Shame: Developmental, cultural and clinical realms

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BOOK REVIEW


The dynamic of shame has been receiving increasing attention over the past few decades. The text Shame: Developmental, Cultural and Clinical Realms is another contribution to the literature. In providing a review of this text of contributions edited by psychoanalyst Salman Akhtar, shame will be contextualised in terms of some meta-themes in contemporary psychoanalysis, as well as reconceptualised as an intrapsychic phenomenon.

The text provides both theoretical and applied (clinical) approaches to shame, with most chapters including psychotherapy case studies or abridged clinical vignettes. In examining psychological dynamics, it is important to appreciate both structural (e.g. intrapsychic) and circumstantial (e.g. environmental influences) factors. As will be discussed, Akhtar’s text emphasises the latter, as shame is conceptualised essentially as resulting from interpersonal experience. For example, the chapters covering developmental dynamics highlight the shame some child/adolescent patients experience from physical deficiencies/defects they perceive as embarrassing, but also identify their early ruptures in infancy (primarily in the context of the mother-infant dyad), which authors such as Ayers (2003) have cited as instrumental in contributing to pathological shame. Early caregiver disconnect exacerbates our innate tendency towards shame and, in the extreme, can manifest in aggressive narcissism. In fact, in a recent paper, I hypothesise that unconscious shame drives psychopathy (Heinze, 2017). As such, the interpersonal dimension should not be understated, and the text provides a cogent summary of psychoanalytic perspectives in this regard.

However, this framework, of conceptualising shame as emanating solely within the context of interpersonal dynamics, is reflected throughout the text and can limit our understanding of the emotion which, in turn, has significant implications for treatment. The text reflects what has been underemphasised in the literature in general, namely the intrapsychic nature of shame (e.g. independent of interpersonal experience). This omission is critical, for psychoanalytic interpretation will be qualitatively different if shame is conceptualised as primarily circumstantial rather than structural. Specifically, because the authors in the text essentially conceptualise shame as originating in the context of early interpersonal relationships, the opportunity for alternative therapeutic interpretations is missed. While shame becomes pathological within a relational milieu,
a more attuned clinical response to it might be found by considering shame’s origins as an intrapsychic structure.

With regard to meta-themes, Mills (2005) addresses the historical shift away from the unconscious in psychoanalysis. Mills couches his argument by noting the influence of postmodern thought which, by its privileging of subjectivity, influenced the emergence of relational psychoanalysis. He describes how relational psychoanalysis rests on the assumption that human motivation is predicated on the desire to form relationships with others, an apparent rejection of classical psychoanalytic drive theory. With the sine qua non of postmodern thinking being that there are no absolutes (e.g. objectivity is an illusion), a relativist norm, which seamlessly supports the ‘intersubjectivity’ of relational psychoanalysis, has emerged. This prizing of relational intersubjectivity becomes problematic if universal elements of the unconscious are to be embraced. Mills pleads to re-establish the primacy of the unconscious and, in the context of responding to arguments praising the merits of relational psychoanalysis, states

These absolutist overstatements lend themselves to decentering intrapsychic activity over relational interaction, draws into question the separateness of the self, the preexistent developmental history of the patient prior to treatment, the prehistory of unconscious processes independent of one’s relatedness to others, and a priori mental organization that precedes engagement with the social world. These statements irrefutably replace psychoanalysis as a science of the unconscious with an intersubjective ontology that gives priority to conscious experience. To privilege consciousness over unconsciousness to me appears to subordinate the value of psychoanalysis as an original contribution to understanding human experience. Even if we as analysts are divided by competing theoretical identifications, it seems difficult at best to relegate the primordial nature of unconscious dynamics to a trivialized backseat position that is implicit in much of the relational literature. For Freud (1900), the ‘unconscious is the true psychical reality’ (p. 613), which by definition is the necessary condition for intersubjectivity to materialize and thrive (p. 8).

Mills is being cited here to draw attention to the historical trend in psychoanalysis which has involved a retreat from the unconscious as the primary focus of inquiry. With much of contemporary psychoanalysis now embracing a relational/intersubjective ethos, it is predictable that the way in which shame is conceptualised reflects this. So, while one could argue that Shame: Developmental, Cultural and Clinical Realms places too great an emphasis on understanding shame from a relational/interpersonal/intersubjective perspective (e.g. one contributor, Apurva Shah, states ‘Shame is an interpersonal emotion’) the more appropriate critique is of the state of psychoanalysis, in toto, with the text simply reflecting this dominant trend in the field. This shift away from an appreciation of the role of the objective unconscious towards an emphasis on ego, relational and cultural factors is reflected in the book. On the one hand, some may understand this as a strength, as the text reveals a diversity of thought on the topic of shame within the psychoanalytic
community. On the other, it could potentially lead to confusion for the reader, leaving one unclear about the role of shame from a psychoanalytic perspective.

As Mills notes, psychoanalytic thought has gradually transitioned away from the unconscious as its primary area of investigation. Following Freud, psychoanalysis experienced a shift in focus to the ego, the relationship and, more recently, the culture. This shift away from the unconscious (absent any relational context) is illustrated throughout the text, influencing the way which shame, in general, has been conceptualised for roughly the past four decades. Importantly, this shift has contributed to how shame has come to be perceived as an emotion which is defended against, rather than a phenomenon which, itself, is a defence. If framed as a defence, we can consider that shame plays a key role in keeping one from confronting the unconscious. Understanding shame as a defence goes hand in hand with appreciating the unconscious independent of relational dynamics.

With the relational nature of contemporary psychoanalysis, it is not surprising that the literature primarily frames shame as emerging interpersonally, and this is echoed by the authors in Akhtar’s text, which includes a number of case studies alluding to shame developing as a result of early maternal (and in some cases, paternal) disconnect. However, it must be remembered that Tompkins (2008) identified shame as an innate affect. It is an emotion we are born with. Certainly, as with any innate emotion, the relational matrix can result in a disruption and distortion of shame. Yet, shame is with us from the beginning. As such, we must wonder why. What purpose does the emotion serve?

Shame as an intrapsychic phenomenon is represented symbolically in Genesis: ‘Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings’ (Genesis 3:7). This metaphor speaks to the dawn of consciousness which, by default, is accompanied by the loss of innocence (e.g. paradise as symbolised by merger with the mother, lack of individuation) and the subsequent pain of one’s confrontation with reality. Importantly, shame, symbolised by the covering of the genitals in the narrative, is inextricably tied to the dawn of consciousness. Of note, Meredith-Owen (2013), in an article also questioning the effect of relational thought on traditional analytic principles, states ‘Adam and Eve, by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, became self-conscious and thus aware of difference: capable now of reflection but at the cost of becoming exposed to limitation and shame’. One can see how shame is triggered in the moment of being forced to confront the reality of who one is. This narrative reveals that shame is not inherently interpersonal or intersubjective. Adam and Eve are shamed as a result of their own curiosity (the pull for awareness), and this curiosity is framed as a transgression. We see that shame is triggered when the individual pursues truth and is confronted with consciousness (awareness). The shame experienced is independent of any relationship and is not about any sense of defectiveness. Shame is the price paid for the pursuit of self-knowledge and psychological transformation.
Much of contemporary psychoanalytic thinking frames shame as an emotion we defend against and the contributions in Akhtar’s text (e.g. Smolen cites Lewis, noting the ‘defense against shame is to hide or run away’) reflect this tendency. The etiology of defending against shame is attributed to early relational ruptures, which the contributors in the book consistently reference in the case studies/clinical vignettes presented. This contrasts with the thinking of Freud and his counterparts whom frame shame as a defence (e.g. against exhibitionism). These original formulations of shame as a defence echo the dynamics presented by the Garden Of Eden myth. The Garden of Eden narrative is about the emergence of consciousness, and the triggering of individuation (e.g. ‘exhibiting’ oneself), which clearly generates a response of shame. We see that the pain of perceiving reality engenders a shame reaction. In this context, shame is a defence against consciousness and awareness which has the paralysing effect of limiting our freedom, will and agency. Indeed, Erikson identifies this tension in the stage labelled ‘autonomy vs. shame and doubt’. From this vantage point, shame can be understood independent of an interpersonal, intersubjective context – Adam and Eve experience shame in response to seeing reality (e.g. becoming conscious). Shame, here, is an intrapsychic defence against one’s confrontation with consciousness.

As the title implies, the text explores shame from developmental, cultural and clinical perspectives. The authors, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, provide a well articulated context and history regarding the way in which shame has emerged in the clinical literature. The contributions inform the audience about how, first, from a Freudian perspective, shame was framed as a defence, with subsequent conceptualisations of shame emphasising the conflict between the ego and ego ideal, followed by it being understood as an emotion defended against in narcissistic personality structure. Additionally, hypothesised distinctions between shame and guilt cultures are offered. As such, the text serves as a cogent primer for the uninitiated reader. However, throughout the text the authors present this historical development from Freudian to contemporary perspectives of shame as if it was an evolution in thought, with the implication that current conceptualisations (which construe shame as an affect to be defended against) are somehow more incisive. For example, in his chapter ‘Shame and Shamelessness’, Akhtar provides such an overview of the history of shame in the psychoanalytic literature, yet, in the section titled ‘Synthesis’ he states ‘Pooling the foregoing observations and deleting their antiquated and incorrect parts (especially those pertaining to gender and sexuality) one can safely conclude that shame refers to a dysphoric affect … (italics added)’. Suggesting that more traditional psychoanalytic thought is antiquated reflects Mills’ (and Meredith-Owen’s) concern about the way in which relational/interpersonal themes have become privileged over the ‘primordial nature of unconscious dynamics’. So, while framing how shame, as a domain of scrutiny, has emerged in psychoanalytic thought benefits the reader to a degree, deemphasising classical psychoanalytic ideas which value the unconscious,
independent of relational dynamics, limits what the reader can potentially
consider in formulating a comprehensive understanding.

For example, Jerome Blackman’s contribution ‘Laziness and its Links to
Shame’ includes a case study of a man who presented a dream in which he
was performing fellatio on himself, noting ‘we figured out he was sexualising
his wish to suck on a woman’s breast, in turn symbolising oral dependency
wishes that cause him extreme shame’. As echoed throughout the book, this
interpretation reveals what I have argued is the hypothesised connection
between shame emanating within a relational matrix and its conceptualisation
as an emotion defended against.

Coincidentally, in a current paper (Heinze, in press) I present a case study
of a male patient who, similarly, had a dream of performing fellatio on himself.
However, invoking a more mythically inclined perspective (as represented by
classical Freudian and Jungian thought), an interpretation based on personal,
relational history is disregarded in favour of one which addresses the archetypal
imagery (e.g. primordial unconscious dynamics). I first comment on the
dream imagery, noting that

Paglia (1990), in her discussion of ancient cosmogonies, describes the Egyptian
god Khepera ‘who gives birth to the second stage of existence by an act of mas-
turbation.’ Paglia quotes ‘I had union with my hand, and I embraced my shadow
in a love embrace; I poured seed into my own mouth, and sent forth from myself
issue in the form of the gods Shu and Tefnut.’ Paglia goes on to comment ‘Khep-
era bent over himself is a uroboros, the serpent eating its own tail, a magic circle
of regeneration and rebirth’ (1990, p. 41). Here we begin to see the ancient roots
of the uroboros archetype.

I go on to argue that

When this patient’s dream is interpreted more literally (e.g. he is performing
fellatio on himself in order to self-sooth, in essence providing a substitute for the
nursing breast that was not provided,) we are left with a subjective interpretation
based on the patient’s perception of his life experience. However, by definition,
an archetypal image, being independent of any personal experience, is objective
and provides a perspective that is purposive. In this sense the image of fellating
oneself is representative of the archetypal ouroboros (as noted in Paglia’s afore-
mentioned quote). Rather than interpreting the dream from a deficit (e.g. trauma)
perspective, an interpretation based on teleology, namely that the patient has been
‘fertilizing himself’ with the insight gained from treatment (e.g. the meaning of
growth, rebirth, transformation, fecundity, etc. reflected in the image), can be
offered.

With specific regard to shame, we can see that from a mythically inclined per-
spective dream imagery is de-literalised and the ‘shameful’ idea of dependency
wishes disregarded. Rather, this potentially ‘shameful’ symbol of self-fellatio is
understood as a universal unconscious representation (e.g. the ouroboros, an
archetypal image of the collective unconscious), inviting the individual to address
his confrontation with aspects of the psyche (e.g. continued self-fertilisation, increasing self-awareness and individuation). Here we see what is lost when our understanding is limited to literal and relational notions of shame. If we recall the role of shame in Genesis, Blackman’s patient’s shame reaction, rather than being due to dependency needs should, instead, be understood as a defence against the potential for greater self-awareness. Viewing shame in this manner requires a suspension of the idea that it emanates only in the context of interpersonal, relational dynamics (which would, predictably, lead the analyst to offer an interpretation focusing on dependency wishes). As mentioned earlier, interpretation based on understanding shame as part of an intrapsychic structure has dramatically different implications for treatment.

The text’s inclusion of cultural perspectives is also challenging if the ‘primordial nature of unconscious dynamics’ is to be rightfully regarded. For example, as with most of the chapters, Apurva Shah provides an insightful and intriguing summary of psychoanalytic thought on shame, specifically in the context of differing cultural conceptions. Importantly, and to his credit, Shah attempts to balance both relativist and universalist conceptualisations of shame. However, Shah’s argument is based, in part, on the premise that psychoanalysis being ‘a quintessentially Western and ‘white’ discipline’ has measured ‘other cultures using its own yardstick, and then found them wanting (Altman, 2006). Shah makes this point in the context of challenging psychoanalytic thinking which identifies shame as a more primitive (e.g. developmentally earlier) emotion than guilt. A concrete illustration of this psychoanalytic assumption is Erikson’s model of human development, which places the stage in which shame is experienced as developmentally earlier than that of guilt. This is of concern to Shah because of the distinction between shame and guilt cultures which, by implication, he argues, suggests that shame cultures are somehow inferior (e.g. psychologically less evolved). As such, his thesis, in part, involves postulating that shame and guilt are actually not that distinct in the first place. Here we see echoed the influence of postmodern thinking which is of concern to Mills. Rather than appreciating the universality of the objective unconscious (consider the earlier example of the uroboros representing archetypal imagery), a postmodern perspective emphasises the colonialist influence of Western European thought, portraying psychoanalysis as an instrument of power and domination, which elevates guilt (primarily Western/individualist) over shame (primarily non-Western/collectivist) cultures. This argument not only has the effect of shaming Western thought (from which psychoanalytic theory emerged – hence the reason why the Akhtar’s text exists), it also fails to consider the possibility of universal psychic structures which serve distinct purposes (e.g. shame and guilt are unique and involved in separate psychological functions) and, in turn, collapses differences in the service of avoiding any perceived imperialist notions suggesting cultural superiority. In true postmodern spirit, it all becomes subjective and the idea of an objective unconscious dismissed. Paradoxically, Shah concludes by asserting
that ‘Shame seeks reunion with the mother, a return to the womb, symbolised by the various descriptions of shame in which there is a wish to be swallowed up by Mother Earth (as in the of Sita, above). Thus we hide in order to be found, in order to be reunited with our mother’. Not only does Shah posit a universal here (which, I presume, he feels is possible based on his argument that there, ultimately, are no significant distinctions between shame and guilt cultures), suggesting that union with mother is a superior, and ubiquitous, psychological state (which, incidentally, post-modernist thought would challenge as a broad based assumption about human nature that dismisses potential cultural differences), he also frames shame as regressive, leading us to merger (and he does not describe this in a pejorative manner), rather than a defence against individuation.

However, the debate of the unconscious as a universally objective entity vs. psychoanalysis as an instrument of power is too lengthy to address in this review, so it will be argued that the cultural perspective presented by Shah in the text clearly illustrates the influence of postmodernism on psychoanalysis about which Mills expresses concern.

To conclude, Shame: Developmental, Cultural and Clinical Realms provides a contemporary psychoanalytic perspective of shame which helps the reader understand how it can result in psychopathology. However, being situated in a postmodern relational/interpersonal milieu, the text downplays the intrapsychic nature of shame and its concomitant role as a defence against individuation. By not considering shame as a defence, there is an absence of alternative psychotherapeutic interpretations which could be explored. Finally, the book’s inclusion of cultural perspectives highlights the inherent tension of trying to reconcile the idea of the ‘primordial nature of unconscious dynamics’ with the subjectivism and cultural relativism inherent in postmodern thought.

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