

Shame, Humiliation, and Humility: How Human Rights Ideals Impact their Roles in the Continuum of Balance and the Continuum of Toxicity

Evelin Lindner, 2012

Reflections in response to H  l  ne Lewis questions in connection with her work on shame.

Dear H  l  ne, let me begin with pointing at two kinds of basic continuums. First, there is a continuum of maximisation, and, second, a continuum of balance (if you find alternatives expressions, dear H  l  ne, please let me know!).

The continuum of maximisation is a continuum of “extremes are good.” The continuum of balance, in contrast, is a continuum of “too much” versus “too little.” The continuum of maximisation has two variations. One indicates “the more the better,” the other points at “the less the better.” The latter might also be called the continuum of minimisation or toxicity.

The continuum of maximisation of “extremes are good,” or, alternatively, “more is better” or “less is better,” is a one-directional continuum. This continuum is relatively easy to grasp and act on. In the case of “less is better,” for example, it can operate with the archaic flight reflex of “get away”! Unlimited greed would be a case of “more is better.” Both extremes are sometimes being sequenced. Bulimia, for example, would be a combination of both, first “fill yourself as much as you can,” followed by “empty yourself as much as you can.” Our contemporary economic arrangements indicate “accumulate as much as you can,” followed by “throw away as much as you can so that you can buy new things.”

The continuum of balance is much more demanding to grasp and act on, since it is a continuum of “too much” and “too little.” In this continuum, simply “getting away” would be too simple. The post-apartheid South Africa that you refer to, dear H  l  ne, and other similar social contexts, can serve as examples: feeling inferior and being ashamed of feeling inferior, might be “thrown out” too much when one wishes to resist humiliation, and the other extreme, namely, shamelessness, may be the result.

Since continuums of balance between “too much” and “too little” are more difficult to live with and manifest than continuums of maximisation, they often are mistaken for continuums of maximisation. People often apply the wrong continuum because it is simpler, they act on the continuum of “extremes are good” in places where they ought to act on the continuum of balance. As a result, people go from one extreme to the other: people who wish to get away from one extreme, may fall into the other extreme. This happens because what is appropriate in a one-directional continuum of “more is better” or “less is better” is too simple-minded in a continuum of balance. For example, when we have “too much shame,” we might say, “let us have less shame,” yet, we will arrive at shamelessness if we forget that there is something called “too little” shame. Or, when we have “too much government,” we might say “we want total freedom! No government!” and will arrive at a situation    la Somalia when we forget that total freedom is freedom for the bullies to take over, and that only “just right” government can provide freedom for all, or freedom understood as an even playing field for all. Unity in diversity is another example, people believe that unity means uniformity without diversity, and forget that both, unity and diversity can be maximised if balanced against each other.

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Also humiliation might be misplaced into the wrong continuum. Prior to the emergence of human rights ideals, acts and systems of humiliation were regarded as part of a continuum of balance: a white supremacist thought it to be prosocial—and not obsolete at all—to create shame and humility in his underlings of colour by way of humiliating them. There was a kind of “right amount” of humiliation to be meted out: a person, to be a “good underling” in the eyes of a dominator, needed to be humiliated sufficiently to be a willing tool in the hands of the dominator, albeit not humiliated to the degree that he or she would not anymore do anything, or, to say it poignantly, “a dead slaves was no longer a good slave.” This is different in a normative context of human rights, in a context that calls for equality in dignity and rights, where acts and systems of humiliation are now posited in a continuum of toxicity. Only feelings of humiliation continue to play in the continuum of balance, see Lindner (2007).

In other words, the human rights refolution (he term *refolution* was coined by Timothy Garton Ash, who drew together *revolution* and *reform*) changes the nature of the continuums within which humiliation and shame are posited. There is no longer any “too little” with respect to acts and systems of humiliation: zero humiliation is what is needed. Only the case for feelings of humiliation remains in the traditional continuum. We need feelings of humiliation if we want to stand up against abuse; feelings of humiliation are the very emotional fuel of the human rights revolution. Feelings of humiliation give us the strength for what Paulo Freire calls *conscientization*—Freire (1970), Freire (2004). In other words there is a difference between acts and systems of humiliation, on one side, and feelings of humiliation, on the other side.

Also in the case of shame, there are two different kinds of shame, what Linda Hartling calls the *trait* and the *state* of shame. Humiliation, when accepted, leads to shame, which leads to meek subservience or the “trait” of shame, a dynamic that was skilfully used by white supremacists in South Africa to maintain their arrogation of supremacy. They regarded this dynamic as highly prosocial for their purposes. However, after the dismantling of apartheid, this kind of shame is no longer seen as prosocial, it is now rejected as antisocial, and, as a consequence, indeed, it is less of it is that we want today! In a human rights inspired context, shame is regarded as negative and antisocial when flowing from humiliation.

Yet, there is also another kind of shame, what Linda calls the state of shame. This is the kind of shame that is positive and prosocial when it keeps society together. In this case, too little shame is “bad” or antisocial because we do not wish to live in a shameless society. In this case, shame has nothing to do with humiliation, it does not flow from humiliation. And it is also not humiliating to feel shame, on the contrary, we may even be proud to live in a virtuous society where people are able to feel this kind of shame.

In other words, human rights ideals have moved acts and systems of humiliation, together with shame flowing from humiliation, from the continuum of balance into a continuum of toxicity. But, not all kinds of shame are part of this transition, prosocial shame remains posited in a continuum of balance: while some people may have a disposition to be too easily ashamed and would need to be more assertive, other people behave too shamelessly. Humility comes in here, humility is when one finds the right balance between too much and too little shame, when one is ashamed of arrogance, but not ashamed of what Paulo Freire calls conscientization.

Here is also the misunderstanding that occurs after revolutionary uprisings, namely, that many think that one can move the entire phenomenon of shame from a continuum of balance to a continuum of toxicity. I remember the time of student revolts in 1968, when a girl who resisted having sex with everybody was branded to be a “stooge of outdated bourgeois values.” She was told to stop being ashamed, her shame was interpreted as “lack of revolutionary consciousness”: “Wer zweimal mit derselben pennt, gehört schon zum Establishment” (“Whoever is sleeping with the same person twice, is part of the establishment”) was a

popular saying used by young revolutionary males. Similarly, apartheid may be one reason for people to confound shame with humiliation. Particularly, and this is a question to you, dear H  l  ne, when I think of President Zuma and those who admire him, I imagine that they justify what they do by saying that they no longer want to be subservient to humiliation?

The continuum of shame, in a human rights based context, has two poles; one of its poles represents “too much,” it points at “too much bad” shame, too much of the kind of meek subservience that flows from accepting humiliation, or “too much shame that flows from a personal disposition to overdo it.” This kind of shame, indeed, needs help to be healed and prevented. Here all the psychologists who help people to develop a stronger sense of worth and to become more resilient in the face of humiliation have their field of work cut out. However, they have to be careful and are well advised to consider that, on the other side, it is possible that there is “not enough of good shame” around. In short, there is a middle point, a “right amount” of shame and a “right kind” of shame for society to be in balance.

Linda and I, we discuss this continuously, for example, when we explore why the self-esteem movement in the United States went too far. Or, a British friend who is a professor in China, once told us that he had empowered his Chinese students for many years, and the result was that some of them turned out to become “rather disgusting and arrogant people.” In other words, Linda and I, we even avoid the word empowerment. Our friend in China prefers the word *entrustment*.

Continuum of Toxicity		
too much	→ one direction	only a level of zero is truly safe and desirable

Table 1: Continuum of toxicity

Continuum of Balance		
too much	→← just right	too little

Table 2: Continuum of balance

Continuum of Toxicity		
too much	→ one direction	only a level of zero is truly safe and desirable
Dioxin: every amount of dioxin in food or air is too high, there is no safe level	There is only one direction for action: decrease!	Everything has to be done to bring the level of dioxin to zero
Acts of humiliation (like domestic abuse, bullying, or gender violence) and systems of humiliation (like apartheid): every amount is undesirable	There is only one direction for action: decrease!	Everything has to be done to bring the level of acts and systems of humiliation to zero

Table 3: Continuum of toxicity with examples

Continuum of Balance		
too much	↔ just right	too little
Certain minerals and vitamins can be toxic and will damage health if the dosage is too high.	A certain amount of minerals and vitamins is indispensable for health.	Lack of certain minerals and vitamins may be deadly.
Humiliation: Acts and systems of humiliation, prior to the human rights revolution, were regarded as legitimate prosocial tools to establish gradients of power of “higher beings” presiding over “lesser beings.” (In contrast, this application of humiliation has no place anymore in a continuum of balance in a human rights based context.)	In a context where ranked honour is seen as a legitimate normative frame (apartheid, for example, or cultural contexts such as the Taliban), people are expected to subserviently accept humiliation from above, and met it out to their inferiors.	In a context where ranked honour is seen as legitimate normative frame (apartheid, for example, or cultural contexts such as the Taliban), leaders are expected to be dominators. They would be toppled if they failed to oppress and humiliate their underlings and keep them down.
Shame: In a human rights based context, shame, if it flows from humiliation, is seen as potentially toxic, because it might rigidify into a “trait” that re-establishes the category of “lesser beings.”	It is virtuous to be able to feel humiliated and ashamed, in the face of abuse (whereby abuse, in a human rights based context, is defined as violation of equality in dignity), and to use these feelings as a source of energy to embark on conscientization, as, for instance, Nelson Mandela did. Humility has its place here.	A shameless society is not worth living in. Everything must be done to nurture the ability to feel humiliated and ashamed in the face of abuse in the population (whereby abuse, in a human rights based context, is defined as violation of equality in dignity),.
Humiliation: In a context of ranked honour, feelings of humiliation are used as fuel for revenge. In a human rights based context, this is no longer seen as appropriate, see, for example, James Edward Jones and his paper “The post victim ethical exemption syndrome: An outgrowth of humiliation.” See also Lindner’s <i>Making Enemies</i> book and the chapter on addiction to humiliation.	Feelings of humiliation can be a source of energy to embark on conscientization, as Nelson Mandela did.	To my view, in today’s world, there is a lack of shame and a dire need to feel more humiliated in the face of ecological and social unsustainability on our planet and among our fellow human beings. Stewardship and solidarity lack in a world where narrow self-interest and an overshoot in individualism are being prescribed so as to achieve profit maximisation.
Empowerment can lead too far. One of the most striking examples is the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.	Humility has its place here.	Terms such as <i>learned helplessness</i> have their place here. Psychologists help their clients to rise from feeling worthless.
Uniformity is a “too much” interpretation of unity, and division is “too much” diversity.	Unity in diversity has its place here.	Division means there is too little unity, and uniformity means there is too little diversity.

Table 4: Continuum of balance with examples

Thomas Scheff (who is a member in the Global Advisory Board of our Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies network) touches upon this discussion, see Scheff (2003). Here comes a paragraph taken from the conclusion of Scheff's paper:

As indicated at the beginning of this article, the classic sociologists believed that emotions are crucially involved in the structure and change of whole societies. The authors reviewed here suggest that Shame is the premier social emotion. Lynd's work, particularly, suggests how acknowledgement of Shame can strengthen bonds, and by implication, lack of acknowledgment can create alienation. Lewis's work further and in much more detail suggests how shame/anger loops can create perpetual hostility and alienation. Acknowledged shame, it seems, could be the glue that holds relationships and societies together, and unacknowledged Shame the force that blows them apart. Since we are now in a position to clearly define Shame as a working concept, perhaps the time has come to begin systematic empirical studies of its effects on social systems.

Thomas Scheff, in his work, explains that shame went "underground," "since there is shame about shame, it remains under taboo." Perhaps one may say that shame became too much associated with humiliation?

We may conclude that we, as society, need to value and nurture a sense of shame, not only in South Africa, also in the rest of the world. Not least overshoot "capitalism" pushes aside shame and glorifies shamelessness. This process is poignantly described in the following saying: "When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men living together in society, they create for themselves in the course of time a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it," formulated by Frederic Bastiat, 1801-1850, in his book *The Law*.

Linda and I, we have discussed the relationship between shame and humiliation throughout the past ten years, dear Helene. We are rather unhappy with the state of the art in this field. Particularly, we feel uneasy with the conceptualisation of humiliation as part of the shame continuum. Linda will be able to tell you much more about this. See article that I wrote to discuss this topic in 2007. We also prefer to use the term *connection*, rather than *bond*, or *attachment*.

In our Oslo conference in August this year, one of our participants said that we, through our work in our network, remove "the shame from humiliation." One could turn this saying on its head and say that it is equally important to remove humiliation from shame! Removing shame from humiliation is something that Nelson Mandela did, one may say. He refused being ashamed and stood up against humiliation. Apartheid was a system that attempted to humiliate people of colour with the aim to make them feel so ashamed that they would subserviently accept their lowly position in society. Nelson Mandela removed shame from humiliation, he declared the humiliation of apartheid to be illegitimate, to be no reason to be ashamed. Nelson Mandela's achievement does not mean, however, that the opposite is not equally necessary: sometimes, one has also to remove humiliation from shame: In certain situations, is not humiliating to feel a sense of shame.

Perhaps one could summarize the gist of your message to the world as follows, dear Helene:

"Let us value the potential of shame to lead us to humility! Let us refrain from misperceiving shame as outflow of humiliation! Let us move away from resisting shame in a misguided attempt to resist humiliation!"

Reference List

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