A Role for Shame in Communication Ethics

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Keynote Address
for the
Seventh National Communication Ethics Conference
Western Michigan University

May 31, 2002

For shame! I feel so ashamed of myself! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Shame on you! That's shameful! Have you no shame? You are absolutely shameless! These phrases and feelings represent some of the typical roles that shame has played in the past in our culture. For the most part, such judgments seem to be downplayed in current culture. Jean Bethke Elshtain, Professor of Social and Political Ethics at the University of Chicago, describes a predominant cultural attitude toward shame (Elshtain, 1995, p. 69).

> My late friend Christopher Lasch was right to claim that much of what is disturbing in contemporary democratic life is the result of what he called 'the triumph of therapeutic culture' – the idea that the wider culture exists only to minister to our individual needs and wants. . . . One of the promises of therapeutic culture is that shame can and should be banished. This is a mistake. I think that 'the boundary of shame' has an important place in culture.

Elshtain supports the "accurate, honest, and authentic" presumption "that there are some things that are simply shameful, even if the <u>boundary</u> of shame is different for different cultures." Carl Schneider, a psychotherapist and theologian, notes that "popular magazines and journals regularly bring us new psychological theories urging that we realize our true humanity by divesting ourselves of guilt and shame." But he argues that "shame is not a 'disease'; as we shall see, it is a mark of our humanity" (Schneider, 1977, pp. xiii-xiv; also see Schneiderman, 1995, pp. 48-50).

Can some conception of shame be legitimate as a part of communication ethics? This is not a topic that has been much on the mind of scholars writing about communication ethics. As an index item, "shame" does not appear in the four general communication ethics textbooks that span three decades, including the first four editions of my own. Nor does shame appear in the index of the three organizational communication ethics textbooks, nor in the index of the numerous media and journalism ethics textbooks I have examined. There are a few isolated exceptions to this neglect. Although textbooks on interpersonal communication also seem not to treat shame as relevant, Harold Barrett's book, <u>Maintaining the Self in Communication</u>, describes a central positive role for shame in ethical development (1998, pp. 5-6, 56-58, 93-94, 181, 262). Molefi Asante, an African-American communication scholar, not only laments the decline of civility in contemporary society, but also condemns the "trivialization of shame" (Asante, 1995, pp. 12-15). A major exception to the general neglect of shame by communication scholars is a lengthy essay, "Messages of Shame and Guilt," published in 2000 in <u>Communication Yearbook 23</u> (Planalp, et al., 2000).

Despite this downplaying of shame and neglect of a role for it by most

communication scholars of ethics, articles spanning the '70s, '80s, and '90s in such diverse sources as the New York Times, Harper's, The Nation, Newsweek, and National Review urge the rehabilitation of shame as a legitimate ethical force in society. Consider the titles of these essays: "Long Live Shame! (Hoffer, 1974); "There's No More Shame" (Kaus, 1982); "For Shame" (Lasch, 1992); "In Praise of Shame" (Lapin, 1995); and "The Return of Shame" (Alter and Wingert, 1995).

The issue of shame does surface from time to time in the news. For example, two liberal critics condemned President Reagan for being "literally shameless when it came to the question of factuality" (Green and MacColl, 1987, p. 11). A syndicated political columnist condemned President Clinton for "routine and unending deceptions" on matters not only of personal behavior but also on public policy. The columnist concluded: "What inhibits most people from routine lies is a sense of shame. Clinton seems to lack this" (Samuelson, 1998). And Clinton belatedly did say in one of his speeches of public apology: "I am profoundly sorry for all I have done in words and deeds. . . . Quite simply, I gave in to my shame" (Clinton, 1998).

Shame as a Contested Concept

Shame as a human emotion is a contested and controversial concept in such fields as anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, and moral philosophy. Some of the major disagreements focus on definitional characteristics, on its differences from guilt, on whether it is a legitimate concept in ethics, and whether shame plays positive or negative roles (or both) in human moral development (Deigh, 1983; Gilbert and Andrews, 1998; Gilligan, 1976; Isenberg, 1949; Katz, 1997; Kekes, 1988; Kellenberger, 1995; Lamb, 1983; O'Hear, 1976-77; Planalp, et al., 2000; Scheff, 1995; Tangeny and Fisher, 1995). The current dominant negative focus in psychiatry and psychology is on shame as a corrosive, self-destroying pathology or as a threat to a person's fragile self-esteem (Broucek, 1991; Lansky and Morrison, 1997; Karen, 1992; Miller, 1996; Morrison, 1996; Nathanson, 1987; Nathanson, 1992; Nussbaum, 2001; Wurmser, 1981). For example, Andrew Morrison views shame as an unhealthy burden on the self. He emphasizes the relation of shame to such feelings as failure, inferiority, defectiveness, unworthiness, incompetence, passivity, despair, unlovability, and low self-esteem (1996, pp. x, 10, 22-57). Melvin Lasky and Andrew Morrison observe: "Often the hidden dimension, shame has been called the 'veiled accompaniment' of such clinical phenomena as widespread and divergent as narcissism, social phobia, envy, domestic violence, addiction, identity diffusion, post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation, masochism, and depression" (1997, p. xv).

Normal or Situational Shame

In contrast to such negative pathological emphases, I urge consideration also of what some call normal or situational shame (Karen, 1992, pp. 42, 58, 62; Nussbaum, 2001, p. 218). I am thinking about the view of philosopher Gabriele Taylor who sees shame as an emotion with positive roles in moral self-assessment and self-protection (1985, pp. 53-84; also see Boonin, 1983). Normal or situational shame includes the following dimensions. Shame is a feeling or emotion we experience when something we do or say (or fail to do or say) falls short of or violates our own basic moral character. We recognize that our behavior is less than expected by our own ideal moral self or image of our self at our best ethically. It is thus that the phrase, "I am ashamed of myself," takes on meaning. Of course our ideal moral self image is constructed by us over time under the eyes of others in the context of group or cultural norms that we accept or reject. In shame we feel like hiding or avoiding. A normal or situational sense of shame is a kind of moral compass to help us monitor the ethics of our behavior. The feeling of shame need not be an all or nothing matter. We may experience degrees of shame. Because persons are not perfect and in order to be a healthy emotion, shame should not persist indefinitely or be universalized by us to make us ashamed of all our behavior. Shame as a moral concept can stimulate us to more closely approximate our ideals as long as they do not demand impossible perfection. A sense of shame can help us avoid ethically dubious behavior in the future (Morris, 1976, pp. 59-63; Piers and Singer, 1953, p. 11; Thrane, 1979a).

Shame as Central to Ethics

Let us consider some philosophers, psychologists, and psychiatrists who see shame as central to human ethics (for example, Greenspan, 1995; Gibbard, 1990, pp. 135-140, 145, 295-300; Hanson, 1997, pp. 165-168; Liszka, 1999, pp. 12-39). While recognizing the scholarly emphasis on the pathologies of shame, Schneider contends that such studies have traced such pathologies "without simultaneously bearing witness to the constructive role played by shame in moral development" (1987, p. 200). In his book on shame, Schneider emphasizes the worth of shame as an "integral dimension of human experience" and as a "resource in the journey toward individuation and maturity." For him, shame is not solely a problem to be solved or eliminated (1977, pp. ix-xviii). In the social ethics of Agnes Heller, shame is "the only inborn moral feeling in us," cannot be overcome or eliminated, and should not even if we could (1985, pp. 6, 53; Heller, 1988, pp. 99-100). Gary Thrane argues that not all "shame reactions are infantile or unhealthy" and that the human "liability to shame is now seen as an inevitable by-product of the loving construction of the self. Identity and individuation are protected by the fear of shame" (1979b, p. 339). "The liability to shame," contends Thrane, "is the price we pay for knowing what we are, for

knowing what we admire, and for wishing the two to be one" (1979a, p. 161).

Peter French believes that to be without a sense of shame, to be shameless, is bad morally and that shame "is a virtue or very like a virtue. Having some shame seems to be morally obligatory" (1989, p. 343). Robert Solomon describes a complex web of emotions or moral sentiments that stimulate our sense of individual and social justice. He gives shame a significant role. To feel shame about not doing something we ought to do, or about something we did but ought not to have done, may contribute to our realization that an injustice must be rectified. To be shameless, Solomon believes, "is a profound vice, perhaps the worst of all vices" (1989, p.67).

Shame is not just an emotion "appropriate for earlier epochs"; it is essential to a sense of justice (Solomon, 1990, p. 296). Aaron Ben Ze'ev provides an excellent summary concerning a significant role for shame in ethics (2000, pp. 527-529):

> Shame is probably one of the most powerful emotions for moral behavior. . . . Its emergence indicates that some of our most profound values are violated. Shame prevents many people from behaving immorally and from losing their own self-respect. . . . [Shame] expresses the fact that we care about this norm and this caring is commendable from a moral point of view. . . . The presence of shame, which expresses our basic values, is helpful in maintaining human dignity and integrity.

Even among the psychiatrists and psychologists who focus their research on the pathologies of shame, some recognize a central role for normal shame in healthy human ethical growth (Gilbert, 1998, pp. 78-79, 225, 228-229; Morrison, 1984, p. 86; Morrison, 1996, p. 15; Wurmser, 1981, pp. 64-67). Donald Nathanson, for example, believes that a developed sense of ethics implies a "healthy awareness of shame – not too much and not too little." If we choose to reflect on our shame, we can learn from it. We can "decide to use this particular moment of shame as a spur to personal change – an unexpected opportunity to make ourselves different" (1992, pp. 308, 327, 460). Nathanson reminds us (1987, pp. 194-195):

> Yet shame is not a disease. Rather it is a mark of our humanity. We are valuing animals, and shame plays an important role in our system of values, despite the fact that what is valued changes from generation to generation. The importance of shame cannot be overlooked. . . . It is shame that protects our privacy, just as the sense of shame can draw us more deeply into our own spaces to determine if our actions and attitudes are acceptable to our personal morality.

Feminist Perspectives

Of course we must bear in mind that unwarranted shame and pathological shame routinely work to the disadvantage and detriment of persons who (because of class, race, or gender) are marginalized, trivialized, demeaned, or ignored by society as inferior or defective (Planalp, et al., 2000, p. 47). Some feminists discuss the harmful effects of shame on women in our culture (Bartky, 1990, pp. 83-98; Jamieson, 1995, pp. 77-88; Starhawk, 1987, pp. 176-179). But several feminist scholars who stress the generally negative effects of shame on disempowered and marginalized women also argue for a legitimate role for shame in the moral life of privileged and empowered women (for example, see Fisher, 1984). After examining the ways in which guilt and shame have functioned to subordinate women, Elizabeth Spelman (1991) argues that shame should remain a valuable element in feminist ethics. Her argument on this point warrants extended quotation (pp. 228-229):

> Feminist ethics, I have been insisting, must at least address the history of woman's inhumanity to woman. This part of the history is shameful. However, I am not proposing a daily regimen of shame-inducing exercises. Nor do I think that deep self-doubt that is part of shame can serve as the immediate ground of a vibrant feminist politics. . . . But I do not see how women who enjoy privileged status over other women (whether it is based on race, class, religion, age, sexual orientation, or physical mobility) can come to think it is desirable to lose that privilege (by force or consent) unless they see it not only as producing harm to other women but also as deeply disfiguring to themselves. . . . Seeing myself as deeply disfigured by privilege and desiring to do something about it may be impossible without my feeling of shame. The degree to which I am moved to undermine systems of privilege is closely tied to the degree to which I feel shame at that sort of person such privilege makes me or allows me to be.

Shame and Moral Conscience

The centrality of normal shame to ethics also has been argued by connecting a sense of shame with a sense of moral conscience (for example, Langston, 2001, pp. 127-128; Miller, 1996, pp. 33-34; Seidler, 2000, p. 89). Few go as far as Virgil Aldrich who not only gives shame a central role in ethics but also <u>equates</u> shame with conscience and describes shame as the "voice of conscience" (1939, pp. 59-60). Some see shame as one important aspect or dimension of conscience. Communication scholar Michael Hyde introduces his book, <u>The Call of Conscience</u>, by saying: "Indeed people whose lives are

uninformed by conscience are otherwise known as psychopaths. Such people cannot be trusted, for they lie without compunction, injure without remorse, and cheat with little fear of detection. . . .Forget about such things as guilt and shame, compassion and fairness, duty and justice" (2001, p. 1). Ben-Ze'ev contends that the "feeling of shame . . . can bear witness to an uncorrupted conscience; and such a person is better than one who is both wicked and shameless" (2000, p. 528). Gershen Kaufman concludes: "Shame is an innate universal affect which has inherently adaptive, and therefore distinctly positive, features. Shame is crucial to the development of identity, conscience, and a sense of dignity" (1992, p. xii). Several scholars make an even tighter linkage between shame and conscience. Although his research focuses on the pathologies of shame, Morrison states that because "the threat of shame can serve to maintain a moral level of behavior aimed at preserving a good image of the self, I believe that it can serve as an instrument of conscience" (1996, p. 14). In his overview introduction to a special issue on shame in the American Behavioral Scientist, Thomas Scheff concludes: "Shame signals serve not only to keep the right distance from others but also to establish a moral direction for our behavior. What is called 'conscience' is constituted not only by cognition but also by emotion." Feelings of shame in anticipation of our actions "serve as an automatic moral gyroscope somewhat independently of moral reasoning about consequences" (1995, p. 1057).

Public Shaming Arenas

Now I turn to various arenas in which intentional public shaming can occur and to some of the issues concerning public shaming. We should bear in mind at the outset the warning in the entry on "shame" in a recent encyclopedia of ethics: "The act of invoking shame is itself a moral question and should be approached with moral care. For example, while there may be good cause to say, 'You should be ashamed of yourself for stealing from your parents,' there may not be good cause to say, 'You should be ashamed of yourself for crying'" (Shame, 1999, p. 248).

First we turn to the arena of criminal justice where public shaming has resurfaced in recent years. In fact "over the last decade judges have been reviving shame-based sentencing in pockets across the country, doling out alternative punishments designed to humiliate the criminal and send a stern message to the public" (Deardorff, 2000, p. 18). Some judges have required offenders to display their crime using "scarlet-letter type signs, bumper stickers, or clothing." In lieu of jail time, in a North Carolina city a shoplifter stood outside the victimized store with a sign describing her crime. Some city governments place derogatory signs in front of slum buildings to shame the owners (Deardorff, 2000, p. 18). In an attempt to cope with prostitution, some cities have purchased space in local newspapers to publish the names (and sometimes mugshots) not only of convicted prostitutes but also of clients caught seeking sex

for money (Targeting, 1995, p. 24; also see Alter and Wingert, 1995, pp. 21-25). On the one hand, proponents of shaming say it should not "be used on everyone but is worthwhile if it keeps people out of jail, acts as a deterrent, rehabilitates the perpetrator, and satisfies the victim." On the other hand, critics of shame-based punishment contend that it "causes psychological damage and that crime should be stigmatized, not the criminal." Shame-based sanctions in Illinois have been invalidated by higher state courts (Deardorff, 2000, p. 18).

Public shaming also surfaces in citizen letters to the editor of newspapers and in citizen opinion columns. One citizen condemned the comments by professional basketball player Dennis Rodman that attacked Mormons and their religion. This citizen argued that "public figures holding court in public places must meet some minimal standards of decency, or must be held to account for failing that basic test. . . . That is exactly what we should do now. The kind of bigotry that Dennis Rodman showed deserves public shaming now" (Lipson, 1997, p. 27). Another citizen chastised the television networks for the proliferation of reality-based shows, such as "Survivor," that promote such survival skills as lying, cheating, backstabbing, exploitation of others, and survival of the fittest at all costs. Laments this citizen: "What a national shame" (Johnson, 2000, p.11). A letter writer condemned the Chicago Tribune for publishing in the sports section a lengthy feature article describing how a father and son shot a leopard during an African safari. The writer judged: "Hiding in a blind waiting for an unsuspecting animal is an act of cowardice, something that should bring a feeling of shame, not pride" (Martineau, 2001, p. 18). After the September 11 terrorist attacks, a letter writer condemned Americans who turn hatred on others because of their religion or ethnicity and thus lower themselves to the level of the terrorists. The writer concluded: "Don't bring shame on America" (Downs, 2001, p. 16). Another letter writer took issue with a reporter's column that faulted President Bush's speech to the nation on the evening of the terrorist attacks for being awkwardly worded and delivered. The writer felt that these were trivial matters in light of the massive loss of life and the heroism of rescue workers. This writer opened her letter by stating simply: "Shame on James Warren for writing a column criticizing President Bush's speech" (Bogart, 2001, p. 22). "George Bush's use of American children to raise money for the children of Afghanistan is nothing but a shameless political ploy," asserted a letter writer (Taylor, 2001, p. 18) who questioned: "How many Afghan children have died as a result of our dropping bombs on them?"

Political columnists comment on shame. Concerning the detailed public exposure of Bill Clinton's sexual behaviors, Leonard Pitts, Jr., observed: "Who in history – Nixon included – has ever been so roundly and profoundly humiliated? . . . Who has ever been so thoroughly shamed?" (Pitts, 1998, p. 19). On the same day in the same paper, John Kass noted that while Clinton was on the telephone with a congressman, Monica Lewinsky testified that "Clinton unzipped himself and she did her duty." Kass concluded: "He is without shame" (Kass, 1998, p. 3). In a lengthy article in Harper's, Robert Kaus condemned the

corruption and unethicality of Washington influence peddlers. In the 1960s and 1970s, he believed, "there was something, less formal than law, that at least held corruption in check. This was a public morality and its disciplinary mechanism, shame." However, as of 1982, he noted sarcastically: "Breath free, Washingtonians. There's no shame anymore" (Kaus, 1982, pp. 9, 11, 15).

Figures in the political lime-light also use shaming. In her moving speech to the 1992 Republican National Convention, Mary Fisher, an HIV-positive middle-class white wife and mother, tried to bolster the spirits of AIDs victims who found little support around them. "It is not you who should feel shame, it is we. We who tolerate ignorance and practice prejudice, we who have taught you to fear. We must lift our shroud of silence, making it safe for you to reach out for compassion" (Fisher, 2000, p. 170). In his 1995 presidential campaign speech attacking sex and violence in the entertainment media, Bob Dole warned: "But those who cultivate moral confusion for profit should understand this: we will name their names and shame them as they deserve to be shamed" (Dole, 1997, p.246). Republican House Majority Leader Richard Armey condemned President Clinton as a "shameless person" concerning Clinton's sexual behavior (Barbs fly, 1998, p. 3).

Of course corporations and other organizations utilize and are targets of public shaming. Planalp and her colleagues have examined at length both the positive and destructive ways in which organizations employ shame or are targets of it. I will not attempt to summarize their analysis, but I urge your to read their excellent treatment (Planalp,2000, pp. 27-38). Here I will simply offer four additional examples. Philosopher Peter French (1985; also see French, 1986) advocates the use of what he calls "The Hester Prynne Sanction" against the legal and ethical misdeeds of corporations. This would involve court-mandated and supervised adverse publicity and advertising describing the corporations's misdeeds and punishment. The adverse publicity would be financed out of the offending company's advertising budget, published and aired in appropriately visible outlets, and produced by an advertising agency not employed by the corporation. French believes that such a scarlet letter of shame is an appropriate threat to a corporation's prestige, image, and social acceptance. He contends: "[T]he imposition of the Hester Prynne Sanction on a corporation broadcasts a corporate offender's behavior, thus arousing (1) appropriate social contempt, (2) a recognition of failure to measure up, and (3) the kind of adjustments to operating procedures, policies, and practices that are required for the corporate offender to regain moral worth both in its own eyes and those of the community"(p.25). A month after the terrorist attacks of 9-11, an irate reader of the Chicago Tribune argued (Fournier, 2001, p. 18): "United Airlines Chairman and Chief Executive James E. Goodwin's announcement that UAL 'will perish' is nothing but shameless pandering in the wake of the September attack against our country. United's problems stem from long-term mismanagement of its core business, at the expense of quality

employee relations and customer service."

Media scholar Marvin Olasky (1985/1986) has urged public shaming of public relations practitioners for ethical lapses. If the Board of Directors of the Public Relations Society of America expels a member, Olasky believes that the board should publicly explain "the reasons for the expulsion, with names named. PRSA would thus bring shame into play." In addition, says Olasky, there is a need for individuals, organizations, and the media to monitor the ethicality of public relations practice and through exposure "help to restore a sense of shame" (pp. 45-46). Cees Hamelink (2000), an international media scholar, notes with approval: "Amnesty International cannot hand out prison sentences to those who violate human rights. However, its politics of shame and exposure is certainly effective and provides a good deal of protection for victims of human rights violations" (p. 192).

The reasoning of those who advocate the use of public shaming for varied purposes perhaps is best captured by Alter and Wingert (1995): "In other words, the restoring of a sense of shame is only partly about today's miscreants. It's more about tomorrow's – the ones who might grow up in a world where the moral boundaries are clearer. And it's ultimately about the law abiding as much as the law-breakers – the moral compass of a nation. . . . If the public believes that those who transgress will be called to account, its cynicism may ease a bit. That would make a little finger pointing more worthwhile" (p. 25).

Shaming in the Classroom

Whether it is termed public shaming or private interpersonal shaming, one of the most controversial uses of institutional shaming is in the classroom. To what degree is shaming focused on ethical issues an acceptable educational method? Although he uses the term guilt, in his book, Educating for Character, Thomas Lickona actually describes the role of situational, normal, or constructive shame as a moral feeling necessary for full development of a sense of conscience. Constructive shame, he believes, says "I didn't live up to my own standards. I feel bad about that, but I'm going to do better." In addition, Lickona argues that development of the capacity for constructive shame "helps us resist temptation" (Lickona, 1991, pp. 56-58). Now consider the personal example reported by legal scholar and social critic Stephen Carter in his book, (integrity). He reflects on a childhood chastisement he received for cheating.

> I do remember that I was made to feel terribly ashamed; and it is good that I was made to feel that way, for I had something to be ashamed of. The moral opprobrium that accompanied that shame was sufficiently intense that it has stayed with me ever since, which is exactly how shame is

> supposed to work. As I grew older, whenever I was tempted to cheat . . . I would remember . . . the humiliation of sitting before my classmates, revealed as a cheater (Carter, 1996, pp. 3-4; for a hypothetical but similar experience, see Schneiderman, 1995, p. 246).

In her 1992 address to the Second National Communication Ethics Conference, Josina Makau condemned the use of shaming as a classroom teaching technique because it undermines a student's development of critical or liberatory consciousness. Her conclusion warrants quotation at length.

> Inherently unloving and authoritarian, shame inhibits the achievement of authentic self-awareness, growth, and nurturant connectedness. Used primarily to control, shame reinforces external, often arbitrary standards of judgment, inhibiting the likelihood of achieving authenticity. Shame jeopardizes the development of a natural spiritual sense of connection, caring, and empathy. As a result, shame inhibits the development of perhaps the most essential elements of critical consciousness, critical and empathetic understanding (Makau, 1992, pp. 7-8).

In 1996 in the pages of the journal, Communication Studies, Makau disagreed with Lawrence Frey, Lee Artz, and their colleagues at Loyola University of Chicago about the relationship of a sense of shame, a sense of justice, and classroom shaming (Frey, et al., 1996). She objected to privileging justice "over other virtues such as love, compassion, care, sensitivity, and connection." She recognized that shame has been utilized by educators to "explore prejudice, unreflective acceptance of privilege, or other modes of belief and conduct often associated with societal patterns of injustice and inequality." She contended, however, that although "shame has been associated with developing a social justice sensibility, it is arguably an anathema to cultivation of an ethic of love and care." Makau asked the Loyola scholars, would they "condemn shame as an 'appropriate emotion' to be cultivated in communication classrooms?" (Makau, 1996, pp. 135-136). The Loyola scholars replied that they agreed that cultivation of shame "is an inappropriate goal in our classrooms." Nevertheless, they argued that "recognition by students and teachers of their own complicity in creating and perpetuating social injustice may invoke a feeling of shame." And certainly if "shame is evoked in classroom situations, it is incumbent on all involved to move beyond such a feeling toward constructive activity that might alleviate the shame and its sources" (Pollock, et al., 1996, pp. 147-148).

In her 1998 keynote address to the Fifth National Communication Ethics Conference, Makau contended that while "there may well be an appropriate role for shame in the broader study and understanding of communication ethics, there is no appropriate role or use for shame in the classroom." She argued that classroom shaming "has great potential to undermine our efforts to inculcate an ethic of love and care, of respect, and of compassion for all, and little prospect for contributing to the fulfillment of these outcomes" (Makau, 1998, p. 6). However, discussions by Makau with some of the participants during the course of the conference led her to conclude: "As a result of these dialogues, I am less confident that my unequivocal and unqualified view on this issue is warranted, and I look forward to future opportunities for exploration" (Makau, 1996, p. 6, note #2). Here I would extend Makau's call and urge further examination of situational or normal shame as an outcome of classroom shaming (for example, see Tombs, 1995).

Ethical Guidelines for Shaming

Planalp, Hafen, and Adkins (2000) suggest five ethical guidelines for using messages of shame and guilt. I adapt them for our further consideration of the ethical use of shaming in public and in the classroom. First, what grounds for shame should we encourage or discourage through such messages? Some grounds for shame may be accepted generally, such as lying, cheating, stealing, physically hurting others, or neglecting close relationships. Other grounds for shame appear less important or actually harmful, such as "not owning certain consumer products, wearing socially inappropriate clothing, having less-than-ideal body shape or size, being of a devalued race or ethnicity, being a survivor of a disaster or downsizing, being a victim of a crime, being poor, or being disabled." But some grounds may be more uncertain or controversial, such as "performing inadequately at work, failing to repay a loan, gender bending, gossiping, being on welfare, the sins of our forebears" (pp. 52-53). Second, to be most constructive and least damaging, where appropriate shame should be acknowledged privately and publicly. Acknowledgment of shame promotes reflection about its grounds and consequences, minimizes its "conversion into self-protective or other-blaming rage," minimizes perpetuation of shame in the guise of "blaming, insulting, or demeaning others," and promotes (especially through apology) the "psychological and spiritual healing" of both the transgressor and the victim (p. 53).

Third, in terms of enhancing or damaging self-esteem in the long run, shame messages should be rooted in standards that are realistic (not set too high or too low) and that are clearly explained considering the level of understanding involved (pp. 53-54). Fourth, to what degree does the person or group being shamed actually have control over the grounds of the shame? To be ashamed for ones sex, race, or disability hardly seems ethical. Also determine when shaming seems to serve a person's selfish goals through controlling others

rather than the nurturing of collective values. For example, do "I shame my class for not doing reading because I want them to try harder to learn or because I am irritated about having to lecture?" (p. 54). Fifth and finally, messages of shame should promote rather than undermine the connections and relationships "among people and between people and the larger society." For groups and society to cohere, shame must "coexist with honor, pride, and loyalty." Compassion and caring must be integrated with "just and responsible shaming" (pp. 54-55).

Conclusion

Philosopher Bernard Williams (1993) reminds us of the essential role of normal or situational shame in our lives. "By giving through the emotions a sense of who one is and of what one hopes to be, it mediates between act, character, and consequence, and also between ethical demands and the rest of life" (p. 102). As I conclude my examination of a role for shame in communication ethics, let us consider Aristotle's discussion of shame and shamelessness. In the context of Aristotle's theory of virtue ethics, or character ethics, shamelessness is always bad. To be without the capacity for shame, to be without a sense of shame, is undesirable. Shame can act as an ethical restraint on wrong actions. Both always feeling ashamed of everything and never feeling ashamed of anything are states of character to be avoided (Aristotle, 1941, pp. 959, 961, 1001-1002, 1392 [1107a, 10-14; 1108a, 30-34; 1128b, 10-34; 1383b, 12-21]; also see Palmour, 1986, pp. 284-299).

In light of Aristotle's discussion, we can understand better the urging of Stuart Schneiderman (1995) that our search should be for a "reasonable mean, one that avoids suggesting that we need never to feel shame and that we need always feel it" (p. 55). In a somewhat similar vein, Planalp and her colleagues warn of the "danger of two extremes: ignoring the value of shame and (re)acting against shame unwisely" (Planalp, Hafen, and Adkins, 2000, p. 55). The issue of whether there should be a legitimate role for shame in communication ethics is captured in a final question I pose: Is there literally nothing anymore that persons could speak, write, or depict for which they justifiably should feel a sense of shame?

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