

Shame thinking for Social work, theory, research and practice

Paper 1: The context of shame and the experience of double suffering

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This paper, as the introductory paper of the symposium, will firstly offer an overview of contemporary developments in 'shame thinking' in social work, referencing research and theoretical literature to look at how carefully applied theory is altering the landscape of practice and research in this field.

Drawing on social work and social policy research, the paper will then review the literature to understand what mechanisms generate shame. Evidence generated mostly in Western Europe and the USA, suggests that the neo-liberal state and austerity policies engender the potential shaming of communities and individuals. However, such shame is experienced as a devastating personal emotion by, for example, those who experience poverty because of this. Research in run down communities suggest similar causation and similar outcomes.

Theme three is the personal experience of shame, considered the psychosocial concept of 'double suffering'. Shame is frequently generated by actions external to the individual: social policies or through personal abuse by others. The acute and pervasive emotion of shame is internalised where no external 'fault' is evident. Shame, e.g. is often experienced by the victims of abuse and violence, inflicting 'double suffering': the abuse, and the ongoing emotional devastation of shame at this. Likewise with poverty: e.g. from poverty to shame to social disconnection to loneliness: again this may be experienced as a 'double suffering'.

Offering remedial and therapeutic interventions with shamed communities and shamed individuals is an urgent, contemporary challenge for social work.

Paper 2: Shame and social work in the organisation

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This presentation is focused on the connection between shame and organisations in social work and presents some of the outcomes of recent exploratory research carried out in Italy. Mistakes and blame are frequent and common presences in any social work organisation. Being wrong is an unpleasant emotional experience especially when accompanied by the sight of the damage done and when internal or external voices not only blame for the wrong action but also criticise the whole person. The shift from 'I/you made a mistake' to 'I am/You are a mistake', that is 'I am/you are a failure as a practitioner or even as a person' is easy and common, and shame may be the resulting feeling. Even if it may be useful feedback to give constructive opportunities of learning from mistakes, criticism is more often felt by people as an attack and a sabotage to their own self-confidence and this produces more commonly defensive reactions, rather than listening and reflecting. In these circumstances learning from mistakes becomes almost impossible for the individual and the whole organisation.

The author will present some examples of short reflective writing by social workers and social work students who made an in-depth structured reflection on some of their most relevant experiences in relation to this issue during research workshops conducted by the author. Feelings of lack of personal and organisational resources and competencies, strong empathic reactions to hard situations faced by service users, complex relationships with colleagues and managers are some of the emerging outcomes from this exploration. At the same time, the social workers involved gave interesting suggestions on how to create organisational contexts where understanding and sharing even feeling of inadequacy produce more resilient social workers and better interventions.

Paper 3: Shame, poverty and the child protection system

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Although there is no official collection of data on the socio-economic circumstances of the families of children on child protection plans or in the care system in the UK, a study by Bywaters et al (2018) confirmed that there is a clear link between social deprivation and a child's chances of being on child protection plans or out of home care. However practice is heavily influenced by individualised risk discourses and punitive blame culture has developed. The paradox is that we know most of the children are from poor backgrounds, and poverty is largely invisible in child protection practice and policy.

Drawing upon a number of research studies with families living in poverty and experience of the child protection system, this presentation explores how family members describe the shaming experiences of poverty and how these can be compounded by the actions of professionals in the child protection system. In a risk saturated system, feelings of blame and shame dominate and can lead to avoidance and defensiveness, dynamics that inevitably disrupt the potential for effective protective and supportive work with children and families.

The presentation concludes with recommendations for poverty-aware critical social work practices that attend to the material realities of families lives, whilst also addressing the affective dimensions of living in poverty and being involved in the child protection and family court systems, with a particular focus on workers reflecting on 'what what they do does'.

Paper 4: Positive and negative risk aversion: exploring blame, shame and practitioner agency in precautionary practice

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Risk aversion – the tendency to err on the side of caution – is evident in social work, though our understanding of both its causes and effects is less clear. Although critics point to the role played by actuarial logic, actually risk aversion cannot be reductively attributed to actuarial knowledge strategies but instead is better theorized as a function of practice in an environment in which social worker concerns regarding blame and shame are very real. In this paper I draw on empirical data to explore two related questions. Firstly, how to blame and shame intersect with individual practitioner subjectivities in actual incidents of precautionary practice? Secondly, should risk aversion necessarily be regarded as a negative phenomenon? The key argument of the paper is that practitioners themselves specify 'varieties' of risk aversion, discernible by reference to their own agentic motivations. In some instances, practitioners recognise precautionary practices as driven by fear of the consequences for themselves of 'failure', usually potential 'false negatives' and the attendant attribution and inculcation of blame and shame. Here, exclusionary or inhibitory judgments are justified by reference to concerns regarding safety or harmful behaviour. They also, however, specify instances in which, on the basis of considered deliberation, they quite intentionally impose such measures on service users because they believe this is the right thing to do. Here, collective well-being is privileged ahead of the service users right to self-determination, and risk aversion reconstituted as necessary and reasonable. These findings raise questions regarding the assumptions that underpin discourses of risk, safety and partnership, and I will conclude the paper with some discussion of their implications for these ongoing debates.

Paper 5: Using the free association narrative research method (FANI) to explore questions of shame and social justice

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The FANI method emerged as a response to frustration regarding the limitations of both survey research and the qualitative interview as conventionally understood. Since its inception (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), the FANI method has been used in a wide range of studies, most notably in health and in criminology, (Gadd 2007; Garfield 2010; Hollway & Jefferson 2013) and has been shown to be particularly useful in topic areas which are troubling, sensitive or likely to engender shame and where participants may experience a need to "account" for themselves. Using multiple interviews with small numbers of participants, the method is open and exploratory to ensure that the areas of interest for the study are covered, but with the use of very few questions and with questions structured to engender the telling of the participant's story. The method aims to facilitate exploration of "defended" positions, accessing thoughts, narratives, emotions and interpretations. Underpinning these processes is the idea of the "defended" subject and its counterpart, the defended researcher; with these concepts serving to both explore what might be generated in the interview setting but always locating this within the social. It is this latter aspect which serves to bring in social justice questions.

This presentation will explore three studies where the FANI approach was utilised to draw out issues of shame and social comparison which hold together the personal and the social. The studies, concerning women's' lives in an unequal society; family food practices and Non-Epileptic Attack disorder (NEAD) show how understandings of neoliberalism and inequality enter into the social and personal world and how central shame is as a facilitating mechanism. Key characteristics of the method will be examined with particular reference to it arguably lends itself to use by researchers with "practitioner" backgrounds, such as social workers.