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# Shame and Humiliation: From Isolation to Relational Transformation

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## **About the Authors**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is a discussion of shame and humiliation that goes beyond individualistic perspectives, offering a broader, relational analysis of these profound and complex experiences. In addition to defining and examining the harmful consequences of various forms of derision and degradation, the authors explore clinical encounters with shame and humiliation, present a case, and describe relational practices that can transform shame and humiliation into opportunities for growth and greater connection.*

## **A Relational Conceptualization of Shame and Humiliation**

### **Linda Hartling, Ph.D.**

While most of us can think of at least one occasion in which we felt shamed or humiliated, in many instances these types of experiences are difficult to identify, difficult to acknowledge, and difficult to express. To recount experiences of shame or humiliation, we risk revisiting painful images of being devalued, disempowered, or disgraced, perhaps triggering or reinforcing further feelings of shame. Yet, below our immediate awareness, these experiences can have a profound and enduring influence over our daily behavior. Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver note that “we become so fearful of engaging others because of past neglects, humiliations, and violations...we begin to keep important parts of our experience out of connection. We do not feel safe enough to more fully represent ourselves in relational encounters” (1995, p. 1). Experiences of shame or humiliation—including experiences of being scorned, ridiculed, belittled, ostracized, or demeaned—can disrupt our ability to initiate and participate in the relationships that help us grow.

To begin examining the painful impact of shame and humiliation, we must call upon our best relational practices to create a context in which clients feel safe enough to represent their experiences. These practices include:

1. **Listening and Responding:** Experiences of shame or humiliation often alienate and silence individuals, in extreme cases, leading them into what Jean Baker Miller describes as “condemned isolation” (Miller, 1988). To overcome the silence and disconnections induced by these experiences, Judith Jordan reminds us that, “In real dialogue both speaker and listener create a liveliness together and come into a truth together. Dialogue involves both initiative and responsiveness...”

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(1989, p. 3). Within a context of responsiveness—a context of listening and responding—we offer clients an opportunity to feel safe and to fully represent their experience.

2. **Mutual Empathy:** Mutual empathy not only entails empathizing with a client's experience, but it also encompasses empathizing with the client's *strategies of disconnection* (Miller & Stiver, 1994), the strategies that may have allowed the client to survive sometimes unimaginable, dehumanizing encounters with others. Moreover, mutual empathy means identifying and empathizing with *our own* experiences of feeling shamed or humiliated as well as our personal and professional strategies of disconnection, which can interfere with our ability to be fully present and engaged in a relationship.
3. **Authenticity:** The practice of authenticity is about being authentic in a way that facilitates the growth of our clients. It is not about self-disclosure, but about being fully present and engaged in the relationship, a point made clear in the Stone Center paper, "Therapist Authenticity," (Miller, Jordan, Stiver, Walker, Surrey, & Eldridge, 1999).
4. **Movement Toward Mutuality:** Shaming or humiliating interactions can thrive within a context of dominant-subordinate relationships (i.e., non-mutual relationships) in which one person holds the power to degrade another. By moving toward mutuality, we are moving away from the power-over dynamics that promote and perpetuate shame and humiliation (see Jordan, 1986).
5. **Humor:** One relational practice that many of us use, but rarely acknowledge, is the practice of humor. Humor can be an effective method of disarming or neutralizing some feelings of shame or humiliation, specifically, humor in the form of taking ourselves lightly and laughing with each other about vulnerabilities and imperfections that make us unique relational beings.

These are only a few of the relational practices that can potentially bridge the disconnections caused by shame or humiliation. All too often, shaming experiences have taught clients that safety lies in disconnection and separation. Relational practice invites clients back into relationship and offers them the opportunity to find healing through connection.

### From a Separate Self to a Relational Perspective

Shame and humiliation, along with guilt and embarrassment, belong to a family of emotions that

have been referred to as the *self-conscious emotions* (Tangney & Fischer, 1995). They are called the self-conscious emotions because they cause us to reflect upon ourselves; we become *self-conscious*. However, this view is based on a traditional perspective that emphasizes a separate, independent self as the primary unit of study (Jordan, 1989). If we expand our understanding to incorporate a broader, relational perspective, experiences of shame and humiliation might be described as causing us to reflect upon *ourselves in relationship*. Therefore, it might be more accurate to say that these emotions make us *relationally-conscious*, which is most obvious when shame or humiliation serve as precursors to disconnection or rejection.

Relational/Cultural Theory (R/C Theory) offers us the opportunity to move beyond separate-self analyses to an awareness of the relational dynamics of these experiences. Throughout this paper we will describe and expand a relational perspective to achieve a deeper understanding of shame and humiliation.

### A Relational Understanding of Shame

The word shame comes from a variety of European words that literally mean "to cover, to veil, to hide" (Wurmser, 1981, p. 29). The literal meaning of the word is consistent with the individual responses associated with shame, e.g., feeling exposed, avoiding eye contact, wanting to hide or withdraw. Examinations of shame found in the literature often describe this emotion as an experience of the self, a failure of being, a global sense of deficiency, or a failure to achieve one's ideas (Lewis, 1998). The literature recognizes shame as an intense, enduring experience that affects the whole self.

Applying a relational perspective, Judith Jordan defines shame as "a felt sense of unworthiness to be in connection, a deep sense of unlovability, with the ongoing awareness of how very much one wants to connect with others" (1989). Further, Jordan suggests that shame diminishes the empathic possibility within a relationship, cutting off the opportunity for the individuals engaged in the relationship to progress toward mutuality and authentic connection. All of us can likely recall feeling isolated or cutoff from others after experiencing some form of shame. Jordan brings our attention to these relational dynamics. While separate-self analyses acknowledge shame as an intense, enduring experience involving the whole self, a relational perspective significantly enhances our understanding, suggesting that shame is an intense, enduring experience, involving one's *whole being in relationship*.