

Shame

J. N. Hooker
Carnegie Mellon University

Published in
Encyclopedia of Business Ethics and Society, Sage Publishing (2008) 1900-1902

Shame is an important mechanism in much of the world for discouraging unethical behavior. Shame may be defined as public censure and disapproval, while honor, its opposite, is public affirmation. Shame and honor may be endowed by one's inherited circumstances or family station, but they also serve as negative and positive reinforcements of behavior. Shame takes many forms, including embarrassment, humiliation, loss of face, ridicule, punishment, expulsion from the family, and exile.

Relationship-Oriented Cultures

Shame-based regulation of behavior is most prevalent in relationship-oriented cultures, which rely heavily on personal supervision. This is because the experience of shame, in the sense intended here, requires that other people take note of one's behavior. A relationship orientation is typically found in non-Western countries.

Direct supervision plays a central role in relationship-oriented cultures because authority resides in persons rather than rules. Rules may be laid down, but they receive their legitimacy from the persons who lay them down, such as parents, teachers, husbands, bosses, elders, or political leaders. These are also high-context cultures, in the sense that behavior norms need not be spelled out explicitly but are learned from the context of everyday life. Activities that superiors allow to proceed without immediate censure are assumed to be permissible.

Relationship-based behavior regulation can be seen in countless everyday business contexts. For example, department stores in relationship-based countries typically ask customers to pay a central cashier rather than the sales person who showed them the merchandise. The customer then brings a receipt to the sales person in order to pick up the items purchased. The reason for the central cashier is that direct and constant supervision of persons who handle money is viewed as necessary, and it is easier to supervise one person than many.

Loss of face is a particularly important mechanism for enforcing behavior norms, as for instance in many Asian cultures. Exposure of bribery in the news media, for example, may lead to loss of face that is highly damaging to one's personal and professional life even if there are no legal consequences. Loss of face is a powerful force, however, that must be managed with care in everyday business situations. For example, a boss who criticizes employees in front of their coworkers can cause serious loss of face that leads to poor morale or resignations. It can also result in loss of face for the boss, and consequent erosion of authority, since the boss exhibited poor management skills. Generally a boss should not cause employees to lose face unless they have already done so by demonstrating gross incompetence in front of their peers, or unless their conduct is truly immoral rather than merely inept.

An Ethic of Care

A relationship orientation tends to be associated with an ethic of care, which in turn stems from a conception of human nature defined by relatedness to others. In Confucian cultures, for example, one scarcely exists apart from the family, and in many African cultures the village, not the individual, is the unit of human existence. As a result one's first concern is for those with whom one is connected—the extended family, friends, village, tribe, or ethnic group—since this is in essence concern for oneself. Cronyism and nepotism, frowned upon in the Western business world, may represent high moral virtue.

Shame-based cultures do not reject justice, but view it as a derivative value when it applies. Justice is important to the extent that it is grounded in the fact that caring for significant others is tantamount to caring for oneself. Shame is the primary form of social regulation because it results from a failure to care.

Shame-based cultures may be susceptible to corruption in the form of bribery and kickbacks, since personal relationships are necessary to getting things done. There is a constant temptation to create a relationship quickly by exchanging favors, rather than undergo the long process of building mutual trust.

Shame vs. Guilt

Shame is best understood when contrasted with guilt, which is a private rather than a public phenomenon. It is a feeling of regret for doing something one believes to be wrong. (This should be distinguished from legal sense of guilt as being responsible for an act.) One can feel guilty for an act that is known to no one else, but one cannot be shamed unless others are aware of the act.

Guilt provides a basis for behavioral regulation in rule-oriented cultures, including many Western cultures, much as shame does in relationship-oriented cultures. In rule-oriented cultures, the rules are seen as having authority in their own right. Behavior norms are explicitly spelled out in laws, government regulations, company policies, and instructions. Activities that are not explicitly prohibited by rules are assumed to be permissible.

Guilt-based regulation relies on the fact that people learn to feel guilty for breaking the rules. It therefore requires only intermittent supervision, along with the threat of punishment for violating the rules. The central role of guilt and relief from guilt is reflected in the Jewish and Christian faiths, which profoundly influenced the West.

This is not to deny that shame and honor have historically played a role in Western countries. Miscreants were once placed in stocks and pillories for public ridicule, and gentlemen resorted to duels to preserve their honor. In modern times, however, shame and honor tend to be secondary to guilt in importance, as witnessed by the fact that they seem a bit quaint or old-fashioned.

The example of the department store illustrates the difference between guilt-based and shame-based enforcement. In rule-based cultures, customers often pay the sales clerk directly, and all sales persons have access to cash registers. Guilt-based internal regulation, along with accounting controls and fear of punishment if caught, are viewed as sufficient deterrence against theft.

If a tendency toward bribery is a weakness of shame-based cultures, guilt-based cultures are susceptible to corruption in the form of cheating—perhaps by understating taxable income or altering the books to obtain a more favorable accounting statement. This is due to the reliance on guilt and relative lack of supervision, making the society vulnerable to a minority who are not deterred by guilt. Recent business scandals in the United States, and to some extent in Europe, illustrate this possibility.

Rule-based cultures are associated with an ethic of justice and equality, which again stems from a particular conception of human nature. Human beings are regarded as rational individuals who are ultimately a law unto themselves and therefore equal. Since no one has authority over others except when it is sanctioned by rules, social cohesion requires that one accept the rules voluntarily because they are self-evident and logical. This gives rise to an ethic based on equality, fairness, and logic, which is elaborated in Western ethical theories. Rule-based cultures do not reject duties to family and friends,

but view them as derivative values when they apply. Guilt is the primary form of regulation because it results from a violation of rules one recognizes as inherently valid.

The distinction between shame-based and guilt-based cultures is very general and glosses over many differences within each category, but it is nonetheless valuable for understanding ethics across cultures.

Further Reading and References

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