Groups Inquiry: Working with Shame and Guilt

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SOWK 307

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April 13, 2020

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Collective guilt and shame are constructs that can have both macro and micro level impacts on our relationships with others (Weiss-Klayman, Hameiri, & Halperin, 2019; Lickel, Steele, & Schmader, 2011). While searching for literature on the impacts of one's shame on others within a group, one of the first concepts that emerged was the use of "vicarious detoxification" for men's groups addressing intimate partner violence (Alonso & Rutan, 1988; Wallace & Nosko, 1993). Based off psychoanalytic and object relations theories, vicarious detoxification requires each participant to disclose the events that brought them to group (Alonso & Rutan, 1988). The belief is that if enough group members share their shame-inducing event, their defenses will eventually break-down, and they will be ready to face their own shame (Wallace & Nosko, 1993).

The bombardment of shame-inducing narratives without an ability pass in sharing brings into question how power dynamics, stages of change, ethics in services would work with the vicarious detoxification method. Furthermore, the validity of vicarious detoxification's ability to abate shame has been brought into question (Dutton, 2006). The original sources and references for vicarious detoxification, such as Alonso & Rutan (1988) and Wallace and Nosko (1993) provide no empirical evidence to support their claims to the proposed outcomes. One of the key assumptions made in vicarious detoxification is that others in the group will provide the environment to challenge the defense mechanisms of shame (Alonso & Rutan, 1988; Wallace & Nosko, 1993). This assumption does not take into account the newer concepts of collective shame and guilt that may inhibit or alter the direction of conversations for members in the relevant identity groups or in-groups present in the group process. While object-relations theory may provide groundwork for interpersonal schemas that influence group work, it is also

worthwhile to look at other ways interpersonal connections and rapport development can take place that acknowledge the current literature on interpersonal shame and guilt (Günter, Bruns, Feuling, & Hasenclever, 2013; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2015; Carlson & Heth, 2010). Thus, there is a need to examine how guilt and shame can be constructively worked with, so that social workers to adhere to the social work ethics of competence through evidence-based practice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2015).

The Constructs of Guilt and Shame

Individual Shame

To unpack the concepts of collective shame it is important to first explore the construct of individual shame. As noted by Berné Brown, our own experiences of shame are a conceptualization of who we are (2007). One of the dangers of individual shame group sessions is its propensity to elicit destructive and/or defensive behaviours (Brown, 2007; Sanderson, 2015; Rotella & Richeson, 2013). From a phenomenological perspective, each individual's experience of shame or guilt inducing events will be dependent on the individual's personal context (Sanderson, 2015). Therefore, what might induce shame in one individual may evoke guilt in another (Brown, 2007). As shame can bring out a series of survival mechanisms, constructively working with guilt and shame in group contexts is an important part of healing and reconciliation (Sanderson, 2015).

Individual Guilt

Drawing further from Berné Brown's work, the construct of individual guilt can be thought of as the self-evaluation of the actions one partakes in, and a reflection on the morality of those actions (2007). Similar to shame, the focus of guilt is a self-reflection of the action(s) taken. What is different is the reflection of the morality does not reflect self-worth (Sanderson,

2015). Thus, guilt explores the action(s) taken without defining ourselves by the consequences (Brown, 2007). Guilt is unique in that it leaves room for exploring the possibilities of what can be done, such as reparations and reconciliation (Sanderson, 2015).

Collective Shame

Collective shame, sometimes referred to as vicarious shame, has been conceptualized as a consequence of an injustice that tarnishes the image of an in-group (Weiss-Klayman, Hameiri, & Halperin, 2019; Welten, Zeelenberg, Breugelmans, 2012). Collective shame is not unique to an in-group that carries out an injustice, however. Experiencing injustice and oppression as part of an out-group can also be source of collective shame, allowing for multiple layers of shame to stem from historical in-group and out-group experiences (Páez, Marques, Valencia, & Vincze, 2006).

While shame may be constructed as a negative experience, it may also serve pro-social functions (Lickel, Steele, & Schmader, 2011; Sanderson, 2015). As suggested by Gunn & Wilson (2011), collective shame is a reflection of how other groups would view the in-group in light of the actions the in-group partook in. The distinction between pro-social reactions to shame may be rooted in the development of healthy, as opposed to chronic, shame. Part of the distinction between healthy and chronic shame is the perspective-taking that is involved (Sanderson, 2015). When group image is particularly important to an in-group, shame may provide greater interest in reparation to restore group integrity and disconfirm the stereotype (as cited in Lickel, Steele, & Schmader, 2011).

If collective shame is not kept in balance with guilt, it may lead to denial, moral disengagement through motivated reasoning, ideological conflict, and use of defense mechanisms that try to superficially reappraise the image of an in-group (Sharvit, Brambilla,

Babush, & Colucci, 2015). This arguably runs the risk of in-group members experiencing a shame spiral that move individuals towards an experience of chronic shame (Sanderson, 2015). Thus, awareness of in-group identities that exist for individuals is an important consideration when considering both the impact of, and how to address, individual and collective shame within a group. Building capacity within groups to understand shame and work with guilt can provide an opportunity to address both the underlying social justice issues and provide enhancement of social functioning in the group.

Collective Guilt

Often connected with collective shame, collective guilt (also known as vicarious guilt) is experienced as the consequences of an injustice carried out by one's in-group (Weiss-Klayman, Hameiri, & Halperin, 2019; Chen, Wei, Shang, Zhang, 2018). The illegitimacy of the action(s) carried out, like the construct of individual guilt, is usually associated with reconciliatory support by the in-group who conducted unjust actions (Páez, Marques, Valencia, & Vincze, 2006). The distinction between collective guilt and collective shame is the relation between guilt and interdependence of the in-group individuals involved in an injustice (Chen, Wei, Shang, Zhang, 2018). When one individual feels they had the ability to control or influence the actions of the other, a sense of guilt arises (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005).

Constructive Work with Guilt and Shame in Groups

While basic psychoeducation of shame and guilt could be a starting point in the group that could potentially enhance of the group process, one may need to continually readdress shame and guilt as they reemerge. In-groups and out-groups exist in relation to their power over other groups within a societal structure (Bishop, 2015). Therefore, very few individuals who have had membership to one in-group that have never exploited an out-group at some point in

time. Group facilitators need to consider what in-group's participants may hold membership in and consider what elements of shame and guilt may emerge from membership of oppressor and oppressed groups as topics are explored (Gunn & Wilson, 2011).

Being that there are a multitude of experiences within a group setting, potentially providing multiple layers of in-group and out-group experiences, one strength to consider within the group is the existence of empathy between group members. As outlined in work done by Welten, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans (2012), when social identity threat is not the primary lens to processes the transgressions or actions of others, the individual's perspective taking may be rooted in empathy. As developing empathy for others can be a precursor to the development of self-empathy, the use of empathy with members of common in-groups may provide a conduit for developing self-compassion (Sherman, 2014). The perception thus moves beyond an immediate appraisal of how other out-groups view the in-group. As empathy as seen as a counteractive emotion to shame, highlighting and building off the empathy that exists within a group to counter vicarious shame may provide an alternative pathway to reduce in-group defensiveness and focus on addressing the concerns through healthy shame and/or guilt (Sherman, 2014).

What becomes central to processing and working with collective feelings of guilt and shame are the mindsets that are used to make sense of information presented within a group context. The two primary mindsets of interest are incremental mindsets and entity mindsets (Weiss-Klayman, Hameiri, and Halperin, 2019). Where incremental mindsets see individuals as malleable in their relations to others (people develop over time and are influenced by situational factors), entity mindsets see individuals as individuals as innate and fixed (Rydell., Hugenberg, Ray, & Mackie, 2007). Another related concept is the larger-scale meta beliefs – what society believes about individuals or groups based on the incremental and entity theories. Drawing

from Weiss-Klayman, Hameiri, and Halperin (2019), facilitators may be able to shape conversations around themes that challenge mindsets of meta-entity theory by fostering discussion on meta-incremental mindsets. Framing a meta-incremental mindset would mean that facilitators shape conversation and intervention around societies perceptions of both the in-group and out-group's abilities to change.

As indicated by Weiss-Klayman, Hameiri, and Halperin's research (2019), an entity mindset was associated with more shame than an incremental mindset. The countering of collective shame with meta-incrementalist perspectives may bring shame in an appropriate balance with guilt. However, one does not need to necessarily strive to remove individual or collective shame in its entirety. Shame can still be a pro-social emotion for individuals to feel. The ultimate goal would be to develop healthy shame (Sanderson, 2015).

As noted by Weiss-Klayman, Hameiri, & Halperin (2019), high entity beliefs that reduce collective shame can reduce collective guilt as well. Thus, the means by which we address collective guilt and shame could negatively impact the reconciliatory mandates of some groups if it is not addressed in a targeted manner. The objective would be to prevent shame from blocking the pathway of guilt; thereby allowing for reparation and pro-social behaviors. Challenging ideas of essentialism may be one path (by challenging meta-entity mindsets). Thus, facilitators would seek to allow participants to work with guilt as a constructive emotion through their capacity to generate, work towards, or partake in reparative responses (Sanderson, 2015). Recognizing guilt in that way would tie in Gunn & Wilson's (2011) findings that guilt has been correlated to providing reparations, along with reduced prejudice towards the out-group.

Worth consideration is the concept of social identity threats. Gunn & Wilson (2011) suggest that defensiveness is evoked social identity threats when the ingroup feels a need to

deflect the ingroup's acts of injustice. Thus, exploring too much collective guilt is counter-productive in working with members of an in-group. Gunn & Wilson (2011) propose that the application of self-affirmation theory may counter the impacts of these threats. Reaffirming the positives of an in-group domain other than that where the identity threat takes place may keep individuals in a space where they can explore social injustices with reduced defensiveness that allows for an acknowledgement of collective guilt and social injustice. Thus, the entire integrity of the in-group identity is not jeopardized. Components of the in-group's image that can be enhanced could be more easily explored. This approach would fit well with a strengths-based approach to social work practice by recognizing that all individuals, groups, and communities have strengths, while working with those strengths to improve communities (Saleebey, 2013).

Conclusion

The literature on shame and guilt has continued to progress since the 1970s. As modern literature as evolved, our understanding of collective shame and guilt requires a more comprehensive consideration of in-groups, out-groups, shared identities, vicarious emotions, mindsets, empathy, and group strengths. If we ignore the opportunities to address these collective emotions, we will miss the chances of addressing their underlying roots. To maximize the wellbeing of clients, and opportunities for social justice, we should consider addressing the vulnerabilities that emerge from collective shame and guilt.

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