parents' divorce even if it is a result of circumstances completely outside her control. Equally, the shame felt by those who have suffered abuse or bullying seems to far outweigh the shame felt by the perpetrators. This relationship between moral character and shame is explored further later in the paper, but it is sufficient to say here that the distinction between moral failure and non-moral failure and shame is not as distinct as may be presumed.

Nevertheless, the distinction between shame and embarrassment is one in which it appears that there is a perception of failing to be good enough, or to act morally enough, in shame that is not present in embarrassment. Others (e.g. Modigliani, 1968; Shott, 1979; Klass, 1990) have argued that the difference between shame and embarrassment is not the event that precedes the emotions but rather the effect these emotions have on the self: embarrassment indicates a deficiency way that the self is presented (a mis-representation of the true self), whereas shame is a deficiency in the self itself. The difference then is an

ontological one: shame is connected to the perception of real flaws, embarrassment is tied to apparent ones (Sabini *et al.*, 2001).

The other comparison that is often made is between shame and guilt. This has traditionally been conceived as a public / private distinction, where shame results from public exposure and disapproval, whilst guilt is an internalised conscious reaction to a violation of one's personal standards (Ausubel, 1955). However, Tangney *et al.* (1996; 2002) argue that this distinction does not seem to be supported by empirical research which indicates that both emotions are often experienced in the private realm. Rather, it is embarrassment and its associated physiological reactions that seem to be the public emotion. Similarly, humiliation is a public shaming experience where the disapproving gaze of others is clearly felt and often deliberately induced by another. Klein (1991, 94) defines it as the 'experience of some form of ridicule, scorn, contempt, or other degrading treatment at the hands of others'. Shame and guilt, in contrast, are often part of one's intrapersonal world. It may then be better to say that shame is a globalist emotion (targeting the whole self) whilst guilt is local (targeting a particular act)[1]. The difference between shame and guilt is the difference between an action and a mode of being. If one feels guilty, one feels morally culpable and regret for an act, e.g. 'I shouldn't have done that'. In contrast, if one feels ashamed, the moral culpability is turned on oneself, e.g. 'I am a bad person'. As Lewis (1971, 30) identifies, 'The experience of shame is directly about the *self*, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the *thing* done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but it is not itself the focus of the experience.' Lewis suggests that shame is a bodily *state* and therefore not a feeling as such. This reflects Sartre's conceptualisation (2003 [1957], 245) that shame is by nature an ontological recognition. He says,

> It is a shameful apprehension *of* something and this something is *me*. I am ashamed of what I *am*. Shame therefore realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself.

As the concept of shame is an ontological one wrapped in our very being, it is difficult to measure or categorise. This may explain why vignettes or real accounts of experiences provide us with much better clarity than the results of scientific attempts at conceptualisation. One of the key limitations to many empirical attempts to conceptualise and differentiate shame from other emotions is the lack of ecological validity. As Brown (2006, 50) notes, 'that there are no universal shame triggers is consistent with research that indicates that shame is person- and context – specific and there are few, if any, classic shame-inducing situations'. Shame scales constructed by psychologists in particular, often utilise anaemic examples or questions that are devoid of any real context or experience. Nevertheless, there are some qualitative studies that have been partially successful in attempts to articulate the experience of shame; what it is to live-with-the-concept (Diamond, 1988). For instance, Tangney *et al.* (1996, 1257) noted that, 'when experiencing shame, people felt physically smaller and more inferior to others; they felt they had less control over the situation'. Similarly, in Brown's (2006) studies, participants used words such

as '*devastating*, *noxious*, *consuming*, *excruciating*, *filleted*, *small*, *separate from others*, *rejected*, *diminished*, and *the worse feeling ever*'.

The problem with conceptualising shame is that it can be so deep-seated that there is no conscious acknowledgement or language by which it can be described. The key problem, as Scheff (2003) notes, is that shame is such a taboo concept that it is often silenced: even referring to it risks offence, as Sanderson (2015) observes in her work on the difficulties of counsellors working with those suffering shame. This silent or hidden shame, which Lewis (1971) called 'unacknowledged shame' is often so repressed that it there are no obvious feelings associated with it. As a consequence, much of the literature in sports psychology refers to the externally perceived concepts of stigma and humiliation rather than shame (e.g. Wahto *et al.*, 2016; Gulliver *et al.*, 2012; McMahon *et al.*, 2017). Shame as a concept is implied rather than identified, and whilst there may be similarities in the descriptions of shame given by others, a full conceptual account will remain elusive.

SHAME AS AN ETHICAL CONCEPT

Contemporary philosophical theories of shame are generally separated into two categories: *group-centred* theories (e.g. Deigh, 1983; Calhoun, 2004; Maibom, 2010) which argue that shame occurs as a result of a belief that one has fallen short of the expectations of others; and *agent-centred* theories (e.g. Rawls, 1971; O'Hear, 1977; Taylor, 1985; Nussbaum, 2004; Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni, 2012) which argue that shame occurs as a result of a perception that one has failed to live up to one's own values. I am more convinced by the group-centred theory because personal accounts of shame generally refer to the perception of oneself *as-if* through the eyes of others, as the vignette at the outset indicated. However, it may be that both theories are viewing the same phenomenon using different lenses. Shame is clearly an evaluation of one's own worth but mediated through a belief about the perception of others as to that worth. There is no evidence to suggest that shame occurs in the absence of a social world. Instead, shame is often seen as the evolutionary equivalent to the way that bad smells and the feeling of disgust limit hunger. Nathanson (1992, 134) calls it the 'innate modulator of affective communication' in the way it moderates social behaviour.

Most of the philosophical literature in sport on the concept of shame refers to it as an ethical regulator in that a fear of shame ensures that we act appropriately, i.e. do not cheat or bring ourselves into disrepute. McNamee (2002; 2008) is one of the few that have provided an explicit analysis of it and does so in relation to Aristotelian virtue theory whereby he considers the quasi-virtue of aidôs (the sense of shame) and its absence (the vice of shamelessness). Whilst Aristotle did not believe that shame was a virtue itself, he argued that the sense of shame activated other virtues such as courage (EE, 1229a). For Aristotle, virtues are states or dispositions of character that give rise to decisions. Virtues are therefore not emotions even if they are dispositions to experience or avoid emotions.

For example, courage requires the disposition to overcome the emotion of fear. Correspondingly, if shame is an emotion it, therefore, cannot be a virtue or vice. Like fear, it is the emotional response to the result of our actions or social occurrences (Nichols, 2016). According to Aristotle, our sense of shame (or fear of being shamed) increases in the presence of others that we admire and about whose opinion we care. As such, Aristotle's view that a sense of shame activates the virtue of courage seems reasonable since fear of feeling shame for an (in)action may be a motivator to act in ways that we would not act in otherwise. This view is supported by evolutionary theorists who maintain that a sense of shame evolved because it enables a negotiation of social hierarchy (e.g. Gilbert and McGuire, 1998; Frijda, 1993; Gilbert, 1997; Sznycer *et al.,* 2018). Under this model, shame functions as a means of managing hierarchy without the negative consequences of physical aggression (Keltner and Harker, 1998) and leads Nichols (2016, 175) to argue that, 'An apt sense of shame, one that is neither hypoactive nor hyperactive, is one of the most efficient mechanisms through which individuals regulate cooperation in a group'. In this Aristotelian model, we need to find the balance between an excess and deficiency of the capacity to feel shame, and to feel shame at appropriate things. This model reflects McNamee's view of a sense of shame regulating the behaviour of athletes. Indeed, McNamee (2002) argues that humiliation [public shaming] is the consequence of the vice of hubris. This view is shared by Taylor and Johnson (2014, 255) who argue that humiliation is deserved if it 'rectifies poor judgement or pretentiousness and is a way of upholding the meaning of excellence in sport'. For Taylor and Johnson, such instances occur in cases whereby a player has made an illegitimate status claim in asserting they are of a higher skill level than is the case. In such cases, shame is deserved and acts as a moral corrective. However, other than McNamee citing a researcher's response to a question posed at a conference where he said Danish cyclists saw shame as a powerful disincentive to doping (McNamee, 2008, 191) there is little empirical evidence to support the view that the experience of shame acts in this way.

Instead, there seems to be more evidence to indicate that a sense of shame can reduce, rather than enhance, levels of cooperation for certain types of people. Whereas the feeling of guilt often leads people to attempt to repair the situation, feelings of shame lead to a fleeing from it (Bagozzi *et al.* 2018). For example, a study by Declerck *et al.* (2014) suggested that a sense of shame reduced cooperation in those who were more likely to be cooperative by nature. It may be that individuals who are more sensitive to the perceptions of others, and in whom they hold esteem, may become withdrawn and less cooperative due to a greater fear of shame eliciting behaviour. In contrast, those who are more ego-centric are less likely to withdraw themselves from a situation after a shame-inducing experience[2]. Ego-centric individuals are more likely to cooperate with others in an attempt to salvage their reputation and arguably not out of any moral sense of regret. These are individuals who may, for all apparent purposes, express regret for an action but whose real motivation is damage limitation. Such individuals may feel no shame since, as noted earlier, it requires a self-awareness and reflection on the perception of the self by others, as well as caring about this perception. These individuals are more likely to provide extrinsic reasons for their

behaviour and are therefore arguably less likely to feel shame. This may be an athlete who has been stripped of his world titles for doping offences, or who has suffered reputational damage by being caught cheating on his wife, or by drink-driving, and who then seeks to rebuild his reputation by appearing on a major chat show, or in a sponsors' advertisement to demonstrate how sorry he is. These athletes 'go on the offensive' in order to regain control of the situation. So, whilst it may seem reasonable to suggest that shame can act as a behaviour regulator or modifier in cases where an individual is publicly humiliated for wrongdoing such as cheating, it requires a genuine attitude of self-reflection and remorse and a willingness to seek redemption in the eyes of others. The Hollywood hero narrative of a 'bad boy turned good' by being caught cheating is not supported by the evidence. It is rather the fear of shame, than shame itself, that for most, acts as the moral regulator.

A question then arises over when it is considered appropriate to feel shame. Cheating in sport is generally seen as an area where the correct moral response is to feel shame since one has acted immorally. However, there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that this is the case since there are clearly set out punishments for cheating, e.g. yellow/red cards, fines, and bans. These formal punishments may have the unexpected result of reducing the likelihood of shame since the evidence suggests that shame is less likely to be felt if the punishment is not one of social-exclusion. For example, if the price for infringing social norms is converted to a non-moral one (i.e. a monetary one, such as a fine), the sense of shame is reduced and individuals are more willing to break the rules as a result (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000). To explain this further, a parallel may be seen in the way in which technology can replace the need for moral action as can be exemplified in the case of 'walking' in cricket. Prior to the advent of technology which would determine whether a player was out, it was expected that a player who knew she was out (because she felt the ball hit her bat) would walk off the field even if the umpire had not given it. Arguably, this moral convention was driven by a sense of honour and an avoidance of shame. However, since the introduction of officiating technology, it is now less likely that a player will walk even though it more likely that the correct decision will be ultimately be made. It seems that technology has removed the sense of shame. Previously, a player may have felt the gaze of others who knew that they were out despite the umpire incorrectly ruling it otherwise. Now the epistemological authority - judging 'out/not out' - has been transferred to the new officiating technology (Collins, 2010) and there is less likelihood of error in officiating and less likelihood of 'getting away with it'. In other words, the more accurate officiating decisions are perceived to be (either through the professionalisation of sport officiating, or the increased use in officiating technology), the less moral onus is placed on an athlete's behaviour. It is no longer a shame-inducing experience. Equally, receiving a fine for cheating can be rationalised as literally 'the price' one has paid for one's actions.

Yet the initial vignette focused not on cheating, an area which is generally seen as one which should induce the feeling of shame, but rather performance. The swimmer simply failed to live up to the performance expectations of being an elite athlete. It is this area of

performance failure where the topic of shame has been further considered in sport. Discussion on the ethics of 'blowouts' and 'running up the score' (whether it is morally acceptable to demonstrate athletic superiority by inflicting a heavy defeat on the opposition) highlights the lack of consensus in the evaluation of shame as the correct moral response. Dixon (1992) suggests that being on the end of such a defeat is no cause for shame since it does not indicate any moral or non-moral character fault but only a sign of athletic inferiority. He suggests that any feelings of shame are misguided and based on irrational logic. McNamee (2002) too argues that shame is an improper response to sporting failure on the basis of performance. Yet, this seems to misunderstand the nature of shame and feelings of humiliation, as the discussion over when it is reasonable to feel shame is irrelevant if feelings of shame still occur. As noted earlier, often the recipients of actions (of abuse or divorce) feel more shame than those perpetrating them despite, as Dixon argues, it is illogical or irrational for them to do so. As Hardman *et al.* (1996, 59) note, being on the end of a heavy defeat *does* cause feelings of shame and humiliation regardless of whether it is rational or not for the individual to feel them:

> It is in part precisely because coaches and athletes do pursue one-sided victories with malicious intent, and in part because losers do interpret such intentions as humiliating when soundly beaten, that a forceful connection has developed in our culture between lopsided victories and shame.

In response, Dixon argues it is more shame-inducing to reduce one's performance once victory is assured since it suggests that winning is the only goal, and that the opponent is not worth playing one's best for. This view is mirrored by Taylor and Johnson (2014) who argue that humiliation occurs when an athlete is powerless to act against a reduction in his status in the eyes of others. According to Dixon's account, a player's status is reduced if they are seen as an unworthy opponent and can be demonstrated when a team 'softens' up on the opposition by treating it as a practice game to trial set-plays or substitute players.

The question as to whether feeling shame over failure of performance is beneficial or harmful is not straightforward. It may be the case that the shame experienced by athletes of inferior skill levels can be a motivator to improve through determination, hard work and practice, and ultimately be a means to sporting excellence. After all, being on the receiving end of a rout is often claimed to be the driver for improvement as athletes claim they never want to be subject to the experience again. But conversely, it may lead to individuals giving up completely on the basis that they do not feel able to attain a competitive standard, or it may lead them to depression and despair in believing they will never be good enough. So whilst we can see two areas where shame is often seen to be a morally valuable emotion: in regulating behaviour and preventing rule-breaking, and in providing a motivator for improving sporting skill, the evidence for both is tenuous: shame does not necessarily follow from cheating even though we think it should, and conversely, shame can lead to disengagement and withdrawal from sport even though we think it should not.

SHAME AND ATHLETE WELL-BEING

As the previous section has indicated, whilst the capacity to feel shame can act as a moral guide, shame itself can be immensely destructive. Indeed, Gilbert (2003, 1225) argues that, it 'can lead to various unhelpful defensive emotions, such as anger or debilitating anxiety, concealment or destructive conformity'. The different effects of shame on individuals further highlight the difficulty of conceptualisation. Shame can manifest itself in various ways, from depression and withdrawal to anger and aggression. Indeed, concluding their study of shame in sport, Fontana and Fry (2017, 291) note, 'there is little research to suggest that individuals benefit from experiencing shame.' Indeed, most first-person accounts of shame are highly discomforting and demonstrate what a debilitating and enervating experiencing it can be; as illustrated by another extract from the auto-ethnography presented earlier:

> *The pool deck is buzzing with competitors from other countries. I stretch with my teammates and then line up to get weighed, something I dread each day. As I stand there in the middle of the concourse in my swimwear, along with my team-mates, two of the swimming team managers stand in front of us with scales systematically weighing us. I feel exposed. I notice a lot of our international competitors looking at us. As the line dissipates and my turn approaches, panic overcomes me. What if I put on weight again today? For the last two days, my weight has increased by 0.15 of a kilogram. I find panic overwhelms me and instead of getting my weight recorded, I inconspicuously jump into the pool and start swimming… [Later,] As I walk outside of the change rooms, the managers are waiting for me with their clipboards and those dreaded scales. My feet step carefully onto the scales. My body is motionless, careful not to move or bump the scales and cause a slight increase in the number. My weight is 72.85 kg, another increase of 0.15 kg. The two managers are not smiling and look at each other. Then, the larger of the two men starts to speak.*
>
> *Manager: "Jenny, we are concerned with your weight increases. You need to think about whether you still want a place on the National team because your weight is indicating that you are not remaining focused and committed. Your skin fold reading was also up four days ago. We will be interested to see how you go in your skin fold measurements tomorrow when they are repeated."*
>
> *I find myself immediately questioning my level of commitment. Maybe I am not worthy of being a member of the national team?*
>
> *At dinner that night I hardly eat. Have to fix my body. My consciousness is also alerted to the coaches and team managers' gaze during dinner. I can see that they are all looking at what is on my plate. I put some corn onto my fork and bring it to my mouth. As I eat, they then whisper to each other. They continue to gaze at me with*

> *every spoonful that I eat. Their constant gaze suppresses my appetite and I no longer feel hungry. Somehow my stomach has been tricked into feeling satisfied, however I have eaten so little. I am so desperate to do something about my weight.* (McMahon and McGannon, 2017, 227-228)

The author later describes how the shame she felt about her weight led her to bulimic behaviour in forced vomiting and the taking of laxatives. The shame she felt is starkly apparent in the above account. Moreover, it illustrates the way in which the inescapable gaze of others becomes all consuming.

Sartre refers to this as the 'drain hole' in which the presence of others pulls us down; the mere presence of others in our world pulls apart our ego-centric perspective and orientates it towards them. This change in perspective he calls, 'a radical reorientation' (2003 [1957]). To illustrate, Sartre gives the example of a man peering through a keyhole watching the events in the other room. Initially, the man is not aware of his own being since he is a pre-conscious subject; he is simply looking outwards on other events. However, he hears steps down the corridor and becomes aware of someone watching him looking through the keyhole. He is suddenly aware of himself as he appears to the other; he is aware of himself as voyeur and feels shame. Shame is not experienced because the man looking through the keyhole was doing anything morally wrong (since he could be peering into an empty room) but rather he experiences a radical reorientation of his world whereby he is transformed from being a subject to an object simply by seeing himself through the eyes of another.

Similarly, in the case of the elite swimmer, she becomes consumed by the way in which she perceives she is seen by her coaches and other athletes. It is this, and not her weight, that leads to her bulimic behaviour. In later reflections on this episode, the author notes, 'I saw myself as a failure and an athletic fraud… I realize that I was a person who was damaged… I was a person who refused to look at my own reflection in a car window or a mirror.' (McMahon and McGannon, 2017, 228) Such radical reorientation meant the athlete was unable to pull herself away from seeing herself the way that she believed others saw her.

Sport by its nature is a social enterprise. Though we might be able to play games whilst alone; for instance, testing our self against a previous target or challenging our self against the terrain or elements, we can only take part in sport with others. When we play sport we do so in the public arena; we recognise that we are under the gaze or look of others (whether they are spectators, other players or coaches) and we are aware that we are seen by a being that is not the self. Dixon (1992) and McNamee (2002) are correct in their observation that failing in sport isn't shameful because of the act itself: missing a penalty, falling during a race, or being wrong footed against an attacker. However, it is under the acknowledged gaze of others that these feelings occur. As Sartre (2003 [1957]), 312) puts it;

> Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an* object; that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an *original fall*, not because of the

> fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have 'fallen' into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am.

Participating in sport, and in elite sport in particular, where the gaze of others is felt more intensely, is to recognise that you are in their world; you are fixed as an object in the eyes of another. Sartre described this as a process of transcendence, and this reflects the previous discussion in relation to the diminishing of status and as noted in Brown's (2006) descriptions of feeling 'small' 'diminished' and 'filleted'. However, as noted by the cases of the ego-centric individuals, there may be an attempt to reject this transcendence or diminishing of status in which feelings of shame are projected outwards towards others. This can manifest itself in pathological behaviour such as anger, addition or impulsivity (Morrison, 1989).

Such an account is exemplified in the following extract from Brown (2012, 97-98):

> I don't want to oversimplify something as complex as the response to shame, but I have to say that when it comes to men, there seem to be two primary responses: pissed off or shut down… when men feel that rush of inadequacy and smallness, they normally respond with anger and/or by completely turning off. [But] I wanted to make sure that I wasn't filtering what I heard from the men through my own experiences. When I asked [a male therapist specializing in men's issues] about the concept, of 'pissed off or shut down,' he told me this story to illustrate the point.
>
> When he was a freshman in high school, he tried out and made the football team. On the first day of practice, his coach told the boys to line up on the line of scrimmage… this was his first experience on a field, in full pads, across from boys whose goal was to flatten him… His coach yelled his last name and said, "Don't be a pussy! Get on the line." He said he immediately felt shame coursing through his body.
>
> "In that single moment, I became very clear about how the world works and what it means to be a man: 'I am not allowed to be afraid. I am not allowed to show fear. I am not allowed to be vulnerable. Shame is being afraid, showing fear, or being vulnerable.'"
>
> When I asked him what he did next, he looked at me in the eye and said, "I turned my fear into rage and steamrolled over the guy in front of me. It worked so well that I spent the next twenty years turning my fear and vulnerability into rage and steamrolling anyone who was across from me. My wife. My children. My employees. There was no other way out from underneath the fear and shame."

The notion that anger can mask feelings of shame is supported by other literature that suggests anger is associated with assertiveness and shame with self-doubt. Indeed, we tend to evaluate those expressing anger as being more competent than those expressing regret,

even if the words spoken are exactly the same (Tiedens *et al.,* 2000, 2001). Similarly, Hareli *et al.* (2013) argue that expressions of shame decrease perceived competence by indicating a lack of self-confidence and self-worth. In the masculine environment of sport, it is therefore unsurprising that athletes are reluctant to express the feeling of shame and may instead turn it into other emotions such as anger.

Imagine for example, a player who misses the winning free shot in a game of basketball. The shame at such a public failure is projected towards other players whom he regards with contempt: 'We were only in that position because Luke played so poorly throughout the game. The coach got his selection wrong; Luke should never have been playing. If it wasn't for him we would never have ended up having to chase the game.'

This transformation of shame into a projection of anger towards another is a way of deflecting the shame that one feels. That there is a cultural expectation for those participating in sport to be tough, both mentally and physically, is arguably likely to increase the suppression of shame and attempts to acknowledge and overcome it. Feelings of shame may be externalised in other ways, such as aggression, violence, addiction, depression, self-harm or even suicide. Although there have been more recent campaigns to highlight mental health and well-being in athletes, it is still the case that athletes are less likely to seek help for mental health issues than non-athletes (Wahto *et al.* 2016). One of the reasons suggested for this is that athletes fear a stigmatisation by other athletes and their coaches for being weak (Gulliver *et al.* 2012). Indeed, Bauman (2016) suggests that mental toughness and mental health are contradictory concepts in elite sport because being seen as 'weak' and admitting feelings of failure or inadequacy go against our conceptions of sporting success. The argument holds that to be a successful athlete, one needs to be mentally tough; being mentally tough is to be able to face and overcome adversity, whilst being mentally weak is to succumb to pressure; therefore, admitting to not being able to face and overcome adversity, or succumbing to pressure is to admit failure as an athlete and is a barrier to sporting success. Caddick and I (2012) have argued against the concept of mental toughness for similar reasons. For instance, one criterion in definitions of mental toughness is the lack of self-doubt (Gucciardi, Gordon and Dimmock, 2008) and athletes are therefore deterred to admit to anything other than absolute self-belief. As previously noted, shame is a silent taboo and is often unacknowledged and repressed (Lewis, 1971; Sanderson, 2015; Scheff, 2003). The shame attached to feelings of shame is demonstrated by the fact that whilst it is acceptable for athletes to seek psychological help for performance or goal-setting reasons, it is less acceptable to do so for reasons relating to mental health (Gulliver *et al.* 2012; Gucciardi *et al.* 2017). Fontana and Fry (2017) argue that ego orientated athletes, in particular, are likely to internalise their shame and experience harmful health effects as a result. Perhaps then, stories of athletes suffering eating disorders, addiction, violent tendencies or self-destructive behaviour need to be viewed through this lens.

CONCLUSION

The problem when studying shame is its ethereal nature. As an ontological emotion it is not subject to empirical testing or falsification. Even individuals suffering shame may not consciously acknowledge it and as observers we can only make inferences and assumptions as to its existence. Whilst shame is arguably an emotion that has evolved to enable greater social cohesion and cooperation there is a far greater weight of argument to suggest that the emotion of shame can be detrimental. Whilst a fear of disapproval from others, and an appropriate sense of shame, may act as normative guide in some situations and may prevent individuals succumbing to temptations such as doping; the public and ever-increasingly quantifiable nature of elite sport suggests feelings of shame can lead to harmful consequences and behaviours. This is further compounded by the cultural expectations that good sport is characterised by a masculine demonstration of strength in being physically and mentally tough. As such, where the nature of sport at the elite level means an athlete's identity is more tightly associated with sporting performance, feelings of shame may be supressed and released in other pathological ways, such as anger, addiction and self-harm.

The question, therefore, is how to ensure that elite sport is better equipped to deal with the damaging effects of shame in sport. One suggestion may be to provide coaches in particular, with a greater awareness of the harmful consequences of objectifying their athletes and reducing individuals to quantifiable performance indicators since, as illustrated in the examples above, that is likely to lead to feelings of shame about one's self-worth. The accusations of bullying and intimidation – shaming behaviours – that are often associated with a 'no compromise' attitude found at the elite end of sport are likely to exacerbate feelings of lack of self-worth and lead to poorer athlete mental health and well-being. Equally, it is important that athletes are encouraged to value themselves in much broader ways than simply the product of their successes and failures on a sports field. Part of this must start at the ground level in youth sport and training academies and involve parental training too. As noted, the likelihood of experiencing shame increases if we believe we are seen poorly in the eyes of others whose approval we desire, and many accounts of shame in the counselling literature are rooted in feelings that we have let our family down. This demonstrates the importance of healthy parent-child relationships in early sporting experience and a conscious attempt to ensure an athlete's self-worth is not rooted in their performance on a sports field. Finally, greater efforts need to be taken by those working in elite sport to reduce the stigma associated with admitting feelings of guilt, failure and shame, and to reduce the narrative around mental toughness and resilience. Providing training in emotional intelligence and emotional coping strategies may be part of the solution as would destigmatising the term 'shame' by actively using it in normal conversation. Equally, enabling athletes and coaches to understand that fearing shameful experiences or feeling shame is part of the normal human condition and can be a means of ensuring good and excellent sport. These steps may start to reduce the likelihood of athletes experiencing the negative effects of shame and reduce the likelihood of 'unacknowledged

shame' which manifests itself in other damaging forms of behaviour, such as anger, aggression, violence, addiction, eating disorders and other forms of self-harm.

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NOTES

[1] I thank Alfred Archer for suggesting this conceptualisation.

[2] This is not to say that the participants actually felt shame; rather the incident was judged by the researchers to be shame inducing.

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