

The power of public shaming, for good and for ill

April 9 2015, by Lydia Woodyatt



Shame can hurt, but it can also be used to motivate positive behaviour. Credit: Rob/Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA

You may not have heard of Justine Sacco but she gained brief infamy online in 2013 when she sent one ill-considered Tweet that subsequently

"[blew up](#)" her life, all in the time it took her to fly from London to South Africa. The onslaught of online fury cost her job, but this in many ways was only the beginning of the negative consequences of the event on Sacco's life.

Jon Ronson's writes about Sacco's case in his new book, [So You've Been Publicly Shamed](#), which considers the serious consequences of public shaming in the age of Twitter and social media.

From the [scarlet letters](#) and public stocks of the past, public shaming has a long history. In fact, it's likely we have all been publicly shamed at some point in our lives. Intentionally or unintentionally, others may have called attention to us in such a way as to make us feel we are somehow unacceptable, insufficient or flawed.

While shaming can also serve a positive function in terms of promoting positive and responsible behaviour, sadly it can easily be misused and cause lasting harm to those shamed.

Close to home

I remember sitting among a group of mothers recently. One mother commented on my only having a single child, publicly shaming me for my choice. Being a woman often involves acts of public shaming: shaming for our employment or stay-at-home status; for breastfeeding (or not); for parenting choices; "fat shaming"; "skinny shaming"; "slut shaming" and so on.

Of course shaming is not a uniquely female phenomenon. Anyone can be shamed for their clothes, beliefs, politics, sexuality, sexual prowess, race, food choices, possessions and careers (or lack thereof). Many of us would agree that these things are inappropriate (if common) targets of shaming.

But [shame](#) is often communicated publicly for a range of more politically acceptable issues: the intake of unhealthy food; prejudice; bullying; smoking; and domestic violence, among other things.

What is shame?

Shame is the painful feeling associated with a negative evaluation of the self: that you are bad, flawed, inappropriate, or less than what you ought to be. This is opposed to guilt, where the target of evaluation is one's actions: that you did a bad thing.

There is research to suggest that shame is associated with [poor mental and physical health](#). Shame is also associated with activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) and immune systems, similar to physical threat, which can be unhealthy when prolonged.

But, like other aversive emotions such as fear, shame is [functional](#) to the extent that it encourages goal-directed behaviour and survival. There is now substantial psychological evidence – including physiological, cross-cultural, social, and evolutionary – to suggest that shame helps us to negotiate group life by alerting us to when our membership of, or [status](#) within, groups is at risk.

In this way shame may function like a [gauge](#) of threat to our moral-social status. In response to the question "am I a good or valued group member?", the feeling of shame communicates a painful red alert that we may be falling short. In this way shame can emerge as a result of loss (or anticipated loss) of status, or by violating socially derived norms, values or expectations. Shame ultimately responds to our psychological need for belonging and acceptance.

Shame is associated with the feeling of wanting to avoid, hide or disappear; to minimise the threat to the self in a social context.

Social function

However, shame can also motivate [responsibility and repair behaviours](#) when we feel that there is actually [something that we can do](#) to change the cause of our shame. Taking responsibility can then lead to [self-forgiveness](#) and resolving our feelings of shame. The red alert can then switch off.

However, when we feel there is nothing we can do to remedy the situation causing shame – to "fix" ourselves – or when repair seems difficult, risky or costly, shame can lead to more detrimental shame management strategies such as avoidance, withdrawal, self-punishment or defensiveness.

Public shaming thus has several social functions: it communicates group norms, to both the norm violator and onlookers; it punishes the norm violation by lowering the status of the transgressor and the pain of shame; and it elevates the status of others as norm conformers.

The impact of [public shaming can vary](#). Where public shaming is stigmatising – that is, a person's behaviour is discussed in such a way as to make them feel that they are incurably flawed – this leads to poor outcomes because there is no pathway to repair.

Stigmatising shaming can lead to unresolved feelings of shame and may effectively disconnect an individual from the moral community. A bully stigmatised for bullying, or an alcoholic stigmatised for drinking, is (counterintuitively) more likely to continue the problematic behaviour.

Reintegrative shaming

But shaming can be reintegrative. Where attention is drawn to a

wrongdoing, or perceived wrongdoing, in such a way as to communicate respect for the person, by people who love, care and accept the person, it opens up the possibility of repair.

One wonders whether reintegrative shaming can even occur online. Without reciprocity, and an expectation of ongoing cooperation, or personal knowledge contextualising a behaviour within the wider perspective of a person's life, it is doubtful. Other human tendencies that tend to attribute failures of others to character flaws, that cause [group polarisation](#) and [schadenfreude](#), may continue to lead to stigmatising digital shaming, as in the case of Justine Sacco.

Of course, raising our voice against inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, racism and [domestic violence](#) is important. But before we do so, if we care about changing others' behaviour, and we aren't just trying to be clever and gain status ourselves, perhaps we should pause to think about whether we are marginalising or diminishing another person, insinuating that they are hopeless or flawed.

Or are we communicating respect and opening up a pathway for repair? There is a substantial difference between the two approaches, and whether the shame generated can shape behaviour for the better.

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Source: The Conversation

Citation: The power of public shaming, for good and for ill (2015, April 9) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-04-power-shaming-good-ill.html>

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