

Shame and social work: Theory, reflexivity and practice

L. Frost, V. Magyar-Haas, H. Schoneville, & A. Sicora (Eds)
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Shame and Social Work is an excellent, edited collection of contributions by European authors on this important aspect of social work practice. The editors are Liz Frost, an Associate Professor at the University of the West of England, Veronika Magyar-Haas, a Professor in Educational Science at the University of Fribourg, Holger Schoneville, a Senior Lecturer in social work at Dortmund University and Alessandro Sicora, an Associate Professor of social work at the University of Trento.

A simple dictionary definition of states: “[Shame] is the painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behaviour” (Lexico. Com). Shame may also be attached to the stigma of being a member of a marginalised or devalued group. In their introduction, the editors note the paradoxical nature of shame—that it is both social and unspeakable. Shame is experienced when an individual feels they have not measured up to some normative standards or expectations. Shame can lead to self-exclusion as the person feels they have been devalued because they did not meet normative expectations. The authors cite Sicora (2018, p. 29): “In shamed states we are never enough.”

Shame is a social emotion often left unaddressed in social work and yet it is often present. It is relevant to both the people we work with and our own professional experiences. Houston (2015) has noted the internalisation of shame that results from service users feeling denigrated and defined as dysfunctional. Much of our work is connected to supporting people to

resist stigmatising labels and addressing the damage caused by internalised stigma and resultant strong feelings of shame. In the contemporary ideological climate, social workers also feel the weight of many expectations that we will be infallible and successful, and when we do not “measure up” there are many ways that social systems can focus attention on our deficits rather than our strengths. This book explores shame in depth and is a much-needed contribution to our understanding of this challenging emotion.

The editors aim “to make sense of the complex relationship between the social conditions, norms and expectations that co-produce shame ‘in contemporary social work settings (Introduction, p. 1). This edited book has nine chapters and is divided into three parts: the first part examines theoretical perspectives of shame; the second focuses on service user experiences of shame, while the final section part focuses on practitioners and how they encounter shame in their work. A short review cannot do justice to the complexity and breadth of this edited collection, so I have drawn from only four chapters.

In chapter 1, Liz Frost draws on Honneth’s theory of recognition to construct a three-part framework with which to explore shame in social relations. This framework has three levels or categories of shame: the *political / national the group / social* and the *individual / personal*. Of these categories, social shame resonates perhaps the most for social workers who work with groups that are subject to stigma and negative

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stereotypes but also, as a profession may feel stigmatised, at times by virtue of association. “Felt stigma” (Scambler, 2004) at the individual level results in shame—for example, fat stigma produces shame about our bodies if they do not conform to societal norms. As Frost expresses so well in this book: “it is, in tandem, profoundly socially generated, though individually lived” (p. 25).

In chapter 4, Marie Demant and Frederike Lorenz explore shame in the context of institutional abuse of children. With relevance to Aotearoa readers with our current focus on abuse in state care, Demant and Lorenz discuss the way humiliation of children is a form of violence with lifelong impacts. Their research, based on testimonies of adult abuse survivors found that physical punishment and belittlement resulted in “barriers for children’s agency, social connection, voice and their ability to reach out and receive help” (p. 101). This is a very helpful chapter for exploring the implications of harmful institutional practices.

In chapter 7, in the third section of the book, Matthew Gibson situates his discussion of shame in the organisational context of social work (see also Gibson’s 2019 book on shame in child and family social work). Gibson argues that managers and leaders in social work organisations “go about regulating shame” so that any feelings of shame that arise in the tasks social work are expected to do are “contained and diverted, while ensuring that shame is evoked as a result of any transgressions” (p. 143). Gibson notes that the boundaries of shame (what is felt as shameful and what is diverted) arise within institutional discourses about what is expected within social work organisational settings. Managers construct, through language and narrative, the notion of an ideal social worker. Departures from this ideal (constructed and maintained by discourses—shared language, behaviours and the like) constitute the conditions for shame. Thus, professional behaviour is regulated and, even when the discourse is

not tangible, some degree of conformity is instilled.

The next chapter, by Mark Hardy, follows on well from Gibson’s work. Hardy builds his argument from risk theory, describing how the prevalent focus on “harmful events that may or may not happen in future” (p. 165) means that social work may not always pay adequate attention to actual need. Risk thinking is highly visible, even dominant, in policy formulation about social work. It is present in checklists, rigid assessment tools and audit systems. Risk-averse practice in an effort to prevent future harm risks doing harm in the here and now by acts of commission or omission. A brainstorm with any group of social workers could produce numerous examples. When assessment tools and routinised interventions drive practice, practitioner autonomy is reduced. Hardy notes that this environment can make social workers fearful of mistakes (because of expectations of infallibility, our systems should prevent harm). Thus, if bad things happen, someone is to blame. And blame and shame are very closely linked with social workers who are hyper-aware of the stigma attached to high-profile failures.

Link and Phelan (2001, p. 367) noted that “stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labelled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination”. While much of the literature on stigma and related shame focuses on service users, links have been made to social work itself. As Gibson and Hardy’s chapters have described, shame can both produce behaviours that are unhelpful for service users but also impact on perceptions of social work. Much of the Aotearoa New Zealand research in this area has confirmed the impact of negative stereotypes in social workers’ collective identity (see for example, Hobbs & Evans, 2017; Staniforth et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, in a study of perceptions

of social work conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand, Beddoe et al. (2019) found that social workers held ambivalent views about their profession. On spite of felt pride in their social work, for many, the expectation that they would encounter critical views of social work, alongside emotions generated by media reports of bad practice produced feelings of shame. The research reported that participants “strongly perceived recognition of stigma attached to the profession” (p. 537).

Stigma, shame and blame are thus ever-present aspects of social work experience at many levels. There is so much more in this edited collection than can be discussed in a brief review. This book is recommended to social workers educators as offering some good readings for critical perspectives on social work. What I appreciated particularly was the how the authors drew from different social science disciplines to provide a rich exploration of the complexity of shame and its influence on social workers and our practice.

Reviewed by **Liz Beddoe**, University of Auckland

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