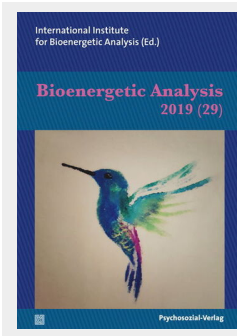


Scott Baum

Shame and the Dilemma of Human Destructiveness



Bioenergetic Analysis

29. Volume, No. 1, 2019, Page 23–38

Psychozoal-Verlag

DOI: [10.30820/0743-4804-2019-29-23](https://doi.org/10.30820/0743-4804-2019-29-23)



Reviewers for this issue:

Garry Cockburn, Helen Resneck-Sannes, Maê Nascimento and Scott Baum

Translators of abstracts for this issue:

Claudia Ucros (French), Maria Rosaria Filoni (Italian), Maê Nascimento (Portuguese), Pablo Telezon (Spanish), Olga Nazarova and Alesya Kudinova (Russian)

Submissions for consideration for the next volume of *Bioenergetic Analysis* must be sent to Leia Cardenuto (leiacardenuto52@gmail.com) between June 1st and September 1st, 2019.

Bibliographic information of Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (The German Library)
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

2019 Psychosozial-Verlag, Gießen, Germany
info@psychosozial-verlag.de
www.psychosozial-verlag.de



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). This license allows private use and unmodified distribution, but prohibits editing and commercial use (further information can be found at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). The terms of the Creative Commons licence only apply to the original material. The reuse of material from other sources (marked with a reference) such as charts, illustrations, photos and text extracts may require further permission for use from the respective copyrights holder.

Cover image: Vincentia Schroeter, *Hummingbird* © Vincentia Schroeter
Cover design & layout based on drafts by Hanspeter Ludwig, Wetzlar
Typesetting: metiTec-Software, me-ti GmbH, Berlin, www.me-ti.de

<https://doi.org/10.30820/0743-4804-2019-29>
ISBN (PDF-E-Book) 978-3-8379-7492-8
ISBN (Print) 978-3-8379-8254-1
ISSN (Online) 2747-8882 · ISSN (Print) 0743-4804

Shame and the Dilemma of Human Destructiveness

Scott Baum

Abstracts

This article examines the phenomenon of shame and related states from clinical and theoretical perspectives within Bioenergetic Analysis. Links are made to the general problem of human destructiveness and to the specific ways that shame is used destructively in relationships and families. The author's personal struggle is used to illuminate one approach to living the reality of destructive shame.

Key words: shame, human destructiveness, neurotic guilt, bioenergetic analysis

La Honte et le Dilemme Humain de la Destructivité (French)

L'article analyse le phénomène de la honte et d'états associés dans la perspective clinique et théorique de l'analyse bioénergétique. La honte est mise en perspective avec le problème général de la destructivité humaine, et notamment comment elle est utilisée spécifiquement à des fins destructives dans les relations et les familles. Le combat personnel de l'auteur dans ce thème illustre une approche permettant de vivre avec cette réalité de la honte destructive.

La Vergüenza y el Dilema de la Destructividad Humana (Spanish)

Este artículo examina el fenómeno de la vergüenza y estados asociados a ella, desde la perspectiva, clínica y teórica del análisis bioenergético. Links son hechos hacia el problema general de la destructividad humana y específicas maneras en que la vergüenza es usada en las relaciones y en las familias. La batalla personal del autor ha sido utilizada para iluminar un determinado enfoque que permita vivenciar la realidad de la vergüenza destructiva.

La Vergogna e il Dilemma della Distruttività Umana (Italian)

Questo articolo esamina il fenomeno della vergogna e degli stati correlati, dal punto di vista clinico e teorico dell'analisi bioenergetica. Vengono proposti collegamenti con il

problema generale della distruttività umana, e con i modi specifici in cui la vergogna viene usata in modo distruttivo nelle relazioni e nelle famiglie. La battaglia personale dell'autore è usata per illuminare un approccio a vivere la realtà della vergogna distruttiva.

A Vergonha e o Dilema da Destrutividade Humana (Portuguese)

Este artigo focaliza o fenômeno da vergonha e de estados correlatos, a partir das perspectivas clínica e teórica da Análise Bioenergética. Aponta-se, também, correlações com o problema geral da destrutividade humana e com maneiras específicas em que a vergonha é usada de maneira destrutiva em relacionamentos e famílias. O autor utiliza sua própria luta pessoal, como exemplo para ilustrar uma abordagem da vivência da realidade da vergonha destrutiva.

Стыд И Дилемма Человеческой Деструктивности (Russian)

В данной статье рассматривается феномен стыда и связанные с ним состояния с клинической и теоретической точки зрения биоэнергетического анализа. Проводятся связи с общей проблемой человеческой деструктивности и тем, как стыд используется деструктивным образом в отношениях и семьях. На примере личных трудностей автора освещается один способ проживания реальности деструктивного стыда.

Introduction

A survey of the literature on shame and related states reveals a repeated refrain: that shame has been little studied. For example, before Morrison (1989) and Goldberg (1991) embark on an extensive examination of the literature and theory of shame in the psychoanalytic approach to understanding personality formation and behavior, they both make a point of saying that shame, as a unique phenomenon, has been little studied. This is puzzling because shame is an immediate somatopsychic event that seems integrally a part of human experience.

What might lead to such an omission? Could it have to do with the inextricable linkage of shame and destructiveness? In this paper I will argue that one reason that shame is neglected as a fundamental emotional and psychic human process has to do with its relation to the experience and facing of our own destructiveness. The dilemma in the title refers to the fact that human destructiveness seems to be intrinsic to our beings as creatures. Shame actually functions as a means of control on the unrestrained expression of negativity. But shame is easily perverted to use as a method control people. In that use it is very destructive itself. How do we find our way through this labyrinth of experience?

Using theory, clinical material, and my own experience, I will try to illuminate the functions and meanings of shame states, particularly from a bioenergetic

perspective. I will also describe in personal terms the related dilemmas of living with too much shame, not enough shame, and no shame.

The Origin of Shame

Using a bioenergetic perspective is useful here. The somatic processes observable in shame states are cringing and burning. Cringing is an involuntary reaction in which a person pulls inward from the surface of the body. It is a movement to make oneself smaller; and to retract from contact and expansion into the environment. This movement is seen in all the emotional states and reactions related to shame from the least uncomfortable to the most, from bashfulness, to embarrassment, to humiliation, to guilt and shame. The second process is burning. Blood rushes to the surface of the body and the capillaries expand and so there is a flush at the surface. But there is a burning also deeper inside the body. This burning I will relate to the worst of shame states later in this paper, and to the psychic, emotional and interpersonal significance of the concept of hell. In the throes of the most forceful of these states the often-expressed impulse is the wish to make oneself disappear. The disappearance, it is hoped, will mitigate the bad feelings related to shame states, and will also reduce the contact with other people that intensifies the bad feelings.

From a bioenergetic standpoint this is a very specific action. It is a generalized contraction at the visceral level, and a pulling of energy and contact from the periphery inward. It is not a collapse, or contraction in specific neuromuscular groups. It is not a generalized tightening. Cringing causes a person to pull back from expansion into the environment. It is a movement away from the edge of contact with the environment and with people. This movement is accompanied by the emotional states mentioned above which are listed in order of ascending unpleasantness.

What is the evolutionary function of this set of human reactions – somato-psychic events and their corollary emotional states? In order to answer that question, even in a beginning way, shame and shame related states have to be understood as a fundamental element of relationship systems. Sartre (1984) uses shame to assert the certainty of the existence of someone other than ourselves. Our feeling of shame informs us that another person exists who has been affected by us. The effect we have had causes us to feel bad. There is ample research data (Bloom, 2013), and certainly anecdotal data that tells us that children feel bad about hurtful or injurious behavior without needing extrinsic instruction.

These early reactions are rudimentary elements of both self, and self-other relationship systems. The two systems are complementary. The first is the system of processes and structures by which a person develops and maintains positive self-regard, we call that *narcissism*. The second is the system of developing and main-

taining healthy and positive relations with others that we call *attachment*. Shame can become unhealthy in both systems. But it is not intrinsically so. When I say that, I am saying that there are constructive elements in shame states that have to be understood. Shame and related states inform us that we are being seen by and reacted to by others. It is, along with love and hate, part of a constellation of basic feelings that informs us, through our bodily reactions, that others exist, and that their reactions and feelings matter to us.

Two Views of the Significance of Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame are two of the unpleasant states that come out of this dimension of relating to others. One way to distinguish between them is to see guilt as a product of an interpersonal process, a part of a transaction, and shame as largely an internal self-referential process. Guilt ensues when one has transgressed against another, caused injury or harm. The feeling of guilt calls for and prompts apology and reparation. Once the reparation is made and is successful, the guilt may abate. The wrongness is in the act and can be redeemed. The feeling is in the middle layers of the body. Shame is experienced in the deeper interior of the body. The feeling is that the wrongness is in the person. It is a wrongness of self. Apology and reparation do not abate shame. In fact, the relief from shame is not easily arrived at, and methods to reduce shame or to mitigate it are not self-evident, as they can be in the case of guilt. Shame is challenging to understand and to cope with.

One difficulty is a result of the fact that shame has two components. One component are feelings of shame that are stimulated by the reactions of other people to each of us and our behavior. The reactions imply, or explicitly state, that a system of values has been violated. In the violation, a behavior that goes against those values and beliefs, the violator reveals herself or himself to be the kind of person who can perpetrate such a violation, and hence should be ashamed of herself or himself. When the violator shares the value system, the shame is felt to be congruent with the values and expectations the violator has of himself or herself.

This is where things get confusing. Because another component of shame comes from intrinsic sources. It results when one's behavior does not match the internally held vision of oneself as a good person. This shame is not referable to the effect of critical others whose reactions stimulate shame. Rather, this reflects a failure by the person to live up to her or his standards and expectations of her or himself.

We are all familiar with social systems that use shame as a method for controlling the inner reality, and the behavior of members of the group. Here we come to the first of many connections to be seen between shame and the reality of human destructiveness. In many belief systems, in many cultures, and in

many societies, there is a strong, if only partly conscious, belief that children, and hence all people, trend inevitably to self-interest and self-gratification, and so to destructiveness. In the face of this shame is the strong corrective needed, powerful as it is, to rein in harmful behavior.

And we are all familiar with social systems in which a central program of the group, or organization, or society is to control and dominate the members. Shame is an effective method for this because, as we will see, chronic shaming interferes with, even precludes, the feelings needed to represent oneself. Chronic, debilitating shaming breaks down the structures needed to fight back against the degradation of self and disables the sources of power to assert one's value.

However, it is a mistake to see this extrinsic origin of shame and its abuse by authorities in a child's life as the only source of shame. Another component of shame comes from the internally held vision of oneself as a good person. If we believe that the only thrust in a child toward goodness comes from the indoctrination imposed by authorities from the outside, then this other way of understanding shame is irrelevant. If we believe that there is an impulse to goodness in all people, then shame also reflects a person's failure to live up to her or his own standards. The creation of an aspirational image of oneself to strive for, an idealized self, seems to be an established element in the development of personality. It is a compound of endogenous elements springing from our evolutionary heritage; then, exogenously from the early interactions with those around us; and perhaps, as well, from metaphysical sources beyond our comprehension. It seems indisputable that people have a thrust to do what is good and right.

The Relationship Between Shame and Self-Esteem

But we are impelled by forces in us that urge to actions that are not good and right, as well. Healthy positive self-regard requires an ability to adjust our view of ourselves to include negative or destructive attributes. The person who feels bad – guilty – about what she or he has done, has to have ways to restore good feeling. That includes repairing, to the extent possible, the damage that has been done, including apology, restitution, amends, expiation. When those are successful, there is the possibility of a restoration of positive self-regard, whether or not the injured party forbears or forgives the transgression.

In the case of shame, as it is used in this paper, the process for restoration of positive self-regard is even more difficult. Because the felt experience is of being bad, not of doing bad. In this case, a person's response to the bad feeling in order to alleviate or abate the feeling is not clear. In both cases, of guilt and of shame states, the response must contain a mature effort to face the feelings and what they mean. It cannot include shrinking from whatever reality about myself is revealed by the bad feelings. Developing a mature capacity to face one's destructive

feelings and impulses: negativity, greed, envy, etc., is necessary for the development and maintenance of self-esteem. Shame signals the possibility that one has felt, and even behaved, in ways that do not correspond to the kind of person one aspires to be. Disregarding that shame closes a person from knowing themselves and from knowing the effect she or he has on others.

When self-esteem is not developed or is not solidly established as a somato-psychic and emotional process and structure, successful absorption of the blow to self-regard contained in guilt and shame cannot be used constructively. Recovery of positive self-regard is then difficult or even impossible (more will be said about this below). When this is the case, defenses, what we call narcissistic defenses, must be developed and employed to protect one's ego from irremediable deflation, and concomitant self-condemnation. The mature encounter with and acknowledgment of one's negativity and destructiveness become limited and the integration of those characteristics into a mature identity restricted. When this occurs the impact on relationships is profound.

The Relational Function of Shame

Much of the history of human thought, spiritual search, political theory, and psychological investigations is permeated by the urgency of understanding human destructiveness. Is the urge to destroy, to harm, to cause suffering, to inflict pain, to dominate, to exploit, intrinsic to the human species, an unavoidable part of the human condition? Or, are these urges breakdown phenomena caused when healthy constructive needs and urges are thwarted, deformed by unresponsive, or uncaring, or cruel and damaging adults during a child's development?

The latter view, that shame is a product of the interaction with other people rests on the observation and experience that we have all had of people trying to make us feel small, and to feel bad about ourselves as people. The reasons that people do that to each other are manifold, but the intent is clear. Making a person feel small, inferior, insignificant, without intrinsic value reduces the person's ability to represent her or himself. It diminishes their power.

The healthy use of power rests on the healthy feeling of positive self-regard. Healthy positive self-regard rests on the feeling of goodness. The feeling of goodness rests on the experience of goodness in oneself, and the faith in that goodness coming from the people most influential in a person's development.

A bioenergetic perspective provides insight into the connection of power, goodness, and the interpersonal effects and dynamics of shame. A deep understanding of pleasure reveals a connection to the benevolence and goodness in the universe. This connection is explored at length in the monograph on Modern Bioenergetics published by the NY Society for Bioenergetic Analysis (2011). When a person's visceral connection to goodness can be constricted, or made

conditional on the approval of another, or even destroyed, that person becomes more controllable.

Shame can be used to make another person smaller, this is the energetic and emotional effect of humiliation. Chronic shame and humiliation have the effect of defeating a person in the assertion of her or his goodness. That assertion is part of the foundation needed for the development and maintenance of positive self-regard. The visceral, self-directed connection to goodness undergirds autonomy and the possibility to face and take responsibility for one's negativity and destructiveness without complete ego-deflation and the resultant depression, or compensatory defenses that create a false sense and appearance of self-esteem.

If the bad feeling we call shame is due to the negative intentions and actions of others that are designed to dominate and control us, then the only reasonable reaction is to fight back in an effort to defeat those efforts. Fighting back is very difficult, if not impossible, when the foundational belief about oneself is that I feel shame because, indeed, I am bad, and I am without the redeeming value of goodness. Asserting goodness under these conditions is useless. It is as if one were to argue with one's God, the being that is the final arbiter of goodness and badness.

If, however, we believe that feelings of shame are inevitable in life, that each of us, no matter how good a person, is sufficiently flawed that destructive, uncaring, self-interested acts will not be avoided. Then responding constructively to shame and the reasons for feeling it requires a foundation of positive self-regard. This is to buoy and support ourselves through the arduous and challenging task of facing our own destructiveness, metabolizing the knowledge of that destructiveness, and effecting any repair to others, and the change to ourselves that may be required.

We see here the interaction of self and self-other systems. Self-systems of positive self-regard are dependent on and interact with interpersonal systems. Positive self-regard is an amalgam of endogenous experiences of self and the effects of the interactions with others. In healthy people negative information about oneself, arising from failures to live up to one's ideals, or coming from others about the negative effects on them of one's behavior are metabolized and used to grow and develop.

In the absence of a foundational positive self-regard, facing even valid sources of shame in ourselves and in our behavior, or fighting off malicious attempts at inducing a feeling of shame, becomes unbearably painful and frightening. The person without the foundation of positive self-regard is that way because of chronic, unremitting, and ultimately successful attacks on her or his goodness as a person. Eventually, that person is poised over a bottomless pool of toxic shame, guilt, self-recrimination, indictment, endless torment – truly, the fires of hell.

Indeed, in the worst cases the intention may be to consign the person to hell, eternal punishment for her or his crimes against the authority rendering the judgment. Depending on what we believe, we may understand hell as a boogeyman phenomenon, a creation to frighten and control people who are doing nothing

wrong. Living in hell myself, and my clinical research on the subject suggests otherwise.

I have found that the drive to revenge and the need to make oneself “even” again in relation to someone who has harmed or dominated us are related. We are driven to restore equivalent value between us and the person who has injured us and made us feel smaller than that person is. We repair the damage to our self-valuation by inflicting on the other what the other inflicted on us, if no other method of repair exists. When all efforts to restore self-regard fail chronically a bitter hateful state ensues. With no way to punish those who have denigrated, shamed and humiliated me I search for someone to make pay for this devastation to me.

The Creation of Hell

In the most pathological of families a child, a dependent, becomes the object of a frustrated, twisted drive in the parents. Someone has to pay for the suffering that afflicts the parents, for the mistreatment he or she has endured (this is the revenge need at work). A parent’s incapacity to function effectively in interpersonal reality limits her or him to relating to the child as the perpetrator, the source of the parent’s suffering. Consigning the child to hell for the perceived evil and malevolence in the child is the outlet for the parent’s desperate need that someone should be made to pay for the injustices done, and the suffering caused her or him. Someone should be shamed, and thus reduced, made to feel bad for what has been done to her or him. Revenge and restoration of self-value are needed to mitigate the shame and humiliation that pervade the parents’ inner life. The child, immature, dependent on the judgments of the adults for the formation of self-image, is the only available object for these feelings.

Burning with shame is the somatic manifestation of being consigned to hell. When the situation that evokes this feeling is transient, and the transgression causing the reflexive feeling can be atoned for, the damage repaired, the fires are quelled and perhaps only a residual memory of it left. But when the aim is to consign a child to hell for the suffering an adult has lived, there is no exit from hell. The burning is internal and eternal.

Abandoning Hope

The poet tells us the sign over the entrance says, *Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here*. There is a significant clinical truth contained in that saying. As in the depictions of hell in Bosch paintings, those consigned to hell are in constant torment. When a person cannot stay suspended over the pit of self-loathing that is a basic

constituent of that hell, the unbearable pain and the hopelessness for redemption can drive a person to suicide. To avoid catastrophic deflation and collapse the person may, as an alternative to suicide inflate her or himself, trying desperately to remain above the pit, using all the energy she or he has to stay inflated, at whatever cost to him or herself or to others.

This way of defending against catastrophic ego deflation and the accompanying shame states results in attitudes and behaviors we refer to as narcissistic defenses. In the absence of healthy positive self-regard, a person generates reactions to counter the inner feelings of worthlessness, and the humiliating and shaming attacks coming from outside. These defensive-aggressive attitudes include superiority, omniscience, derision, ridicule, contempt, denigration, and the like.

One of the awful twists in this dreadful situation is that the child, who is now the subject of indefensible indictment, becomes the enraged, hateful, malevolent being the parents accuse him or her of being. At least this is what happened to me. This diminishes even further, to the point of irreversibility, the capacity to fight on one's behalf, to represent oneself. Any protest of the unjustness of the accusations of badness is accompanied, at least unconsciously, by the knowledge that the accusations are true and accurate. The source of the malevolent feelings is concealed. The feelings themselves cannot be denied. The consignment to hell is now sealed, both by the indictment and condemnation of the authorities, and by one's own knowledge of the internal transformation to malevolence that has taken place.

I will say again that much of the history of human thought, spiritual search, political theory, and psychological investigations is permeated by the urgency of understanding human destructiveness. Is the urge to destroy, to harm, to cause suffering, to inflict pain, to dominate, to exploit, intrinsic to the species? Or are these urges breakdown phenomena caused when healthy constructive needs and urges are thwarted, deformed by unresponsive, or uncaring, or cruel and damaging adults during a child's development? It matters a great deal which position is believed. A central thrust in the development of modern psychotherapy is the effort to identify and relieve neurotic guilt, guilt and shame brought into existence through the efforts, intentional – but mostly unconscious – to punish and control others. If, and how, this can be accomplished is a question put to endless study. How a therapist goes about her or his part in it depends substantially on what the therapist believes, consciously and unconsciously, about this question of human beingness.

Defending Against Shame

Chronic unrelieved states of shame are unendurable and necessitate the fabrication of defenses. These defenses work both against further penetration of shaming

attacks from outside the person, and from surges of shame, self-loathing and self-recrimination from within. A profound insight into the structure of these defenses comes by way of the character Homer Simpson in the television cartoon show in the United States called "The Simpsons".

In one episode, Homer, a thoroughly degenerate and dishonorable man, husband, and father, is approached by aliens who have invaded Earth with the plan to take possession of its resources for their use. The aliens' method for cowing and subduing the human populace, presumed to be those who belong here and to whom the Earth belongs, is to ask people what it is they most desire. When people answer, the aliens grant the wishes and then ridicule and denigrate the receivers for their weakness and moral turpitude. They are craven, spineless people, without principles, driven only by their appetites. It is a very effective technique. One by one all the human denizens of earth succumb. Broken down, without self-esteem, they submit to the possession of the aliens. Then the aliens come to Homer. When asked what he wants he says, as he would at any other time, "beer and donuts." After satisfying that wish, he is asked again, and says the same. Then the assault on his self-value begins. He is called selfish, venal, simple-minded. There is a long dramatic pause as the aliens wait for the horror caused by seeing himself reflected this way to set in.

This drama is a brilliant explication of one of the basic elements in the possession of one person by another. It happens all the time in the development of narcissistic deformations in children. The very appetite which the parents accept and encourage in one moment, becomes the mark of the child's corruption and exploitiveness the next. The child cannot deny the reality of his or her feelings of need and desire. So, the accusation of having those feelings sticks. Once the feelings are defined as reflecting and intrinsic badness in the child, shame is inevitable.

The exposure of self as being as the aliens in this episode see them, desperate for gratification, without principles, makes people susceptible to possession. Their self-esteem is broken down and they are ripe to surrender the authority to define their own goodness and uprightness to the aliens. The aliens are now in authority over the people's regard of themselves and can now control them from the inside.

When Homer Simpson reveals his heart's desire to be beer and donuts, he exposes himself to the ridicule and denigration that lead to shame, to cringing and withdrawing inward, to burning in the hell of recrimination and contempt generated by others' view of him, and by his failure to live up to his own standards of probity and self-respect. It should lead to Homer's breakdown in self-regard and availability for possession and the surrender of will, and resources, to the aliens.

But his response to their indictment of him as greedy, venal, morally corrupt, and self-centered is to say, "yep, you got me there". He validates the perception

of him as being as he is described to himself. He is not horrified, and so, broken, by the shattering of his image of himself. In this moment, Homer becomes impervious to the eviscerating effects of the accusations. He appears to have no expectation that he be otherwise. While this makes him a despicable character as a person and father, it does inoculate him against the deflation and the turning against himself that would make him vulnerable to another who claims to know him in his true despicable and contemptible identity.

A person using Homer's defensive organization as depicted in this vignette makes himself impervious to possession by not caring about the other person's judgment. And not caring about the effect he or she has on the other. There are various ways this defensive style can manifest behaviorally, but they all have in common the belief that one is superior to others, in all ways, a conviction held explicitly, consciously or unconsciously. But as we see in Homer's case, this defense is a tightrope walk. The person is suspended over a cesspool of hateful self-recrimination, ego-deflation, horrific self-loathing. If it fails, a catastrophic collapse of self-regard occurs which cannot be endured. Homer succeeds in fending off the assault by embracing his dissoluteness. But he does so without self-consciousness, and without any seeming concern for the effects of his imperviousness to others' judgments on the way he treats them.

Coping with Shame

The bones provided by a theoretical understanding of shame states and the relationship to destructiveness need the meat of clinical material to flesh out the picture in the form of lived experience. As with so many studies of human suffering clinicians benefit from the study of the most severe forms of the damage. In the case of shame, the most compelling material comes from my understanding of myself and my work with patients which I will use here to illuminate the material presented above, and to examine the possibilities for psychotherapeutic treatment of people in whom pathological shame states are a central element in personality and experience.

Without durable, sustainable positive self-regard shame becomes unendurable and unworkable. The somato-psychic states of shame grind on against the core being without cushion. A literary version of this is depicted unflinchingly in the novel "A Little Life" by Hanya Yanagihara (2015). The protagonist is a bright, complex human being. The shame that pervades his life from early sexual abuse and other mistreatments cannot be abated by the love and the care of others. Neither those relationships nor his successes as a functioning person can create what has been destroyed in him, that is the possibility to regard himself positively as a way to contend with the shame and self-loathing he feels. Tantalizingly, for us therapists and patients in psychotherapy, we are told the

he could never bring himself to share this inner reality and its origins with anyone.

I can tell you that sharing that inner reality with people who care and can receive it is insufficient by itself to undo damage to self like this. Understanding personality organization in the reality of the destruction of healthy narcissistic functioning takes us into the realm of experience of people who live as schizophrenic and borderline personalities. In this reality overpowering shame is induced in the child before any narcissistic functions are stable. Shame is one constituent element in a suite of unendurable and unworkable states, psychotic states, feelings beyond bearing. To understand the challenges of working psychotherapeutically with shame states under these conditions requires seeing shame in the larger context of profound damage to personality and the transformations that occur in these conditions.

In my case, profound shame is coupled with, among other states, abject terror. The two states are intertwined, and the functions needed to cope with each are related to each other and affected by the lived experience related to each. In 2013 I went to a boxing camp. I have trained as a boxer for more than twenty-five years, but I never stepped in the ring. On the last night there were bouts, intended to be training matches, between fighters matched for size and weight, and in my case, age. Two rounds. When I returned to my corner after round one, I was filled with a white terror so intense that everything disappeared – it consumed me. In what was left of my consciousness I could not imagine how I would go out for round two. I have had some cataleptic experiences, where my body collapses totally. Very few, because I guard myself rigorously against it happening.

This time, as I have so much in my life, I threw myself back into the ring. I could feel my back pushing me into the center of the ring. Despite that impelling force in me, I am very aware of the continuous experience of being disabled by terror. And I am aware of the shame associated with being betrayed by my body when I am unable to fight when fighting is called for. And I am exquisitely aware of my cowardice, and the disappointment in myself that I cannot hold fast and fight when I have to, and when I would have had to as a child. Terror and shame converge in a vacuum of external positive, admiring, appreciative feeling to destroy the potential for the development of positive self-regard.

But the destruction of positive self-regard, and so any bulwark against crippling shame, is not only a deficit, an absence. There is an affirmative process that takes place as well. This is an outcome resulting from the fact that by the time I was four years old I would have murdered my mother in her sleep, if I could have, to escape from her to my father. This is not a metaphor for how enraged and hateful I was. This is a transformative process in which my inner being was altered. I was eventually rescued by a father who was very charismatic and with

whom I was merged. He was a thoroughly corrupted person who believed that what he felt and believed was intrinsically correct, and any actions arising from that “knowledge” intrinsically valid and unimpeachable.

The state of terror I experience is associated with the reality of my mother’s being, a despair and emptiness beyond words for description. I have come to call it the “dead-end of everything”. There is nothing there, no life, no beauty, no goodness, no benevolence, no pleasure. The malevolence I was exposed to, which was in the beings and lives of both my parents, saturated and transformed me. In malevolence are included: hatred and sadism; corrosive contempt and superiority; appetite and grandiosity that only being a god can match. The saturation in malevolence destroys the pathway to goodness and benevolence. The central character in “A Little Life” cannot manage it.

I cannot manage it. With respect to shame specifically, facing my core reality of virulent competitiveness, corrosive unmitigated contempt, merciless hate and vengefulness has no balancing love or kindness or respectfulness. I see myself as I am, and I have behaved no more clearly than in my behavior towards my first, late, wife. I saw in her some of the cost to her my treatment of her incurred. But the destruction of love in me did not make her love for me impossible. With her love and care, and that of others I constructed a version of myself that corresponded better to what I have come to see and believe in – a life I would not have to be ashamed of.

What Can Be Done

As in other cases the worst damage points to what can be done in less severe cases. My research into the human condition has led me to the conclusion that human beings need – for our psychic and emotional survival – to believe that the people who have harmed us will eventually be brought to account and suffer for what they have done to us. Regrettably, for so many of us the only people that can be consigned to hell are the children of those needing the relief sending someone to hell brings. Bereft of the possibility of holding the perpetrators of their suffering accountable, innumerable parents unconsciously assign that role to their children and attack and torment them. In the extreme, childhood looks like a psychic, emotional, and, of course, often physical version of the Bosch painting referred to earlier in this paper.

This hell becomes structured into somato-psychic form and process as surely as repressed and suppressed affect and expression does. The deep effects of chronic cringing become habitual postures and behavioral disposition. The unbearable flames of shame and humiliation become self-loathing and denigration, setting stomach and lungs and connective tissue afire with the agony of punishment for sins committed and attributed.

Bioenergetic methods provide strong vehicles for protest, for defiance of imposed condemnation and hostility. These methods can offer a form for protest against imposed destructive shame. But by themselves they are not enough. The central project of psychotherapy includes a confrontation with oneself as one is, without the film of rationalizing defense. Without this there is no hope for integration, for integrity. Psychotherapy, in its modern origins, emerged from an eternal study of how to understand and even to deter human destructiveness. In the form it has taken in these latter years it increasingly rests on a hope that empathy, a feeling of the other's experience, would lead to sympathy for the other, and a recognition of common humanity. Internalized values of compassion and care would act to mitigate destructive action. Without that the fear of eternal shame is the only deterrent to destructiveness that is internalized.

Both methods fail to deter destructiveness sufficiently to provide safety for the future of my children and grandchildren. We see all the time shame perverted to destructive ends – control, subjugation, rendering people docile to abuse and exploitation. But without some facing of and being accountable for one's destructiveness, and without some bad feeling about it, how is destructiveness curbed?

And, when we are working as psychotherapists what are we to do when we are with people consigned to hell. What are those people to do? In my case the solution to living in hell, to the extent there is one, has been for me to embrace the reality. Live it as fully as I can. Embrace, not condone, not become resigned. In this taking-up of reality I have found that I can create other versions of myself than the core version. I can live by values that do not grow out of the corrupted, paranoid, self-serving values of my parents. I can take whatever they gave me that was of benefit, and I can add the immense gifts of those who love me, therapists included. What I cannot do is to deny the continuous truth of what it is to live in the experiential truths of the 'dead-end' of everything' and the transformation to malevolence.

What we can all do, therapists and all the rest of us, is bear witness to these truths as lived in the lives of our patients, our friends, in the society around us. Let's remember that biblical shame is not about sexuality. It is about self-knowledge, the aspiration to the knowledge that is godly, that puts us at the center of our existence. Embracing shame, in its corrosive condemning aspects, and in its constructive corrective aspects may enable us to find ways to share and support each other in a truthful accounting of ourselves and others.

At the Memorial Ceremony for Al Lowen, George Downing encouraged us to read deeply in what Al Lowen wrote. There is more there, he proposed, than what is evident at the surface. My own reading of Lowen's work (1975), and of Wilhelm Reich's (1962), is that both glimpsed the connection of pleasure to goodness, a connection the authors of the monograph on Modern Bioenergetics

(2011), explore more fully. We all make the central connection, again, more or less consciously, that the capacity to link one's positive self-regard to the benevolence in the universe through pleasure can inoculate us against the effort to turn us against ourselves that is central to the malign use of shame. When people have a visceral, grounded experience of what is good it is hard to tell them what to do, how to think and feel.

As I have written elsewhere, the people who I describe here as consigned to hell are often also living in a reality without connection to benevolence. Without the connection to goodness to temper our saturation in malevolence and shame, what comfort can there be? I end this paper with a quote from my therapist of many years. It speaks to the powerful effects, often undervalued in my estimation, of bearing witness as an aggressive, affirmative force. It also underscores the demands made on the therapist willing to live with someone in hell.

Here is a little example. It is about a man I wrote about in Toxic Nourishment and Damaged Bonds. I called him Milton. He is a man who has been in pain all his life, pain that won't go away. I don't know whether it will ever go away or not. I have no idea and he doesn't either. It is awful. He would commit suicide if not for what I'm not sure – maybe his children, maybe something more, a kind of deep dedication to the truth of life, his truth. He is devoted to inner truthfulness. We have been together many years, and he was in therapy many more years with people before me. He is trying to make contact – with himself, with life. He is committed to his search. To be present in his search yet not able to be present in life – to be present at all is a plus. For some being present to one's non-presence may be better than not being there and not knowing it. For Milton, it's a must.

A few weeks ago, he said, "I feel my father killed me or some part of me." And I said I absolutely believe you. And he weeps. After a long silence he says, "When I heard your words, I felt an entity leave me." That's the little vignette. He's not cured, I'm not cured. I'm in pain, he's in pain. I'm broken, he's broken. But at this moment, this one little moment when he felt, actually felt, took many years to find. These weren't wasted years. They could look wasted. Some therapists wouldn't have been able to stand it. But these years weren't wasted because a moment arrived when he felt my belief in his pain. For an instant he believed that I actually believed he was in pain and that his pain could be permanent. He heard me and for a moment felt my affirmation of the truth of his feeling. A feeling that came through was "Yes I absolutely, absolutely believe you." And he said "When I heard you, when I heard your words, I felt an entity leave me." Now I know that if one entity leaves there are probably a million more. But it was a precious moment that took years to happen. No insurance company would pay for this moment. But it is an eternal moment. A moment that makes a difference to the universe forever. And some of you may be feeling ripples of it today (Eigen, 2010, p. 18–19).

References

- Baum, S. et al. (2011). *Modern Bioenergetics: an integrative approach to psychotherapy*. New York: New York Society for Bioenergetic Analysis.
- Bloom, P. (2013). *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Eigen, M. (2010). *Madness and Murder*. London: Karnac Books.
- Goldberg, C. (1991). *Understanding Shame*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc.
- Lowen, A. (1975). *Bioenergetics*. New York: Coward, McCann & Georghagan.
- Morrison, A. (1989). *Shame, the Underside of Narcissism*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Reich, W. (1962). *The Sexual Revolution*. New York: Noonday Press.
- Sartre, J-P. (1984). *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Washington Square Press.

About the Author

Scott Baum, PhD, ABPP, is a member of the IIBA Faculty and a clinical psychologist living and practicing in New York City, USA.

docsbpsych@aol.com