

Title: Stigma, shame and recognition in social work education and practice

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Theme 3

Language: English

Presentation of the symposium

Philosophers and political scientists, as well as sociologists and psychologists have recently considered shame in a range of publications. Social work theorists have also latterly begun to discuss shame as an emotion with a strong impact on service users but also on social workers. As a painful emotion, due, e.g. to a consciousness of inadequacy, it highlights personal limits and, as any human emotion, is healthy until it is transformed into a more pervasive state.

This symposium is aimed at examining shame and some of its implications in social work with special regard to stigma related to elderly people (suffering because of gerontophobia and ageism) and 'poverty', but also with regards to its impact on social work students with their failures and mistakes during their placement and the limits of regulation and management of emotions in social workers.

The first paper by Liz Frost considers the theoretical perspectives currently of use in thinking about ageing, shame and stigma, and discusses how these can be utilised for social work. It draws upon material on older people and their experiences of shame. Contemporary ideas on working with shame in social work will be interrogated for their value in working specifically with shamed older people.

The second paper by Holger Schoneville examines the theoretical concepts of stigma, shame and recognition to explore their different potential for understanding the situations that people "in poverty" face. It is clear that living in poverty does not only mean to face a substantial lack of economical resources but also produces negative social attributions resulting in social stigmas.

The third paper by Alessandro Sicora presents a didactic experience in applying some reflective tools to help social work students in their placement to understand the connection between mistakes, shame and responsibility. Making a mistake is as common as unpleasant. In certain conditions making mistakes repetitively produces feeling of inadequacy and shame. In fact many students experience shame intensively during their placement but reflective tools can help them to develop a better understanding of their mistakes and overcome their shame.

The fourth and last contribution by Veronika Magyar-Haas discusses contemporary requirements concerning the regulation of emotions in general and, especially, with social workers, and asks questions relating to the boundaries of emotional management by reference to the phenomenon of shame.

Contribution 1

Title: The social construction of old age as a stigmatised category: understanding and working with shame.

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This paper will consider the theoretical perspectives currently of use in thinking about ageing, shame and stigma, and discuss how these can be utilised for social work.

Both gerontophobia and ageism are understood as rife in 21st century consumer societies. Firstly, this paper will consider how sociology, e.g. contemporary work on misrecognition (Fraser, 2013), can elucidate the socio-political context of such oppression.

Like all inequalities, this is not simply an issue of political power, but also one of personal experience. I will discuss how an understanding of the lived experience of the subject of denigration relies on theory which explores the relationship between society and individual identity. Irving Goffman's concept of stigma, for example, offers a great deal:

The stigmatised individual ...has incorporated from the wider society ...what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree, that he does fall short of what he really ought to be...Shame becomes a central possibility.' (Goffman 1963, 17-18)

Additionally, writers drawing on their own experience of inhabiting 'discredited' identities, such as Franz Fanon, will be cited, evoking the painful process of identity damage thus inflicted.

As regularly noted, discussions of 'ageing' and 'the ageing body' often merge. The fertile study of the body, from 1980s, particularly on gender, is discussed here to consider ageing and the shame experienced in the (forced) habitation of the socially devalued body.

Having presented this material on ageing and experiences of shame, contemporary ideas on working with shame in social work will be interrogated for their value in working specifically with shamed older people.

Fanon, F. (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lan Markmann. New York: Grove

Fraser, N (2013) *The Fortunes of feminism*. Cambridge: Polity

Goffman, I., 1968. *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Harmondsworth: Pelican.

Contribution 2

Title: Living in Poverty. Stigmatisation, shame and the struggle for recognition.

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Living in poverty does not only mean to face a substantial lack of economical resources. It comes together with a certain form of (secondary) integration within the society. The secondary-integration is defined by the exclusion from certain parts of the society, like the labour market, but also means a specific relation between the individual and the larger society.

The individuals face negative social attributions. These deviations can result in social stigmas. A stigma can be understood as a (more or less) permanent negative attribution towards a deviation from social norms and values that is created and recreated in social interactions.

While the individual reactions to stigmatisation differ, it is widely acknowledged that the emotion of shame is a form of social reaction towards the stigmatisation. Within shame the social deviation from societal norms is mirrored as an emotional response. Within the theory of recognition shame can be understood as a form of disrespect towards the subject and subjectivity. It is an attack towards the subject within its struggle for recognition. The paper will examine the different theoretical concepts of stigma, shame and recognition to explore the different potentials to understand the situations that people “in poverty” face.

Contribution 3

Title: Shame and responsibility: an opportunity for social work

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This paper will describe a didactic experience in applying some reflective tools to help social work students in their placement to understand the connection between mistakes, shame and responsibility.

Doing a mistake is as common as unpleasant. In certain conditions making mistakes repetitively produces feeling of inadequacy and shame. Many students experience shame intensively during their placement, even if mechanisms of denial and self-defence deeply affect the possibility to be aware of it. In other cases, mistakes may lead to a constant and productive tension to maximise learning and minimise. This process may be more fruitful if the reflection is guided by appropriate reflective frameworks aimed at an in depth exploration on errors and failures (Sicora 2017).

Moreover, the so-called ‘Swiss cheese model’ described by Reason (1990) provides a very good description for considering the cause of any accidents and helps switching from the idea of “guilt” to the concept of responsibility in complex systems. Blame culture is the main obstacle to expressing and listening to affirmative and useful feedback on mistakes. The role of placement agencies and universities, any precondition of the students (like, for example, their skills, knowledge, attitudes and motivations) and any other condition effecting the learning experience are elements of a chain of conditions whose complex interaction determines the final result in term of learning. Any failure may be the precious occasion for a more effective learning on how to become reflective practitioner.

Sicora, A. (2017) *Reflective practice and learning from mistakes in social work*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Reason, J. (1990) *Human Error*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Contribution 4

Title: Emotional management in social work – and its boundaries

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Emotions are a constitutive part of the social. They are produced, shaped and managed in social, familial, sexual, professional, etc. interactions as well as in economical or political

power relations in different institutions and organisations. In this sense, emotions provide information not only about the subjects but also about social, pedagogical, economical relationships.

For the last thirty years, contributions in the context of sociology of emotions (Hochschild 1983) have given insights concerning the connection between emotional experience and social behaviour, social structure, social status and social inequality (von Scheve 2013). In the context of his research in social services in New York in the 1970s, Herbert Freudenberger (1974) observed emotional exhaustion with social workers, caused by overworking and disappointment of expectations – and described the phenomenon as burn-out. Against the backdrop of current sociological and psychological analyses, which describe burn-out as a «sickness of our time», it is worth asking from a social-pedagogical point of view how prospective professionals handle subtle or obvious requirements (stated by themselves or by others) for controlling and managing their own emotions.

The contribution discusses these contemporary requirements concerning the regulation of emotions in general and, especially, with social workers, and asks questions relating to the boundaries of emotional management by reference to the phenomenon of shame. How far does shame reproduce social and normative expectations? In what way might the bodily expression of emotions – like reddening of the face – suggest, that some feeling cannot be regulated?

Freudenberger, H. J. (1974). «Staff burn-out». In: *Journal of Social Issues* 30/1, pp. 159-165.

Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

von Scheve, C. (2013). *Emotion and social structures. The affective foundations of social order*. New York: Routledge.