

# Rezension *Review*

Vanderheiden, Elisabeth / Mayer, Claude-Hélène (Eds.)

*„The value of shame: Exploring a health resource in cultural contexts“*

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His higher education focused East Asian world religions and philosophies (B.A.), counseling across cultures (M.Div.), and interdisciplinary studies in the social sciences (ABD) at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education.

His four careers have evolved through 11 years of counseling foreign students at Cornell and Stanford universities, 8 years of teaching intercultural communication at Stanford and the University of Hawaii, and 30 years of intercultural business management consulting in 13 countries in Asia, Europe, and North America. He has published widely in each of these areas.

He also founded the Stanford Institute for Intercultural Communication (SIIC), the Clarke Consulting Group (CCG), and cofounded SIETAR (1971) and SIETAR Japan (1984).

## Introduction

This volume provides a convincing argument that western perspectives of psychology and psychotherapy offer only one way of perceiving identity and social development that may not be effective in other cultures around the world. It seriously questions assumptions about universalisms of personal identity concepts, human emotions such as shame, and healthiness.

Open-mindedness and intellectual humility are predecessors to the paradigm shifts advocated by this book's editors. The first shift is from the concept of health and wellbeing as the absence of disease to positive perceptions of emotions as psychological factors that are a potential health resource for individuals and societies. This definition of health has been changed to a "state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing, and not merely [as] the absence of disease or infirmity" (p. 4). Hence, positive psychology is grounded in the studies of shame in culture-specific contexts where a positively judged condition of shame can contribute to building personal growth and community development.

The second shift is from perceiving cultural differences as liabilities to an

understanding of the assets inherent in the uniqueness of each culture and an acceptance of how its members perceive healthiness of individuals and societies.

This shift is based on the editors' definition of culture as "historically derived and socially transmitted ideas (e.g. symbols, language, values, and norms) and practices (e.g. rituals, mores, laws), as well as artifacts (e.g. tools, media) and institutions (e.g. family structure)" (p. 24). A third definition is of shame as "a culturally embedded concept and as a resource which can support the personal and collective growth of individuals and cultural groups, thereby creating mental health and wellbeing" (p. 3).

The aim of this book is to synthesize empirical research-based and theoretical perspectives on shame in various cultural contexts and from socio-cultural different perspectives, to provide new insights and a more comprehensive cultural base for contemporary research and practice in the context of shame. (p. 2)

The editors and their twelve contributors are highly qualified as researchers and practitioners with careers in Australian, Indian, South African, New Zealand, Northern American, European, and other countries. They are professionals in various fields in psychology,

psychotherapy and health education who work with individual clients and with groups. Some are immigrants living in countries not of their origin, some work with indigenous peoples and with low socio-economic status patients, with diversity management and leadership development. They have published results of their studies and work in multiple professional journals. Their profiles are outlined in the volume, pages xiii to xvii. The editors are dedicated to publishing upcoming studies in shame, empathy, errors, mistakes, and failures, and love, each from a positive psychological perspective and in a variety of cultural contexts. This work makes a significant contribution to the efforts of discovering healthy approaches to the emotion of shame in the context of multiple cultures.

## Content

The authors discuss multiple definitions and functions of the two concepts of culture and shame and how they relate to embarrassment, guilt, fear, and pride in alternative cultural contexts. While providing a comprehensive literature review of shame research from mostly Western scholarship that is grounded in a pathological perspective of shame, the authors provide a clear review of the more limited positive psychology studies of shame that focus on the last two decades. These discourses on shame in various cultures are often grounded in the question of the differences between the goals of the individual versus the collective. These differences are expressed in perceptions of independent personal identities and self-actualization in individualist-oriented cultures. However, in collectivist-oriented cultures shame serves as a guide for integrating into a group and society as a whole with a greater appreciation of harmony. In this volume's research, collectivistic cultures value shame as being more positive and individualistic cultures perceive it as more negative. Hence, adaptation is more relevant in collectivistic

cultures while self-expression is more valued in individualistic cultures. There is more shame in the failure to achieve the harmony of the collective, than in the failure of the individual's personal expression to the collective. All of these factors impact the negative and positive perspectives on shame in cultures around the world. This is particularly true in my perspective of psychology in Japan and the U.S., the two countries where I have worked in counseling and coaching organizational executives throughout my professional career.

I support the authors' position that the emotion of shame may be universal but its experience, perception, expression, and function are quite different across cultures in specific social contexts (p. 23). Shame is understood in the context of specific times in history, in each gender, generation, religion, status, educational level of achievement, physical ability, language, ethnicity, nation, ideology, in the extent of one's experience outside of one's own country of citizenship, and in an organization's collective culture, i.e., a corporate culture. All of these and more are elements and expressions of culture. In this book there are references to cultures of nations, indigenous peoples, ethnicities, history, gender, and religion but in a relatively limited number that the book leaves the reader thirsting for more in-culture-context examples.

This volume integrates different psychological perspectives and approaches, including moral and spiritual references to shame, social and literary approaches, as well as culture-specific insights gained from Australian, Indian, South African, New Zealand, Northern American, European, and other cultural contexts. The book's three sections explore: (1) theoretical perspectives of shame and culture, (2) culture-specific perspectives of shame, and (3) applications of shame and culture in therapeutic and counseling practices. I will review here just a couple of chapters, one from section 1 and one from section 2 on Indian concepts of shame.

In the book's first section on theoretical perspectives, author Thomas Ryan explores the positive role of shame from moral and spiritual perspectives. The author draws upon relevant works from Thomas Aquinas. His aim is to provide evidence of individuals who have transcended social shame in their spiritual (individual) and social (collective) lives. Ryan first examines the relational functions of shame in which our sense of identity and social inclusion depends on our behavior being socially acceptable. Emotions like shame, guilt, honor, and pride are all personal indicators of our perception of others' judgments of our behavior, thus showing the relational nature of emotions. He utilizes data from mother-baby interactions that stimulate those emotional reactions in the baby to demonstrate how early in life humans evolve these emotions from interpersonal interactions. His discussion examines the context of cross-cultural relationships, an affective response and the process of evaluation—of self and others in relation to moral, educative and spiritual dimensions of shame (p. 89).

His second focus directs us to the role of convictions and virtue ethics, including shame – a concept from Aristotle and developed by Thomas Aquinas. To Aquinas convictions are held in light of one's virtue ethics, which include the central emotion of love as expressed in charity and compassion. Aquinas' views converge with Ryan's three aspects of shame (relational, affective and evaluative) but are primarily seen in the context of love in a theological framework (p. 90). Apart from Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas was an early expositor of a positive psychology of shame and its role in personal and social development. Ryan's inclusion of Aquinas' references offers insight from a source perhaps unfamiliar to a majority of readers. I particularly found Ryan's footnotes resourceful for readers who enjoy deeper insights.

Ryan's third focus is on the educative dimension of shame in two forms: the

personal and the collective. He discusses shame in correlation with honor in the personal educative aspect. Here too he represents Aristotle and Aquinas' treatment of shame regarding its correlation with honor. "Honor and shame are social responses—one to moral goodness, the other to a failure to live up to that" (p. 93). Ryan suggests that the correlate of shame is honor, which is the desire to be in union with the beloved other. Therefore, the beloved one can honor the one who feels shame by communicating with acceptance, respect, and charity, thus enabling the healing power of the collective. Ryan advocates this collective process as "an occasion in which human limitation [of shame] is transformed through the presence and the power of love" (p. 96).

For the collective educative aspect Ryan describes three examples of group learning as related to shame and injustice between cultural traditions in the Australian context. He identifies other traditions with virtues that function similarly, in particular the Confucian tradition, which he perceives as having relative cultural equivalence to the western virtues, of propriety (as in western love), righteousness (as in western justice), shame (as it serves righteousness), and benevolence (as in western compassion and love). With an emic point of view from the eastern perspective, I wonder if those whose first language is Chinese, Japanese, or Korean would see the same equivalence as is seen from an etic perspective. This western psychology pattern of seeking the universality of core assumptions and interpretations that exists in parallel in other cultures has been predominant throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. It is not constructive from an eastern perspective and has often been challenged by those with other worldviews. Ryan demonstrates with examples how a culturally dominant individualistic culture can collectively heal from generations of guilt and shame brought on by earlier colonization of a collectivistic culture of indigenous peoples. The dominant

culture channels their collective shame by acting with restorative justice for the cause of reconciliation and healing between the two cultures. "Shame, as an educative force, is a morally praiseworthy emotion expressed as our affective responsiveness (and responsibility) to those who have suffered injustice" (p. 100-101).

Ryan's fourth focus is the spiritual dimension, which has to do with integrating one's life with the ultimate value that justifies one's existence. Such a goal is ipso facto moral in nature. Ryan suggests that this starts with the individual rather than the person in the context of relationships. Such non-relationship thinking of one's search for oneself is grounded in the individualistic culture perspective that differentiates between individuals and the roles they play in society. In collectivistic cultures, all individual thought is couched in relationships. To think otherwise only leads to utter despair in isolation and can lead to complete social withdrawal and suicide. From the collectivistic culture's perspective one's self must always exist in the relationship context otherwise there is no harmony, only an existence not worth living. This is why the western concept of self-actualization apart from the community, or personal empowerment apart from the community, is so foreign and inconceivable to the collective culture members. It destroys harmony and promotes conflict in society. Individualist cultures' members for the past fifty years have expressed needs for sensitivity, attentiveness, and mindfulness training workshops, as well as synergistic thinking for successful leadership training. From an eastern perspective these are the necessities for survival and the avenues toward harmony, the ultimate value collectively held. It seems increasingly obvious with the global movement toward multiculturalism that cultures no longer exist in a vacuum and every culture has its own mixture of all cultural perspectives. Cultures are always changing as a result of the ongoing "multiculturaliza-

tion" processes. Hence, there is a need for researchers to focus on the intercultural dynamic between cultures and not solely on culture-specific investigations.

Ryan suggests, "If shame is to provide a stimulus for changed behavior at the cultural level, there must be an underlying cognitive and affective shift" that includes attentiveness and intentionality to act in response to shame (p. 103). I would conclude that this challenge is appropriate to persons with an individualistic cultural perspective. A similar challenge to the collectivistic culture would be to include members of other cultures into their own communities, rather than to think of them as outsiders and strangers, which is a pattern inherent to collectivistic culture members. From an individualistic culture perspective, I appreciate Ryan's perspective and insightful approach to exploring the deeper meanings of shame as a potentially positive and resourceful emotion for intercultural contexts. He approximates a balancing of perspectives.

In the book's second section on culture-specific perspectives on shame, Dharm P.S. Bhawuk describes the Indian concept of Lajja, or shame. As one with experience growing up in the eastern culture of Japan and studying religion, philosophy, and psychology from Eastern perspectives, I found this chapter quite refreshing and suitable for its representation of two of the core theses of this book, that cultural context must be appreciated when considering concepts of shame and guilt and that therapies must be designed to be appropriate in different cultural contexts. Bhawuk clearly presents the essential differences of eastern and western cultural perspectives of shame through his psycholinguistic, religious, psychological, and philosophical analysis of sanskrit and hindi scriptural texts, as well as in urdu and in a modern hindi epic. He applies these perspectives to the interpretation of modern day conversations and proverbs that serve to elucidate the values and perspectives of this eastern culture. He

examines both external and internal elements of shame and guilt and suggests a synthesis that challenges the distinct and non-overlapping constructs of shame and guilt in western cultures. These eastern concepts offer an alternative view of how human behavior evolves through these emotions and provide an eastern perspective of a more inclusive global psychology. Rather than a western dichotomous view of human emotions, the eastern concepts of harmony and inclusion open up a unifying and healing approach to interpreting human emotions in a way that provides a balancing and inclusion of what appear in the west to be distinct and separated. Lao Tsu's well-known integration of the yin and the yang in perfect balance has grounded many eastern perceptions of natural and constructive human emotions that represent a positive psychological perspective centuries ago, even many centuries before Aristotle.

As Lajja or shame is the key to approaching the other 26 virtues, it is also “the inner impediment guided by scripture or cultural norm of appropriateness that leads one to act appropriately. It is a mental process that restrains a behavior or another mental process, i.e., a thought or desire” (p. 119). In other words, allegiance to the practice of all the other virtues can be achieved by yielding to the guidance provided by shame, i.e., shame opens the door. This represents a long history of practicing positive psychology – cultivating shame rather than avoiding it because it leads to individual and community practices of the virtuous life. The underlying definitions present a view that shame “works as both an internal and external preventive mechanism (internal: one does not feel good about not doing an appropriate behavior and feels bad about doing an inappropriate behavior; and external: one is guided by what others would say if one does not do what is expected of the person and if one does what is not expected of him or her)” (p. 121).

I was impressed with the use of shame

revealed in the literature. Bhawuk's reference to fourteen psychosomatic expressions of shame that arose emotions at the beginning of an arranged marriage relationship helped me understand the same social practice that exists in many other Asian cultures. I had always wondered about the source of values that kept arranged marriages together in eastern cultures and now I understand how shame becomes our guide through appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Bhawuk reports that in daily usage shame is utilized within the parables and sayings of the culture. I have found such sources in my work with kotowaza (proverbs, parables, sayings, or idioms) in Japan – U.S. relationships to be equally informative as such parables and sayings offer a moral guide for members of each culture throughout history. They provide excellent guides to intercultural interactions when utilized in intercultural training programs. I was excited to see Bhawuk's utilization of similar artifacts of culture to convey meaning from each culture to another. In eastern cultures at least, such kotowaza are powerful reminders of the value of shame and other emotions, i.e., humility, in maintaining harmony for healing in social relationships. Such a positive interpretation of shame “works both as an internal and external preventative mechanism, mediating desire and action” (p. 130). Bhawuk concludes with some applications of how this eastern perspective of shame could be very constructive in and between other cultures when working toward a global psychology for both individuals in relationships and organizations. I am convinced that indigenous constructs offer us in any culture some very helpful insights into expanding our thinking and behavioral repertoire for professional therapeutic counseling.

## Conclusion

Shame can become a key ingredient in reinforcing socially acceptable behavior through an awareness of authenticity,

integrity and congruence both within the individual and the collective, and can contribute positively toward an acceptable social value system and norms. Shame can contribute to the resilience of a person by enhancing the ability to attach meaning to the social environment and to experience a sense of belonging and protection by self and others. Thus, “shame becomes a powerful regulative of the individual and of the collective, and initiates lifelong learning, growth and development” (p. 32). As one who has practiced intercultural counseling and intercultural management coaching for fifty years, I strongly support the paradigm shift recommended in this book as essential in enabling clients in ways that develop personal and organizational growth. New insights from socio-culturally different perspectives of identity and group development can be found in the differences between individualist and collectivist contexts whereby individuals can learn to be productive members in organizations and in their new roles. Applying positive psychology rather than pathological concepts of shame can be more effective when the contexts are the drivers of these new insights.

However, even positive psychology is fraught with challenges in identifying emic insights if the counselor, therapist, or researcher is dependent on an etic approach to discovering new psychological concepts, based upon culturally biased instruments, especially when dealing with identity development and emotions, such as shame. Acceptance of alternative cultural value systems and norms can assist practitioners and researchers alike to benefit from efforts to develop context-based effective methodologies and instruments with greater relevance and sensitivity to the positive qualities of shame outside of their culture-bound perspectives.

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