

11-14-2018

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Journal of Moral Education, Vol. 48, No. 1 (November 14, 2018): 109-125. [DOI](#). This article is © Taylor & Francis (Routledge) and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Taylor & Francis (Routledge) does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Taylor & Francis (Routledge).

The politics of shame in the motivation to virtue: Lessons from the shame, pride, and humility experiences of LGBT conservative Christians and their allies

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ABSTRACT

Philosophical views defending shame as a catalyst for moral virtue are at odds with empirical data indicating that shame often yields psychologically unhealthy responses for those who feel it, and often motivates in them morally worse action than whatever occasioned the initial shame experience. Our interdisciplinary ethnographic study analyzes the shame experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) conservative Christians and the church members who once shamed them but are now allies. In this context, shame, humility, and proper pride work together amid hierarchies of social power to influence peoples' motivation, ability, or lack thereof to love and care for others. Shame may catalyze virtue, but not where it has been imposed as a chronic disposition.

KEYWORDS: [Shame](#), [humility](#), [pride](#), [lesbian](#), [gay](#), [bisexual](#), [and transgender \(LGBT\)](#), [moral motivation](#)

1. Introduction

Is shame always toxic or can it motivate virtuous action and foster thriving? We address this question drawing from our qualitative sociological and philosophical study of the US-based conservative Christian movement to open dialogue with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and to affirm LGBT identities, alternative gender expressions, and in some cases same-sex marriage.¹ Here we consider the shame experiences of both LGBT conservative Christians and the heterosexual, cisgender² Christians who have become their allies. This study illuminates the value of shame as a tool for moral education by showing that we must consider what kind of shame people experience and under what conditions. To moral educators interested in whether shame promotes virtue, our analysis suggests that we cannot adequately approach the question without understanding the substantive content of shame and humility, the relationship between them, and their roles in everyday social relations.

Some moral philosophers argue that feeling moral shame—ashamed for one's moral flaws—can lead people to become morally better and to restore damaged relationships (Aristotle, [1999](#); Flanagan, O. 2013; Manion, 2002; Shotwell, 2011). However, the empirical literature from psychology suggests that feeling shame often seems either to stifle action (Karlsson & Sjöberg, [2009](#)) or to motivate morally worse action than whatever occasioned the initial shame experience, including aggression and violence (Lewis, 1992; Pattison, 2000; Tangney, 2007). Shame also often yields psychologically unhealthy responses for those who feel it, including rage or depression (Lewis, 1992). In light of these data, some philosophers defend moral shame more cautiously, arguing that even if feeling shame often does not yield moral improvement, a *liability* to feel shame retains moral value because it indicates the presence of humility: a person's self-understanding responds to others' experiences of them (Calhoun, 2004, Thomason, 2015).

While recognizing shame as a 'social emotion,' many scholars nevertheless treat it (and morality) as a property of individuals (Taylor, [1985](#); Turner & Stets, [2006](#); Moll et al., [2007](#); Tangney, [2007](#)). Social and cognitive psychologists focusing on the 'moral self' have found links between selfhood and morality using survey or neuroimaging methods (Han, [2017](#); Han, Chen, Jeong, & Glover, [2016](#); Hardy & Carlo, [2005](#); Hardy, Walker, Olsen, Woodbury, & Hickman, [2014](#); Moll et al., [2007](#)). Similarly, philosophers who link shame and humility treat these as individual properties, not appreciating how social power dynamics can disrupt this link, nor more generally how social power shapes peoples' experiences of and responses to shame in ways that may either support or undercut virtue development (Thomason, [2015](#)).

Rather than treating emotions and morality as individual traits, we begin with the premise that human beings are social creatures. A person's identity is intersubjectively constituted over time as they internalize significant others' perceptions of them through interpersonal interactions in contexts of social power (Goffman, [1967](#); Mead [1934] 1967). We also approach morality as a social practice, rather than as a set of individual beliefs or attitudes. We investigate the link between self-concept and moral action as people experience it in daily interactional life, the contexts in which people define and experience collectively what is moral, what is virtuous, and what promotes thriving (Calhoun, [2004](#); Walker, [2007](#)). Marie may feel virtuous in making certain decisions, but others' experience and moral assessment of her actions may reveal consequences and meanings that overshadow her intentions. Those assessments may, and often should, impinge on her self-conception. We argue that like shame, humility is best understood in the context of social relationships. We use qualitative sociological data to examine the social dynamics of shame and humility, and to argue that a liability to humility and healthy pride—two sides of the same coin—influences the extent to which a person is liable to experience shame as a motivation to virtue.

After discussing our methods (§2), we define shame and provide an overview of different types of shame experiences in the context of social relations (§3). We then discuss the totalizing, chronic shame our LGBT conservative Christian participants report experiencing (§4). In light of these data, §5 complicates philosophical arguments that link the moral value of feeling shame with humility by showing that a liability to shame does not *itself* indicate the presence of humility. Rather, whether one experiences shame as chronic or only episodic influences whether one develops humility, which in turn shapes shame's role in moral motivation. The chronic, totalizing shame our LGBT participants experience does not support humility as we define it, and it impedes thriving. In §6 we argue that the *episodic* shame experienced by heterosexual, cisgender allies can be a catalyst for moral virtue when supported by both humility and virtuous pride. Synthesizing data from both groups, we conclude that *humility–pride* constitutes a single virtuous disposition that supports a person's liability to experience shame as a catalyst for moral improvement.

2. Methods

From 2014–2018, we conducted approximately 489 hours of participant observation and conducted 113 semi-structured interviews with 102 participants in this movement, averaging 90 minutes.⁴ We focused on the Gay Christian Network (GCN, now Q Christian Fellowship), which was founded in 2001 to connect gay, and now lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) (conservative) Christians to each other for support and works to foster respect and compassion in disagreement; The Reformation Project (TRP), which was founded in 2012 with the explicit agenda of advocating for conservative Protestant churches to affirm LGBT identities and same-sex marriage, taking an explicitly intersectional approach to social justice; the Marin Foundation (TMF), a Chicago-based organization that advocates dialogue and respect between conservative Christians and the LGBT community; and the Center for Inclusivity (CFI), which takes an explicitly affirming position regarding LGBTQIA2S+ (2S refers to Native American Two-Spirit people; + indicates those not listed who have similar issues) people and a broad approach to intersectional justice, thematizing racism, sexism, able-ism, cissexism, and religious bigotry in addition to sexuality. Our goal is not to generalize about this movement, but to understand in depth the experiences that people bring to it in order to revise and extend previous theories (Burawoy, [1998](#)).

Participant-observation took place at discussions, workshops, conferences, and other events sponsored by these four organizations. We learned about the movement by straddling the line between participant and observer, participating enough not to distract others, asking and answering questions when appropriate. We jotted notes by hand during the meetings and elaborated them soon after events to preserve detail. We recruited most interview participants during participant-observation, or they were referred to us by previous participants.

Interviews were typically conducted by one researcher and recorded with permission. They were held in a place of the participant's choosing, such as their office or a restaurant, or if necessary through video conferencing, and ranged from 50 to 210 minutes, averaging about 90 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured around a set of relevant topics, allowing respondents to determine content and pace, with follow-up questions asked when more explanation was needed (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995, Lofland et al., 2006). Participants in the movement referred us to articles and blogs that they saw as significant to explaining their perspectives. Interviews were professionally transcribed, and along with speech transcripts, published materials (blogs and articles), and fieldnotes, were kept and coded in a searchable database using Nvivo.⁵

Our ethnographic methods serve as a bridge between positivistic studies and philosophical arguments built entirely on hypothetical situations and conceptual analysis. As with any ethnographic research, our results are not strictly replicable, so to ensure the accuracy of our interpretations and analyses, we consulted with participants and leaders in the movement. The strength of our methods lies not in generalizability, but in the depth of the meanings and experiences captured.

3. Experiencing shame in social relations

To define shame, we draw from philosophers (Ahmed, 2015; Calhoun, 2004; Shotwell, 2011; Taylor, 1985; Thomason, 2015; Velleman, 2001;), psychologists (H. Lewis, 1971; M. Lewis, 1992; Tompkins, 1995), theologians (Fowler, 1996) and sociologists (Scheff, 2000; Stein, 2006). Analysis of these studies in light of our qualitative research leads us to define shame as an inwardly directed emotion with three central aspects: (1) painful exposure as a defective self; (2) fear of a break in an important social bond on the basis of that exposure; and (3) a sense of powerlessness over one's identity. Scholars often initially define shame by distinguishing it from guilt, which is action oriented and more readily fixable. By contrast, shame is person-based and says, 'I am bad' in all or some respects.⁶ The pain of shame is not just the disappointment of realizing that one is flawed; it is the pain of feeling exposed as flawed in ways that one fears will make important others question one's worthiness for relationship and belonging (Lewis, 1971; Thomason, 2015; Velleman, 2001). People describe the affect of shame as awful, as wanting to hide, 'disappear into the ground,' as having racing and obsessive thoughts about one's failings, which make it difficult to focus on anything else (Karlsson & Sjöberg, 2009). Yet even as shame signals desire to withdraw, it simultaneously indicates a longing for acceptance, love, to 'reconstitute the interpersonal bridge' (Ahmed, 2015; Sedgwick, 2003). Shame protects the social bond by reminding us that others' experiences of us matter (Calhoun, 2004; Fowler, 1996; Lewis, 1992; Scheff, 2000; Stein, 2006; Thomason, 2015).

We find it helpful to clarify the nature of the bond that the ashamed person fears breaking. It can include both a sense of belonging within a community and what Buber ([1923] 1970) called *I-thou relationship*, the intimate, ego-free connection he distinguished from the more superficial and ego-driven *I-it experience*. Relationship, in Buber's sense, is not just any routine interaction, but a feeling of boundless connection and profound equality in which the self 'has no borders,' is open to growing and changing as a result of interpersonal connection (p. 55). We argue that shame reflects an experience of disruption in interpersonal connection at this level.

Shame experiences vary in their temporal dimension. People can experience shame either in isolated episodes that come on suddenly, or as a chronic state of being (Lehtinen, 1998; Woodward, 2000).⁷ A person is liable to feel shame as episodic when loss of rank or status in the eyes of others is not generally expected, and so they feel shame as a sudden exposure that lowers their standing. In contrast, when shame is chronic, a person's feelings of painful exposure, fear of rejection, and powerlessness do not appear as sudden, unexpected intrusions into an otherwise undisturbed consciousness, but as an internalized disposition and way of feeling emotionally at home in the world. In a therapeutic context, Bradshaw (1988) writes:

Shame as a healthy emotion can be transformed into shame as a state of being. As a state of being, shame takes over one's whole identity. To have shame as an identity is to believe that one's being is flawed, that one is defective as a human being. Once shame is transformed into an identity, it becomes toxic and dehumanizing. (p. xvii)

For those with a disposition of shame, acute shame feelings confirm their sense that they were unworthy all along (Lehtinen, 1998, p. 62). Our data show that episodic shame may have moral benefit for some people under certain conditions; however, when shame becomes a person's habitual way of navigating the world, it violates the self and can harm their ability to cultivate virtues that support healthy relationships and moral action.⁸

4. Dispositional shame for LGBT conservative Christians

In order to understand why many conservative Protestant churches actively dispense shame toward those with same- or multi-sex attractions or different experiences of gender, we need to understand the narrative that conventionally frames conservative Christian thinking about gender and sexuality. These churches maintain that God's plan for creation includes two opposite complementary sexes, male and female, intended by God to be united in marriage. They see binary gender in the book of Genesis not as a general description but as a tacit commandment, unspoken because it's so obvious, preceding the Ten Commandments in time and importance (Moon and Tobin, 2018; see Mohler, 2014). Conventional conservative Protestants hold and generate what Bourdieu (1989) called symbolic power by repeating this interpretation of Scripture and positing same-sex attraction and variant experiences of gender to be sinful violations of it, separating a person from God and the community or even indicating rebellion against God (Gagnon, 2001; Mohler, 2014; Strachan, 2014).

When communities assume that the behaviors they associate with LGBT identities are sinful, shame might seem like an appropriate emotion, the way shame over alcoholism or the temptation to cheat on one's spouse can inspire better behavior and a redeemed identity. But our data show that shame does not help 'fix' sexual orientation and gender variance the way it works for sins such as theft or lying. Sexual orientation and gender experience do not themselves rupture relationship but are part of the basis from which a person relates to others. Rather than helping to restore relationships, shame directed at these aspects of a person targets their ability to have relationships in the first place. Elsewhere we unpack this shaming dynamic, which we call sacramental shame (Moon and Tobin, 2018).

Sexual orientation and gender identity do not generally respond to acts of will, and this relative immutability makes shame in these cases not an episodic disruption, but a chronic condition. It perpetually disrupts a person's ability to realistically assess their strengths and weaknesses and to love and serve others. Many of our respondents are told that they are unfit for ministry or even church membership. They are constantly reminded that their capacities to love and know God and themselves are broken and dangerous, and that they must fix themselves before they can serve others. A white, gay respondent in his late twenties whom we call Jimmy had attended a 10-week ex-gay⁹ residential program and observed that some participants continually re-enrolled; their sexuality did not change, and meanwhile, they in effect 'hid from life' rather than serving others. A gay African American man we call Jamal was permitted to lead a ministry on the condition that he continued to live as celibate. Even with this acceptance, he was regarded with suspicion. Once, his pastor summoned him to address another member's claim to have seen him 'on a date,' which would cause them to remove him from ministry. Jamal had to ask whether the church allowed him to leave the house and have a nice time with another person, or if he could only go out alone or in groups. Unmarried heterosexuals were also expected to abstain from sex, but were never questioned in this way. This constant suspicion and surveillance reinforced the feeling of perpetually needing to prove his worthiness.

Many LGBT participants speak of experiencing shame's effects as toxic, poisoning not just relationships, but their mental and even physical health. Some speak of depression and attempts at suicide, and others speak of surprising physical consequences, including a black respondent in her twenties being hospitalized with uncontrollable asthma attacks, a healthy mixed-race respondent in her early twenties being hospitalized with a heart rate of 19, and a former Nashville Christian music superstar contracting a rare and life-threatening autoimmune disorder (Strudwick, 2014), all of which doctors could only attribute to the intense stress caused by their shame around gender and sexuality and the fear that they would lose their places in the church.

Drawing from Fowler (1996), Brownson (2013) suggests that this toxicity comes from vague and mixed messages like 'We love you, but we abhor the way you operate emotionally' (p. 216). Our data suggest that what is toxic is not just the mixed messages, but the fact that church members (sometimes unintentionally) break relationship with an LGBT person, posit that the rupture is the LGBT person's fault, and leave no way for the latter to fix it. LGBT respondents say things like 'I lost about eighty percent of my friends when I stopped being celibate,' or 'I was thrown out of my home when I came out to my parents,' and even their heterosexual, cisgender supporters lose relationships.

When shame motivates people to restore relationships they have broken, they tend to feel closer to God. However, for LGBT conservative Christians who have internalized their churches' teachings and who spend years trying to rid themselves of their attractions or suppress their experience of gender, the absence of change creates the feeling that no matter how desperately they love God, God must not love them and that God's rejection of them is their fault. For many of these respondents, shame is both totalizing—the whole self is chronically experienced as defective—and is instilled as a disposition. In his blog and in person, Kevin Garcia has eloquently described how chronic, sacramentalized shame about his same-sex attractions nearly killed him, both spiritually and literally. He writes:

These unwanted homosexual attractions were something I viewed as . . . a cancer to be cured, a tumor on my heart to be cut out. I was terrified to share my torment with many people because I was ashamed. I was told that if I just prayed the right prayers, if I fasted, if I did the 'heart work,' that maybe, hopefully, God would grant me the grace to overcome these temptations. But nothing ever worked. Not therapy, not prayer, not getting 'demons' cast out of me, not fasting, not group confessions, not holy oil, nothing. For ten years I was convinced it was something wrong with me. It had to be me. I wasn't ever going to be good enough for God because I wasn't strong enough to overcome this trial . . . What was the fruit of that labor? Literal death. I wanted to kill myself and nearly did. . . . I tried to kill myself because I saw my heart as incontrovertibly damaged. I believed my soul was marred beyond any hope of healing. (Garcia, 2016)

LGBT respondent after respondent recounts this kind of experience—of constant and seemingly unending shame and coming to believe that their capacity for relationship was so dangerous that they could not indulge it even in friendships, leading to lives cut off from intimacy and bonding of any kind (Moon and Tobin, 2018). A 25-year-old mixed-race respondent we call Emily spoke in an interview of having realized she had same-sex attractions right around the same time in high school that she became Christian. Having appreciated the redemptive possibility of the ex-gay movement at the time, she ascribed to what they considered her 'brokenness,' 'being a "gift to your community," a service to the other people in your life who have kids. And you can kind of uniquely fit this niche of a social helper.' She continued:

To hate this part of myself so much that I spent 80 percent of my energy every single day attempting to eradicate it—it felt holy. It felt like that was what was making me righteous . . . I can specifically . . . remember instances of crying out to God . . . 'Even if you don't take this away from me, this suffering is more than okay. Because I believe you love me that much. I would do anything for this cause. And if the difficulty of my life testifies to the extent of which your love has covered the brokenness of all of humanity, then I will do this for the rest of my life.' And,

unfortunately, that's sort of masochistic, and, over time, I think, really begins to . . . impact the way a person doesn't just relate to themselves, but relates to their friends, relates to their family members, and even relates to God. And I found myself unconsciously shutting down connection. . . . I am an extrovert. I do love people. And I can listen to stories and laugh and have a good time. And so it was bizarre to [my friends] that, inside, I was crumbling in every moment because I was so fervently policing myself and making sure that I did not let myself go too far emotionally with someone, lest I start to have this idea that I would want to share life with them, and experience intimacy at any level with them.

In the grip of chronic shame, Emily lost a sense of herself as someone capable and worthy of I–thou relationship with others.

So many LGBT conservative church members experience dispositional shame that the GCN held a conference breakout session on shame resilience, which one of us attended as a participant-observer. In the course of small group conversation, she asked whether people thought there could be such a thing as healthy shame or whether shame might ever be appropriate to feel in the face of serious wrongdoing, for example. The question was met with a unanimous and resounding 'No!' Participants had been so harmed by shame that they saw no value in it. When shame becomes a disposition, the liability to feel it does not retain moral value.

5. Shame, humility, and moral motivation

Several philosophers argue that feeling shame in the face of moral failings or flaws can motivate people to virtue (or at least curb tendencies toward vice). Flanagan (2013) examines the addict's shame as an appropriate moral response to the normative failures of addiction, and Shotwell (2011) discusses how white shame can be a catalyst for antiracist action. Manion (2002) argues that shame is more likely than guilt to induce positive moral transformation for two reasons: because shame targets a flawed self and not just a person's actions, and because shame comes on suddenly and unexpectedly, halting agency and jolting an individual into self-doubt about her presumed standing as a good person. Shame forces a person to confront the gap between the person they really are and the person they want to be.

Like many philosophers who defend moral shame, Manion (2002, pp. 83–84) speaks in general terms about its moral potential, but her analysis only describes one kind of shame experience: episodic shame that is felt about parts of the self by people who already feel worthy, whose moral standing in the community is not routinely threatened. Our data affirm that this type of shame experience may sometimes serve as a moral wake-up call where people confront the moral standards they endorse and see how their moral character falls short of those standards. But as we have learned from our LGBT respondents, and as the psychological data on shame attest, shame very often leads to self-harm and sometimes even self-destruction, and it prevents people from feeling that they can do good in the world. This reality has led some philosophers to defend moral shame more cautiously and indirectly by considering what is morally wrong with shamelessness, an invulnerability to feeling shame in the face of others' shaming criticisms (Mason, 2010; Thomason, 2015).

In her defense of shame's moral value, Thomason (2015) writes, 'Being shameless is bad because it signals a person's failure to recognize . . . that their own point of view is not the only point of view that matters' in determining their identity and how well they are doing, morally speaking (pp. 20–21).¹⁰ It is easy to believe that we are more virtuous than we really are, and to rationalize away or deny our moral shortcomings. Thomason argues that at least a liability to feel shame seems essential to morality because it is linked with humility—the willingness to admit that we might be wrong about ourselves—and specifically to the recognition that other people's perspectives of who we are matter in our self-estimation.¹¹ Thomason does not define humility, but her account suggests that she thinks it involves openness to others exposing our flaws that we might either fail to perceive in ourselves, deny, or rationalize. To the extent that I acknowledge, even embrace this vulnerability to other people, I am open to learning from them and potentially being transformed by relationship with them.

We situate humility as a virtuous mean state between the vices of pride (Roberts, 2009) and the vices of deficiency, including self-abasement, self-abnegation, and servility (Snow, 1995; Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, & Howard-Snyder, 2015). Roberts (2009) and Roberts and Wood (2007) note that the driving concern for the viciously proud is self-importance, a preoccupation with puffed-up status. Humility, they argue, is having no concern for self-importance; the humble are those who lack the vices of pride. Their unconcern with status frees them up to pursue their projects without worrying about how they will appear or whether they get credit, for example. This understanding of humility as a lack rather than as having any positive content opens up counter-intuitive possibilities, which Roberts and Wood themselves acknowledge, such as the humble white supremacist (Roberts, 2016, p. 187)¹² or the humble Nazi (Roberts & Wood, 2007, p. 241).

We agree that humility enables unconcern with self-importance, but in our view it is because humility is a substantive moral virtue. We follow those who define humility as a disposition to be aware and take ownership of one's flaws and limitations (Snow, 1995; Whitcomb et al., 2015) but we add to this definition that humility is also always concerned to prioritize relationship. From their research with two intentional communities, Spezio, Peterson, and Roberts (2019) came to a similar conclusion. The 'humble white supremacist' is impossible in our view because white supremacy encourages allegiance to the ego, in particular one's inflated self-concept as superior; humility requires allegiance to relationship, which cannot be premised on superiority (Buber, [1923] 1970, p. 167).

This aspect of humility—concern to prioritize relationship—also helps explain what links humility and shame. Feelings of shame indicate that a person fears losing and wants to maintain or re-establish what humility disposes us to preserve: relationship. The longing for relationship that shame communicates is a longing for what humility makes possible and motivates us to prioritize. When dispositional shame leads to the vices of deficiency, this longing is distorted; the person comes to feel wholly unworthy of relationship. Other people's degrading narratives have too much authority over my self-estimation and I come to accept that perspective as the basis of my self-concept.

Humility thus sits opposed both to vicious pride (Roberts, 2009) and to the vices of deficiency (Snow, 1995). Openness and vulnerability to others are not themselves virtuous if one's vulnerability collapses the self into others and obscures one's own worthiness from view (Narvaez, 2014, p. 304). Building on Thomason's argument, shamelessness blocks relationship by closing people off to others as a source of selfknowledge and mutual connection, and habituated shamefulness blocks relationship by making them excessively vulnerable to others' degrading treatment.¹³ Our LGBT participants teach us that contrary to Thomason's claim, the liability to feel shame does not itself indicate the presence of humility.

The dispositional shame instilled in our respondents by their faith communities encourages the vices of deficiency, which in turn reinforce their liability to experience shame as a catalyst for self-harm and cutting themselves off from relationship. Dispositional shame in this context can make people feel chronically unworthy not only of relationship, but even virtue itself because trusted loved ones and moral guides relentlessly impugn their capacity for moral goodness and often bar them from serving others.

Not all shame is dispositional, and the episodic, partial shame experiences that Manion and others defend can have moral value. However, philosophers have not explained adequately why relatively privileged people experiencing episodic shame would respond with moral improvement rather than, say, hostile defensiveness, rationalization, or scapegoating. The heterosexual, cisgender allies we heard from help us to see under what conditions shame can lead to moral betterment.

6. The humility and shame of allies

Some heterosexual, cisgender conservative Christians change their minds, learn about and from LGBT people, apologize for prior attitudes and behaviors, and treat LGBT church members in a way that feels more like love to everyone involved. The motivation to love is not limited to those who come to support same-sex marriage. They take many perspectives, but all in this category reject their church's treatment of LGBT people as a special category of sinners, second-class church members whom one should keep at arm's length until they have 'overcome' their sinfulness. One theme that dominates these responses is that their minds and hearts changed because they desired to protect relationship. We argue that humility supports this desire and sets the stage for experiencing shame as a catalyst for moral improvement.

Some respondents explicitly attribute their change of heart to their concern for relationship. A white, former megachurch pastor we call Richard explained that it was his relationship with a gay friend that exposed his 'blind spots' about gay people's experiences in the church and made him realize that relationship is key to learning how to love as Jesus modeled and commanded. In an interview, he shared:

[I]t was a complete blind spot to me until I was in a [friend] relationship [with a gay person. . . .] [Y]ou're dealing with people and you need to engage in conversations with them. You need to sit across from a gay or lesbian friend of yours who can . . . say, 'This is really hurtful. You saying that my relationship is like incest is really hurtful. You saying that it's like bestiality really dehumanizes my partner.' But you need to be able to have that conversation with someone that you're not going to dismiss as left-wing, you know, crazy LGBT activist type. But if you don't allow yourself to be in a relationship it's very easy . . . and that's where I think a lot of folks in the church misstep.

An Arab-American megachurch pastor we call Edward had a close friend who led the music in his church and who came out to him in tears, terrified that he would sever the friendship and fire her. He recalled:

[T]hat just wrecked me. It was over from there. . . . When one of your best friends who is like, like as close to the inner circle, whatever that means, as you can be, is still afraid [of you . . .] I just—we couldn't go another day with that, you know?

This pastor's friendship mattered to him and when he realized that his friend was afraid of him, the questions that arose over his self-concept as a good friend and a loving Christian led him to change his church's policies.

But other participants who sincerely want to love and care for their LGBT family member or friend often do not respond this way, and instead mobilize to 'fix' the person's 'broken' gender or sexuality. What leads a person who realizes a relationship they value is threatened to question themselves and their role in breaking the relationship, rather than to deny or rationalize the brokenness, or to blame another? Stories shared from other allies indicate humility makes this difference.

When the eventual founder of TRP, Matthew Vines, first told his father, Monte, that he was gay and wanted to pursue a same-sex marriage and still be Christian, Monte's desire to preserve their relationship made him not want to be the one who denied his son that path. Describing his approach a few years later on a panel of parents of LGBT people at a Reformation Project conference, he clearly showed the connection between humility and a desire to preserve relationship. He said:

I had invested so much of myself into creating a good relationship with Matthew, and I was hoping to enjoy this good relationship for the rest of my life. And I was afraid that if I failed to affirm him in his desire for a same-sex relationship and a same-sex life, that could undermine our good relationship. . . . I needed to be able to speak from a position of authority, meaning that I knew what I was talking about, and I knew that I really didn't. Not that I had any question that my position was right, of course it was right. [audience laughter]

So I committed to Matthew that I would undertake a [Bible] study with him. . . . And I thought if we studied the Bible together, he would see . . . in God's own words that this is not what God approves of and he was going to have to deal with that himself. . . . And to my great surprise . . . I found myself changing my understanding about this . . . as we went through the Bible passages.

Monte remarked that prior to this event, he had found the whole question distasteful. Now, his interpretation of Scripture was shaped not by disgust, but by a relationship of respect and love that he wished to protect.

Concern to prioritize relationship over their narrative can lead people to recognize the possibility of being wrong and become open to transformation.

Again and again, heterosexual, cisgender people come to this movement from a place of humility—'Maybe I really don't know what I'm talking about'—that is evoked by their desire to prioritize relationship with LGBT people, with coworkers, ministry members, children, siblings, hiking buddies, and neighbors.¹⁴ Humility leads a person to cultivate the vulnerability necessary to learn from another, even about deeply-held and communally-enforced truths regarding God's order and their own privileged place in it.

Acute feelings of shame in the moment can make a person cringe, want to turn away, and feel temporarily unable to act, but humility fosters allegiance to relationship and can help them to channel that shame as a catalyst for moral improvement, to avoid letting arrogance break relationship. Humility allows shame to catalyze change so they can be the person they aspire to be, one who loves others authentically, as they believe Jesus modeled and commanded. Edward, the megachurch pastor, shared:

Our approach, specifically with the LGBT community, is just not working. . . . Our theology and our reality aren't matching, yet we're trying so hard on a broad scale in the Christian community to change our reality, as opposed to reexamining our theology, and that's just not working. It's hurting people. It's creating a lot of damage. . . . I don't understand that resistance a lot of times because it just seems like it would be so simple to be like 'Well, maybe if we at least, just for a second, consider the fact that we might be wrong,' it would open up a lot of people's hearts and minds and bring a lot of healing that is so desperately needed around this topic.

7. Humility—pride as the basis for virtuous shame experiences

Our study helps bridge the gap between philosophical ideals touting the moral benefits of shame and empirical realities showing shame's moral fragility and riskiness. Shame can be a powerful moral motivator, but only when people are emotionally able to embrace vulnerability to others and experience the exposure of their flaws and shortcomings without losing sight of their own worthiness. What enables people to retain this sense of their basic worthiness so that their openness to others does not slide into servility or belittlement? Drawing on data from both groups, we think that virtuous pride, which supports self-respect, protects the self from the vices of deficiency and contributes to the conditions that enable people to experience shame virtuously.

Roberts (2009) defines pride as a boost in feeling when one perceives that something worthy of praise is in some sense mine. For LGBT Christians who have endured chronic, sacramental shame, the thing of value that needs to be claimed as theirs is basic human worth. This form of proper pride—confidence in one's own basic goodness, in Christian terms, as created in the image of and loved by God—is often cultivated either in the experience of a direct message from God, or in recognizing the human worth of other LGBT people (Edman, 2016). Proper pride is part of what helps our LGBT participants recover from chronic shame. Cultivating proper pride pulls them back from the self-abnegation and self-abasement that chronic shame instilled in them and restores the humility that enables them to experience shame in a healthy way, not about the totality of who they are, but about specific imperfections of character that they can work to improve. They know they are worthy to love and serve others, to strive to be like Jesus. One respondent, a 27-year-old white gay man we call Greg, told us that after he had worked through his struggle with sacramental shame, claiming and affirming his sexuality, he recovered his ability to experience shame in a healthy way. He reflected:

I probably make mistakes, do things that I shouldn't have done, that I'm ashamed of, that's normal. And . . . the reasons I'm ashamed or feel like it's wrong are not because of my sexuality but just normal things any straight person would get caught up in or be ashamed of as well. I see it as, okay, this has nothing to do with my sexuality.

Similarly, heterosexual, cisgender church members who become allies to LGBT people have relatively privileged identities in this community and may have never had their capacity for moral goodness routinely shamed, questioned, and doubted as a result of their sexuality or gender identity. Proper pride gives people confidence in their basic worth which enables them to withstand painful moral scrutiny without losing a sense of their basic goodness, even as they recognize and feel ashamed of their moral flaws.

Seeing how both humility and pride function together in supporting a liability to feel shame in a virtuous way leads us to echo philosophers and psychologists who affirm that humility and proper pride are two sides of a single virtuous disposition, but we extend these accounts (Narvaez, 2014; Whitcomb et al., 2015).¹⁵ We advocate the term humility–pride to keep alive the fact that we are talking about a disposition that: (1) is grounded in desire to prioritize relationship; (2) enables realistic self assessment of strengths and limitations; and (3) enables people to embrace their vulnerability to others in a way that can acknowledge and withstand the painful truths about the self those others expose, rather than defensively protect their self-concept or excessively belittle themselves. Humility–pride makes a person both appropriately vulnerable to the other and open to self-scrutiny, and it gives one a stable, strong enough sense of their own worth to withstand the painful exposure of their moral flaws and use that exposure in the service of moral improvement. This emotional backdrop of humility–pride enables a person to experience shame—that emotional red flag that we may be failing our relationships—not as self-abasement or denial of the other, but as a catalyst for love.

As an interdisciplinary team, we hope that our contribution may help advance scholarship in a number of fields. Our refined definitions of shame and humility may help provide clearer concepts for analysis and more precise definitions for empirical researchers to operationalize. Drawing from our qualitative data, we have made several arguments that could form hypotheses to test in empirical studies attuned to the social constitution of the self. Future research might distinguish between episodic and chronic shame, for instance, and examine whether and to what extent each form promotes and impedes thriving, or examine the extent to which the presence of chronic shame affects the results of episodic shaming. Empirical researchers might also examine the extent to which various definitions of humility (or humility–pride) hold explanatory power with regard to positive outcomes. Our research suggests fruitful directions for philosophical work too, exploring the conceptual viability of treating humility and pride as two aspects of a single virtuous disposition. Philosophers might also pursue the underexplored role of arrogance as an obstacle to experiencing shame virtuously.

Notes

1. LGBT is an abbreviation for a number of categories often invoked together because of the similar challenges their existence poses to complementarian thought, but people do not always talk about all of these categories and sometimes they include others. The reader is most likely familiar with the terms lesbian and gay. Bisexual refers to people who have the capacity to be attracted to another person regardless of that person's sex or gender. Transgender refers to people whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth; it includes those who are of the other binary sex category as well as those who identify with no sex/gender or in between sexes/genders. Our analysis here focuses primarily on lesbians and gay men, as they are talked about the most. Bisexual, trans, and intersex people face similar dynamics, complicated by evangelicalism's general lack of discourse around them. In addition to those referenced in LGBT, this movement also sometimes includes people who for a variety of reasons identify as queer (Q), but since most people who identify as queer also identify as something else on the list, and because queer has so many meanings, we omit it from our analysis. Intersex (I) refers to people whose bodies are born not conforming to binary ideas about sex, and intersex

people are often misgendered from birth. This movement sometimes embraces asexuals (A; experiencing no sexual desires) and/or Native American two-spirit people (2S; embracing traditional third and fourth sex categories/roles). We do not have enough data to speak to these categories. The refusal to acknowledge the existence of all of these categories causes much of the harm discussed here.

2. Cisgender means agreeing with the sex assignment given at birth; not transgender.

3. We leave open the possibility that anger may be a morally appropriate and psychologically healthy response in extreme conditions of structural injustice or oppression that routinely assault their personhood and psyche (hooks, 1995; Lugones, 2003).

4. Alicia Crosby, of CFI, assisted us by interviewing LGBTQI people of color who might not have wished to be interviewed by white women. After being briefed on our interviewing methods by Moon, she conducted 40 of our 113 interviews, averaging 60 minutes.

5. As a qualitative sociologist, Moon trained Tobin in these methods.

6. Guilt stops the action and can reset the agent on a different, better course of action to redress the transgression; shame freezes agency, signaling that the self is bad and not just its activities—that the self one is threatens the social bond (see Lewis, 1992, p. 35).

7. Some psychological studies of shame measure what they call dispositional shame, by which they mean the degree to which a person is shame-prone or disposed to feel shame, which seems to lead to poor psychological and behavioral outcomes (see summary of this work in Deonna, Raffaele, & Teroni, 2012, especially pp. 42–67). We speak of ‘dispositional shame’ slightly differently, to indicate situations in which shame has become instilled in the person as an enduring emotional outlook.

8. Lewis (1992, pp. 164–173) reports that chronic shame often becomes pathological and can in severe cases result in psychological disorders including narcissism and multiple personality disorders.

9. ‘Ex-gay’ therapies often suggest that homosexuality or gender variance can be healed. Many conservative Christians started to accept that these did not work in 2013, when the president of the ex-gay umbrella organization, Exodus, shuttered the organization and went on US cable television to issue an apology to all he and the ministries had harmed.

10. Similarly, Mason (2010) argues that the shameless person makes their self-concept definitive of who they are and places no other-regarding constraints on what they will allow themselves to be. The shameless aren’t vulnerable to experiencing a gap between their selfconcept and the moral identity their actions or other people expose them to be.

11. Thomason’s argument rests on a distinction between morally good outcomes and moral value independent of outcomes. Her point is that even in cases where feeling shame leads to morally bad outcomes, the liability to feel it retains moral value independent of those outcomes because it indicates the presence of humility: a person’s self-understanding responding to others’ experiences of them.

12. Roberts (2016) says, ‘If you are a white supremacist, we will deny that you are overall virtuous; your fundamental project, after all, is despicable despite [being egoistically disinterested]. But I think we have to admit that you have the virtue of humility’ (p. 187).

13. Arrogance also closes people off to others as a source of self-knowledge and mutuality, but in a different way. Shamelessness means a person is invulnerable to feeling shame. By contrast, the arrogant are highly

vulnerable to feeling shame but also highly likely to deny that vulnerability and to bypass their shame, which is another reason to doubt the inference from a liability to feel shame to humility.

14. See, for instance Baldock (2014), Gritter (2014;) and Marin (2012).

15. Narvaez (2014) gives a neurobiological explanation and defense of the argument that the balanced, ethically virtuous self is buoyed by two sides of a single virtuous disposition— humility (healthy vulnerability to/love of others) and virtuous pride (healthy forms of selflove) (pp. 302–305).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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