A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING LEADERSHIP EFFICACY: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF SHAME IN CHRISTIAN LEADERS

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
by
Matthew James Williamson

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
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APPROVED BY:

______________________________
Don Bosch, EdD, Dissertation Supervisor

______________________________
Steven T. Smith, EdD, Second Reader
ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the Christian leader’s experience of shame within organizations and its impact on their leadership efficacy. For this study, shame is defined as a deep sense of internal, negative pressure that typically elicits a subconscious desire to suppress or deflect. Since every organizational leadership role has a degree of accountability, emotional risk is potentially present in all negotiable interactions. This paper investigated the social/cultural encouragement of shame and potential avoidance of shame when emotional risk and failure are perceived. Brené Brown’s (2006) Shame Resilience Theory inspired this study. This theory is aligned with the purpose of this study, as Christian leadership must face shame to develop healthy, Christ-like relationships, which demand internal growth. This study leveraged Alsaigh’s and Coyne’s (2021) Framework for Hermeneutic Phenomenology Research to guide the methodology through a three-stage interview process and participant journaling. Thematic analysis revealed that participants experience shame dynamics within the organization in physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual ways causing significant taxation on a leader’s bandwidth. This taxation often results in cyclical instigation and perpetuation of shame until broken by contemplation. Also, the analysis revealed that Christian leaders are responsible for interpreting and appropriately responding within their community by declaring and demonstrating shared values, developing an acute sense of reconciling differentiating worldviews, and remaining hyper-vigilant to the needs of their followers, encouraging the cultivation and growth of their entire community.

Keywords: Shame, leadership, personal growth, connection, contemplation, isolation
Dedication

To God’s glory. Thank you for letting me be a mouthpiece (Jeremiah 15:19).

To the feelers of shame, both the shamer and the shamed—there is hope if we face it.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

T. S. Eliot, excerpt from The Wasteland
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To God—I certainly did not have language for it then, but two decades ago, you allowed me to witness the sweeping, destructive nature of shame in the church and my family. Even now, describing such a thing as a gift is hard. But in those moments, you instilled in me a fire, and when shut up in my bones, I could not hold back (NIV, Jeremiah 20:9). This journey began with a desire to understand what I profess—no half measures. Perhaps now I have finally found the words. Thank you.
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List of Abbreviations

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Liberty University (LU)

New International Version Bible (NIV)

New English Translation Bible (NET)

Shame Resilience Theory (SRT)

Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous (VUCA)

Yahweh or Jehovah (YHWH)
CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

Society encourages the neat compartmentalization of negative emotions in one’s personal life. Often, there is an unspoken expectation of leaving emotions, such as anger or shame, at the door of school, work, and even church. The messiness of pain is far easier to ignore than face (Brown, 2018). A Christian could easily say the same about sin. It is much easier to ignore. David (2016) describes the psychological damage that repressed emotional pain causes. Over time, these repressed emotions amplify, leading to angry outbursts, depression, and significant health concerns (David, 2016). These potential experiences represent obvious barriers to leadership. Recognizing and successfully reconciling shame in oneself and within the individuals a leader supports is critical. For Christians, the risk associated with following the secular culture of “armoring up” and refusing to process shame creates a Christian faith indistinguishable from secular ambitions often focused on power, wealth, and fame. These ambitions starkly contrast Christians’ warning about being of the world and the reception Christians should expect to receive (New International Version Bible, 2006, Romans 12:2, John 15:9).

The concept of sin and its consequence can seem simple enough, as the Bible is remarkably clear about what it is and the consequences of pursuing a sinful life. Unfortunately, a Christian’s faith does not inoculate them against sin. It becomes even more challenging in many cases, as Christian leaders are often placed on pedestals within communities and obligated to maintain appearances (Benner, 2015). Instead of facing harsh truths, leaders may seek the distractions of the prosperity gospel or numb difficult emotions through alcohol, sex, or pornography. Instead of facing the shame of being “less than” or “not good enough,” it is all too easy to look for gratification elsewhere. This repression has dangerous implications for spiritual
health. Benner states, “Christian spiritual transformation is much more radical than sin avoidance. And the knowledge of self that is required for such transformation is much deeper” (2015, pp. 61). The phenomenon of shame could effectively explain the perpetuation of workplace inequity regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, body image, mental health, physical disability, faith, and other differences resulting in an “us” versus “other” dynamic.

King David's reign is a comprehensive example of shame and its impact on leadership in the Bible. In 2 Samuel 6, the reader sees a near-naked David dancing unabashedly in the streets of Jerusalem. He even challenges his wife, Michal, when she reprimands him for his indignity. This passage offers a glaring correlation to Genesis 3, where in David’s obedience to God, he does not seek to cover up his body like Adam and Eve. David was most unashamed at the beginning of his reign and covenant with God. In 2 Samuel 6:22. David declares that he would become even more undignified than dancing around the town center in his underwear. However, after David settles his allegiances and puts his kingdom in order, he falls to temptation. Secure in his power, David stays back in his kingdom when he should be at war (NIV, 2 Samuel 11). At best, David commits adultery with Bathsheba. At worst, this act can be considered rape, for what woman could refuse a king in ancient Middle Eastern culture given the power disparity of the gender and caste expectations?

When Bathsheba is with child, David tries to regain his honor, as his indiscretion and infidelity are no longer a secret, by killing Uriel and marrying Bathsheba (NIV, 2 Samuel 11). David’s posturing is known to at least Uriel, Joab, and Nathan, if not everyone. David’s shame begets sin, which generates more shame. David’s sin causes him shame, disrupting the covenant God created with him, much like Adam and Eve. The cost of this shame leads to his own daughter’s rape (NIV, 2 Samuel 13), the loss of his kingdom (NIV, 2 Samuel 15), his son’s death
(NIV, 2 Samuel 18), and the inability to carry out his vision of building the Temple (NIV, 1 Chronicles 28-29).

Even following the annals of Hebrew kings down the successive generations, this breach of the covenant gives way to moral indifference and outright rejection of Jehovah’s (YHWH) covenant. Only when Jesus comes and dies on the cross, forming a new covenant with God’s creation, is the cycle that David put into motion set right. David achieves reconciliation through vulnerability when he forgives the guilt of Shimei’s and Mephibosheth’s treason (NIV, 2 Samuel 19). He had every right to sentence them to death. The words of Eger resound, “If you have something to prove, you are still a prisoner” (Eger, 2020, p. 111). David’s transgressions not only serve as a warning to Christian leaders about faith, honesty, and obedience. It is also a narrative of shame, how the shamed perpetuates shame on others, and how one can only find their way back to community and peace through grace and emotional vulnerability. What is the significance of leadership as a responsibility to identify and mitigate the role shame plays within oneself? Within others? Are there consequences to not addressing shame within an organization? Should leaders attune themselves to the immediate or lingering impact on their team dynamics?

The research problem provides the study's specific focus, followed by the purpose statement and subsequent research questions that frame the study. Assumptions and delimitations further structure the study’s parameters. This chapter also details the gap in the literature, how this study adds to the academic understanding of shame, and ultimately provides a detailed outline of the study design.

**Background to the Problem**

According to Dr. Brené Brown (2018) and her twenty years of research, shame is at the core of why leaders struggle, fail, or inflict damaging behaviors on others. The path to effectively
dealing with shame requires leadership from a place of emotional vulnerability (Brown, 2018).

What makes it so difficult to be emotionally vulnerable? Why is it biblically necessary to be vulnerable and lead from a vulnerable place? The theory of leading from a place of vulnerability has implications that resonate far beyond business development and academic education. This vulnerability is at the core of how humanity interacts with and affirms each other and the degree that Christian leaders are prepared to manage significant social and cultural issues. Brown shares,

Wholeheartedness is engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to believe that we are worthy of love and being loved...it’s putting down the armor and bringing forth all the misshapen pieces of history that, when separated, keep us feeling exhausted and torn. The Latin root of integrate is integrare, “to make whole” (2018, pp. 72-73).

Brown’s (2018) comments are behind a growing behavioral science that a Christian should immediately recognize as the doctrine of humanity, acknowledging that God intentionally created every human in His image and is worthy of redemption. The internal trigger that keeps humans from making this decision is the same shame that Adam and Eve felt in the Garden of Eden. With an acute focus on being vulnerable and rewarding a culture of vulnerability, a leader can address, undo, and prevent the wounds of shame (Brown, 2018; Ellenhorn, 2020; Van Yperen, 2002; Hamel et al., 2020).

**Theological Reasoning**

Living and leading in an emotionally vulnerable way, including its inherent risk and rewards, draws strong parallels with the doctrines of humanity and sin. Regarding these doctrines, Allison states, “Both dignity and depravity typify the human race, human institutions, human aspirations and achievements, human communities, and human beings individually” (2008, pp. 174). These aspirations vividly fill history books. Although leadership rarely summits
the peaks of human capabilities, such as the painting of the Sistine Chapel or space travel, it constantly deals with God’s most precious creation, humanity. In the everyday stewardship of this great responsibility, leaders fulfill their calling and find joy in its purpose, as God calls Christians to love our neighbor and preach the Good News (NIV, Matthew 22:37-39, Matthew 28:19-20).

It is also true, however, that leaders commit humanity’s greatest sins. The Holocaust and slavery are just two examples of the dreadful depth humans can reach. Although very few leaders intend to impact their employees negatively, a leader’s inability to connect and understand the implicit experience of their team is critical in building cultures where leaders hear, affirm, and develop their teams to perform (Brown, 2018). More recently, organizational behavior theories have focused on eliminating bureaucratically structured execution, attempting to harness the unique talents of everyone on a team and where every voice has influence (Hamel et al., 2020; Brown, 2018; Sinek, 2017). This sense of community is a corresponding echo of theological anthropology. Directly connected, the reason leaders or organizations struggle is explicitly tied to the doctrine of sin, often manifested in the arrogance of power, the greed for wealth, and the vanity of accomplishment (Ledbetter et al. 2016). Organizations often reward bullheaded leadership as it delivers short-term results quickly (Kovač, 2016). The dangers of aggressive and passive-aggressive leadership pervade an organization’s culture causing retention issues and efficiency drains. Teams struggle to deliver in environments where speaking up and challenging toxic leadership is psychologically unsafe (Brown, 2018).

Each Christian should know the difference between serving Christ and the community and serving oneself. The doctrine of sin gives Christian educators and leaders insight into why
humans struggle to be their best selves. It dramatically informs the need for academic study, intentional development, and real-world practice. Willard shares,

The greatest need you and I have—the greatest need of collective humanity—is the renovation of our heart. The spiritual place from within us from which outlook, choices, and actions come has been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed (2012, pp. 14).

The decisions formed away from God tend to leverage self-serving tactics, such as driving for a promotion or bonus. Neither is innately evil but does not reach beyond the self, which often leads to the detriment or exclusion of others. When humans experience dissonance in their ecosystems, it breeds distrust and has physical, mental, and spiritual ramifications (Benner, 2015; Goleman et al., 2013). To protect themselves from this dissonance, humans put on emotional armor, such as hiding inconvenient truths from supervisors, gaslighting those who disagree, or withdrawing entirely from a situation where a leader is needed to move forward. This armor, intended to cauterize the wound, leads to numbness and self-preservation, which breaks down the sense of community and psychological safety (Brown, 2018; Ellenhorn, 2020; Hamel et al., 2020).

Closely connected, the doctrine of humanity reminds the Christian educator and leader that each human, including oneself, is worthy of love and has a destiny to fulfill Christ’s example, belonging within an emotionally vulnerable, connected community (Estep et al., 2008; Kilner, 2015). Although not everyone fulfills this destiny, it is critical that each Christian still see this possibility in every human, regardless of where they are on their journey. Kilner states, “People are created in the image of God, which means how they are treated and to what they have access matters greatly…human rights are God’s rights over humanity more than one person’s rights over another” (2015, pp. 317-318). Regarding shame and vulnerability, this doctrine informs each Christian that there is a stark difference between the authority of loving correction and self-righteousness. The tendency to be self-righteous breaks the psychological
safety of a community, causing fear or avoidance. In Christian leaders, this opens the door to pride and arrogance, causing believers to turn their eyes away from God by replacing Him with other idols. As Christian leaders should endeavor to be more Christ-like, the personal responsibility of digging into one’s shame, where it comes from, and what behaviors occur when a leader experiences it are critical. Not only does this allow each leader to find true peace with themselves, but it also allows the leader to manage conflict and dissonance around them more effectively.

**Biblical Significance of Shame**

The first interaction that readers have of shame in the Bible occurs in Genesis 2:25. The reader understands from the beginning that shame was not an emotion intended to exist in creation. In Genesis 3, the reader contends with losing connection with YHWH. Eve faced an internal struggle of whether it was best to be obedient to God or take a significant risk in eating the forbidden fruit to gain divine wisdom and be more God-like. Although the serpent is crafty and bends the truth, Eve’s actions do not resonate with her Creator’s instruction. She doubted her worth in the face of the serpent’s accusation, that she was blind to the knowledge that she was unlike God (*New English Translation Bible*, 2019, Genesis 3:5). Adam, tempted by the same allure, capitulates. The Bible does not overtly articulate the emotions at play, but imagining Adam’s reluctance to disagree with his only human companion is not difficult. Adam even blames God for giving him Eve, who led him to sin (NET, Genesis 3:12). This connects shame to the rejection forced upon the self or those within the community. Adam’s and Eve’s fear of rejection and the shame of being excluded from the divine is palpable (NET, Genesis 3:5). Cozens and Ochs (2019) explore this exact theological implication. They argue that although guilt and sin are implicit in the framing of Genesis 3, fear and shame are explicit and, as such,
demonstrate the primal reactions to transgression and a portrayal of the complexity of the human condition (Cozens & Ochs, 2019). Further, they share that this presents a “shift in identity from the divinely ascribed to humanly acquired, leading to a fear of personal inadequacy in the eyes of the other, and hence an interpersonal self-consciousness and the desire to manage one’s self-disclosure” (Cozens & Ochs, 2019, p. 186). If this is the case, this argument's anthropological and theological nature demands an investigation into shame and its subsequent impact.

Adam and Eve are not alone in this struggle; there are many examples of men and women who give into sin throughout scripture. For most, this road does not stop at the initial sin but nearly always devolves into more sin and disobedience before repentance and reconciliation occur (Hunt & Hunt, 2018). Adam and Eve’s shame from disobeying God led them to run, hide, and cover themselves (NIV, Genesis 3:8). Moses’s shame of feeling inferior led him to strike the rock instead of obeying God (NIV, Numbers 20:9-11). This rush to satisfy the Hebrews was a way to silence the inner voice of doubt, but it led to Moses’s exclusion from the promised land. The woman at the well avoided her community and came to the well during the midday heat because she was divorced five times (NIV, John 4). Peter’s shame caused him to deny Christ (NIV, Luke 22:54-62). Judas’s shame of betraying Christ led to his suicide (NIV, Matthew 27:5). A well-known story about the shame that Western Culture typically misreads is of King David’s shame of committing adultery that led him to kill a loyal soldier (NIV, 2 Samuel 11:6-27). This shame kept David from God, led him to more sin, and caused strife, his child’s death, and public disgrace. Richards and O’Brien (2012) detail this story by arguing that David did not repent because he did not feel guilt. Instead, he attempted to restore his honor, preventing further shame, by asking Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba and then killing Uriah and heroically taking on Bathsheba as his (David’s) wife. David was unconcerned about Bathsheba’s feelings, only
attempting to manipulate Uriah to restore David’s honor as a “holy” king. When Uriah refuses to let David off the hook by sleeping at the entrance of his house, David escalates the situation out of shame as he cannot save face and restore his honor (Richards & O’Brian, 2021). Due to this shame-induced reaction, God punishes him as David will not own up to his actions. This shame finally pushes David to his knees and into repentance.

Lastly, it is critical to note that shame is not guilt and how this impedes an accurate understanding of sin and shame. Jesus has already paid the cost of our guilt (Romans 5:12-18). Tennent argues about the danger of not understanding shame theologically. He explains,

If we only know about guilt, there is a danger toward legalism and depersonalization of what it means to be a human in rebellion against God and discord with our neighbor. If we only know about shame, there is a danger of losing clear objective basis for God’s righteous judgment that transcends the changing vagaries of human culture (Tennent, 2007, p. 101).

Western culture better understands guilt than shame and leans heavily towards binary reasoning (Cozens, 2019). Something is right or wrong, black or white, good or bad. This shallow understanding of the dynamic of sin and shame only further perpetuates shame. Wright (2008) describes guilt as an unbearable burden on the conscience; shame as a severe destruction of one’s self-esteem. He argues that the postmodern understanding of shame derives from an inconsistency between the image of ourselves that we project and the selves we know on the inside (Wright, 2008). Shame is a conscious understanding that humanity is not what it should or could be due to its separation from God since the fall in the Garden of Eden.

**The Bible on Emotional Vulnerability**

Thankfully, there is a path to God through Christ. For shame specifically, the way forward begins with emotional vulnerability and transparency about the shame one feels (Brown, 2018; Ellenhorn, 2020). In Romans 3:3-5, Paul reminds his audience that sin does not alter God’s
faithfulness to his creation, demean Christ’s sacrifice, or end the power of grace. This same promise is lived out even in Genesis after the first sin. God could have immediately struck down Adam and Eve for their sin, derailing creation for or outright disobeying a direct commandment and introducing sin into a pure world. He could have started over. Thankfully, God did not. As God curses the serpent, he creates a covenant with Eve. She will bear offspring that will defeat the serpent, a prophetic promise that a woman will give birth to Christ who will finally destroy sin through death, resurrection, and final return (Genesis 3:15, Hebrews 9:26). Shame declares a life unworthy and incapable of good. Still, the doctrine of humanity declares that every life is worthy of love and that there is a path to God through Christ (Estep et al., 2008). God did not abandon Adam and Eve. He clothed them and made a way forward for them (Genesis 3:21). Hunt (2018) discusses the psychological implications of this covenant with Adam and Eve, as they must acknowledge their wrongdoing through banishment, suffering, grief, and reconciliation. She examines the progression of eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which allows God to create a moral consciousness within humanity, the tools to successfully navigate having free will, or the ability to choose between good and evil (Hunt, 2018).

As sin occurs, Christians must engage in confession, repentance, and reconciliation so that shame does not push the believer into isolation, fear, and lying (James 5:6, Galatians 6:2, 2 Corinthians 12:9). Bonhoeffer (1978) argues that only restoration of fellowship between God and man can overcome shame. Vulnerability is about “giving up on the idea of trying to cover [shame] over…salvation from shame means looking to Him to be told who we really are” (Cozens, 2019, p. 24). In emotional isolation and fear, humans again armor up, using unhealthy and sinful behavior to hide from God like Adam, Eve, David, and Peter. The acts of confession,
repentance, and reconciliation are critical for Christian leaders to remain on the right path after sin (Van Yperen, 2002). Like the hemorrhaging woman in Luke 8:43-48, we must make public our shame, outwardly and inwardly accept the gift of Christ’s grace, and live outwardly in a way that reflects a believer’s dedication to their faith. It was through this woman’s humility and emotional vulnerability that she risked public disgrace and social condemnation that she found freedom. Her courage to look at her fear of being unworthy and crawling to touch the hem of Christ’s garment is what opened her heart to God’s redemption and renewal. This woman’s actions connect to David’s (2018) theory on emotional agility. What an individual represses emotionally, they cannot understand. What one does not understand cannot be addressed effectively. Christ asks his followers to be childlike, as young children do not know shame or arrogant pride (NIV, Matthew 18:3).

Statement of the Problem

The most prominent research on shame and how to effectually mitigate it in leadership has been done by Brené Brown (2018) and presented in her book, Dare to Lead. She closely examined the common behaviors demonstrated by those in leadership who do not effectively manage shame, allowing it to manifest negatively at work and in their personal life. Brown also explored the healing process of organizational culture, centered on being courageous through emotional vulnerability. She argued that there are no shortcuts in this work and that the benefits, both personally and organizationally, far surpass the ability to maintain the current approach (Brown, 2018). The closely related topics of psychological safety and anti-bureaucratic leadership are well explored in Sinek’s (2017) Leaders Eat Last, Hamel’s and Zanini’s (2020) Humanocracy, and Edmondson’s (2018) The Fearless Organization. They drew correlations to building capacity during shifting business priorities through co-creation, harnessing the
innovation of an entire organization, not just its officers. However, this requires humility from leaders and the intentional work of creating psychological safety within the organization when disagreements occur.

In Christian academic research, Cozens and Ochs (2019) examined the origins of shame within the Biblical stories of creation and the fall in their article *Have You No Shame?*, advocating for shame's profound role in sin and the perpetuation of humanity’s state away from God. They do not correlate these origins with living or leading differently. Even in Cozen’s (2019) subsequent publication, he draws zero correlations to the leader. Also, Wright (2008) discusses guilt and shame’s role in Western culture’s lack of forgiveness and restitution in *The God I Don’t Understand*. He argues that Western culture’s significant focus on personal and objective guilt has atrophied its ability to understand the nuance of shame and the need to be internally consistent with oneself. The cross addresses both (Wright, 2008; NIV, Ezekiel 36:15-32). Even here, Wright doubles down on shame being a healthy reminder to live uprightly and misses the implications of the doctrine of humanity. However, if God removes the shame of a sinner, then shame cannot remain but is more accurately recognized as guilt, where guilt states that they did something wrong versus shame, declaring that they are inherently flawed (Brown, 2018; McNish, 2004). The reader and leader are left to parse shame’s implications on leadership growth and efficacy.

There are also literary works closely associated with the effects of shame in Christianity, such as Van Yperen’s (2002) *Making Peace*, which helps leaders work through conflict through repentance and reconciliation. In his book, he does investigate core causes that touch on self-awareness and unwillingness to root out sin, but not the why behind the unwillingness. Also, David Benner’s (2015), *The Gift of Being Yourself*, deeply analyzes self-awareness and digs into
addressing the ugliness of sin and shedding the false self. This idea of shedding the false self correlates most closely with shame. Lynch (2013) synthesizes ideas of shame and narcissistic vulnerability from other’s professional research but relates complex clinical approaches to the reaction of individuals who undergo trauma and their ability to defend against shame and maintain homeostasis. Each of these sources points towards a tertiary aspect of shame and its relationship to leadership through a Christian lens, or more specifically, why sin creates shame and how the doctrine of humanity is the path to courageously dealing with shame through emotional vulnerability. Again, Brown’s (2018) work comes closest to this point of concern but does not directly explore the theology of shame and its mitigation.

Unfortunately, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer is nearly alone among 20th-century theologians in giving importance to shame” (Fowler, 1993, p. 819). In short, shame has received little focus in mainstream academia and even less in Christian theology. Fowler’s (1993) article lists the researchers who have contributed to this area of research as it impacts every area of modern life, in which pastors and theological educators must be versed. He identifies Erik Erickson, Carl Schneider, Helen Merrel Lynd, Helen Block Lewis, Carl Goldberg, Donald Nathanson, Silvan Tomkins, Thomas Scheff, Suzanne Retzinger and Rita Nakashima Brock. However, none of these authors examine the Christian’s theological obligation to resolve shame through organizational behavior.

By speaking with experienced leaders, this phenomenological study provides insight into how shame impacts their leadership. Also, this study examined how leaders potentially mitigate this powerful phenomenon's negative impact.

**Purpose Statement**

This qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study explored how Christian
executive-level leaders understand shame's impact on personal growth, leadership effectiveness, and social connection. This study defines executive-level leaders as individuals holding formal leadership positions at the executive level of an organization (Drucker, 2011). Also, this study defines the experience of shame as the intense, fear-based emotion of not being good enough, often resulting in destructive internal or external behaviors like perfectionism, favoritism, gossiping, discrimination, blaming, harassing, comparison, and self-worth tied to productivity (Brown, 2018). Brown’s (2006) Shame Resilience Theory inspired this study's purpose, and the researcher explored the research through Alsaigh’s and Coyne’s (2021) methodological framework. They built this framework on the study design of Gadamer (1976), which was instrumental in the implementation of hermeneutic phenomenology.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1.** How do Christian executive-level leaders of an organization understand, if at all, shame and how it relates to their leadership efficacy?

**RQ2.** What is the Christian executive leaders’ experience, if any, of organizational developmental programs as it relates to shame?

**RQ3.** What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and personal growth?

**RQ4.** What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and social connection?

**Assumptions and Delimitations**

Qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology was assumed to be the most effective methodological approach. It was critical not to generalize to a broad population but to dig deeply into carefully selected criteria to explore the intended phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As the research experiences are unique to each participant, with any variation of shared
experiences possible, it is critical to follow a bracketing methodology to eliminate threats to data integrity.

**Research Assumptions**

This research assumed a substantiative difference in organizational effectiveness between bureaucratic organizational leadership versus democratic, human-centric models. Also, this research assumed that Brown’s (2018) theory of courageous leadership through emotional vulnerability accurately identifies areas of damaging leadership approaches caused by shame. By extension, this study also assumed that most, if not all, selected leaders are part of organizations that have ineffectually safe-guarded against leadership structures and styles that promote shame-based, armored leadership approaches.

Another assumption was that the hermeneutic, phenomenological research methodology was the most effective technique for collecting and assessing the experience of the studied executive leaders, as it reveals the leaders’ perceived self-efficacy through open-ended interview questions and meaning-making through post-interview debriefs.

Although the study assumes leaders will be honest in their replies, shame is a challenging subject and nearly always an intense emotion. To effectively gather the phenomenological data, this study also assumed that Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) framework for conducting sensitive research is the most effective approach. They argue that the researcher must understand the personal impact that the participant and the researcher will experience, build rapport during their first encounters, self-disclose to build credibility and empathy, reciprocate as fair exchange, and take precautions against emotional impact from feelings of guilt, exhaustion, desensitization, or developing attachments (Dickson-Swift’s, et al., 2007).
Lastly, this study assumed that the data gathered from these unique participants could not be generalized to a larger population and did not select individuals based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or social status.

**Delimitations of the Research Design**

This study explored aspects of the shame dynamic in real-world applications that may limit generalization for other groups or attributes not addressed in the research. This research did not involve leaders in entry-level or Chief-Executive positions, as this study requires an examination of direct reporting and lateral influencing relationships. It also did not involve self-employed business owners or managers who operate in nonautonomous, uncompromising processes or roles.

This research was delimited to examining the impact of a Christian worldview in these leadership roles versus prototypical leadership behaviors not exclusively centered on faith. This study did not research emotions of leadership behaviors not elicited by the impact of shame, social connection, or personal growth in developing a leader’s efficacy in their executive-level leadership position and organizational field.

This research was delimited to ten executive-level leaders working in organizations within the United States that lead teams and are significant stakeholders in their organization’s vision and execution of the associated business model.

This research was further delimited to participants who are voluntarily willing to complete all phases of the interview and journal process during the two-month timeframe and can provide descriptive and self-reflective narratives of their lived experiences regarding shame through oral and written communication.
Definition of Terms

These terms were thematic to the research study:

1. *Armored Leadership:* a stylistic approach to leadership that values goals of perfectionism, directive-based leadership that often results in a pervasive fear of failure (Brown, 2018). This leadership style typically works from a place of resource scarcity, numbing emotions, strength through power over, and extensive emphasis on expertise and being right.

2. *Bureaucratic Leadership:* a leadership style that advocates for top-down decision-making. It has a narrowing lens of its employee bases’ ability to make the right decisions for the organization over self (Hamel & Zanini, 2020).

3. *Courage:* the active decision to lean into difficult situations regardless of feelings of fear, scarcity, rejection, and any other emotional risk (Brown, 2018). The willingness to challenge institutional norms to support others (Hamel & Zanini, 2020).

4. *Curiosity:* a leader’s genuine attempt to understand the situation with an open mind through active listening and interactive dialogue. Rules are provisional; curiosity is often deviant from the status quo (Leslie, 2014).

5. *The Doctrine of Humanity:* every person is made in the image of God, by God’s making, and is worthy of love and honor (Estep et al., 2008).

6. *The Doctrine of Sin:* every person has fallen from the grace of God due to willful disobedience, beginning with the original sin, and cannot achieve salvation without accepting Christ’s sacrifice and authority (Estep et al., 2008).

7. *Empathy:* engaging in an emotionally supportive role, the ability to experience another’s emotions cognitively or relationally (Goleman et al., 2013).

8. *Emotional Intelligence:* how leaders manage themselves and their relationships (Goleman et al., 2013).


10. *Executive Leadership:* an intentional approach to organizational effectiveness that involves abstract, critical thought and a high level of personal responsibility to provide positive results for the organization (Drucker, 2011).
11. **Guilt**: often confused with shame, guilt is a different emotion defined as doing something wrong as a person, whereas shame is believing someone is inherently wrong and therefore does bad things (Brown, 2018; Cozens, 2019).

12. **Humiliation**: often confused with shame, humiliation is a distinctively different emotion that is a feeling of a negative, undeserved experience versus shame being a negative, deserved experience (Brown, 2018).

13. **Meaning-make or meaning-making**: the process of how people construe, understand, or make sense of life events, relationships, and the self. Through meaning-making, people retain, reaffirm, revise, or replace elements of their orientating system to develop more nuanced, complex, and useful symptoms. (Igelnizki, 2000).

14. **Psychological Safety**: a climate where people are comfortable being themselves, expressing concerns, and sharing mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution (Edmondson, 2018).

15. **Self-Awareness**: understanding one’s strengths and limitations, degree of personal confidence and self-worth, awareness of the impact on others’ emotions, and efficacy of intuition (Goleman et al., 2013).

16. **Shame**: the intense, fear-based emotion of not being good enough that often results in destructive internal or external behaviors like perfectionism, favoritism, gossiping, discrimination, blaming, harassing, comparison, and self-worth tied to productivity (Brown, 2018).

17. **Transparency**: displaying honesty and integrity; trustworthiness regardless of emotional consequence (Goleman et al., 2013).

**Significance of the Study**

Through the qualitative methodology of phenomenological research, it was necessary to understand the perceived correlation between shame, social connection, and personal growth among leaders who significantly influence an organization’s success. Knowing that leaders within organizations significantly impact the company's financial results and the lives of those the leader influences and leads, the ability to understand shame directly correlates to the leader’s efficacy.
Leaders in hierarchal organizational structures have increased autonomy and can adopt either rewarded or condemned leadership styles (Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Capps, 1993). The effort to advance awareness around shame and to help leaders engage with the inner work necessary to prevent shame-based decisions can increase organizational effectiveness by building community, developmental growth, and curiosity as a tool for autonomy during real-time change (Brown, 2018; Pink, 2009; Edmondson, 2018). Leaders can leverage emotions as data to understand their motivations, both how and why they repress difficult emotions they struggle to metabolize (David, 2018). By increasing their self-awareness, they can avoid armoring up, deteriorating relationships, improve their emotional intelligence, and increase connection through emotional vulnerability.

Fowler (1993) asks for more research linking Christian theology and shame, as the field is scant with examples. The secular perspective of shame far outpaces faith-based understanding. Groundwork was needed to establish a framework for practitioners to employ. Shame is a unique experience for each leader based on many layers of complex psychological attributes (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). As such, it was necessary to maintain the phenomenological design. Given the desire of the researcher to study the impact of shame and considering the doctrines of humanity and sin, it was critical to remain grounded in hermeneutic values (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

**Summary of the Design**

Hermeneutic phenomenology aids the orientation and interpretation of lived experiences. Through meaning-making, the pedagogical value provides a coherent, structured approach to understanding everyday education's ethical, relational, and practical components (Fuster Guillen, 2019). Fundamentally, phenomenology attempts to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its distilled essence (Gadamer, 1990). This distillation into text provides a
reflective and reflexive appropriation in the reader, strengthening understanding (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Through understanding, growth. For this study, quantitative research was not the most effective approach. It does not fully explore a phenomenon nor distill it into a concept the researcher and participants clearly understand.

The researcher chose hermeneutic phenomenology for multiple reasons. First, the interview, journal, and diary aspects of data collection allow for thorough dialogue, providing a more accurate understanding of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon of shame. Second, through reflection and thematic analyses, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon can be leveraged to make the implicit explicit. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to go beyond ordinary language to capture the participant’s sentiments and intentions. Specifically, this allowed the researcher to understand better how these leaders defined shame, understood shame regarding their leadership efficacy, and how shame actively or passively influenced their ability to grow developmentally and socially connect.

In considering other qualitative research approaches, the researcher could have utilized grounded theory to study shame in Christian leadership. Brown’s (2006) study on shame utilizes grounded theory to examine the shame phenomenon in women. However, this type of study focused primarily on the thematic data from the researcher’s point of view. Phenomenology allows the participant to be at the center of the qualitative data, establishing their meaning in collaboration with the researcher.

Within phenomenology, there are multiple approaches, including transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic designs (Polkinghorne, 1989). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to explore the theological nature of each Christian leader’s understanding of shame more deeply and how it impacts their efficacy. Hermeneutic
phenomenology was chosen over transcendental or existential approaches as it acknowledges the value of the participants’ experiences in context, attempts to understand their unique experience deeply, and allows for critical analysis within a significantly complex phenomenon, such as shame. Since shame is a deeply personal experience and emotional vulnerability almost exclusively depends on the individual’s perception and understanding, the hermeneutic approach provided the best methodology to ascertain more about the shame phenomenon within Christian leaders.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has introduced the phenomenon of shame as a significant contributor to emotional amplification, as a master emotion emblematic of a leader’s inability or unwillingness to face difficult truths, and at the root of why leaders struggle to achieve a more idealized self. This chapter has orientated the reader to the study by establishing concise research questions, research assumptions, delimitations, key terms, and a summary of the research design.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

To effectively establish the purpose of this study and the subsequent methodology, it was critical to understand the theological, theoretical, and related literature regarding shame and leadership efficacy. This literature review also worked to establish a thorough examination of the modern and historical understandings of shame and its impact on organizational leadership efficacy as well as the theological origins of shame. This literature review also attempted to differentiate between the emotions of shame and guilt. Lastly, this review established the need for this study through the literature gap that reinforces the phenomenon.

Theological Framework for the Study

A Christian leader's connection to God, the community, and oneself is intrinsic to a healthy and mature faith (Lingenfelter, 2008). The history of Christianity is rife with examples of Christian leaders who further the kingdom of God despite social and physical risks (Ledbetter et al., 2016). At the same time, this history is also full of tragedies when biblical and Christian leaders disconnect from God, their community, and themselves. Shame is the enemy of connection with others, oneself, and God. Shame is the “intense painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love or belonging” (Brown, 2018, pp. 126). Brown’s (2006, 2018) definition of shame more accurately captures the negative implications of living a life consumed by shame, whereas most Christian authors’ definition of shame stops short, only defining shame as an inherent belief that the self is flawed (Forrester, 2001; Capps, 1993; Cozens, 2019; Albers, 1995; McNish, 2004). To effectively understand shame and how to mitigate it fully, it was necessary to understand its theological significance, particularly concerning social connection. In this literature review section, this theological
framework examined the doctrine of sin, the theology of shame, the theology of connection through emotional vulnerability, and the theology of leadership efficacy.

**Doctrine of Sin**

An integral aspect of a theological examination of shame is the doctrine of sin. Adam and Eve were created to commune in God’s presence, possessing the integrity of a soul without sin. The original sin disrupted this state of integrity, divorcing humanity from a face-to-face relationship with God. Genesis 3 records the origin of sin, and the fall of humanity from the ideal God intended (Estep et al., 2008). Satan, cast out of heaven for his vanity, arrogance, and desire for power, seeks to deceive and twist the ultimate representations of God’s creation. Peddling half-truths and planting seeds of doubt, Satan convinces Eve and Adam of their inferiority to God and encourages them to partake of the forbidden fruit (NET, Genesis 3:2-5).

In the wake of this action, God institutes clear and significant consequences, both for the serpent and humanity, as the introduction of disobedience and sin into creation perverts humanity’s ability to fulfill the intended role as image bearers (Estep et al., 2008). The apostle Paul examines the connection between original sin and its impact on the subsequent generation of humanity in Romans 5:12-19. Essentially, “The solidarity between Adam and the human race is such that his sin-death connection is imputed to all human beings. Because of his sin, together with the concomitant penalty of death, all human beings are guilty of Adam’s sin, made sinners, die physically, and are judged and condemned by God” (Estep et al., 2008, pp. 185).

In YHWH’s covenant with the Hebrews, the law clearly outlined God's character and moral law (Estep et al., 2008, pp. 186). The Old Testament books of Numbers and Leviticus contain these laws, guiding His people through clear definitions and safeguarding against sins of presumption, ignorance, commission, and omission. As proven throughout the Old Testament,
the first covenant was imperfect, as humanity continually returned to sin, reinforcing Adam’s eating of the forbidden fruit. Only with the perfect sacrifice, the death of God’s son Jesus Christ, are the sins of believers supplanted, wiped away, and justified in God. Judah Smith captures this in reference to a significant verse (NIV, John 8:11), “Jesus told the woman accused of sexual sin to ‘go and sin no more.’ That wasn’t a threat. It was a declaration of freedom. He wasn’t interested in condemning her past. He wanted to rescue her future” (2013, pp. 27). This perfect sacrifice, however, has allowed Christians to slowly forget the necessity of constantly addressing sin in everyday life, in every action and thought. Modern society does not emphasize liturgical confession and sanctification; it is entirely left to the individual's choice (Capps, 1993).

Moore (2018) explores the paradox of Paul’s and John’s competing perspectives of sin. Where the Apostle Paul examines sin as an internal struggle of guilt in Romans 3:10, 23, John addresses sin as shame in revoking access to community and belonging, feeding and perpetuating shame (NIV, 2 John 1:10-11). On the surface, John’s intention is a bid for purity. In effect, however, John invalidates the believer’s belonging to the community of faith because they greeted a false teacher. Despite John’s message of a loving congregation, there are numerous fractures in his attempt to live his theology aloud (Moore, 2018). Moore attributes his understanding of shame to Brown’s (2008) research, declaring shame as negative and condemning. Understanding the doctrine of sin and its correlation to shame guided the dissertation’s phenomenological interviewing. It served as a grounding point to assess the participant’s understanding of the impact of shame and leadership efficacy as an obligation of their faith.
Theology of Shame

The first moment of sin is also the first moment of shame in the Bible. Eve faced an internal struggle of whether it was best to obey God or take a significant risk eating the forbidden fruit to gain divine wisdom and be more God-like—her fear of being less than is plain (Hunt, 2018). The first emotion explicitly stated is shame (NIV, Genesis 2:25, Genesis 3:7). Although the serpent is crafty and bends the truth, Eve’s actions reveal her desire to be greater than she is currently. She rejects who she is in favor of a false self (Benner, 2015). She experiences the internal shame of being an imposter and not being worthy—a disconnection from her intentional creation as an image bearer of God and partner for Adam. Adam, tempted by the same allure as Eve, capitulates. The Bible does not expressly convey the inner dialogue of either Adam or Eve, but it is not difficult to imagine Adam’s reluctance to disagree with his only human companion. The shame of feeling less-than is palpable. The fear that Adam and Eve experienced, having sinned, at being separated from God and the safety of that connection, they hide and project their sin onto the serpent (Hunt, 2018).

Essentially, Adam and Eve shift blame to each other and then to the serpent, attempting to hide the truth out of immense guilt and fear of losing connectedness with God, their creator and only sentient being with whom they interact. Adam even dares to blame God for giving him the woman who caused him to sin (NET, Genesis 3:12). Adam’s fear of not belonging pushes him to lash out. Not only did they fail their primary goals as stewards of creation (Hunt, 2018), but from this perspective, choosing to respond in shame kept Adam and Eve on the course of sin.

Adam and Eve are not alone in this struggle; scripture has many examples of men and women who give into sin (Wilhoit, 1991). For most, this road does not stop at the initial sin but almost always devolves into more sin and disobedience before repentance and reconciliation.
Adam and Eve’s shame from disobeying God led them to run, hide, and cover themselves (NIV, Genesis 3:8). Moses’s shame of feeling inferior led him to strike the rock instead of obeying God (NIV, Numbers 20:9-11). This rush to satisfy the Hebrews was a way to silence the inner voice of doubt, but it led to Moses’s exclusion from the promised land. King David’s shame of committing adultery and losing face led him to kill Uriel, a loyal soldier (NIV, 2 Samuel 11:6-27). This shame kept David from God, led him to more sin, and ultimately cost him his kingdom, the rape of his daughter, his child’s death, public disgrace, and forfeited the honor of building the Temple.


Even widely studied parables have threads of shame that run through them. In the parable of the compassionate father, the prodigal son shames himself, the brother that stays home shames the brother that left, and the father shames neither. The father encourages both to be within community (NET, Luke 15). In the parable of the clever steward, the dishonest manager admits that he is too ashamed to beg and not strong enough to work (NET, Luke 16). If the manager had only been open and honest with his employer, he would not have had to resort to dishonesty. The parable of the talents challenges self-preservation through the law, as it is antithetical to community (Matthew 25). The recipient who buried the talent did not invest it, perhaps because that was against scripture (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-38). However, the law did not save the servant from reprimand. He buried it to save himself, afraid of losing twenty years of wages!
Shame through Separation

McNish (2004) calls shame a paradox, underlining the tension between union and separation. She states,

It is the story of our longing to be at peace with our maker, of feeling ourselves somehow connected with God—made in God’s image—yet always experiencing ourselves as falling short and being exposed—physically in the demands, desires, sufferings, and finiteness of the flesh, intellectually in our ignorance about the origins and meaning of our existence, and spiritually and emotional in our existential loneliness (McNish, 2004, p. 128-129).

Each Christian is responsible for understanding the consequences of living in service of Christ and community or in service of oneself. The doctrine of sin and its correlation with shame gives insight into why humans struggle to be their best selves. As Christians,

The greatest need you and I have—the greatest need of collective humanity—is the renovation of our heart. The spiritual place from within us from which outlook, choices, and actions come has been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed (Willard, 2002, p. 14).

The decisions formed away from God tend to lean on self-serving tactics, such as a promotion or bonus. Neither of these is innately evil, but if done without the appropriate purpose in mind can lead to the detriment or exclusion of others.

To protect themselves from shame, humans wear emotional armor, such as hiding difficult truths from supervisors, gaslighting those who disagree, or withdrawing completely from a situation where social risk is required (Brown, 2018). This armor, intended to lessen the blow of shame, leads to numbness and self-preservation, breaking the sense of community and psychological safety (Brown, 2018; Edmondson, 2019). In this sense, sin and shame create a vicious cycle of reciprocity. Unless the pattern changes, a false self is created, perpetuated, and destroys any sense of connectedness with oneself, community, and God (Benner, 2015). Ernest
Becker (1973) examines Adam’s and Eve’s fall, representing the fundamental dilemma between the human spirit and body. He states,

[Humankind] has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity…this is the paradox: [humankind] is out of nature and hopelessly in I; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the fill-marks to prove it…[Human kind] is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and have to live with (Becker, 1973, p. 26).

This separation from intimacy with God causes shame’s profound effect. Subsequently, every experience of separation creates new, repeated grief. In the wake of Abel’s death, Cain understood separation from his community to be certain death. Guilty and without denial, Cain implores God to help him, and God does—God finds a way forward for Cain and protects him (NET, Genesis 4:9-16).

Theology of Connection through Emotional Vulnerability

One of the most foundational doctrines in the Christian faith is the doctrine of humanity or theological anthropology. This belief states that humans are made in God’s image as dependent beings (on God and community), as holistic beings whose physical body, spirit, and soul are good, and that God makes each human individual intentionally (Estep et al., 2008). The “term ‘image’ is about connection in a way that may also involve reflection. Being the image of God turns out to mean having a special connection with God and indeed being a meaningful reflection of God” (Kilner, 2015, p. 54). Seeing this image is an intrinsic responsibility of Christians, especially leaders. This image also requires the leader to work towards the standard of flawlessness seen in Christ (Kilner, 2015, p. 91; 1 Peter 2:21). Leaders must deliver on their
responsibilities and successfully root out shame, which occurs through community, vulnerability, and actively disrupting the manifestations of shame.

For shame, the way forward begins with emotional vulnerability and transparency about the shame one feels (Brown, 2018). In Romans 3:3-5, Paul reminds his audience that sin does not alter God’s faithfulness to his creation, demean Christ’s sacrifice, or disrupt the power of grace. This same promise is lived out even in Genesis after the first sin. God did not strike down Adam and Eve for their sin. Conversely, God curses the serpent and creates a covenant with Eve. She will give birth to Christ, who will set things right by destroying sin through his death, resurrection, and final return (NIV, Genesis 3:15, Hebrews 9:26). Shame declares a life unworthy and incapable of good. However, the doctrine of humanity declares the worth of every life. God did not abandon Adam and Eve. He clothed them and made a way forward for them (Genesis 3:21). Like Adam and Eve, God has not abandoned the rest of creation. As sin occurs, Christians must engage in confession, repentance, and reconciliation so that shame does not push the believer into isolation, fear, and lying (NIV, James 5:6, Galatians 6:2, 2 Corinthians 12:9).

In emotional isolation and fear, humans again armor up, using sinful behavior to cover up and hide (Brown, 2018; Yperen, 2002). Just as the hemorrhaging woman in Luke 8:43-48, shame must be addressed by accepting the gift of Christ’s grace. It was in this woman’s emotional vulnerability that she risked public disgrace and social condemnation that she found freedom. Her courage to face her fear of being unworthy, as she crawled in anonymity to touch the hem of Christ’s garment, opened her heart to God’s redemption and renewal. Christ asks his followers to be child-like, as it is a young child who is not beset by shame or arrogant pride (Matthew 18:3). Shame requires community and wrestling with the painful sources of personal shame (Yperen,
2002). Until this happens, a leader will struggle to lead authentically by submitting fully to God, as Moses, David, and Peter did to reconcile their shame and sin.

It is essential to understand that shamelessness is not the absence of shame but rather its repression (McNish, 2004). It is a manifestation of relational power dynamics, where an individual attempts to regain power by living out “shamelessly” or rather an attempted defense against the actual feeling of shame itself. Simon’s contempt for the penitent woman in Luke 7:36-50 is a strong example of this phenomenon. Simon views this situation through a binary lens of right and wrong. He cannot see the moment's beauty as he seeks to defend himself from the shame of feeling unworthy and projects it onto the sinful woman. Since she was more deeply aware of her separation from God’s holiness, she better understood the power of His grace. Therefore, her emotional vulnerability is the way forward for both herself and Simon as he sees his self-righteousness as the shame it is for the first time (McNish, 2004).

**Theology of Leadership Efficacy**

This study investigated the connection between shame and Christian leadership. Having examined the theological nature of shame as caused and perpetuated by sin, it was necessary to understand Christian leaders' obligation to understand the source of their shame and affect it in a way that reflects the commitment to the redemption and renewal of Christ’s sacrifice. The Bible is painstakingly clear about the consequences of failing to lead under God’s lordship. Matthew 18:6 states, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (NIV, 2006). There are many ways to measure leadership efficacy in organizational results and milestones. This section examined leadership efficacy through the lens and impact of a leader’s ability/ inability to identify and mitigate shame.
**Sense of Purpose**

A clear sense of purpose allows a leader to make decisions more readily, as the lens through which they make decisions is in service of the values of their organization, self, or faith. Otherwise, a leader under pressure can revert to self-serving, shaming behaviors, losing the required perspective for interacting with other cultures through honor and respect (McPherson, 2020). Christian leaders have an inherently defined sense of purpose, as Christ’s words, actions, and the Great Commission are clear. However, a vision of what a leader lives in service of can often be narrower and more crystalized to a specific mission field, culture, or aspect of life to help testify of God’s love. This purpose must also be one of community, for “the primary home of theology is the believing community, it will be more likely earthed in life and will more likely remain evangelical” (Chester & Timmis, 2008, p. 161). If a life purpose is self-serving or does not go beyond our immediate family or friend group, a Christian is not fulfilling one of the core biblical principles tasked by Christ.

**Inner Work**

Understanding the doctrines of humanity and its closely related doctrine of sin, especially as it relates to the image of God, emphasizes man’s finitude and responsibility to grow toward his and her God-given destiny (NIV, Romans 12:1-2). If Erikson (1950) and Lewis (1971) describe shame as the opposite of autonomy, then to effectively work against the negative impact of shame, leaders need to increase the behavior and skillset of autonomy. This demands constant self-reflection and education, allowing individuals to exert their will more successfully. The church and Christian leadership must be heavily involved in this matter (NIV, Ephesians 1:17, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 3:2). This should happen in all aspects of a church. As explored
earlier, pursuing Christ as the perfect image of each human’s destiny implies that considerable growth is needed.

Humans require development to understand Godly behaviors better (NIV, 1 Samuel 2:26, 1 Corinthians 13:11). This involves empathy, emotional vulnerability, courage to address behavioral gaps in oneself and others, and speaking to the shame that unreconciled sin creates. (Brown, 2018; Goleman et al., 2013; Forrester, 2001). It is a necessity that Christian leaders stay grounded in the humility role modeled by Christ to serve both as instruction to the students and teams each leader is responsible for stewarding. Grant (2021) compares and defines arrogance, confidence, and humility. Arrogance is ignorance and conviction; confidence is knowledge and conviction; humility is knowledge and the willingness to adjust convictions based on newer, more accurate information. Similarly, inner work is engaging with growth through humility so that an individual can more effectively mitigate challenges, which typically involve shame in some form.

Early (2006), in his publication The Inner Work of the Chief Executive, explores the significance of self-awareness as it relates to God’s purpose in our lives, Christ’s example, and the act of sanctification through the renewing of minds (NIV, Romans 12). He posits that inner work requires the courage to face the reality of who we are in God compared to how we show up as sinful humans, the humility of fellowship to submit to God and other believers, and competency found through practiced skill (Early, 2006). This work is often painful and challenging. However, to effectively serve others, especially those of other cultures, Christian leaders must be self-aware, seek opportunities to grow, remain humble, and keep Christ at the forefront of their purpose (Hiebert, 2008). Christian leaders must create organizational cultures that resolve internal and external conflict, an accelerant and exponent of shame.
Creating environments that move beyond theoretical goals is necessary. Leaders must choose to engage in the inner work and achieve progression. This work requires, in part, being unafraid to deal with current, polarizing social issues openly and acknowledging that mistakes will occur (McNish, 2004; Hiebert, 2008; Moore, 2018; McPherson, 2020). Understanding how to navigate a situation beyond confession to repentance, discipline, and reconciliation is a valuable and necessary skill set. Typically, individuals and churches stop at confession and do not always effectively allow behavioral transformation, as shame often causes regression back into sin (Van Yperen, 2002). Maturated leaders can recognize the shame that others feel, the consequences of what can happen if unaddressed, and handle the conflict in themselves.

**Progression as the Opposite of Perfection.** In experiencing shame, leaders often turn to the pursuit of perfection. McNish (2004) identifies this as an internalized defense against shame. She states, “Using the defense of perfectionism, one is always striving to avoid shame by being perfect, selfless, and beyond reproach in every respect” (McNish, 2004, p. 60). Essentially, this defense disowns aspects of the self, an action that embodies shame. As a common misconception, perfection may seem Christ-like, for Christ is, after all, perfect. The Bible tasks believers with becoming more and more Christlike (1 Corinthians 11:1). However, the truth of seeking perfection belies a desire to hide away the dark and ugly sides of oneself only to show what is good and perfect outwardly. This intention reveals shame. This belief removes room for grace, failure, for imperfection. Benner (2015) warns readers that hidden emotions do not become weaker but more powerful and will rise to the surface eventually. This sentiment is found throughout the Bible (NIV, Numbers 32:23, Luke 12:2, Ecclesiastes 12:14, Proverbs 16:18). Further,

The word perfect does not mean flawless; it means mature. Paul understood the ‘end’ goal to be the maturity of God’s people. Spiritual maturity is prompted by a commitment
to teaching the Word of God. Spiritual growth is not instantaneous and it is not easily measured. It is slow. It is hard work. It is time-consuming. Nevertheless, it is the measure of an effective church (Bredfeldt, 2006, p.17).

Progress is not the path to perfection. Instead, progress is on the opposite side of the continuum as perfection (Brown, 2018). This notion aligns with the biblical doctrines of sin and salvation. Humans are with sin and can never be perfect without the redemption offered through Christ’s sacrifice (NIV, Romans 11:26-27). Even though believers cannot attain perfection, engaging in deliberate action through sanctification, such as liturgical acts of communion, prayer, worship, and baptism, is necessary. It is, therefore, logical to establish personal development in a Christian’s life as an obligation of faith. Wilder (2020) reminds the reader that a believer must do what Jesus taught. There is a significant difference between doing what Jesus teaches versus what a pastor, parent, or ideology teaches. Much of this requires facing the paradoxes of faith, as Moore (2018) describes, utilizing midrash to help navigate the cognitive dissonance between conflicting scriptures versus settling on false conclusions because they are easier to metabolize.

**Measuring for Leadership Efficacy**

How does a Christian leader measure their success in identifying and mitigating shame beyond only internal workings, however difficult and monumental this is in itself? Luke 6:43-45 teaches the believer that good hearts deliver good fruits, meaning that the outcomes of how a leader shows up and contributes reflect their efficacy – their impact. Hiebert (2008) examines this notion regarding Christian perspectives of their faith. Often churches and Christians are distracted by vague notions of a biblical worldview, fixating on limited components. Some misinterpret scripture and pursue worldly goals, such as financial success or physical pleasure. Some misinterpret the church’s purpose, such as Christians who fixate on only the kingdom aspect of a biblical worldview, pursuing a physical world where Christianity is the primary
purpose of world government. Falling to the same mistakes of the Pharisees, it is an easy lie to believe one can litigate themselves into holiness. Christians must keep Christ and Christ’s actions at the center of their motivations (Heibert, 2008). A leader has significant control over their team’s organizational culture. The willingness of a leader to influence this culture impacts the health of relationships, the inclusion of diverse backgrounds, and the psychological safety of giving and receiving feedback.

**Summary of Theological Framework**

This theological framework intended to establish connections between the doctrines of sin and the subsequent theology of shame to Christian leaders' obligation to become more self-aware, engage with their inner work, and promote connectedness through emotional vulnerability. This section also articulated the theological necessity of effectively measuring leadership efficacy to mitigate shame. The exegesis of these concepts reinforced the phenomenological nature of the research and the importance of the study in service of Christian leadership.

**Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The theological examination of shame in the previous section provides a critical component of the biblical and scriptural foundations of why Christians must identify and mitigate shame's role within organizations. The dissertation's theoretical framework must establish a sound basis for the qualitative study of shame and leadership efficacy. There are six sections of this framework; The first is Shame Resilience Theory (SRT), followed by Theoretical Aspects of Qualitative Methodologies, Elements of Phenomenological Theory, Interviewing within Phenomenology, Considering Shame in Phenomenological Interviewing, and Pertinent Phenomenological Studies.
Theoretical Understanding of Shame

Much of the research regarding shame, and the subsequent formal theories, are centered on the psychoanalytical treatment of moderate to severe behavioral problems, such as acute depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and disorders related to body image (Tangney, 2003). Since shame is widely viewed as a suppressive emotion, it is often a fundamental part of dysfunctional behaviors regarding avoidance and anger, leading to an inability to interact with social and moral norms (Tangey & Stuewig, 2004). Often, shame is confused with guilt, as the English language does not provide more than one word to grasp the nuances of shame. Other languages explore the difference between the shame that comes from disgrace and the shame that comes from not fitting in with societal expectations (Scheff, 2003). Conceptually, Scheff (2003) defines shame as a threat to the social bond. Shame-sense or shame-proneness occurs as people anticipate shame in every social interaction (Scheff, 2003). The fact that English only has one word for shame emphasizes the limitations of language in identifying and accessing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Shame in Western Culture

The confusion of guilt with shame is also due in part to how Freud and Breuer, undoubtedly influential in the modern understanding of psychoanalytic theory, largely ignored shame as a regressive emotion found in women, children, and “savages,” reflecting the ageism, sexism, and racism of their day (Scheff, 2000). Over time, this has contributed, specifically in Western Culture, to the phenomenon of “shame about shame,” where the subconscious interactions with ongoing shame events often cause subsequent feelings of rage to surface and impair or destroy social connections (Leeming & Boyle, 2004). This act perpetuates shame in
both the one who experienced shame and the shamer. In its rawest form, shame is the fear of being disconnected or cut off.

**The Shame of Personality.** A novel concept of study regarding personality and temperament is currently challenging the science of previously held beliefs, specifically within Western culture. Cain’s (2013) research examines the dynamics between introversion and extroversion within the self and organizations. In Western culture, society strongly reinforces extroversion, seeing introverts as second-class citizens. Cain illustrates many examples of this. The highest accolade a child can receive in school? They are outgoing. Modern protagonists of movies and books? Football captains, bold crime investigators, rock stars. Highly sought-after leadership qualities? Presence, vocalness, collaboration. The challenge is that innovation and creativity need solitude to strive (Cain, 2013). Introverts are empirically more likely to make more accurate observations, provide a deeper problem-solving analysis, and generally develop deeper relationships (Cain, 2013; McHugh, 2017). Shame has implicated different personality types in Western Culture, which often happens unconsciously. Leaders do not always understand why but continue to reinforce these stigmas, leveraging shame to blame people for who they are, not just what they do.

**Shame Resilience Theory (SRT)**

In her theory, Dr. Brené Brown (2006) defined shame as an emotion that elicits feelings of isolation, feeling trapped, and feeling powerless. Brown’s definition of shame emerged from her original research as an intense, painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and, therefore, unworthy of acceptance and belonging. Financial or employment concerns, family, body image, health, addiction, sex, surviving trauma, stereotypes or discrimination, and religion are often the source of shame (Brown, 2006). Within the framework of SRT, Brown also posits
several critical components of shame resilience. This framework includes (1) recognizing, naming, and understanding shame triggers; (2) identifying external factors that lead to feelings of shame; (3) connecting with others to receive and offer empathy; and (4) speaking about our feelings of shame with others. These behaviors build shame resilience and reduce the power that the intense feelings of shame elicit.

SRT suggests that understanding the universality of the internal struggle with shame substantially increases the likelihood of reaching out and connecting with others (Brown, 2006). In their book, Shackelford and Denzel (2021) suggest that practicing Christians and professional coaches believe that finding one’s calling, or purpose, is an individual journey. This sense of rugged individualism, a cultural mindset intrinsically tied to American identity, has stark implications compared with the data on shame (Brown, 2018). Is mitigating shame an individual journey, or does it require community? Understanding shame resilience is critical in growing connections, increasing emotional vulnerability, and increasing leadership efficacy.

There is a significant gap in the theoretical literature regarding Christianity and shame. Theories about shame are virtually non-existent and fall short of explaining the impact of shame within Christian leaders and faith-based organizations. Without these theories, there are no researched correlations from the doctrines of sin or humanity, meaning that studies do not adequately describe why shame exists, allowing Christian leaders to better identify and work towards mitigating its impact.

Theoretical Aspects of Qualitative Methodologies

To fully understand shame's impact on Christian leadership efficacy, particularly the influence of personal growth and social connectedness in Christian leadership, it is necessary to engage with study participants through qualitative research. Due to its behavioral and social
science nature, research questions help the researcher understand the emotional weight of a participant’s response, where quantitative data can fall short (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study participants will have varying familiarity with shame and its impact. An interview-style approach will allow for a better understanding of a participant’s perspective in an area that is complex and not studied thoroughly (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). A qualitative study also allows for uncovering deeper root issues as the process progresses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Generally, qualitative studies help researchers explore areas of study that have not been thoroughly investigated (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). By nature, a qualitative study can explore deeply complex areas of study, test the validity of theories in real-world scenarios, develop new concepts within a phenomenon, or evaluate the effectiveness of specific policies, practices, or innovations (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). However, qualitative studies rarely allow researchers to identify a cause-and-effect relationship, typically only measured by quantitative mechanisms (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). Although being able to identify and draw correlations between why shame happens and what caused it is highly intriguing, the study focused on Christian leaders’ understanding of shame and how it impacts their organizational effectiveness, which further emphasized the need for a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research contains a diverse set of methodological approaches. Despite these variances, every qualitative approach will have two core attributes. First, the study centers on a phenomenon occurring in the natural world (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). Second, the researcher analyzes the phenomenon’s intricacies (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). There are multiple ways to approach a qualitative study. These approaches are typically made through a case study, ethnography, phenomenology, a grounded theory study, narrative inquiry, and content analysis (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). When exploring the components of different methodological
approaches, only phenomenology and narrative inquiry allowed for the necessary level of 
examination of the participant’s experience. Both of these approaches begin with a specific set of 
narrow experiences. They are semi-structured to allow the participant to fully convey their 
experience so the researcher can interpret the data and make conclusions (Leedy & Ormond, 
2019).

The phenomenological research methodology seeks to explore and better understand an 
experience from the participants’ viewpoint (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). Creswell and Creswell 
(2018) indicate that the researcher of a phenomenologically based study has personal experiences 
connected to the study itself, wanting to engage with the participants to comprehend the 
phenomenon the study seeks to explore more fully. Examining how several individuals perceive 
experiences regarding the same phenomenon allows the researcher to consider similar and 
dissimilar themes, identify data correlations, and ultimately make meaning through how this 
phenomenon was experienced (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A final aspect of a qualitative study that is important to consider is how data is collected. 
Given the intensity and depth that qualitative studies need to examine the research problem 
thoroughly, population sizes are typically smaller than the qualitative approach ranging from one 
or two individuals to 20-30 or more (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection occurs through 
several mediums, including observations, interviews, and documents, both physical and 
audio/visual (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Of these collection types, conducting one-on-one 
interviews and collecting data digitally in a confidential way helps provide the psychological 
safety needed to accurately explore the topic of shame in organizations, as shame can be 
particularly damaging or feel intrusive (Edmondson, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This 
capability also indicates the need to engage in a phenomenological study specifically. The
researcher intends to capture how Christian leaders experience shame in correlation to their perceived efficacy.

**Elements of Phenomenological Theory**

A phenomenological study attempts to understand others’ experiences related to a specific phenomenon to understand better the experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that researchers often have experience related to the study, attempting to engage with participants to better understand this process within themselves. Considering how multiple people can share similar experiences and often have different perceptions or impacts of a given phenomenon allows the research to make meaning and identify correlations within the data, ascertaining what something was like from another insider’s perspective more clearly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As previously mentioned, a phenomenological researcher will almost solely depend on in-depth interviews with carefully selected sample sizes, often lasting 1-2 hours (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There is not a specific sample size required, but a range between 5 and 25 is typical (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormond, 2019).

Researchers must suspend preconceived ideas or conclusions from their experiences throughout data collection (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). This intentional act of suspension is often called bracketing and can be very difficult for researchers with personal experience related to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In determining the array of questions, being mindful of this tendency in phenomenological data collection helped ensure that the observations remained accurate and were not leading or filtered through one narrow lived experience. The researcher added specific steps and methodologies to the research process to help prevent the bias from influencing the study’s outcome.
Theoretical Aspects of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a slightly more narrowed application of the phenomenological qualitative technique. This methodology emphasizes that individuals are as distinctive as their life stories (Fuster Guillen, 2019). It further considers life's mundane or taken-for-granted events, which many experiences but few understand. The researcher can achieve meaning and understanding by examining this phenomenon in detail. Hermeneutic phenomenology does not have a rigid methodology but instead follows six guidelines. They include “commitment to abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question, investigating the experience as lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and considering parts and whole” (Kafle, 2011). Laverty (2003) examines hermeneutic phenomenology through ontological, epistemological, and methodological basis, identifying self-reflection as a critical point understood via the hermeneutic circle: reading, reflective writing, and final interpretation.

The purpose of Hermeneutic Phenomenology as a research method is to aid the orientation and interpretation of lived experiences. By recognizing its meaning, pedagogical value derives a coherent, structured approach to understanding everyday education's ethical, relational, and practical components (Fuster Guillen, 2019). This value is difficult to measure in other methodologies. Fundamentally, phenomenology attempts to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its distilled essence. This distillation into text provides the reader with a reflective and reflexive appropriation, strengthening understanding. Through understanding, growth. The “phenomenologist does not relegate the theoreticians, but prefers to disregard them to obtain freedom of thought” (Fuster Guillen, 2019, p. 223). Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to “get beneath the subjective experience and find the genuine objective nature of what an individual realizes (Kafle, 2011). Investigating the experience as it is lived and
attempting to distill the phenomenon through writing and rewriting are core components of hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. This process can be done across multiple interactions with the phenomenon through the participants or observations, mainly through interviewing or journaling. Understanding the phenomenon more accurately is the sole aim of this technique (Polkinghorne, 1989).

**Interviewing within Phenomenology**

A leading phenomenological design leverages three sets of interviews. Developed by Irving Seidman (2013), the methodology allows for intentional time to process and extricate layers of meaning within the participant’s experience. The first interview situates the phenomenon from the participant’s perspective utilizing details from their life history such as education, family life, workplace dynamic, or community. The second interview attempts to isolate and flesh out specific details of a particular experience most associated with the phenomenon. The first and second interviews are intentionally created and delivered to help build the foundation of the study within the participant’s mind. The third and most critical interview attempts to establish new meaning from the participant’s experience. It presents questions that allow both the researcher and the participant to establish connections between different aspects of the story, such as personal and professional aspects of life within the phenomenon itself.

This set of interview questions will attempt to draw correlations between the Christian leader's inner experiences (personal story) and shame's impact on their leadership within the organization (professional). The researcher or participant cannot effectively connect without genuinely understanding the participant’s internal narrative. In the third interview, the researcher
must carefully and actively listen to meaningful verbal and non-verbal cues, such as pauses, questions, or detours in logic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The advantages of interviewing techniques within a phenomenological framework allow the researcher to glean historical data without personal observation and control the questions to help the participant more clearly convey their experience within the phenomenon (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). However, this information is indirect and must be examined for and guarded against bias by the researcher, especially since participants may be at varying degrees of understanding (Leedy & Ormond, 2019).

**Considering Shame in Phenomenological Interviewing**

Shame can be difficult to broach, especially when the groundwork for psychological safety is not prevalent. It will be important in the qualitative interviews to maintain anonymity and preface the interaction with a specific, easily accessible context to allow leaders adequate time to process. Dickson et al. (2007) believe the data collection process to be a potentially intense and emotionally exhausting experience for the researcher and participant, primarily if it deals with taboo or stressful memories. Careful consideration of this allowed for a more accurate investigation into the phenomenon. Since many aspects of everyday lived experiences can generate feelings of shame, assessing the interview prompts and responses through reflexivity will be critical to prevent participants from thinking they are being judged (Leedy & Ormond, 2019; Rizvi, 2010). Valandra (2021) suggests utilizing reflexive questioning for the researcher, allowing space to assess for bias and learnings throughout each stage of the interview process, enhancing credibility, and safeguarding the participant’s experience and accurate portrayal of their lived account.
Seidman (2003) suggests utilizing a three-interview approach, which this study adopted. The first interview places the participant’s experience in the context of the phenomenon. This process allows the participant to reconstruct constitutive events that are the subject of the study (Seidman, 2003). The second interview focuses on the participant’s everyday experience of the phenomenon, allowing the researcher to gain the most insight into the lived experience. The third interview engages the participant in meaning-making, establishing the phenomenon's significance. It is not always about a pay-off but engages the intellectual and emotional connections of the participant between the phenomenon and life (Seidman, 2003).

It was critical to the research to build rapport with the participants before and at the beginning of the interview process (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). This cadence allowed for increased participant disclosure and more data collection. As a technique, the researcher used vulnerability to self-disclose, generating psychological safety (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). As such, the researcher prepared to share critical moments of personal shame associated with poor efficacy. It was also important to effectively document the physical and emotional impact of the process on the researcher and participants, as many of the effects were potentially unanticipated (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). As an intrinsic aspect of a qualitative study, the researcher collected memos, or recorded notes, to track breakthroughs, key observations, or themes (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). These in-the-moment interpretations are significant to the study, but the researcher must guard against bias from the researcher’s lived experiences, personality, and worldview. The researcher leveraged Valandra’s (2010) reflexive questions to do so.

There are different ways to approach a phenomenological study, such as descriptive and interpretive. With descriptive phenomenology, often referred to as transcendental phenomenology, a researcher can take a global perspective of the essence discovered (Sloan &
Bowe, 2014). Interpretive phenomenology, or hermeneutical phenomenology, claims that a researcher cannot remain neutral and detached during research and believes that language distillation and meaning-making are central to phenomenological research (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Interpretive phenomenology also accounts for the passing of time and how the participant interacts with the world around them (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This study leveraged hermeneutic phenomenology.

**Pertinent Phenomenological Studies**

The following section provides a selection of relevant phenomenological studies with similar theoretical frameworks. The first dissertation is by Dr. Rasha Alsaigh, a hermeneutic phenomenological study examining mothers’ lived experiences of caring for children receiving growth hormone treatment. These researchers framed the concepts of uncertainty, normalization, and stigma associated with this phenomenon and elaborated on the participant’s emotional experience through themes perpetuating the phenomena. They ultimately concluded with clear connections between the phenomenon and the participants’ experience, allowing the reader to relate with them and gain a better understanding. Based on the perceived relationship between the themes and the participants, the researchers propose the need for practical and emotional support for parents. This relationship significantly impacted the development of a hermeneutic research methodology by Alsaigh and Coyne (2021). This study leveraged this framework throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

The second study by Dr. Carmen Doyle (2019) explores the mothers’ lived experiences of distributing medicine to children with severe disabilities. This study leverages hermeneutic phenomenology to examine the mothers' emotional distress and will contribute to the aim and technique of interviewing and meaning-making within the hermeneutic circle.
A third study leverages hermeneutic phenomenology as a mixed methods study to illustrate the users’ lived experiences and abstract motivations in online communities, particularly in business organizations. Galehbakhtiari and Hasangholi pouryasouri (2015) study interdisciplinary experts in psychology, consumer behavior, information technology, and e-commerce to accurately understand the connection between participant motivations and a healthy online community. Leveraging semi-structured interviews and the hermeneutic circle, the researchers identified emergent themes, created a cognitive map, and identified many roadblocks for online communities that managers must be aware of when engaging in these workplace tools.

Another dissertation identified is Dr. Dionne M. Kress (2008), studying the phenomenological experience of executive coaching, self-awareness, and leadership behavior changes. The related literature and topic corresponded closely with the study of shame in perceived leadership efficacy. They served as a framework for this research in concepts of self-awareness, leadership efficacy, and perceived outcomes desired from the participants following the investigative portion of the phenomenological study. The framework that Kress provides within her dissertation has been and will continue to help establish the correlation of the leader’s self-perception regarding shame.

The last dissertation is by Dr. Patricia McCarthy Broderick (2009), a phenomenological investigation into the role of self in moral dilemmas. This dissertation represented a helpful guide to the researcher as a model of phenomenological study grounded in theological and scriptural perspectives. It also engages with analytical interviewing techniques and meaning-making methodologies as presented by Rizvi’s (2010) *The Shame Inventory.*
Theoretical Literature Summary

These studies touch on different aspects of this dissertation’s intention, but the combined theories, methodologies, frameworks, and intentions support this dissertation’s aims. These dissertations utilized qualitative phenomenology and leveraged interview-style approaches. This section of the literature review attempted to assimilate how the SRT guided the theoretical aspects of qualitative methodology, phenomenological theory, interviewing, and considering shame in interviews.

Related Literature

This section of the literature review attempted to provide a detailed review of the various topics in the research question. This section of the literature review examines leadership and organizational literature, self-awareness and emotional vulnerability, a sense of purpose and inner work, community and connectedness, and the degree to which these topics exist in Christian literature. Although not exhaustive, this section attempted to highlight the specific complexity of the literature reflected and exposed a substantial gap.

Shame within Leadership and Organizational Literature

Considered the master emotion, shame is complex and poorly understood, primarily due to the decades of inattention it has received in psychoanalysis (Scheff, 2003). Often misidentified as guilt, embarrassment, or other emotions caused by shame because of amplification, it is only recently that shame has become the focus of behavioral science (Scheff, 2003). Erikson (1950) was the first to reject Freud’s assumptions, arguing for shame as the primal influence of human emotion nearly 50 years later. Shame was not accurately established as a social phenomenon until the early nineties, separated from Freud’s sexually centered Drive Theory (Broucek, 1991). Only one study effectively separates shame, guilt, and embarrassment (Keltner & Buswell,
1997). Even more recently, researchers are beginning to draw paradigm-shifting conclusions in organizational leadership and parsing out shame’s many causes and effects. This shift leads to better identification and methodologies to mitigate or eliminate the destructive tendencies of this particular social fear. Due to this, however, much of the related literature is not explicitly about shame but more so its implied and tertiary aspects, such as denial through a false self, emotional fragility and amplification, and ultimately the destructive effects of shame in the internal and external spheres of human experience.

**Personal Implications of Shame**

There are several internal ramifications of shame within the self, particularly unmanaged shame. Dr. Susan David’s (2016) research and subsequent book center on how emotions and motives, often subconscious, derail humans. Identified as *hooks*, David connects the powerful feelings of shame to the internal, devolving monologue that often spirals from one narrow perception of an event to a self-condemning assumption about personal worth. These hooks happen dozens if not hundreds, of times a day (David, 2016). The *inner critic* is relentless, is connected to one’s sense of personal worth, formed by the lived experiences of real and imagined failure, and often due to childhood development, where the precise language of how one experiences difficult emotions has not developed and slips into the subconscious (Brown, 2010; Benner, 2015; David, 2016). David posits that the presence of an emotion, which is not morally or ethically charged, is a signpost to personal values. Anger, for example, is not inherently wrong but rather a data point that reveals a conflict with personal values. Sitting in it and making new meaning of the emotional experience allows an individual to make a more informed decision, often free of the knee-jerk assumptions and biases that occur with emotion (David, 2016). A leader’s ability to navigate this inner world will determine their long-term success.
When faced with difficult emotions, Western culture typically encourages the suppression, compartmentalization, or denial of difficult emotions (Brown, 2010; Benner, 2015; David, 2016). The common trope of “check your emotions at the door,” or the sexist “you’re too emotional” and “man up and deal with it” becomes direct reinforcement of social expectations not to feel, not to process what is happening. As such, humans become emotionally rigid, losing or never developing emotional resilience. David (2016) exhorts that rigidity in the face of complexity is toxic. Shame is a tremendous catalyst in this dynamic, an instigator and perpetuator of the cycle. An individual experiences shame in a social setting (family, work, school, church) because of the culture’s inability to deal with the complex emotion, so the individual suppresses/denies the emotion, and the suppression/denial delays the processing of the emotion which amplifies it, causing further shame from the social dynamic. First, shamers often express behavior as they recognize the same socially dangerous traits of others within themselves (David, 2016). Second, the shamed suppress emotion out of a desire to belong, a core component of the human condition (David, 2016; Benner, 2015). Third, emotional turmoil manifests when one can no longer suppress it. This manifestation can happen emotionally through anxiety, depression, outbursts of anger, or the grief of tears (Brown, 2010; David, 2016). The inability to reconcile these emotions is a significant part of the stress cycle, which can also manifest physically, metastasizing as high blood pressure, hypertension, stroke, and more (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019).

Recognizing when internal and external shame occurs allows an individual to hold space for the emotional experience, either in the self or another. By holding space, an individual can begin understanding the emotion, connecting the experience to a more profound sense of purpose, personal values, or deeply held belief. With this, a person is more aware and better
positioned to respond constructively to their social environment, breaking the shame cycle (Brown, 2018).

**Organizational Implications of Shame**

Dealing with the experience of shame is difficult enough within the confines of one’s internal dialogue. Being thrust into the public, social sphere to deal with shame in the halls of school, the meeting rooms of work, or the dining space of the fellowship hall can be damaging, sometimes even traumatic. Within organizations, the vulnerability that comes with opening oneself up to criticism or emotional hurt becomes a liability and, as such, promotes the cordonning of feelings (Brown, 2018). Brown (2018) calls this social defense mechanism *armoring up* or perpetuating cultures that reward perfectionism, emotional stoicism, and the compartmentalization of personal from professional life. In other words, we are easy to handle, manage, and nice at work despite internal challenges such as problems at home. Brown argues that the unwillingness to engage in uncomfortable conversations kills courage and pushes people to actions that protect the ego. By pursuing perfectionism, leaders may foster the fear of failure or see exhaustion as a status symbol (Brown, 2018). Another common form of *armored leadership* is to numb, which everyone does to some extent. Turning to food, work, social media, shopping, streaming services, video games, pornography, or substance abuse are all examples of numbing, and when it becomes compulsive, it becomes addiction (Brown, 2018). Christian leaders and faith-based organizations are not exempt from these behaviors.

Another form of shame in an organization comes from the inherent structure of large businesses—bureaucracy. Stratified and myopic, the typical organizational approaches often rob teams of creativity, personal empowerment, and agility (Hamel & Zanini, 2020). Structure is not intrinsically wrong, but the standardization of operating procedures can calcify processes as
employers start to believe the process is more important than the people doing the process. With business growth and earnings in mind, this modern problem destroys why organizations exist in the first place. Organizations exist to provide opportunities and services to people (Hamel & Zanini, 2020). Hamel and Zanini (2020) consider it a moral and social imperative to shift the operational structure back to people orientated. Through their research, Hamel and Zanini argue that engaging teams in meaningful ways that grow initiative, innovation, and resilience is a ten trillion-dollar benefit worldwide.

As Ellenhorn (2020) warns, human nature typically follows the shortest path to success (or, more deeply, acceptance and affirmation). He states, “When you are disappointed because you can’t attain something, you face the painful experience of losing something you’ve identified as important and needed” (Ellenhorn, 2020, p. 86). To manage these feelings, humans often resort to less-than-honorable actions to mitigate disappointment, feelings of failure, or rejection. In cases of cultural diversity, this can turn into hate, racism, and social stratification based on cultural differences. These actions do not have to be overt and aggressive, either. Racism, ostracization, and power-over can also be internal monologues of the oppressor. Doing nothing is doing something, and it typically perpetuates the power of the in-group.

An intrinsic aspect of organizational efficacy and leader-follower relationships is giving critical feedback. This relationship is often a significant source of workplace shame (Brown, 2018). Cavicchia (2010) describes the connection of coaching (feedback) experiences to the emotions of being missed, dismissed, humiliated, or criticized as an evocation of historical parent-child experiences. If leaders armor up and coach in a way that protects their discomfort, this destroys the relational bridge to the employee or constituent, inflicting shame and deteriorating trust (Cavicchia, 2010; Brown, 2018). To understand and mitigate this dynamic,
leaders must demonstrate high self-awareness and engage in a way that honors themselves and others.

**Emotional Vulnerability in Literature**

To effectively recognize what is triggering shame within, it is critical that all Christians, especially leaders, have an acute ability to understand their internal landscape, what causes it to shift, and why certain emotions surface under varying circumstances. This understanding is necessary to establish a deep sense of purpose and to live authentically. Benner (2015) articulates two main aspects of self-awareness: self-acceptance and self-knowing. These aspects require an honest understanding of deeply rooted sins and the radical acceptance of being loved as a sinner. A Christian cannot inhabit God’s full calling on their life without dismantling the false self (armor), coping with the subsequent nakedness (emotional vulnerability), finding and accepting their identity in Christ (purpose or calling), and living out this identity (authenticity, inner work) (Benner, 2015).

**Sense of Purpose**

Collins (2020) believes the world is rich in success but impoverished in meaning. The Apostle Paul reminds Timothy and the believers in Ephesus that wealth and power are the roots of evil. Pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness are the best focuses of a life lived (NET, 1 Timothy 6:6-12). How a Christian believer lives, and a leader shows up at work for their team is the purpose, not the accolades and money. Sinek (2017) discusses this concept from a secular perspective in his book, *The Infinite Game*. Built upon James Carse’s research, who was a theologian and philosopher, Sinek establishes that much of the world is infinite, meaning that it never ends, and the players and the rules are constantly in flux. This is the same for business and culture. There are no agreed-upon rules, the players
continuously change, and any static measurement is often arbitrary. The challenge, however, is that organizations often attempt to make these infinite games finite, meaning there are winners and losers through force rankings, evaluation distributions, or political missteps. This environment leads to unethical leadership, such as the abuse of power, as the focus is on winning the game (getting the bonus, promotion, being number one). He offers the alternative of refocusing on an infinite game, where leaders intimately understand who they are and what they are working toward. The latter he calls a *just cause*.

The *just cause* is more readily available for Christian leaders and faith-based organizations but is not often what the social rules and scoreboard prioritize. Is the congregation size and bank account being confused with a *just cause*? Is American Conservatism being confused with the biblical *just cause*? Often the abuse of authority is intertwined with decisions that avoid conflict as much as it is for monetary gain or more power (Brown, 2018; Goleman et al., 2013; Van Yperen, 2002). Everyone in the organization should have a *just cause* that guides their life. Each organization should have a vision that is ideal and just. After all, a believer must remember that the organization will not be there to mediate between them and God (Revelation 20:11-15). Conant and Federman (2020) reinforce this belief by saying that a leader’s life story is their leadership story. Serving as another example of how compartmentalizing limits a leader’s ability to own their story (or testimony) fully reflects the authority of God in one’s life. It creates connectedness through the understanding of shared experiences.

**Authenticity**

Northouse (2019) effectively portrays the rise of authentic leadership against political scandal, social upheaval, and unreliable information systems, all calling for the deep-seated desire for trustworthy, dependable, predictable *authenticity*. In his early writing, Bennis (2010)
first presents his primal understanding of authentic leadership. In them, he discusses the pervasive challenges of bureaucratic secrecy, where leaders hoard resources in fear of sharing power and political maneuvering is the standard. Bennis’s concept of leadership is inseparable from the concept of authenticity, and this authenticity develops through “crucible moments” (Bennis & Biederman, 2009). Difficult, lived experiences grant meaning through perspective, reveal capability through tested limits, and grant a skillset to help others. It is often the things that break some that allow others to rise to their feet and keep moving.

Bennis and Thomas (2018) expand on this in their four essential leadership skills derived from these crucible moments. First, engaging with others in shared meaning focuses on seeing the real narrative and interacting with it alongside those impacted. This practice often allows a leader to put the authority and creative license back into the hands of the followers, decentralizing authority. The second is developing a distinct, compelling voice. The third attribute is integrity. A typical association with integrity is honesty and doing what one says they will do. Bennis and Thomas (2018) do not necessarily differ from this take, but choose a more specific approach, defining integrity as knowing and living with one’s values. Confidence and know-how come from understanding and perceiving one’s actions through a few significant lenses.

Benner (2015) builds on this concept, writing extensively about acknowledging oneself as one truly is, without masks or false idealizations. Bennis’s integrity is sacrosanct to manipulation and deception. These values reveal how a person interacts with the world around them, both constructively and not. For instance, one may value truth which seems straightforward enough, but the hidden motive may be a desire to control, as navigating ambiguous environments can be scary. The fourth trait is adaptive capacity (Bennis & Thomas,
2018). The authors characterize this component of authentic leadership as grasping context and demonstrating hardiness in adversity. The power of hardiness, associated with clear values and a sense of purpose, is that it never diminishes one’s hope. This hope builds resilience, puts loss into perspective, and allows leaders to rally consistently. Authenticity becomes a new lens to make decisions. To do otherwise becomes a lie—anathema to Christian morals. A Christian leader may experience this as character development, enhanced spirituality, discovering a calling, or surviving an existential crisis (Wilson, 2019). Effectively, the practice of authenticity through crucible moments can either mitigate shame or fully harness the problematic experience of shame for growth.

**Inner Work in Leadership**

Cultural evolution and societal demands pull leaders in many different directions, continuing to transform what it means to be an effective leader. As such, leaders must develop to meet the organization's political challenges, philosophical influence, or technological resources. Needing to grow and face the unknown does not supplant the notion that God is omniscient but reinforces the decision to believe, learn, grow, and put the truths absorbed into action. This willingness to self-reflect and courageously face one’s shortcomings is difficult but necessary and worth it. Batterson (2016) shares that God is in the business of helping us overcome our fears. He graciously brings us back to the place of failure, and then He helps us pick up the broken pieces and puts them back together again.

For leaders, this can be an incredible moment of transformation or a terrible moment of sin. Like Adam, when placed in a situation with the opportunity to lean on God, it is easy to embrace the apathy and stubbornness of choosing not to grow or the arrogance of believing that progression is unnecessary. Sure, refusing to pursue a professional advancement due to
leadership proficiency is one thing, but it is another to waste opportunities to advance God’s work. For example, choosing not to step up to teach a Sunday school class because of a fear of public speaking or not accepting instruction from a concerned friend because of arrogance. These ramifications ripple far beyond just personal reputation and effectiveness as representatives of Christ. The willful stagnation becomes a negative reflection of Christianity.

James K. A. Smith (2009) speaks about how the surrounding culture subconsciously tempts each Christian at nearly all moments of life. Smith believes that cultural institutions do not just want to give us entertainment or education; they want to make us into certain kinds of people. These practices are not neutral or benign but are intentionally loaded to form us into certain kinds of people—to unwittingly make us disciples of rival kings and patriotic citizens of rival kingdoms. Music, movies, school curriculum, and political stances have agendas and motivations. Christian leaders can unknowingly depart from biblical and theologically soundness if they are not careful. Lowe and Lowe (2018) add that Western individualism glorifies and exalts the autonomous individual who forges his or her destiny in the world. Biblical individuality recognizes the existence and importance of the individual but always contextualizes and situates the individual within some larger human community (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 208). There is power in routine, methodology, and strategic time. This reality is an aspect of spiritual formation that continues throughout a lifetime.

Both emotional vulnerability and inner work require a strong sense of humility. Adam Grant (2021) defines three correlated concepts of humility, which he sees as the most effective mindset through which leaders approach knowledge and tactics. The first concept is arrogance, which he defines as having ignorance and conviction. Grant describes the second concept as confidence, which he defines as having knowledge and conviction. Lastly, the third is humility,
which he specifies as having knowledge and being willing to change one’s conviction when faced with more robust logic or accurate information. Grant’s (2021) argument questions the individual’s degree of understanding and willingness to evolve and move forward. In essence, it is a measurement of being to admit there is a better way that puts the community in the center of the action. Brown (2018) calls this getting it right versus being right.

**Mastery**

Lewis (2014) speaks of the process of inner work as mastery. Described as an ever onward almost, Lewis examines mastery as an antithesis to perfectionism, as joy in the continuous work, and a knowing that arriving (achieving success and stopping) is just as damaging and unfulfilling as never having started at all. As a next step in Sinek’s (2017) just cause as an ideal state through infinite mindedness, mastery describes constant and intentional improvement as an obligation to the journey, despite setbacks, criticism, and failure (Lewis, 2014). Like Michelangelo’s non finito style, Ralph Ellison’s two-thousand-page notes left, or Franz Kafka’s literary masterpieces left at death in mid-process, the enlightenment from the journey becomes more prized than its completion (Lewis, 2014). A Christian leader should recognize the doctrine of sanctification and the pursuit of being Christ-like, knowing that it will never be achieved.

An integral part of mastery is creating environments and systems that support this deep sense of purpose and pursuit of excellence. In Atomic Habits, the author soberingly warns the reader, "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems” (Clear, 2018, p. 28). This mantra is repeated throughout his book and has become widely popular across social media. As part of his habit-focused framework, the space between what an individual wants and who an individual ends up being is determined by what an individual does and often
does. Clear (2018) examines the science of habit making and breaking, creating tremendous implications in how a leader can fundamentally change how they show up, are perceived, and ultimately the quality of their work. It is not an accident but requires a clear purpose, goals, roles, and healthy relationships.

**Sense of Curiosity**

Curiosity is a leader’s genuine attempt to understand the situation with an open mind through active listening and interactive dialogue. Rules are provisional; curiosity often deviates from the status quo (Leslie, 2014). Stanier (2020) lays out the consequences of a lack of curiosity. He shares that failed curiosity demotivates the direct report, overwhelms the leader, goes into directives, compromises team trust, and collaboration, and limits organizational agility. Leaders try to protect their egos from shame by being the expert or leveraging micromanagement. The receiving end of armored leadership can be challenging to digest—the ability to innovate and be creative atrophies because of practices where teams simply execute one vision. Staying curious in a conversation longer allows a leader to gain a stronger sense of empathy, a more concise understanding of root issues, and a more profound sense of personal understanding (Stanier, 2020). Coupled with candor, curiosity allows a leader to remain in learning mode. Sonenshein (2017) calls this stretching, where a leader views setbacks as moments to learn and grow from versus failure. Pitting stretching against chasing, which Sonenshein defines as pursuing something because it is precedent, creates mindlessness and complacency. Chasing removes curiosity from the equation and calcifies a leader’s ability to adapt quickly. Shame also plays a significant danger in the concept of chasing. When high expectations are externalized (or determined by others), the pressure from delivering can be
distracting due to the anxiety and fear of failing to live up to these expectations (Sonenshein, 2017).

Grant (2016) also discusses the potential traps of processes that promote efficiency. One of the highest prizes within an organization, maximizing productivity, comes at the price of particular ways of conducting business or best practices. Over time, these processes cause calcification, a term Grant coins to explain the cost of employees no longer actively thinking or looking for alternative ways to go forward. He further examines the notions of expertise, sharing the Dunning-Kruger effect that establishes the false confidence (or unwillingness to be ignorant) that comes with knowing more. Shame induces people to fake their knowledge, causing ineffective decisions. By promoting genuine curiosity and holding that all ideas are provisional and up for negotiation, leaders can continuously inspire teams into creativity, innovation, protect psychological safety, and ultimately discover the best paths forward. From a surprising perspective, this also examines the potential danger of choosing empathy over curiosity. Empathy attempts to understand how someone is feeling, but leaders do not always have similar lived experiences, meaning that empathy can backfire, causing others to feel unheard. Curiosity supersedes empathy as a leadership mindset on nearly every occasion (Drummond, 2019). This form of curiosity completely reframes failure and being “wrong” to a step forward and learning. Pulling in doctrinal concepts of grace, this function of curiosity also prioritizes progress over perfection. Brown (2018) argues that progress is the journey toward perfection but rather sits on the opposite end of the continuum as perfection. In this way, the impact divorces itself from intention, where walking the path well is more important than the destination. In Ephesians 6:5-8, Paul instructs slaves to obey their masters with sincerity of heart, and in Hebrews 12:1, he encourages each believer to run the race set before them.
Self-Awareness

An effort to shift an organization’s culture to recognize and reward emotional vulnerability is like the concept of growing it in oneself, naming it. Being willing to openly discuss the benefits of emotional vulnerability and the dangers of shame with a team drives awareness, as it is a universal fear and salve. However, leaders must move quickly to create psychological safety or risk causing severe damage to organizational trust. One critical application is learning to intentionally set parameters for disagreement and expectations with teams and congregations. This creates an environment where people know the formal process to share concerns without fear of reprisal (Ledbetter et al., 2016). It also allows leaders to be confident in themselves as they hear from their community about areas of desired improvement. Another tactic is to create a group of mentors or elders specifically tasked with offering alternative approaches and constructively criticizing decisions. Brown (2018) calls this technique “rumbling” and does not overlook ideas due to personal agendas or railroading. When selecting these mentors or elders, there must be varying leadership strengths and worldviews. Thought diversity ensures that decisions are considered from all angles, reducing blind spots. It also ensures that no specific groups of people are overlooked, including race, mental health, physical disability, military status, or professional background (Sinek, 2018). Also, this approach ensures decision-making includes those with knowledge and empathy from lived experience.

It is also essential to co-create as many new processes as possible, allowing teams to offer their insights and discuss concerns or fears. “Participation which grows out of the assumptions of Theory Y offers substantial opportunities for ego satisfaction for the subordinate and this can affect motivation toward organizational objectives. It is an aid to achieving integration” (McGregor, 2006, pp. 175-176). This way, leaders can work through business objectives openly,
addressing fears and concerns without triggering shame in themselves or their teams, furthering an environment of psychological safety. Listening patiently and intelligently to reason and emotion is critical to achieving vulnerability (Goleman et al., 2013). Effective listening is an essential skill to achieve this desired state. Being heard and affirmed is a core component of combating shame (Lynch, 2013; Brown, 2018). It is critical to note that vulnerability is not disclosure, as disclosure can inhibit the development of psychological safety (Brown, 2018; David, 2016).

**Candor**

The phenomenon of shame significantly inhibits the ability to speak honestly in service of others. In organizations defined by the power striations of a bureaucratic structure, titles are viewed as critical and are often automatically associated with competence or technical expertise. Kegan and Lahey (2016) examine the phenomenon of developmental growth at higher levels of an organization, finding that personal leadership is rarely challenged in meaningful ways. Lower-level leaders are challenged more often due to the inherent privileges of being higher on the totem pole and having less to do with merit. To combat the unwarranted power imbalance in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) components of organizational leadership and reduce the social shame that comes with challenging upwards, organizational resilience and adaptability must remove the importance given to titles or tenure. This allows every organizational member, from the Chief Executive Officer to the custodian, to challenge a poor result or offer a novel idea. Candor within the community also evokes the necessity of truth over harmony. Seemingly counterintuitive, choosing truth before harmony instills psychological safety and a strong sense of justice. Reconciliation cannot happen without the truth. It is a necessary community component; without them, trust and connectedness deteriorate
Another aspect of candor is one of an internal nature. Having strong connections with the following sections of curiosity and mastery, the ability to establish candor with oneself is a necessary part of growth, moving beyond denial and resistance. Establishing this environment in organizations and developing leaders to explore with candidness introspectively allows for increased honesty and trust. Therefore, emotions are data points that teach versus commands that are roadblocks (David, 2016). Emotions are an inherent part of organizational makeup.

To pretend otherwise is denying the fundamental building blocks of humanness. However, teaching leaders to explore, understand, and deal with emotions safely and honestly is critical. Also, candor leads to non-conformity. Like the notion of authenticity established by Bennis and Thomas (2009), non-conformity focuses sharply on the belief in power without status (Grant, 2016). What is the most critical aspect of non-conformity? The ability to think and willingness to speak for oneself. This is antithetical to shame in many ways, as candor prevents secrecy and dishonesty from existing, although it certainly increases conflict. This complex mindset requires much from leaders.

**Connectedness and Community in Leadership**

Shame is not problem-solved in a ten-step strategy. It requires community and wrestling with painful sources of personal shame. Until this happens, a leader will never lead authentically by submitting fully to God. Also, by not making this personal transformation, leaders cannot effectively engage within their organization to do the same. In a business of people fighting their own shame, any façade will quickly fall apart and revert to a culture that rewards shame armor and emotional stoicism (Brown, 2018).
The desire to connect is biologically hardwired and is widely touched on by behavior researchers (Maxwell, 2010; David, 2016; Brown, 2018). Despite being something humans long for and the extreme lengths to which humans avoid feelings of shame, connection can be difficult, especially in organizations mired by bureaucratic structures (Hamel & Zanini, 2020). Maxwell (2010) examines connection through communication. If a leader is present and actively listening, is intellectually engaged, and engages in non-verbal cues allows communication to create a connection with others. Over time, this also builds credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). The humility required to know and understand those a leader interacts with is not easy, and the trust built over time is easily destroyed (Early, 2006). This means honoring the other person, suspending one’s worldview, and leveraging genuine curiosity to learn.

Kouzes and Posner (2017) also convey the critical role of collaboration in effective organizations, where the co-creation and negotiation of goals allow for trust and community to thrive. This cannot happen in an environment with shame-induced, armored leadership (Brown, 2018). Another aspect of leadership through connectedness is prioritizing face-to-face interactions. Social accountability for interpersonal interactions often generates a heightened obligation to listen and hear each other, where the alternative can lead to immediate consequences (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). These interactions also allow for a leader to interpret non-verbal cues as well. Kegan and Lahey (2016) envision organizations where every team member receives intentional, tailored development to increase feelings of belonging, empowerment, and a belief that anyone can reach their professional goals. This approach allows an organization to become larger than the sum of its parts.

An intrinsic aspect of organizational efficacy and leader-follower relationships is giving feedback. This unbalanced relationship is often a significant source of workplace shame (Brown,
Cavicchia (2010) describes the connection of feedback experiences to the emotions of being missed, dismissed, humiliated, or criticized as an evocation of historical parent-child experiences. If leaders armor up and coach in a way that protects their discomfort, this destroys the relational bridge to the employee or constituent, inflicting shame and deteriorating trust (Cavicchia, 2010; Brown, 2018). To understand and mitigate this dynamic, leaders must demonstrate high self-awareness and engage in a way that honors themselves and others.

Financial incentivization is another component perpetuating shame within organizations, as it often serves as a balm to organizational stopgaps. Higher wages or bonuses are leveraged to improve retention if employee turnover occurs. However, Pink’s (2011) research indicates that financial incentivization becomes detrimental to performance at a certain level of cognitive complexity. Beyond this point, motivation stems from organizational autonomy to self-determination, the ability to master a task or skillset, and a deep sense of personal purpose. He further advocates that mastery and purpose can never be divorced, as this inevitably devolves into moral/ethical shortcuts. It is difficult not to see the connective tissue between this perspective and the doctrine of sin.

**Christian Leadership Literature**

The Bible is full of rich examples of leaders and managers, enormous successes and failures, and perhaps one of the most impactful sources of vision-casting that have been a central aspect of life for thousands of years. King David is a striking example of leadership, especially in contrast to his predecessor, Saul. David led with credibility and a complete understanding of his subject’s problems (NIV, Deuteronomy 17:15), he carefully considered difficult decisions and was generous (NIV, 2 Samuel 5:11), he strategically leveraged relationships to achieve goals (NIV, 1 Chronicles 14:1), he was humble and gave credit where due (NIV, 2 Samuel 5:12, 6:12-
15), and lastly, he took accountability for his mistakes (NIV, Psalm 51). “David illustrated clearly that the Christian leader, too, must be willing to exercise spiritual means to mold, stimulate, and continually challenge his colleagues and subordinates” (Engstrom, 1976, p. 33). David developed his people and strategically leveraged relationships to achieve Yahweh’s vision of the Hebrew nation for 40 years. He is an excellent example to the modern Christian leader who often stands in a secular world with secular rules and expectations.

In the New Testament, Jesus provides an example of leadership very different from what a businessperson might seek. As Bredfeldt (2006) portrays, Jesus would not have made an effective Chief Executive Officer but still stands as one of the most influential leaders in recorded history. He disrupted normalizations (challenged the status quo in service of people) and developed empowerment within his followers to think critically and with autonomy so that his vision would be carried out long after his physical departure. We see example after example of this from Jesus, with his disciples and others alike. Bailey (2018) reminds the reader that Jesus went out of his way to encourage a woman whom culture gave a second-class status, a Samaritan. He honored her. He broke the taboo and offered her living water. This courage is leadership; it breaks the mold. It trailblazes toward the right destination regardless of the absence of a well-defined path. It affirms everyone’s humanity and individual sovereignty and moves them toward the goals of salvation and community. Paul acts as another stellar leadership example. Servant leadership is a widely adopted style that proposes decision-making in service of the followers, either team or customer/congregation. Paul often speaks about servants and slaves. Christians must toil for the good of Christianity and the community in which we exist (Clarke, 2012).
Church ministries are incredible tools that help meet the needs of the community where a congregation or organization resides and provide meaningful ways for Christians to personally grow towards Christ and live within the call to reach others in His name (Livermore, 2015). As such, these ministries meet the community’s needs by focusing on Christ and how to live more fully in his example. Often, churches can over-index on other attributes of faith, such as evangelism, church, or kingdom (Hiebert, 2008). When ministries are defined by one of these alone, it often leads to unhealthy biblical worldviews. For instance, focusing on evangelism as a means to an end often creates a vacuum of spiritual development and community support, as the ministry loses sight of the gospel’s purpose. Of kingdom, Hiebert (2008) warns that Christianity becomes a civil religion used to justify democracy, capitalism, individual rights, and Western cultures. If believers start with the kingdom, however, they make Christianity whatever they want—capitalist, socialist, or cultic communist. Christians must begin with the King, for it is the King who defines the kingdom. This lack of balance within a Christian worldview is arguably an extension of armoring up, a way a Christian exhibits power over others to implement control over an environment that can be unpredictable, dangerous, and painful (Brown, 2018; McNish, 2004).

These related literary subtopics attempt to illustrate components of shame, its mitigation, and the subsequent leadership impacts. Divided into three main parts, it was pertinent to examine the research topic to deeply examine leadership and organizational literature, self-awareness and emotional vulnerability, a sense of purpose and inner work, community, and connectedness. Without these concepts, shame would not be effectively understood. Therefore, a study regarding shame and leadership efficacy would not be adequately covered, particularly in a phenomenological interview approach.
Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

Once the researcher examined the related literature, it was necessary to review the rationale for the intended study and provide an overview of the significant goals in the literature.

Rationale for the Study

Christian leadership development is one of the few areas of Christian literature that rarely ventures beyond mimicry, identified by replicating specific spiritual virtues or behaviors, which often come up short in different contextual situations. This may read something like “humility” or “faithful” with a series of Bible verses served in defense. There is certainly nothing wrong with pursuing these biblical virtues. However, Christian educators and leaders must correlate these biblical concepts to modern, contextually relevant skills in ways that can be effectively digested. Wright (2008) and Fowler (1993) discuss the importance of adjusting ministries away from the legalistic nature of guilt to the internalized battle with shame that most people can recognize in a postmodern world. As outlined previously, knowing how and why leaders show up in specific ways is intrinsic to effective solutions. Due to Western culture, American idealism, and lack of familiarity with shame, leaders must engage with their internal shame and create organizations that refuse to perpetuate shame in the workplace (Forrester, 2001). Shame in leadership, especially in Christian leadership, exacerbates many social issues, such as gender, race, age discrimination, and the atrophying of spiritual disciplines due to stagnant growth.

Not only will addressing shame bring Christians closer in their faith in God, but it will also allow Christians to better serve as ministers and witnesses of faith, living out the doctrine of humanity in ways that honor others, refusing to manipulate through relational power dynamics and internalized defenses (McNish, 2004). To do this, however, the study of the personal phenomenon was necessary to both ground the study in firsthand accounts, to gather
misperceptions of shame, and process the findings through the hermeneutic cycle so that a framework could be created, orientating shame through lived experiences and Christian theology.

**Gap in Literature**

Although many resources examine shame, nearly every Christian approach does so through either the sole lens of Christian theology or clinical/depth psychology describing why shame needs to be understood. However, little to no research examines shame regarding leadership through a Christian, teleological perspective. When applied to the everyday experience of shame, the number of available resources and studies dwindles quickly. The growing body of behavioral science regarding emotions, candor, and self-assessment has been highly insightful, such as the work from Grant (2021), David (2016), and Stanier (2020); only Brown’s (2018) work directly addresses shame in organizational leadership. Regarding specific Christian studies, there are no correlations beyond single-digit dissertations analyzing tertiary concepts of shame in Christian domains, such as coaching Christian leaders or how Christian-orientated meditation decreases mental health issues. These are necessary studies but do not directly interact with the core issue of shame as the master emotion that causes and perpetuates damaging behaviors, both internally and externally. Even many theological treatises of shame are not based on research and often contradict the research that has been done. At best, they offer inefficient aphorisms of shame in the Christian faith. Due to this, no subsequent studies and a gap in the literature for Christian-orientated emotional vulnerability practices scaled for organizations.

**Profile of the Current Study**

Shame, particularly regarding leadership efficacy, is a rising societal and spiritual concern. Having been dealt an injustice by Freud and due to the nature of Western Culture,
shame is primarily misunderstood, causing misinterpretations and solutions as answers to the wrong questions. This study attempts to both equip Christian leaders with more accurate language regarding their personal shame experiences and better understand how these leaders attempted to navigate this phenomenon through their theological lens. Also, this study attempts to add to the small collection of literature in service of helping leaders grow beyond their shame experiences.

As a function of sin in a fallen world, shame provides its curse and solution—the need for community (Forrester, 2001; Capps, 1993; Moore, 2018); Emotional vulnerability is required to mitigate the negative impacts of shame (Brown, 2018). However, emotional vulnerability must be cultivated through self-awareness, humility, personal growth, and an active engagement with the community—not just a homogenous community. Measuring Christian leadership's efficacy must contend with grace and work (Forrester, 2001; Sadler, Jr., 2022).

The phenomenon of shame in Christian leader experiences provides an opportunity for leaders and educators to recognize shame formally and its impact within themselves and their institutions and establish methodologies to help provide growth and systemic changes. The potential for a more explicit framework through the lens of Christian theology is incredibly relevant and an urgently needed field of inquiry.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The significance of this study through the qualitative methodology of phenomenological research is critical to examine and understand the perceived relationship of shame leadership efficacy in leaders who significantly influence an organization’s success. Building community, cultivating co-creation, and innovation as a tool for autonomy during real-time change are core components of organizational effectiveness. As this topic is not thoroughly explored within organizational leadership, there was a need for an intentional set of tactics to examine this skill set and explore ways to identify solutions.

This chapter outlines the research design synopsis, including a clear reiteration of the research problem, purpose statement, and research questions. Also, the specific aspects of the research methodology, including the sample process, ethical considerations, and how the data are gathered and assessed for themes. This chapter closes with a detailed differentiation of the thematic data and correlations found.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

Shame is considered the master emotion and is defined as the fear of being unworthy of love and belonging (Brown, 2006; Scheff, 2003). Often researched from a clinical, psychoanalytic perspective in work dealing with behavioral disorders, shame is often overlooked. This is partly due to Freudian philosophy, describing shame as a regressive emotion only found in women, children, and those deemed racially inferior (Scheff, 2003). Regardless, the emotion of shame has strong implications in everyday life, including organizational leadership. Brown (2006) developed her Shame Resilience Theory (SRT) to examine the phenomenon of shame as experienced by women in difficult life situations, such as domestic
abuse. She adapts this research later, examining the common behaviors exhibited by those in leadership who do not effectively address shame, allowing it to manifest in damaging ways at work and in personal life. As Brown (2018) shares, shame is a challenging emotion to experience and is often best explored by its tertiary effects, such as the physical and emotional ramifications when an individual experiences scarcity or feels unworthy. To understand the underlying causes of what goes wrong, starting with the relationship between the current state and the ideal is often helpful. Concepts of organizations that allow for emotional vulnerability, curiosity, and self-development draw strong correlations to organizations with change agility, innovation, and growth, not only for the leaders but throughout the entire organization (Brown, 2018; David, 2016; Grant, 2021).

**Purpose Statement**

This qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study explored how Christian executive-level leaders understand shame's impact on personal growth, leadership effectiveness, and social connection. This study defines executive-level leaders as individuals holding formal leadership positions at the executive level of an organization (Drucker, 2011). Also, this study defines the experience of shame as the intense, fear-based emotion of not being good enough, often resulting in destructive internal or external behaviors like perfectionism, favoritism, gossiping, discrimination, blaming, harassing, comparison, and self-worth tied to productivity (Brown, 2018). Brown’s (2006) Shame Resilience Theory inspired this study's purpose, and the researcher explored the research through Alsaigh’s and Coyne’s (2021) methodological framework. They built this framework on the study design of Gadamer (1976), which was instrumental in the implementation of hermeneutic phenomenology.
Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1.** How do Christian executive-level leaders of an organization understand, if at all, shame and how it relates to their leadership efficacy?

**RQ2.** What is the Christian executive leaders’ experience, if any, of organizational developmental programs as it relates to shame?

**RQ3.** What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and personal growth?

**RQ4.** What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and social connection?

Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative research study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological design to examine the impact that same has on Christian leadership efficacy, particularly understanding the influence of emotional vulnerability and connectedness with shame in Christian leadership. Due to its behavioral and social science nature, interview questions can be leveraged to explore the full emotional weight of a participant’s response, whereas quantitative data can fall short (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Not fully understanding the participant's familiarity with shame and its impact, the researcher leveraged semi-structured questions to facilitate open discussion. This tactic provided a better understanding of a participant’s perspective in an area that is complex and not studied thoroughly versus a quantitative study (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). A qualitative study allowed for uncovering deeper root issues as the process progressed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A phenomenological study attempts to understand others’ experiences related to a specific phenomenon to understand the experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that researchers often have experience related to the study, attempting to engage
with participants to better understand this process within themselves. Considering how multiple people can share similar experiences and often have different perceptions or impacts of a given phenomenon allows the research to make meaning and identify correlations within the data, ascertaining what something was like from another insider’s perspective more clearly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological research corresponds with the study of shame in leadership efficacy, especially since it begins with a specific set of narrow experiences. It is semi-structured to allow the participant to fully convey their experience, where the researcher could then interpret the data and make conclusions, either separate from or with the participant (Leedy & Ormond, 2019).

As a narrower subset of phenomenological study, hermeneutic phenomenology aids the orientation and interpretation of lived experiences. By recognizing its meaning, pedagogical value is derived, providing a coherent, structured approach to understanding ethical, relational, and practical components of everyday education (Fuster Guillen, 2019). Fundamentally, phenomenology attempts to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its distilled essence. This distillation into text provides the reader with a reflective and reflexive appropriation, strengthening understanding. Through understanding, growth. It is critical to understand that “the phenomenologist does not relegate the theoreticians but prefers to disregard them to obtain freedom of thought” (Fuster Guillen, 2019, pp. 223). The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is “get beneath the subjective experience and find the genuine objective nature of the things as realized by an individual (Kafle, 2011).

The research questions were formulated to draw out the participant’s understanding of shame and their unique experience with the phenomenon. The first research question explicitly engaged with the participant’s understanding of shame, their leadership, and how others
experience them. This also helped the researcher understand the participant’s language regarding shame, providing space to clarify and adjust for more accurate language. The second research question connected the participant’s experience with developmental programs and established a connection between shame, community, and maturation. The third research question attempted to extract meaning from the participant’s experiences, both through their lens on personal maturation and the lens of the organization. The last research question was designed to extract meaning from the participant’s experiences, both through their lens of social connection and the lens of the organization.

**Setting**

This study focused on the experience each Christian leader participant has with shame within the organizations they lead. As a delimitation to the study, each leader has direct reporting individuals that they are responsible for and the ability to influence company protocol. Within the parameters of Christian theology, this allowed the researcher to examine the potential for increased shame behaviors, such as ethical shortcuts driven by bureaucratic bottling (Hamel & Zanini, 2020), armored leadership that condemns emotional vulnerability (Brown, 2018), and perpetuates ineffective strategies due to a lack of autonomy, critical thought, or creativity (Grant, 2021). To better understand the theological lens of shame implications, the organization will not be limited to a specific type of organization, as the study is about the experiences of a Christian leader and not a specific, homogenous workplace.

**Participants**

The population of this study consisted of ten self-identified Christian leaders who are or have worked in faith-based and non-faith-based organizations in the Southeast United States who lead, have led, or directly influence teams to deliver on organizational goals. The
sample size allowed the researcher to deeply explore the phenomenon in a specific participant type. Hermeneutic Phenomenology does not seek to generalize findings but illustrates the phenomenon thoroughly (Gadamer, 1990; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). These leaders must be important stakeholders in their organization’s vision and execution of the associated business model. The leader was required to demonstrate an interest in understanding the measured phenomenon, be willing to engage in multiple interviews for as long as 90 minutes, have their responses recorded visually and audibly, and understand that the findings would be transcribed without any personal identifiers.

The sample of participants was selected using purposive sampling, identified by the researcher who met the study research population criteria (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). Using this approach allowed for the specific criteria to be met and to leverage the known relationship to reduce assumed anxiety around the problematic subject of shame. The criterion sampling of phenomenology established the accuracy of the participant to the research population expectations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Accurate and intentional representative sampling allowed for logical assumptions to be made for a larger population (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). Although the research study does not intend to research specific gender, race, age, or childhood experience implications in the study, the researcher will identify participants that vary in each of these categories to measure a broad degree of the phenomenon and prevent bias in the data collection based off participant demographics. These data points garnered during the initial interview with the candidates determine future willingness to explore the phenomenon of shame within their personal leadership and organization.

The researcher asked the participants to choose pseudonyms for their names and organizations to protect confidentiality and increase trust (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). The
specific answers for the backgrounds were carefully documented to ensure ethical use and serve as a reference point for potential thematic data outcomes. The answers were gathered during an initial interview to establish rapport and serve as a lens for further data to be assessed.

**Role of the Researcher**

Qualitative researchers reject quantitative notions of validity and reliability and lean toward credibility and transferability as stronger criteria to assess study outcomes (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). When assessing credibility and transferability, researchers must carefully assess how their intuition, lived experiences, and worldview may influence the recorded data of the study, especially as interviews and content interpretation are heavily leveraged methodologies in qualitative approaches. As such, a researcher is a tool in the study themselves (Leedy & Ormond, 2019).

The researcher carefully considered types of bias that might lead to a certain interpretation of data or conclusion based on the subjectivity of preconceptions. The researcher leveraged reflexive questioning at every research phase to engage honestly with bias, limitations, degree of understanding, and impact of personal experiences (Valandra, 2012). The researcher kept these pre-understandings in a diary throughout the study. Regarding this study, the researcher is a Christian and has served as an executive-level leader within an organization for 12 years with influence over the mission and vision of the work. The researcher’s experience in this area required intentional safeguarding against preconceptions that allow for confirmation or relation bias, perhaps looking more favorably to a particular type of experience or tenure. Since all leaders are subject to shame, it was equally important that the researcher engaged in diary entries to understand and actively process personal shame experiences before and after
interviews with participants. Similarly, the researcher took measures to engage with reflexivity by examining lived experiences and worldviews that the researcher had concerning shame-based behavior. The researcher took meticulous memos, distinguishing data from reflections (Leedy & Ormond, 2019).

Many demographics or other physical dimensions of difference were not anticipated to be a direct measure of the participant’s perceived leadership efficacy regarding shame. However, race, age, gender, faith, emotional health, physical capability, and mental health are areas where society inflicts shame. As such, the researcher noted any of these measurements within the interviews to ensure no bias impacts the data. Also, each of the questions the interviewer asked was solely based on the phenomenon or in service of better understanding the participant’s responses. All questions asked were documented.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical concerns are always a concern in qualitative research, including confidentiality, emotional state/support, and the degree to which the inquiry is overtly addressed without leading the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Careful consideration of these concerns is provided in this section of the dissertation to ensure safe study parameters and gain approval of the methodology by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were selected at the beginning of the first interview. The researcher then cross-referenced the pseudonyms with the participant’s demographics and background to ensure no external correlation could be made. Only the researcher saw the names linked to the participant. The information will remain secured in a locked filing cabinet and a two-step security verification process on the researcher’s computer. This data will not be shared in any capacity and will be securely destroyed/deleted five
years after the completion of the study. Once the transcription was deemed accurate and all identifying labels were substituted with pseudonyms, the video/voice recordings will be deleted after five years. No participants were under eighteen years of age.

Interviews involving shame and other difficult emotions and experiences surfaced by shame are sensitive in nature—multiple steps needed to be taken to safeguard the emotional wellbeing of the participants. The researcher reviewed the consent form with the participants and reminded them that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Also, the researcher offered to pause the interview at any point the participant appeared to be in emotional distress. If necessary, the researcher would have offered the participants a break or stopped the interview at any point to provide psychological safety for the participant and protect the data's integrity (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Seidman, 2013).

Many participants may have connected their shame to moral failures or traumatic experiences of their past. To better understand this phenomenon, it was necessary to prevent any preparation of the participants about the subject, as social and cultural bias may have influenced the participants to alter their narratives (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). To this end, only general information regarding the subject of the study was shared before the interviews. The purpose of the study was expressed as “to explore the experiences of Christian leaders’ as they have experienced degrees of personal growth, leadership efficacy, and social connection over their career.” Eliminating the concept of shame from the purpose potentially prevented the participants from creating new definitions of shame, context, or building up unnecessary internal anxiety.

**Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

This section rationalizes and explores the methodology chosen to investigate the topic of Christian executive-level leaders’ lived experience of shame in their workplace. The collection
method is justified by relevant literature and details the research design, reflexivity, chosen sampling technique, recruitment, and access information. This section includes considerations to protect the study's integrity and the IRB approval process to ensure ethical research.

Collection Methods

Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to gain understanding through dialogue, which at its core, is grounded in curiosity and openness to another’s worldview, lived experience, and opinion. Gadamer et al. (2004) disliked the terminology of data collection and preferred the term gaining understanding as a more accurate representation of how the process works. Dialogue, the central technique of hermeneutic phenomenology, encompasses the discussion between two people and how the reader engages with the text (Gadamer et al., 2004; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). As such, hermeneutic phenomenology leverages interviews as the primary methodology for gathering information. Through this, accounts of personal experience, protocols from participants’ experience, autobiographical accounts, and observation-description of a document provide input (Fuster Guillen, 2019). The researcher also leverages personal anecdotes to narrow the perception of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2002). Using memos, researchers can document reflection points during the interviews based on the process or the participant’s response that help develop themes and codes for later analysis (Leedy & Ormond, 2019).

For this study, the researcher leveraged three data collection methods. The first method was semi-structured interviews that allowed the researcher to explore the phenomenology apace to the participant’s recollection. Secondly, the participants journaled throughout the study. Lastly, the researcher leveraged a diary throughout all stages of the study to immerse and interpret the interviews, journals, and the researcher’s personal experience. This methodology is non-linear and occurs in tandem.
**Instruments and Protocols**

In the descriptive phase of the study, the lived experiences of the participants were gathered through a series of interviews, journals kept by the participants, and a diary kept by the researcher to process the interview transcriptions, interview memos, and journal contents. Due to the complexity of these lived experiences, tendencies to generalize or use casual explanations, and the mundane interruptions of daily life, careful consideration is given to each of these steps to craft, validate, and refine these protocols carefully. Before setting up any of the procedures with the participants, the researcher sent an information packet to each candidate, including an expression of interest and an informed consent form.

**Interviews**

Interviewing is integral to social science research (Seidman, 2013). It is widely covered in literature and present in each of the hermeneutical approaches the researcher analyzed (van Manen, 2002; Gadamer et al., 2004; Fuster Guillen, 2019; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Laverty, 2003; Kafle, 2011; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Humans constantly interact with the world around them through investigative interviewing, seeing, hearing, and processing at all times of consciousness. The researcher is responsible for leveraging the interview information as data (data-as-resource) and as a function of meaning-making (data-as-topic). The researcher gains understanding through the process alongside the participant. It is a collaborative process to build or reveal the meaning of the participant’s lived experience. Doyle (2019) describes this process as enabling the consciousness of experience through receiving, giving, and being present through difficult experiences. Gadamer et al. (2004) believe that dialogue transcends conversation when one is open to the opinion of others, as language is both the medium of communication and how understanding becomes potential.
The researcher’s interaction with the interview transcription is just as important outside of its real-time occurrence. Gadamer et al. (2004) emphasize the necessity of listening to the interview recordings, writing the interview into transcripts, and then reviewing those transcripts as a vital part of processing, uncovering, and understanding the phenomenon. This includes the memos and field notes of the researcher made in conjunction with the interview transcription itself (Gadamer et al., 2004; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

**Interview Pilot.** As a first step in the interview instrument, it was helpful for the researcher to conduct an interview pilot. Rehearsing with volunteers from coworkers in similar work settings that meet the study’s requirements allowed for accurate interpretation and refining of the interview questions. This also allowed the researcher to refine their personal presence, interaction style, and better gauge the participant’s psychological safety. The pilot stage allowed for invaluable feedback and established a degree of comfort to let the participant’s experience unfold organically (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). This pilot covered two aspects of the study instruments. First, the study and process were explained. Second, the interview and journal prompt was reviewed via Zoom. Feedback was collected in real-time with the additional option for the pilot participants to share feedback through email within one week after the pilot.

**Interview Structures.** This study leveraged Seidman’s (2013) three-step interview, allowing intentional time to process and extricate layers of meaning within the participant’s experience. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher and participant to explore the phenomenon more freely as the interview unfolded. The first interview situated the phenomenon in the participant’s perspective utilizing details from their life history such as education, family life, workplace dynamic, or community. The second interview attempted to isolate and flesh out specific details of a particular experience most associated with the phenomenon. The first and
second interviews were intentionally created and delivered to help build the foundation of the study within the participants’ minds. The third and most critical interview attempted to capture an understanding of the phenomenon and realize its significance regarding leadership efficacy, development, and social connection. The last interview presented questions allowing both the researcher and the participant to establish connections between different aspects of the story, such as personal and professional aspects of life within the phenomenon. It was critical within the third interview that the researcher carefully and actively listened to meaningful verbal and non-verbal cues, such as pauses, questions, or detours in logic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The interview leveraged a semi-structured approach to prompt information without leading or allowing close-ended responses. Interview 1 attempted to establish a healthy relationship between the researcher and participant, review the completed information packet, and their personal identification as Christian leaders. This interview established the delimitations and limitations of the dissertation.

Interview 2 attempted to establish how the participant defines shame, how they have experienced it within their organization, and the significance of these experiences to them (as in what lived experiences external to the organization amplify those from within the organization). These questions answered Research Question 1 of the study. The initial questions were as follows:

- I am interested in understanding how you define shame. Would you explain the definition of shame?
- What is the significance of shame to you within your workplace?
- Do you have examples that represent experiences of shame that you would be willing to share?
- What is the significance of these experiences to you? As in why do they have the impact they do?
- It may help if you tell me your story. Start at whatever point you would like… (This question can be selected at any point if the participant is struggling to
engage with the concept of shame. It helps establish a narrative of their own versus the researchers and can inadvertently create intersections for the phenomenon of shame from a personal experience.

Interview 3 attempted to establish how these experiences impact their leadership and their organization's efficacy regarding development and social connection. This question attempted to answer Research Questions 2-4 of the dissertation. The initial questions were as follows:

- In what ways do you think shame inhibits social connection within your organization? Would you be willing to share examples?
- In what ways do you think shame inhibits personal growth within your organization? Would you be willing to share examples?
- In what ways would you alter your workplace to facilitate improved versions of development and/or social connection? Why?

The interviews were audibly recorded on Zoom to allow the researcher to focus on the participant and the conversation, including nonverbal and silent communication while taking memos (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; van Manen, 2003).

Journal

The participants were asked to keep a digital diary with generalized instructions. There were no limitations based on the participant’s desire to record their thoughts digitally or physically. Nor were the participants expected to record their responses in prose, poetry, or illustration. However, the participants were asked to upload their entries to a secure OneDrive provided by the researcher. They were not able to see or access other participants’ entries. The researcher asked the participants to make journal entries after each interview. No prompts were mandated as the journal will serve as a place for the participants to reflect pre- or post-interview. The participants were asked to complete a reflection on the journal process. During the pilot interview, the participant was asked to provide feedback on it as a tool to use in further study.

- Was the journal easy to use?
- Are the instructions clear and succinct?
• Is there any complex language used in the instructions that can be adapted for better connection to leadership efficacy, developmental programs, or social connection?

These questions allowed the participant to make meaning from their experience within the interview and further engage in previously unprocessed interactions with their shame phenomenon, adding value to further interviews in service of answering the research questions.

**Diary**

As a final instrument, the diary allowed the researcher to de-brief and meaning make the interview experience, as well as any intersections the interview has with the participant’s and the researcher’s lived experiences (Gadamer, 2004; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This phase of the research attempted to make more direct contact with the lived experience (Fuster Guillen, 2019), where the researcher wrestles with grasping the meaning of the lived experience through the participant. It was a fully realized experience of empathy. The researcher established a pedagogical tool for the self, the participant, and the reader (Fuster Guillen, 2019; van Manen, 2003).

As a first step, the interview audio was transcribed verbatim to record and aid the researcher in processing (Gadamer, 2004). Non-verbal communication and memos were coded for additional data and triangulation during analysis (Seidman, 2013). The researcher processed pre-understandings that may have influenced follow-up questions and began the immersion process, implementing a preliminary interpretation of the text (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). These transcriptions were heavily noted with feedback, extrapolations, ideas, and themes that add to the meaning of the phenomenon. This includes transformations of the researcher’s perceptions of the phenomenon. At this stage, a deeper, richer understanding of the phenomenon takes place as it involves the interrogation of every comment, pause, and even what is unsaid (Alsaigh & Coyle,
2021). The diary also contained synthesis and theme development from the reworking of this process, which were later coded for analysis. The researcher spent time during the diary process after each interview, the stage of interviews, and before beginning the next stage of interviews to ensure thorough analysis leveraging Valandra’s (2012) techniques regarding the use of self in research.

**Procedures**

This hermeneutic phenomenological study is interpretive in nature, extracting data about the lived experiences of Christian leaders with shame in the workplace. The researcher isolated the experiences of development and social connection related to leadership efficacy as core components of shame in the workplace. To accomplish the goal of exploring and reaching a deeper understanding, the researcher:

1. Submitted a consent form, proposed interview questions, purposive sampling solicitation request, and ethical consideration to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University (see Appendix A).

2. Sent a formal request to organizations where participants meet the population requirement and study (see Appendix B).

3. Created an information packet that includes an introduction from the research, participant’s demographics, organizational role, the approved consent form, and an outline of the study (see Appendix C, D).

4. Once consent was garnered, the researcher developed a pilot interview to gain feedback about questions and researcher efficacy to adjust the interview method (see Appendix E).
5. Conducted three virtual semi-structured interviews with each participant to establish the participant's lived experience. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, including researcher memos (see Appendix F, G).

6. In tandem with the interviews, the researcher asked the participants to keep a journal to process thoughts post-interview and reflect on the phenomenon experience. The participants submitted their journals to a secure, digital OneDrive that only the researcher can access. The researcher gathered and processed entries as data (see Appendix H).

7. In tandem with interviews, the researcher leveraged a diary to consider the phenomenon's pre-understandings, learnings, and potential as data. This diary was also where the transcription and analysis of the data took place. Reflection questions were guided by Valandra’s (2012) reflexivity techniques at all stages. Questions and answers were recorded in the diary (see Appendix I, J).

8. Destroyed audio recordings, written transcriptions, journal writings, diary reflection, and analysis five years after completing the study. During the study, the digital components of the research were held on a two-step verification, password-protected computer. The physical components are secured in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home office.

9. All personal identifiers of individuals and organizations were replaced with pseudonyms of the participant’s choosing.

Data Analysis

Hermeneutic phenomenology, based on the work of Gadamer (1976), establishes a process for gathering data through interviews and diary. Since much of the hermeneutic cycle is
non-linear, establishing themes for coding can be challenging. Methodological coherence and the researcher’s responsiveness are necessary to achieve confidence in the data and its interpretation (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

**Analysis Methods**

This study leveraged the framework provided by Alsaigh and Coyne (2021), as Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1976) do not provide a methodology for analysis. Data analysis occurs during steps four (Analyzation) and five (Establishing Trustworthiness) of the framework established by Alsaigh and Coyne. There are six stages within the *Transcription and Analysis* step (see Appendix L).

**Stage 1: Immersion**

In this stage, the audio interviews are converted into written records and read repetitively to ensure thorough cognition of the participant’s lived experience, anecdotes, the researcher’s memos, participant’s journals, and initial entries of the researcher’s diary. This deep understanding allows the researcher to begin annotating significant themes or anomalies in the qualitative data. These themes facilitate coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This careful examination of the data allowed for a deeper meaning of the phenomenon.

**Stage 2: Understanding**

Every single sentence of the collected data is assessed and interrogated during this stage, both in what was said clearly and what was implied but not said. To avoid bias regarding silence, the researcher denoted in a memo during the interview based on non-verbal feedback or other context and leveraged Valandra’s (2012) process to capture insights and reduce bias through pre-understanding or assumption. Based on the overall themes, the researcher identified open codes, or first-order participant constructs (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). These are derived directly from the
participant’s ideas in their own words. This was a critical part of the open coding, preventing the researcher’s pre-understandings from unduly influencing the coding.

**Stage 3: Abstraction**

In this stage, the second-order researcher constructs were identified. This stage generated several open codes, so it was necessary to leverage a computer program to aid in the formation of codes. This researcher leveraged NVivo 12 (QSR) to organize these codes into categories. This process allowed the researcher to identify core categories and establish more detailed sub-categories and sub-themes (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). As a representation of the researcher’s ideas and foci, these sub-themes are created through theoretical knowledge and lived experience and are, in turn, abstractions of the first-order constructs and serve as an act of integration between the researcher and the participant. This thematic analysis uncovers underlying themes that may not be overtly evident within a given data set proscribed in the initial stages of transcription and coding (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

**Stage 4: Synthesis and Theme Development**

Once the granular sub-categories and sub-themes are established, the researcher begins meaning-making. This is represented within the hermeneutic circle as aggregation (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). With a deepened understanding of the phenomenon, the parts of the whole expand, adding value to the reader, participant, and researcher. It was necessary that the researcher challenged these themes and checked against any of the researcher’s pre-understandings.

**Stage 5: Illumination and Illustration of Phenomena**

At this stage, the researcher linked the themes and sub-themes of the entire data to literature, establishing interrelationships and reconstituting the participant’s experience to
highlight key findings. This serves as the final stage of the hermeneutic circle and completes the final interpretation of the phenomenon for the researcher and participant. Although the hermeneutic circle, by its nature, is never complete, it is critical for the researcher to recognize the saturation of themes and data (Gadamer, 2004).

**Stage 6: Integration and Critique**

As the final stage of the framework provided by Alsaigh & Coyne (2021), the researcher reviewed the participant’s and researcher’s data to ensure the accuracy of any fused meanings and finalize the last interpretation. This was accompanied by a figure to represent the findings visually.

**Trustworthiness**

Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to deeply examine and represent a participant’s experience as close as possible to what it was like to live that experience personally (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). As the researcher and participant’s ideas and experiences integrate, the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are leveraged to establish trustworthiness.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. For this dissertation, the researcher leveraged methodological coherence and researcher responsiveness as tactics to accomplish this. Methodological coherence is represented through the course of the study non-linearly as the *immersion, understanding,* and *abstraction* stages required the researcher to switch back and forth between collecting data, understanding data, and application to ensure congruence of research questions, literature, procedure, data collection, and analysis (Laverty, 2003). The three-step interview process intends to place the experience of the
phenomenon in the correct context, reconstruct the experience, and associate it with the experience to ensure accurate understanding (Seidman, 2013). Researcher responsiveness is established by staying present, open, and honest throughout the research process indicated within the researcher's diary and memos. Being empathetic in the interviews and reading the journals, leveraging direct quotes, allows the readers to participate in the data validation. Through careful planning, a semi-structured interview format, precise transcription, and illumination of the participant’s experiences, the researcher can minimize distortion, reduce idiosyncrasies, and validate internal consistency (Seidman, 2013).

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to the detail of the research context, processes, and procedures. In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, dependability is problematic as, by the nature of the study’s framework, the participant and researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon will evolve throughout the study and over time, so a final interpretation is technically not achievable (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). However, in the research context, the procedure and process changes will be documented and articulated throughout. The researcher will integrate an auditable path to assist with the replication and expansion of this methodology. The number of participants and data collection methodologies allow for triangulation and enhance the study's dependability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Conformability**

Confirmability refers to whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data or the objectivity of the data. Analogous to a hermeneutic phenomenological study, the researcher cannot maintain a genuinely objective perspective of the phenomenon but can identify and parse pre-understandings and biases at the beginning and
throughout the study. An equivalency of conformability in this type of phenomenology is being open to the text and data (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Fuster Guillen, 2019). The researcher’s diary allowed for and enhanced the ability to process and limit the impact of subjectivity on the data.

Transferability

Transferability is the possibility that results found in one context apply to others. In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, the objective is not to take a broad view (generalization) of findings but, conversely, to establish a deep account of the phenomenon of the shame Christian leaders experience in the workplace. It can, however, generate postulation, commonality, and other transferable connections to similar lived experiences related to shame, leadership, and organizational efficacy. As Gadamer (1990) states, understanding can only be attained through harmony between the entirety of the whole and individual parts of the data. This serves as a reflection of the quality of the researcher’s understanding versus the study's outcome. Other researchers could leverage this data or replicate the methodology to expand upon the phenomenon of shame in the workplace or provide a deeper analysis of a specific organization or leader-follower relationship, especially regarding the theological implication of shame. Due to the nature of hermeneutic phenomenology, transferability is limited.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented an outline of the analytical process of the study, showcasing examples of how the research methodology described the phenomenon of shame in Christian leaders within the workplace, the emergence of themes, and ultimately an interpretation for the researcher, participant, and reader to attain a deeper understanding of this lived experience. Filtered through pre-understandings and a clear, five-step framework, the analysis offered insight into the complexities of the methodology as it was experienced. This chapter attempted to
showcase a hermeneutic phenomenological explanation of the cyclical immersion of the study, presenting a summation of the interconnected processes, specifically the exploration of themes, subthemes, and subcategories, creating an essence of the phenomenon.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to better understand the organizational, lived experience of shame in Christian leaders. This study also examined the intersection of social connections and personal growth with the leaders’ ability to recognize, mitigate, and remove shame from within their interpersonal and organizational relationships. This chapter will outline the protocol and measures leveraged to structure the data analysis, provide demographic and overview contextual of the research participants, and identify the central themes and sub-themes extracted from the interview, journal, and diary processes. It will also illustrate significant passages from the participants’ narratives related to the themes and sub-themes. Finally, this chapter will provide a definitive response to the research questions and conclude with an assessment of the research methodology design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

A fundamental purpose of the study was due to the lack of existing research regarding the phenomenon of shame in organizational leadership for Christians. The procedures and processes presented below outline the data collection that accurately reflects the shame Christians experience in organizational leadership. The researcher identified study participants based on the study criteria. The researcher invited these participants via email to join the study and to sign the approved consent form before beginning any data collection.

The 10 participants completed three virtual interviews, resulting in a combined 27 hours of fully transcribed, interactive dialogue on video and audio recordings. Also, the participants completed a combined 30 journal entries. This researcher’s diary, memo observations, and reflections as part of the hermeneutic circle augmented the data. All collected data were
processed through transcribing, iterative reading, a preliminary interpretation to identify first-order constructs, integration of abstracted concepts to identify second-order constructs, synthesizing the overarching themes culminating in aggregation, and connecting these understandings to the literature to illustrate and illuminate the phenomena of shame in organizational leadership for Christians. This framework is modeled by Alsaigh and Coyne (2021). The data analysis concluded with a detailed response to the study’s research questions.

**Demographic and Sample Data**

Ten participants contributed to a semi-structured, three-part interview process created to extract robust narratives of the lived experience of shame in organizational leadership for Christians. Each study participant self-identified as a Christian adult, at least 18 years of age, an executive-level leader within an organization (bilateral power dynamic), and willing to subject themselves to the recording of questions about shame. As part of the efforts to maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym that intentionally reduces, if not eliminates, the possibility of presumptive inferences.

Each participant was selected through purposive criteria sampling based on several distinct conditions and characteristics. All study candidates met the criteria, but three candidates passively withdrew, meaning that they did not actively provide the necessary acknowledgment to continue the study or complete the consent form. No other participants withdrew throughout the process. As a participant accepted the invitation and determined that they met all study criteria, they were informed of their acceptance via email and asked to complete the consent form. Once complete and turned in, the participants were asked to schedule three 60-90 minute interview sessions with a week between sessions. A participant profile was created based on the first interview, which collected demographic data (Appendix F).
Participant 1: Lillian

Lillian is a conscientious 31-year-old woman whose nine years of leadership experience do not capture her wisdom fully. Engaging, attentive, and imminently concerned about meeting the researcher's needs, she ensured that she was accurate in her understanding while constantly reorientating herself to information, applying her understanding to shame as it grew throughout the process. Her compassion and apparent devotion to those she felt were under her responsibility were strong character traits throughout the data collection process. Lillian reported a strong, active relationship with Christ, a committed relationship with her husband and two young sons, one of whom was due to be born soon.

Having grown up in the church, Lillian committed her life to Christ at a young age. One of the defining characteristics of her altar call was the fear of dying and not going to heaven, followed by years of church politics, the rigidity of the church’s social standards, and the deep responsibility of upholding specific traditions, whether outlined in scripture or not. Experiencing a second conversion later in life, Lillian now attends a non-denominational church with her family, whose mission is spiritual growth, healing, and community. When speaking about her faith experience, it was clear that there was discomfort when connecting the church’s expectations and a family member’s struggle with mental health. A series of unspoken rules held by the church’s elders and passive-aggressive sermons interpreted to be about her family member’s struggle made an indelible mark on Lillian’s personal values; values of compassion, vulnerability, and the desire to grow continuously.

When defining shame, Lillian immediately connects the emotional experience to her family upbringing. She is not accusatory and accepts that her parents were doing the best they
knew how but describes this relentlessness to do things in a very specific way. She recognized how much she needed to grow. She shares,

I went to counseling a few months before my dad passed away. It was kind of a proactive grief process. I knew I wanted to be prepared for it. And obviously I went there for one thing but you kind of end up touching on so many aspects of life and there I discovered that the way I see the world and life and how one should go about life was so small. Life is bigger than what I believed at the time, it was bigger than how I was raised and there are a lot of ways to maneuver through life if you wanted.

For her, shame is intimately tied to the failure to live up to someone else’s standards, specifically, those she cares about. Lillian also strongly connected shame, memory, and physiological response. She can vividly recall the moments she felt shame, nearly all in social settings, and experiencing sweating, jitteriness, stomach-churning, and complete loss of appetite.

Lillian connects these early experiences to her time as a leader. When describing her professional shame experiences as “being blindsided,” “not belonging,” and when seeing the shame dynamic in others, recognizing someone “can’t do the correct thing.” She shares, “I was watching my boss answering questions designed to prove a point. There was no openness, curiosity, or way to have a positive outcome. It was a forgone conclusion and was incredibly embarrassing for her and everyone experiencing that moment.” Lillian grew animated recalling these moments. Her empathy was palpable when she recalled stories when others suffered from the shame dynamic even more than her own experiences. She called it, “an accidental intrusion.” She recognized in retrospect how often she did not intervene in so many of these moments to mitigate shame with others, to stand up for and even defend. She self-identified the connective tissue between the political danger and power dynamic of each instance.

In the last interview, Lillian reflects on the responsibility leaders have within her organization to “not confuse organizational problems with our people.” She indicates how her
organization often focuses on specific personality traits, especially extroverted behaviors, and that leaders “need to be curious and get to know people at a deeper level…decision makers often have short interactions that have lasting consequences.” Lillian also recognizes that there needs to be space for “humans to be humans,” inferring that there needs to be space for failure and learning versus perfection. She adds, “It's up to the leader to make a quality, authentic conversation, if they do it at all, and has an immediate impact on someone’s long-term success.” She further declares “that leaders have to care; it has to be the lens through which they consider all aspects of their job.”

**Participant 2: Jude**

At 30 years of age, Jude was the youngest participant in the study with the least leadership tenure. However, she holds an impressive position at a major engineering firm almost entirely staffed with male professionals. Analytical, methodical, and patient, Jude carefully considered her responses to each question, ensuring she considered every question and delivered on her responsibility as a participant. As Jude reflected on her faith experience, she recalls the experience of straddling protestant and catholic traditions between her Lutheran church and Catholic school. She recognizes the sternness and conviction of her teachers and religious authority figures, continuously cutting off her curiosity and needs to understand the deeper implications of a process. She attributes this curiosity as a byproduct of her analytical mind. She shares,

I was trying to satisfy my curiosity, asking why we light candles, confess, take communion monthly, why, why, why. The answers I received were always surface level…the extensive formalities didn’t generate a ton of value, there was no connection to a greater purpose. The [church leaders] didn’t provide that…I showed up, listened, and participated. It wasn’t until I was 15 years old or so when the pastor gave this really moving sermon and I was singing this hymn and I felt this significant spiritual connection
while singing the hymns. It’s hard to describe. I had this overwhelming spiritual connection, and I knew that this was where I needed to be.

Her recollection was framed heavily on the importance of ritual traditions and understanding why Christians engage in these traditions. Without understanding, it can be perceived as rigid, suffocating even. Spiritual leaders must explain the deeper intentions behind these traditions, shifting the purpose of these rituals from a chore to an act of devotion, of love.

Jude defines shame as “facing all the things that are wrong with you, being incomplete and seen as less-than or when someone looks at you and believes you aren’t capable of doing things yourself.” When asking for clarity, a distinct component of shame is She adds, “Shame is about someone else pulling out of the closet the things that make you want to hide in the closet.” There is a clear link between the violation of personal sovereignty and shame for Jude, this notion of being acted upon without permission.

In exploring her professional experiences of shame, Jude recalls the sheer number of instances where it was difficult to manage shame in new and unpredictable situations. When her boss perceived a negative impact, the leader was not interested in helping Jude grow or develop beyond the mistake(s). Rather, the leader wanted to explore “how she could miss it,” focused only on what was faulty with her thought process and not her routine, communication approach, or personal accountability. The focus was not on what she did but that, in retrospect, she did not arrive at where the leader wanted her, or more accurately, that the leader was bothered and had to get involved. Jude mentioned the phrase foresight for predictive analytics, or essentially attempting to tell the future. This alarming experience connected intuition and foresight to tools leaders use to bludgeon others, shaming them for what they cannot see.

Jude also shared a moment when she was called out in front of her peers and subordinates. She stated, “[her leader] called me out in front of everyone. It made me feel like I
had no purpose here, like all my hard work had no value.” Despite being years ago, she commented on the physiological changes, the heat, sweat, internal pressure, and a shaky voice. Jude also recognized that her instinct was to escape the moment rather than justify herself or ask for clarity. After probing, Jude offered that this was in two parts, both in her leader’s unwillingness to deal with the minutia and her own upbringing, given that her parents are from a country with strong Asian influence where, as a daughter, her responsibility was to honor her parents through strict obedience and purity. She internalized this frustration as failing an authority figure, shaming herself and her deeper sense of purpose for not predicting her leader’s need for something unforeseeable.

**Participant 3: Esther**

Esther is a 31-year-old district manager for a large retail organization. Bright and introspective, she immediately began correlating new understandings from past experiences in the interview process. Having grown up in the church, Esther recognized that her faith was a strong pillar of her life as she experienced much change in her family dynamic. Moving away from her single mother into her aunt’s and uncle’s house also brought an incredibly strict protestant church experience, where a strong emphasis was placed on rules and consequences when breaking them. As she moved back into her mother’s house nearly five years later, it was not without relief that she recognized there was more to her initial faith experience and conversion, having been “overwhelmed with emotion” and feeling of needing to be aligned to the “right” side of things. Esther mentioned that “my uncle was the driver of it. [Aunt and Uncle] are not together anymore, they are divorced.” There was a strong correlation to this as evidence that their faith and how they approached it was not about healing but about rule-following.
In reflecting on her experience of shame in the workplace as a Christina leader, Esther defined shame as “this feeling of embarrassment or inadequacy, like you don’t belong.” In ruminating over the actual definition, she ruminated about shame being isolating. She comments, “In the moments where I’ve felt shame, you’re sort of feeling like isolated. You’re alone in the feeling and that the situation or person is against you and you feel completely alone and that no one understands what you’re feeling in this singular moment.” In this, Esther also recognizes that shame is very complex and feels like there are many nuances to it, pointing to a lack of precise language, either personally or culturally. She continues, “well, I guess it just depends on how we view right and wrong. You can feel guilty or shameful over something you’ve lived your whole life believing is wrong, but in all actuality, isn’t. Your worldview, values, perspective, these all directly impact what you feel shame about.”

Further in the discussion, Esther explores the prevalent shame dynamics in her organization. She even surprises herself by becoming cognizant of how often it happens. She immediately connects to gender norms and the disparity of power, where men typically hold more privilege than their female counterparts. She comments,

This male leader simply couldn’t relate to the working moms on his team, seeing children as roadblocks to success. He saw children as distractions to a career. The moms were disproportionately impacted by this, as the males on the team had wives who stayed home but the moms’ spouses chose not to do that. The supervisor’s lack of awareness, even if not malicious, had a significant impact. Something as innocuous as being unable to hear a customer’s baby cry without criticizing the child sends a clear message to those listening, overstepping professional boundaries. It creates confusion for the working mom, you know? She wants to be successful at work but also loves being a mom and is hearing that they’re incompatible.

When asked why we often struggle to disrupt this shame dynamic openly when we see it, Esther commented,
Oh gosh. I think in the moment it’s like you’re questioning whether it’s a big enough deal or if you’re overreacting? The last thing a woman wants to do is be oversensitive, right? I also think we try to justify where it’s coming from. Like, the person isn’t mean. Why should I embarrass them back for embarrassing me or someone else? You know, it really comes down to fear. I think we are afraid to speak up because we don’t think it will end well. I think we sometimes prefer being nice and respectful over being courageous. But it’s all fear.

Further in the conversation, Esther discussed the line between flipping tables in the temple and being compassionate or giving others grace. The conversation posed an intriguing question. If God dwells within humanity after Christ’s birth, would shaming not be the equivalent of violating the temple?

**Participant 4: Aaron**

Aaron is a 46-year-old leader in a Christian, missions-based organization. Having spent time as a pastor and living abroad as a missionary for many years, he now leads a team to help immigrants or students get established in a new faith community. Aaron was the most versed in Christian theology and could articulate clear connections between concepts and scripture, bringing wisdom and patience to exploring shame in organizational leadership. Reflecting on his faith experience, Aaron shared a concept he called “cheap grace” to describe his initial understanding of how Christianity worked. Most of his church experiences lacked discipleship and focused so heavily on the litigation of holiness, a pharisaical notion of following the rules equating to salvation. He also pointed out that his decision to accept Christ was a conscious, solo experience and that God always called him back when he strayed. His faith always seemed to be renewed through grief. He shared,

> I didn’t really grasp my awareness of grace until I was a youth pastor, I was struggling with being a pharisee, you know, because as a teenager I was always taking advantage of the grace of God. I had lived under a cheap grace. When I started following Christ, it was about knowing Jesus, ministering, sharing his gospel with others, living under his lordship, obedience, discipleship, taking up your cross. All of that I focused on swung the
pendulum in the total opposite direction…but Paul is saying that you’ve come to Christ, and you’re sanctified but now you must find what pleases him. There is a lot of this in scripture and in our lives, this tension of grace versus worship, obedience versus grace…but it is all about the pursuit of holiness in Hebrews 12:14.

Aaron further discussed how his faith experience and shame were derived from this inability to straddle the tension, that when we only hold one perspective as true, we lose the deeper meaning of scripture.

When defining shame, Aaron referenced guilt and embarrassment; as having done something wrong or immoral. He also shared that shame was often “self-imposed” or “perceived by oneself” instead of something others placed on an individual. Aaron also recognized that shaming often has a positive intent and is well-meaning but misses on impact. He recognizes shame as a universal experience and that there is irony in this, as shame is isolating. We are ”all collectively hiding behind masks.” Aaron makes a startling comment. He shares that “Satan is the accuser of the brethren, accusing God’s people. He creates space and doubt for people to shame themselves. For people to defeat themselves.” Regarding work, he offers,

People will use shame in the workplace as a subtle way to manipulate others. Like, I would never say that. That was not my conscious intention. In some ways, I thought manipulating my team was about being a good influence, but it was really about getting my own way. I did not understand that people needed margins to their page. They need rest and space. I leveraged people’s faith convictions to get them to do what I wanted, where the alternative was them thinking that they weren’t dedicated enough.

He further explores the dichotomy of not shaming others or oneself with the apparent lack of shame in the world. Shame indicates that a believer is separated from the presence of God, but shame is now often wielded amongst and against each other to bludgeon each other, act like gods, and push others outside of the circle of acceptance and love. The conversation briefly transitioned to different personalities people have, even in children within the same households. The individuals with the most outsized responses “have the thinnest skin.” He shares, “How do
you care about obedience, but when you’re held accountable, you fall apart.” In exploring another example of shame, Aaron finds a correlation between the inability to metabolize difficult emotions leading to shame. He states,

Our hope was to encourage these small behavioral adjustments. These concerns were shared with us by nearly the entire team, but no one had the courage to approach the person, so we had to as leaders. Instead of accepting and making minor adjustments, there was this huge explosion. We tried to reaffirm our love and intent to improve the relationship, but I believe they perceived it as shame and were just not able to work through it…they shut down, no communication, and it destroyed the relationship.

Aaron said shame often encourages us to isolate, but “Jesus sent people out two by two and people out in teams, and that’s kind of the model, not just doing it by yourself.” The team dynamic, especially on smaller teams, is seen throughout his last example of shame in his organization. The proximity and the shared experiences are what build trust and intimacy. The anonymity of large organizations and lack of intimacy encourages hiding and creating a façade.

He shares that “shame is the opposite of honor…we desire to be seen as honorable so much that we can succumb to this pressure to be perfect, which can lead to hypocrisy and shallow relationships.”

**Participant 5: Jack**

Jack is a 39-year-old church leader with almost 20 years of ministry experience across multiple cities and states. He has a gregarious personality with a ready smile and a quick laugh. Nearly his whole career has been as a spiritual teacher to middle and high school-aged youth. An “open book,” Jack did not shy away from difficult truths in the telling of his faith experience and exploring the shame dynamic within organizational settings. He speaks of being raised in the church but only having a shallow understanding of what it meant to follow Christ. He recalls “stepping away from faith…what he learned at church did not saturate.” After a series of life
experiences at school and church, Jack took to hiking the Appalachian Trail. This experience was one of enlightenment, solitude, beauty, and physical and spiritual exploration. Through this experience, he faced the paradox of “extreme highs and extreme lows, extreme understanding and extreme doubts.” It was not until a Road-to-Damascus moment that God supernaturally manifested in a way that was undeniable to him. This experience pushed Jack to commit to a job that would fundamentally alter his relationship with God.

In defining shame, Jack referenced inadequacy and a strong feeling of guilt. He builds on inadequacy as “something that comes from comparison with others” when we look “to others for affirmation.” He also sees shame as something inherently associated with conflict, a universal experience. He acknowledges the importance of addressing shame in the workplace because “we are people, everybody messes up, it's part of life, and we simply do not talk about it enough. We get so focused on people as a problem because we move so quickly, with so much speed, that we don’t slow enough to find the real issue and confuse it for the person.”

In exploring a shame dynamic in an organizational setting, he shares a dynamic where others in his workplace had unclear roles,

We didn’t work on the same team, but I always tried to help her out. She oversaw this program for students, and I offered to help, but she declined. The next day she was really short with me, wouldn’t look at me in the eyes. I clearly upset her by not helping her out. I got her flowers and gave her a card. It didn’t help. I started to feel so bad that it was hard for me to concentrate. I felt foolish for not just showing up anyways, but I made other plans when she said I didn’t need to be there. Her husband told me to tell her face-to-face. So, I worked up the courage and apologized, and she said thank you, and her demeanor changed immediately, a full 180.

Jack deftly illustrated the shame often inflicted on others when looking for specific outcomes without making a formal request. If his coworker had let him know her frustration, he could have immediately responded but was left to guess and negotiate a path forward. He fully recognizes,
in retrospect, her desire to be seen and affirmed, but she perpetuated that same impact onto him as she was the one who could mitigate it.

Jack explored the idea that rampant shame cultures create “animosity.” He adds, “There is no trust. It creates avoidance. You tend to ignore the people you don’t want to deal with or situations you know will be difficult.” He identifies that we often hide behind seriousness, sarcasm, or silliness to survive the moment and protect ourselves instead of considering what the other person needs in the situation, potentially triggering the individual unnecessarily or never really getting to the heart of the issue. Jack builds off this form of passivity in recognizing the inefficiency of large teams. He states,

I really think the hierarchy gets in the way. You shouldn’t have that many people, it gets in the way of meaningful conversations. You end up focusing on the problems or the people to connect with the most and it leaves this large pool of people that really don’t get any of your attention. And as a leader in ministry, you must face the organizational issues every week, multiple times a day. You don’t get to escape the difficult situation by being off or going to a different church. This causes people to make up their own context and inhibits the ability for leaders to work through it in conversation. We’re rushed. We’re in a hurry.

Jack describes the lack of self-accountability that comes with long tenure and the calcification of repeatedly doing things the same way without concern for results. He imagines a responsibility where we are constantly engaged in trying to grow, drawing a correlation between spiritual stagnancy and shame dynamic, outsourcing leadership to followers, and gaslighting them when they show concern.

**Participant 6: Peter**

Peter is a 36-year-old HR practitioner and 16-year leader in the hospitality and retail sectors. Based on observation, Peter came across as kind and balanced, showing strong ownership of finding the middle ground in his responses. In all his replies, there was a shared
responsibility between the leader and the follower, between the holder and receiver of the power
dynamic. In capturing his faith experience, Peter shared that he was raised in the Methodist
church grounded in a rich faith tradition primarily focused on “showing up as you are and
transparently working towards a better you.” Churchgoing was generational, every Sunday and
every Wednesday. Peter describes the “responsibility of giving back to the community. Being a
servant of the church is indistinguishable from serving the community.” Peter grew into his faith
over time but attributed the rich, strong community he grew up in as a place of strength he could
turn to in times of spiritual duress. This prevented him from facing a “dark night of the soul” in
isolation, as he could always turn to his faith and family community for support.

In defining shame, Peter mentions, “a feeling of being embarrassed, a feeling of being
less than…also the feeling of secrecy and something that you would not want someone else to
find out.” Peter further illustrates that shame occurs when someone calls out another’s actions
without consideration of the person’s desire, a violation of acting without permission. Later in
the process, Peter references the dangers of a “grind mentality,” or “hustle culture,” and how it
can lead to unhealthy perspectives on self-worth when goals are not actualized. He also
references the rise of entrepreneurship, alluding to the idea of failing on your terms versus failing
on someone else’s terms. There is a desire to be in control, to have the power, and therefore, not
be a victim of someone else’s power dynamic.

Considering the shame dynamic in his workplace, Peter quickly latches on to situations
with varying expectations or different shared definitions of success. He shares, “The tone that my
supervisor used indicated a response that was not equal to my own. I wasn’t against the
feedback, but it was the implication that she expected more and didn’t give me a chance to talk
through it. There was no dialogue, just an indictment of missed expectations.” He goes on to express,

The circumstances of how the feedback is given is important. Is it around other people? Sometimes the impact of what is said can be more difficult or felt more abruptly if the direct reports of the leader are present. It isn’t just a reflection of the leader but also the team that is present. If the expectations aren’t clear, it can create a lot of spin, a lot of opportunity for others to make their own context or blame someone else in that space…you’re not given a chance to process it or time to remove your emotional response to the circumstance. It’s all raw response.

Peter adds that this is not just a kindness to others to correct them in private but also a responsibility to allow the individual to hear the feedback, wrestle with it, and ultimately grow from it. Otherwise, the benefit of the feedback might be completely negated because the recipient shuts down and is no longer open.

In the last interaction, Peter spoke in depth about a leader's responsibility to be open to alternative outcomes. He shares, “When unhealthy pressure becomes strain on relationships, it can be a catalyst, like a chemical reaction, that is unexpected and unpredictable. It can be unpredictable even to the person having the reaction, escalating the situation unintentionally. This regret can cause a lot of shame and almost perpetuates it exponentially. If the leader isn’t open to other alternatives, there is a foregone conclusion of accountability.”

He discusses the necessity of leadership maturity and the wisdom required to separate shame from regret. In closing, Peter also brings up a leader's orientation to their direct report. He shares,

If my leader’s orientation to me is self-serving, they can view my results as making their job easier or harder or even getting in their way and keeping them from their success which will most likely result in shame-based responses or one-sided accountability. Alternatively, if a leader is orientated to me is in service of me, they’re most likely to remain open and curious about how I’m viewing the issues at hand, you know, and try to help me mitigate where I may be getting in my own way. It’s all about a leader who is
willing to invest. These conversations aren’t easy and take time but can be done without losing the forward momentum needed. We can do both.

Peter shared an example of where he struggled in a former role, reflecting on the mental anguish and anxiety that comes from double and triple-checking every decision out of fear of failing. The leadership was without empowerment or generating confidence but rather about hemming him in with every mistake or misstep. It was clear that Peter was not shying away from accountability but rather illustrating that a direct report is stuck for a reason, often different from other direct reports or what the leader has experienced. The ownership lands with the leader. He states, “It is the leader’s responsibility to recognize and acknowledge the differences of each situation, to remain conscious of the layers of complexity versus laying the burden at the feet of the direct report.” This behavior abandons the direct report to summit the mountain of their responsibility alone, leaving the door open to self-shaming dynamics.

**Participant 7: Simon**

Simon is a 36-year-old district manager for a major organization. He has significant field leadership experience in many cities and states. Serving as, perhaps, the most optimistic of the participants, his conversion story is one of deep spirituality, hope, and centered on kindness to those around him. Growing up with a single parent who worked long hours, Simon was deeply loved but left to his own spiritual journey. Falling in love with sociology and psychology in college, Simon was inspired to seek answers and explore Eastern and Western faith traditions. Buddhism appealed to him for much of his life, grounded in the ideals of moving towards the best version of self. Eventually, though, Simon would come across Christian authors who vulnerably spoke to their faith journeys, providing practical wisdom and the notion of God’s unconditional love and grace. Simon demonstrated a deep connection and responsibility to be part of a community prioritizing charity, service, and growth.
In defining shame, Simon spoke about inadequacy, not being worthy, and not feeling a sense of community or belonging. He immediately goes into an example of a time he was developing for his current role and was late for an interview. He comments,

The interviewer was not very gracious to me for being late. I remember leaving that call feeling like I’ll never get promoted after that. It was the leader’s lack of openness to talk about why he was late. Instead, it was just this accusation of wasting his time. When I apologized, he told me to apologize to myself because the call was for me. It was this realization that my opinion or apology didn’t matter. Who I was as a person was ultimately unimportant because of this one misstep. That wasn’t where it ended, either. There was this real sense of combativeness. The point of me being late was helped against me throughout the call. At one point, I was discussing a skill set I was trying to develop, creating boundaries with time despite being really organized and having a great calendar. They told me that I probably disrespected my wife as part of this discussion. It was just a whole different level. When I got off the call, I was really struggling not to be super combative.

In describing a shame dynamic, he experienced with a direct report, where it was his title and position that created this overwhelming sense of pressure on the direct report. Simon had to actively engage with her and talk about the positive things the leader had achieved, the logical steps they could take to improve the situation, and that he ultimately had supreme confidence in this leader’s abilities. Even then, it was clear that the leader was spiraling. He had to go to great lengths to separate her personal worth from the current operational results. Through his methodical sharing of the experience, Simon mentioned the importance of giving the leader space and time to process, revisiting the conversation until the leader understood the task in great detail, and constantly thanking the leader when she was vulnerable with him, even when the emotions were difficult or “negative,” meaning that these feelings may frustrate other leaders because it is inevitably slowing perceived progress.
Later, Simon revisits the shame experience he had regarding the interview. He recalled sitting in his office alone for a few hours, thinking and processing the situation. Afterward, he was grounded in his self-worth and capability to move forward. He declares,

We’re good. Lesson learned. I’ll take it and keep going…you have to make time for the internal dialogue where you have to remind yourself that our mind is often our own worst enemy, right? We often make things way worse than they are. When I feel shame, I do my best to create accurate context and perspective. You know, I’m alive, and I’ve got a good job, and my family loves me. Like, I’m good. Then I can forgive the other person and myself. That solitude allows you to rewind the situation for just a second, just kind of breathe it out so you can make room for grace. We so often forget to reflect and pause, where we can recenter ourselves in our values.

Lastly, Simon discusses shame as a bartering tool. He reflects on his supervisor and the reluctance to assess people as good without exhaustive proof. He shared that she held onto the mistakes of others as a provocation to move quicker or as a defense when things did not go as planned. Simon expressed the danger of our humanity when we see others as expendable or a currency to gain leverage in a power dynamic to cement one’s own narrative. This bartering, this manipulation destroys trust.

**Participant 8: Ezra**

Ezra is a 33-year-old district manager for a major organization. Immediately, Ezra’s charisma and ability to readily connect genuinely lent itself to an energy that filled whatever space he was in. Initially raised by his great-grandfather in a Baptist church, Ezra reflects that faith was all he and his great-grandfather had. It was the single driving force of his young memories. When his great-grandfather could not care for him anymore, Ezra spent time in several different households but did not return to church until college. Spiritually, he hit a wall, and with nowhere to turn, Ezra returned to that driving force of his youth. He went back to church. A few months into attending, Ezra recalls this turning point. His pastor approached him
and asked him to play a role in the organization, one of service and leadership. The pastor mentored Ezra in a sort of apprenticeship. The pastor’s intentional investment in Ezra introduced him to a strong, supportive community. He states,

I remember feeling so lost, so ashamed, when I sought out faith again. Running was saturating every aspect of my life. Even walking into the church, I felt so awkward and ashamed. Reflecting back, I know I was feeling shame from all sides of my professional experience and even pushing shame on others in this spirit of survival, of making it through the day. It wasn’t until the pastor’s request shifted something in my heart. It was a deep sense of purpose, of responsibility. It was an exit from a vicious loop. I felt empowered, refreshed. I felt seen for the first time…I think it began with the pastor’s testimony. He shared all of his own faults. He didn’t hide anything. This was the first time I saw someone in authority be vulnerable. It shifted something in me.

Ezra recounts the pastor's role in his community, a small and rural town. It was Ezra’s first look into the hard work of spiritual disciplines and how a man of God recognizes his sin and actively repents.

In the second session, Ezra defines shame as “a feeling of unworthiness, a lack of belonging, this belief that you don’t fit, right? Regretting this deep-rooted component of who you are that you think it is unchangeable.” He explains that shame is unlike the easy corrections that come with embarrassment or guilt; shame is much heavier and more profound than other negative emotions. He also sees shame as an unconscious aspect of a professional workplace. He states,

Many of us carry shame into the workplace in ways that we don’t even know. As a senior leader, if I don’t acknowledge the shame I carry, I could be leading people in their shame space, triggering thoughts and feelings in them that I had no idea existed. I know I’ve leveraged shame because of struggling in a space and often get really judgmental and unknowingly hold people accountable based on my own projections…I walked into a store today, and the leader was definitely not exactly proud of the state of her business. I could tell. I could have either ignored it and carried on burdening her even further or I can go find a seat and talk about what she’s going through. We can be conscious of it and actively work through it with others, or we can ignore it; even unintentionally moving through the world, we can cause or perpetuate shame.
Ezra was very reflective at this moment, hyper-aware of the challenge and tension leaders often have to hold between achieving organizational results and helping teams get through the obstacles, either professional or personal. He recognized how difficult this is as the business results still need to be achieved but resolutely denied that he had to choose between the two. He further explores,

I had this experience where there was an individual who was really struggling. It didn’t matter what I did to support her; she wouldn’t make the necessary behavioral changes I needed to see. It took me a while to understand that I can’t take on the emotional and mental work of others. Some of the physical work I can do. I can provide clear goals and expectations. I can give advice or try to draw correlations to what I see and the tactics or results that the leader is and isn’t doing. There is a point where my responsibility ends, and yours begins, you know? I still care, I’m still here, I’m still invested, but I can’t do the job for you. This is where I have to have courageous conversations, like call it out.

With further discussion, Ezra touched upon the many tools we leverage as leaders instead of courageous conversation. He brought up how we tell people that we sometimes must micromanage something as an inference to do the work for others, to achieve the outcome no matter the cost. Ezra also spoke about sarcasm and passive-aggressive comments to communicate needs indirectly. These tactics “use up so much unproductive energy. It didn’t bring anyone closer. It didn’t build any trust.”

**Participant 9: Jeremiah**

Jeremiah is 34 years old and has been a counselor for a county school system for the last four years and was a youth director at a local church. He was the most reserved and tentative of the participants, cautiously approaching the questions in ways that seemed initially guarded but eventually evolved into carefully considering the prompts that provided clear, rich information. Having grown up in the church and giving his life to Christ at a young age, Jeremiah attended many times each week. His conversion moment hinged upon not wanting to regurgitate his
parent’s or friend’s faith but to explore what his faith meant for him. Getting married and divorced at an early age became this crucible, as his contemporaries did not have shared experiences. He felt very much alone and turned to God for reconciliation. Jeremiah shared,

I was listening to my pastor pose a question to a men’s small group. He was single for a long time before getting married, and I have been single for a long time myself. And he posed the question, like, ‘Is God enough?’ I may pray for a wife, but if God’s answer is for me to be single, will God be enough for me? And I felt that. I felt like that right after my divorce and going through all this effort to find my faith without jumping into another relationship. Is God enough? Yes, he needs to be enough, and then we can worry about all the rest, right?

This comment led to a brief exploration of abstinence and how organizations or institutions create rules without understanding. Instead of abstinence being a fear-based rule to keep young adults from having sexual intercourse, can the conversation be about God being enough? Jeremiah discussed how leaders engage with teams. How often do leaders get caught up in the narrow perspective of right and wrong, good and bad, black and white versus the deeper discussion of purpose, intent, and desired outcomes?

In defining shame, Jeremiah closely related shame to guilt. Shame is “what you’re feeling guilty about or feeling that shame of doing something you know is wrong, either before or after you do it.” When recalling instances of shame, he recognized that “I typically get away from conflict, like avoid it at all costs. When somebody overreacts, I try to remove myself from the situation before it gets worse.”

Shortly after, Jeremiah recounted a situation where he worked with another counselor on a complicated disciplinary issue. He shared,

My coworker can get very agitated and easily provided by the way some of the people in the area interact with us, and because we are also part of the community, we kind of know what to expect. We generally know where to draw the line, so we don’t respond in outsized ways. She kind of lost that for a bit and said something that the parents took in a very negative way. So, they both started going at it, and I had to intervene. The parents
were yelling, and the counselor was about to go off on them. I know this comes from the territory, and there is probably a level of comfort because we live in the same area, go to the same grocery store, or even had the parents in school in the past...the school had exhausted many measures of support and disciplinary action and the parent felt like we were targeting the student. My coworker got defensive. It triggered this sense of incompetence in the face of a really difficult, complex situation.

The school at which Jeremiah leads is in a high-poverty area with high crime. There is often some degree of neglect, and rarely purposefully. There is this deep-seated feeling but refusing to be seen as needy or broken. Jeremiah shares, “When you’re in this environment constantly and often don’t see the impact you make, being the outlet that the parents, students, and even coworkers use to pass on their frustration.” When there is an inability to metabolize difficult situations, either out of maturity or even mental bandwidth, exhaustion comes from having emotional walls up all the time. Jeremiah often spoke about the lack of time and resources and how that can either be what people ultimately blame for the issues or turn inward, almost cannibalizing themselves with shame.

In reflecting on a personal hardship that he is experiencing, Jeremiah recalled the embarrassment and shame he often feels at not being able to drive himself to work or the grocery store, constantly having to navigate questions from friends, coworkers, and those at his church about why. Instead of facing the assumptions and judgments of others, he has often resorted to leaving meetings early or going out a side door to avoid these interactions. He shares,

I don’t want to lie and say my car is in the shop, but it’s been this ongoing issue for a few months now. I don’t want to be rude. When it comes up that I was arrested and my license was suspended, they treated me differently. There make up their own context. They assume they know what happened and obviously, they don’t. That feeling, in that moment, even if they say nothing. It’s hard not to internalize it and beat myself up over it.
Jeremiah commented on this acute sense of sterility and civility, feeling stuck in limbo or a sort of no man’s land. He has been actively searching for reconciliation and finding ways to engage in his church community regardless of the discomfort it sometimes brings.

In the last session, Jeremiah discussed things he would like to change in his professional workplace that could help mitigate frustration and perpetuate shame that seems to lead to high turnover and burnout. He pointed to his administrators, or leaders, who seemed to escape conflict whenever possible. This unwillingness to face the difficult thing seemed to be,

A fallacy of time. Although it minimized the pressure or severity of the immediate issue, there is never any mediation or reconciliation between the two conflicted parties. When people are unwilling to face important issues at hand, we can use busyness to avoid the deeper issues. Administrators are ‘always’ busy but so is everyone else. We still have to face the obstacle.

**Participant 10: Levi**

Levi is the oldest participant at 50 years and has the longest professional leadership experience. He is also a military veteran and brings 33 years of leadership perspective. Levi did not know his father until a few years ago and was primarily raised by his grandfather and mother. He remembers very structured routines, especially regarding faith. His grandfather took him to church weekly and withheld play until they finished their daily scripture reading. Levi remembers feeling shame at a young age, being the child of a single mom who was not married. He distinctly remembered how the church felt towards his family dynamic, shunning his mom, and how his grandfather grew frustrated over the institutionalized church. When his mom married later, his stepfather was abusive, and Levi eventually found a slight reprieve at a local church where the pastor invited him, taught him the power of memorizing verses, and co-created a prayer with Levi.

In defining shame, Levi shared that,
Shame is a feeling of insecurity; it is very much a negative emotion. It happens when we live outside of our values, when we lose sight of our purpose. It is certainly a fear of being outcast or not accepted...when I feel shame, I feel this internal desire to draw inward. Shame for me is a sense of rock bottom. I want to get organized, think through things, and build a new routine I can be disciplined about. I think this is partly because of my stepfather. He used shame as a fulcrum to motivate me. If it wasn’t physical, he’d mentally [abuse]. The strange part about it is I never blamed him. I always blamed myself. I joined the army to get away from them and thrived on the physical or emotional turmoil that basic training brings. I thought my life prepared me for it but in retrospect I thrilled on it because the result was a direct impact on my hard work and mental resilience.

In recounting shame experiences in professional settings, Levi comments,

I had this [direct report] that I didn’t hire, she was a transfer to me from another store. I remember thinking that this was a crapshoot...five months later she is really struggling and comes into work late. When I addressed it with her, she told me she had a mentor status with [a high-level leader]. I knew who this leader was. I worked with her for many years. We were really close. Unfortunately, I made this decision to drag her through the mud. So, I called [the high-level leader] and she had never heard of my direct report. I brought the leader in essentially backed her into a corner...by the end of it she ran out of the office and started crying. I remember feeling justified, like some sort of righteous individual. Now I know I completely failed. I did not show up correctly in the moment regardless of her actions. She may not have been an effective leader, but she wasn’t a terrible human being. There was a clear distinction for me there, like making decisions because of what I wanted versus trying to help her...I let myself get triggered by her lying. To me, she became an obstacle I needed to overcome.

In addressing the source of this response and how his organization often fails to mitigate shame in their leadership or teams. He explores,

There is a strong political hierarchy where what you say and do is constantly being scrutinized as being in service of helping leaders look good or get ahead. Like, are you pro-me or anti-me. Trust and loyalty are often twisted to be this thing that you owe someone forever, even if you pay off the balance. The less power you have in the given situation, like our [entry level positions] have a more critical response because you’re stuck with it. There is nowhere else to go...we get so caught up in being the person we are expected to be that we stop being ourselves due to the political power and micropower dynamics. There is this massive shame dynamic of wondering how who I am isn’t enough to speak people or get this job I’m told that I’m ready for. I remember being so wound up and worried that being myself was the farthest thing on my mind. After, I felt awful because the mixer didn’t go the way I wanted and it was all in my head because
I wasn’t living within my values, I wasn’t myself. On top of that, I got feedback that I wasn’t myself! Currying favor to get a whole bunch of people say yes to me in a room is a recipe for disaster. I’m told to look this way, sound this way, say these things, behave this way, which only reminds me that I’m not and can’t be those things and when I do that, it’s held against me!

Levi closes the session with a reflection on how leaders often use niceness to avoid conflict, which is an avoidance of honesty. He shares, “Trust doesn’t require a lot. Trust only needs an unwillingness to break it.”

**Data Analysis and Findings**

**Data Analysis**

The data collected across the length of the study totaled to 27 hours of video/audio recording, 249 pages of interview transcription, 30 journal entries, 6 pages of researcher preconceptions, and 38 pages of interview memos and researcher diary reflections as part of the hermeneutic circle. The researcher completed the immersion stage as part of the fourth step in Alsaigh’s and Coyne’s (2021) framework for facilitating the data analysis of hermeneutic phenomenology. In this step, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly listened to and read to gain a thorough understanding of the whole text. Understanding the entire text is the first step of the analysis, as it will inevitably influence every succeeding part of the data analysis. To prevent the impact of any pre-understandings the researcher may have had going into the immersion process, the researcher engaged in Valandra’s (2012) series of questions as captured in the researcher dialogue to ensure full awareness of the preconceptions and to enhance open-mindedness to the data. The transcripts were heavily annotated, identifying key concepts, important narratives, and central themes that the participants shared. Each transcript was carefully examined for ideas, all adding an important voice to the phenomenon of shame in organizational leadership for Christians. The researcher also noted moments where concepts
created resonance and new meanings for the researcher, serving as a trail marker for transformation and growth. This act of dialogue with the text established primary meanings and represented a fusion of the participants’ and the researcher’s understandings (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

The data was then processed through the stage of understanding (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2012), where each sentence or section was correlated to the whole, attempting to find meaning in the correlations. This was done by generating open codes represented in the participant’s ideas as expressed in their own language. In the third stage, or abstraction, the second-order constructs were identified. Due to many first and second codes, the software program NVivo 12 (QSR) was leveraged to assist in the organization, category creation, and data comparison to establish core categories, subcategories, and the subsequent identification of sub-themes. This analysis offers a way of discovering underlying themes in each data set (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2012).

In the synthesis and theme development stage, the data were thematically analyzed and connected back to the whole text to find new meaning and expand on the established sense of the transcripts and journal entries. This process, the movement from examining the parts to the whole, is at the core of the hermeneutic circle and is called aggregation (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2012). The researcher constantly challenged the themes that surfaced throughout this aggregation and synthetization process, to preunderstandings of the research and where the data may not have reached saturation. An illustration of how themes evolved into final themes is visualized in Figure 1.

In the next stage, the researcher illuminates and illustrates the phenomenon, linking literature to the themes and establishing a relationship between concepts. This allows the participant’s experiences and the researcher’s understanding to illuminate, or expand, upon the
phenomenon, highlighting key findings in the data (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This is clearly examined during the final stages of the dissertation and visually represented in Figure 2.

The final stage of the data analysis process is integration and critique. This is where the researcher carefully criticized the themes and conveyed the final interpretations. These findings will be represented in the next section and ultimately illuminated in the research conclusions of the dissertation's final chapter.

As the participants’ transcribed experiences were particularly robust due to the consistency of the narratives and because of the multiple types of data collection processes, the researcher was able to achieve saturation, which is the point at which new data no longer provides new understanding (Gadamer et al., 2004). Saturation was specifically found during the completion of the fourth participant’s third interview (participant Aaron), or about two-thirds of the way through the data collection process. This redundancy across multiple sources also provides evidence of triangulation and further confirms that the conclusions established from the data accurately represent the participants' lived experiences, adding to the study's validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As demonstrated in Figure 1, the researcher followed the hermeneutic process, process preunderstandings, and checked for researcher biases. Also, the researcher demonstrated integrity to the participant narratives, staying open and receptive to each participant’s stories to ensure their perspectives were represented as precisely as possible.

Detailed in Appendix L, there is a cyclical motion between each component of the hermeneutic circle, where the reflexive nature of the process allows the researcher to find new meaning in the phenomenon by constantly criticizing and synthesizing the narratives (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).
Findings

The researcher identified four dominant themes in the data: (1) Dissonance – Instigation of the shame experience, (2) Isolation – Perpetuation of the shame experience, (3) Contemplation – Mitigation of the shame experience, and (4) Resonance – Prevention or Elimination of the shame experience. Figure 2 shows a thematic chart that indicates the themes and subthemes of the study. The researcher supported each theme and subtheme with excerpts from participant interview transcriptions and journals.

Figure 1

Christian Leader Experience of Shame in Organizations

Dissonance – Instigation of the Shame Experience

The participants conveyed shame experiences represented by either initiating the shame dynamic, receiving the shame dynamic, or observing the shame dynamic as a bystander. In each of these perspectives, there was a clear perception of dissonance as every participant understood shame as an unwanted, mostly unhealthy emotion and certainly not an ideal place to exist in.

This stage of dissonance, where most shame-based experiences seemed to take place, was
articulated as one of unconscious awareness, unconscious response, and dissonant conscious response.

**Unconscious Awareness.** Most of the participants demonstrated a partial understanding of what shame is by definition or formal effect. Interestingly, all participants were hyper-familiar with what shame felt like and could define it by metaphor but, at best, only demonstrated a tertiary awareness of what shame is, why they experience it, and how others experience it when under the impact of the dynamic. This was most acutely represented by defining shame as guilt, regret, or embarrassment. In effect, the participants had little language for shame and were often meaning-making in real-time, processing and actively revising thoughts. The act of this, as will be explored in the stage of contemplation, was a valuable tool. Some participants doubled down on their definitions when asked if there was a distinction between shame, guilt, regret, or embarrassment. For others, they began actively reorientating their perspective when establishing a separation between definitions, developing more precise language.

- **Oh, good question.** I would define shame as a bottom emotional reaction. We are embarrassed or not proud. We aren’t doing something right based on the vision we had for our life.

- **Shame is a feeling of guilt and inadequacy from others**…you’re guilty, you aren’t doing something right. Shame comes after you’ve done something wrong where guilt is more immediate.

- **This isn’t a question I think about a lot.** We can take definitions for granted, can’t we? I would say it is a feeling of guilt or not measuring up. I’ve done something wrong or immoral. I think it can be self-imposed or something that is perceived or placed on me, either intentionally or not.

- **In my own words, how do I define shame?** A feeling of embarrassment, a feeling of being less than. Let me continue to think (long pause), almost the feeling of like secrecy, something you would not want someone else to find out.
• Oh, wow. Let me think for a minute (long pause). The word vulnerable is coming to mind. Shame for me is about people seeing everything that’s wrong with you or sending a signal to others that you need help or are lesser, that there is some gaping hole that someone else sees and thinks that they can plug. Shame is (long pause) about pulling out of the closet the thing that makes you want to hide in the closet.

• I think [shame] is this feeling of inadequacy like either you don’t belong, or you messed up or you’re not worthy.

• It’s funny you pose that question. We talked about guilt in church this morning. You know, such a fun conversation. Shame is something that you feel guilty about when doing what you know is wrong.

• The best way I can think of to define shame is maybe unworthiness, like a lack of belonging. There is also this sense of hopelessness in the sense that you can’t take it back, that it’s unchangeable.

• Shame is a feeling of insecurity, like if do something that’s wrong or didn’t behave the right way. Sometimes if I impact others negatively, I feel ashamed.

• Oh, how would I define shame? I would probably define shame as this feeling of embarrassment or feeling inadequate. Or because you have a certain belief or opinion, you feel like an outsider.

**Unconscious Response.** There was a common theme amongst many of the participants where they demonstrated awareness that when someone, either themselves or someone else, was the instigator of the shame dynamic, there was a significant change that it was unintentional, either because the instigator was not attuned to the situation, or the receiver responded in a way that was unpredictable due to their life circumstances.

It is important to note that there was a dichotomy between the examples in these discussions. The first was accidental, but due to the leader’s neglect of the emotional temperature of the room, where the leader still requires ownership and accountability for their actions. The other was an awareness that even when the leader does everything right, they can unintentionally trigger a response that is in no way the leader’s fault but still up to the leader to address.
Although there are many reasons why individuals may not be consciously aware of the shame dynamic, most of the examples shared met the following criteria: avoiding difficult truths, moving too fast (hurrying or seeing busyness as a virtue), or repressing difficult truths without fully processing.

- He was covering the store, but he never gave us any support, direction, or feedback. He wrote me off. When I got my review, I remember feeling so embarrassed and upset. I was blindsided. You know, like why didn’t you tell me any of this before? I understood that he got along with some of the others in the building. Maybe it was my newness or that he couldn’t relate. He was sitting in my review with my new leader, and I asked him about it. He was so flustered and tried to deflect.

- I wanted to run at the first sign of distress. You know? Just hop in the car and drive away. I just want to go. I don’t want to argue, I can’t think. The last thing I ever want to do is say the wrong thing or say something I’ll regret so I’d just rather leave and if I have to, pick it up later.

- I called, texted, emailed. Nothing for days. She wouldn’t even look at me. I eventually worked up the courage to talk to her and apologized for doing the thing she told me I could, and it was a complete 180. She was back to normal. I felt terrible for two weeks and she held this over my head when all she could have done was come talk to me about what she needed.

- My boss came in to visit, you know, just to check-in. We went through the entire day full of visits and conversation and at the very end, there is this critical message of her thinking I should be farther along. Completely blindsided me. I would have been completely fine, even understanding if this had been addressed along the way and not delivered at the last minute, all at once. When I asked her about it later, she shared that she overreacted and because I was new in role, and she should have done more to help. But I know if that’s really what she was thinking, you know? The damage was done.

- She was well known for developing talent and was direct and caring. But she was so passive-aggressive at times. I understand giving feedback but be direct and don’t do it in front of others. Even though she was the only one talking, it made me feel inadequate in front of everyone, that what I did had no purpose.

- I couldn’t control it. I felt so tense. But I just put my head down and started working really, really hard by cleaning…I could ignore it and show everyone I cared by working or stop, engage in the conversation to defend myself. But I come from a background
where you take feedback, and you apply. You don’t argue with it. I did it out of respect for my boss.

- I was standing there in disbelief, watched [former supervisor] completely disrespect her in front of everybody. We all just watched it happen. You could tell she was not pleased by his comment. I was kind of stuck there, even though it didn’t happen to me. I didn’t get involved out of self-preservation if I’m being honest. I did want her to think I needed to save her and didn’t want to get involved and be wrong or make something out of nothing.

**Conscious Response.** Although significantly rarer than examples of unconscious response, there were several examples where the leader instigated, received, or observed a conscious initiation of the shame dynamic. In these instances, direct action was taken to achieve a specific outcome. The most common component seemed to be a degree of manipulation or an active approach to taking back power to regain leverage.

- Every Monday we had a call, and it was called “Look Who’s Brining Us Down.” [Supervisor] would call everyone out, one by one, in front of everyone else. You could hear the vulnerability in [my peer], like it was crushing him. [Supervisor] was beating a dead horse. It made no sense. Became this thing of quiet quitting, like [my peer] couldn’t win.

- She got really mad at me, telling me I needed to come up with a better solution. I told her that was why I was calling. She didn’t take kindly to that, and she hung up on me.

- When I was new to leading a team, I remember this time I essentially tried to manipulate my team into doing what I wanted them to do. Really, that’s what it was. It’s like I convinced myself I was trying to influence them, but I essentially shamed them into doing what I thought was best instead of listening to their needs.

- The pastor driving his political messaging almost hate filled. I knew at that moment; he had an axe to grind. It was a clear disrespect of others. I remember recognizing that I couldn’t join this church.

**Isolation – Perpetuation of Shame Experience**

In all participant responses, there was a strong undercurrent of how an individual responds, physically or emotionally, when they are the experiencers of the shame phenomenon.
Although it had positive and negative connotations, the idea of isolation came up constantly. This is particularly poignant if shame is the fear of being disconnected, then isolation, whether self-imposed or not, is powerfully connected to the shame dynamic. The three subthemes related to isolation are a subconscious awareness of shame, dealing with unproductive conflict, and facing a denial of the doctrine of humanity.

**Subconscious Awareness.** Moving away from an unconscious, primal response to shame into a known but not fully understood level of the shame dynamic, this stage represents aspects of the shame experience that can be acted upon once understanding is achieved. Several participants mentioned physiological responses to the shame dynamic and the emotional and spiritual implications that the shame dynamic had, culminating in a denial of the doctrine of humanity. Through these stages, the participants recognized that they either self-isolated to recover from the shame dynamic or were exiled from their community through shame.

- My whole body felt tense. I felt the blood rush to my face. Thank goodness I have a lot of melanin in my skin so you can’t really see it. I rarely get emotional, but it was hard to hold it back.

- I remember my stomach dropping, like churning, and getting jittery. There was a headrush. Oh gosh, I remember completely losing my appetite. I couldn’t eat at all, like not even think about eating.

- It really hurt me how he was treating her. I had so much empathy for her. At the same time, though, it felt private, like I shouldn’t be here. It was an intrusion.

- I remember after, I just sat in my office alone. I don’t know how long, maybe a couple of hours.

- You know, I could tell she needed space to think and process. She naturally needs space to kind of think through stuff. So, I’d wait and then circle back.

- I told my team I loved them, and I could tell it wasn’t going to be reciprocated…like why is it so awkward using the word…you want someone to love you back, right? I
think we just have to help each other get over the shame of being rejected and embrace being loved and loving others.

**Unproductive Conflict.** Within the isolation stage, a few participants provided examples of subconscious perpetuations of shame via an unproductive conflict, meaning the acceptance or rejection of shame occurred in ways that only exacerbated the shame dynamic. This is separate from the conscious response explored in the dissonance stage as it is not actively intended and forces individuals out of community into isolation.

- She asked me for feedback, and I told her about some frustration I was having regarding how she views talent in my market. You could tell she wasn’t having it. It didn’t matter how many leaders she’s developed or trained, that she has no [employee issues] in her store or that she’s great at communication and is super smart. She put it back on me about doing a terrible job letting people know where they stand. What does that mean? like someone can’t ever be promotable because they’re currently working through stuff? The fact that she put my feedback to her back on me told me everything I needed to hear.

- What I observed was a lack of awareness the leader had. It was less about intentionally trying to create an environment of anti-working moms. He was just so unaware of how he was coming across. It just doesn’t feel good to look across the group of people and we all have kids except this guy.

- She’d do this thing where she intentionally kept people on edge as a way to get results. With one hand she’d offer support and kindness. With the other, she’d say something that completely contradicted everything before. Like this was the only reason she called, to tell me that I was struggling in this space, and I needed to fix it. I was like she was afraid to compliment people for fear they’d stop working hard. We’d get into these weird, I mean I wouldn’t call them arguments, but verbal tennis matches. I’d ask her what she meant by certain things, and she’d leave it vague and surface level. It was like she just wanted me to fix it but couldn’t be bothered by getting involved.

- A couple of years ago, my organization took a strong stance on social justice issues. And I agree, I think it was an important conversation that needed to take place. It was really difficult because we had this polarizing response to things. Like cops or free speech. We called them listening sessions, but it really became this dynamic of listening to only one type of person or people with one perspective. We couldn’t hold the tension between these two conflicting truths. I saw the damaging effect it
had on relationships, people avoiding large swaths of their lives or passive-aggressively judging someone else because they didn’t subscribe to overarching beliefs. It really made me doubt my beliefs, my thought process.

**Denial of the Doctrine of Humanity.** From a Christian theological standpoint, accepting the narrative of a shame dynamic denies the doctrine of humanity as it declares that every person is made in God’s image and worthy of love and honor (Estep et al., 2008). A few participants were partially aware of this contradiction to their faith and shared it during the interviews and journals.

- Rather than simply trying to be faithful to God’s unique call on my life, perhaps I am placing my own great expectations on myself. Perhaps the problem is wanting…to feel that I’m a worker worthy of his wages in a sense, that those who are giving to my non-profit agency and keeping me working and serving are getting their money’s worth…am I even worth the salary I do receive?

- Part of a leader’s job is to help others feel worthy, right? Then why do we use shame or blaming weaknesses when people fail to cover up feelings of inadequacy?

- While at a big meeting with my team in [redacted], I noticed many others received awards based on behaviors in performance, and I was the only one that didn’t. That feeling sat with me so heavily…I felt unworthy to be in my position. I was feeling myself spiral.

- Looking back, it actually makes me sad how much my self-esteem was impacted by this accusation of arrogance. As a leader, sharing my achievements with my peers and boss was not comfortable for me. I depended on others to share those things for me. I would also be nervous that my achievements were somehow still not good enough for my boss to be proud of me.

- I’m giving it everything I have, you know, but it’s not perceived as good enough. So it’s almost like this idea of it doesn’t matter how hard I work or how much I care, I still fall short.

**Contemplation – Mitigation of Shame Experience**

Continuing to grow from the first stage of dissonance and through the stage of isolation, a new and unique leadership experience emerged. Contemplation exists as a component of
isolation but is where a distinct worldview shifts, where consciousness moves from a self-centric perspective to others-centric, or where an individual is meaning-making with and in service of others’ needs instead of just the self. A growing awareness of responsibility to the community characterizes this transition. All data sets contained narratives of the leader’s conscious awareness of self and others and the responsibility of meaning-making through contemplation. Although not addressed verbatim, there was a significant change in verbiage throughout the interviews and journals, either expressing a desire to learn more about this phenomenon or an immediate application of new understanding.

Conscious Awareness. All participants spoke of the responsibility of leaders to be aware of the shame dynamic in themselves and, when possible, others. When the shame dynamic is recognized, most participants also shared the importance of its mitigation or a reorientation of the leader to address the active shame dynamic. To describe this space, they used phrases such as self-aware, personal growth, and inner work. When reorientated, the participants demonstrated a new or widened perspective.

- After the first interview we had, I immediately became more aware and started looking for more instances of the shame. Just because we are talking about being Christians and our experience of shame in the workforce, right? I started asking myself where there are areas where I’m not being true to by beliefs.

- The higher I go up in a company, the more I’ve realized that I am so much farther removed from my teams. They have less time with me than say my direct reports when I was in a single location. I simply have less shared lived experiences with them than I used to have, which means I have to be really careful with the assumptions I make. It takes so much more time to slow down and invest my time, but I believe it’s worth it. I guess that’s part of the inner work, to be disciplined around things that aren’t easy but have a big payoff.

- I think about the response of this particular leader afterwards. Even though she was courageous at the moment, she moved a little differently and communicated differently afterwards. Where she was private about her marital status before, now she was
addressing it proactively because she wanted to get a head of it...and I just keep coming back to the leader in this scenario. He created an environment where she had to change how she was responding, not because she had trust or because she was more confident but because she needed to control the narrative, like prevent a game of telephone, you know?

- I think there is a big responsibility from the leader to invest in their team. You can have somebody stop struggling through giving direction but that doesn’t necessarily mean they are getting better because maybe they don’t really understand what went wrong. If they’re walking away with a lot of anxiety, it is a clear signal that there is more work to do by the leader. We have to be accountable to what we say and how we say it.

- Not all situations or areas of responsibility are created equal. What someone is struggling with in New York may not be the same thing another person in New Orleans is. They may be in two different boats with two different challenges. Certainly, there is a degree of personal accountability, but the leader has to have skin in the game, right? Like, they’re the leader. It’s literally in the job description.

- I’m sure you’ve heard of this thing called the *Power of And?* Well, it’s morphed into this impossible task of doing more, more, and more stuff. As a leader, I have to disrupt that and really help my team understand that we need to do what’s of value and that sometimes means not doing other stuff now or maybe even at all. If we don’t slow down, we end up spending all this time on the wrong problems. And organizational problems are really just people problems. Like what about my own leadership is getting in my way right now?

- I don’t know but if everyone just knew then I could just not worry anymore. Like everyone knows already so I don’t have to hide this think that’s weighing me down. Their curiosity would be satiated, and we could just move on. It makes me think about the need to be transparent and that it’s generally the stuff we make up that keeps us from moving forward.

- I realized that I’ve been chopping off parts of me and putting them in a box, so it doesn’t get in the way of my success. So, there are these parts of me that I believe is me, is true, and should be worthy of people’s respect has to be put in the dark because I’m afraid of the consequences. That’s textbook shame…it’s recognizing that we can be good people and be kind and have respect for each other. Can’t we just get comfortable saying that?

- The higher you go in organizations, the more self-aware you need to be. The impact that you have on people on so many levels and how easily you can shift things. It’s so easy to be in a hurry but you can make or break someone so quickly in that setting.
Meaning Making. Throughout the data collection process, there were several inferences to a desire to understand the phenomenon more clearly. There were also several instances where the participant developed a cognitive connection, leading to deeper meaning and comprehension, ultimately opening themselves to different perspectives and a wider worldview.

- I’m still struggling with this, you know? I definitely want to learn more about shame and the way we feel about it and the impact it has on ourselves and others.

- I was kind of verbalizing and really being honest with myself about it. I can’t say with all honesty that I would have talked about it if I hadn’t been asked the question directly or really even addressed it to myself on a deeper level. I think it’s been really helpful in making new connections or why I’m feeling a certain sort of way. It’s definitely been helpful and enlightening in that sense.

- I’m learning that I spend more time trying to observe other people’s thoughts and actions than I do on my own.

- This process has allowed me to keep doing the inner work and has pointed me to a few topics I need to lean into.

- I’m realizing how easy it is to internalize situations that have nothing to do with me.

- Even if no solution is offered, verbalizing my concerns and know that these concerns are being acknowledged helps in processing the bigger picture.

- This study helped me remember that our faith is deeply personal…my shame should not hold me back from committing to a personal relationship with the Lord…in those instances, I must remember that we all have a cross (burden) to bear and we all carry it in our own way.

- In Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame” (1 Peter 2:6, NIV). So somehow my faith in Jesus makes it so that I will never be put to shame, even though I deserve to if judged simply by my own actions.

- Being surprised with feedback is not fun, but sometimes it is unavoidable. This is where trust helps a ton. Even if the conversation is difficult internally for me to get through, I can still walk away knowing it was honest and trust I am receiving this feedback because this person is invested in my success.
**Resonance – Prevention of Shame Dynamic**

The participants each expressed perspectives on what idealized organizational approaches would be to improve social connection and personal growth related to the study’s research questions. In these last interviews and journal entries, subthemes emerged and centered on conscious action, leading (or existing) in community, and spiritual growth.

- A significant focus for any leader or organization is to improve your leadership, right? But the focus can’t be on shareholder profit or organizational results, it has to be centered in growing people. The other stuff will come when the goal is really to help you grow and progress as an individual. The business results just help point to where we still need to grow.

- We make a concerted effort to create vulnerably shared experiences, so we get to see each other’s challenges and stumbling blocks. We know each other and we get to see each other’s shameful things more often. We realize our lives aren’t all put together and that there are shameful things in all of our lives. We are imperfect but we love each other and work with each other through them. So yeah, I think there is definitely still an expectation for how you perform in your job and morally. We’ve made a choice of will to work together. Jesus sent people out two by two, he sent them out in teams. We can’t do it all by ourselves. We practice authenticity. We role model it.

- When I think about my organization, one of the values we espouse is care. Although we don’t always deliver on it because you know, people are imperfect, I think this value really underlines this kind of baseline for how we treat people. To tell some you care, right? That’s a big deal. There are so many things that come with the sentiment of care. To really care for someone, I have to be honest with them, make time for them, be patient and open.

- I see leadership as this two-way street. It’s a give and a take. A compromise or co-creation with all the individuals who share in the responsibility of doing this aspect of the work. The focus remains on the problem, not each other. There is a clear intention, there is investment, and we hold how we summit the mountain loosely.

- We don’t outsource our leadership. If there is a hard decision to make or if a difficult request is made of me, it’s my responsibility to lean into it. I can push that down or pass it along. It’s like putting your money where your mouth is. That’s when you know what kind of leader you are.
• I think our lack of self-awareness leads quickly into this frenetic pace of decision making. There has to be a conscientious effort to engage in dialogue before, during, and after ensuring we are taking everyone with us and that we are all holding hands on the decision, or at least everyone was heard before a decision was made. This builds trust and belief in, I think Brené Brown says it, “getting it right not being right.”

• I think mature leadership, even for non-Christians but especially for Christians, is this idea of being kind and understanding despite having different worldviews. When did we lose the ability to understand that two conflicting things can be true? Like I can hear you out, see you, affirm you and not believe the same things you do. That’s okay. I really think we’ve got to get better at coinhabiting those spaces.

• One thing that I see on my team, and we don’t do it often, but when we spend time together, we have a lot of fun. We enjoy it. I think there is something to it. It takes time and investment, but always seems to be worth it.

• I don’t know if I’m suggesting a meritocracy, as there has to be room for grace and getting things wrong, but I think we constantly have to earn our role as leaders. It can’t be something like tenure, where when you’re in, you’re in. If we are earning it every day, I think our people see it.

**Interpretation of Christian Leaders’ Narrative**

The phenomenon of shame for Christian leaders in organizations is a personal component of how they move through their workplaces, encountering the shame dynamic constantly. This phenomenon is not unique to these leaders based on gender, race, years of experience, or socioeconomic status but is a component of humanness, correlating directly to both doctrines of humanity and sin. The experience of shame for Christian leaders in organizations profoundly impacts how they experience themselves and others to God. Shame can alter deeply held beliefs and reorientate one’s values, ability to exist in community, and ability to experience personal growth both spiritually and emotionally.

The shame dynamic induces powerful emotional responses at an unconscious, subconscious, and conscious level. These responses often manifest as frenetic hurry, an idolization of busyness, the numbing of difficult emotions, repression, defensiveness, or even
manipulation of others. It is primarily driven by ignorance of shame and how it manifests within us and others. This ignorance means shame typically remains in the unconscious space, is rarely identified as the culprit, and causes serious and lasting psychological damage that takes years of conscious, intentional work to roll back.

Surface-level understanding of an insidious shame dynamic can result in many outcomes but nearly always results in isolation or exile. There is a physical exile, experienced as termination, demotion, or an unwanted transfer. More commonly, isolation is felt existentially as an ostracization of human connection. This can and is often self-imposed based on fear and false contextualization but can also be wielded as a tool to actively regain power in a relationship by ostracizing another. In both scenarios, however, there is a subconscious denial of the doctrine of humanity, seeing a person as broken, inconsequential, or not deserving of honor or worthiness. Without conscientious effort, a leader can exist within the stages of dissonance and isolation as a continuous cycle unless they break out, engaging in contemplation and actively mitigating the shame experience.

If a Christian leader holds the doctrine of humanity and sin as true, then it becomes a mandate to engage consciously with the source of shame's effect on behavior. Through this contemplation, a leader becomes more self-aware of how others experience their leadership and how the leader experiences others. This awareness demands reconciliation, requiring an expanded worldview, allowing for deeper understanding and more precise language. Through this reorientation, a Christian leader is left with a choice, if one can still call it such, to return to community from exile, living fully a new set of deeply held beliefs, a new lens through which to view themselves and others.
Responses to Research Questions

The following responses to the research questions that guided the study are provided as a direct outcome of the hermeneutic phenomenological framework through immersion, understanding, abstraction, synthesis, illumination and illustration, and integration of the data collected.

RQ1. How do Christian executive-level leaders of an organization understand, if at all, shame and how it relates to their leadership efficacy?

The Christian executive-level leaders who participated in this study provided substantial insight consisting of robust oral and written narratives compilations and observed data from which the researcher established four distinctive themes and subsequent subthemes. These stages provide a framework to understand the Christian leader’s experience of the shame dynamic in organizational settings.

Although each participant’s narrative represents a single lived experience of the shame dynamic, no leader, let alone a Christian leader, surpasses the phenomenon and is therefore excluded from experiencing the shame dynamic. It is an ongoing experience that requires constant vigilance and consistent reorientation through contemplation. A leader will certainly oscillate between the many stages but will ideally not return to dissonance, or if a leader finds themselves in dissonance, now has an understanding and framework to return to contemplation.

Seemingly universal to the participant’s experiences was the realization that shame was rarely, if at all, a positive force within organizational efficacy. As a parallel, all leaders could easily identify physiological, social, and organizational symptoms associated with the shame dynamic, all of which were deemed unwanted or undesirable despite not having clear language or definitive understanding of what the shame dynamic is, how it manifests within their leadership or how others experience their leadership. This resulted in a holistic view that the
participants wanted to actively learn about shame, their leadership, and teaching others about the shame dynamic.

**RQ2. What is the Christian executive leaders’ experience, if any, of organizational developmental programs as it relates to shame?**

Soberingly, none of the participants could demonstrate awareness of developmental programs directly related to shame within their organizations. When asking the participants, “In what ways would you alter your workplace to facilitate improved versions of personal growth and/or social connection?” most leaders immediately shared a desire for structured developmental approaches they would add to their organizational tools to educate on shame, its many surface level effects, and skill sets to work through the difficult emotions inherently attached to it. As referenced by the gap in the literature, this is also a significantly underserved area of focus for development in faith-based and non-faith-based organizations. A few leaders referenced Brené Brown’s *Dare to Lead* (2018), but their knowledge of shame was based on their own study and not driven by the organization itself.

**RQ3. What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and personal growth?**

Many first-order constructs, or central themes from the participant narratives, centered on shame's role in inhibiting personal growth. Through synthesis, aggregation, and illumination, the data provided the following components incorporated into the findings, as represented in Figure 2 above.

- **Dissonance - Instigation**
  - **Unconscious Awareness**
    - Imprecise Language
  - **Unconscious Response**
    - Avoidance
      - Hurry/Busyness
      - Numbing
These themes and subthemes indicate that Christian leaders experience shame dynamics within the organization in physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual ways, causing significant taxation on a leader’s bandwidth, including both energy and focus resulting in a cyclical instigation and perpetuation of shame until the cycle is broken by contemplation.

RQ4. What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and social connection?

Some first-order constructs, or central themes from the participant narratives, directly centered on shame's role in inhibiting social connection or growth. It is important to note, however, that community will always be impacted, even indirectly, through dissonance or isolation, and it is not until contemplation and resonance are achieved that a leader can fully return from exile to enter once again into community which, by definition, requires authenticity and immersion of the leader into community. Through synthesis, aggregation, and illumination,
the data provided the following components incorporated into the findings, as represented in Figure 1.

- Dissonance - Instigation
  - Unconscious Response
    - Avoidance
    - Defensiveness
- Isolation - Perpetuation
  - Unproductive Conflict
    - External
    - Internal
- Contemplation - Mitigation
  - Conscious Awareness
    - Others-cognizant
  - Meaning Making
    - Widened worldview
- Resonance - Prevention
  - In Community
  - Spiritual Growth
    - Holding tension

These themes and subthemes indicate that Christian leaders are responsible for interpreting and appropriately responding to their community. This is done by declaring and demonstrating shared values, developing an acute sense of widening and reconciling differentiating worldviews, and remaining hyper-vigilant to the needs of their followers, encouraging the cultivation and growth of their entire community.

**Evaluation of the Research Design**

The hermeneutic phenomenological design of this study offered a singularly effective methodology to explore the lived experience of shame of Christian leaders within organizations. Guided by the framework provided by Alsaigh and Coyne (2021), the researcher effectively worked through the hermeneutic circle, focusing on the participants’ and researcher’s lived experience and keeping this central to the data analysis (Fuster Guillen, 2019). The process
allowed the researcher to access the robust narratives and draw correlations through themes and subthemes through immersion into the participants' interviews and journal entries, investigating the transcripts for first-order open codes, and abstracting second-order open codes. Initially, there were many codes and potential directions, but the abstraction, aggregation, and synthesis processes allowed the researcher space to challenge the themes and pre-understandings, staying true to the core narrative of the data.

The central purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of shame for Christian leaders in organizational settings, knowing that Christianity provided a specific lens to look at leadership and limited the tactics a leader could use to ensure efficacy by nature of the ethical and moral standards denoted throughout scripture. Essentially, the researcher believed that shame was an unconscious factor in leadership efficacy and that Christian theology provided a unique correlational dynamic for leaders to recognize, understand, and overcome shame within their leadership. As a result, the research was intentionally designed to gather substantial data through multiple methods to support as much saturation of the experience as possible. The data collection methods included video and audio recordings, participant journals, and a researcher diary employed to capture pre-understandings and memos.

For ease of facilitation, the interviews were scheduled and facilitated exclusively online. The interviews were conducted on a secure, encrypted platform with passcodes given only to the participant. The researcher engaged with each participant at the beginning and end of the interview to increase comfort, connection, and trust. The virtual meeting space gave the participants a perceived buffer, maintaining control over their volume, mute, video, and ability to disconnect without repercussion. Social accountability was significantly reduced, lessening the potential discomfort of being in person to discuss a sensitive topic. This also allowed participants
across the southeast United States to schedule and reschedule interviews based on personal needs, significantly increasing participation rates and potentially decreasing withdrawal rates due to unforeseen issues.

Thankfully, all participants easily accommodated the interview and journal processes, given their familiarity with the virtual tools. However, the researcher did walk through how to access, upload, create, and save journal entries on the researcher’s OneDrive, allowing the participant password-protected access to their single file. This approach provided an easy-to-access and useful tool for both parties and increased the participant's comfort, knowing they could upload, edit, or delete their content if and when they chose. For the transcription and Journal data collection processes, this increased validity, as the participants were able to ensure an accurate accounting of their narrative. Sharing access to single folders also meant that the researcher could securely store all audio and video recordings, the researcher diary, participant journals, the participant consent forms, the pilot interview consent form, and pertinent email responses all in one location. This minimized confidentiality risk, as everything is securely stored in a single location and, if needed, could be shared with approved researchers, such as the dissertation sponsor.

Participants were identified, requested, approved, signed the consent form, and scheduled the interviews for one week between sessions over seven weeks. A few minor issues required rescheduling due to a participant’s personal needs but otherwise had few issues. It is important to note that two candidates did not move beyond the identification, request, and approval phase as they did not sign and return the consent forms. No inquiry was made as to why the candidates did not choose to move forward, but a note was sent to appreciate their initial interest and thank
them for their time. The researcher identified two more candidates, ensuring the total number of participants stayed a ten.

Utilizing the Zoom platform for the interviews resulted in two audio recordings and one video/audio. The audio recordings were then processed through the NVivo 12 (QSR) transcription process and were edited for accuracy while listening to the audio recording. The thirty transcriptions, thirty journals, and researcher diary were then loaded into NVivo 12 (QSR) for coding as Word documents. Again, leveraging the OneDrive function and NVivo transcription process made this simple and significantly reduced logistical challenges as everything except the researcher memos were already digital.

Although the interview questions were semi-structured, allowing the participants to answer in ways that were true to their own narrative and uninfluenced by the researcher, the participants provided narratives with a surprising amount of overlap, allowing for the clear and nearly immediate development of the main themes. There was more variation in the participant journals where the participants approached them in one of three ways, either as a personal reflection on the past interview experience, extrapolating their personal learnings throughout the study, or as a tool to explore other experiences not captured in the interviews. Although more consistency from the journal approaches may have been helpful, the variability was helpful as it provided insight into data the methodology would not have otherwise captured without this foresight.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to this study, guided by Alsaigh and Coyne’s (2021) framework for data analysis, Valandra’s (2012) reflexivity guidelines, and the significant amount of data collected through the methodologies above definitively represented the lived experiences of the Christian leaders who participated in the study. The narratives pulled
from the study and subsequent data analysis provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of the Christian leader in organizations than previously provided in the literature, successfully illustrating the primary themes and subthemes of the phenomenon.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This study aimed to explore and understand the lived experience of shame for Christian leaders in organizations. This study also sought to find a specific correlation, if any existed, between social connection and personal growth to the shame dynamic these individuals experienced. This final chapter summarizes the study, including a restatement of the research purpose, a review of the research questions through which the study was framed, a high-level summary of the study findings, and a comprehensive examination of the conclusions, implications, and applications. This outline also provides a section regarding the research's limitations and concludes with potential areas for further research.

Research Purpose

This qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study explored how Christian executive-level leaders understand shame's impact on personal growth, leadership effectiveness, and social connection. This study defines executive-level leaders as individuals holding formal leadership positions at the executive level of an organization (Drucker, 2011). Also, this study defines the experience of shame as the intense, fear-based emotion of not being good enough, often resulting in destructive internal or external behaviors like perfectionism, favoritism, gossiping, discrimination, blaming, harassing, comparison, and self-worth tied to productivity (Brown, 2018). Brown’s (2006) Shame Resilience Theory inspired this study's purpose, and the researcher explored the research through Alsaigh’s and Coyne’s (2021) methodological framework. They built this framework on the study design of Gadamer (1976), which was instrumental in the implementation of hermeneutic phenomenology.
Research Questions

The researcher developed four key research questions that helped guide the formation and implementation of the study itself. This ensured that the researcher stayed grounded in the original, singular purpose of the study. The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1.** How do Christian executive-level leaders of an organization understand, if at all, shame and how it relates to their leadership efficacy?

**RQ2.** What is the Christian executive leaders’ experience, if any, of organizational developmental programs as it relates to shame?

**RQ3.** What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and personal growth?

**RQ4.** What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and social connection?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

The data was collected from participants using a three-session interview process that produced 27 hours of video/audio recording, 249 pages of interview transcription, 30 journal entries, six pages of researcher preconceptions, and 38 pages of interview memos and researcher diary reflections as part of the hermeneutic circle. This data was thematically analyzed through Alsaigh’s and Coyne’s (2021) framework for conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research, mainly through the hermeneutic process of immersion, understanding, abstraction, synthesis and aggregation, illumination and illustration, and integration. The final themes and subthemes were challenged against the collective, holistic participant narrative and to check the researcher’s pre-understandings. A summary of the study’s findings regarding each research question and subsequent conclusions is provided. The relationship of the study’s findings to the theological, theoretical, and related literature review is discussed. Lastly, the implications and applications of the study are discussed.
Research Conclusions

Four distinct research questions guided this study. This section summarizes these inquiries and how the data upheld or countered each question.

RQ 1: How do Christian executive-level leaders of an organization understand, if at all, shame and how it relates to their leadership efficacy?

The collected data provided robust descriptive experiences of Christian leaders and how they correlate the shame dynamic to social connection and personal growth with their leadership efficacy. Based on the extensive oral, written, and observed data, the researcher was able to establish that (1) Christian leaders have imprecise language regarding shame due to their limited understanding of the dynamic, how to precisely define it, the theological implication of shame, or how to express the way it specifically impacts how they perceive themselves, how others perceive them, or how they perceive others when the phenomenon is at play. Initially, the participants generally understood shame as guilt, humiliation, embarrassment, or regret. This limitation made meaning-making challenging during the first stages of the data collection process as the researcher needed to explore the phenomenon of shame. (2) Participants recognized the difficult experiences and emotions that shame causes or resurfaces, correlating behaviors that cause avoidance or unproductive responses, ultimately triggering self-isolation or community-initiated exile. This act of isolation or exile results in the fear of separation that the individual so desperately tries to avoid. (3) The Christian leaders experiencing shame recognized that isolation or exile pushes an individual into a space of potential reorientation. Either the individual can accept the narrative of shame and deny the doctrine of humanity, unable to mature further, or the individual can reject the narrative of shame, entering meaning-making and deeper understanding.
RQ 2: What is the Christian executive leaders’ experience, if any, of organizational developmental programs as it relates to shame?

The data from the study indicated little to no correlation between the leaders’ knowledge of shame and associated components of personal growth to organizational development programs in the interviews or journals. The participant’s responses to the data collection processes guided by Research Questions 3 and 4 indicate that the leaders desired more shame-related development and were not receiving any. Their knowledge of shame and their leadership indicated it was from personal interest-based research/reading.

RQ 3: What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and personal growth?

The data suggests several correlations between the participants’ lived experience of shame to personal growth fell under four main themes: dissonance, isolation, contemplation, and resonance. Each theme correlated to the Christian leader's specific actions or roles in each stage regarding shame. In respective correlation, they are instigation, isolation, contemplation, and prevention.

Theme 1: Dissonance – Instigation of Shame Dynamic. The participants mentioned several components of shame that represented unproductive responses and served as a non-ideal state of leadership or experience. Dissonance was typically characterized by uncomfortable emotional states of being, living outside of one’s values, or being at odds with their community, either work or otherwise. This main theme has three subthemes and corresponding descriptive connotations. (1.1) Unconscious Awareness. The participants were mostly unable to articulate clear definitions of shame as they had spent very little time actively processing it. However, being unaware of a phenomenon does not mean that the participants were free from the impact of shame. Nevertheless, the participants' lack of language and awareness of shame definitively
inhibited their ability to acknowledge or address the dynamic, invariably impacting their
efficacy. (1.2) Unconscious Response. Although the participants indicated a desire to avoid a
state of “dissonance,” it was apparent that existing in this place was largely unconscious,
meaning that leaders often instigated shame upon others or themselves as an instinctual response
to self-preservation protection of the ego. These behaviors included but were not limited to, the
idolization of busyness or being in a constant, frenetic hurry, numbing undesirable emotions,
repressing emotions by ignoring them, or immediately adopting an optimistic outlook without
processing the difficult emotions.

**Theme 2: Isolation – Perpetuation of Shame Dynamic.** The participants indicated a
transition of awareness from unconscious to subconscious behaviors when shame was instigated
by another or themselves. In this stage, the Christian leader is essentially forced to manage their
response to the shame dynamic in unproductive or productive ways. An unproductive response
traps the leader in a cycle between Dissonance and Isolation. (2.1) Subconscious Awareness. In
this state, the Christian leader was partially aware of the shame dynamic, primarily due to the
emotional impact. The leader cannot avoid the difficult and uncomfortable emotions triggered by
the shame dynamic. The impact of the shame dynamic was experienced both physically and
emotionally by the participants even, or perhaps especially, as they were not fully cognizant of it.
Physical manifestations included, but were not limited to, sweating, loss of appetite, queasiness,
and hives. Emotional responses were described as wanting to cry, run away, or justify
perspective. (2.3) Denial of Doctrine of Humanity. Christian leaders demonstrated a
subconscious decision to accept or deny the doctrine of humanity. Denying the doctrine of
humanity resulted in deterioration to dissonance or stagnation in isolation from the community.
Accepting the doctrine of humanity, not just as an opposition to the doctrine of sin but in conjunction with it, pulled the leader into a state of contemplation.

Theme 3: Contemplation – Mitigation of Shame Dynamic. The data implies the third stage of awareness for Christian leaders experiencing shame within organizations. In this stage, the leaders become fully conscious of the shame dynamic and begin to orient their understanding of why they are experiencing it. (3.1) Conscious Awareness. The participants conveyed examples where they were aware of the shame dynamic and readily indicated specific triggers, often pointing to historical and psychological origins within themselves. (3.2) Meaning-Making. Now fully aware, the leaders demonstrated the ability to leverage observed experiences, shared experiences, or inferences to create new meaning, build out logical causations, or were able to develop reasoning justifiable in the utilitarian sense, even if not moralistic. Many of these examples showcased clearer language or stronger beliefs regarding shame and the leader’s deepened orientation—examples such as engaging in reflective mindfulness or seeking new information supported this thematic stage.

Theme 4: Resonance – Prevention of Shame Dynamic. Referenced as an idealized stage of leadership, the participants indicated situations where a leader role modeled preferred techniques, creating resonance with followers, or conveyed leadership behaviors the participants desired to see within their organizations. (4.1) Conscious Action. This subtheme represented values-based leadership actively engaged in inner work, often associated with spiritual disciplines like prayer, scripture reading, and proactive, routine contemplation. (4.3) Spiritual Growth. This last pattern indicated a leader’s ability to metabolize difficult situations as their maturity gives perspective to handle difficult situations or emotions.
**RQ 4: What perceived relationship, if any, exists between a leader’s experience of shame and social connection?**

The overarching themes of this research question were closely aligned with research question 3. As such, the researcher used the same main themes, indicating the associated subthemes and subsequent descriptive connotations.

**Theme 1: Dissonance – Instigation of Shame Dynamic.** The participants mentioned several components of shame that represented unproductive responses and served as a non-ideal state of leadership or experience. Dissonance was typically characterized by uncomfortable emotional states of being, living outside of one’s values, or being at odds with their community, either work or otherwise. This main theme has three subthemes and corresponding descriptive connotations. (1.2) Unconscious Response. Continuing with the desire to avoid a state of “dissonance,” it was also apparent that an unconscious response that reduced social connection was an automatic defensive response, rejecting the request made by another in service of the individual’s own comfort or ambitions.

**Theme 2: Isolation – Perpetuation of Shame Dynamic.** The participants indicated a transition of awareness from unconscious to subconscious behaviors when shame was instigated by another or themselves. In this stage, the Christian leader is forced to manage their response to the shame dynamic in unproductive or productive ways. An unproductive response traps the leader in a cycle between Dissonance and Isolation. (2.2) Unproductive Conflict. The participants indicated the futility of several interactions in this stage of isolation, such as being unable to communicate clearly with another, struggling not to shut down, or not being able to silence the internal, destructive monologue characterized by being an imposter or being unworthy.
**Theme 3: Contemplation – Mitigation of Shame Dynamic.** The data implies a third stage of awareness for Christian leaders experiencing shame within organizations. In this stage, the leaders become fully conscious of the shame dynamic and begin to orient their understanding of why they are experiencing it. (3.1) Conscious Awareness. The participants conveyed examples where they were aware of the shame dynamic and readily indicated specific triggers, often pointing to historical and psychological origins in themselves and others. (3.2) Meaning Making. Now fully aware, the leaders demonstrated the ability to leverage observed experiences, shared experiences, or inferences to create new meaning, build out logical causations, or were able to develop reasoning justifiable in the utilitarian sense, even if not moralistic. Examples such as spending time with others, engaging in reflective mindfulness, or willingness to remain curious all supported this thematic stage.

**Theme 4: Resonance – Prevention of Shame Dynamic.** Referred to as an idealized stage of leadership, the participants indicated either situations where a leader role modeled preferred techniques, creating resonance with followers or conveyed leadership behaviors the participants desired to see within their organizations. (4.2) In Community. While this aspect of resonance is certainly a goal in itself, there was a secondary meaning to being in community and it served as an observable indicator that a leader who achieves resonance will be observed and given credit for leading effectively in community. The fruits of their labor are evident to others. (4.3) Spiritual Growth. This aspect also indicated a skill set of holding the tension between two conflicting truths. The variability of perspective and lived experiences was a strong, repetitive narrative throughout the interview and journals, indicating that a leader must be able to reconcile the differences without attempting to dismiss or synthesize worldviews.
Theological Implications

The Literature Review of this dissertation outlines a theological framework for viewing Christian leadership and shame through a Christian worldview. This review examined the doctrine of sin, connection through emotional vulnerability, and leadership efficacy.

The Doctrine of Sin

This study’s findings reinforced that the doctrine of sin is a core and active component of shame within organizations. Since Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree (Genesis 3), humanity has found themselves wrestling with community, intrinsically at odds with their corporeal sovereignty and knowing that a divine connection is missing, severed in the infancy of existence. This physical manifestation of shame, captured in the doctrine of sin, has plagued humankind through the original exile from Eden (Genesis 3), the exile of Cain (Genesis 4), the departure of Noah (Genesis 7-9), the dispersion at Babel (Genesis 11), the journey of Abraham (Genesis 12), Jacob runs from Esau (Genesis 27) and again from Laban (Genesis 31), and Joseph from Canaan to Egypt (Genesis 37) and on and on. In only the first book of the Bible, nine distinct stories regarding the patriarchs of the Hebrew tradition are centered on the necessary and inevitable separation from community into isolation. Each of these, plus so many more examples throughout scripture, represent God's efforts to inexorably draw his people back to him, to a new Jerusalem, a new Eden.

In a post-modern age, shame-induced exile from community rarely occurs as physical displacement. Instead, it takes place on a spiritual and emotional level with startling frequency. Since the Western tradition of Christianity often more closely represents Platonism than the Christianity of the Gospels and Early Church (Rohr, 2012), believers have primarily lost the language and significance of shame and separation from community as it has been overshadowed
by the dualistic nature of guilt and the strong emotions of humiliation, embarrassment, and regret. Although these experiences correlate with shame, they fall short of the theological significance of shame. Still, “we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:22). As represented in the findings, Christian leaders experience this dissonance and isolation from community.

**Connection Through Emotional Vulnerability**

Concerning connection, the research affirmed the Christian leader’s need and responsibility to intentionally cultivate relationships, serving as a place of strength and courage but also as a place of accountability. The participant’s narratives continuously reinforced the doctrine of humanity as a key pivot point in leadership. Understanding and growth cannot happen if the leader denies the implications that humans are made in God’s image as dependent beings (on God and community), as holistic beings whose physical body, spirit, and soul are good, and that each human individual is made intentionally by God (Estep et al., 2008). The cyclical nature of the dissonance and isolation stages of the findings indicate a cyclical nature between sin and disconnection, instigation, and perpetuation. Lastly, shamelessness came up in the participant’s narratives; specifically, that shame can be positive, which was validated in the theological literature not as the absence of shame but as its repression. Someone can be bold in the face of their shame, but this does not mitigate it. This affirms that shame is in no way constructive. It requires Christ’s grace and the courage to live within that grace (McNish, 2004).

**Leadership Efficacy**

What was not originally included in the Literature Review was a critical, core discovery of the research and inherently belongs as a consideration in leadership efficacy, or more accurately, increasing leadership efficacy, is the role of contemplation. Richard Rohr states that
“one cannot really look at life and society from an ego-less position except through the lens of prayer, particularly the emptying form of prayer that we call contemplation. The contemplative mind is the most absolute assault on the secular worldview that you can have because it is a different mind. This is the failure of liberalism” (Rohr, 2012, pp. 158-159). Contemplation is not about functionality but about dualistic thinking, holding the tension between two conflicting truths. This stands in direct conflict with Western thinking. (Rohr, 2012).

What the research did confirm, however, was the necessity for a clear sense of purpose through values-based identity and the ongoing responsibility for leaders to engage in the cyclical nature of contemplation and resonance constantly. Growth cannot happen unless a leader disrupts the edges of their understanding and holds their convictions loosely (Grant, 2021). Although the concept of perfection only appeared once in all the gathered data, a significant theme pointed to progression and the connection of shame to unfinished inner work.

Theoretical Implications

The Literature Review examined a theoretical understanding of shame in Western culture, personality, Brown’s SRT (2006), and the methodological implications of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Shame in Western Culture

Although the research did not draw direct commentary regarding shame-based theories or discourse around Western culture, it did reinforce the limited knowledge suggested in the Literature Review due to the lack of participant knowledge or academic understanding regarding the shame dynamic. The cyclical nature of shame, perpetuating itself, did prove true in the findings. Also, the terms introvert and extrovert did come up in two interviews, underlining
Western culture’s tendency to favor extroverted behaviors, especially in organizational settings. This was not included in the main themes or subthemes due to the small number of occurrences.

**Shame Resilience Theory (SRT)**

Although this study did not attempt to validate the findings of Brown’s SRT (2006), it found a clear correlation with her hypothesis, suggesting that shame is a universal struggle and that connection with others is a significant benefit. The study also reinforced the unconscious and conscious responses underlined in Brown’s (2018) dialogue regarding the dangers of rugged individualism and David’s (2016) examination of toxic positivity.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

This study examined the experiences of ten Christian executive-level leaders in organizations who have experienced, do experience, and will continue to experience shame in the workplace. This research intended to understand these lived experiences better and assess for deeper meaning between shame and leadership efficacy through social connection and personal growth. The hermeneutic phenomenology guided by Alsaigh’s and Coyne’s (2021) framework and Valandra’s (2012) reflexive questions to determine pre-understandings led to the collection of thorough, robust narratives gathered through interviews, journals, diary, and observed data. This methodology was determined to be an incredibly effective approach, achieving saturation of the data and creating new meaning in ways that had not been previously achieved through the literature. As such, this study builds upon the current literature and provides clear and unique insight into the lived experiences of Christian leaders regarding shame in organizations.

**Application**

The study pointed to three audiences in the shame dynamic: the *shamer*, the *shamed*, and the *observers of the shaming*. The applications of the study have something to offer each
audience. First, and perhaps the most obvious, begins with the *shamer*. This study pointed to key components of the shame dynamic that allow the shamer to move from unconscious to subconscious awareness, from subconscious to conscious awareness, and ultimately to conscious action in ways that move from unproductive to productive and transition the leader from self-centric motivation to others-centric motivation. This framework provides key milestones for Christian leaders to set for themselves or their organization that drive awareness and a focus on personal growth.

Second, this study indicates supportive evidence of *shamed*. It provides a clear reminder and critical pivot point centered on the doctrine of humanity, holding the *shamed* accountable to God’s grace and promise. The world is a tragic place (Rohr, 2012). As Hiebert (2008) warns, it is too easy to over index evangelicalism or usher in the kingdom versus keeping a clear and undistracted focus on the King. When the voice of the imposter, the imperfect, or the failure shows up, the shamed can disrupt this voice, either internal or external, and be reminded of the doctrine of humanity, embracing the contemplative mind and moving towards resonance.

Lastly, for the *observers of shame*, this framework can also impart courage and growth, as outlined in both the examples of the *shamer* and the *shamed* to be more conscious of the shame dynamic occurring, to leverage precise language when calling it out, and to help all parties engage in the meaning-making and increased understanding component when holding the tension between conflicting worldviews.

Although not part of the research questions and focus of the study, the researcher asked each participant about their faith experience as part of the study requirements that each participant self-identify as Christian. In most interviews, the participants indicated to the researcher that they had adverse experiences with churches and church leaders, especially
regarding social connection and the church leader’s efficacy. The narratives involved a strict rigidity of rule-following, a spirit of litigating holiness, the unwillingness or lack of understanding in teaching the doctrine of the faith they espouse, or openly initiating a shame dynamic to maintain power. The behaviors associated with this power dynamic included gossip, passive-aggressive behaviors from the pulpit, or exclusion without advocacy, meaning they leveraged their position in the church to cut off this individual without adhering to healthy, biblical mediation practices. This pattern is incredibly troubling and may point to a significant need for tools that help leaders identify and actively mitigate shame within the organizations, especially faith-based organizations and ministries.

**Research Limitations**

Every study faces limitations to the research, especially through its methodology. This study is no exception. This section discusses the potential threats and impacts to the study and its findings. These limitations include the entirely virtual nature of the study’s methodologies, the lack of previous research on the Christian leaders’ experience of shame in organizations, the demographic component of the participants’ size and type of organization.

A potential limitation that this study encountered was the fact that it was conducted in a completely virtual setting. This reduces the perceived significance of social responsibility, making it easier to ignore, dismiss, or reduce the importance of delivering on such a contract (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Interestingly, the more distance there is between two people, the tendency for either the researcher or participant to construe the other more abstractly, meaning there is less connection (Trope & Liberman, 2010). When discussing difficult topics, such as shame, the perceived buffer of virtual space between the researcher and the participant can also decrease anxiety (Katz & Rice, 2002; Yen et al., 2012), which hopefully lends itself to the
trustworthiness of the study. Although the researcher tried to expand interactions through variability of methods, such as the journals which could be completed on a computer, phone, or written out and a photo taken, this variability was still limited. Variability is important in networking and virtual interaction (Campbell & Garner, 2016). There is also a component of fatigue with interacting purely virtually, both for the researcher and the participant. This constant contact with the virtual world can create exhaustion to an “always on” response and reduce the desirability to engage in these mediums (Campbell & Gardner, 2016).

As explored in the next section, this study can be drastically expanded. However, this may have presented a limitation in a specific focus on the shame experience of Christian leaders in organizations, as this proved to be a wide-ranging area of study. This may have allowed the participants to transition between many different components of the shame dynamic within their examples. Future studies should consider this, narrowing down their hypothesis and focus on the phenomenon.

Lastly, the type and size of organizations either needed to be narrower or the researcher needed to gather more participants across different types and sizes of organizations. The data is comprised mainly of major retail organizations. There was not enough data to consider if the type of organization impacted the shame dynamic or the frequency of the dynamic. Also, the leaders who worked in faith-based organizations had a deeper understanding of the Christian theology behind the tertiary impacts of shame, even if not on shame, which may have influenced perspective. Similarly, two participants had worldviews significantly impacted by Eastern philosophy based on their professional experience or cultural background. These two leaders were more adept at speaking to the nature of Eastern culture’s honor-shame dynamic, or a focus
on harmony versus distinction, vastly different from Western culture’s dualistic perspective on right/wrong (Richards & O’Brien, 2012).

**Further Research**

This study, as perhaps most knowledge does, revealed how much more information is needed to understand the shame dynamic for Christian leaders. Much more discovery, refining, and dissemination is needed to bring Christian leaders into this crucially important conversation regarding their conscious awareness of shame and their ability to mitigate shame both as a believer and an effective leaders. As this study hopefully concluded, the doctrine of humanity demands it. Further areas of research could include:

- Population adjusted to incorporate participants from specific age ranges, specific geographic areas, types and sizes of organizations, or faith traditions.

- Pilot studies to implement tactics or generate specific ideas to address the shame dynamic for Christian leaders in organizations, specifically skill sets used to transition between the four stages of dissonance, isolation, contemplation, and resonance.

- Specific variables within the organization structure or culture that may increase the likelihood of the shame dynamic occurring.

- Efficacy of contemplation strategies to recognize, mitigate, and potentially prevent the negative implications of the shame dynamic.

- Impact to the Christian leader’s physical, mental, and spiritual health when engaging or disengaging with the dissonant and isolation stages of the research compared to the contemplation and resonance stages.

- Influence of the Christian leader’s initial and current church experiences and the shame dynamic.

- Examination of the shame dynamic in regard to socioeconomic factors, such as whether or not shame is a more prevalent phenomenon in poverty-stricken areas compared to areas with higher average incomes.
Conclusion

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lived experience of shame in organizations with ten Christian leaders. All participants were impacted by shame in their organizations as the shamer, the shamed, and an observer of shame. The participants’ and the researcher’s discovery, reflection, and active meaning-making of this phenomenon revealed shame's critical nature and impact on the Christian leader's unconscious, subconscious, and conscious states. Also, the Christian leader’s experience of shame moves from unproductive responses to productive responses. The ideal state for Christian leaders is to actively contemplate their shame-based behavior leading to increased understanding, leadership impact, and resonance with community. Although each leader had strikingly similar overlapping narratives, there were distinct perspectives, assumptions, and deeply held beliefs. This awareness underscores the necessity of further research and proves the significance of this study and its contribution to understanding the shame phenomenon in Christian leaders.

Christians, let alone Christian leaders, must engage in the inner work of contemplation and constant reorientation toward Christ. Christians are implored to seek peace with everyone and to pursue holiness (NIV, Hebrews 12:14). The doctrine of humanity insists that Christian leaders see themselves and others as worthy and intentionally created by God. This singular belief serves as a light, a beacon on the hill to guide leaders through the dark nights of the soul. It becomes a rallying flag and stronghold for leaders to find new balance when and after stumbling (NET, Isaiah 8:14; Matthew 21:44). Rohr (2012) reminds Christians of the sobering reality of the continuous stumbling they will experience as Christians, which serves both as a lesson in holiness and the active gathering of believers to Christ. Just as God made a way forward for Adam, Eve, Cain, Jacob, David, and the entirety of the fallen creation through Christ, He is still
breaking and strengthening the bones of a Christian’s faith. The fall must happen before the recovery. The recovery is a process of moving from conscious awareness to conscious action, not just to know better but to do better, to move from the violation of the fall into the healing grace of God. The Lord said, “You are standing at the crossroads. So, consider your path. Ask where the old, reliable paths are. Ask where the path is that leads to blessing and follow it. If you do, you will find rest for your souls” (NET, Jeremiah 6:16, emphasis added).

For Christians to effectively lead, whether in a church or corporate office, they must stand and face shame, both in themselves and others. Christians must courageously move through shame. In its facing, in the moving, revelation is found and hope secured.
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Brown, B. (2008). I thought it was just me (but it isn’t). Avery.


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January 26, 2023

Matthew Williamson
Don Bosch


Dear Matthew Williamson, Don Bosch,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.104(d):

Category 2.iii. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Williamson Recruitment Letter Template

[Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Recipient],

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand the lived experience of shame in Christian leaders. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to examine the lived experience of shame within Christian leaders and how emotional vulnerability and leadership growth impact the destructive implications of shame, both for the individual and for the organization for which the leader works. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join this study.

Participants must identify as Christian, are 18 years of age or older, and be located within the Southeast United States. Participants must have lived experience with the intersection of shame and leadership with an awareness of how this has impacted their leadership efficacy and social connection. Participants should be able to provide comprehensive, descriptive narratives of the lived experience. If willing, participants will be asked to take part in three online interviews within a six-week period. Each interview will last between 60 to 90 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be collected as part of this study, but all collected information will remain confidential, ensuring identifying information does not enter research findings.

No preparation will be required for the interviews, but the participants will be asked to keep a journal, leveraging provided prompts to reflect between sessions providing at least one entry per interview.

To participate, please respond to the letter via email or phone call. Participants that meet the study’s limitations will be notified by email and provided with interview dates and times. All interviews will be recorded for both video and audio. Instructions for how to use Zoom will be provided. Zoom is a secure, HIPPA-compliant platform that can be accessed through a computer, cell phone, or tablet.

The consent form will be provided once the participants are identified through the parameters of the study. This will contain additional information regarding the study and methodology. The consent form must be signed digitally before the first interview.

If you have any questions about the study or about the process of becoming a participant, please reach me at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at studentemail@liberty.edu. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Matthew J. Williamson

Doctoral Candidate, Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University

xxx-xxx-xxxx | studentemail@liberty.edu
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Consent

Title of the Project: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study Exploring Leadership Efficacy: Understanding the Impact of Shame on Christian Leaders
Principal Investigator: Matthew Williamson, Doctoral Candidate, Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must identify as Christian, be 18 years of age or older, be an executive-level leader in an organization, and be both the holder and receiver of the power dynamic (have a leader and lead/influence others). Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?
The purpose of the study is to explore the phenomenon of shame regarding leadership effectiveness and social connection within Christian leaders to help make meaning of the experiences and establish better methodologies for addressing shame.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in 3 separate, virtual, audio- and video-recorded interviews conducted on Zoom that will take 60-90 minutes each.
2. After each interview, participants will write a journal leveraging provided prompts to reflect between sessions providing at least one entry per interview, which will take 15 to 30 minutes for each journal.

How could you or others benefit from this study?
Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of shame in Christian leaders by providing the methodology for Christian leaders to explore this phenomenon within themselves and with others under their stewardship, providing space and intention for meaning-making. It can also provide insight and clarity about how and why shame shows up, leading to a better understanding of how to emotionally respond in healthier, more intentional ways.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?
The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.
How will personal information be protected?
The records of this study will be kept private. The researcher will ensure the data remains
confidential using pseudonyms. Published reports will not include any information that will
make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the
researcher will have access to the records.

- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the
  conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet. After
  five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be
  shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for five years and then deleted.
  Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect
your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free
to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?
If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email
address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data
collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?
The researcher conducting this study is Matthew Williamson. You may ask any questions you
have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [redacted] or at
[redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Don
Bosch, at [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone
other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the IRB. Our physical address is
Institutional Review Board, 1791 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA,
24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research
will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered
and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers
and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what
the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.
The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study
after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I agree for the person named below to take part in this study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

____________________________

Signature & Date
APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT ACCEPTANCE EMAIL

Williamson Participant Acceptance Email

Participant Acceptance Email

[Participant],

Thank you for your interest in my research study on the impact of shame on Christian leadership. I am happy to inform you that you meet the parameters of the study. This email is an official request for you to join the study.

If you are willing to move forward, I will schedule three video interviews on the Zoom platform. Based on your schedule, I am more than willing to schedule day, evening, and weekend timeframes. Once confirmed, you will receive an email with the necessary login information and a reminder 24 hours prior to the interview. If you experience any problems with the platform or need to reschedule, please let me know as soon as possible through email at studentemail@liberty.edu or by calling my phone at (xxx) xxxx-xxxx. Additionally, you will need to download, review, and digitally sign the attached informed consent document. This document will provide detailed information about the research study and should be read carefully. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me.

Interview 1: This interview requires no preparation. It will last between 60-90 minutes. The Zoom platform is a secure HIPAA-compliant program that can be accessed on a computer, a cell phone, or a tablet. Instructions on how to utilize the program are located on Zoom.com and are provided as an attachment to this email. The login information for each interview will be provided in the calendar invite for each respective interview. It will also be included in the reminder email 24 hours before the interview. During this interview, we will share our professional and personal backgrounds with each other, review the consent form and background of the study, and how you came to identify as a Christian.

Interview 2: The second interview will begin to explore your lived experience of the phenomenon of shame. During this 60-90 minute session, the time will attempt to define shame, how you have experienced it in your organization, and the significance of these experiences to you.

Interview 3: The third interview will attempt to establish how these experiences impact the efficacy of your personal leadership and the organization you work in. It will focus primarily on developmental growth and social connection.

Due to the complex nature of shame, every effort will be made to provide a psychologically safe, compassionate, and accepting space for you to share your experience. You will be able to remove yourself from the study at any point if you feel it is in your best interest to do so.

Thank you for your interest in the study and for considering participation. I am humbled by the opportunity to explore your lived experience of shame in Christian leadership. Again, please download, review, and digitally sign the consent form before our first interview session.

Sincerely,

Matthew J. Williamson
Doctoral Candidate: Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University
xxx-xxx-xxxx | studentemail@liberty.edu
APPENDIX E: PILOT INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT

Williamson Pilot Interview Informed Consent Document

What benefits can come from this study?
Hermeneutic Phenomenology, the methodology of this study, allows the participant and researcher meaning make together. As such, both the researcher and participant may benefit from processing the questions derived for the purpose of the study as well as tertiary benefits from exploring potentially novel perspectives. Participation in the study will provide a chance to share your own narrative of shame in a psychologically safe, compassionate, nonjudgmental environment.

This study can impact society at large by providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of shame in Christian leaders by providing the methodology for Christian leaders to explore this phenomenon within themselves and with others under their stewardship, providing space and intention for meaning-making. It can also provide insight and clarity about how and why shame shows up, leading to a better understanding of how to emotionally respond in healthier, more intentional ways.

What risks are associated with this study?
There is no anticipated risk to the individuals reading the study’s intent and providing feedback on the interview process, respective interview questions, and journal prompts. However, sharing any components of the study publicly before the study takes place could negatively impact the experience of potential participants or detract from the impact of findings if the study is published.

You will retain the right to immediately cease or suspend the feedback process.

How will your personal information be protected?
You will not be providing any personal information regarding the pilot interview.

Will you be compensated for participation?
Participants will not receive any compensation for participation in the study.

Is participation voluntary?
Participation in this study is solely voluntary. At any time, you are free to not answer a question, strike a response from the record, or withdraw from the study at any time.

What should you do if you withdraw from the study?
If you choose to withdraw yourself from participation in the study at any time, please contact the researcher through the provided email address/phone number included in this consent form. All associated data will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in the study’s data, themes, or conclusions.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?
The researcher conducting this study is Matthew J. Williamson. You may ask any questions you have at any time, either during the interviews themselves or by contacting him at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or at studentemail@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s sponsor, Dr. Don Bosch, at sponsoremail@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you can contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email irb@liberty.edu.
Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to provide feedback regarding the interview and journal components of this study. You will be given a copy of this document for your records and the researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study before signing this document, you can contact the researcher with the provided contact information.

I have read and understood the information on this form. I consent to participate in this study.

Printed Name: ___________________________  Signature and Date: ___________________________
## APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

### DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Leadership Experience</th>
<th>Role, Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lillian</td>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>31 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Undergraduate Level Education</td>
<td>9 years of leadership</td>
<td>Retail, major organization</td>
<td>HR Generalist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jude</td>
<td>Asian Female</td>
<td>30 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Graduate Level Education</td>
<td>8 years of leadership</td>
<td>Engineering, major organization</td>
<td>HR Practitioner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Hispanic Female</td>
<td>31 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Undergraduate Level Education</td>
<td>11 years of leadership</td>
<td>Retail, major organization</td>
<td>District Manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>White Male</td>
<td>45 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Graduate Level Education</td>
<td>25 years of leadership</td>
<td>Missions, large organization</td>
<td>Missionary Team Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>White Male</td>
<td>39 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Some Graduate Level Education</td>
<td>19 years of leadership</td>
<td>Church, small organization</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>36 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Undergraduate Level Education</td>
<td>16 years of leadership</td>
<td>Retail, major organization</td>
<td>HR Practitioner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>White Male</td>
<td>36 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Undergraduate Level Education</td>
<td>18 years of leadership</td>
<td>Retail, major organization</td>
<td>District Manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>33 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Undergraduate Level Education</td>
<td>15 years of leadership</td>
<td>Retail, major organization</td>
<td>District Manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
<td>Hispanic Male</td>
<td>34 years old</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>Graduate Level Education</td>
<td>15 years of leadership</td>
<td>Education, large organization</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.*
APPENDIX G: SAMPLE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Williamson Sample of Interview Questions

Interview 1

Date and Time of Interview: Level of Position:
Name of Interviewee: Years of Service:
Name of Company: Number of Direct Reports/Influenced leaders:
Male/Female: Highest Level of Education achieved:
Financial value of the organization: Age of Participant:
Type of Business: Tell me about your faith experience.

Interview 2:

- How do you define shame?
- What is the significance of shame to you within your workplace?
- I'd like to explore experiences of shame in your leadership journey. Would you share a specific example that stands out to you?
- What is the significance of these experiences to you? Why do you think this experience had the impact it did?
- It may help if you share an example of a difficult work experience that involved a supervisor or a direct report who had a negative response you were not expecting. Would you tell me about this experience? (This question can be selected at any point if the participant is struggling to engage with the concept of shame. It helps establish a narrative of their own versus the researchers and can inadvertently create intersections for the phenomenon of shame from a personal experience.

Interview 3:

- In what ways do you think shame inhibits social connection within your organization? Would you be willing to share a personal experience?
- In what ways do you think shame inhibits personal growth within your organization? Would you be willing to share a personal experience?
- In what ways would you alter your workplace to facilitate improved versions of development and/or social connect? Why?

Probing Questions:

Tell me more...
Can you expand on...?
Can you describe...?
Would you care to elaborate...?
With whom...?
I'm having trouble understanding...
Your role is unclear...
APPENDIX H: JOURNAL INSTRUCTIONS AND FORMAT

Journal

PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL

Research Study Title: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study Exploring Leadership Efficacy: Understanding the Impact of Shame in Christian Leaders

Participant Name:

Instructions: To assist in the meaning-making process of your lived experiences with the phenomenon of shame, this journal will give you a medium to reflect on the interview experience and capture your thoughts. The number of entries is not specified and how much you write is your decision. You may wish to write about an experience you recall before, during, or after the interview that is of significance to you. Please comment on anything you think will help you or me understand the impact shame has had on your leadership experience(s). Examples of things you may wish to write about may include how you have felt receiving critical feedback you were not expecting, the experience of a situation that you did not handle the way you wanted to, your experience with making, maintaining, or experiencing the deterioration of social relationships at work, etc.

- Focus on trying to capture the experience clearly more than the quality of writing. Write freely about your experience. The above examples are suggestions only.
- Please ensure you date each entry as this will help organize the entries.
- If you mention names of persons or places, these will be removed to ensure confidentiality.
- You can capture your thoughts digitally, send pictures of your entries, or request mailing information and you can return the physical journal entries after the third interview (~12 weeks).

Date: ___________________ Time: ___________________
APPENDIX I: DIARY SAMPLE

Williamson Diary Prompts

Conceptualizing the Study based on Valandra (2012)

1. What do I already know about this topic/idea?
   - I have lived experience of shame, especially in the space of executive leadership, having been a leader who held experienced the power dynamic for seventeen years.
   - I have also studied the concept of shame prior to my doctorate program but it was not until the doctoral program that I began to understand the theological and deeper psychological workings and significance. My initial conceptualization of of this shame dynamic was centered on why church communities were filled with anger, social ostracization, doctrinal schisms, and more. Also, I was deeply motivated to understand why Christians often struggle and fail to live out the faith we espouse. I needed an explanation beyond our fallen state and that being holy is difficult. This felt far too much a surface understanding, being accountable to the dissonance of our faith lived out.
   - Shame is at the core of the human experience, effectively the emotion of experiencing life disconnected from God after the fall. Shame is the first emotion described in the Bible and is acutely experienced by Adam and Eve before their exile from Eden.
   - Shame is not guilt or embarrassment but is the belief that the self is fundamentally broken or inadequate versus doing something wrong or making a mistake.
   - It is the fear of being without community, to be cast out, unwanted, disgraced. For Christians, this is intimately tied to our faith experience but is not theologically understood by most believers. This is generally due to the disparate understandings of shame between Western and Eastern philosophical developments over the last two millennia.

2. What is the source of my knowledge? How do I know what I know?
   - My knowledge is based on extensive reading and lived experience, initially inspired by Brené Brown’s research beginning in 2006 about the impact of shame. Her theories hypothesize that vulnerability and community are the only ways for someone who is stuck in shame to find meaning and healing. There are strong faith-based institutions within her writings. There seemed to be a loose string here, especially regarding the theology of shame, that I desperately wanted to understand as a believer and a leader. The more I pulled, the more I wanted to know. The more I knew, the more I believed this subject was of vital importance to a Christian leader’s internal emotional and faith homogeneity.

3. How have my personal and professional experiences shaped what I know?
   - I am an HR practitioner with nine years of experience in helping leaders grow, develop, and work through behavioral tendencies that hold them back.
   - I, like all humans, have experienced shame and understand the debilitating fear that prevented me from showing up the way that I wanted. I have spent time with these moments where I lacked courage and have attempted to meaning-make, processing root causes and practicing skill sets to overcome and fundamentally alter the internal responses I have in these moments of fear, turning what caused me shame in the past as an opportunity for connection, communication, or boundary making.

4. What questions do I have about what I know?
   - I want to understand the efficacy of our language/beliefs as Christians. Why do Christians struggle with shame in the same way non-believers do? Does our faith inoculate us against shame? Should it?
   - Why do shame-fueled issues run rampant in the church? Why is it so drastically untouched? It makes sense in secular organizations but are we not capable of rising beyond this?
   - Can a Christian framework regarding the impact of shame help Christian leaders mitigate shame internally and better lead within their organization? If so, how?

5. How does this topic influence my worldview, knowledge, and background?
APPENDIX J: DIARY PROMPTS

Williamson Diary Prompts

Conceptualizing the Study based on Valandra (2012)
1. What do I already know about this topic/idea?
2. What is the source of my knowledge? How do I know what I know?
3. How have my personal and professional experiences shaped what I know?
4. What questions do I have about what I know?
5. How does this topic influence my worldview, knowledge, and background?
6. How does my worldview influence how I experience and/or construct this topic/idea/population?
7. What assumptions, presuppositions, biases, attitudes, and beliefs shape my construction of this idea?
8. What challenges me most about this topic/idea?
9. What am I passionate about regarding this topic/idea?
10. How are my life experiences shaping the design of this study?
11. What are the experiences of potential study participants concerning this idea?
12. What are the experiences of potential study participants with the research process?
13. Why do members of this population participate in the research process?
14. What benefits do they receive from their involvement?
15. How can practitioners and researchers work together to encourage this population’s participation?
16. What difference will this study make to the body of knowledge and to the participants?

Implementing the Study
1. How do my life experiences shape the implementation of this study?
2. How do I experience myself concerning the community members participating in my study?
3. Who are the cultural brokers of this community and what is my relationship and access to them?
4. What potential power dynamics are relevant to reflect upon and/or to address?
5. How has the study taken place accessible and culturally safe for participants?
6. How have I verified that the participant meets the study criteria?
7. How does the study participant understand the purpose of the study?
8. How do the study participants demonstrate an understanding of why I am talking to them?
9. Is participation truly voluntary?
10. What motivates the participant to talk to me?
11. How can what I disclose about myself potentially influence what participants share or do not share
12. What am I noticing about study participants’ communication patterns?
13. What kind of information do study participants share about themselves without solicitation from me?
14. What do study participants share before and after the formal interview/study begins and ends?

Analyzing and Writing the Study
1. How do my social demographics shape my interpretation of the data collected?
2. How can I privilege participants’ voices in constructing new knowledge?
3. Whose stories are represented?
4. Whose voices are missing?
5. In what ways did my presence influence the participants’ responses?
6. In what ways am I invested in the study’s findings?
7. How does my investment in the study influence my interpretations and presentation of findings?
8. What audiences might benefit or be harmed by the study’s findings?
9. How does my relationship to the analytic tool shape the analysis and findings?
10. How did participants’ responses after the formal interview influence my interpretations of their stories?
### APPENDIX L: ASLAIGH & COYNE/NVIVO STAGES AND PROCESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aslaigh &amp; Coyne’s (2021) Stages of Hermeneutic Phenomenology</th>
<th>Process in NVIVO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Choosing an Appropriate Open Research Question</td>
<td>Leveraging open ended questions with related follow up questions to ensure deep understanding for subsequent coding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Identification of Pre-Understandings (Before Data Collection)</td>
<td>Distilling researcher notions of presumptions and bias through diary guided by Valandra (2012). Compared with first order constructs to remain oriented to the phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Immersion Gaining an Understanding Through Dialogue with Participants</td>
<td>In-depth interviews, memos, journal narratives, and diary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Gaining Understanding through Dialogue with Text</td>
<td>Transcribe, read, re-read, and construct qualitative database in NVIVO. Create first order constructs from transcripts (open coding). Identify initial themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Understanding</td>
<td>Thorough investigation of text. Finalize first order constructs (open codes).</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Abstraction</td>
<td>Identify and finalize second order researcher constructs. Leverage NVIVO to organize open codes into categories for subthemes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Synthesis</td>
<td>Meshing of themes. Establish meaning within the phenomenon to whole text. This movement (aggregation) is the core component of the hermeneutic circle, ideally leading to deepened understanding.</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Illumination</td>
<td>Literary themes and subthemes identified; interrelationships established within participants’ stories. Verify quality of stories leading to clarification as a final stage of the hermeneutic circle.</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Integration and Critique</td>
<td>Critique final themes and establish final interpretation of research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Establishing Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Create confidence through methodological coherence and researcher responsiveness. Establish understanding through harmony between whole and parts of the data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>