

MGC2021

Shame: The self, the organisation,
the institution



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This session will cover

Part I: Defining shame

- Sensitize you to the concept of shame.
- Open up and expand your understanding of shame.
- Awaken you to the prevalence of shame.
- Point to the significance of shame and why it is important to understand.

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This session will cover

Part II: Shame in organisational contexts

- Illustrate the relevance of shame to management and organisation studies.
- Show why shame is relevant to *you*, as future workers and managers, and show why shame has practical implications for the workplace and for people's experiences of the workplace.



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This session will cover

Part III: Reframing shame

- Debunk conventional wisdom and show that shame is "volatile" (Lewis, 1971: 198); if handled with care, shame can be constructive and a creative force, and useful for innovation.



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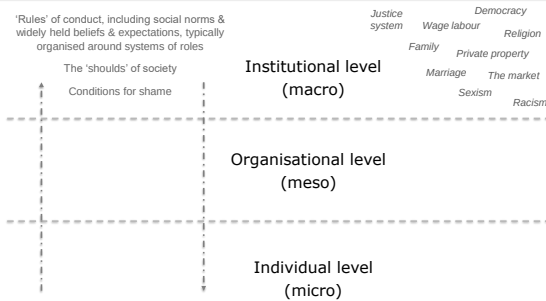
Session objectives

- Illustrate how shame is core to the human experience and inescapable, and therefore highly pertinent to multiple aspects of organisational life.
- Illustrate how shame affects our capacity to *reflect* and to *act* in considered ways, with commitment and purpose ("felt action", Mills & Kleinman, 1998).
- Show how shame is therefore key to understanding two of the most fundamental concepts in management theory: *reflexivity* and *agency*.
- Show that shame is a powerful resource, that needs to be handled with care in the workplace.



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Shame: Individuals, organisations, and institutions



Shame: Individuals, organisations, and institutions

- Social institutions transcend organisational boundaries and establish conditions for shame.
- Organisations, as well as individuals, are embedded in a social context, and must show a proper relation to this context, lest they lose social support for their activities (socio-cultural interface between organisations and society).
- Both individuals and organisations, therefore, can draw on social norms to engage in deliberate shaming attempts – “we are all both the watchers and the watched,” (Creed et al., 2014: 289). Individuals and organisations can draw on these norms in cynical ways and / or abuse them.

Public shaming: use of technology

- [Public shaming not new](#)
- But more pervasive and wide-reaching with internet, e.g.
 - [Logan Paul, Youtube star](#)

See also, [Monica Lewinsky's TED talk](#)



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 - Human rights or environmental
 - HR issues; harassment
- Danger to it
 - Vigilantes
 - Lasting effects on people; always stored on internet



Part I: Defining shame

Defining shame

Definition	Shame dimensions	Organisational example
"An intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (Brown, 2006: 45).	Acceptance and belonging – not necessarily about 'transgression'. Group membership.	• Connected to concept of 'acceptable' identities. • Implications for whether we feel we are 'recruitable' and 'acceptable' for the workplace. • Pressure to conform to group norms, including counter cultural norms. • E.g. Goffman (1963) and Ragins (2008): "discreditable identities". • E.g. Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen (2008): "deep acting". • E.g. Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen (2008), unethical behaviour.

Defining shame (cont.)

Definition	Shame dimensions	Organisational example
"Sensitivity to shame is learned early in life and internalized such that violating social norms can arouse feelings of shame. Shame can also arise from the deeply held expectation of being found defective, or judged as not meeting some ... ideal in society or organizations" (Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017: 658-659).	Acceptance and belonging. Transgression, broadly speaking. Idealised expectations of self.	• Performance expectations in the workplace. • Idealisations of particular professions (e.g. clinicians, stockbrokers). • Idealisations of workers ('ideal worker'). • Pressure to conform.

Defining shame (cont.)

Definition	Shame dimensions	Organisational example
"... a person's experience of negative self-evaluations based on anticipated or actual depreciation by others" (Creed et al., 2014: 276).	Others' perceptions of us (the 'watchers' – we are all implicated in shaming processes).	• Performance expectations in the workplace. • Expectations re. appearance, dress, comportment.
"[A] perception of a discrepancy between ideal and actual self" (Scheff, 2000: 97).	Our standing as a valued member of a community.	• League tables and ranking measures.
"Shame goes to the heart of who we think we are. In this sense, shame puts one's self-esteem on the line and questions our value system ... If you're interested in and care about the interest of others, you spend much of your life blushing. Conversely, if you don't care, then attempts to shame won't move you" (Probyn, 2005: x).	Our status, relative to others. Continuous self-monitoring and self-regulation.	• "Disciplining" and controlling people in the workplace (Creed et al., 2014). • Anxiety and fear of measuring up.
	"Factual" basis for shame not necessary – imagined is enough (Scheff, 1990).	• Shame is a powerful resource that can be used "nefariously" (Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017).

Defining shame (cont.)

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- "[A] perception of a discrepancy between **ideal** and actual self" (Scheff, 2000: 97, describing psychological definition).

Defining shame (cont.)

"By shame, I mean a large family of emotions that includes cognates and variants, most notably embarrassment, humiliation, and related feelings such as shyness that involve reactions to rejection or feelings of failure or inadequacy. What unites all these cognates is that they involve the feeling of a *threat to the social bond ... no matter how slight.*"

(Scheff, 2000: 96-97, emphasis in original)



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Shame: Key points

- Shame is a *social* emotion.
- 'Trivial' instances of shame (or its cognates, such as embarrassment, shyness, or humiliation) are related to our consciousness, and in fact are not trivial at all.
- Shame is fundamental to the human condition, but curiously, we have been socialised into being ashamed of shame itself. Shame is a "taboo" topic (Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017).
- Shame is actively suppressed, but universally experienced. Hence it is rarely openly acknowledged and has been little studied in scholarly terms (although the body of literature is growing). Because of its ubiquitousness, it is highly relevant to organisational life.
- The etymological origin of shame means "to cover up" (Lynd, 1958: 23) – shame is about unwanted exposure and our attempts to prevent this, which involve 'covering', both literally and figuratively.



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Part II: Shame in organisational contexts

Shame in organisational contexts: Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen (2017)

Key points:

- Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen are interested in the various effects that shame does and does not have on ethical behaviour in organisations.
- They grant organisations a powerful role in the shaming process and in influencing ethical behaviour.
- They bring group norms and organisational culture into the picture, and suggest that these affect individuals' emotions and decision-making processes, including whether or not individuals do or not feel shame in unethical situations, and whether they feel comfortable and safe enough to voice their concerns.



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Shame in organisational contexts: Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen (2017)

- They make the important point that organisations can use shame for nefarious purposes (the 'cabbage' e.g.).
- They also acknowledge that *organisations* can be publicly shamed (e.g. BP oil spill, organisational apologies).
- They point mainly to the destructive consequences of shame ('discharged' emotions, acting out, aggression, violence, and so on), but they do acknowledge that there is another dimension to shame that needs to be explored: How shame "can be used constructively in a reparative prosocial manner to create a culture that seeks to promote self-improvement" (p. 671).



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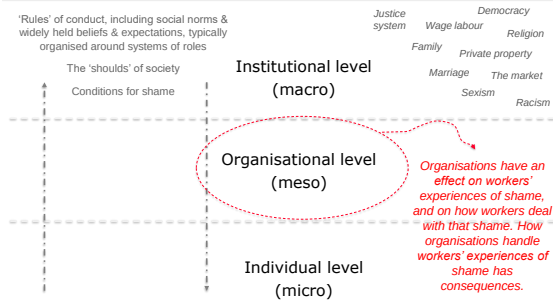
Shame in organisational contexts: Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen (2017)

Murphy & K-P's propositions	Translation
Proposition 1a: An affective event (e.g., unethical transgression, incompetence) attributed to a failure of the global self that is effortful, unpleasant, and perceived as a threat to the individual will elicit the emotional reaction of felt shame.	People feel shame when they recognise that they've done something wrong or aren't measuring up to expectation.
Proposition 2: Shame impacts the individual such that the more the person experiences (a) felt shame or (b) anticipatory shame, the greater the likelihood will be of their intuitive moral judgment of themselves as being wrong (bad) in the processing of socioemotional information related to their social acceptance (within-level relationship).	Intense experiences of shame have a greater impact on us than less intense ones.
Etc.	Etc.



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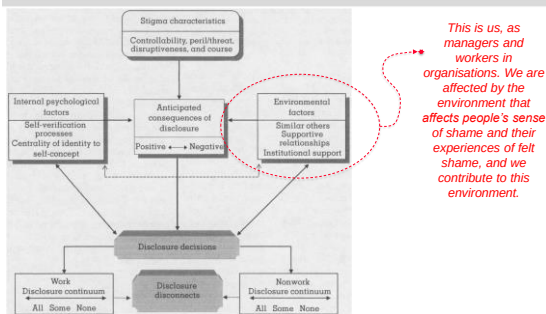
Shame in organisational contexts: Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen (2017)



Shame in organisational contexts: Ragins (2008) and Goffman (1963)

- "Invisible stigmas" and "institutional support" for disclosure (Ragins, 2008).
- "Discredited" and "discreditable" identities and information control (Goffman, 1963).
- "Passing" and covering (Goffman, 1963).
 - "managing information about his [sic] failing" (p. 42)
- Managing disjunctures and identity integration (Ragins, 2008)
- Objects of/Reason for shame socially constructed – can change over time

Shame in organisational contexts: Ragins (2008) and Goffman (1963)



Antecedents to disclosure of invisible stigmas across life domains (Ragins, 2008: 199)

Shame in organisational contexts: Ragins (2008) and Goffman (1963)

Ex-prisoner reintegration into the workforce

Bringing together the concepts discussed by Ragins (2008) and Goffman (1963)



Part III: Reframing shame as a potentially constructive experience

Reframing shame

Shame:

"Blinding"? Paralyzing? The "opposite of autonomy"?

Or

Revelatory? Impellent? Empowering?

Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017; Lewis, 1971: 25, citing Erikson, 1956

Reframing shame: A revelatory, impellent, and empowering experience

- Shame concerns *self-consciousness*. It facilitates insight. (Lynd, 1958)
- Shame disabuses ideals, and ideals are social. They concern our belief system and deeply rooted ideas about the way the world works, and in which we trust (Scheff, 2000; Lynd, 1958).
- Shame is disorienting, because it reveals a discrepancy between actuality and a previously taken-for-granted understanding of self and society (Lynd, 1958).
- Shame *disembeds* us from our social context.

Reframing shame



"What we [had] thought we could count on in ourselves, and what we [had] thought to be the boundaries and contours of the world, turn out suddenly not to be the 'real' outlines of ourselves or of the world, or those that others accept."

(Lynd, 1958: 46)

Reframing shame: A revelatory, impellent, and empowering experience

- Disembedding activates a "questioning of meaning" (Lynd, 1958: 57), and forces us to question our ideals and assumptions about the way the world works.
- Disembedding brings about an emotional reckoning with the foundations of our knowledge. This forces us to question the way the world works, including 'prosaic' activities and routine practices ('the way things are done'), such the delivery of public goods (e.g. healthcare), people's experiences of the justice system, the delivery of financial services, and so on.
- This reckoning with the foundations of our knowledge is key to creativity, re-invention, and innovation, **but only in certain conditions.**

Reframing shame

[Brené Brown: Listening to shame](#)



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Reframing shame in an organisational context

Innovation (Healthcare innovation and improvement)

Bringing together the preceding concepts with the work of Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen (2017)



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Reframing shame in an organisational context (Healthcare innovation & improvement)

'Rules' of conduct, including social norms & widely held beliefs & expectations, typically organised around systems of roles

The 'shoulds' of society

Conditions for shame

Institutional level
(macro)

Organisational level
(meso)

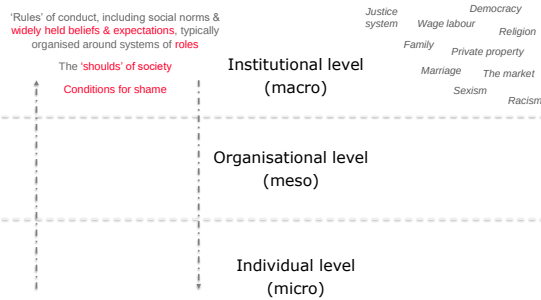
Individual level
(micro)

Justice system
Wage labour
Democracy
Religion
Family
Private property
Marriage
The market
Sexism
Racism



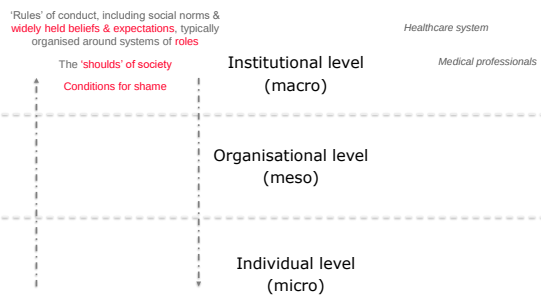
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Reframing shame in an organisational context (Healthcare innovation & improvement)



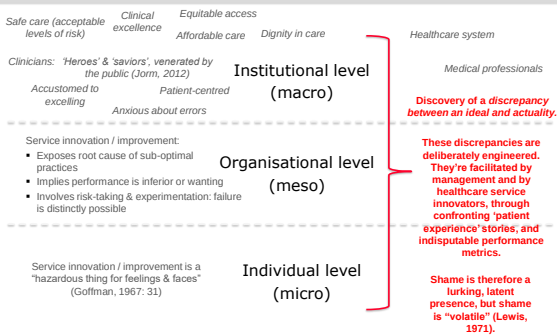
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Reframing shame in an organisational context (Healthcare innovation & improvement)



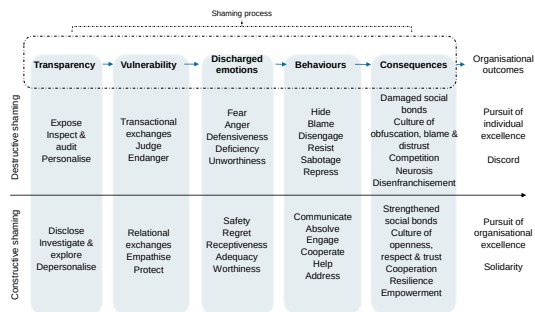
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Reframing shame in an organisational context (Healthcare innovation & improvement)



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Shame in organisational contexts: 'destructive' v. 'constructive' shaming



Arguments for constructive shaming

- Increase ethical behavior?
- But needs to be done ethically itself, e.g. because of:
 - Righting the power imbalance
 - Confusion about online communities
 - The futility of argument
 - Pleas for help and third-party assistance



Concluding thoughts

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- Shame is ubiquitous and universal – it is part of the human condition and therefore organisational life, and it is worthy of our consideration and attention.
- While shame is mainly viewed in organisational contexts as an “ugly” emotion and a negative phenomenon, this is probably because shame (and its aftermath) is usually handled in insensitive or cynical and manipulative ways that are not restorative and do not affirm the individual or group.
- Shame is “volatile”. This makes shame a potent, somewhat dangerous organisational resource – it provides organisations with substantial power that they can misuse.
- But, shame can be key to insight and agency. Shame can be a constructive experience if harnessed appropriately, and can help us create, reimagine, and reconstruct our futures.

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