

REVIEW ARTICLE

Shame and Identity Formation: An Exploration of Lived Experience

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Abstract

Although shame is often associated with negative sentiments and outcomes, it may also prompt the formation of core identity. This autoethnography draws from personal experiences of stigmatization and life achievement to explore how emotions related to shame influence one's sense of self, perceptions of belonging, and emotional resilience. Through a phenomenological lens, the author's life experiences are integrated with theories of identity formation, emotion, and social interaction to suggest that shame has the potential to stimulate construction of one's core identity. The author examines how early life experiences dealing with social exclusion contributed to the pursuit of autonomy and success by motivating a redefinition of self-worth and enabling the derivation of meaning through confronting challenges and achieving success. The implications of this analysis reveal that shame is not only a hindrance but can also act as a catalyst for growth and identity coherence.

INTRODUCTION

The works of Erikson [1], Mead [2], and Goffman [3] are the theoretical precursors of identity concepts that focus on stages of identity development, self-concept, and role enactment. Contemporary identity theory extends these ideas to explore how identity guides decision-making, life outcomes, decisions, and sense of belonging to social groups [4]. However, scant attention has addressed what might be called paradoxical shame, which suggests that shame can be both debilitating and generative [5,6]. The following autoethnography examines this paradox, focusing on the generative phenomenon to consider how shame can guide core identity formation, including the values, beliefs, passions, and experiences that constitute the self.

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Theoretical background

Identity is an evolving construct embedded in self-exploration, social engagement, and narratives that individuals create about themselves that others reinforce or refute. Ego, which refers to awareness of one's uniqueness, reflects identity. Emerging during adolescence, identity provides a sense of well-being [1]. While one's identity can evolve over time to include new roles and emerging characteristics, core identity is the unchanging part of the self. One's core identity involves "an all-encompassing feeling of sameness, continuity and uniqueness" [7].

Brooks [8,9] claims that knowledge of the self is contingent upon the capacity to tell a coherent narrative about oneself. These life stories draw in part from master narratives, which are shared stories among a culture that influence beliefs, actions, and understandings of the world.

The self can be utilized as a unit of analysis in research. Indeed, Dieumegard and colleagues [10] assert that lived experience, as an ongoing process perceived internally, is a fundamental unit of analysis. It is phenomenologically associated with cognition [11]. Drawing from this framework, shame is a strong emotion that can rupture self-image while simultaneously motivating efforts to enhance self-integrity.

Czub [5] notes that shame emerges when exposition incites reactions from others that indicate unattractiveness to them. Feelings of shame that begin in the formative years of development can endure for a lifetime. Although the consequences can be negative, feelings of shame can engender the formation of core identity [7,12,13], along with other life experiences including interactions with others [14]. Gornick [15] notes that shame is internalized and remains in the conscious mind permanently. Over time, it can create consequences for the individuals who have internalized the feelings of shame. Mental depletion and exhaustion can result from feelings of shame [16]. Brown [17] notes that

shame is a painful feeling of believing that one is flawed and therefore unworthy of love. The author's childhood experiences of humiliation and social isolation laid the emotional groundwork for the author's self-reflection.

Method

Autoethnography, as a method of qualitative research that examines researchers' subjective experiences and emotions [18], directs inquiry toward self-reflection to generate a fuller understanding of the phenomenon under study. It seeks to connect the personal to the broader sociocultural patterns. Conveying personal experiences is valid approach to exploring core identity formation, as subjective knowledge contributes to explanations of identity [19]. The author utilizes autoethnographic self-reflection to gather experiential data. As such, this positions the author as both the subject and unit of analysis in examining how experiences of shame during childhood have influenced the formation of identity. The lived experience considered here is presented and simultaneously analyzed through reflection on emotions, social engagements, and adaptation to stigmatization at a young age. The method engenders a series of thought-provoking questions, the answers to which facilitate comprehension of core identity formation and how it is sustained over the life course. The methodological approach has significant limitations. Generalization cannot be inferred. It relies on the author's recollection's which may be biased.

The questions that the author explores include: Can youthful adventurous pursuits shape identity in relation to shame? If so, how does youthful adventure begin? Is it through imagination informed by reading comic books or listening to crime episodes on the radio? Is it inspired by fantasies? Is it mired in unforeseen events? How does adventure mold core identity? How are emotions tied to core identity exploration? Does the emotion of fear reveal core identity? Answers to these questions may offer insight into identity formation. Delving into selected adventure events and linking

them to core identity formation is the objective of these autoethnographic recollections.

For readers, exploration of their adventures may help them to better understand their beliefs and values associated with their core identity. Adventure experiences are housed in a lifetime of intentional pursuits and random occurrences. By recounting selected adventure events, light is shed on how core identity is shaped and sustained [20]. The notion of traditional adventure suggests pursuits like mountain climbing, free-falling, base jumping, and parachuting, outback skiing and extreme hiking. None of these adventure activities are related here. The liberal use of the term adventure denotes a mindset that reflects a spirit of adventure. It involves degrees of social or physical risk. A spirit of adventure is expressed through escapades, athleticism, environment, and serendipitous circumstances. Situational determinants often reign. Mentally and physically testing oneself, either consciously or unconsciously, is ubiquitous. It plays a part in making adventure choices. But what is the connection to core identity formation? Is it necessary for core identity formation?

Awareness of how others are perceived is also part of a spectrum constituting core identity. But in everyday life we are unlikely to be acutely aware of our core identity. Yet it may arise in simple interactive negotiations, for instance when an individual attempts to intimidate another. Is the reaction forceful engagement or retreat from the encounter? This may reflect the extent to which one's identity is threatened.

Narrative: shame, stigma, and the spirit of adventure

The process of identity formation has implications for those shamed who seek redemption through adventure pursuits, especially athletics. Events described below are illustrative of the author's youthful adventures and their contribution to core identity formation.

Before the age of 10, I had experienced embarrassment but never shame. This changed

at St. Vincent's grammar school. Baldness brought on by radiation treatment for scalp ringworm convinced a nun at the school that my scalp was contagious when in fact it was not. Reluctantly and cautiously, she allowed me to attend my eighth-grade class. Nevertheless, she insisted that I sit in the back of the classroom and wear a protective white muslin skull cap. For the entire term, I was like a non-verbal piece of human furniture. The concept of stigma was unknown to me at the time. I was ashamed of what I believed to be a bodily defect.

Attending church on Sunday was required, yet I had to sit in the upper rear portion of the church, away from my classmates. From that vantage point I could peer down at classmates sitting below in pews. They would often turn around and gaze up toward me. The sight of what may have appeared to be a condemned boy sitting in the choir with a funny hat prompted tittering and laughter. Ironically, head coverings for males in Catholic churches were prohibited during masses, yet I was the exception. Sitting apart from classmates lasted five months, and afterwards, my classmates were reluctant to interact with me. They considered me to be contagious. At 10 years of age, being an object of derision and being socially isolated produced identity consequences, and my sense of self was born.

The mortification derived from being stigmatized and socially isolated fueled a powerful emotional desire to escape perceived assaults on my self-esteem. My desire to deflect taunts engendered a strong will to seek athletic competition and pursue music and a diverse body of literature from Henry Miller to Jack Kerouac, helping to mitigate psychological harm. Identity formation was underway. Ruminating on athletic pursuits helped link shame as an impetus for identity formation.

Participation in organized athletic pursuits and gaining acclaim may have provided me with a way to avoid lingering shame and stunted self-development. Achieving a modicum of acclaim assuaged assaults upon the self.

Skilbred and colleagues [21] found that athletes seek “uniqueness” and seek to participate in a to distinguish themselves from others.

Adolescent shame can be transformative, similar to emotions such as anger, anxiety, and fear. Shame engendered my drive to overcome its’ pernicious effects through athletic pursuits, which countered feeling inferior from shame. Athletic competition instilled self-confidence and core identity in me.

DISCUSSION

The fear of losing the acceptance of others can create an unconscious desire for acclaim [5]. Acclaim in this analysis set a path to the author’s self-restoration. The belief in being special (i.e. scholar-athlete) molded the author’s core identity. As the physician writer Atul Gawande [22] observes: “Your competence gives you a secure sense of identity.” This conviction empowered many of his early decisions and actions. Today the conceit persists, albeit in a diminutive state. Successful athletes as scholars are distinct [21,23–25]. An athletic hubris inhabited the author’s mindset. He embraced it, which suggests narcissism. Caron [26], writing in the *New York Times*, notes: “To some extent, narcissistic traits exist in all of us, and a little narcissism isn’t a bad thing... self- enhancement, can help us cope with adversity.” The author’s narcissism is not “little” but functional.

Shame can be both destructive and constructive. Czub T. [5], notes: Shame is perceived as a negative experience that motivates people to get rid of it and avoid experiencing it in the future (247). As part of her research on shame, Brown [17] observes shame changes how people think of themselves. Shame can also affect core identity. For example, if a student is told that they are a slow learner, this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy that compels the student to act in a manner consistent with slow learning.

Emotions elicited by shaming are powerful behavioral forces. Emotional reaction to

shaming is involuntary. It is difficult to avoid being affected. Emotions unfold indeterminately and can be self-destructive or constructive, but they are transitory. One can be calm at one moment and angry at the next. Emotions are difficult to conceptualize and even more difficult to measure in a valid way [7]. Some emotions evaporate without a trace while others linger on before gradually dissipating. The fluidity of emotions challenges the author’s ability to conceptually link emotions with identity. Nevertheless, the emotion of shame is central to the author’s initial athletic actions to counter humiliation.

Questions remain: Does shame endure longer than anger? How are emotions connected to identity? The connection appears distinct but may be tenuous. The initial emotion fades, yet the behavior evoked remains, albeit in diminished form. The adventure impulse fades over time and daily mundane events, physical aging, and a lingering sense of incompleteness replace youthful adventure quests. However, physical challenge can evoke core identity. Recalling memories of former successful athletic endeavors helps confront present day physical challenges. Reminiscing on athletic events from years ago (i.e. an amateur boxing championship) can help mentally compensate for physical challenges, such as maintaining an everyday swimming regimen. Recalling memories from the author’s profession as an anthropology professor can help with present-day writing. The reservoir of memories is deep, and it helps sustain identity. Competitive athletic pursuits afforded a modicum of acclaim. Athletic acumen, scholarly accomplishments, and adventurous experiences helped to form my identity.

CONCLUSION

This autoethnography demonstrates that shame influences identity formation. Despite the isolating effects of early shaming, the long-term contributions of shame foster self-awareness, identity resilience, and a sense of purpose. For the author, experiencing shame

and stigmatization at a young age became the impetus for the construction of identity, forged through physical and academic achievement. As the pursuit of adventure wanes with aging, the internal pursuit of meaning continues. The spirit of adventure continues psychologically and through existential perspectives on past experiences and current life.

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