Anti-Racist Solidarity Work: Categories, Guilt, and Shame: On Alexis Shotwell's *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*

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Alexis Shotwell's *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (2011) is an important, ambitious book that I admire greatly and whose aims I support. I marvel at the reach and complexity of her project and the grace with which she has integrated its various threads.

I wholeheartedly agree that the various forms of nonpropositional knowing that Shotwell articulates are extremely important. As she acknowledges, there have been a few philosophers who have written on these forms of knowledge/understanding, but we would all be a lot better off in our epistemology, political philosophy, and political action if many more of us try to encompass this kind of work. Nevertheless, I am a bit overwhelmed by the sheer number and kinds of changes we would need to make to begin explicitly incorporating nonpropositional knowledge into our projects. I first need to get my bearings by doing some sorting, then I will turn more concretely to guilt and shame.

Getting my bearings. Much of what interests Shotwell is knowledge that cannot ever be captured fully in propositions, namely, her categories 1: skill knowledge, 2: the intersection of somatic and conceptual understanding, and 4: emotional knowledge.[1] I would add another category to this: knowledge by acquaintance—of other people, not of "sense-data." Shotwell

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might consider this a subcategory of type 2, somatic/conceptual understanding, but to my mind it does not fit neatly here. Her clearest cases of category 2, for example, knowing your gender, seem far removed from knowing Michelle Obama. In any case, knowledge by acquaintance has the advantage of being an accepted philosophical category in case someone (foolishly) still needs convincing of the importance of nonpropositional knowledge. Knowledge by acquaintance of people different from ourselves might well interest Shotwell as she considers the nonpropositional knowledge base we can acquire to facilitate anti-racist work.

In contrast with knowledge that cannot ever be fully propositional is Shotwell's third category, knowledge that could be but is not yet propositional. It is at least propositional in its form or shape, even if it is not fully explicit. By looking closely at our assumptions and our commonsense knowledge, we can excavate some, even if not all, of the propositions contained there. I would thus group the other three categories together and leave this one a little bit separate. It will soon be clear why I mention this.

Cutting across these four kinds of knowledge are two different kinds of scales. The first is "explicitness"—the degree of conscious knowledge/understanding ranging from that of which we are clearly aware all the way down to what is not conscious but is nevertheless framing or influencing our actions. Shame provides us with good examples here. Sometimes we are explicitly aware of our shame, but at other times we cannot understand the reason we want to hide from view. Also note that category 3 (not yet propositional) knowledge is located only on one part of this scale. That is another way it differs from the other three kinds of nonpropositional knowledge.

The second scale is that of rationality. I do not equate rationality with propositional form, even if the most obvious examples are propositional. Rationality can be intricately involved in

any of these kinds of knowledge, but sometimes it is less so. In considering emotional knowledge, for example, we have many "cognitive theories" of emotion that explain the ways in which rational thought is intertwined with, say, anger. In a particular case it might be propositional thought (for example, my current anger rests on my belief that my friend was unjustly treated by the U. S. Transportation Security Agency), but it could be broader than this as well.

The scales of explicitness and rationality overlaid on the categories of nonpropositional knowledge are important to me because we need to take into account where people—both ourselves and others—are located on the scales as we strategize about social change. What will, in fact, move people to take up and succeed in anti-racist activities or join in movements to end violence against gay and trans people will depend not only on their nonpropositional knowledge, but also on the degree to which it is explicit and the degree to which it encompasses rational components. For example, suppose a father of a recently-out lesbian joins a group that fights violence against LGBT people. If we want him to function well in the group, it can be important to know 1) what level of consciousness he has of his own homophobia, and 2) whether it results from negative affect such as disgust or from unstated, but accessible, assumptions about a God's sexual ordering of the universe, nonhuman animals, or whatever. In short, it's important that we acknowledge the two scales, explicitness and rationality, as well as the categories of nonpropositional knowledge.

The fact that I even mention rationality might lead someone to worry that I hold out too much hope about the power of reason to effect change. I am not too hopeful, though I surely would not give up on reason where it might work. For example, if we know someone just can't stand being inconsistent, then we might hope to move her off her commonsense views of race or

sexuality by showing her their internal inconsistencies. She can then build on what Shotwell calls the "good sense" within her common sense. What is more important to my focus here is that I want to entertain a full range of nonrational and nonpropositional possibilities (including, of course, the solidarity work that Shotwell advocates). I do not want to exclude *anything* that might work. We could, for example, 1) distribute social justice pills if it seems that racism and other "-isms" can be treated chemically,[2] 2) hire marketing experts who can use their typical nonrational techniques to counteract the morass of incoherent "commonsense" assumptions that have not been rationally caused, 3) after we determine how emotions move us in ways that are positive, use "training" groups to move people nonrationally into more socially productive emotions, and so on. The first two might feel especially wrong because we want people doing things for "the right reasons." However, if their current views and behavior are not rationally based anyway, then we should not be worse off with different nonrationally produced, but socially better, behavior and attitudes.[3]

My second topic has a narrower focus: guilt and shame in the context of anti-racist solidarity work. In Shotwell's discussion of these emotions, she focuses on 1) recognizing—rather than denying—the presence of negative affect in the forms of guilt or shame, and 2) harnessing negative affect to do positive solidarity work. Her nuanced discussion shows that she appreciates the difficulties in making one's way through the thicket of guilt and shame. Nevertheless, she explains in some detail the ways in which shame can have positive value in anti-racist work, but she does not find so much positive value in guilt. To be clear, Shotwell does not say that shame is good because it can motivate us and guilt is bad because it can shut us down for anti-racist work. However, because she is willing to travel farther along that path than I am, I want to explain why I am less sanguine than she is about her preferences.

To start, let us consider whether a consensus exists among scholars about guilt and shame. There is a vast amount of interesting literature on these subjects, ranging from empirical studies in psychology and social neuroscience to philosophical and literary work. These concepts have evolved over the centuries and are still used in a variety of ways. Nevertheless there is something close to agreement on some points. Both guilt and shame are "social emotions" (unlike, say, fear and disgust) and at the same time self-referential (or reflexive). They are or can be moral emotional responses. Although I did not find agreement either in precise definitions of the concepts or concerning the usefulness of these approaches in the context of anti-racist solidarity, some clusters of features appear often enough to give us rough characterizations (with which Shotwell agrees).

Guilt (and so the feeling of guilt) is tied to believed or actual responsibility for wrongdoing or causing harm; it carries along with it a desire to confess, to be forgiven, or to make some kinds of amends or reparations. In the context of racism, white people's feelings of guilt often occur, as Shotwell notes, about the advantages that accrue to us simply by our being white. Sandra Bartky calls this guilt about privilege a form of "guilt by complicity" (Bartky 134-35).

Shame is tied to failing to live up to expectations and ideals either of our own or of other people (people whom we value, so whose ideals we internalize). Its characteristic behavioral tendency is to want to hide, to not be seen, or, in extreme cases, self-loathing or hatred. It is about the self as a whole—the kind of person we are. In the context of racism, someone could feel shame about being the kind of person who fails to overcome the pervasive institutional and culturally embedded racial prejudices and biases, or the kind of person who backslides easily into racist attitudes.

People differ in whether they are more prone to shame or to guilt. Moreover, at least some of us can feel guilt and shame simultaneously: guilt for violating a rule, for example, giving an undeserved high grade to a student you like, and shame for being the kind of person who does this or who has been discovered doing it by a valued colleague. Some of us might not even be clear whether to call what we feel guilt or shame, or whether we feel one or both of them.

So much for general agreement. Let's move on to what is important for anti-racist work. Shotwell's strategy, with which I concur, is to find a path that makes white people's bad feelings productive, not by way of propositional knowledge, but by using emotions and emotional knowledge as they are found in our real lives. In anti-racist contexts with negative emotions we want to:

- Move away from the immobilizing impact of negative emotions and channel them to motivate people in productive ways.
- Move white people out of the center of thinking about their negative emotions.

These must be done in a context in which people understand that racism is structural, systemic, and not simply the sum of individuals' acts (Shotwell 84).

In order to cut to the chase, I'll argue that the best strategy is to mobilize both guilt and shame in analogous ways and not to assume that one will be more productive than the other. Why? As I noted earlier, people vary individually on whether they are prone to shame or guilt, even within a society that tends to push them in one direction. Among those who try to categorize cultures in terms of shame or guilt, dominant cultures in North America are seen as guilt-inclined. But even within "guilt cultures," members of stigmatized groups are more likely to be prone to shame, so one must be careful dealing with shame. A shame-prone person might be immobilized by the feeling of being a hopelessly bad person, a failure at most things she

attempts that are genuinely good, etc. A guilt-prone person might be immobilized by feeling that she has done such heinous acts that they are simply unforgivable and cannot be "repaired." Neither of these immobilized people will be of much use in anti-racist solidarity work. However, I'm not sure that it's because of the reasons Shotwell tends to cite, namely, because guilt is less social than shame (I think both are social), because guilt rather than shame keeps the white person at the center of things (it either might or might not) (86), because guilt individuates white people's responsibility more than shame (86), or because "perhaps we cannot address the experience of shame by directly doing something in the world" (87).

Shotwell cites Laura McNeill who says that white guilt does no one any good (Shotwell 82, citing McNeill). Michelle O'Brien, who is also cited, worries that the confession that is linked to guilt "masks not further guilt, but the very possibility of honesty, openness and transformation. It precludes the very chance of ever recognizing what is happening in a real, grounded substantive way," that is, it obscures structural, systemic racism (Shotwell 83, quoting O'Brien). These seem too strong to me. I maintain that the problem is not that white people's guilt simply does *no good*, but that it's too easy to misdirect reparative intentions in ways that are not useful. I certainly agree that confessing or seeking forgiveness while wallowing in self-centered guilt is counterproductive. Given this fact, coupled with the fact that people vary in whether they are more likely to feel guilt or shame, I want to argue that regardless of which emotion people feel, we want them to be motivated to find *something* that they can interpret as a positive step to take. We can do this within the context of understanding that racism is systemic and that our actions, while positive, cannot "solve" the problems or erase completely our bad feelings. The guilt-prone person who wants to try to make social reparations for white privilege might need help to figure out how to do so in the massive structures of racism and anti-racist

struggle. Working in solidarity with others while not minimizing our differences certainly "counts" as reparation work.[4]

Although I don't prefer guilt to shame as motivation for anti-racist work, I want to note that some psychologists do. David Amodio and his colleagues in psychology/social neuroscience purported to show that although guilt first produced negative affect, in a very short time it motivated subjects to take "prosocial" actions in a racial context.[5] Although I'm always a bit skeptical about the ways that experiments on undergrads with EEG caps on their heads translate into real world social action, there's no more reason to be skeptical of this work than of other empirical work on shame or guilt. Amodio *et al*. did not do a comparably detailed study of shame, though shame was also a small part of this study. They speculated, "Whereas guilt transforms into approach motivation aimed at reparation, shame may be more likely to transform into withdrawal motivation aimed at avoiding social scrutiny" (Amodio, Devine, and Harmon-Jones 329). In plain English, wanting to hide from other people is not a good emotional start for prosocial action.

Other more traditional psychologists who work on guilt and shame include June Price Tangney and her colleagues. One example of Tangney and Dearing's that concurs with Amodio's positive tilt toward guilt rather than shame is this: Guilt is internal, but "unstable and specific," so it is more easily dislodged. Shame is internal, stable, and globally attributed (Tangney and Dearing 53-54). In shame we need to make changes in the self and personality, but guilt can target changes in behavior.

As I said above, I am not arguing that guilt motivates us better than shame; I simply think it's a mistake to overlook guilt's potential. I find some of Shotwell's thinking about shame very promising, for example, that shame is relevant to identity formation and that feeling bad about

oneself gives an opening for wanting to be a different kind of person. What I'm not so sure will help are shame's "disruptive function" and the fact that we don't automatically know what to do with shame (Shotwell 90). We don't automatically know what to do with guilt either. We have to figure these things out in either case, as well as use reason to understand the systemic context in which we act. I find Eve Sedgwick and others who Shotwell cites very helpful. I am also taken with Michael Morgan's book, *On Shame* (2008). My central point is that we need to deal with *whatever* people tend to feel and work it out from there.[6] To do this work I would use any of the arsenal of strategies, nonrational as well as rational, that I outlined before turning to my discussion of guilt and shame: reason, marketing techniques, morality/social justice pills, workshops, behavioral training, or others that might prove effective.

Notes

[1] Shotwell often speaks in terms of understanding rather than knowledge. Because I believe she could have used either term in most contexts in the book, I more often use "knowledge."

[2] Peter Singer, "Are We Ready for a Morality Pill?" (January 28, 2012) prompted this thought. While I was wrestling with the idea, Stephen Colbert, on *The Colbert Report*, March 27, 2012, mentioned that a blood pressure drug, propranolol, allegedly reduces implicit racism. Propranolol seems to impact the part of the brain that deals with fear.

[3] When Shotwell gave a lecture at the University of Waterloo in November 2011, I could not yet face up to the idea that I would favor these nonrational strategies. I've since bitten the bullet, though still not comfortably.

[4] It's much easier in daily life to find concrete reparative acts in the context of sexism than in racism (and more easily personalized in spite of systemic sexism). This no doubt reflects how often we live with people of other genders or races. A man's guilt about years of putting a very heavy household burden on his women partners can be alleviated somewhat by his actually doing the laundry, cleaning, and cooking, especially without being told to, being thanked, or needing supervision. Repair here works much better than the self-centered need to confess or be forgiven; one might even want to say to constant confessing, "Shut up and clean the bathroom." Even the

institutions that most enthusiastically practice confession, for example, the Catholic Church, make parishioners *do something* to make amends, even if others of us consider saying Hail Marys and Our Fathers not very productive. One wonders whether they should not at least require community service.

[5] David M. Amodio, *et al.* (2007). If you're wondering what "prosocial action" the subjects took, they preferred reading magazine articles about how to decrease racism over control articles on steps to a healthier lifestyle or on TV's potential to teach infants. I should also note that Amodio *et al.* are working in a tradition of studying the social emotions that believes that guilt motivates improved behavior; the question at issue in this study concerns more how it works than whether it does work. They have a dynamic theory of guilt that incorporates work on the emotions at the time of the transgression as well as later.

[6] I don't have space to discuss whether sympathy or empathy works better for antiracist work, but my general approach to their use would be analogous to the ways I treated guilt and shame: acknowledge whatever you or others feel and try to channel it for positive results.

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