

Research Paper

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Exploring Shame Resilience Theory (SRT) and its potential for understanding how shame affects the behaviours of women with lived experience of imprisonment

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Executive Summary

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Acknowledged shame ... could be the glue that holds relationships and societies together, and unacknowledged shame the force that blows them apart (Scheff, 2000:258)

Background

The impetus for this research came from our growing understanding of how certain behaviours presented by women in prison were not recognised - either by the women or prison staff - as being potentially rooted in shame. These understandings grew over the many years we led The Forgiveness Project's prison programme RESTORE - an intensive group-based programme that helps prisoners explore the narratives of their lives. The experience we gained working with women participating in RESTORE formed a crucial understanding of how unprocessed trauma can manifest as shame that triggers violent and challenging behaviours in women.

Equally we grew to understand the strong taboo around shame and the fear it provokes, often rendering it unrecognised and unspoken yet still perniciously present and active, shaping the women's engagement with themselves and one another. The connection between shame and aggression greatly interested us as it bore out what we were witnessing in the prison. Walker and Knauer argue that 'humiliation and shame are the core trigger and vulnerability for violence' (Walker and Knauer 2011:725) and crucially argue that understanding these complex dynamics are essential for promoting mental health among offenders. This connection was strongly advocated by Gilligan (1996) in his work looking at connections between shame and violence making the strong declaration that 'the emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence, whether toward other or self' (Gilligan 1997: 110).

Our growing understanding was that explicitly naming, exploring and speaking shame appeared to offer greater agency to then address aspects of life where shame was particularly active.

In our discussions with both prison officers and psychologists it became clear that fear around explicitly naming shame was high. A serious concern was that women who presented with challenging behaviours were labelled by staff as unmanageable, rather than those behaviours being recognised as potentially shame based. Through further discussions with staff, it became apparent that the link between shame and violence was not explicitly known or understood.

As a result of these concerning observations, we felt it was crucial to deepen our understanding of shame and how it impacts on women in prison, with a view to support more tailored interventions that better support women and staff to understand and manage shame. We discovered Shame Resilience Theory (Brown 2006) which defines an approach to managing and overcoming shame. This theory named our already established approach in RESTORE and gave us a clear impetus to explore the use of Shame Resilience Theory's (SRT) in interventions across the female prison estate.

Key Aims and Objectives

Our aim was to explore SRT and its potential to understand how shame affects the behaviours of women with lived experience of imprisonment. It was important to us that this research did three things: 1. Contribute to the understanding of shame-based behaviour of women in custody. 2. Develop this understanding to create more effective strategies and interventions to support the women in their recovery and 3. Support staff in their direct work managing behaviour and violence.

We are both trained in trauma informed practice and feel our research builds on the foundation of trauma informed approaches and interventions. While both female estates we worked in had specific trauma informed training for staff, it was clear that the lack of understanding as to how shame behaviours were related to trauma was hindering their ability to work with and support the women. Discussions with a Senior Manager and other staff recognised this gap of understanding and the need for this research to support staff and interventions that could manage these complex and challenging behaviours.

It is from these observations and our ongoing conversations with prison management that our focus for the research was developed. Our objectives were:

- 1 To define SRT, understand its roots, competing perspectives and explore applications and uses in different settings:
- 2 To interview women who have lived experience of prison, and who have experienced an SRT informed programme (RESTORE), in order to explore whether or not SRT was useful to them both inside prison and on release.
- 3 To interview women who have lived experience of prison to explore the key factors that women identify have changed the way they have managed their behaviour during time served and subsequently on release.

Research Design:

Work on shame can be challenging, not least because of the “slipperiness” of shame, which makes identifying, defining, and analysing this feeling a necessarily inexact science, but also because of the affective toll it may take on the researcher. Shame is, notoriously, a painful emotion, and a sustained engagement with shame—even if this is at an academic, scholarly “re- move”—can leave one vulnerable, even hurt, in its wake. (Fischer, C. 2018. P. 371-372)

Our initial research design was to conduct the research in the main prison establishment in which we were working in order to better understand the experiences of women currently serving custodial sentences. We gained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Criminology in Cambridge in January 2019. However, HMPPS National Research Committee declined our application for a number of criteria, so we revised our research design to work with women released from prison into the community and received ethical clearance in August 2019.

A total of 16 women who had participated in RESTORE and who had since been released were contacted. The women represented a good cross section of the female estate, including women who had served both long term and short-term sentences for varying offences ranging from manslaughter to fraud. Eight women responded positively, but unfortunately one woman was unable to participate due to personal circumstances, so in the end we conducted seven semi-structured interviews. All interviews were held in Wales and England, close to where each woman lived. The women chose the spaces they felt safest in – these were either their homes or therapeutic spaces in their communities.

A crucial element of our research design was careful safeguarding, including a process of preparation and debrief for each woman, supporting them to identify key individuals in their own community who they could later share their experiences with if needed. We recorded interviews with one another pre and post each interview as a way of reflexively attending to our own situated position within the research. We were aware of the potential to interlock our subjective experiences with the women themselves. We decided to jointly interview the women where possible and shared transcription of each interview between ourselves. Due to the very nature of shame, and its potential to overwhelm us due to our own lived experience of shame, we designed methods to take care of ourselves and to provide opportunities to step away from transcribing the data at different points.

Methodology

We used a case study methodology with thematic analysis of data, obtained from a set of in-depth semi-structured interviews with the women, using a phenomenological perspective. As the interviews were being conducted in retrospect of women's lived experience of prison, employing a phenomenological perspective allowed them to explore, re-frame and reveal new layers of meaning from their experiences without seeking to explain or analyse all they had been through. By offering a descriptive process our hope was to enable the women to navigate the messy complexities of speaking shame and find a way of making new meaning out of their lived experience of shame.

Thematic Analysis – Key Findings:

Out of our thematic analysis we identified 5 key themes: *SRT in programmes*, *Resilience as a Life Force*, *Meaning Making*, *Resilience against Unwanted Identities* and *Re-humanising Self and Other*.

1 – Shame Resilience Theory (SRT) in programmes: this theme identified how programmes delivered in the prison estates were often inappropriate for the women's individual circumstances. There appeared to be little uniformity in the programmes available across the prison estate, and little, if any tailoring to meet and adapt to the specific individual needs of women. It was noticeable that programmes looking specifically at trauma only focused on generic aspects of trauma and offered little opportunity for the women to explore their own individual circumstances.

A concerning finding in this research was how the training and work across the prison estate associated with safeguarding women from self-harm and suicide was impacting negatively on the women who undertook that training and work. This impact was primarily due to the training only focusing on procedures to deal with incidents of self-harm but not addressing the vicarious trauma the women experienced as they supported other prisoners who were at risk. This was having a real impact on their own resilience.

2 – Resilience as a life force: our findings recognised that despite leading very traumatic lives, the women were able to access an inner resilience in order to survive. This fight to survive went on despite their excruciating battle against their internal feelings of toxic shame. It is in this word 'despite' that we identified the life force of these women that steered them to feel worthy to live.

Women described many varied and creative strategies they used in order to maintain their dignity and shield themselves from procedures deemed as 'safeguarding' the prison system, but often experienced as highly shaming by the women. Our findings noted a particular disturbing vulnerability for the women under the gaze of male officers regarding their bodily appearance

It became apparent how the women applied strategies as an everyday practice to survive and their sense of self, alongside their strong sense of accountability, became a driving force of resilience to get through their sentences.

3 – Making meaning: this was a key theme across all our research data, and revealed how the women reframed a new, restorative meaning of their experiences from the previous meanings they had formed whilst serving in prison. The research findings point to the fact that the women were making meaning continually throughout their time in prison. The process of finding new meaning out of their experiences was a way to reframe and create a new understanding of the 'why' of what had happened to them - which in turn allowed the women to endure and survive their experiences.

4 - Resilience against unwanted identities: A crucial finding emerging from our data was the way the women were being seen and identified by staff, friends, family and society for their offences, drug taking, roles as mothers and body image. These unwanted identities revealed key aspects of where they felt most shame and noticeably separate from how the women either wanted to be seen or who they believed themselves to be. Our findings revealed how the women became resilient by committing themselves to keep changing and to creatively adjust and forge new identities in order to survive their experiences. Identifying one key individual who enabled the women to hold onto a sense of a new and healthy identity was crucial for women's resilient selves to be strengthened and emerge. A notable disturbing finding in our data revealed the power dynamics between prison staff and female prisoners, particularly relating to gender and female identity that were exploitative and demeaning to the women's identity as women.

5 - Re-humanising self and other: Building on the theme of unwanted identities our findings showed a huge disparity in the way that prison officers treated the women - those that sought to humanise their existence and those who overtly de-humanised them. The women revealed repeatedly how they were not being treated as an individual, and their sense of how they were received and seen by officers added to this sense of powerlessness and dehumanisation. The levels of de-humanisation disclosed in the interviews were at times very serious with some very abusive examples.

A notable place of resilience within de-humanisation came from a growing sense of self. All the women spoke of identifying with a self that was not of a prisoner - a resilient self, built around their admittance of their guilt, their honesty, integrity and clarity as to where injustice was held for them. It was clear this sense of holding onto their sense of identity was essential in the face of some of their experiences to de-individualise the women. The process of re-humanising for the women was demonstrated in a few small but very important examples of prison officers who demonstrated empathy, compassion, kindness and consistent reliability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our research clearly indicates that shame has a huge impact on the lives of women who have lived experience of imprisonment. The research appears to highlight that speaking, understanding and developing resilience in relation to the damaging, pervasive and corrosive nature of shame facilitates personal growth, responsibility taking, and an easier reintegration into community than would normally be anticipated. Therefore, we would recommend that Shame Resilience Theory (SRT) be incorporated into intervention programmes within the female estate.

Our research pointed to the potential influence of positive brief interactions between officers and the women in prison to dissipate shame or behaviours that appeared to be rooted in shame. Therefore, we would recommend that SRT is specifically included in the Five Minute training Interventions in order to facilitate further the change that these interactions are designed to encourage.

We would like to make these further recommendations:

- More research looking at the explicit link between trauma and shame in women in custodial settings. This would include a wider cohort of women, offences, length of sentences and behavioural challenges. There is a sparsity of research on women and shame specifically within custodial settings, despite calls for further research (Brown 2006, Brown 2009, Elison, Garofalo & Velotti 2014, Fitch, Nazaretian, Himmel and 2018 and Hernandez & Mendoza 2011). We would also recommend research looking specifically at links between shame and behaviour in order to further the understanding of this connection.
- Examine existing intervention programmes in order to ascertain the potential and possibility of incorporating SRT.

- All women entering the prison system should have equal and fair access to high quality interventions that meet their needs. This research has highlighted the need for uniformity across the female prison estate.
- That facilitators in intervention programmes that encourage women to share their stories or speak of their trauma receive training in SRT and facilitating the sharing of shame related issues. This would include offering spaces where shame-free guilt could be explored in an explicit manner in order to encourage responsibility taking.
- Establishing a training course for prison officers in Shame Resilience Informed Practice. This training would include:
 1. The development of a working understanding of shame; various ways it can present, impact on relationships, recognition of behaviours and increase skills in the ability to engage, and dissipate shame based behaviours
 2. Clarify and develop understanding the connection between shame and trauma, and resilience.
 3. Understanding the four elements of SRT (Brown 2006) – recognition of personal vulnerability, critical awareness of shame in self and the wider environment, the development of mutually empathetic relationships and the ability to speak shame.
 4. The development of appropriate language to de-escalate shame based behaviour.

ENDS