

Critical and Radical Social Work
Poverty and Shame - Messages for Social Work
--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	CRSW-D-14-00043R1
Article Type:	Voices from the front line article
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Keywords:	Poverty, inequality, shame, social work, child protection
Additional Information:	
Question	Response

Poverty and Shame – Messages for Social Work

Abstract

This paper discusses the work of a project bringing together family members living in poverty with experience of child protection services, academics and practitioners to develop a training programme for social workers on work with families living in poverty. In this paper the theme of the first workshop, 'poverty and shame' is explored. The content of the discussions are analysed and implications for the development of critical social work practice considered.

Introduction

In 2005 a project involving families living in poverty with experience of child protection services, academics and practitioners developed a training programme for social workers on work with families living in poverty. The project was a collaboration between ATD Fourth World, the Family Rights Group and academics from Royal Holloway, University of London. The family members were supported by ATD Fourth World, an international human rights and anti-poverty organisation. The project's overall aim was to develop and deliver with service users (hereafter referred to by their preferred term 'family members') a teaching programme that would increase awareness of the impact of poverty on children and families and social work responses necessary to improve the quality of their lives (Gupta and Blewett, 2008). *Getting the Right Trainers* (ATD Fourth World, 2005) documents the process and content of the project that led to teaching at Royal Holloway, conference presentations, and a SCIE e-learning module.

In 2014 ATD Fourth World and Royal Holloway decided to repeat the project in order to involve a wider range of family members, academics and practitioners in the revision of the curriculum. We recognised the need to incorporate developments in theoretical and research knowledge, as well as changes in policy and practice contexts. The aim of this project is somewhat more ambitious.

1 We plan to develop a training programme delivered by family members, and also
2 contribute more widely to the development of critical social work practice,
3 which challenges the dominant neo-liberal political and policy discourse that
4 individualises risk and blames families for their poverty (Parton, 2014). Rising
5 levels of poverty and inequality, severe cuts to family support services and more
6 punitive responses to families involved in the child protection and family justice
7 systems increased our motivation to undertake this project.
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14 The *Giving Poverty a Voice – Social Worker Training Project* involves four half day
15 workshops to which family members, practitioners and academics are invited.
16 This paper explores the themes discussed in the first workshop on ‘poverty and
17 shame’. Twenty-three participants took part in this workshop: ten family
18 members from ATD Fourth World and a parents’ advocacy group; four
19 academics; five practitioners from social work and law; and five ATD Fourth
20 World workers. The workshop started with a short presentation and film on
21 poverty and shame, followed by a group discussion on the experience of shame.
22 We then divided into smaller mixed groups to discuss social work practice and
23 shame, and practice that promotes human dignity. The discussions were audio-
24 taped, transcribed and thematically analysed. All participants were informed
25 that the discussions would be used to develop a training programme and
26 disseminated through journal articles and conference papers. All participation
27 was voluntary and the anonymity of participants assured in the production of
28 training materials and other dissemination documents.
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45 **Why poverty and shame?**

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47 During the *Getting the Right Trainers* project family members identified that
48 living in poverty was more than just lack of resources, but was also about being
49 treated with a lack of dignity and respect (ATD Fourth World, 2005). Therefore,
50 including consideration of psychological as well as social impacts of poverty and
51 the inter-relationship between these in our themes for the workshops was
52 imperative. Lister (2013: 112) defines poverty as not only being about material
53 disadvantage and economic insecurity but also a ‘shameful social relation,
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1 corrosive of human dignity and flourishing, which is experienced in interactions
2 with the wider society and in the way people in poverty are talked about and
3 treated by politicians, officials, professionals, the media, and sometimes
4 academics'. Jo (2013: 517) similarly argues that the 'the conceptual lens of
5 poverty must be broadened from the purely material to include the non-material
6 and from the individual to the collective'.
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12 Some psychologists suggest that shame is one of the most pernicious of emotions,
13 creating a sense of powerlessness and inadequacy arising from the fact that,
14 unlike guilt, it is experienced as an internal, stable, negative attribution about the
15 self as opposed to an external, unstable, negative attribution about a specific
16 behavior (Tangney and Dearing, 2004; Tracy & Robins 2007). Brown (2006: 45)
17 defines shame as 'the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are
18 flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging'. Behavioural
19 responses to shame can include withdrawal and social isolation, avoidance of
20 feelings of shame through substance misuse, depression, anger and self-harm
21 (Nathanson, 1992; Gibson, 2013). Tangney & Dearing's (2004: 120) review of the
22 research evidence concluded that 'there is no debate regarding the pathogenic
23 nature of shame'. Whilst the psychological literature has engaged extensively
24 with the emotion of shame, it has been argued that exploration of its dynamics
25 has paid insufficient attention to social context (Scheff, 2003).
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39 Reference has been made in the literature on poverty to the effects of shame for
40 some time. Townsend (1979: 241) identified the 'social shame of those with little
41 money' and Sen (1983:159) suggested that shame is at the 'irreducible absolutist
42 core' of the idea of poverty. More recently the intersection between shame and
43 poverty has increasingly become the subject of important analysis and policy
44 discourse (Chase and Walker, 2012). Lister (2013: 112) argues that research
45 with people living in poverty has highlighted 'the psychological pain all too often
46 associated with poverty: disrespect, humiliation and an assault on dignity and
47 self-esteem; shame and stigma; and also powerlessness, lack of voice, and denial
48 of full human rights and diminished citizenship'. She identifies the process of
49 'Othering' by which people in poverty are treated as 'Other' and inferior. As
50 Lister (2006: 91) explains: 'it affirms 'our' identity and legitimates our privilege
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1 while denying 'them' their complex humanity and subjectivity. In doing so, it all
2 too easily serves to justify poverty and inequality by blaming the 'Other' for their
3 own and also society's problems'. This 'Othering' process can be seen in the
4 dominant media and political discourse, where families living in poverty are
5 labeled as 'scroungers' and blamed for their poverty. Peel (2003: 10) argues that
6 the underlying problem is 'the way that people who are not poor think about
7 those who are'. Shame is regarded as individually felt but socially constructed
8 and imposed on people living in poverty by the hegemonic narrative of general
9 public discourse and their dealings with others around them (Walker et al.,
10 2013).

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20 Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue that there is a very strong link between ill
21 health, social problems and greater levels of material inequality in society. They
22 link inequality to shame and stigma as greater inequality increases the
23 importance of social status leaving people living in poverty feeling unvalued and
24 inferior. Sen (1995) in his work on the Capabilities Approach also recognises
25 issues of relativity and the social construction of shame and stigma associated
26 with poverty. He argues that poverty leads to the deprivation of certain basic
27 capabilities, and these include 'social achievements such as taking part in the life
28 of the community, being able to appear in public without shame' (Sen, 1995, p.
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40 Chase and Walker (2012: 740) describe poverty as 'a meta-arena for the
41 emergence of shame especially in contemporary British society where success is
42 largely measured according to the attainment of economic goals'. They suggest
43 that shame is almost always co-constructed; combining a subjective judgment of
44 one's own inabilities; anticipation of how one will be judged by others; and the
45 actual interactions with others, including professionals and bureaucracy that
46 compounded feelings of inferiority and unworthiness (Chase and Walker, 2012).
47 Whilst we all have the capacity to feel shame, poverty-induced shame and stigma
48 can compound other experiences of discrimination, oppression and abuse (Frost
49 & Hoggett 2008). Gibson (2013) suggests that shame is intrinsic to the child
50 protection system and that we need to develop more 'shame-reducing' social
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1 work practice, especially with families experiencing social inequalities.
2 Featherstone et al. (2012: 631) argue that: 'In a context of rising inequalities, the
3 corrosion of trust and the internalisation of shame and social inferiority are of
4 particular concern not only in terms of consequences for the wider social fabric,
5 but also in terms of how such features get played out in everyday practice
6 encounters, particularly where the stakes are very high (e.g. where issues
7 around the protection of children are on the agenda)'.
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13 **Themes from the workshop**

14 **How is shame experienced?**

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21 Participants identified disrespect for people living in poverty amongst the
22 affluent. This includes a lack of awareness and understanding about the impact
23 of poverty on the lives of those experiencing it, leading to judgments and ridicule
24 that exacerbate feelings of shame. One participant spoke about the area in which
25 she lives, which has recently started to undergo a process of gentrification,
26 where a café advertisement stated in bold letters 'food bank for the rich'. She
27 said:
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35 *"Why would someone use the phrase 'food banks for the rich' to*
36 *advertise a café? I think this is totally disrespectful, they thought it*
37 *was a joke. Nobody thinks about the people using food banks".*
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41 Media representations were felt to perpetuate shameful stereotypes and
42 politicians identified as also espousing views of the poor that are discriminatory
43 and validate shaming negative attitudes. Participants noted the necessity of
44 effective and public counter-narratives that increase understanding about the
45 lived experiences of people in poverty and their daily struggles to do their best
46 for their families and communities.
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53 Participants highlighted how the simple fact of having to make use of
54 bureaucratic support services was humiliating and undermined self-esteem.
55 Attending Jobcentre Plus (JCP) was identified as being particularly shaming. This
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1 was related to the general stigma of having to claim benefits, as one participant
2 explains:

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4 *“There is a pillar in front of our JCP that I stand behind so people on the*
5 *buses going past can’t see me waiting outside”.*
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9 However, humiliating and dehumanising treatment from workers compounded
10 these feelings of worthlessness. For example, treatment by JCP staff was
11 highlighted for making people feel invisible and that their existence does not
12 count, while the sanctioning process was described as criminalising. Some
13 participants spoke about unreasonable and unattainable bureaucratic
14 expectations that set them up to fail and exacerbated material hardship and
15 feelings of failure. One participant described her son’s experiences:
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19 *“Last year, my disabled son arrived late at JCP because of roadworks. He*
20 *was verbally abused because of that. I was shocked because he was*
21 *sanctioned and then it was a slog to get human recognition. You get*
22 *more respect in Tesco. You get treated better as a consumer... We were*
23 *invisible. You can drop dead of a heart attack and still get the blame. At*
24 *the tribunal/hearing against the sanction I felt that the word of staff was*
25 *taken above ours. We were then told that such behaviour and treatment*
26 *is written into their contracts”.*
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38 The following diagram summarises the various interrelated experiences of
39 poverty-induced shame identified by participants, stemming from wider societal
40 discourses and the interactions of people living in poverty with organisations
41 and professionals.
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45 **Figure 1**

46 **Social work practice, shame and poverty**

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51 When talking about their experiences of social work in the context of child
52 protection practice, family members spoke about feelings of shame and stigma
53 from simply having professionals involved in their lives. These feelings were
54 compounded by perceptions of pre-judgment and blame. They gave examples of
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1 feeling disrespected; often being disbelieved and treated as a liar; automatic
2 assumptions that they had done something wrong; and being blamed for their
3 poverty. An advocate and children's guardian also expressed feelings of 'shamed
4 by association' when supporting parents' perspectives.
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8 Home visits were highlighted as shameful experiences when social workers
9 behaved dismissively or disrespectfully. One family member recalled a time a
10 social worker arrived, stated she wished to be referred to by her last name, but
11 addressed the family member by her first name, pronounced it incorrectly and
12 continued to do so throughout the visit even when corrected. Another family
13 member from Black and minority ethnic (BME) background described a time
14 when a social worker (also from a BME background) responded to what she
15 perceived as mess by exclaiming '*no Black person keeps their house like this*'. Both
16 family members stated that these experiences were humiliating, as though the
17 social workers had been gratuitously asserting authority over them, increasing
18 the 'Othering' process.
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22 Feelings of shame were also connected to parents' sense of 'a lack of control'
23 over decisions that impacted on their lives. Some participants identified times
24 when they felt professionals had violated their trust and confidentiality, leading
25 to feelings of powerlessness. Powerlessness was also related to experiences such
26 as '*goalposts changing*', '*being set up to fail*' and being talked about but not to.
27 One participant spoke of the objectifying experience of receiving a report written
28 about herself by a professional who had limited contact with her:
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*"When I read it I thought 'this isn't me!'I couldn't even understand
it, all the jargon in it. It's not made for lay people it's made for
academics that are going to read it. But for the parent, when it's
about you, you want to understand it, you want to know what they
are saying."*

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Child protection conferences were particularly singled out as spaces where
participants felt '*lost*', '*invisible*', '*powerless*' and '*voiceless*'. One said that:

*"The meeting may be about you and your life but you are excluded from
the discussion".*

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These feelings of powerlessness and voicelessness were linked to subsequent feelings of shameful inadequacy. Family members spoke of sometimes not understanding what was going on at the conference or even why it was being held, and as a result *'feeling stupid because you don't understand'*. One participant powerfully summarised many of the negative experiences of these meetings:

'For me the whole thing is awful, you are dealing with every emotion, you have to come to terms with loads of different things that you have no control over, you've got no decision in. You sit at the table and listen, but you are not allowed a choice or an input that's going to have any impact. So you are sat there observing what everyone else is doing with your life, and your children's lives on the basis of strangers around the table. It is degrading, humiliating. Everything is taken away from you.'

Challenging shame in social practice

In the workshop participants also discussed how social work practice can promote dignity and respect, including within processes that are inherently shameful (like child protection conferences). Participants argued that social workers must recognise parents' sense of stigma, shame and fear of losing their children, which impact on their ability to ask for help and engage with Children's Services. Being approachable, respectful and, importantly, treating each family as unique were identified as important aspects of professional practice. One of the practitioners, a barrister, said:

'My experience of working with families in the court system is that they're invisible, they are not seen as actual real people. You give a person dignity when you recognise that they exist.'

Family members spoke positively about social workers who spent time with them and got to know them as individuals, as opposed to a *'tick box'* exercise. One participant explained that a social worker went fishing with him and his

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2 sons. At the end of the trip the social worker was greatly impressed by how well
3 he was able to look after his children. Another participant said:

4 *'She took time to get to know us. She went to the school and nursery.*
5 *She was a good social worker. She even said she learned from me. She*
6 *was only 23 and at first I was skeptical, but we learned from each*
7 *other'.*

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13 In relation to feelings of invisibility, one academic noted that the emphasis on the
14 child could often render parents and the family unit as secondary or seemingly
15 unimportant. Addressing this point, one family member stressed the importance
16 of *'seeing the child as part of the family, rather than separate from the family'*. She
17 spoke about *'team around the family'* meetings being far more supportive and
18 productive than the *'team around the child'* meetings she had previously
19 attended.
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27 In relation to child protection processes, feelings of powerlessness, fear and
28 inadequacy can be reduced by improved information about procedures and
29 expectations, so that families know what is happening, their responsibilities and
30 their rights.
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35 *'Going to a conference for any family is going to be shaming and*
36 *there isn't any way to completely alleviate the shame, but we can at*
37 *least ask what we can do to make the process a little bit easier,*
38 *alleviate the anxiety, give the families an understanding/more*
39 *knowledge about what the process is all about'.*
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45 Some suggestions for improving the experience were:
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- *Don't overlook learning disabilities! Individuals with learning disabilities really do struggle to understand without appropriate support.*
 - *Be mindful about what we write about others – avoid prejudicial language.*
 - *Go through reports with families beforehand.*

- *Better chairing of conferences – the chair speaks to parents first, give them an opportunity to speak first, when the conference is over, ask parents if they have any concerns.*
- *Give parents a ‘Jargon Buster’ (a glossary, that parents can use to understand professional jargon).*

Involvement of trained non-professionals can also be valuable. A few of the participants were from a council-run Parent Advocate Service that assigns parents who have previously been through the child protection system as supportive advocates to parents currently within the system, prior to and during the initial child protection conference. This service was reported as helping parents to feel more informed about and less stigmatised by the process, and as reducing feelings of shame by highlighting to parents that they are ‘not alone’. As two advocates noted:

‘I go to people’s homes and I tell them ‘I’m not a professional, I’m just like you’. You see them relax and they tell me more than they might have told the social worker.’

‘... we have been through the system, we’ve experienced it, we know where these people are coming from.’

Judgmental attitudes and prejudicial views were identified as needing to be challenged and for this process to start early on in professional training. Family members spoke of professionals needing to avoid imposing high expectations that most families could not live up to. One spoke of relief when she had a social worker who understood that a teenage boy’s room could be a mess and did not consider this a sign of bad parenting. Accordingly, making expectations manageable so individuals are not set-up to fail, and recognising positive steps that families make, rather than just focusing on negatives, were important messages from participants.

‘I think this is important – the humanity should be brought back’

Conclusions

Enabling the voices of people marginalised by poverty to be heard is one way of

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counteracting the lack of recognition and respect accorded them. As Lister (2006: 97) explains: 'It is a way of seeing - and hearing - people in poverty as human beings whose presence matters'. With this project we aim to make a contribution to social workers' understanding of the experiences of families living in poverty and to the development of practice that promotes people's dignity and capabilities to care for their children. In this first workshop the importance of recognising structural causes of psychological distress was discussed, and the prevalence of feelings of shame associated with poverty confirmed. These emotions were compounded by experiences of a child protection system that left some family members feeling powerless, voiceless, unfairly blamed and on occasions 'set up to fail'. The 'us' and 'them' Othering processes associated with poverty were reinforced by their status as parents involved with child protection services.

Krumer-Nevo (2009: 318) argues for 'research and practice grounded in an equilibrium of structure and agency, that tell the stories of men and women, youth and adults who live in poverty as tales of pain on the one hand and of struggle and power, on the other, as tales of structure - limiting and damaging - on the one hand, and of subjectivity and agency - rich and human - on the other'. These struggles and exercises of agency are often played out in relationships with social workers, and can, as Gibson (2013) identifies, impact on how family members are perceived and treated by professionals. By failing to acknowledge sources and feelings of shame, practitioners can collude with processes that compound family members' sense of powerlessness, worthlessness and inadequacy.

Social work, however, can also be experienced differently through practice that recognises the complex interactions between personal problems and structural inequality and challenges the dominant discourse individualizing risk and blaming families for their poverty. Attention needs to be paid to the use of professional power in ways that promote rather than diminish human dignity and family members' capabilities; and a critically reflexive approach that recognizes how one's self and social position influences the narrative one develops is necessary (Krumer-Nevo, 2009; Fook, 2012).

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FIGURE 1

