

## **Bookworm's Corner**

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Brené Brown, B. (2004). *Women & shame: Reaching out, speaking truths & building connection*. Austin, TX: 3C Press.

Dr. Brené Brown presents *Women & Shame*, a painful and universal topic for women and anyone who loves women, in a very enlightening, edifying, and intriguing style. She gracefully makes a gender-specific concern a matter of growth and empowerment. I have not been as excited about a book in some time, evidenced through my purchasing multiple copies for Christmas gifts for female family members. Dr. Brown presents the tenets of shame so honestly that the reader not only cries tears of release and discovery, but also laughs out loud; Dr. Brown's insights and interpretations originating from the interviews are bittersweet and poignant. This book is critical for women, a must-read, testament to our university and Social Work program. Dr. Brown speaks to those of us who are PhD students by revealing that research can be many things and does not have to be dry and difficult. *Women & Shame* covers vital issues relevant to the shame continuum in three areas: research methods, content, and impact.

*Women & Shame* is not a self-help book; however, this book can definitely help you as a woman, a social worker, a researcher, a student, and a human being. The interpretations and analysis of the data are necessary for furthering women's health, both mental and physical. This is a purely qualitative study with raw data presented in a qualitative methodological format with the results and findings subsequently interpreted. Through this methodology, the book presents concrete issues and offers real life concerns for women, accomplishing the tremendous feat of uniting us all in unique and universal issues. Qualitative typologies are presented in understandable and enjoyable formats, drawn through caricatures in the book. Dr. Brown utilizes qualitative research refreshingly via laywoman-terminology, presenting research in a package that one can readily decipher, accept, and thus pragmatically apply to one's personal experience. Qualitative terminology arises to describe phenomena from the data, such as "shame corridor" and "shame spiral". Interview quotes and raw data convey the subjects' real and frequent shame experiences in a way that not only furthers knowledge and scholarship, but also renders such learning and knowledge enjoyable and fun. All findings are interpreted from the data (p. 89).

Dr. Brown concretely guides the reader to the reality that research begins as a journey. This is extremely important to us as students, because research is a human process; knowing this increases appropriate expectations. The researcher cannot separate self from the research they are doing; it is all part of a whole. Dr. Brown presents this beautifully by using herself as an example throughout the book. Also, research need not make the subject alien; research participants read the analysis and were available for feedback about interpretations given in the book.

Regarding content, presentation of the data reveals obvious thematic patterns from the narratives of the participants. *Women & Shame* gives an academic yet understandable interpretation of the data naturally, specifically, and humanly. Even more academic is the grouping, coding, and sorting of the data to lead us to theory formation, based within reality and common sense. Theoretical foundation, including counter and supporting arguments, theory, and rationalization to shame reactions are also presented with references. The tremendous amount of work that went into *Women & Shame* is obvious, considering the hours of interviews, processing and analysis.

Format of *Women & Shame* supports the text content by allowing ease of understanding through presentation of information via concepts, catch words and phrases, qualitative interview quotes, critical analysis exercises, and specific examples of application through theory and interpretation. Within the text, the obvious political, social, gender, and research themes emerge. Examples and exercises provide necessary reality checks throughout to assist with integration of concepts and applicability. The introduction presents the transition of an idea into a genuine research study and reveals that the meaning of doing so is an emotional process. The book is formatted in a process sense, giving explanations of how the use of labels, language, and lenses influence our interpretations of everyday life. Throughout the text, Dr. Brown neutralizes this painful subject with humor and fair comedy. The initial chapter presents immediate raw data in quotes, which transitions in later chapters to immediate narrative descriptions of the data and subsequent interpretation with raw data following. Dr. Brown presents the idea of shame and contrasts this with guilt and embarrassment; her ideology of "shame resilience" evidences the logic of interpretation, giving foundation to the analysis between the differing reactions and approaches within the subjects to shame. The "Shame Web" is the typology for the sources of shame experiences, evident in thoughts of what you should be, who you should be, and how you should be. Empowering emotive reactions and approaches to the Shame Web are through "Shame Resilience" (ch.2). Findings from the study show that shame resilience consists of empathy, connection, power, and freedom. From these findings, Dr. Brown continues her analysis by discussing

the elements of shame resilience; personal vulnerability, critical awareness, reaching out, and speaking shame. The last three chapters examine these shame areas by category; appearance, motherhood, parenting and family, identity and aging, health and sex, religion and spirituality. Derived from the findings, Dr. Brown offers pragmatic exercises via “Inside Out” boxes, to assist in gaining critical awareness. Throughout the book, Dr. Brown cites both differing and similar theories and studies of shame in research.

Impact is our gift from *Women & Shame*. Overall, Dr. Brown is fair to both genders and stays true to her research background with relevant and vital statistics (p.92). Dr. Brown avoids no controversial topics and addresses all issues shame conjures. Importantly, Dr. Brown addresses responsibility to self and others (p. 87), creation of community, and emphasizes the critical nature of personal work as both collective and political (p. 88). References to media, capitalism, and social-community expectations are well evidenced as narrative supplements potential growth and knowledge. The micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice are embedded throughout *Women & Shame*. Dr. Brown reveals such social work implications in both personal and professional ways, continually showing us that research cannot be separate from self. Dr. Brown’s authority in qualitative methods, research, and women’s issues, as well as political and global research, is unmistakable. *Women & Shame* furthers this authority.

Dr. Brown accomplishes a paradigm shift through *Women & Shame*. This book is about women, interpreted by women, its academic endeavors benefit women, and utilizes research in a refreshing way to give us all “shame knowledge” to overcome “conflicting and competing social-community expectations” (p.30). And this knowledge building about women can be done in a new and refreshing way, reflecting a woman’s style and inherent nature. What a brave and necessary endeavor! Kudos Dr. Brown! You make us all proud.