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The Global Poverty of Shame as a Change Agent in Global Poverty

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Title: The Global Poverty of Shame as a Change Agent in Global Poverty

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Abstract. This article explores the problems in employing shame as a change agent in the political world.

Third World leaders within the Group of 77 recently completed a meeting and deliberations in Havana, Cuba. One issue discussed at the meeting was global poverty and one recommendation to alleviate such poverty was to induce global economic powers to share their wealth--i.e., for the haves to share with the have-nots. The change agent to effect this sharing was to be shame. The question is whether even successfully inducing shame will lead to the desired behavior of sharing.

Shame often denotes a painful emotional state engendered by perceiving that one is not measuring up to standards that one positively values. Imbued within this denotation is a conjoint perception of somehow being responsible for not measuring up to standards.

In the case of global poverty, the Group of 77 may be assuming that the global economic powers would feel shame just because there is poverty. However, few realistic appraisals of economic theories, policies, and behaviors yield the notion that poverty should be nonexistent, only that poverty should be minimized contingent on a host of other variables, phenomena, and factors.

As to a sense of self-responsibility for poverty, global economic powers certainly differ about how much causal effect they have in the global economy. There certainly are no generally agreed upon, reliable predictors of causes of recession, depression, booms and busts, and cycles of confidence and panic. Even if there were, the global economic powers might quickly seize on the misbehavior of the poor--not the rich--as instrumental in poverty. Here the misbehavior of the poor might engender and be fueled by ethnocentric attributions of the poor not being able to understand or have the will to comply with appropriate economic behavior.

Another problem in engendering shame as a change agent concerns the behavioral predictability of shame. Social psychological research suggests that the congruence between intrapsychic state--e.g., shame--and external behavior is dependent on temporal, spatial, historical, and yet other similarities between state and behavior. Moreover, once the change attempt is perceived as, indeed, a change attempt, shame might be short-circuited as an emotional state and a behavioral consequence might occur contrary to the desires of the change attempt's initiator. This contrariness would be symptomatic of the psychological process of reactance--often the bane of change agents.

Hopefully, the Group of 77 has other weapons in its armamentarium of change agents besides shame. If not, shame may only be reinforced in those who must live in and with intractable poverty--regardless of who's to blame. (See Ashby, J. S., Moran, W. J., Slaney, R. B., & Cotter, J. M. (1997). Psychologists' labeling of the affective states of shame and of guilt. *Psychotherapy*, 34, 58-63; Frolund, L. (1997). Early shame and mirroring. *Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 20, 35-57; Lansky, M. R. (1999). Wrestling with Proteus: The many forms of shame. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 19, 362-372; Massaro, T. M. (1997). The meanings of shame: Implications for legal reform. *Psychology, Public Policy, & Law*, 3, 645-704; Poor

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nations seek sharing of global wealth. (April 14, 2000). The New York Times, p. A3.) (Keywords: Group of 77, Poverty, Shame.)