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**Giving due consideration to shame – the significance of  
emotion to adult educational experience.**

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## Abstract

This paper argues that shame is integral to adult educational experience in that it motivates the decision to both resume and continue formal study. In emphasizing the place of emotion within the formation of educational identity it links social experience to identity construction and discusses the place of human agency within this process. After Jenkins (1996), it understands identity to be the product of a simultaneous and ongoing synthesis of both internal and external definitions of self and in focusing on the extent to which shame may be integral to identity, argues that its attribution is constitutive of this dialectic. It also reveals how the notion of an ideal educated self is essential to the biographical accommodation of shame and argues that critical insights into the lived experience of mature age students will be achieved by investigating adult education from this perspective.

In *Shame: The Exposed Self*, (1992, p. 5) Michael Lewis presents an account of shame involving a student demoralised by a poor mark. For Lewis, the student's emotional response is indicative of a level of confusion in that she fails to distinguish her role and performance as student from her individual identity. While the anecdote reveals the volatility of graded assessment, it also suggests that results have an existential quality to them, in that by eliciting shame they unwittingly articulate a sense of who we are, our place in the world and the quality of our existence (Lazarus and Lazarus 1994, p.41). Yet clearly not all students interpret their results this way, so what is the process by which an assessment item may speak to identity and signify a failure of character? Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997, p.18) provide a clue via their definition of what it means to be an educated person. In an account that emphasises the social significance of adult educational identity, they state:

'It is only important for learning to be considered education if to be an educated person is important to their identity, if it acts as a means of distinguishing themselves from others and identifying themselves with other educated persons.'

In what follows I will outline a rationale for investigating the role shame plays in shaping the identities of mature age students and provide a theoretical overview of the assumptions underpinning an inquiry of this kind. My argument is that shame is, in many instances, responsible for motivating the desire to both resume and continue studying as an adult and is, therefore, integral to the emergence of an identity that is commensurate with an ideal educated self. As a consequence, this paper raises issues that are critical to the ontology of adult education particularly given that mature age students with a broad range of experiences are participating in increasing numbers across a range of educational settings. In contrast to Lewis (1992), I consider shame to be indicative of a more precise sense of one's standing in the world in that its presence is symptomatic of the social forces that underpin self-perception. As a component of biography, shame speaks to a person's history, memory, and social identity and therefore provides valuable insights into the lived experience of mature age students. The paper therefore argues that shame is simultaneously a site on which the interplay of the philosophical and the empirical are played out (Alverson and Skoldberg 2000, p. 1) and the means by which research may link the social structure to the social actor (Barbalet 1998, p 27).

## Background

My interest in shame derives from both my personal and professional experiences. From 1996 – 2003 I taught and coordinated a course that prepared adults for further study, primarily, but not exclusively, at the undergraduate Arts level. The course attracted students from a broad age range and somewhat diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and while it would make very little sense to categorise them as a homogenous group, there was a high degree of commonality in regard to the way in which they spoke about resuming study. In general, many referred to the manner in which education provided a sense of personal enrichment and emotional fulfilment and I became very interested in the way in which metaphorical terms such as growth and transformation were used to describe their experiences. I also began considering the extent to which these descriptions were illustrative of a relationship between knowledge and identity in that *being* students appeared to have fundamentally changed the way in which they interpreted their place in the world. It was also apparent that those completing the course and proceeding on to further study displayed very high levels of personal satisfaction at realizing their objectives. There was an emotional intensity associated with their graduation that suggested their academic success spoke directly of them; that their personal identities and role as students were one and the same thing; and that their transition to further study was a powerful and significant achievement as a result of this. As a result, I became very interested in theorizing what influences were at work in this amalgam of identity and social experience.

As I have indicated, these are not the observations of a dispassionate onlooker and my receptiveness to their thoughts and language was, in part, a consequence of experiencing the world in a similar way. Resuming study as a mature age student, as I did in the late nineteen eighties, remains a significant component of my biography and my interest in shame has its origins in the desire to understand why returning to study as an adult is such a powerful experience both intellectually and emotionally.

Traditionally, these two realms of experience have often been understood to be incommensurable. For example, feminist educational theory has shown the ways in which, historically, masculine assumptions underpin the notion of the educated person. As a consequence, reason and rationality, (traditionally understood as masculine attributes), have been seen as integral to the ideal educated self while emotion and feeling (alternatively characterised as feminine) have been marginalised (Roland Martin, 1981). However, to make sense of adult educational identity within the context of shame is to promote their equal measure. In understanding shame in terms of its relationship to knowledge and by emphasising the manner in which its affect gives rise to the desire for a formal education is to reconcile them in a form of benign companionship. Therefore, rather than distinguishing between intellectual and emotional life worlds, it is more productive to understand them as the mutually contouring forces that are integral to lived experience.

If intellect and emotion are cohabitants of identity then so too are social interaction and reflexivity, or, to put it another way, internal and external attributions of meaning. Therefore any understanding of adult educational identity predicated on

shame must come to terms with the process by which it is both initially attributed, and subsequently accommodated, biographically. To attempt to trace the origins of shame and identify the configurations of its authoring is to simultaneously underscore the personal and social dimensions of identity construction and this in turn produces tensions in regard to the value of theory that addresses shame from a psychological, as opposed to a sociological perspective. In the subsequent sections I present a sample of the literature on shame, cite an experiential application, and show how Jenkins' (1996) model of social identity provides the basis for an application of shame to the sociology of education and resolves tensions surrounding the respective roles of both structure and agency in terms of identity construction.

### **Theoretical perspectives on shame**

For Kerby (1991, p. 49), 'the experience of shame is manifest only against a background of leading a life where one requires a certain respect from others.' The notion of shame constituting an emotional response to the awareness that one has fallen short to either one's own, or another's expectations, is common to a range of theorists (Dalziell 1999, Lewis 1992, Lazarus and Lazarus 1994, Katz 1997). Scheff (1997, p. 210) argues that shame is generated by the, virtually, constant monitoring of self in relation to others. Like Wilson (2001, p. 73) and Katz (1997, p.233) he claims this monitoring occurs both in solitary thought and social interaction and shame is therefore, the most frequent, and possibly, important emotion. Bartky (1996, p. 227) defines shame as the psychic distress at the self being apprehended as inferior, defective, or in some way diminished. Drawing on Sartre she states – 'once an actual other has revealed my object-character to me, I can become an object for myself; I can come to see myself as I might be seen by another, caught in the shameful act.' Katz (1997) also acknowledges that revelation is frequently associated with shame and that the exposure that is central to its formation requires an audience. In the first instance that audience is the self, in that 'others' discoveries about ones self are not shameful unless one learns of their discovery (Katz 1997, p. 233). Shame is therefore contingent upon an audience before whom inadequacies are paraded. However, while it is necessary to register the occurrence of a revelation about self from the perspective of others, face- to- face encounters need not eventuate for the attribution of shame may result from the self *imagining* itself being seen. As Katz (1997, p.234) puts it, 'what brings shame is taking towards oneself what one presumes is the view that others would have were they to look.'

These perspectives suggest that shame's attribution stems from an exposure to a critical gaze. That the source of shame is the evaluation of self via the eye of others (real or virtual) means that shame can be primarily characterized as socially orientated and in the process, the self becomes both the subject and object of scrutiny. Kerby (1991, p.49) argues that shame indicates what is important to us despite the fact we may only be partly aware of what this is. To this end, the narratives driving shame shape what it means to be a subject, a process that, arguably, is determined by the mutually contouring forces of reflexivity and social interaction.

Overall, these perspectives reveal the extent to which shame is implicated within the maintenance and production of social control and conformity. Evidence of the link between emotion and social relations is clearly manifest in the notion of stigma, that is defined by Lewis (1992, p.194) as '...a mark or characteristic that distinguishes a person as being deviant, flawed, limited, spoiled or generally undesirable.' In general, stigma signals a failure to meet societal standards, rules, or goals (Bartky, 1996 Wilson, 2001) and this may subsequently result in social isolation or a threat to social bonds (Katz, 1997 Scheff, 1997). Stigma is, therefore, a correlate of shame and may well be integral to the desire to be educated in that to experience shame as a deficit of knowledge is to stigmatise the uneducated self. Goffman (1969, p.215) suggests the risk of stigmatisation is present within the most routine or banal social occasions in that 'there is no interaction in which the participants do not take a chance of being slightly embarrassed or a slight chance of being deeply humiliated.' It may be that shame threatens at our every turn.

By way of application and demonstration of the relevance of this theory to experience, I recall a female student of mine explaining what motivated her to return to study. The woman I refer to was in her forties when she commenced the course and while thumbnail biographical sketches are obviously problematic as a consequence of their lack of detail, she appeared to be what might be reasonably described as a successful and articulate woman with much to take pride in on account of successfully running a family business, having a close relationship with her husband and children, owning a home in a middle class suburb and having the opportunity to travel. And yet, as a consequence of her place in the social structure, she came into contact (both in a professional and personal capacity) with many people who were tertiary educated and from her perspective this presented a problem, primarily because she had not attended university. She confessed to being acutely conscious of her lack of formal education and this was most keenly felt in more intimate social contexts (say, a dinner party) where she felt her inadequacies were far more likely to be displayed. As a result, she became increasingly concerned about what she perceived as gaps in her knowledge and her perceived inability to talk about the world in the same way as her tertiary educated friends and colleagues, to the point that she eventually returned to study.

Her account highlights a concern with assuming a form of identity where the absence of a formal education is associated with negative attributes. And, interestingly, her sense of personal inadequacy comes to the fore despite living a life that appears to be, on the surface at least, commensurate with success. The relevance of theoretical perspectives on shame are relatively obvious here – there is an emphasis on the self being found wanting in the eyes of others and an accompanying experience of psychic distress as a consequence of the internalisation of such feeling. In this regard her lack of education speaks directly of her and she feels both exposed and stigmatised. It is also worth briefly noting the contextual nature of her exposure, in that that the attribution of shame is inseparable from the status accorded to the world in which she finds herself, and interestingly, there appears to be very little consolation in being successful *despite* a lack of formal education.

Her willingness to tell stories about shameful experiences is significant given that silence and denial are understood to be characteristic of its presence (Lazurus and Lazurus 1994, p.65, Scheff1997, p.208). This suggests that she has managed to accommodate her shame biographically - presumably via her return to formal study, and Giddens (1991) presents a perspective that is useful in terms of making sense of how the accommodation of such feelings may be achieved. He argues that we do not merely 'have' a biography - we actively *live* a biography that is reflexively organized in terms of knowledge about life choices. This implies that identity is located within narratives that are continuously revised as a consequence of being mediated by knowledge that is in turn formulated within power structures. It is also a perspective that also attempts to show how a unity of self is maintained in the face of the complex configurations of knowledge that characterize contemporary experience and for Giddens (1991), the significance of shame results from the manner in which it threatens self unity. He states: 'Shame bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography (p. 65).' Given this perspective, the experience of shame is significant in that it motivates the decision to return to study by generating a re-evaluation of life choices through the threat shame poses to self-identity.

Shame therefore speaks to the social experiences that precede a resumption of study in that its presence provides clues about the knowledge that motivated that decision. However, just as significantly, resuming study may also incorporate the desire for an alternate form of identity. In this regard becoming a student is symptomatic of the reflexive reorganisation of identity that is defined by the projection of the self into an idealised future that is, as I suggested earlier, associated with the idea of being an educated person.<sup>1</sup>

One of the more interesting aspects of theory on shame is the view that gender is integral to its formation and Sandra Bartky (1996, pp. 225-36) while giving an emphasis to the centrality of gender, presents a critique of theories that, in general terms, understand shame to be the consequence of self-assessment. Her ideas highlight difficulties inherent in researching the effects of shame, in that she questions whether shame manifests a conscious presence. Her analysis identifies self-assessment as revolving around three beliefs. The first is that deviation from a norm marks someone as a person of lesser worth. The second argues the self must have knowledge of the deviation; and the third asserts the self must subsequently realize that one's standing in the world has been altered as a consequence. However, her observation that someone may feel inadequate *without* deviating from a norm reveals the complexity of shame and the potential shortcomings of self-assessment. Her analysis takes place in the context of her observation that women appear more

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<sup>1</sup> Giddens' idea of a unified self is problematic in the context of postmodern conceptions of identity that emphasise the notion of the fractured self. However, the idea that shame poses a threat to identity remains applicable, regardless of whether it operates within a context of unified or fractured understandings of selfhood. For me, the significance of the threat is its social origins and the possibility of it motivating action.

prone to experience shame than men and she understands this phenomenon to be the result of women internalising intimations of inferiority through social institutions.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, shame is not so much a particular feeling or emotion (even though it involves specific feelings and emotions) as what she describes as a pervasive affective attunement to the social world. In this regard, the “feelings” that constitute women’s shame in regard to their academic ability do not reach ‘a state of clarity that could be dignified as belief’ and she argues that were they to be elevated to the level of proposition, then shame would vanish under the weight of contrary evidence (Bartky 1996, p.226).

During the course of delivering Arts preparatory classes it was clear that feelings of personal inadequacy and a diminished sense of self characterised the self-perception of many of the women enrolled in the course. Similarly, their levels of personal confidence were rarely commensurate with their academic ability and an approach to adult educational identity predicated on an investigation of shame presents a framework for establishing how such feelings of inadequacy are constructed and provides a mechanism for evaluating the role education might play in their construction, maintenance or resolution. Given that shame *is* more likely to be felt by some than others necessitates locating subjectivity within the configurations of the power structures and social institutions that shape knowledge. To do so is to inevitably examine the place of structure and agency within the context of shame’s authoring, and it is to a brief overview of this dialectic that I now turn.

### **Agency**

Within the literature on shame there are significant differences in regard to the role of agency. Wilson (2001, pp. 71 – 81) argues that the attribution cannot be purely external or the self will not be affected by it. While acknowledging that weight of moral opinion, for example, may inform shame, he emphasizes it cannot succeed regardless of agency. For Lewis (1992, p. 71), shame, as a self-conscious emotion, acts as an interrupt signal that informs us that the actions we have taken have failed, and the interrupt ‘clearly serves the biological function of enabling the organism to reconsider and alter its strategy.’ His model of how the experience of shame occurs is, in the first instance, predicated on an individual’s success or failure at abiding to standards, rules, and goals that are grounded in social experience. This produces a ‘signal’ to the self that affects the organism and produces self-reflection that generates the resultant emotion. While the model doesn’t specify what constitutes success, failure, or any particular standard, rule, or goal, it assumes the self-

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<sup>2</sup> She is alerted to this possibility while conducting professional development classes as part of a post-graduate course for teachers. The classes are made up of men and women with similar experience and qualifications, however, she observes the women to display far less confidence in their ability to master the material, despite the fact that in the main, they appeared to be academically better students than their male counterparts.

attributions that lead to specific emotions are internal events that reside in people themselves (p.63). Thus: 'Shame is not elicited by any event "out there." Rather, such external events lead to particular internal interpretations and attributions which, in turn, elicit shame (p.64).'

However, in contrast, Lehtinen (1998, pp. 59 –61), like Bartky (1996 p.56 -9), claims that the role agency plays in the attribution of shame may be contextualised by gender. For her, women experience shame differently to men as a consequence of their subordination through patriarchy. Citing the psychological literature (that establishes women are more shame prone than men), she speculates whether this is merely a matter of higher frequency and more diversified intentionality, or whether the more extensive process is instead, indicative of conceptual specificity – that is, does shame signify something different to socially subordinate individuals?

Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997), whilst not writing on shame specifically, provide a perspective on the role of agency in identity construction in that –

'the postmodern story of self is that of the de-centred self, subjectivity without a centre or origin, caught in meanings, positioned in language and the narratives of culture. The self cannot know itself independently of the significations in which it is enmeshed' (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p. 103).

According to this perspective the self is involved in an unending renewal of subjectivity and this subjective engagement with discourses, practices and institutions lends significance to the events of the world. Experience then, can be read as a text with no final pattern or meaning. Crucially however, they argue that making sense of experience can be either empowering, disempowering, or both, in that the way in which we produce ourselves discursively produces combinations of both 'active' subjects and objects of power. (Usher et al. 1997, p. 104).

Shame, therefore, may be present as an interpretive experience that disempowers – and here I consider the possibilities of the shame of redundancy, sole parenthood, relationship breakdown, long-term unemployment, or not being tertiary educated. In such instances there is the sense of the social world bearing down on the self, stigmatising it, speaking of its unworthiness, propagating an awareness that one has failed to meet the collective expectations of self and others. However, shame may be simultaneously enabling, in that it induces activity by providing a means of aspiring to dignity (Kerby 1991, p.49). In the event that experiencing shame does give momentum to the decision to resume study, then it is clearly enabling in character despite the fact that this may merely be the consequence of conforming to dominant expectations in regard to the value of education. And having set a return to study in motion, the knowledge generated in an Arts context may also provide the means for

an individual to discursively 'de-code' or reinterpret their experiences and, in the process, perhaps further alleviate their sense of shame.<sup>3</sup>

As a potentially contradictory and conflicting constituent of subjectivity, shame thereby resists researchers positioning subjects exclusively as either passive dupes, or completely self-conscious and autonomous decision makers. Given that shame is configured through the forces of signification, social experience and reflexivity, its presence is best understood as being the product of both internal and external definitions of self. This necessitates locating its attribution within a theoretical framework that understands identity construction as being constitutive of the structure \ agency dialectic without necessarily privileging one aspect of the process over the other.

### **Jenkins and social identity**

Jenkins (1996, pp. 1 - 15) uses the terms identity and social identity interchangeably. For him, social identity forms the basis of society in that without social identity there is no society, and this argument is based upon the assumption that social identity assumes both an individual and collective form. He also questions why theorists assume a difference exists between the individual and the collective given both are the consequence of interpretation, and, as a consequence, never completely resolved but perpetually in process of becoming. Furthermore, he argues that in distinguishing the individual/personal from the social/cultural, one form of identity is often privileged over the other in that it is 'assumed to be more important – if not actually more "real"- than the other' (p. 15) in terms of the contribution it makes to self hood.

In contrast, Jenkins (1996, p.19) argues that the individual and the collective, while not exactly the same, can be understood to be in many respects similar, in that 'each is routinely related to – or, better perhaps, entangled with – the other; that the process by which they are produced, reproduced and changed are analogous; and that *both* are intrinsically social.'

He states –

'If identity is a necessary prerequisite for social life, the reverse is also true. Individual identity – embodied in self hood- is not meaningful in isolation from the social world of other people. Individuals are unique and variable, but selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed: in the process of primary and subsequent socialisation, and in the ongoing process of social interaction within which individuals define and redefine themselves and others throughout their lives' (Jenkins 1996, p. 20).

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<sup>3</sup> It is, of course, also possible that assumptions specific to particular disciplines or indeed common institutional practices may enhance, as opposed to alleviate, a sense of shame. As I indicated in my introduction, one obvious example is the potential for graded assessment to induce a sense of failure.

Thus, an understanding of self emerges as 'an ongoing, and in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others' (p. 20) and this conception of selfhood gives rise to a model of identity construction containing two distinct threads. Firstly, 'social identity is both a practical accomplishment and a process,' and secondly, 'individual and collective social identities can be understood via the dialectical interplay of processes of internal and external definition' (p. 25).

Given the anatomy of shame and the process by which it is attributed to experience, Jenkins' model provides a theoretical base for shame's application to the sociology of adult education through its understanding of the process by which identity is accomplished. His model is consistent with theoretical approaches to shame that chart its attribution through the dialectal interplay of internal and external forces that are integral to experience. It therefore provides a basis for inquiring into the way emotional experiences of shame are connected to educational identity and allows for an examination of the structural forces that give shape to identities while simultaneously acknowledging the processes by which meaning is subjectively negotiated and internalised.

### **Fresh perspectives**

There is, as far as I can determine, no established body of literature that addresses adult education specifically within the context of shame despite a burgeoning interest in the emotion across a range of academic disciplines during the last twenty years. While this reveals the importance and timeliness of conducting research into shame within an educational context, it is also worth considering the ways in which existing educational research may be re-evaluated in light of this approach. By way of example, Bamber and Tett (2000), in arguing for institutions to be more cognizant of the needs of non-traditional entrants, highlight the extent to which emotions and feelings are central to the transition into higher education. In analysing the sorts of difficulties faced by adults from socio-economically disadvantaged areas of the UK, they highlight the tension around becoming academic or professional in that these attributes may be considered undesirable in their communities (Bamber and Tett 2000, p. 63). Though not stated as such, their analysis reveals the potential for shame to be associated with social mobility.

Shame also appears to be integral to Munns, Nanlohy and Thomas' (2000) research that analyses why adults from the western suburbs of Sydney decide to resume studying with the aim of becoming primary school teachers. The research explains their motivation in terms of 'cultural fracture.' The term refers to the ways in which some students, when initially withdrawing from education, aren't resolved to reject education completely, but rather understand that 'they can, and might still, make it educationally in the future' (Munns, Nanlohy and Tett 2000, p.167). Accordingly, this lingering sense of unfinished business allows the person to return to study at another time, often with the aid and assistance of a significant other. However, while the term 'cultural fracture' provides an explanation of a particular process, it doesn't

automatically reveal what that process is grounded in. The authors acknowledge that students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to be adversely affected by school rejection in that it will impact directly upon their future social position and therefore it isn't surprising that the prospect of disadvantage is likely to make returning to study attractive, especially where education is linked to social mobility. However, in reading the student's accounts of their return, I was struck by the ways in which they referred to experiences of degradation and humiliation when reflecting upon their educational histories. The extent to which their reflections bore traces of shame was exemplified in a statement about the meaning attributed to a TER ranking of 21. The respondent states – 'It was degrading and upsetting and my parents were devastated' (Munns et al.2000, p. 170). This suggests that experiences of shame may well be integral to the reflexivity that is characteristic of cultural fracture and given that her TER ranking signifies a very public failure to meet social expectations what better way of resolving this shame than by studying to become a teacher?

In the course of this paper I have demonstrated the significance of shame to the social relationships, institutions, and processes that, for Barbalet (1998, p. 9), legitimise a sociological inquiry into emotion. My argument is that shame is integral to the construction of adult educational identities in that its presence is responsible for motivating the decision to both resume and continue studying. I have also shown how this desire is predicated on the emergence of an ideal educated self and that the resumption of study may be the means by which experiences of shame are accommodated biographically. Linking shame, identity, and biography thereby provides a means of gaining a partial, but nonetheless critical, insight into the ontology of adult education via the emphasis it places on both personal and social aspects of identity construction. Nietzsche (2003, p. 90) claimed that 'the charm of knowledge would be small if so much shame did not have to be overcome on the road to it,' and in tracing the social origins of shame the challenge lies in identifying both the extent of its presence and the origins of its attribution. To do so is to go some way towards understanding why a life may sometimes seem incomplete in the absence of tertiary study, and this, surely, is a concern that goes to the heart of adult education.

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