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Shame on who?

Experiential and theoretical accounts of the constitution of women’s shame within abusive intimate relationships

A thesis
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Angela Jury
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Abstract

This feminist project explores the experiential accounts of twenty-five women who have lived through abuse within their intimate relationships. Their stories, gathered through a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews intended to elicit accounts of resilience were saturated with emotion-talk, especially shame-talk. To address questions of the relationship between these accounts and theoretical accounts of abuse, and shame the women’s texts were engaged in an analytic dialogue with feminist knowledges of abuse against women, Erving Goffman’s sociological understandings of shame, stigma and mortification of the self, Thomas Scheff’s sociological theory of shame and social bonds, and feminist poststructuralist understandings around the constitution of human subjectivity. These conversations enabled development of a conceptual representation of the special and highly specific form of social bonding experienced by victims of abuse within intimate relationships. This bonding begins with processes of mortification of the self, the gradual erosion of a sense of self through the systematic imposition of various shaming and shameful actions. These processes take place within a specific social context created through the constitutive power of dominant discourses of gender, heterosexual coupledom, matrimony and motherhood which work to shape the lives of individual women. Because of the specific ways in which these discourses currently operate within Aotearoa New Zealand they result in the constitution of a narrow range of tightly prescribed subject positions available to victims of intimate partner abuse. This analysis leads to an argument that women’s inability to ‘do’ motherhood or intimate partnership in line with dominant discourses of mothering and relationships (because these simply cannot be achieved within an abusive context), opens them to the debilitating effects of shame. Shame, both actual and threatened, promotes silence, isolation and dangerous private spaces as women seek to protect themselves from its painful experience. I argue that it is therefore crucial to promote the availability of discursive positioning for women living through abuse which offers non-shaming and realistic choices.
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