

A supervision with Richard Erskine

Following his London conference on shame, November 2019, **ANOUSHKA BEAZLEY** was prompted by her own personal experience to talk directly with Richard Erskine to help understand her feeling of shame and to dispel it.

Anoushka Beazley (AB): Richard thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.

Richard Erskine (RE): It's my pleasure.

AB: I think the best place to start is how all of this came to happen in the first place. I was at your wonderful Shame conference in London, November 2019, and you had been talking to a large group of people about shame for a stimulating two hours before we took a break. A friend of a friend came up to me and said, 'Anoushka, what are you doing here?' Instantly I went into shame and felt wrong. I thought, 'Oh I shouldn't be here.' Her intonation sounded to me like, 'Anoushka, what are you doing here at this place'.

I remember having a sense of shame inside me. I sat with my shame for the rest of the day. I listened to all this amazing theory that you were talking about. I thought that the only way I was going to be able to release myself from the shame that was consuming me was to walk to the front of the room and talk with you. Because I was saying to myself, 'I deserve to be at the back of the room.' Instead, I walked to the front of the room, spoke to you and asked if you wanted to work together. At that point my sense of shame diminished.

RE: You did just the opposite of the most common human reaction which is to shrink away and to hide. It's similar as when a dominant dog approaches a non-dominant dog in the park. The less dominant dog will crouch down, drop its tail between its legs, lower its ears in order to avoid conflict. You did not diminish yourself, you did not withdraw, but instead you came forward, you stood up and you presented yourself. That is what people have to do, often many times, to overcome shame.

AB: That uses a huge amount of energy.

RE: Oh yes, because you're running the risk of conflict.

AB: Ok. So, the reason we withdraw or hide ourselves is the fear of conflict.

RE: Yes. I think so. I think what you heard was a humiliating tone. That may not have been her intention.

AB: No

RE: I hear that tone often in the UK, less here in Canada. In the UK I'm frequently reprimanded by some store clerk, or hotel employee or airline employee who will say something in what I take to be a humiliating tone. I think it comes out of your education system, children learn that tone and attitude and it becomes part of the culture.

AB: And is it possible it goes back even further? I'm thinking about colonialism during the British Empire.

RE: I think so. My experience of being in India for an extended period of time was that the Indians who had become Anglicised sometimes had a similar tone and attitude. I don't find it from the non-Anglicised Indians but I do find it with some British educated Indians. Perhaps they view people in a hierarchy.

AB: You wrote in an article in the *Transactional Analysis Journal* on Shame and Self Righteousness (1994) that Lewis (1971) was one of the first psychoanalytic writers to relate shame to clinical practice. Why do think it took so long?

RE: Although Erik Erikson in 1950 (Erskine, 1994) used the term 'shame,' the writers of psychoanalytic literature were concerned with guilt; almost everything was phrased in terms of guilt. That came out of Freud's drive theory where he was focused on the guilt that people have because of their instincts. In the English language we frequently confuse the two terms. People will say 'I'm ashamed' when they are describing guilty, or they say that they are guilty when they are really feeling shame. So, there's a confusion in the popular lexicon about what we mean. Guilt is about having done something wrong, a crime. The courts are concerned with guilt, they want to know if you did the crime or not. The legal system doesn't care if you're ashamed of the crime. Although being ashamed may give you a lesser sentence if you're

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standing before the judge.

AB: So, this is the difference between the external and the internal shame and guilt. One is internal and the other external.

RE: Yes. Shame is a very internal process. Guilt is about behaviour, ‘I have done something wrong.’ When I am guilty I may also be ashamed. I may hide, go quiet, become passive, think that something is wrong with me. Guilt is about behaviour, ‘What did I do to harm someone else?’

AB: Lewis emphasises that there is a struggle to regain a sense of being valued that follows a loss of self-esteem. This struggle is so much a part of shame.

RE: Your struggle was to walk to the front of the room and speak.

AB: Yes, because I had experienced a loss of value and esteem in the eyes of this person.

RE: Or as you imagined it.

AB: Yes. And, at a two-day conference, another day of possibly feeling shame to get through, so I thought to myself, it is best not to get withdrawn.

I wonder where your awareness around your own shame began?

RE: Ha ha ha. I was asked to do a symposium for ITAA and to write an original article on shame. The head of the program committee called me, asked me to take on the project. I responded with, ‘I don’t know anything about shame.’ He said, ‘Yes you do, I’ve watched you do several workshops and you’re always dealing with shame.’ He offered to send me a few books. That and a few articles was all that there was at the time. These books and articles sat on my desk for months, unopened. I’d look at them but I wouldn’t do anything.

One day I was in my psychoanalysis, on the couch, and I said to the analyst, ‘I’ve got this project on shame and the deadline’s coming up, I don’t know anything

about shame.’ He responded with one word, ‘Oh.’ I sat up and I looked at him and said, ‘What’s that “Oh” mean?’ He said, ‘what do you think we’ve been talking about for the last couple of years?’

So that afternoon I went back to my office and I said to my first client, ‘We never talk about shame.’ It was like opening Pandora’s box. That night I went back to my men’s group and talked about shame. I was surprised because the whole conversation shifted. Several of the men talked about their shame. Some even talked about being ashamed of their sexual inadequacies that they had never shared with anybody before. And so the following week I brought it up in my seminar. Some months later I started a research project that lasted a couple of years. Together with a group of fifteen psychotherapists we read the various literature and collected clinical examples. Our qualitative research project gathered a lot of information about the dynamics of shame.

AB: I read an interesting article about a roundtable discussion you were involved in (Erskine, et al, 1994).

RE: I had invited each of the people on the round table to present a workshop as part of a two-day Symposium on the Treatment of Shame. Each of them did a three-hour workshop in addition to that round table discussion.

AB: Carl Goldberg (1994) named himself the gadfly and to me it felt like a protective label he needed to wear to protect from his own shame of speaking out and saying something different to what everybody else had been saying up to that point. He said that everyone had been talking about shame as the infidel and how can we talk about shame as interpersonal when we talk about it in such a one-sided manner. Do you remember that?

RE: Carl Goldberg and I were lunch buddies. We’d get together every couple of weeks for lunch and have long conversations, he was always quite a provocateur.

AB: Well, interesting that he names himself the gadfly which is defined as a person who goes against the consensus to provoke a reaction.

RE: Yes, I think he was probably responding to my keynote speech in which I talked about shame as being interpersonal. I said that shame is a result of a humiliating transaction with someone else, either because of their words, tone or being ignored, put down, or criticised in some way.

Shame is very interpersonal. I think that Carl Goldberg was trying to take the position that there was some benefit in shame, that shame served the function of civilising us and that shame brings us back to the norms of society.

I can see that in terms of kindergarten age kids where shame may be used such as, 'You cannot pull Suzy's hair' or 'You cannot spit on another child.' There may be an importance in this kind of shaming. Perhaps it can help kids learn how to get along with each other. That's certainly Fanita English's (1975) position; she thinks that shaming has a very civilising function. But, what most of my clients are talking about is the shame that comes from being put down, castigated, defined. That is painfulness.

AB: Tomkins talks about shame as the affect present when there has been a loss of dignity, defeat, transgression and alienation.

RE: My professional development seminar had such a lot of discussions about Tomkins, who sees shame as a natural emotion. I do not. I see shame as a composite of emotions, not something inherent in human beings but rather a series of feelings in reaction to how we've been treated.

AB: Richard, explain to me what you mean by a composite of emotions.

RE: The shame is built out of several things – the hurt of not being accepted as I am. This may be what happened inside you at the conference. That woman didn't come up and say, 'Ah, Anoushka I'm so glad to see you here.' But she said it with a tone that was hurtful. The second thing is fear, not being accepted for who I am. The value of me as a human being, the colour of my skin, my ethnic heritage, my religion, my unique composition of what makes me human and I'm afraid of being rejected for that. So, it's the fear of rejection for who I am and the hurt for not being accepted as I am. I am afraid of being rejected because of who I am as a human being, the colour of my skin, my ethnic heritage, my religion, my unique composition of what makes me human. I'm afraid of being rejected for any of that. So, it's a composite of the fear of rejection for who I am and the hurt for not being accepted as I am.

And then, you did something. You didn't comply, you didn't slink into the back. Most people will comply with how they've been defined or spoken to. They will go passive and they'll take on that definition and so become compliant with the humiliating transaction. That compliance stops them from expressing the anger, which is what you did, which seems a civilised thing to do. You didn't turn to the woman and say, 'Don't you dare speak to me in that tone of voice.' But what you probably did was disavow your anger, hold it all inside and do nothing external with it. Then all of this together – the hurt, fear, disavowal of anger and compliance – leads the person to the conclusion that 'something's wrong with me.' The 'something's wrong with me' is cognitive, and each

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AB: You think I'm of no value. Let me show you how I can be no value for you. I comply.

RE: That's right. Now that's a very cognitive way to describe it. I don't think it is as cognitive and thought out as that. I think it's more reactive. It's emotional and it's rapid.

AB: Which is one of the reasons you maybe feel it is interpersonal, because of how reactive it is.

RE: That's right. Yours was certainly interpersonal. Now, was it only this woman. Probably not. It's probably the way you've been treated for a long time, for many years, throughout school, having brown skin, living in a British culture with your religion. All of that is going to contribute to people's attitudes so shaming may be a big part of your life.

AB: I definitely experienced a lot of cultural shaming at school.

RE: You can't avoid it. I had just the opposite. I was the white kid in the black neighbourhood. But there were times when I was shamed because I didn't have what the other kids had in terms of sports. Although I was a sprinter and could run as fast I didn't have the jumping co-ordination or the height to play basketball. I didn't have the rhythm to be a good jazz musician. In fact, a guy who is now a famous drummer actually said directly to me, 'You, white boy, you don't have any rhythm.'

AB: So that's not just a movie line that happens in real life!

RE: It was a hurtful comment and it got me out of the music business.

AB: And in that period of your life did you shrink?

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RE: Sometimes. But other times I knew I had advantages. I’d walk into a store and I wasn’t watched by the store owners like the other kids would be.

AB: You were able to understand that as an advantage and not be shamed by it which is a choice perhaps also determined by personality.

RE: I don’t even know if it was a choice, this is how it was. In some situations I knew I was privileged. In other situations I knew I was laughed at. I don’t think I gave it much thought until later in life when looked at my own history of shame.

AB: I wondered about your route into psychotherapy and how direct it was and whether experiences in your formative years took you to other places.

RE: My route to psychotherapy was because I didn’t want to go to Vietnam. I indentured myself to the Chicago Board of Education who paid for my university. I owed them three years of service. I was a special education teacher in the black ghetto schools of Chicago and I taught special ed which meant I had twenty crazy kids in my classroom, though legally I was only supposed to have ten. I had kids who never said a word and hit their heads on the desk, I had kids who claimed that they had committed murder. I watched a mother beat her kid with an extension cord. My job was to mainly keep control. If I taught them to read that would be amazing. Then I fell in love with the kids. I started taking more psyche courses at night, I got a masters and then went on and got a PhD. I found my niche.

AB: One of the things I enjoy on my training is being able to leave the house without the fear that someone might ‘see’ my shame, and being able to talk about it, to have these types of conversations like you and I are having now – that has been really freeing.

RE: Talking about shame is tremendously relieving. When first I introduced the term ‘shame’ to some of my clients they didn’t know what I was talking about. In my

own life talking about my sense of shame, responding to other people’s sense of shame, as well as reading or writing about shame has been very freeing, like having a good warm bath when you’ve been cold and dirty.

AB: Given that your teachings and writings have played such a big part in bringing the subject of shame to our awareness, do you think that we are talking about it the way we need to be talking about it or is there some shame in that shame?

RE: Probably there’s other ways to talk about shame that I don’t know yet. What we have done has been wonderful because it’s changed a lot of people’s lives. Is it enough? Probably not enough. A lot of people are ashamed of being ashamed. When the core belief is ‘something’s wrong with me’ any attempt to address that core belief runs the potential risk that we’re going to reinforce that belief.

AB: And is that where the narcissism plays in?

RE: Maybe. Most people when they are in a narcissistic process, and I’ll include narcissistic personality disorders, those with narcissistic patterns or styles, they are defending against shame. Moving into self-righteous behaviour which other writers have called arrogance. In the latin languages the word doesn’t translate to self-righteous so I have to use arrogance. Essentially, there’s nothing wrong with me the problem is you. An I’m ok you’re not position.

AB: And we come back to Berne’s four existential positions.

RE: That existential position is the core of narcissism. Although I use it more in terms of Frank Ernst (1971) behavioural definitions that he describes in his writings on the OK Corral. Ernst describes behaviours that are based on the position ‘I’m OK, you’re not OK,’ such as the tone of voice of your friend.

I’ve never explained self-righteousness before in terms of the OK Corral – but that’s certainly a good way to look at both the internal experience and the behaviour.

AB: I wonder sometimes whether cultural shame needs to be a separate entity all on its own. It feels big right now, in the world.

RE: It’s certainly big here in the news today about what is happening politically here in the United States.

AB: Ah yes. A president has been impeached.

RE: But it's not only about race it's about which clan do you belong to. There's a lot of shaming between one news media to another. Each group is implying that the other group is 'not OK.'

AB: We also have Brexit happening here. People leaving Britain after having considered it their home.

RE: And when they go back they will be a foreigner in their previous native land.

AB: And they will take that cultural shame with them.

RE: To re-experience shame in the new place.

AB: And perhaps if they have children this will be passed down into the next generation like with my parents.

RE: Now you're getting into a whole new thing: transgenerational shame. I'm going to be conducting a seminar here in the first week of January with a group of experienced psychotherapists. I'm bringing in a psychoanalyst who is a third generation German whose grandparents were very active in the Nazi movement. I've invited him to talk about the legacy of his family's history and the shame that he has endured all his years. A shame that he says Germans deny.

AB: Which is where the family constellation work fits...

RE: My impression is that family constellation is a useful psychodrama in the hands of some people. In the hands of the originator I don't think so because I think he imposes his own cultural biases into it, full of his own countertransference such as believing that parents should always be honoured. But I think this is not therapeutic in the situations where the parents have mistreated their kids. Yes, I think family constellations have wonderful possibilities of undoing shame through the generations. My work on the treatment of the Parent ego states means that I am almost inevitably working with the shame of the parents or the grandparents. Gloria Noriega and I have spent a lot of time talking together about the various approaches to transgenerational scripting which is a lot to do with diminishing shame, a shame that may have been passed on from generation to generation.

AB: And when Carl Goldberg talked about private shame...

RE: I think he was saying that we don't have a way to talk about it. Shame is often experienced without concept or words. This is why I find it necessary to introduce the concept of shame in my psychotherapy with clients.

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AB: Well Richard, thank you so very much for making it possible for us to talk about the shame, for making it a little less private. I've really enjoyed it.

RE: You're most welcome. And I hope you sleep shamelessly tonight.

References

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