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Shame, Poverty and Social Protection

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Shame, Poverty and Social Protection

Keetie Roelen

Summary

Despite long-standing conceptual considerations of shame in understanding poverty and debates about its moral, social and emotional qualities, the role of shame in poverty reduction policies remains largely unexplored. Notions of shame or mechanisms leading to shame – such as stigma or lack of dignity or respect – feature in many studies and policy evaluations, yet few studies have considered the interaction between shame, poverty and policy as its core focus.

This paper has two objectives: Firstly, it aims to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the interactions between shame, poverty and policy. Shame is considered to be both intrinsic and instrumental to poverty; shame undermines the human right to dignity and respect and subjective wellbeing and also represents a capability deprivation or a breakdown in conversion factors (impeding the conversion from capabilities into functionings). Secondly, the paper explores these interactions with a focus on social protection and welfare policy. Given the universal nature of the 'shame–poverty nexus' and the majority of research on shame originating from Europe and the US, the paper focuses its review on low and middle-income countries but will also draw from literature in high-income countries.

The paper concludes with reflections on next steps for research and policy in reference to shame in relation to poverty and poverty reduction policies. These include the need for clarity of language, the need to move beyond the 'shamee' and 'shamer' dichotomy, and the need for exploration of policy options.

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Acknowledgements

Acronyms

CLTS	Community-led Total Sanitation
CSG	Child Support Grant
CSP	Centre for Social Protection
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
UN	United Nations
WeD	Wellbeing in Developing Countries

1 Introduction

Shame has long been present in debates about development and poverty. Notions of the experience of shame as a manifestation of poverty can be derived as far back as the eighteenth century. In *the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith referred to the necessity of having a linen shirt for leading a good life not for their ability to protect the body but because of the shame attached to not wearing a linen shirt (Smith 1776):

> …The present times, through a greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct.
> (1776: 351–2)

This essentially places shame at the heart of an early concept of relative poverty. More recently, Amartya Sen has famously argued that the ability to go without shame is a key capability and that the lack thereof represents absolute poverty (Zavaleta 2007). Others have considered shame from a moral vantage point (Rawls 1971) and in relation to their role in regulating pro-social behaviour (Van Vliet 2008). In the last two decades, the field of social psychology has explored shame as a personal emotion (Tangney 1996).

Despite long-standing conceptual considerations of shame in understanding poverty and debates about its moral, social and emotional qualities, the role of shame in poverty reduction policies remains largely unexplored. Notions of stigma and lack of dignity or respect – that serve as manifestations of shame or can act as mechanisms leading to shame – feature in many studies and policy evaluations, yet few studies have considered the interaction between shame, poverty and policy as its core focus.

This paper has two objectives: Firstly, it aims to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the interactions between shame, poverty and policy. Secondly, it explores these interactions with a focus on social protection and welfare policy.[1] Given the universal nature of the 'shame–poverty nexus' (Walker 2014) but the majority of current research on shame originating from Europe and the US, the paper focuses its review on low and middle-income countries but will also draw from literature in high-income countries.

This paper will be structured as follows: Firstly, the concept of shame will be discussed from moral, social and psychological vantage points. Secondly, the linkages between shame, poverty and policy will be formalised in a conceptual framework – the 'shame–poverty–policy cycle'. Next, the framework will be applied to the particular policy of social protection. The paper concludes with reflections on next steps for the consideration of shame in development.

2 A review of shame

The notion of shame has a long history of thought in the field of philosophy and more recently gained prominence within social psychology (Tangney 1996). This should not come as a surprise given shame's ubiquity and pervasiveness in all aspects of life (Nussbaum 2004; Probyn 2004). It can guide moral and socially desirable behaviour (Van Vliet 2008), but it can also have profoundly negative consequences.

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[1] The terms 'social protection' and 'welfare policy' are used interchangeably in this paper in recognition of the diverse use of terms to denote social protection policy across the world.

Psychological literature offers important insights into the meaning of shame. Shame is an affect or emotion that occurs in response to social rejection or perceived loss of social attractiveness that threaten one's self-esteem and sense of belonging (Van Vliet 2008). Shame is often distinguished from guilt following the evaluation of the 'self' in relation to a negative event, transgression or error. Shame constitutes a negative evaluation of the 'self' as a result of a transgression. Guilt however constitutes a negative evaluation of the transgression itself. Shame and guilt do not significantly differ in terms of the types of events that elicit them, but in the individual's subjective interpretation of the event (Tangney 1996).

Further important distinctions include those between shame, humiliation and embarrassment (Nussbaum 2004). While shame and humiliation can be argued to be on par in terms of the negative assessment of self, embarrassment is lighter and typically deals with a social assessment that does not necessarily reflect on one's own being (*ibid.*). Embarrassment is therefore always social and contextual (i.e. it only happens with other people around) while shame does not require an audience and can be an entirely internal emotion (*ibid.*). Sociologists, however, emphasise the inherent social nature of shame. Cooley emphasises the importance of imagined judgement by others in eliciting shame (Scheff 2003). Goffman suggests that shame is a primarily social emotion as it usually arises from a threat to a relational or social bond (*ibid.*).

Understandings of shame can also be gleaned from the field of philosophy and in theories of moral behaviour (Tangney 1996). In his book *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1971) distinguishes between natural and moral shame. He posits that natural shame refers to attributes that undermine one's self-respect but do not violate moral values (e.g. physical appearance, speech impediments), while moral shame pertains to shame as a result of morally deficient behaviour (lying, betraying someone) (Kekes 1993). Kekes (1993) challenges this distinction, arguing that all shame is moral as it follows a loss of self-respect resulting from the inability to lead a good life based on one's values.

Scholars have long debated whether shame and its effects are positive or negative. Tangney *et al.* (2014) point at the 'two faces of shame', and that feelings of shame have both destructive and constructive potential. Indeed, shame – and the desire to avoid it – has long been recognised as promoting socially responsible behaviour and therefore playing a vital role in the advancement of society (Van Vliet 2008). In reference to the Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS)[2] programme in India, for example, Otieno (2012) distinguishes between good and bad shame, suggesting that good shame can allow for individuals to reflect on their behaviour, reach a level of self-realisation and take responsibility for avoiding open defecation. Hence, the qualification of shame as good appears to follow from the absence of negative impacts on the assessment of the self as well as from the incentivisation of desirable behaviour.

The ambiguous nature of shame becomes even more pertinent when moving away from 'Western' understandings of shame (Gubrium 2014). The social and moral regulatory function of shame appears to be evaluated positively in many cultures, while the experience of shame has been considered to have positive valence particularly in more collectivist societies such as in Southeast Asia (*ibid.*). In China, for example, shame is more prevalent – such as in parenting – and therefore more commonly felt, but is also more acceptable than other emotions such as anger (Wong and Tsai 2007).

Notwithstanding the potentially positive attributes of shame, research grounded in psychology suggests that shame is primarily associated with negative coping behaviours, also in moral terms. Teroni and Bruun (2011) build on the distinction between shame and guilt to point to shame's morally bad nature. They state that,

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[2]   Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS) is an innovative methodology for mobilising communities to completely eliminate open defecation (OD). Communities are facilitated to conduct their own appraisal and analysis of OD and take their own action to become ODF (open defecation free). See www.communityledtotalsanitation.org/ for more information.

> … an emotion can be assessed as morally good if it promotes moral behaviour and as morally bad if it hinders this kind of behaviour. We thus need a criterion demarcating moral behaviour… moral behaviour is pro-social behaviour, i.e. behaviour that promotes and fosters cooperative interactions between members of a group. Some of these kinds of behaviour – such as helping – directly qualify as cooperative interactions, while others – such as apologising – help restore endangered bonds of trust.
> (Teroni and Bruun 2011: 225)

They point out that guilt can promote such morally good behaviour (*ibid.*). By contrast, shame motivates denial of responsibility and externalisation of blame, which may ultimately lead to aggression (Tangney *et al.* 2014).

Four types of negative behaviour can be considered as a result of shame: (1) hiding, dissociation and turning away from responsibilities (as opposed to amending and taking responsibility); (2) self-oriented distress (as opposed to other-oriented empathy); (3) anger and aggression; and (4) psychological problems such as depression (Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek 2007, in Teroni and Bruun 2011). Research on the poverty–shame nexus in seven countries across 'Western' and 'non-Western' societies – including China and South Korea – highlight the overwhelmingly negative experience and moral judgement that accompanies experiences of shame and being shamed (Gubrium 2014; Walker 2014). Walker *et al.* (2013: 224) summarise as follows: 'Respondents universally despised poverty and frequently despised themselves for being poor. Parents were often despised by their children, women despised their men-folk and some men were reported to take out their self-loathing on their partners and children'.

Before discussing the linkages between shame, poverty and policy, it is important to explore the concept of stigma. Stigma – or stigmatisation – is an important mechanism through which shame is induced. Stigma refers to the 'undesired differentness from what we had anticipated' (Goffman 2009: 5) and, crucially, devaluation of that differentness (Bos *et al.* 2013). Stigma occurs through social interaction and therefore resides in social contexts rather than the person (*ibid.*). It follows that stigma does therefore not automatically or necessarily lead to the negative evaluation of the 'self' and constitute shame. Yet stigma and shame are strongly related and 'shame becomes a central possibility' (Goffman 2009: 7). Even if stigma is cause for the slightest degree of embarrassment or humiliation, it will lead to changes in behaviour and impression or stigma management (Scheff 2003). Indeed, public stigma – people's social, psychological and behavioural reactions to someone who is perceived to have stigmatised characteristics – can lead to self-stigma – the 'potential internalisation of the negative beliefs and feelings associated with the stigmatised condition' (Bos *et al.* 2013: 2). In turn, the degree of shame associated with a deviant condition can be considered an indication of whether it is stigmatised or not (Dijker 2013).

3   Shame–poverty–policy cycle

The ubiquity of shame and far-reaching implications in conjunction with increased focus on the multidimensionality of poverty and psychosocial effects of poverty reduction programmes call for a conceptualisation of linkages between shame, poverty and policy. The reduction of multidimensional poverty has been included as a separate target in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #1 (UN 2015) and programme evaluations increasingly consider effects on psychosocial, subjective and relational wellbeing (Attah *et al.* 2016). The notion of shame, however, remains relatively unexplored.

The interactions between shame, poverty and poverty-reduction policies can be captured in the shame–poverty–policy cycle (see Figure 3.1). Poverty is likely to cause or reinforce shame, while shame may decrease, cause or increase poverty. Policies aim to reduce poverty and have

the potential to reduce but also cause or reinforce shame. The direct linkages to shame – between poverty and shame, and policy and shame – are considered in more detail below.

Figure 3.1 Shame–poverty–policy cycle
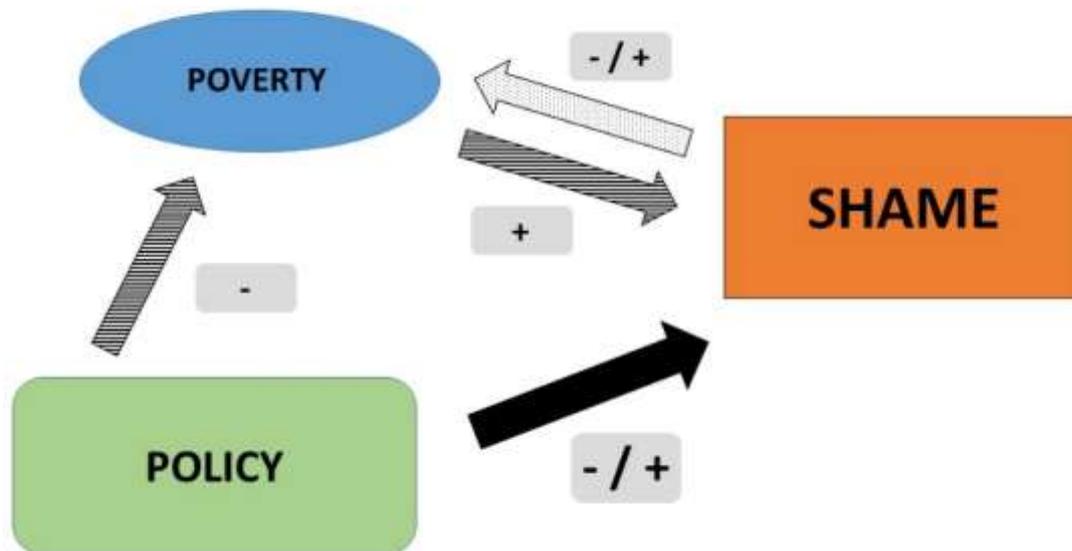
Source: Author's own.

3.1 Poverty and shame

The interaction between poverty[3] and shame can be considered from an intrinsic and instrumental perspective.

The wide range of conceptual frameworks underpinning multidimensional understandings of poverty offer insights into how shame is intrinsic to poverty. Multidimensional poverty includes deprivations in material and non-material domains (Alkire *et al.* 2015), and shame can therefore be considered to be a constituent of poverty as much as it might be a cause of poverty. Shame can be regarded a manifestation of poverty in and of itself as it undermines human dignity (McCrudden 2008) and the social basis for respect (Anderson 2004). Both can be considered to violate the basic human right of dignity and respect and thus to constitute deprivation in non-material terms. The importance of psychosocial wellbeing is also explicitly recognised in the framework of wellbeing as developed by the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research group at the University of Bath from 2002 to 2007. This framework considers wellbeing to be made up of material, relational and subjective components (White 2010), and shame can be conceived of as a denial of relational and subjective wellbeing. Similarly, Maslow's pyramid of need suggests that psychological wellbeing is an inherent part of people's needs and crucial for being able to live a good life (Maslow 1943, 1954), and shame undermines that basic need.

An expanding empirical evidence base confirms that poverty is a universally shameful experience. Regardless of being in Europe, Africa or Asia, living in poverty is associated with feelings of inferiority, embarrassment and humiliation (Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo 2014). Theoretical understandings of the instrumental nature of shame in relation to poverty can be gleaned from the capability approach. This approach offers a twofold understanding of the instrumental role of shame in leading a good life, and particularly how it might undermine a good life. Firstly, it can be said to deprive one of the core capability of affiliation, as defined by

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[3]   Following recent practice in poverty measurement and poverty reduction targets, we consider poverty in its multidimensional form. SDG #1 on poverty reduction includes a separate target on the reduction of multidimensional poverty in UN (2015).

Nussbaum (2000). The capability of affiliation concerns the ability to go with self-respect and non-humiliation, and is one of ten core capabilities that are considered crucial for leading a good life. Secondly, it can be argued to undermine one's ability to 'convert' capabilities into functionings (Robeyns 2005). For example, one may have the knowledge and skills to speak a foreign language (*capability*) but are inhibited from actually speaking the language (*functioning*) due to a strong sense of shame.

Emerging research on the poverty–shame nexus provides evidence of the bi-directional relationship between shame and poverty. The effect of shame on poverty can be positive or negative. Experiences with some programmes suggest that shame may lead to positive outcomes in terms of poverty reduction. Discussions within the CLTS initiative in India indicate that there might be a phenomenon of 'good shame' that is experienced at collective and individual levels and can promote positive sanitation behaviour to the benefit of individuals, families and communities as a whole (Otieno 2012). This understanding appears grounded in on-the-ground experiences with CLTS and its success.

The large majority of the literature on the shame–poverty nexus, however, stresses the negative linkages between shame and poverty (Lister 2004), highlighting that poverty-induced shame can restrict people's decision-making and actions (Walker *et al.* 2013) and limit the ability to move out of poverty. In line with psychological discourse around shame, responses to feelings of shame are found to be largely negative, ranging from keeping up appearances to anger to withdrawal and depression (Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo 2014). Research in rural Ethiopia and elsewhere suggests that stigma, discrimination and psychological morbidity can all serve to reinforce and perpetuate poverty as they reduce one's ability to function (Hanlon *et al.* 2013). Evidence from research on farmers in India shows that the inability to overcome poverty and shame associated with this failure may lead to alcoholism and – in extreme cases – to suicide (Mathew 2010).

3.2 Policy and shame

The link between shame and policy aiming to reduce poverty is strongly bi-directional, with policy having the potential to prevent and counter but also cause, reinforce and perpetuate shame.

Policy can be powerful in countering shame by addressing the mechanisms leading to shame. Lessons from the poverty–shame nexus above highlight the strong negative link between poverty and shame. The corollary is also true; poverty reduction can reduce levels of shame (Gubrium 2014) through instilling or reintroducing a sense of dignity and respect. The brief discussion of stigma in section 2 indicates that policies that address stigmatisation can reduce self-stigma and shame. A review of interventions aiming to address stigmatisation of people with mental illnesses indicates that educational approaches and approaches promoting personal contact can be effective in reducing stigma (Corrigan and Kosyluk 2013).

Policies can include explicit efforts for improving a positive sense of self, either for its intrinsic merits or for its beneficial cognitive and behavioural effects. An experiment with soup kitchen clients in New Jersey, USA tested the effect of positive self-affirmation on cognitive performance and take-up of social policies. Clients that were asked to describe a personal experience that made them feel successful and proud performed better on cognitive tests and reported to be more willing to apply for social assistance compared to those without such self-affirmation (Hall, Zhao and Shaffir 2013). Experiments of similar nature are often grounded in the rapidly expanding literature on behavioural economics and the role of 'nudging' people into desirable or more positive behaviour (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Although interventions have been found to have positive short-term effects (such as in the soup kitchen in New Jersey), they can also be criticised for their 'libertarian paternalist' approach that places responsibility for behaviour solely with the individual without taking account of structural constraints (Brown 2012). Others advocate for more therapeutic and healing approaches such as community healing that interact with everyone's 'woundedness' in more tailored and profound ways (Van der Watt 2016),

recognising that individual experiences take place within more universal experiences and understandings of shame.

Policies can also cause or reinforce shame. As discussed in section 2, stigmatisation can lead to shame. Such stigmatisation can be overt through explicit exclusion or discrediting of stigmatised individuals or more subtle through avoidance of eye contact or social engagement (Bos *et al.* 2013). Policy can be stigmatising in overt ways, such as by introducing a new type of 'differentness' (e.g. creating the group of 'welfare recipients' by targeting welfare support), or highlighting and reinforcing 'differentness' that already exists (e.g. highlighting prevalence of HIV/AIDS among particular demographic groups, or emphasising personal responsibility for being different (e.g. emphasising individual behaviour in being obese). More subtle forms of stigma can exist in policy implementation, such as prioritising response to or treatment of non-stigmatised groups or treating stigmatised groups with less dignity and respect.

Evidence for the potentially detrimental effects of stigmatisation, or the failure to address it, and subsequent self-stigma and shame is most prevalent in the health sector. Various studies have shown that debasing treatment of health-care users can lead to self-exclusion from services, resulting in real risks to health. A study of indigenous Huichol migrant labourers in Mexico found that complicated application procedures in conjunction with shame associated with having to reveal living conditions and facing humiliating treatment by frontline staff led to some giving up their right to free health care (Gamlin 2013). Stigmatising treatment in health facilities has also been found to present important barriers to women in India seeking health care (George *et al.* 2015), thereby ultimately undermining their health. Similar experiences were observed in Bolivia and Ecuador, with women reporting how maltreatment by health staff undermined their self-esteem (Samuels and Stavropoulou 2016). In the US, suicide rates were much higher among sexual minority students in schools that did not incorporate sexual diversity programmes and anti-bullying training in their curriculum (Chaudoir, Earnshaw and Andel 2013).

Theoretically these negative links between policy and shame through stigmatisation, disrespectful behaviour and denial of dignity can be considered 'symbolic violence'. Symbolic violence refers to an imposition of values and exercise of power over dominated groups and can lead to people blaming themselves for their suffering, leaving the role of the society ignored (Bourdieu *et al.* 1999). Bourgois (2002: 223) states 'It [symbolic violence] persuades victims that their own actions are the cause of their own predicament and that their subordination is the logical outcome of the natural order of things'. At an individual level this can manifest itself in self-blame and shame, among others (Gamlin 2013).

4   Social protection: shame–policy linkages

This section explores shame and policy linkages with respect to social protection. The emerging research base from Western and other contexts provides evidence of how policies can promote dignity and respect but also instil and reinforce shame associated with participation in policy. Various conceptual frameworks provide guidelines for grounding policy understandings, both in negative and positive terms. Policies that hold the potential for inducing shame due to their stigmatising nature or explicit use of shaming can be considered to constitute 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu *et al.* 1999) – as discussed in section 3.2, above – or 'symbolic injustice' (Fraser 1997). Policies that seek to promote human dignity (Bloch 1961), recognition (Honneth 1992), recognition and respect (Lister 2015) or recognition and redistribution (Fraser 1995) can be considered to at least be 'shame-proof' policies and at best aim to reduce poverty-induced shame.

4.1 Positive linkages

Welfare policies can instil a sense of dignity, improve psychosocial wellbeing and be powerful in avoiding or countering shame, primarily mediated through poverty reduction. Experiences with cash transfer programmes in Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa clearly indicate that a regular inflow of cash can reduce stress and improve mental health (Samuels and Stavropoulou 2016). In Ethiopia, the receipt of cash transfers was associated with increased respect from family and community members as a result of having more resources, being creditworthy and no longer having to beg for support (Berhane *et al.* 2012). Cash transfers also prove powerful in countering shame among children; experiences in Malawi and South Africa indicate that the additional income helps to overcome shame associated with having to wear old clothes and not being clean (Miller *et al.* 2010; Adato *et al.* 2016). Positive effects are not exclusively attributable to the income effect, however. Recipients of old age pensions in Nepal felt that the pensions that they received reflected acknowledgement and respect on behalf of the government, notwithstanding the fact that the transfer size was relatively small (HelpAge International 2009).

Interventions that do not give cash 'for free' but tie transfers to specific behaviour can be argued to offer a sense of control, agency and empowerment, and thereby counteract shame. As described by Hanlon *et al.* (2013), long-term dependency on aid, particularly coupled with situations of dire poverty, can be associated with feelings of shame and defeat. The introduction of 'co-responsibilities' or 'conditions' that ask beneficiaries to send their children to school or take them to growth monitoring check-ups may make them 'agents' in their own development. In the US, participants in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families' (TANF) 'work-first' policy reported feeling proud at the ability to hold down a job and to be able to model the ability for working hard and being self-reliant to their children (Anderson 2004). Participation in public works can counteract feelings of shame as a result of long-term dependency by giving participants a sense of value and dignity through temporary employment (Subbarao *et al.* 2012).

4.2 Negative linkages

Notwithstanding positive linkages, design and implementation of welfare policy and its programmes can also be profoundly shameful.

Sometimes such stigmatising and shame-inducing measures are used instrumentally. Self-targeting mechanisms, for example, often rely on stigma associated with poverty and the receipt of public support to ensure that only the most vulnerable and in dire need will apply (Coady, Grosh and Hoddinott 2004).

Most stigmatisation and subsequent shame occurs as a consequence of implementation rather than explicit programme design choice, as such making them 'shame-blind'. For example, while the publication of names of those receiving transfers may promote accountability or the need to queue in a public place to receive transfers may make the payment process more efficient, such processes can have profound stigmatising effects (Bastagli *et al.* 2016; Gubrium 2014). In China's *dibao* scheme, the community verification process of whether someone is 'deserving' or not was deemed to be stigmatising and inducing shame for some (Yan 2014).

Notwithstanding the potential for empowerment through the attachment of behavioural requirements to the receipt of cash transfers, programmes that require adherence with conditions can be considered to deny the poor of the social basis of self-respect. Particularly programmes that operate on the basis of sanctions – whereby support is withdrawn in case beneficiaries are unable to comply with conditions – appear grounded in the understanding that the poor can't be trusted to fulfil their civic responsibilities (Anderson 2004). This can lead to widespread stigmatisation of and very shameful experiences on behalf of welfare recipients. Scholars in the UK and the US have warned for workfare programmes'[4] ethical ambiguity in the

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[4]   Workfare programmes are also sometimes referred to as welfare-to-work or public works programmes and denote schemes that provide cash or food in return for work.

UK (Dean 2007) and have argued that rigid work requirements impose unreasonable costs on the poor (Anderson 2004). Public works programmes often have strenuous and demanding labour requirements and offer little pay (Yan 2014), all contributing to the idea that participants have to work hard to be deserving of little remuneration.

Stigmatisation and introduction or reinforcement of shame through welfare policy can have strong adverse consequences and thereby directly undermine its goal of poverty reduction. Research on single mothers and the Child Support Grant (CSG) in South Africa, for example, found that many women felt maltreated and stigmatised by programme staff, sometimes leading them to forego the cash transfers in order to avoid pejorative treatment (Wright *et al.* 2014a). Stigmatisation of welfare recipients – particularly in the UK, Europe and the US – has long been found to deter people from utilising the system despite eligibility in a bid to prevent shame (Casas *et al.* 2000; Horan and Austin 1974; Wyers 1977).

It should be noted that positive and negative experiences are not mutually exclusive and that negative linkages can co-exist with positive linkages in a single programme. Research on the CSG in South Africa, for example, highlights such conflicting experiences. Single mothers receiving the grants reported that the monthly inflow of cash improves their sense of dignity as it enables them to provide better care for their children. At the same time they indicated that the amount of cash was too small to make a real difference and that communities' negative views of CSG recipients eroded their sense of dignity (Wright *et al.* 2014b).

5 'Where next?'

This review of evidence regarding the interactions between poverty, shame and policy gives rise to questions about 'where next?' on how to break or counteract negative linkages and patterns. This note proposes a number of pointers for future debate, research and policy for social protection and more broadly.

5.1 Build interdisciplinary and cross-cultural understandings

Despite the available evidence on shame, the poverty–shame nexus and the role of stigma in poverty reduction policies, many gaps remain. Shame has largely been researched from singular disciplinary perspectives, considering shame as an individual emotion, as a regulator moral and prosocial behaviour or as a social and cultural construct. These perspectives offer crucial but narrow frameworks for investigating shame and its interaction with poverty and policies that aim to reduce poverty. The ambiguous nature of shame as highlighted in the review above – and the implications of this ambiguity for engagements with the issue of shame in policy – calls for the need to be clear in the use of concepts and terminology around shame.

An important conflation in applied research on shame in relation to poverty and policy that appears to contribute to the ambiguity is that of shame versus guilt and embarrassment. Despite a strong distinction between these effects in terms of their qualities and implications in psychological literature, empirical studies assessing the relationship between poverty, policy and shame from a social science perspective tend to conflate these concepts without unpacking their specificities. This appears largely a result of methodological challenges in unpacking the complex phenomena of shame, guilt or embarrassment, but is also due to conceptual objections to unpicking this emotional state (Chase and Walker 2012). Notwithstanding these challenges and objections, the failure to unpack the processes at hand risks drawing the potentially harmful conclusion that shame has its merits. Debates around the role of shame in relation to CLTS, for example, suggests that the notion of 'good shame', while in fact a more accurate connotation might be embarrassment. Future work needs to be clearer in its use of language around shame, more explicitly considering whether the negative assessment of self leads to negative strategies and outcomes or also holds the potential for positive change.

The review of literature also strongly points towards the need for greater cross-cultural evidence. Available literature – particularly from the field of psychology and in relation to stigma associated with the receipt of welfare or programme participation – is highly 'Western-centric' with the majority of research originating from the UK, Europe and US. Evidence from low and middle-income country contexts is expanding but remains scarce and also premised on Western conceptualisations of shame. The need for greater interdisciplinary engagement and conceptual clarity thus needs to be located in culturally appropriate understandings.

5.2 Consider the plurality of shame

The majority of research and debate regarding shame in relation to poverty appears to be predicated on a simple dichotomy between 'victims' and 'perpetrators'. Such a bifurcation fails to acknowledge and engage with the notion that shame is a reinforcing cycle grounded in cultural and social factors and systemic power relationships.

Dynamics of shame are by no means one-directional and linear. Female welfare recipients in the US were found to attribute their own situation to economic and social structures but to employ popular 'victim-blaming' techniques in reference to other women's reliance on the welfare system (Seccombe *et al.* 1998). Similar findings were observed in reference to the Child Support Grant in South Africa (Hochfeld and Plagerson 2011). Research on abuse in maternity wards in South Africa provides a powerful account of how institutionalised norms around care and abuse become embedded in power relationships that both patients and nurses have difficulties to negotiate, essentially making both a victim of reinforcing cycle of shame (Kruger and Schoombee 2010). More generally, 'many people within the caring professions are themselves affected by shame' (Archer 2003 in Walker 2011: 459), often as a result of the inability to provide adequate support to those who need it. Future work aiming to break negative cycles of shame, poverty and policy will need to challenge a 'shamee' and 'shamer' dichotomy, and consider the experiences and perceptions of people living in poverty in relation to their own and others' situations, of those living without poverty, and of those actively supporting people living in poverty.

5.3 Recognise the structural construction of shame

While shame is felt by the individual, experiences are framed and situated within wider systems, narratives and relationships. As indicated by Walker *et al.* (2013): 'shame is individually felt but socially constructed' (Walker *et al.* 2013: 230). The structural embeddedness of shame is already highlighted by the examples above regarding the plurality of shame on behalf of the 'shamees' and 'shamers'. The systemic nature of shame is also illustrated by the introduction of work requirements for the receipt of welfare in the US. The arguable stigmatising installment of such work requirements aimed to counteract widespread and toxic beliefs about welfare recipients being lazy, irresponsible and morally deviant (Anderson 2004) but can be understood as further institutionalising negative and stigmatising narratives of welfare recipients – indeed as 'symbolic violence'.

Various studies on shame and also stigma acknowledge the structural nature of such symbolic violence. Walker and Chase (2014) argue that a triad of politics, media and public opinion provides the systemic backdrop against which shame is condoned, facilitated and even promoted, depending on the country context. Bos *et al.* (2013) place structural stigma (i.e. that what is considered different and of lesser value in a given society) at the foundation of public stigma (i.e. people's reactions to someone with a different and devalued condition) and self-stigma (i.e. coping strategies of those with a different and devalued condition).

Future work needs to recognise the structural and systemic embeddedness of shame in relation to its personally felt experiences. Doing so requires critical engagement with structure–agency debates, acknowledging that while poverty-induced shame might be felt at the individual level, it

is constructed at structural and ideological levels. Considering poverty and the concomitant shame as a purely individual experience is profoundly apolitical. The emphasis on the individual deflects attention from the structural causes of poverty and may oppose rather than catalyse activism for societal change. The recognition that shame is a reinforcing cycle that is grounded in cultural and social factors as well as systemic power relationships is crucial for breaking long-standing patterns that institutionalise poverty and associated shame as a part of everyday life and interaction.

This holds particular implications for the field of social protection and welfare, which has been criticised for its complicitness in transferring the responsibility of reducing poverty to the individual. The skewed focus on lifting demand-side constraints suggests that the responsibility of poverty reduction lies in the hands of the individual entirely. Increasingly comprehensive programmes that aim to tackle individual and household-level obstacles by providing a combination of cash, in-kind and psychosocial support the idea that if households are provided with enough support, they should be able to improve their lives. The corollary of this logic is that failure to move out of poverty equals personal failure; a dynamic that is glaringly clear from the literature on the poverty–shame nexus. Similarly, it can be argued that the very act of targeting – distinguishing the deserving from the non-deserving – creates the foundation on which shame feeds itself. Future efforts in social protection aiming to make programming more shame-neutral or counter-shame will need to engage more critically with their own role in inducing, perpetuating or reinforcing shame associated with being poor, failing to move out of poverty or being a welfare beneficiary because of poverty.

6 Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the linkages between shame, poverty and policy with a special focus on social protection. The discussion highlights the pervasiveness of shame in everyday life and illuminates strong but underexplored interactions with poverty and policies that aim to reduce poverty. The ubiquitous nature of shame, particularly in relation to poverty, emphasises the universal need for breaking negative cycles and exploring positive pathways to reducing shame, both as a goal in and of itself and as a means to poverty reduction. The review of policy experiences in general and of social protection in particular indicate that interventions can reduce shame, either directly through promoting self-affirmation or indirectly through poverty reduction or countering stigma. Yet interventions can also induce and reinforce shame, either explicitly by using it as means to target policies or promote desirable behaviour or implicitly such as through disrespectful engagement and derogatory treatment.

More work – in research and policy – is urgently needed to better understand the interactions between shame, poverty and policy and the pathways through which policy can reduce shame. Future work requires understandings that are grounded in interdisciplinary frameworks, that unpack conceptual specificities and that are embedded in cross-cultural experiences of poverty, policy and shame. The plurality of shame and the structural embeddedness of shame require more critical debate, moving the debate beyond simple dichotomies of those who shame and those who are shamed without consideration of the context in which shame holds its roots. Practically, policy options that seek to engage with issues of shame either implicitly or explicitly need to be explored and investigated, ensuring that the combined fight against shame and poverty is based on a combination of theoretical debate and real-world experiences.

Annexe   Illustrated 'shame–poverty–policy cycle'

Source: Reproduced with kind permission from Jorge Martin.

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