

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Failing the state self: on the politics of state shame

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## Abstract

Observers have noted that world politics is replete with shame. Whether they observe this concerning the apologies regarding past atrocities, the felt necessity for revenge after a humiliating defeat, the feelings that populist leaders find antithetical to the greatness of their nation, or the affective responses to the latter's election, shame seems to be ubiquitous. Vital to understanding the particular politics of this emotion is the concept of state shame. However, the origins, divergent effects, and social and moral roles of state shame are left obscure in International Relations (IR) scholarship, making the concept under-theorized and in need of further elaboration. The primary goal of this research is to (re)conceptualize state shame as a narrative on the social position of the state by building on insights developed by IR theory, sociology, and social psychology. Moreover, the article proposes four types of state shame narratives, namely situational shame, narcissistic shame, aggressive shame, and deferential shame, that can separately account for the divergent effects and social and moral roles that the emotion can be attributed with. These four types, and the politics that characterize them, aim to capture and explain lived practices and meanings that state shame can come to hold.

**Keywords:** politics of shame; state shame; ontological security; IR theory; narratives

## Introduction

Shame seems out of place in the realm of world politics. Observers often comment on how hegemonic or rogue states flagrantly defy and transgress international law with a sense of impunity and even self-righteousness. If anything, it is shamelessness that is believed to guide the actions of states in international affairs. Researchers in International Relations (IR) have, however, observed that shame is far more prevalent in world politics than is commonly assumed. These contributions point to, among others, the importance of the emotion in inter- and intrastate reconciliation,<sup>1</sup> revenge,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Lu 2008; Zarakol 2011; Bentley 2015.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Harkavy 2000; Saurette 2006; Homolar and Löfflmann 2021.

social pressure,<sup>3</sup> and normative behaviour by states.<sup>4</sup> In short, shame is more ubiquitous in contemporary international and domestic politics than intuitively assumed.

Regardless of the finding that shame is widespread in international politics, its role and significance remain undertheorized in IR. Although scholars of this field have used insights from sociology or psychology to understand how shame relates to particular social dynamics within or between states, the emotion is rarely treated holistically.<sup>5</sup> The goal of this paper is to argue for a more comprehensive and theoretically grounded understanding of shame in international politics in order to explain divergent state behaviours that can be linked to this emotion. It aims to expose and criticize the central assumptions regarding shame in IR to evaluate the concept's current use with the purpose of gaining more insight into its contingency and epistemic commitments. The main argument is that shame, in its generic characterization, can be more adequately conceived as a negative narrative on the social status of a state. More specifically, shame is a political emotion attributed to the state self when the state is placed in a situation where its social status is believed to be unwarranted. Competing political agents conceive their state's position as a 'shame situation', with which they deal with by constructing divergent types of shame narratives (i.e. situational, narcissistic, aggressive, and deferential) that each inform particular coping and defence mechanisms. This typology aids in identifying narrative competition between political agents that aim to maintain or change narratives on the shameful status of the state. In so doing, the narrative understanding of the politics of shame can explain why a state copes with shame the way that they do and how it comes to inform their behaviour.

The paper starts off by giving a cursory overview of how shame has been conceived in IR theory. After identifying the causes for its absence in mainstream theoretical traditions, it turns to a broad discussion on the role and meaning of shame in the ontological security literature. The following section lists three critiques regarding how ontological security scholarship has conceived state shame and argues for a novel understanding. The subsequent sections build the main argument by clarifying how states are capable of emotions and developing on psychological and sociological insights to argue that state shame is more adequately understood as a narrative on the state's social status. Afterwards, an argument is made for conceiving a conceptual framework surrounding the shame situation. This, in turn, proposes that political agents construct four types of state shame narratives, namely situational shame, narcissistic shame, aggressive shame, and deferential shame, each inspiring distinct state behaviours. Before concluding this paper, a preliminary perspective is given on some characteristics particular to the politics that this understanding of state shame can expose.

## Shame in IR

### *Mainstream IR and the assumption of shamelessness*

Mainstream theories of IR do not consider shame to be a potential motivator in international politics. Although emotions are always implicitly present in this field's

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Adler-Nissen 2014; Towns and Rumelili 2017.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Ilgit and Prakash 2019; Koschut 2021; Bassan-Nygate and Heimann 2022.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Steele 2008; Ilgit and Prakash 2019; Koschut 2021; Bassan-Nygate and Heimann 2022; Naudé 2022.

theorization,<sup>6</sup> shame is a notable absentee in the discourse of IR's major theoretical traditions.<sup>7</sup> Theorists that ascribe to classical realism expect, to a point, that states are rational unitary actors that do not abide by international rules unless it is in their interest. This makes states fundamentally disconnected from their peers, effectively generating and justifying security dilemmas that are predicated on fear.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, as neorealists assume that world politics have an anarchic, unprincipled nature these IR scholars consider that states do, or even should, not have the restraint or ethical reflection that is believed to be characteristic of shame. Any psychological factors, after all, are marginal to variables that relate to the structure of the international system or the security dilemma.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, theories of IR such as liberal institutionalism or the English School have been more inclined to understand world politics to be subject to moral actions and emotions. The focus of IR liberalism on explaining cooperation has led to stressing the importance of moral emotions and emotional relationships between states.<sup>10</sup> Empathy, trust, and other emotions that facilitate connection are often assumed in these discussions and act as mechanisms that underlie rational considerations for international communities.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, some English school scholars have emphasized the emotional underpinnings of international society.<sup>12</sup> Building on Norbert Elias, they focus on the evolution of how emotions have come to be displayed in the response towards the harm of others. Regardless of the interest of these two IR traditions into the role of cosmopolitan and moral emotions, both do not attribute a significant role to shame.

Shame did come to figure in IR constructivism. In their seminal article on international norm dynamics, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink<sup>13</sup> argued that states follow norms that are associated with their identity because these standards for behaviour act as sources of pride and self-esteem. Social norms are, in so doing, also sustained through the punishing prospect of disapproval and stigma by others when they are violated. In short, norm-breaking behaviour among states can generate shame, guilt, and embarrassment.<sup>14</sup> This inspired research in 'naming and shaming', which is generally considered a process of 'moral consciousness-raising'<sup>15</sup> often employed by the human rights community for bringing pariah states into the fold. Yet, regardless of the emotion figuring in the literature's moniker, it is not accredited with a notable role. Although the ideal goal of naming and shaming is to make individual policymakers of targeted governments feel shame for their

<sup>6</sup>Crawford 2000.

<sup>7</sup>This stands in contrast to the discourse of preeminent classical realists and the progenitors of international relations theory, whose work is scattered with references to shame and self-conscious emotions (such as Niebuhr, Machiavelli, and Thucydides). For some texts that go a bit deeper into these claims, see Donnelly (2004, 66–67; 178–80) and Ross (2013).

<sup>8</sup>Mason 2010, 405; Crawford 2000, 119.

<sup>9</sup>Harkavy 2000, 346.

<sup>10</sup>Crawford 2000, 116.

<sup>11</sup>See Keohane 1990; Rathbun 2011.

<sup>12</sup>Linklater 2004; Navari and Green 2013.

<sup>13</sup>Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 903.

<sup>15</sup>Risse et al. 1999, 237.

transgressions,<sup>16</sup> the emotion itself is not a requirement to act upon the threat of naming and shaming to their state's status in international community.<sup>17</sup> In the naming and shaming literature, shame thus acts more as a metaphor for a state's rational reflection on its reputation costs and status management.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Ontological security, anxiety, and shame***

A growing body of work in IR considers shame to be a more fundamental notion for understanding state behaviour.<sup>19</sup> These scholars are not interested in shame in the narrow sense,<sup>20</sup> for example as it is expressed by individual leaders during public apologies or other forms of remorse but approach the emotion from a so-called macro or communitarian perspective.<sup>21</sup> This approach has most notably been used by authors that engage with the notion of ontological security,<sup>22</sup> which assumes that a state, or any actor for that matter, is primarily concerned with the need to 'maintain consistent self-concepts'.<sup>23</sup> State behaviours that are otherwise considered to be irrational, such as costly humanitarian actions or unwinnable wars, are thus understood and explained as strategies or coping mechanisms for securing a state's sense of self.

The role of shame is considered to be key in this process. This claim originates from Anthony Giddens, a central theorist for the ontological security literature, who argues that unconscious emotional commitments are inextricably linked to the experience of having a 'protective cocoon'. Although feelings of trust are essential to sustaining the latter, shame 'eats away' at it.<sup>24</sup> Giddens does not consider shame to be the negative equivalent of trust, nor does he argue that it is an experience that has to be avoided at all costs. He views shame as 'anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography'.<sup>25</sup> This experience can thus be both a potentially destructive force, as a necessary feature in the psychological development of an individual. In other words, by countering narcissistic tendencies through the necessary acceptance of imperfections and limitations of the self, the individual can develop feelings of pride or self-esteem.<sup>26</sup>

Shame was introduced in IR ontological security studies (OSS) by the seminal work of Brent Steele.<sup>27</sup> Building on the argument that Giddens puts considerable

<sup>16</sup>Friman 2015, 3.

<sup>17</sup>Weisband 2000.

<sup>18</sup>Ilgit and Prakash 2019. Moreover, Friman (2015, 44) claims that 'for the naming and shaming concept to be useful, it should not depend on the actual psychological state of the target'.

<sup>19</sup>E.g., Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010, 2011; Subotić and Zarakol 2012; Adler-Nissen 2016; Browning 2019; Ilgit and Prakash 2019; Lethi and Penannen 2020; Hagström 2021; Verleye 2021; Naudé 2022.

<sup>20</sup>As would be the case in the 'naming and shaming' literature (cf. Friman 2015, 3) or more individualist approaches to emotions in politics. See Ilgit and Prakash (2019) for an extensive critique of this approach.

<sup>21</sup>Koschut 2020.

<sup>22</sup>To clarify, the 'ontological' aspect of this name does not refer to the philosophical study of being. Ontological in this sense only denotes the sense of being, which one wants to secure by maintaining continuity of self and their surroundings.

<sup>23</sup>Steele 2008; Giddens 2006, 3.

<sup>24</sup>Giddens 2006, 67.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 69; Kohut 1971; Erikson 1993.

<sup>27</sup>Steele 2008.

weight on the need for a consistent biographical narrative,<sup>28</sup> he argues that the sense of continuity, stability, and order that an agent desires can only be achieved through constructing stable ‘stories of the Self.’<sup>29</sup> Because the stability of the agents’ narrative is a central feature to ontological security for Steele, so does the emotion that can threaten it. Analogous to Giddens, then, Steele primarily uses the term ‘shame’ as a shorthand to denote the anxiety<sup>30</sup> that originates from the disparity between a state’s self narrative and its self-identity.<sup>31</sup> In other words, state shame refers to the tension caused by an inability of a state to narrate how it sees its self. When states experience shame, according to Steele, they are compelled towards social action, or state behaviour that is commonly described as moral, humanitarian, or honour-driven. Rather than compelled by the international context, such as through the influence of norms or regimes,<sup>32</sup> these prosocial actions are considered to be rational pursuits that principally serve self-identity needs.<sup>33</sup> The origins of these actions do not lie with a challenge to the routines of the state, but instead on their ability to narrate their sense of self.

For Steele, then, shame functions as an internal, subjective motivator for states. It compels them towards prosocial actions that are believed to counter the threat to their self-identity. However, other authors have contended that state shame should not be seen as strictly internally generated and experienced.<sup>34</sup> Following Catarina Kinnvall’s<sup>35</sup> interpretation of ontological security, Ayşe Zarakol<sup>36</sup> takes a middle ground concerning the sources of ontological security, and as such, works with an approach that makes state shame more complex. Specifically, this position assumes that ontological security is a fundamental search for narrative stability about the state self.<sup>37</sup> However, states, just like individuals, always define their self through interactions with others, making self representations impossible to be separated from representations of others.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, both state self-identity and shame are co-constituted by the agent’s interrogation into its self as well as their relations to others. The self-narrative of a state is, then, both a product of domestic factors and its place in international society. Rebecca Adler-Nissen, building on the work of Zarakol, argues that this means that shame also acts as a means to reinforce the notion of normality in international order, specifically through the process of stigmatization.<sup>39</sup> More specifically, acts of shaming and stigmatization reinforce the boundaries of international norms and through this, ensure

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 10–12.

<sup>30</sup>Anxiety is considered by Giddens (1984, 61) a ‘generalized state of the emotions of the given individual’. Moreover, it is ‘fear which has lost its object through unconsciously formed emotive tensions that express ‘internal dangers’ rather than externalised threats’ (2006, 45), and generates repression and its behavioural symptoms, rather than the other way around.

<sup>31</sup>Steele 2008, 2–3; Browning 2019.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Mitzen 2006.

<sup>33</sup>Steele 2008, 2–5.

<sup>34</sup>For an overview of this divide see Krickel-Choi (2022).

<sup>35</sup>Kinnvall 2004.

<sup>36</sup>Zarakol 2010, 2011.

<sup>37</sup>Zarakol 2010, 7.

<sup>38</sup>Kinnvall 2004, 749.

<sup>39</sup>Adler-Nissen 2014, 149.

ontological security and moral cohesion for the liberal international order. How states cope with this situation is, however, varied. In effect, the expression of state shame would be indicative of the politics surrounding the country's self-image and its international status.<sup>40</sup>

The turn towards more existentialist and Lacanian-inspired OSS has driven more recent theorization towards anxiety and less on shame.<sup>41</sup> However, in contributions focussed on state narcissism,<sup>42</sup> shame is considered to be a significant emotion and these works hint at a more radical understanding of shame and its politics. More specifically, feelings of pride and shame are considered in this research as central to self-securitizing processes but mediated by narcissistic narratives of the state. Pride and shame thus define narcissistic self-identification and self-security-seeking of states but they interact in a variety of ways with state narratives.<sup>43</sup> The narrative of shame, in particular, is aimed at emphasizing the weakness of the state and the shame that this fear of inadequacy generates.<sup>44</sup> As such, the greatness of the self remains always assumed, regardless of the existence of these feelings of shame.<sup>45</sup> Shame in international politics can thus also be conceived as a narrative, rather than purely as a political emotion or a metaphor for a social mechanism. This narrative conception implies that the meaning and role of shame might be more subject to politics than is generally assumed by earlier theories in OSS. It is the central goal of this article to further explore and theorize this narrative conception of shame.

## Critique

Before going into formulating conceptual and theoretical wagers, it would serve the clarity of the argument to first stipulate its critiques against prevailing conceptions of shame in OSS. The conceptual development of shame in IR has indicated a notable change from its initial understanding as a social mechanism for interstate conformity<sup>46</sup> to a metaphor for insecurities that arise when the self-identity cannot be reconciled with past or current actions by the state.<sup>47</sup> This has brought a new understanding as to how the emotion of shame can be political in IR. Yet, as this conception is rooted in OSS theorization, it is also susceptible to the broader critiques that have been levelled against this literature. It has been claimed that OSS validates status quo-seeking behaviour by focussing on how states maintain their sense of self.<sup>48</sup> OSS has also been criticized for obscuring power relations

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<sup>40</sup>Adler-Nissen 2014, 170; Subotić and Zarakol 2012, 916. As anxiety generates a broad spectrum of emotions, it also offers more options for analysis. However, as anxiety is in itself not an emotion, but more akin to a 'mood' (Rumelili 2021; Ringmar 2017, 2018) a deeper analysis of the politics and state behaviour that follows anxiety requires dedicated theorization and conceptualization of emotions that are generated by anxiety and ontological (in)security more generally.

<sup>41</sup>E.g., Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Rumelili 2020, 2021; Krickel-Choi 2022.

<sup>42</sup>Hagström 2021; Naudé 2022.

<sup>43</sup>Hagström 2021, 5.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Ahmed 2014, 109; Nussbaum 2004; Tarnopolsky 2010.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Steele 2008.

<sup>48</sup>Browning 2016; Browning and Joenniemi 2016; Berenskötter 2020.

and ordering tactics,<sup>49</sup> and sustaining a problematic one-sided understanding of political identity.<sup>50</sup> In short, the focus of OSS on state self-securitization makes it forgo the layered politics that characterize this phenomenon.

These critiques also hold true for how state shame is conceived in this literature. The emotion acts as a central social mechanism that maintains the status quo by compelling states to secure their sense of self. They namely assume that states want to avoid this insecurity regarding their sense of self or aim to regain the validation to restore the existing situation. State shame thus leaves little room agency or as a potential site for social change. Yet, some states wilfully explore and even offer rectification for shameful episodes in their past.<sup>51</sup> Others actively engage and even celebrate past defeats and commemorate heinous crimes as a part of their state's sense of self.<sup>52</sup> There are also those states that resist this shame and actively refute it.<sup>53</sup> In effect, state shame seems a far less one-sided social mechanism than is assumed.

Additionally, three more specific critiques can be levelled against the current conception of state shame in OSS. First, it is unclear how shame relates to anxiety. Although fundamental questions have been raised regarding the latter concept,<sup>54</sup> it remains unclear whether state shame should be understood as a metaphor for a source of anxiety,<sup>55</sup> as an emotional projection following anxiety,<sup>56</sup> or as a related emotion to this more general mood.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the added difficulty of separating state emotions from state narratives that surround emotions<sup>58</sup> raises questions about the particularity of state shame and what this concept specifically denotes.

Second, the literature is in doubt whether shame, or ontological insecurity more generally,<sup>59</sup> is fundamentally contingent in nature<sup>60</sup> or if it is caused by specific events. On the one hand, the ontological security literature generally assumes that life is contingent,<sup>61</sup> implying that shame is an unforeseeable phenomenon, making its causality something that cannot be theorized upon.<sup>62</sup> On the other, there is empirical research that would suggest that there is some form of structural pattern to be discerned regarding the causes of state shame.<sup>63</sup> Certain identifiable 'external shocks', such as power transitions, scandals, global financial crises, or transnational migration, are namely believed to cause ontological insecurity, implying that this can also be the case for state shame.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>49</sup>Rossdale 2015.

<sup>50</sup>Lebow 2016.

<sup>51</sup>E.g., Branscombe and Doosje 2004; Bentley 2015; Daase et al. 2015; Bagdonas 2018.

<sup>52</sup>Hagström 2021.

<sup>53</sup>Zarakol 2011; Subotić 2018.

<sup>54</sup>Krickel-Choi 2022.

<sup>55</sup>Cf. Steele 2008, 2–3.

<sup>56</sup>Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 249.

<sup>57</sup>Krickel-Choi 2022, 7.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Hagström 2021.

<sup>59</sup>Adler-Nissen 2016, 34.

<sup>60</sup>Steele 2008, 164; Hagström 2021, 3.

<sup>61</sup>Steele 2008, 164.

<sup>62</sup>Hagström 2021, 3.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Zarakol 2011; Epstein 2012; Subotić and Zarakol 2012; Adler-Nissen 2014; Brassett et al. 2021.

<sup>64</sup>Steele and Subotić 2018; Ejdus 2018; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018, 828; Arfi 2020.

Third, the current conceptualization of state shame cannot account for the divergent and contradicting effects that it has been attributed with.<sup>65</sup> Steele argues that states are compelled towards social actions as a result of shame,<sup>66</sup> whereas other research has suggested that state shame can generate paralysis,<sup>67</sup> avoidance behaviour,<sup>68</sup> denials of wrongdoing, feelings of resentment,<sup>69</sup> hostile bravado,<sup>70</sup> or even potentially inspire interstate violence.<sup>71</sup> State shame is thus effectively subject to the constructivist problem of codetermination, namely that a concept simultaneously explains both stability and change without clarifying what drives agents to one or the other.<sup>72</sup>

Based on these critiques, it can be concluded that this concept is both unwieldy and seemingly unsubstantial. This begs the question whether state shame produces ‘a thoughtful ordering of empirical reality’<sup>73</sup> or if it generates more issues than it aims to clarify. Although this comment is reasonable, it forgoes the tangibility of the concept of state shame and its analytical and explanatory potential. More specifically, as an emotion, rather than a mood or ‘generalized state of being’ (cf. anxiety), shame is more concrete and resonates with particular empirical phenomena in world politics that are otherwise difficult to explain in a parsimonious way. Specific practices such as apologies or reconciliation work but also dynamics of violence following humiliation, bouts of policy paralysis, and historical taboos, all somehow make more sense when discussed in light of this emotion. Practitioners and observers use it more naturally and effortlessly to denote what they experience, and it would be understood when it is applied by others. In short, state shame seems to be a grounded notion in social life, a more ‘experience-near concept’ as Clifford Geertz would call it.<sup>74</sup> There is thus value in reconceiving state shame as a concept, as it provides an impetus to question what it means to apprehend and capture broader truths about world politics.

### The emotional lives of states

State shame thus ought to be reconceived. Key for this exercise is to clarify how collectives are capable of having emotions and how this relates to the affective connection between individuals and their respective group or polity.<sup>75</sup> Although there is

<sup>65</sup> A similar problem can be identified with the focus on anxiety. See Krickel-Choi 2022 and Lebow 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Steele 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Flockhart 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Lupovici 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Zarakol 2010, 2011; Browning 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Adler-Nissen 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Harkavy 2000; Saurette 2006; Browning and Joenniemi 2016; Homolar and Löffmann 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Flockhart 2016, 801; Krickel-Choi 2022, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Weber 1999, 160.

<sup>74</sup> Geertz 1983, 57.

<sup>75</sup> Koschut 2020, 79. The emotions that are attributed to the state should be analytically separated from what Hall (2015) calls ‘state emotions’. These are phenomena where state agents actually *act out* emotions, meaning that they express them in behaviour that is recognized as being emotional. State emotions are characterized by properties and feeling rules that are distinctly different from individual and popular feelings (Hall 2015, 26) and do not necessarily imply that they are shared by the rest of the population.

significant debate on this topic,<sup>76</sup> constructivist scholarship generally allows emotions and affect to play a notable role in international politics. Building on the theorization of Alex Wendt<sup>77</sup> regarding state personhood and subjectivity, these authors assume that states are ‘purposive actors with a sense of Self’.<sup>78</sup> The subjectivity of a state, or of any collective actor for that matter, consists primarily of ‘narratives, of stories that constitute our diverse experiences as those of a coherent Self’.<sup>79</sup> Simply put, states are narrative constructs surrounding a collective that positions a self against an other.<sup>80</sup> Individuals use these stories to define their membership which, in turn, constitutes their respective identities. Consequently, Wendt argues, states are unitary actors that are capable of having and feeling a sense of self.<sup>81</sup>

The narrative conception of state subjectivity is used by IR scholars to ground the claim that states exhibit attitudes similar to emotions. More specifically, a state self-narrative constitutes a ‘national habitus’,<sup>82</sup> which is an internalized set of structured and structuring dispositions that collectively limit the thoughts and behaviours of citizens.<sup>83</sup> A national habitus should not be considered as a stable and unchanging *Volkgeist* nor does it correspond with the rather vague notion of ‘national identity’.<sup>84</sup> Rather, it is a process that cannot be essentialized and serves purely as an analytical category to capture collective dispositions that are permanently changing. It is in this national habitus that the collective consciousness of the state becomes manifest.<sup>85</sup> Because of this shared subjectivity, emotional reactions can be attributed to states without them being reduced to behavioural responses by individuals. Yet, recent theorization on the state self has challenged the notion that a singular, unitary, and stable state self can manifest itself through a national habitus, and the associated collective memories and habits that support it.<sup>86</sup> Based on a variety of influences, they argue that state identity is, in fact, essentially incomplete, fragile, and deeply social. The state self is thus not a fixed, singular, or stable narrative. State self-securing then becomes a social process, i.e. ‘security-as-becoming’,<sup>87</sup> where competing narratives are used to overcome the instability and incoherence of the state self.<sup>88</sup>

If one understands that being part of a collective is something that an individual feels and does,<sup>89</sup> it can be argued that the state is spoken, written, and enacted into

<sup>76</sup>Lerner 2020.

<sup>77</sup>Wendt 1999, 2004.

<sup>78</sup>Wendt 1999, 194.

<sup>79</sup>Wendt 2004, 313.

<sup>80</sup>Ringmar 1996.

<sup>81</sup>Wendt 1999, 225.

<sup>82</sup>Subotić and Zarakol 2012, 918.

<sup>83</sup>Heaney 2013; Innes 2017.

<sup>84</sup>Malesevic 2011; Heaney 2013, 255–56.

<sup>85</sup>Subotić and Zarakol 2012, 918.

<sup>86</sup>E.g., Epstein 2011; Kinnvall 2015, 2018; Lebow 2016; Adler-Nissen 2016; Vieira 2018; Naudé 2022.

<sup>87</sup>Cash and Kinnvall 2017, 269. This is also a position that can counter the status quo bias that is common in ontological security research (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020).

<sup>88</sup>Eberle 2019; Vieira 2018; Hagström 2021.

<sup>89</sup>It is necessary to stress, however, that ‘nationhood’ in this sense does not imply that the nation is a concrete and delineable group, but rather a ‘nation-ness’ (Heaney 2013, 257).

existence.<sup>90</sup> Shared memories and habits come to act as means through which collective emotions cut across individuals and forge meaningful associations between them.<sup>91</sup> This does not assume that all state subjects share the same affective experience. Rather, the shared memories and habits constitute an emotional space where feelings towards the state exist. This space has been denoted by the terms ‘emotional’ or ‘affective community’<sup>92</sup> or ‘community of feeling’,<sup>93</sup> and denotes a site where ‘citizens enact and vicariously experience collective national self-hood’.<sup>94</sup> It is through this community of feeling that emotions regarding the state can arise and facilitate, for example, the support for a military intervention in a foreign conflict or public outrage towards a national scandal. During times of crises and conflict, individuals will be subject to feeling rules that guide them into experiencing appropriate emotions.<sup>95</sup> In effect, collective emotions, and the standards of behaviour that surround them, generate social conformity and come to shape both individual and collective bodies through their circulation.<sup>96</sup>

These communities of feeling both constitute and challenge the state’s legitimacy. Similar to the Lacanian subject, the state self is continuously produced, challenged, and reproduced through emotional dynamics and is in a permanent state of becoming.<sup>97</sup> Because the Lacanian subject always strives for ‘wholeness’ to make up for its ‘lack’, it constructs fantasies and imaginations that obfuscate their inherently split and ever-changing self.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, political actors construct, reiterate, or circulate narratives of national unity with the aim of delineating their imagined community and resonating with their respective constituents. Yet, the dominant understandings of what the state self ought to be are essentially contested in the community of feeling. This ‘arena of emotions’ acts as a site where subjects try to enact, assert, and change their understanding of the state self.<sup>99</sup> Competing political agents, such as activists, lobby groups, and politicians, attempt to build on feelings that are circulating in this arena to service their political or psychological

<sup>90</sup>Cf. Epstein 2011, 341–42.

<sup>91</sup>Ross 2006, 199; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 400.

<sup>92</sup>Hutchison 2016; Koschut 2020.

<sup>93</sup>Berezin 2002, 44–45; Williams 1993, 80.

<sup>94</sup>Berezin 2002, 44.

<sup>95</sup>Hochschild 1979; Koschut 2020, 86.

<sup>96</sup>Ahmed 2014, 15; Pettigrove and Parsons 2012, 508. As Febvre (1973, 14) puts it, ‘emotions are contagious’. They bring ‘together large numbers of people acting sometimes as initiators and sometimes as followers, finally reached the stage where they constituted a system of inter-individual stimuli which took on a variety of forms according to situation and circumstance, thereby producing a wide variety of reactions and modes of sensibility in each person’ (Ibid., 14–15). Effectively, Febvre develops an argument similar to the one that is claimed in this research, as ‘the harmony thus established and the simultaneity of the emotional reactions thus guaranteed, proved to be of a kind that gave greater security or greater power to the group; utility thus soon justified the constitution of a veritable system of emotions. The emotions became a sort of institution. They were controlled in the same way as a ritual. Many of the ceremonies practised by primitive peoples are simulated situations with the obvious aim of arousing in all, by means of the same attitudes and gestures, one and the same emotion, welding them all together in a sort of superior individuality and preparing them all for the same action’ (Ibid., 15).

<sup>97</sup>Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018; Arfi 2020, 291; Krickel-Choi 2022, 10.

<sup>98</sup>Kinnvall 2018; Eberle 2019; Eberle and Daniel 2022.

<sup>99</sup>Berezin 2002, 44–45.

needs. In effect, they reproduce rituals, memories, symbols, and narratives to mediate, neutralize, or amplify extant emotions in this community of feeling and bring the state towards particular actions.<sup>100</sup> These affectively charged and mobilizing narratives about the state can become widely and uncritically reproduced in different communities of feeling and eventually reach the status of common sense.<sup>101</sup> The goal of these political agents is, generally speaking, to influence how the state deals with political problems and steer it towards behaviour that they deem desirable.

### State shame reconceived

Shame in international politics can be reconceived by linking the previous discussion with psychological, sociological, and philosophical understandings of shame. Although these conceptions have generally been conceived with individuals' experiences in mind, they can be used as ex-ante assumptions and expectations for more macro approaches.<sup>102</sup> The starting point of this argument is the assumption that state shame denotes a particular narrative on the state. It rests on the notion that states are narrated as being subjects that are capable of experiencing emotions, regardless if they physically can. In turn, this builds on the idea that humans understand subjectivity only through how they themselves experience it. Part of the process of anthropomorphizing other actors is that emotions are projected onto them as key experiences for their formation and are conceived as significant motivations for their actions. This is how Israel can be conceived of taking 'vengeance' on Hamas for the attack on 7th October of 2024, that Germany 'feels guilty' for the Holocaust, or that Argentina was 'proud' of winning the 2022 FIFA World Cup. States thus experience emotions because they are understood as subjects that have an emotional life.

Shame can become a salient emotion regarding the state and resonate in the community of feeling. In so doing, it can circulate among members of this community so that it builds a shared sense among a significant group and comes to shape the collective body.<sup>103</sup> It is specifically projected onto the state when a dominant or unquestioned collective self is challenged. This could be, for example, a disastrous war, a widespread scandal, an economic downturn, or a humiliating loss in sports. During this moment of anxiety, an arena of emotions develops towards this existential challenge. Political agents present themselves in response to this situation as actors that can translate, arouse, appropriate, manage, and suppress emotions that circulate in the community of feeling. Consequently, shame can figure as an emotion that is being embedded in (one of the) competing narratives to describe the particular feeling that the state is, or ought to, experience. In so doing, state shame is a narrative on how the state self deals with anxiety.

<sup>100</sup>E.g., Wolf 2011, 118, 2017, 11; Hall 2015, 25.

<sup>101</sup>Solomon 2015; Hagström 2021, 6.

<sup>102</sup>Hall 2015, 32; Koschut 2020, 82.

<sup>103</sup>Ahmed 2014.

However, shame is an emotion with specific characteristics that will only be projected onto the state when it seems appropriate to a community of feeling.<sup>104</sup> The general consensus in the literature is that shame is an essentially social<sup>105</sup> and self-conscious emotion.<sup>106</sup> It is common in the literature to distinguish shame from adjacent self-conscious feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and humiliation. Although guilt is often conceived as the ‘self-punishing anger, reacting to the perception that one has done a wrong or a harm’,<sup>107</sup> shame is commonly understood as the painful feeling that focusses on a defect or imperfection of the self.<sup>108</sup> In short, the former implies that you have done something wrong, whereas the latter is the feeling based on the notion that you are wrong.<sup>109</sup> Embarrassment is often conceived as an uneasy feeling following public transgression<sup>110</sup> and humiliation as the extreme and unbearable sentiment following intentional public focus and participation in the actor’s failure.<sup>111</sup> Although contrasting these emotions is helpful, it must be noted that this analytical reduction erases some of the more elaborate features of self-conscious emotions and neglects the nuanced way in which they interact, as the borderline between them ‘seems fuzzier than one might imagine’.<sup>112</sup>

The experience of shame is commonly characterized by an intense feeling of pain, a burning sensation, a blushing face, the image of being naked, or the desire to hide and disappear. When experiencing shame, the individual assumes the view of a different actor, who makes a judgement of the self.<sup>113</sup> The view that is assumed, makes the individual see themselves as if they were this other. Put succinctly by Sara Ahmed, by feeling shame, ‘I expose to myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other’.<sup>114</sup> This connects the individual to a community where the experience of shame acts as the affective cost for not abiding by ‘the scripts of normative existence’.<sup>115</sup> More specifically, shame can inform social conformity through the ideal other’s gaze and the subsequent self-evaluation and self-reflection that it gives cause to. The focus onto the self brings individuals to self-regulating and adjusting behaviour so as to conform to these normative expectations.<sup>116</sup> However, shame does not only retroactively make individuals adjust their behaviour to this ideal other’s judgement, the memory to this painful experience also acts as a deterrent for normative transgressions.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>104</sup>This entails taking into account the particular cultural, linguistic, and historical context of said community of feeling. There are highly diverse ways to understand shame, or any other emotion, the following overview is primarily inspired by Western conceptions and Anglo-Saxon literature.

<sup>105</sup>E.g., Williams 1993; Scheff 2000.

<sup>106</sup>E.g., Tracy et al. 1995; Agamben 1999, 107.

<sup>107</sup>Nussbaum 2004, 207.

<sup>108</sup>Other conceptions of this divide give more extensive analytical arguments. See Lewis 1971, Barrett 1995, Tangney and Dearing 2002.

<sup>109</sup>Erikson [1950] 1993; Taylor 1985.

<sup>110</sup>Goffman 1956; Lewis 1995, 73–74; Tracy et al. 2007, 13–14.

<sup>111</sup>Fessler 2007, 183.

<sup>112</sup>Konstan 2006, 102; Tarnopolsky 2010, 157.

<sup>113</sup>Barbalet 2001, 103.

<sup>114</sup>Ahmed 2014, 106

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>116</sup>Tracy et al. 2007, 5–6.

<sup>117</sup>Goffman 1956.

The social and self-conscious nature of shame might also hold true for state shame. More specifically, that it is not only present during extreme moments of existential anxiety but also as a response to more common social pressures. The state is exposed to extant social hierarchies, norms, and identities in international politics. One of these dynamics is that states, and other international actors, continuously comparatively assess themselves and others, which normatively orders them into having a social status.<sup>118</sup> This position mediates the social pressures which channel their respective behaviour, both in national as well as in international politics. The performances of states and other collective actors are continuously assessed through formal (e.g. technical rankings), informal (e.g. diplomatic interactions at summits<sup>119</sup>), internal (e.g. national media), and external (e.g. reports of international non-governmental organisations) means and tools. As a reaction to negative assessments, states can be narrated as being subject to shame. This means that state shame, in a generic sense, is a narrative on how the state self is negatively judged in comparison to an idealized self or other. It is, in other words, a narrative on a negative appraisal of the state's social status.

Yet, shame is a complex emotion with multiple social and moral roles. When individuals feel shame, they are compelled towards restorative actions, which can be performed by rituals such as apologies or compensating behaviour like being intensely focussed on the desires and expectations of others.<sup>120</sup> These are primarily aimed at reaffirming the relationship between themselves and the ideal other by correcting hubristic desires and narcissistic self-conceptions or by facilitating emphatic insight into the lives of others.<sup>121</sup> In so doing, shame can inspire individuals to enact prosocial behaviour and come to a more humble notion of self.

At the same time, restorative actions can also be instrumentalized to tend to a 'narcissistic wound' without having the intended aim of restoring a relationship or generating more empathy for the other.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, shame can also give cause to ego or narcissistic defences<sup>123</sup> such as denial, undoing, isolation, sublimation, projection, and displacement.<sup>124</sup> Shame, then, does not always lead to conformity.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, it can prompt its opposite by inspiring aggressive behaviour that challenges the place of the actor in the social bond and even the bond itself.<sup>126</sup> When repeatedly and intensely experienced, shame can also generate such acute self-hatred within an individual that it can develop negative spirals that

<sup>118</sup>Towns and Rumelili 2017; Zarakol 2017.

<sup>119</sup>Telling of this is the 'international packing order' among UN diplomats. See Pouliot 2011.

<sup>120</sup>Retzinger 1995.

<sup>121</sup>Kohut 1977; Williams 1993; Tangney et al. 2007, 345; Tarnopolsky 2010; Thomason 2018.

<sup>122</sup>Nussbaum 2004; Muldoon 2017.

<sup>123</sup>Shame refutation can also take the form of flattery, in that the agent recognizes the shamefulness of the situation and assumes the view of the other in such a way that they do not reveal any inadequacies (Tarnopolsky 2010, 19).

<sup>124</sup>McAdams 1998, 1125–27; Baumeister et al. 1998. It has been argued that, when the narcissistic tendencies of the self are more compelling than the normative scripts or the ideal other's gaze, the shamed actor might consistently deal with shame in a non-conforming way, giving cause to pathological and anti-social behaviour (Kohut 1977; Morrison 1989).

<sup>125</sup>Tarnopolsky 2010, 191; Goffman 1963.

<sup>126</sup>Scheff 2000.

lead to self-effacement, self-harm, and even suicide.<sup>127</sup> These reflexes stem from the desire to end the intolerable psychic pain and suffering experienced by negative self-evaluation and to escape from the other's gaze.<sup>128</sup>

This large variety of phenomenological expressions, roles, and effects of shame compels psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers to argue against conflating it into one single concept. The rich understandings, notions, and processes that it is connected to indicate that the emotion is multifaceted in its expression. In effect, state shame as a generic concept might be too restraining as well. This would mean that there is variation in how a state shame narrative is constructed and how states deal with it. The basis of this variation can be understood in divergent ways, prompting extensive typologies that build on psychological, sociological, or ethical assumptions.<sup>129</sup> As the goal of this paper is to make state shame a suitable and broad analytical tool for IR, the choice is made to construct a typology that takes power and social interaction into account while also combining various understandings and theories.

### The state shame situation

Building on the symbolic interactionist work of Theodore Kemper and the collaboration of the latter with interaction ritual theorist Randall Collins,<sup>130</sup> Jack Barbalet proposes a model that aims to encapsulate the variety of behaviours that shame can inspire.<sup>131</sup> Here it is key to understand that Kemper considers shame to originate from status loss, especially where there is an initial expectation for status gain.<sup>132</sup> The attribution of loss, or who or what is the cause of the failure of status gain,<sup>133</sup> informs how shame is coped with. Barbalet proposes here that how a person experiences and copes with shame depends on their conception of the particular social situation that they find themselves in.<sup>134</sup> In other words, a person finds themselves in a *shame situation*<sup>135</sup> when they are confronted with a conception of self that is unaligned with their own. Following this understanding, state shame narratives are believed to bifurcate based on how political agents understand the situation that their state is placed in. This situation is made intelligible by analytically, and thus not ontologically, separating two key components that inform different means of coping with shame.

A first component is the assessing actor, or the *source of assessment*. As shame is characterized by an acute awareness of the self, it can effectively lead to a more

<sup>127</sup>E.g., Nussbaum 2004; Probyn 2005; Ahmed 2014.

<sup>128</sup>Lester 1997. The death of the self can be conceived as both a defence against as a restorative action following shame.

<sup>129</sup>Cf. Kemper 1978; Braithwaite 2000; Nussbaum 2004; Tarnopolsky 2010.

<sup>130</sup>Kemper 1978; Kemper and Collins 1990.

<sup>131</sup>Barbalet 2001.

<sup>132</sup>Kemper 1978.

<sup>133</sup>Kemper and Collins 1990.

<sup>134</sup>Barbalet 2001.

<sup>135</sup>The concept of shame situation is borrowed from Tarnopolsky (2010), who uses it to indicate the separate stages of a shame refutation. However, it is argued here that it is also suited for understanding the particular phases of any experience of shame.

entrenched notion of this self and those that supposedly belong to this in-group. Every actor that is not conceived as part of the community of feeling will be seen as an other or an agent in an out-group. Whether this actor is conceived as part of the former or the latter can significantly impact how shame is experienced and, in turn, inform the behaviour of the shamed agent. On the one hand, an actor can be assessed by an agent that is identified as part of their self or in-group. In the case of a state this could, for example, be an MP or a journalist that brings out a scathing report on human rights abuses in the state's military. A close ally could also take up this role, because friendship and trust do exist between states.<sup>136</sup> On the other, an actor can be assessed by an agent that is considered as an outsider, or as part of an out-group. For a state, a typical example could be a particular minority group that criticises how the state treats them or a non-governmental organisation that spearheads an international naming and shaming campaign against a particular policy. The sources of assessment can thus vary between *self* and *other*.<sup>137</sup>

A second component refers to whether the failure of the self is believed to be against prevailing social norms or self-ideals, or the *source of failure*.<sup>138</sup> On the one hand, shame can originate because the actor believes that they did not behave according to dominant normative scripts in their respective society. A state can, for example, observe that it transgressed international standards regarding climate change or that its representatives failed in maintaining diplomatic etiquette. On the other, shame can originate from the actor's belief that they failed some idealized notion that is considered to be an inherent part of their self. These can be, for example, imagined traits of the nation-state or prominent political relationships that the state holds in high regard. The sources of failure can thus vary between *social norms* and *self-ideals*.<sup>139</sup> The variations in these two components generate a matrix that categorizes four different types of shame narratives (see Table 1).

There are undoubtedly significant differences as to how an individual or a state manages this shame situation. It would be problematic to uncritically project it onto the state and assume that the mechanisms would work in a similar manner.<sup>140</sup> To this end, empirical research is necessary to explore the various ways in which these types of shame narratives are present. That being said, there are some considerations that can already be made regarding the level of analysis. First, when an individual finds themselves in a shame situation, they go through a moment of

<sup>136</sup>Koschut and Oelsner 2014. States are also less likely to criticize their friends and allies but if they do, the shamed actor is more likely to agree with the critique. See Terman and Voeten 2018.

<sup>137</sup>Barbalet 2001, 122. It might be a bit confusing to use *other* in this way, since an *other* can also be significant (see previous section). Yet, this particular term does link up to the process of othering that can be generated by a shame situation. For a discussion of how the *self/other* dynamic can be conceived as both dialectical and dialogical, see Der Derian (1987), Neumann (1996, 55–56), and Lebow (2008, 474–79). In general, this paper assumes that the *self/other* dynamic generates a boundary and reproduces a binary that is undeniably Western (Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013). At the same time, shame is a self-conscious experience that brings an intense focus to the boundary between self and other, effectively producing this binary in one of its most extreme forms.

<sup>138</sup>Barbalet 2001, 123; Lethi and Penannen 2020, 89.

<sup>139</sup>Barbalet 2001, 123

<sup>140</sup>Ross 2006; Hall 2015.

**Table 1.** Shame situation, based on the social typology of shame by Jack Barbalet<sup>141</sup>

	Source of assessment	
	Self	Other
Source of failure		
Social norms	Situational shame	Aggressive shame
Self-ideals	Narcissistic shame	Deferential shame

recognition and a moment of response.<sup>142</sup> States can go through similar phases but there are significant differences in timing and agency. Although the moment of recognition and reaction is often immediate for an individual, a state can be suspended in its existential anxiety for a longer period in time. This means that there is time and agency for deliberation, reflection, strategic positioning, and so on, which is less an option for an individual.<sup>143</sup> Second, individuals experience shame affectively, which is not necessarily the case with state shame. The state might be considered to be in a shame situation, yet citizens can distance themselves from experiencing shame vicariously, for example by dissociating themselves from the state or by feeling indifferent regarding the subject at hand. The state still copes with being in a shame situation for which political agents, depending on how they conceive the sources of assessment and failure, construct one of the four following types of shame narratives.

### ***Situational shame***

*Situational shame* is a shame narrative that originates from a shame situation where a failure of a social norm is negatively assessed by the self. More specifically, the actor is made aware of a norm transgression by an agent believed to be part of the self. The failure is conceived as a wrongful, but temporary, transgression that has to be understood as caused by a particular situation, rather than a wrongful intension, hence 'situational' shame.<sup>144</sup> For example, imagine going to a high-class restaurant only to notice that you fail in meeting the particular dress code that is demanded of patrons. You will feel out of place not because of a wrongful action, but because you sense that you do not belong. Although there might not be any material consequences associated with this type of shame narrative, if there are any, they are conceived as superficial or limited in their cost. Coping and ego defence strategies that can be connected to this type of shame narrative are rationalization, for example arguing that the relevant actors were unaware of the norm,

<sup>141</sup>Barbalet 2001, 123.

<sup>142</sup>Tarnopolsky 2010, 57.

<sup>143</sup>To be clear, an individual can experience shame for a long period of time. This claim only refers to the moment of perplexity, not shame in general. Additionally, it can also be argued that the timing is dependent on the type of state shame that is experienced, as the situational type is short-lived (e.g. the 2001 naval incident of the Ehime Maru) whereas narcissistic shame can extend over a couple of decades (such as Germany's reckoning with the Holocaust).

<sup>144</sup>Barbalet 2001.

and some forms of undoing, like ruminations on counterfactuals.<sup>145</sup> To cope with the situation in the preceding example, for instance, you can mention that you were not informed about the dress code or you can apologize and ruminate about how this situation could have been avoided. To be clear, this does not exclude the experiences of guilt or embarrassment but the person will still experience themselves as being out of place.

When projected onto a state, the situational shame narrative understands the state's self not to be fundamentally challenged, as the failure will not act as a permanent negative evaluation of self. However, the state's social status does need to be reaffirmed through a reparative action like an apology or a restitution of material losses. The action is aimed at getting outside respect, admiration, and recognition for the state's legitimate place in the international order, allowing it to maintain a positive self-image.<sup>146</sup> This means that the goal of the restorative behaviour is not necessarily to sympathize with the victims of their actions. An example of this could be seen in recent historical apologies regarding the colonial past of Western states.<sup>147</sup> Particularly intriguing is the apology of the Belgian state for its involvement in the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the former prime minister of Congo. In the official apology, acknowledged its 'moral responsibility' in the murder but avoided accepting any direct involvement and emphasized its current day progressive course (the apology being proof of that).<sup>148</sup> Because of the propensity to apologize or perform similar acts of remorse, this type of shame is closely connected to, and often conflated with, the experience of guilt.<sup>149</sup> The difference between a narrative of state guilt and one of situational shame can be separated by the narrative's object of concern, namely if it is focussed on the self (situational shame) or the self's action (guilt). Depending on the particular cultural context, it can be expected that guilt and shame will be referred to interchangeably in these state narratives.<sup>150</sup>

### **Narcissistic shame**

*Narcissistic shame* is a shame narrative where the actor is made aware of transgressing self ideals by an agent that is conceived as part of their self or in-group. The narrative evokes an intense realization that the shamed actor has had an inflated sense of self, which was based on narcissistic fantasies and hubristic beliefs. Although the latter initially served as a source of pride, the excessive attribution of status to the self comes to be seen as unwarranted.<sup>151</sup> For example, when someone claims to be a skilled musician (which may or may not be the case) but fumbles during a jam session, they might reconsider their self-narrative (i.e. 'being a skilled musician') or practice frantically before performing again to become what they claim to be. The narrative, in other words, recognizes the wrongfulness of the self. In so doing, it recounts the disillusionment in the self being (morally, socially,

<sup>145</sup>Baumeister et al. 1998, 1096.

<sup>146</sup>Cf. Lewis 1971; Barrett 1995.

<sup>147</sup>E.g., Bagdonas 2018; Muldoon 2017; Bentley 2015.

<sup>148</sup>Bevernage 2011; Verleye 2021.

<sup>149</sup>Konstan 2006, 102; Tarnopolsky 2010, 157.

<sup>150</sup>This was the case in the previous example given. See Verleye 2021.

<sup>151</sup>Kemper 1978.

politically, etc.) acceptable, which is characterized by an intense feeling of loss and pain. The narcissistic state shame narrative thus conceives the self as a fragile actor that is trying to reconcile with its wrongfulness.

As a narrative projected onto the state, the narcissistic shame narrative triggers a reflection on the state self and what its legitimate social position should be. In effect, this existential search can lead to a renewed state self narrative and, potentially, the active repositioning of its place in the world. It can inspire actions that aim to restore relations with other actors and make them commit to genuine care for victims as a consequence of their previous beliefs and behaviour.<sup>152</sup> An example of this type of narrative can be found in the current dominant discourse on the Holocaust in Germany.<sup>153</sup> The acknowledgement of the horrors of the Nazi past and the consequent actions towards the Jewish community and the state of Israel, resonate with this kind of narcissistic shame narrative. As the narcissistic shame narrative entails a fragile and searching state self it can give cause to such coping behaviours as isolation, to protect the process of repair, and, potentially, sublimation. This latter defence mechanism entails the transformation of a fantasy or desire into a more socially accepted activity or belief.<sup>154</sup> Because of the fragility that this shame narrative implies, there is always a need to be delicate regarding further actions and discourses.

### ***Aggressive shame***

*Aggressive shame* is a shame narrative that originates when an actor is believed to be negatively assessed by an other for transgressing a social norm, effectively challenging their place in the social and moral world. The member of an out-group or a different agent is believed to shame the self because the latter did not follow the normative scripts of international society. However, the aggression originates primarily from the idea that the self's narcissistic beliefs and fantasies are questioned by an actor that is unwarranted to do so. The negative judgement is then understood as a coercive act to challenge, even change, the self and force it towards conforming behaviour.<sup>155</sup> An example of this narrative is that of a married couple where one partner feels taunted by their significant other regarding their ability to clean the house. Because they are held up to the standards that their partner finds desirable, they feel challenged in their place in the world (i.e. they are 'pushed out of their own house') and will respond through what they feel are reciprocate actions, such as being overly fixated on the cleaning mistakes of the other. Instead of diminishing the narcissistic fantasies and beliefs, the aggressive shame narrative feeds a grandiose notion of self and the hatred for the assessing other.<sup>156</sup> Importantly, the assessing agent can effectively become constructed as an other by the aggressive shame narrative. Aggressive shame narratives namely

<sup>152</sup>Cf. Braithwaite 2000; Koschut 2021.

<sup>153</sup>There has been some discussion in philosophical debates regarding this issue between Karl Jaspers, who claimed that this position ought to be referred to as collective guilt, whereas Hannah Arendt believed that the feeling of shame is more appropriate in this regard. See Zembylas 2019, 308 on this disagreement.

<sup>154</sup>Baumeister et al. 1998, 1103.

<sup>155</sup>Barbalet 2001.

<sup>156</sup>Kinnvall 2015; Lacan, 1998.

inspire a close identification of self and the difference, even oppositeness, from the other.

The projection of this narrative onto a state would conceive the state self as treated unjustly and requires defending. This situation would be described with terms such as rage, anger, contempt, and humiliation to justify aggressive actions. In so doing, the narrative will show similarities with narcissistic rage,<sup>157</sup> namely the total lack of empathy towards the source of assessment which can be manifested as a grudge, spite, anger, or even vengeance.<sup>158</sup> An example of this type of narrative can be found in the dominant discourse of Iran regarding the condemnation of its nuclear activities by the International Atomic Energy Agency and various countries. Conceiving these threats, and the subsequent boycotts, as illegitimate and unwarranted, Iran has repeatedly escalated its nuclear programme, maintained support for proxy wars in the Middle East, and act more aggressively in the Persian Gulf regarding oil tankers and fishing vessels. As this shame narrative defends the self in the most explicit way, it also holds the more recognizable coping mechanisms such as avoidance, active refutation, externalized aggression, or hyper-criticism (i.e. being acutely focussed on how the other behaves and criticizing them on every minor misstep). Apart from these, the narrative can also inspire ego defences such as denial and projection, a mechanism that involves perceiving the other as having a negative trait that the self is – inaccurately – believed not to have.<sup>159</sup> To illustrate this with the previous example, Iranian statesmen often conceive the West, and in particular the USA, as aggressive oppressors and that any Westernization ought to be combatted to ‘return to the Self’.<sup>160</sup> In effect, aggressive state shame narratives inspire and facilitate conflict escalation and general feelings of hatred towards other groups by feeding irreconcilable narratives.<sup>161</sup>

### **Deferential shame**

*Deferential shame* is the shame narrative where the state is assessed by an other for not being committed to their self-ideals. The assessing agent is not just any actor that is not part of the in-group but one with a higher social status, which could be a parent, a teacher, a boss, or a celebrity. Their negative judgement is considered warranted and focussed on dismantling a fantasy or narcissistic desire regarding the self that is believed to be false.<sup>162</sup> In effect, the deferential state shame narrative conceives the actor as deficient and unworthy of pride. The self is thus narrated in a manner that agrees with the gaze of the idealized other and, as such, can lead to the relinquishing of a part of the dominant conception of self.<sup>163</sup> For example, when someone who conceives themselves as progressive is shamed for expressing

<sup>157</sup> Although it is not evident to analytically separate the particular dynamics of shame induced hatred with that of other forms, the general assumption is that aggressive shame is primarily centred around securing the sense of self.

<sup>158</sup> Kohut 1971; Morrison 1989; Harkavy 2000.

<sup>159</sup> Baumeister et al. 1998, 1090.

<sup>160</sup> Horemans 2023, 172.

<sup>161</sup> Cf. Lewis 1971; Retzinger 1995; Scheff 2000; Harkavy 2000; Pettigrove and Parsons 2012.

<sup>162</sup> Barbalet 2001.

<sup>163</sup> Morrison 1989, 63.

racist views, they will conceit to this claim. If the deferential shame narrative is, however, often repeated and becomes part of the common sense of the actor, it can develop into a stigma. In so doing, deep-seated feelings of inferiority towards other individuals or groups will be sustained.<sup>164</sup> In giving up their sovereignty of narrating their own self, whether formally or informally, there are no specific actions or coping mechanisms that can be connected to this particular narrative. However, the assumption can be made that it informs a general sense of melancholia<sup>165</sup> and resentment.<sup>166</sup> In effect, the shamed actor can come to resent their presumed inferior position and develop feelings of animosity towards the shaming actor, effectively breeding an aggressive shame narrative. Following the previous example, the formerly progressive actor might come to resist the negative judgement of them being racist and, potentially, develop more reactionary views as a result of that.

The deferential shame narrative, if it is projected onto a state, would entail the negative judgement of the state self by an actor that is conceived to be superior, for example a regional hegemon, an idealized country in the past, or an international leader like the Pope. In response, the state submits itself to the will of the other and acts in a way that mirrors the latter's desires and expectations. This narrative would express a form of submission towards this judgement, through explicit or implicit acknowledgement of the inferiority of the state self or dominance of the other. The deferential state shame narrative would be present in its most extreme form in conquered states or polities that have been aggressively coerced into specific behaviour. Post-Second World War Japan was, for example, occupied by Allied forces and needed to rescind its self-narrative on military strength and imperial expansion. This situation was experienced as humiliating, especially paired with the economic hardship that followed and the pacifism that Japan had to abide by. Similar to a stigma, deferential shame does not, however, necessarily lead to the internalization of the idealized other's gaze.<sup>167</sup> As the state comes to conceive their position to be radically different from the idealized other, they might come to hold the notion that they can never amount to the same standard. In effect, such a difference might fuel reflection of the own position and can develop into a source for later refutation of the deferential position. This resentment might fuel an aggressive state shame narrative that ends up challenging the other and feed a new state self-narrative based on antagonistic, narcissistic fantasies and desires. Following the previous example, in recent years Japanese nationalist groups have come to resent the pacifism and the subservience to the USA, effectively aiming to reassert their understanding of the Japanese state self. The deferential state shame narrative thus sustains subservience but also contains the fuel for its own transformation.

### The politics of state shame

The narrative understanding of state shame, and the theorization that the conceptual framework generates, is an analytical tool that sheds light onto complex and

<sup>164</sup>Goffman 1963; Adler-Nissen 2014.

<sup>165</sup>Cf. Gilroy 2005.

<sup>166</sup>Cf. Scheff 2000.

<sup>167</sup>Adler-Nissen 2014; Zarakol 2014.

interlinked processes. It describes how such shame narratives could operate and provides insight into why states might behave the way they do when they encounter a shame situation. Additionally, the typology offers an insight into the politics of state shame. In artificially crystallizing political dynamics, the typology exposes when and where power is introduced and makes its mark. One of the central aims of an empirical analysis of state shame would be to determine when structural power comes into play, how political agents can enforce agency, and how state shame can lead to political change. However, some aspects of these dynamics can already be qualified based on the literature and the previous discussion.

First, the sources of assessment and failure can be reframed by political agents. The latter are capable of shaping who is conceived as a self or an other through a variety of discursive strategies such as scapegoating, vilification, or identification.<sup>168</sup> Similarly, sources of failure can be discursively framed as externally imposed social norms but also as inherent to the state or particular community of feeling.<sup>169</sup> The interpretation of the shame situation can thus act as a site of agency for political actors. However, there are limits to the amount of leeway that the shame situation allows. That the sources of assessment and failure are discursively constructed, and can thus be de- and reconstructed, does not mean that they are easily adjustable or are allowed to be adjusted without difficulty. Notions of self and other, and prevailing social norms and self-ideals are deeply ingrained social constructs that are linked to the national or group specific habitus and their particular memories and habits. Political agents who want to change sources of assessment and failure thus encounter robust notions that are profoundly obvious and familiar to many. How this negotiation takes place will be one of the principal focal points of empirical analysis.

Second, structural inequality and hierarchy in IR mediates how states cope with a shame situation. What this means for the narrative competition is that, for one, social status can determine the tenacity of narcissistic beliefs and desires regarding the state self.<sup>170</sup> A great power state or hegemon will, for example, have a more grandiose conception of self and thus more confidence and trust regarding its own assessment. In the opposite case, a lesser or subaltern power can be coerced in accepting the negative appraisal out of fear for severe repercussions, which can effectively lead to structural shaming or stigma.<sup>171</sup> Moreover, a state's historical relationship can also influence how they receive international negative assessment.<sup>172</sup> If the state conceives itself as being at the 'heart' of the liberal international order, for example, they will concede more quickly to social pressures following international criticism. Negative past experiences with international society or a

<sup>168</sup>To be clear, othering is a complex process and can serve many purposes in that 'persons will identify positively with some aspects of other person' identities and will seek to emulate these "desirable" qualities' but 'it may still be possible for a person to reject some aspects of an other with whom it identifies positively, criticizing this very same other for their perceived faults' (Naudé 2022, 67–68). For more on the connection between scapegoating and shame, see Girard (1989, 155).

<sup>169</sup>Although political agents might not make this difference as clearly in empirical reality as is assumed here, this analytical perspective on the source of the wrongdoing is still helpful in the overall analysis of state shame.

<sup>170</sup>Hagström 2021; Naudé 2022.

<sup>171</sup>Adler-Nissen 2014; Zarakol 2014.

<sup>172</sup>Zarakol 2011; Subotić and Zarakol 2012.

subaltern position in it can, in contrast, lead to a proneness of shame refutation. However, because of the focus on narratives and how political agents frame them, the theory presented here is far more agency-focussed. Rather than expose more structural elements of political conflicts, this type of perspective works best when it either builds on structural assumptions or forgoes them completely. Nevertheless, empirical analyses can focus on how these international status tensions figure in and inform state shame narratives.

Third, state shame narratives can bring about both political change and sustain the status quo. Although political identities or discourses might not be infinitely malleable, the shock of having a challenge to the sense of self can offer an opportunity to reimagine alternative understandings of how the world works.<sup>173</sup> It allows for a hybrid position in a liminal space where boundaries that were previously placed are questioned and can be realigned.<sup>174</sup> Shame, in this sense, can be considered a revolutionary emotion.<sup>175</sup> However, the potential for change that a moment of existential anxiety offers does not need to be overstated, as existing narratives always constrain the capacity for adaptation.<sup>176</sup> It is for this reason that ‘change is only possible to the extent that it can be accounted for within one’s biographical narrative’,<sup>177</sup> a narrative that is, at the same time, continuously rewritten and reshaped to accommodate present needs.<sup>178</sup> To sum up, existential anxiety, and by extension state shame, can act as a precondition for both change as for maintaining a status quo.<sup>179</sup>

Finally, the ethical roles of state shame are particular to the context. Both IR and the literature on the politics of shame has a problematic penchant to simplify shame’s inherent moral ambiguity by only emphasizing the ‘dangerous’ or the ‘necessary’ role of shame in social life.<sup>180</sup> It is equally problematic to argue that there would be a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ form of shame in political life,<sup>181</sup> as this Manichean categorization severs the emotion’s moral role from its particular social context. In so doing, it is assumed that state shame, or any emotion for that matter, has the possibility to be both vicious or virtuous in politics regardless of its phenomenological characteristics.<sup>182</sup> For example, narcissistic state shame challenges unfounded beliefs and narcissistic fantasies about the state’s self but this would not necessarily imply that the new sense of state self is morally ‘good’. A state narrative could be imbued with notions of humility and modesty, but could equally

<sup>173</sup>Kinnvall 2015, 164; Zembylas 2019; Untalan 2020.

<sup>174</sup>Bhabha 1994.

<sup>175</sup>Cf. Marx [1843] 1967; Deleuze 1995; O’Donnell 2017.

<sup>176</sup>Subotić 2016; Vieira 2016; Eberle and Handl 2020; Krickel-Choi 2022, 8.

<sup>177</sup>Krickel-Choi 2022, 14.

<sup>178</sup>Lebow 2016, 24.

<sup>179</sup>Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 247.

<sup>180</sup>Tarnopolsky 2010, 7.

<sup>181</sup>Cf. Nussbaum 2004. Ironically, Tarnopolsky (2010), on whose work this critique is based, falls in the same trap by designating ‘flattering shame’ and ‘Socratic respectful shame’ to be less fortuitous in politics than the more balanced ‘Platonic respectful shame’.

<sup>182</sup>Cf. Tarnopolsky 2010, 6; Locke 2016, 169. To be clear, the argument is not that devastating and painful emotions such as humiliation or disgust are morally desirable. The reasoning follows a more sociological position, in that emotions play a complex role in social and political life and their ethical meaning should be interpreted according to their particular context rather than from a universalist principle.

lead to an exaggerated sense of unimportance that makes them withdraw from international politics altogether. Situational state shame might be fitting for an accident at sea between two navies, yet is completely inappropriate regarding a past genocide. Similarly, deferential state shame can be considered ethically warranted in response to an international naming and shaming campaign, or problematic when it is seen as the result of prolonged stigmatization. Although aggressive state shame might be questionable in most cases, it may have merit in the situation where a superpower tries to shame a smaller state into compliance.<sup>183</sup> Consequently, understanding the politics of state shame does not mean identifying whether a state copes with the shame situation in a 'good' or 'bad' way but focusses on how states deal with state shame and how political agents attempt to influence this.

## Conclusion

The central goal of this paper has been to make state shame a more suitable tool for IR. To this end, it gave a conceptual and theoretical overview of how shame has been conceived in IR, in particular by OSS, and criticized the concept's current use. Rather than understand the concept to be unwieldy and untenable, the paper presents a novel conception of state shame that entangles insights from IR, social psychology, and sociology. More specifically, the central argument is that state shame should be understood as a negative narrative on the social status of the state. Depending on how political agents understand the particular shame situation that their state is placed in, four types of narrative can develop as a result to cope with the negative self-conception. The typology consists of situational shame, narcissistic shame, aggressive shame, and deferential shame and relegates diverging state behaviours to each of these four types. In effect, the proposed conceptual framework provides insight into the particularity, causality, and effects of state shame, effectively countering the critiques that have previously been levelled. The politics surrounding state shame are argued to be characterized by the active reframing of the sources of assessment and failure, the role of international hierarchy, the ability of all state shame narratives to bring about both political change and sustain the status quo, and the contextual nature of the ethics surrounding state shame.

In proposing this novel conception of shame, the current paper contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it develops upon a relatively obscure concept that has acted as an implicit or taken-for-granted assumption in multiple literatures on international norm dynamics, status, stigma, and ontological security. Second, it interacts with the specific debate on ontological security's productive, yet problematic, focus on self-securitization by decentring and transcending the dichotomic ontological security–insecurity conception. Although the reconfiguration of shame does not resolve this particular issue, it does offer an insight into the politics that ground collective self-narration and, as such, can inspire an approach that surpasses the determinism embedded in the ontological security literature. Finally, the paper also contributes to the broader academic debate on the politics of shame by

<sup>183</sup>Cf. Pettigrove and Parsons 2012.

discussing how this emotion is political on higher levels of analysis while not using an anthropomorphic perspective.

Rather than conceiving this conceptual work as a finished exercise, the framework that has been presented here should be seen as a starting point for understanding what lived practices and meanings state shame can come to hold. Rather than solely ‘test’ this conception and assess whether it corresponds with reality, empirical research can engage with the claims that have been presented here and come to more nuanced or situated conceptions of state shame. It could problematize the Western understanding of shame or elaborate on additional types of state shame narrative that are obscured by the four dimensional framework that has been argued. Future theoretical work regarding this concept can also focus more on further elucidating the various types and linking them to broader theories and observations in international politics. In so doing, it could provide insight into the various state behaviours that can be inspired by state shame and reveal its politics in a more substantive manner.

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