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Online shaming — a restorative response

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of shame from a definitional and theoretical perspective and examines how the rapid growth and increasing dominance of online interactions have propagated a pandemic of online shaming which, due to the importance of 'the virtual self' in such interactions, is free from the traditional controls that have moderated shame and shaming in the 'real world'. Drawing on the testimony of individuals impacted by this phenomenon, we explore the destructive impact on individuals and society and the potential for restorative practice to offer an effective response.

Online shaming — a restorative response.

In a powerful 2015 Ted Talk Monica Lewinsky describes herself as "patient zero" in the modern pandemic that sees people being attacked and having their reputations annihilated online every day.

> *"Cruelty to others is nothing new. But online, technologically enhanced shaming is amplified, uncontained and permanently accessible. The echo of embarrassment used to extend only as far as your family, village, school, or community. But now, it's the online community too. Millions of people, often anonymously, can stab you*

> *with their words, and that's a lot of pain. And there are no parameters around how many people can publicly observe you and put you in a public stockade. There is a very personal price to public humiliation, and the growth of the internet has jacked up that price."*

Twenty years after her experience as patient zero, Lewinsky contended that the virus of shame and public humiliation has spread to all aspects of modern society and is visible in all aspects of our culture and existence. Lewinsky argued that it is evident in politics, entertainment, news and has pervaded all elements of western society. She highlighted the fact that commentary on a few major social media platforms has a dominant role in public discourse across the globe and she stated that it is undermining democracy and costing lives.

Unfortunately, Lewinsky's call to action fell on deaf ears. The growth of the smartphone as a key device to access the internet in Ireland has grown year on year since 2015 and plans for greater regulation of big technology companies have yet to be delivered. Central Statistics Data shows that 95% of individuals between 16 and 60 access the internet daily and 95% of these use a smartphone for this purpose. Against this backdrop, what contribution can restorative practice make to respond to the shaming epidemic online?

In her book, the Shaming Machine, Cathy O'Neill (2022) provides a compelling analysis of the impact of shaming on social media, connects this with shaming in wider society and details how this is driven by commercial interest whose business model is built on feeding this frenzy. According to the Centre for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), "Social Media platforms have become safe spaces for abuse and harmful content, making them potentially hostile environments for normal users. Hate not only denies those being abused the ability to freely express themselves online, it can lead to substantial direct offline harm and violence."

As research by the CCDH and others shows, things have continued to deteriorate and the COVID 19 pandemic demonstrated the global nature of this problem, the forces driving it and the misery it causes. The CCDH estimates that annual revenues to the anti-vaccination industry are over €30m with over 62 million followers across the globe. This traffic is worth over €1bn to the tech sector and the testimonies from health care professionals who are being targeted online is harrowing.

Given this situation, what responses can restorative practice offer? To address this, it is important to first understand shame, how it operates what are effective responses.

The literature provides several definitions of shame that are useful in considering this question. Paulo, Vargos, Riberio Di Silva and Rijo (2019), bring a number of these together and offer the following: "Shame has been defined as a self-conscious emotion related to the subjective perception of being inferior, worthless, weak, and/or defective." (Gilbert, 2017; Lewis, 1992; Tangney & Tracy,2012)

The authors argue that shame is an emotion that is learnt in childhood and stays with us throughout our lives. It works as a social barometer for regulating thoughts, feelings and behaviours in the context of evolving norms of what is acceptable. Therefore, there is a level of subjectivity and relativity to what could be deemed to be 'shameful' in a society and this is determined by a range of contextual factors that are personal and societal. However, the internet and social media with its global coverage and instantaneous access are redefining social boundaries and norms and machine learning, rather than human beings, is acting as the driving force in this process. This presents significant challenges as the

"shaming machine" becomes increasingly powerful and is a key component of the harmful business model that underpins the growth of big technology companies.

Bradshaw (2005) agrees with this notion of shame and argues that it is necessary to feel shame to be truly human. "Shame keeps us in our human boundaries, letting us know we can and will make mistakes." Therefore, experiencing shame is part of being human and there is a level of inevitability to feeling shame. It is an emotion that is triggered when we feel we have not adhered to accepted standards that are constantly evolving. These accepted standards can be ones that we set for ourselves, those set by society or both.

Another important consideration in relation to social media and shame is its impact on the virtual and real self. Drawing on the work of (Goss et al,1994) and (Gilbert, 2017), Paulo, Vargos, Riberio Di Silva and Rijo, (2019), differentiate between internal and external shame.

> *"Internal shame refers to holding a negative and persistent perception about the self, while external shame refers to the persistent and overwhelming perception that others hold negative beliefs and thoughts about the self."*

These are useful distinctions when it comes to considering how shaming operates on social media and the viability of any response based on restorative practice. It is important to note that one can experience both internal and external shame about the same event or action because it can trigger negative perceptions about the self and the perception that others hold negative thoughts about you. Again, Monica Lewinsky's experience illustrates this effectively. It is the same emotion with multiple dimensions and therefore potential responses. This is further

complicated in a social media environment where the virtual self and a virtual 'other' can be more significant that the 'real self' of 'real other'.

Bradshaw's (2005) concept of toxic shame is also useful in considering the role of shame in the social media world, where the 'virtual self' is often larger than the real self. The author describes this as when shame takes over a person's entire identity and states that it is the antithesis of nourishing shame. Bradshaw (2005) points out that:

> *"…toxic shame is unbearable and can result in the creation of a false self that does not have the shameful characteristics identified in the real self.*

This authentic self is replaced by an inauthentic or other self. While the two can co-exist, one can be dominant in certain situations. This is amplified in the context of social media where the creation of a virtual self that lacks all the imperfections of the real self is promoted, encouraged, and endorsed.

As Lewinsky illustrates it's this virtual self that is attacked most through social media. Most of the people who were posting hateful comments had never met Monica Lewinsky.

With social media, we also enter a realm where there can be several virtual selves. In these situations, the link between these and the real self, or even the authentic virtual self, can grow weaker and weaker. The virtual selves can be immune to regulating emotions like shame and this empowers them to be destructive agents of harm.

In addition automated fake accounts can be easily established and in instances where monetary reward is linked to interaction, the incentive to post hateful and

false content is amplified. In such situations there is little or no link between the virtual entities and any real self, so the shaming regulator is almost completely absent. As Barsotti points out these 'troll farms' emerged in countries like Russia about 10 years ago with the express purpose of sowing division and hate in countries across the globe. The objective here was to elicit emotional responses from people to issues that concerned them.

The complicated relationship between the virtual and real worlds also presents challenges for Nathanson's (1992) 'compass of shame'. This model was developed six years before Google was founded, 10 years before the emergence of Facebook and three years before Monica Lewinsky took up an internship at the White House that would make her patient zero. While Nathanson's model remains useful, its application in a world where the virtual and real are in a constant state of flux is challenging.

It is possible that different selves could respond from different points of the compass. The real self could respond by becoming withdrawn, by attacking themselves or seeking solace in alcohol or drugs to deaden the feeling of shame. This is often a response to shame linked to body image, which research has shown is a particular issue for young women. However, the virtual self could respond by attacking others virtually where, as discussed above, this would not be regulated by the norms of social interaction.

The relationship between shame and guilt is also important in the context of its relationship with healing and restorative practice in addressing shaming on social media. June Tangney (2021) summarises the relationship between these two concepts as follows:

> *"When people feel shame, they feel bad about themselves: 'I'm a bad person for having done this.' When people feel guilt, they feel bad not about the self, but about a specific behaviour: 'I did a bad thing.' And it's a subtle distinction, but it turns out that it leads to very different motivations".*

Tangney points out that shame can lead to withdrawal and blaming other people. Guilt, on the other hand, with its focus on the behaviour rather than the self, can push a person towards making amends. People who feel guilt about a behaviour without feeling shame about the self are more inclined to confess, apologize, in some way, try to repair the harm that was done. In this context the person is more open to being restorative and constructively addressing the harm that has been done. Brene Brown (2012) agrees with this analysis and states that "shame is I am bad. Guilt is I did something bad".

Brown (2012) goes to examine the connection between shame and empathy and argues that empathy is an antidote to shame.

> *"Shame is an epidemic in our culture. And to get out from underneath it — to find our way back to each other… If we're going to find our way back to each other, we have to understand and know empathy, because empathy's the antidote to shame."*

For Brown shame is destructive and she makes important distinctions between how men and women experience shame. This distinction is important in the context of social media as public shaming of men and women operates differently on social media (Brown 2012).

What is clear from this analysis is that shame is a multidimensional human characteristic that has positive and negative effects. Unlike guilt, shame is rooted in the definition of self and social media with its amplification of the virtual self or selves has produced an explosion in personal attacks that have resulted in a pandemic of shaming which has an automated dimension and is undermining social cohesion and destroying lives.

In this situation hope is in scarce supply especially when one consideres that the business models of the social media platforms are built on promoting destructive interactions. While regulation to tackle these is promised, it is rooted in sanctions and penalties rather than restorative practices that would see individuals and global corporations taking real responsibility for the harm they are creating and looking to address them. While the former is long overdue, to many the latter seems impossible. Indeed, this reflects my own position when I embarked on the project that underpins this article. However, then I met Dylan Marron — virtually, of course.

In a powerful Ted talk from 2018, Marron outlined how he discovered that online hate was an inevitable part of becoming a public figure as a successful writer and performer. Unlike Monica Lewinsky, Marron had chosen to become a public figure but their experiences in terms of attacks and personal abuse are similar and reflect many others. However, Marron developed a coping mechanism based on calling people who left abusive messages online and asking them about themselves and why they felt the need to be abusive towards him. However, the objective of the call is not to shame the person, or make them feel guilty so they might apologise, although this might be the outcome. "It's their answer to this question that allows me to empathise with them. And empathy, it turns out, is a key ingredient in getting these conversations off the ground."

Empathy established a connection. This is consistent with Brown's (2012) analysis referenced above. However, it is important to note that Marron acknowledges that:

> *"It can feel very vulnerable to be empathizing with someone you profoundly disagree with. So, I established a helpful mantra for myself. 'Empathy is not endorsement'."*

This is a restorative approach in practice. Marron was moving from being merely connected to others to having a conversation. This is an important distinction because the internet and social media has provided the possibility of infinite connections. The growth of messaging services like WhatsApp is a good example here. But these connections are one-dimensional and don't have the depth of real conversations. This is usually the virtual self in operation — think, for example, of the pictures people use on their profiles on messaging services and how people prefer to text rather than call.

Sherry Turkle (2012) described this phenomenon as 'I share therefore I am' and argues that the technologies are giving us the illusion of companionship without friendship. Turkle (2012) also suggested that the always-connected world is impacting our ability to find solitude and within this a time for reflection where "you find yourself so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments".

Restorative practice is built on a foundation of self-reflection and restoring attachment. It allows us to connect with our humanity, with regulatory concepts like shame and with the restorative possibilities of empathy.

While enhanced regulation of social media platforms will have an impact, addressing the dystopia they are creating will also require a human response. I believe that restorative practice has a role to play here based on my analysis on the role of shame and shaming in social interactions. This is not a new insight. Lewinsky and others have pointed it out previously. Hopefully, these voices will begin to be heard.

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