

## Why Know and Have Shame are Important? The Indonesian Adolescents' Experience

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Received: 8 March 2020 ▪ Accepted: 17 May 2020 ▪ Published Online: 4 June 2020

### *Abstract*

Shame is one of the self-conscious emotions which needs more cultural insights from studies. West's definition of shame has been very negative, following its negative externalization, such as anger. On the other hand, the East concept of shame, as well as Southern Americans, value shame as positive. Within Javanese culture, the most populated island in Indonesia, shame is introduced, educated, and socialized as *isin* from childhood. A mature Javanese is one with *isin*. This study aims at understanding the importance of *isin* of Javanese adolescents. A total of 118 Javanese adolescent students completed an open-ended question regarding the importance of *isin*. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and aided by MAXQDA to code and categorize the responses. Five themes of the *isin* importance are identified: pro-social motives, self-improvement, self-awareness, self-control, and learning resources. There is no negative response concerning the *isin* experience. The findings confirm the positive aspect of shame within the East perspective.

*Keywords:* *isin*, shame, Javanese, adolescents, thematic analysis.

### 1. Introduction

Every human being has emotions and also experiences them that are finally expressed. Generally, all human emotions involve aspects related to them. Emotions in humans arise when something that has a connection with themselves appears or is expected to emerge. Lazarus (as cited in Tangney & Tracy, 2012: 11) states that humans experience emotions when they judge an event as something positive or negative for their well-being. However, some are more relevant to oneself than other basic emotions.

Lewis (2000) states that several emotions involve many elements of cognition, namely shame and guilt. Lewis (2000) formulates a theoretical model of the “cognitive attribution” model that explains how emotions arise based on self-conscious emotions. The process of cognition can be in the form of self-evaluation that raises feelings within oneself to be responsible or not for events or actions that occur. When an individual feels no need to be responsible, the evaluation process itself stops. Conversely, when an individual feels responsible for an action or event, the self-evaluation process continues to the next stage. The next step is to look at the evaluation of the individual’s success in achieving their goals or objectives, by the rules and norms set by themselves or the community (Lewis, 2000).

- West’s definition of shame has been very negative.
- Javanese culture has a specific term to denote shame, namely *isin*.
- Understand *isin* is the first step towards a mature Javanese personality.
- Shame (*isin*) has utilities to control, refrain, improve, and be aware of the self.
- The Javanese feel *isin* if he cannot show proper respect.

According to Tangney and Fischer (1995), self-conscious emotions play an essential role in motivating and regulating almost all individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The search for the origins of self-conscious emotions is fascinating because it bridges the field of developmental research: the development of self-awareness, self-evaluation, and social comparison, as well as mind theory, which is how children understand themselves and others concerning intentions, desires, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions (Wellman & Lagattuta, 2000). Also, because self-conscious emotions arise from how we evaluate our skills and behavior about the prevailing standard norms or how we imagine others will judge us, the self-conscious emotions are essentially related to relationships between self and other people (Tangney & Fischer, 1995). Therefore, emotional self-awareness plays a formative role in the development of self-regulation, obedience, and conscience (Aksan & Kochanska, 2005).

Self-conscious emotions serve important moral functions because they are generated by self-reflection and self-evaluation. When self reflects itself, these emotions provide direct punishment (or reinforcement) on behavior. The valence and intensity of affective consequences that arise are based on evaluating ethical behavior and on evaluating what the behavior expresses about oneself (for example, our character, our talents, our values). In this context, guilt and shame function as a barometer of moral emotion, namely by providing immediate and important feedback about individual social acceptance and morals.

Thus, the moral emotion of self-awareness can have a strong influence on moral choice and moral behavior by providing critical feedback on anticipated behavior (feedback in the form of anticipatory shame and guilt) and actual behavior (feedback in the consequential forms of guilt and shame).

Shame is a very complicated emotion which has been discussed in the literature on psychology and has not had a research which is considered complete until now. Shame is often explained in general as an intense disappointment regarding a person’s shortcomings, weaknesses, or failures because of the comparison of what is owned or achieved with the applicable standards. The shame felt by someone often focuses on the self that is considered damaged, bad, or deformed by the mechanism of escape or withdrawal from the perceived threatening environment (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Some research findings reveal that shame is also considered maladaptive for human psychological well-being (Sheikh, 2014).

The emotion of shame affects broadly in our daily lives. Shame plays a vital role in socialization, function as a mechanism of social control (Creighton, 1988), maintain our sense of personal identity (Hultberg, 1988; Scheff, 1988), reflect our concern for others). Shame subtly shapes our behavior, often by causing people to behave to avoid it.

According to Carlson and Buskist (1997), moral behavior is behavior that is by a set of generally accepted rules. In most cases, when someone reaches adulthood, they have received a set of rules about personal and social behavior, which are based on a set of cultural and social norms that apply in the environment in which they were raised. The most influential explanation of current moral development is that moral values develop in rational processes that coincide with cognitive growth (Papalia, Martorell & Feldman, 2012). Piaget argues that children cannot make moral judgments until they release egocentric thinking and reach a certain level of cognitive maturity.

### *1.1 Shame as a moral emotion*

Shame is one form of emotion that is included in the category of self-conscious emotions because it involves the attention and focus of the individual on self by involving complex processes of cognition, affect, sensation, behavior, and impulse (Van Vliet, 2009). When a person violates the norms and laws, fails to achieve his/her goal, and the event is known to the public, then the shame feelings emerge.

Shame has a special meaning in many Indonesian people. According to Goddard, “maybe there is no better term than being embarrassed to start a survey of traditional Malay / Indonesian culture through the prism of its emotional lexicon” (1996: 432). Therefore, it can be understood that shame and its equivalents have received ongoing ethnographic attention in both Indonesia and Malaysia.

Shame is widely regarded as maladaptive for individual intrapsychic and interpersonal well-being. This emotion has been repeatedly discovered to predict externalizing consequences, including blaming, anger, revenge, hostility, and aggression. However, most of this research has been carried out in North America and parts of Europe (Sheikh, 2014).

In contrast, cross-cultural, cultural, psychological, and anthropological researches paint a very different picture of emotional shame. In particular, in parts of Asia, Africa, and South and Central America, shame is less emotionally promoting externalization of mistakes, anger, and aggression. Conversely, it is often valued in this context as positive moral forces that promote restorative behavior such as self-improvement and prosocial actions (Sheikh, 2014).

One of the first possible steps in characterizing emotions as moral is analyzing their previous conditions/antecedents. Weiner (2006: 87) argues that moral emotion involves “consideration of good and bad, right and wrong, and what should and what must be.” This point of view is consistent with the philosophical inquiry by Hume (1740), sociological concepts, and early ethnology proposed by Westermarck (1932), the initial emotion theory by Meinong (1894), and psychological reasoning related to Heider’s attribution theory (1958).

Also, in line with the functionalist perspective, the social function of moral emotion has been emphasized, namely that moral emotion is associated with the norms and values of society and the interests or welfare of people or groups, beyond self-concern (Cushman, 2011). Interestingly, when psychologists increasingly begin to understand emotions as inherently cognitive (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Russell, 2003), morality also begins to be seen as closely related to emotions (Haidt, 2001).

Shame emotions involve negative self-evaluations (e.g., “I am a bad person”), in contrast to negative evaluations of certain behaviors (e.g., “I do bad things”), which emerge from guilt. In the emotion of shame, someone is considered a “bad,” “immoral,” or “irresponsible” person, whereas in guilt emotions, certain behaviors are “bad,” “immoral,” or “irresponsible.” Also, Tracy and Robins (2006) add this distinction by stating that a person’s weaknesses or shortcomings are considered stable and unchanged in the emotion of shame but are considered unstable and can change in emotional guilt. More controversial differences between emotions of

shame and guilty emotions are related to the nature of “public” and “personal” respectively: One perspective shows that guilt represents internal, “personal” judgment about oneself and one's behavior. In contrast, shame is representing external judgments, namely “public” judgments of others on self and self-behavior.

### 1.2 Embarrassment as a non-moral emotion

The shame felt by someone is not always related to moral concepts. For example, there is an emotion of shame that is not associated with the assessment of morality, namely embarrassment. Miller (1996) has defined an embrace of “an acute state of confusion, awkwardness, embarrassment that follows an event that increases the threat of undesirable (negative or positive) evaluation of a real or imagined audience.” However, it is not clear how this definition distinguishes shame from embarrassment or guilt.

Research shows that sometimes, people embarrass themselves and others intentionally to achieve certain social outcomes (Sharkey, Park & Kim, 2004). For example, beggars try to display an embarrassing display to get the mercy of others. Regarding online prostitution, individuals who display their bodies openly, using minimal clothing are self-humiliating behaviors to achieve specific targets of these individuals. Therefore, it seems necessary to pay attention to how “self” or self “situated” (as being situated) in analyzing the emotions of shame.

Statistics Indonesia reported that based on the projection of Indonesia's population in 2015-2045, the population on Java Island in 2019 reached 150.4 million. This amount is equivalent to half of Indonesia's population, which reached 266.91 million people. Based on the data above, it can be assumed that Java is a beautiful island to many populations in Indonesia. This is indeed inseparable from the quality of the fertile land it has. Many volcanoes on the island of Java provide fertility on the land. Also, Javanese people are known to have very open, flexible, and accommodating (Darmoko, 2016).

Javanese culture has a specific term to denote shame, namely *isin*. Within Javanese culture, children learn to feel ashamed of strangers, to be reluctant, be shameful and guilty, and situations where feelings are revealed openly as well as a violation of rules and manners.

The *isin* socialization takes place after the child learns to feel *wedi* (respect) towards people who must be respected. Children are praised when acting *wedi* towards older people and foreigners. Not long after, children are socialized and educated to feel *isin*. *Isin* means shame, also in the sense of being shy, and feeling guilty (Magnis-Suseno, 1986).

Learning to feel ashamed (understand *isin*) is the first step towards a mature Javanese personality. On the contrary, people who do not understand *isin* are shameless. *Isin* and respect are unity. The Javanese feel *isin* if he cannot show proper respect for those who deserve respect. The feeling of *isin* can arise in all social situations. The only exception is the nuclear family, where there is an intimate atmosphere (*tresna*), and the person does not feel inclined towards the other.

The intimate atmosphere is the opposite of interaction relationships where people have to show respect and are naturally depressed by feelings of *isin*. On the contrary, all relationships outside are always threatened by feelings of *isin*.

It is not an exaggeration to say that fear of *isin* is one of the most reliable motivations for Javanese people to adjust their behavior to the norms of society. If the child is about five years old, he already understands which contexts should make him feel *isin*. The more he grows up, and the more he masters modesty manners, the more he is recognized as a full member of Javanese society.

From the explanation above, West shame literature does not accommodate the

education of shame, knowing shame (*ngerti isin*) and owning shame (*duwe isin*) as the Javanese concept of shame (*isin*). However, it is still questionable whether nowadays, the Javanese adolescents are still knowing shame (*ngerti isin*) and owning shame (*duwe isin*). The indicators of such a situation can be investigated by asking the Javanese adolescents how important shame (*isin*) is. Thus, this study aims at finding the importance of shame, according to Javanese adolescents.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

This study was a qualitative survey that involved 118 Javanese adolescents: 61 males (51.7%) and 57 females (48.3%) with an adequate understanding of shame term *isin* in their Javanese language. All of the participants (100%) knew, were familiar with the term *isin*, and used the term in their daily context of an embarrassing situation. *Isin* was introduced and socialized by their parents during childhood and adolescence.

### 2.2 Instrument

Data were collected using open-ended questions as well as direct contact with the participants using questionnaire-paper based. Questionnaire responses to open-ended questions were then coded using thematic analysis with the aid of the MAXQDA program. The theme of response was analyzed with the inductive approach (Patton, 1990) in which the data would not be driven by the researchers' theoretical interests of the issues. The open-ended question was, "According to your experience, why is *isin* (shame or embarrassment) important to you?"

The analysis is done by coding the participants' answers. The first step is to look at the frequency of meaningful words that most often appear in all participants' responses with the help of WordCloud in the MAXQDA menu. Meaningful keywords identification through WordCloud is an open coding process.

Data analysis was performed by analyzing the relationships between category/theme patterns identified from answers to questions in the survey. This step is axial coding. After finding the theme based on axial coding, the next step is to do selective coding. Selective coding is the process of integrating and filtering categories so that all categories are related to the core categories. MAXQDA helps researchers in collecting, organizing, analyzing, visualizing, and publishing research data.

## 3. Findings and discussion

The findings section presents the students' value of *isin* (shame), which are presented in Figure 1. Based on Figure 1, the Javanese adolescents view the function of *isin* (shame) as the following: (a) self-control, (b) self-improvement, (c) learning resource, (d) self-awareness, and (e) pro-social motives.

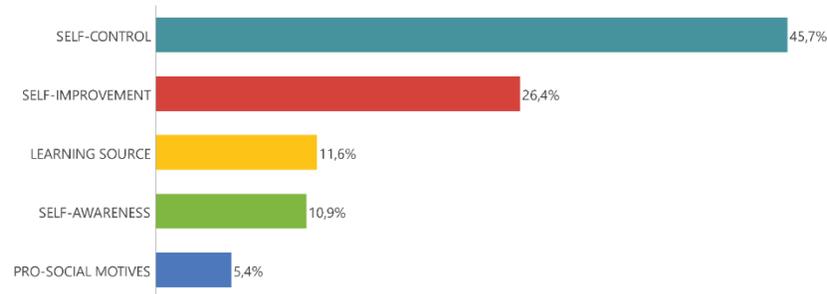


Figure 1. The functions of knowing and having shame in Indonesian adolescents' samples

Figure 1 shows self-control as the most function of shame (45.7%) followed by self-improvement (26.4%), learning resources (11.6%), self-awareness (10.9%), and pro-social motives (5.4%). Below is an explanation of each function of shame.

### 3.1 *Self-control*

The participants perceive that by knowing and possessing *isin*, they experience self-control. By owning *isin*, participants have self-reminder, self-refrain, self-discipline, behavioral guide, and being cautious. Self-control is an effortful regulation of the intention as well as the will-power (Holton, 2003).

In the philosophical and psychological literature, a common self-control issue includes the need to stifle a prompt desire to devour. One easy idea, then, might be that in the face of conflicting motives, the notion of self-control is the notion of an ability to align one's behavior with one's intentions.

Participant 8 expresses his self-discipline when he understood and owned *isin*.

"Helps to be more disciplined."

Self-control is a type of deliberate conduct control, so it seems plausible that it must involve the ability to align one's actions with one's intentions. This indicates that the notion of self-control is a notion of a unique type of control: since an individual may exercise control over his/her actions but fail to practice self-control, a capacity for self-control must require more than an ability to initiate and implement an action but also discipline.

The participant also perceives *isin* to function as self-refrain. According to Becker (1992), optimal behavior is gained through self-refrain. Individual may have better health when he/she refrains from any behavior which lowered their health. When one refrains doing something embarrassing, he/she will not experience embarrassment.

"Because shame can prevent us from doing things that are embarrassing to others." (participant 24).

*Isin* also anticipates the participant to be cautious, as stated by participant 59:

"being cautious in socializing."

And participant 2:

"*Isin* teaches that every act is thought out carefully and cautiously."

The characteristics of everyday life suggest a normative construction of social relationships that could be referred to as "prevention-oriented relationality," characterized by avoiding such painful outcomes as rejection or conflict (Gable & Impett, 2012). This orientation indicates that being cautious in one's relations with others as well as life, in general, is important.

For the participants, *isin* is important because it guides their behavior.

Learning to feel ashamed (understand *isin*) is the first step towards a mature Javanese personality. On the contrary, if people do not understand *isin*, they are shameless, and it is a very sharp criticism. Sense of *isin* is developed during childhood by making him embarrassed in front of neighbors, guests, and respected elderlies when he does something worthy of reprimand.

The self-control function of shame consists of five subcodings: self-refrain, caution, self-reminder, behavioral guide, and self-discipline. Among the five themes of self-control, self-refrained is the most indicator of self-control (Figure 2).

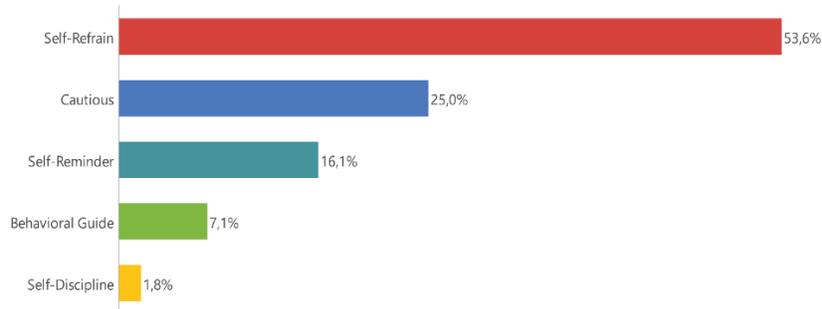


Figure 2. The five thematic indicators of self-control as shame function

Participant 100 feels that by knowing and having shame, he is able to refrain himself from doing something wrong: “stop the wrong desires.” The other participant expresses:

“prevent wrongdoing” (participant 106).

### 3.2 Self-improvement

Participants view their shame as motivation to improve the self. The motive for self-improvement is expressed in conscious desire. It is also expressed in preferences for ongoing upward feedback trajectories, upward comparison feedback, and feedback that may presently be self-threatening but is likely to be helpful in the future (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Hamamura and Heine (2008) feedback dissatisfaction such as criticism is a more useful predictor of self-improvement strivings in the East than West. The shame experience may elicit criticism from people surrounding the perpetrator. However, this feedback dissatisfaction generates and strives the perpetrator to have self-improvement. These dynamic processes show that shame has a function as self-improvement.

Participant 17 stated that “because with shame, I can know ethics”; “do the right thing because of *isin*” (participant 36); and “In order not to repeat the wrong thing” (participant 77).

The self-improvement function of shame is divided into six sub codes as presented in Figure 3 below.

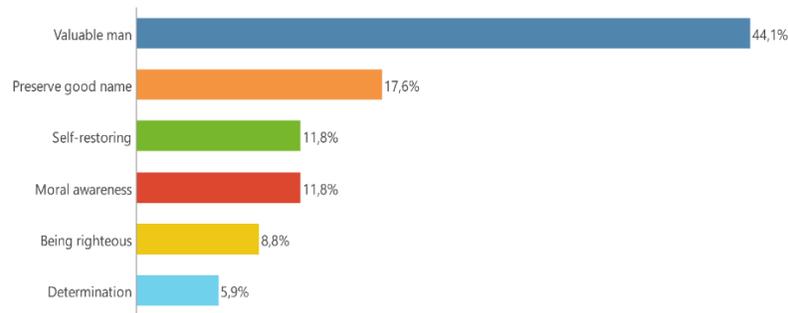


Figure 3. The six thematic indicators of self-improvement

Figure 3 shows that valuable human is the most frequent indicator of self-improvement (44.1%). Being a valuable human being is a process that exists in individuals who experience a process of self-improvement. Participants feel self-worth as a form of reflection on the shame they experience. Shyness does not sink participants into self-vulnerability but motivates them to improve themselves further to become better and more valuable. Participants even compared themselves to animals regarding the importance of knowing and having shame. For them, animals do not know and have shame so valuable human superiority is through shame:

- “I am not animal” (participant 105);
- “No shame is the same as an animal” (participant 63).

### 3.3 Learning resources

Shame experience is not negative in that it provides participants learning resources. Retrospectively, the participants express shame importance as:

- “becoming a lesson to learn” (participant 25);
- “learning from a mistake” (participant 15).

Shame is also considered positive since it is congruous with religious teachings and parental advisory:

- “fitting with religion” (participant 64);
- “remember parents’ words” (participant 73).

These participant responses prove that *isin* (shame) is introduced, socialized, and educated within the families. Figure 4 sums up the learning resources of shame: experiential learning, parental teachings, and religion. The shame experience is thought as the experiential learning source for the participants and the most frequent theme of learning resources.

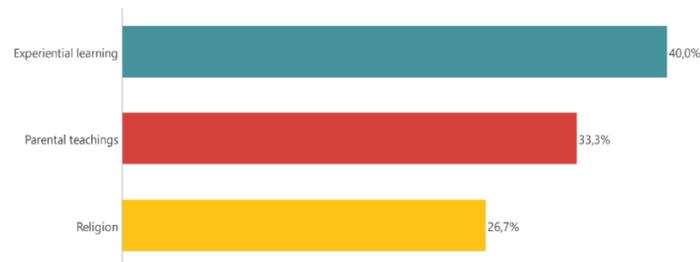


Figure 4. The distribution of experiential learning, parental teaching, and religious teachings as learning resource function of shame

### 3.4 Self-awareness

A classic distinction between focusing attention outward toward the environment (consciousness), and inward toward the self (self-awareness) was proposed by a sociologist George Herbert Mead (Mead as cited in Morin, 2011). Further, Duval and Wicklund (1972) explain self-awareness as the capacity of becoming the object of one's attention. Self-awareness occurs when individuals perceive and process stimuli with the consciousness that he/she is doing it. In this case, participants become aware of what they are doing by reflecting the experience they are having. Also, self-awareness facilitates one to reveal one's autobiography and introspection, anything related to one's self.

Participant 27 states the expression of self-awareness, which indicates knowing self-limitation:

“In order not to behave in an ego manner.”

Another participant (111) believes that “*isin*” has a function of self-awareness in that one can understand his/her behavior limitation:

“so, people do not go too far.”

Javanese interprets self-awareness as the ability to self-introspect, self-regulate his/her emotion, communication, and motivation as real intention and determination, as well as empathy as a form of concern for the environment and himself (Casmini, 2008).

*Isin* has enabled the participant to self-reflect of past failure and transgression so that the participant has been more self-aware (participant 38):

“aware of self-mistakes.”

*Isin* has also driven participant 20 to be conscious of other's observation toward her/him (spotlighted):

“Not considered bad.”

And,

“good in the eyes of others” (participant 89).

The self-awareness function of shame facilitates the participants to know and be aware of their limitations. When they know their limitations, they avoid something embarrassing. Knowing self-limitation in Javanese culture is adorable, and it expresses a humble personality.

The Javanese community's first concept is essentially hierarchically organized, where each person has a place according to his or her class. Everybody must put themselves in the right position. Javanese need to conform to the level and role of others when they speak and act. When participants know their limitations, they conform to their roles and others (Magnis-Suseno, 1997). This value avoids them from behaving embarrassingly.

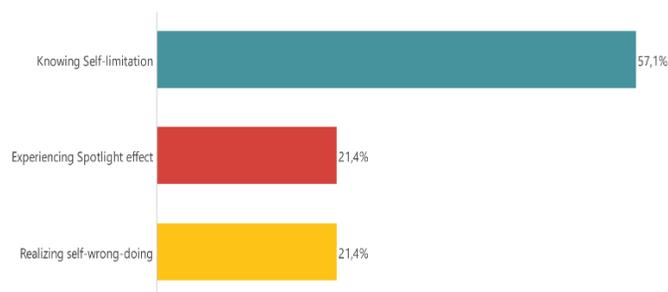


Figure 5. Self-awareness

### 3.5 Pro-social motives

Shame is essential for the participants as it provides pro-social motives within them. The pro-social motives involve the action of upholding the family's honor, keeping social harmony, and sensitive to surroundings. Figure 5 shows the frequency of every value in the pro-social motives.

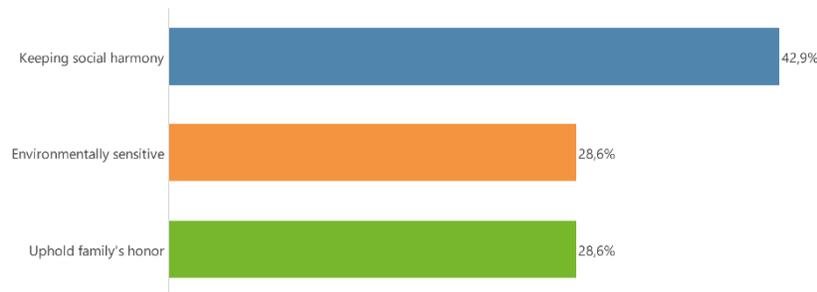


Figure 6. The pro-social motives for knowing and having shame

The participants put a family's honor as a goal to fulfill. It is avoidable for the participants to embarrass their families with their transgressions.

The Javanese saying *mikul dhuwur, mendem jero* has a pro-social meaning. *Mikul dhuwur*, which means upholding the dignity of parents, has a strong message for a child towards his parents, and it is good character education in the family. This character education starts with the family. Within society now, many children forget that they still have parents whose proper names must be taken care of, but many children underestimate this, so often, we find many transgressions committed by adolescents and affected their parents.

Social harmony is put high within the Javanese society. Echols and Shadily (2005) define harmony as a state of suitability and peace. Harmony is also defined as realizing balance in a relationship (Kwan, Bond & Singelis, 1997). Within the Javanese culture, harmony is explained in the *rukun* principle. The *rukun* principle aims to maintain society in a harmonious state. "Rukun" means "in harmony," "calm and peaceful," "without dispute and disagreement," as well as "united in the intent to help each other" (Mulder, 1978). As stated by the participant, shame is necessary because it avoids us to hurt others:

"does not hurt the feelings of others" (participant number 47).

The Javanese are educated so as not to disappoint and hurt others because there is a change of fate towards a better direction so that the Javanese do not let them humiliated. Therefore, the Javanese want always to be introspective, that is, to know their weaknesses and shortages. In order not to fuss, the Javanese avoid the attitude of *oyo dumeh* by helping, helping and being able to understand other people's feelings or empathy (Budiyono & Feriandi, 2017).

According to Susetyo (2006), a study on Javanese students in Semarang shows that the principle of harmony and respect is still a consideration of behavior. Within Javanese society, maintaining harmony involves the behavior of not hurting others. Javanese culture emphasizes the concept of gentleness that makes it difficult for people to hurt other people's feelings. The next concept of Javanese culture is *andhap-asor*. This term, according to the dictionary, consists of two words, namely *andhap* "low" and *asor* "simple." Therefore, to behave, *andhap-asor* means humbling when praising others. This concept makes Javanese people become low profile (Mawardi, 2007). As a Javanese, they will not dishonor their interlocutors and praise themselves. When the Javanese violate this rule, as they refer to the karmic order, they will be considered impolite and may get social sanctions.

What distinguishes one Javanese from another Javanese is in terms of sensitivity, meaning that the more sensitive a Javanese is, the more *nJawani* the Javanese is (Susetyo, Widiyatmadi & Sudiantara, 2014). Collectivistic cultures, as Javanese culture, form interdependent construal of self. A culture that emphasizes the collective self is very distinctive with a natural feeling of the interrelationship between humans with each other, even between themselves as a microcosmos with an environment outside itself as the macro cosmos. The normative task of collectivistic culture is to adjust the self to be fit and maintain interdependence between individuals.

According to Mulder (1994), Javanese cultural values emphasize that Javanese people should have a high awareness of the existence of others. In his life, one is not alone; people are constantly in contact with people from different environments. This relationship will last well if every contact takes place without friction and fun. As participant 15 stated that:

“Because *isin* is the trait that teaches us to be sensitive to our surroundings.”

The above statement refers to environmentally sensitive, which is coded within the pro-social motives of *isin*.

The indicators of upholding family’s honor, keeping social harmony, and sensitive to surroundings reflect that participants are not self-centered but others oriented, which are the characteristics of pro-social attitude.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study focused on the importance of shame in Javanese adolescents. Shame is a valuable experience that is transferred through family education and socialization. The majority of West psychology conception of shame emphasizes the dark side of shame and relates it to mental health problems. However, shame conception of East psychology involving Chinese and Javanese cultures posit shame conversely.

The findings show that shame is not an emotional experience, which is negative and avoided, but shame (*isin*) has utilities to control, refrain, improve, and be aware of the self. Shame is also perceived sacred since it is stated in the religious teachings, parental teachings, and serves as experiential learning for participants. The participants also recognize the relational or social value of shame as it facilitates participants to have pro-social motives.

#### Acknowledgements

This study was supported by LPPM Universitas Tarumanagara.

The authors declare no competing interests.

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