

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Shame on who?

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

**A thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology
at
Massey University**

**Angela Jury
2009**

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 coupledness, 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.

Acknowledgements

I am hugely indebted to the great many people who have helped me in so many ways throughout the long birthing process of this project. Without your help this (truly) wouldn't have seen the light of day.

My thanks go first to the women who so generously and openly shared stories of their experiences with me. Your honesty, trust and generosity were truly humbling.

For the many hours of often patient debate and discussion to which this project owes its final shape, I thank my supervisors Mary Murray and Mandy Morgan. Especially you Mandy - your patience, caring and generosity are gifts beyond any expression of gratitude. An immense thank you anyway!

To my friends, Jude, Julz, Avril, Julie and Corrina, women who generously and patiently tolerated periods of painful angst, offered gentle critique, and always believed the end would come – thank you for your unwavering support.

To my friends and colleagues on the 7th floor at Massey, thanks for your indefatigable encouragement. Heather and Mary, your patient endurance of my process was superseded only by your humor and generosity. Thanks also to earlier members of the supervisory team, Martin Tolich and Celia Briar for their support and to Lee Tillard for her patient transcribing assistance. Much gratitude too to Massey University for the financial assistance that made it possible for me to pursue this research

Thanks also go to some who would perhaps have little idea of their influence regarding this project. Firstly, warm gratitude goes to John Cuff, the first person to suggest to me that there could be more to life than icing Chelsea buns. Secondly, my thanks go to Ange Beckett. Her friendship and belief inspired me and she, quite literally, delivered me to Massey University. Thirdly, huge and totally inadequate thanks go to Marion Wellington for her unswerving (and sometimes unfathomable) belief in me. And finally, my deepest gratitude goes to Kevin and Debbie Butler. Without their support in those early days, the chances of this project reaching fruition would have been remote.

Finally, my most heartfelt thanks go to my partner Jill and my children Karen and Graham. Your love, support and resolute faith in me ensured this work was completed. My debt to you is enormous.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of contents	iii
Introduction: The shape of things to come.	1
Chapter one: Initial theoretical and philosophical framing	5
Patriarchy	8
Victims and/or survivors	10
Heterosexuality – wives and mothers	16
Women as emotion(al)	18
Hierarchy of abuse	21
Cycle(s) of violence	24
Intergenerational cycle of violence	27
Enter resilience	29
Learning the ‘right way’ of knowing and helping	30
The coercive control model	32
Resilience explained	36
Assumptions made explicit	39
Chapter two: Method, methodology and research participants	42
Data gathering choices	42
Ethical approval	46
Participant recruitment and consent process	47
Fieldwork	48
Participants	49
Follow-up interviews	51
Initial analysis: An emerging problem	52

The 'Self' as researcher	54
Critique of feminist analyses of abuse	60
Further influences	64
Overall issues	65
Occupying a feminist standpoint	66
Chapter three: Goffman, shame, stigma and mortification of the self	74
The Self	74
Stigma	76
Shame, stigma and abuse	78
Stigma management: The information game	81
Intimate partner abuse as discrediting/discreditable?	89
Institutionalized violence	91
Mortification of the self	92
Loss of self	93
The production of compliance	96
Step one: Role dispossession	96
Step two: Identity trimming	99
Step three: identity dispossession	100
Step four: Degradation and forced deference	102
Step five: Contaminative exposure	104
Step six: Looping	107
Step seven: Loss of self-determination	109
Fluctuation and unsteadiness	111
Unemotional emotionality	115
Chapter four: Emotion, Thomas Scheff and the social bond	117
Emotion and abuse	117
Thomas Scheff and the social bond	120
Constituting the bond	121
Connectedness	122
Contextualizing connectedness: Public and private	125

Solidarity and alienation	127
The social bond – a feminist reading	130
Mutual/reciprocal ratification	130
The alienation of embarrassment	132
Communication	135
Communication with others	139
Cooperation	143
Attunement	148
Enter emotion: shame and the bond	151
Scheff and social power relations	159
Gendering the bond	160
Moving on once more	163
Chapter five: Feminist poststructuralism	165
Secure social bonds as indicator of social health	165
Traditional analyses: Emerging limitations	168
Feminist poststructuralism	171
Subjectivity	171
Power	176
Domination	177
Discourse	178
Discursive shifting exemplified	181
‘Battered women’: Constitution and consequences	182
Social bonds: A poststructuralist view	185
Thinking, writing AND feeling emotion	186
Probyn and shame	191
Shame and interest	192
But...	194

Chapter six: Discourse(s) of abuse	198
History and legislation	200
Recent initiatives	202
Public/private	204
Participants' understandings of 'abuse'	207
Statutory agencies: Police, Courts, legislation and the judiciary	210
Credibility/believability	211
Allocation of blame	214
Blame, responsibility and the problem of 'evidence'	218
Legislation and the Courts	222
Images emerging	224
Community agencies	228
Agency practice(s)	229
Consequences of agency policy and practices	229
Chapter seven: Discourse(s) of heterosexual coupledness, matrimony and motherhood	232
Heterosexual coupledness and matrimony	232
Motherhood	250
Conclusion	261
References	272
Appendix A: Information sheet	290
Appendix B: Consent form	293
Appendix C: Interview outline and schedule of questions	295