

Chapter 6

“Dream on—There is no Salvation!”: Transforming Shame in the South African Workplace Through Personal and Organisational Strategies

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*When there is no enemy within,
the enemies outside cannot hurt you.
(African proverb)*

Abstract Shame is a concept widely researched in psychology and it has been contextualised across racial groups, cultures, nationalities and gender. In the sub-Saharan African context, shame has been studied particularly with regard to HIV/AIDS and cultural traditions. However, it seems that most of the studies conducted do not focus on, firstly, the work context or, secondly, shame as a possible health resource, but rather as a construct that is related to negatively perceived concepts, such as guilt, embarrassment or stigma. In the sub-Saharan African context, there is a dearth of studies providing an overview of the research studies conducted on shame in sub-Saharan African contexts. The chapter provides an overview on research of shame in sub-Saharan African contexts. It further on explores shame experiences in South African workplaces and presents personal and organisational strategies to transform shame constructively. The research methodology used was based on an interpretative hermeneutical paradigm and applied qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews with individuals from various higher education institutions (HEI) and observations at one HEI in particular. The chapter presents new insights and findings on which experiences in the workplaces lead to shame and how employees manage these experiences to

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overcome negative impacts of shame on individual and organisational levels. Recommendations for future theory and practice are provided.

6.1 Introduction

Shame is a concept that has gained popularity during the past decades and the question of shame and culture has been addressed across psychological sub-disciplines (Markus and Kitayama 1995).

Shame has been researched internationally across higher educational contexts (Wertenbruch and Röttger-Rössler 2011; Qian et al. 2001), cultures, societies and nationalities (Walker 2012), gender (Miller 2002) and personality disorders (Luoma et al. 2008). However, it has been pointed out that culture is often overlooked in research on shame, although “shame is systemic” (Boring 1992, p. 175) and that methodologies in the study of shame, as well as the contexts researched, are often Westernized cultures and thus more research in other contexts is needed (Fessler 2004).

Shame has been described as an emotion that is destructive, negative and immobilising (Tangney and Dearing 2002) and has been distinguished from concepts such as guilt (Wong and Tsai 2007), embarrassment and pride (Tangney and Fischer 1995). Poulson II (2000) notes that there are three key elements of shame:

1. A violation of some role or standard
2. Failure to meet expectations
3. A defect that cannot be easily repaired.

These three key elements differentiate between “normal shame” which is the everyday embarrassments and humiliation we feel for ourselves and others, that is, the first two key elements as discussed, and a “pathological” shame which is an irrational sense of not having crossed to the wrong side of a boundary but having been born there, the last element.

However, shame has also been researched from the perspective of positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000) and resilience (Tangney and Dearing 2002). Feelings of shame appear to last long after the episodes that gave rise to these feelings (Lewis 2004). For shame to exist it appears as though an individual must have developed self-awareness and have other cognitive capacities such as evaluative individual standards and goals which would lead to self-conscious evaluative emotions that include shame (Poulson II 2000). While shame seems to develop through a process of social learning, shame is clearly tied to interpersonal relationships and attachment bonds. Damaging these bonds can be a catalyst of shame (Poulson II 2000).

The focus of shame is mostly from culture-specific perspectives (Westermann 2004) and across cultures (Casmir and Schnegg 2002). According to Poulson II (2000), the differences in shame amongst cultures are particularly distinct when comparing Western and Eastern cultures and may also be seen between individualistic and collectivist cultures.

Poulson II (2000) notes that studies of shame and gender, in particular in the Bedouin of the Negev, seem to associate shame with the feminine and honour with the masculine.

According to Poulson II (2000), in Western culture it would seem that women are more likely to use shame as a means of organising information about the self with individualized responses. It would seem that women experience greater depression as a result of shame while men tend to experience greater rage. Poulson II (2000) postulates that this can be traced back to feelings of powerlessness in childhood the base of all shame. Childhood the root of shame where we are born powerless, Poulson II (2000), appears to grow as life proceeds and have a minimal impact until triggered. However, shame has received little focus in sub-Saharan societies, and even less in Southern African workplaces or HEIs.

This chapter focuses on shame in the workplace in South Africa, particularly in the higher education context, the topics of shame identified in the literature on South Africa and shame in the South African workplace, before presenting the research methodology and the findings. In the end, a conclusion will be given and recommendations for theory and practice provided.

6.2 Shame in South African Historical and Contemporary Contexts

Recently, there have been several incidents that are judged to be shameful in the South African societal context, including fraud (Llewellyn 2000), the killing of endangered wild animals (Della-Ragione 2013), the maltreatment of domestic animals (Mail and Guardian 2013), the president’s criminal and political offences (Van Susteren 2015), and bullying and victimisation in schools (Ahmed et al. 2001). In addition, violence, war experiences and trauma are linked to shame in the South African context (Baines 2008; Munusamy 2015a, b).

According to Munusamy (2015a), South Africa is a “place of shame, violence and disconnect” and South Africans are known for their violence which the author defines as shameful, particularly with regard to the recurring outbreaks and spread of xenophobic violence in the country. In another article, Munusamy (2015b) highlights another incident of shame as that of the “Marikana massacre” in which thirty-four miners were killed during strikes in the mining sector. This massacre by South African security forces was the bloodiest since the end of apartheid. However, the concept of shame refers not only to recent violence, xenophobia and killings, but also to the history of the country. Baines (2008, 221) emphasises that former South African Defence Force conscripts have “attempted to deal with guilt and shame by telling their stories”. Obviously, shame is for them connected to the war, the brutality, the victimisation and the traumatic experiences within the Defence Force, however hardly any narrator admits the “complicity of upholding the apartheid system.” (Baines 2008, 222) and many of them would like to get rid of the “shame of being regarded as

vanquished soldiers who lost the war and so ended on the wrong side of history” (Baines 2008, 226).

Bailey (2011) also refers to shame in South Africa in the context of the recent history of the country. She connects the concept of shame with race by referring to the shame of white South Africans with regard to apartheid. So called “white shame” is connected to concepts of solidarity, penitence and vulnerability and, according to the author, an appropriate moral response to the historical context. Tessman (2001) emphasises that there are only two ways for white South Africans: either to live with the shame (and suffer) or to ignore the shame of the past and move on. Dealing with the shame of the past would then lead to hybrid new white identities that are not based on the racial order, but on heterogeneous identities.

Other research has established that shame is also to be found in the construction of “coloured identities” (“coloureds” are historically defined as a mixed race in South Africa) and the treatment of Khoi/coloured women (Wicomb 1998). Wicomb (1998, 91) provides the example of the shameful treatment of Saartje Baartman, a Khoi woman who was exhibited in London and Paris from 1810 to 1815, and on whose body medical research was conducted to establish the “sexual lasciviousness” of black women. Other research (Julius 2004) has found that in a comparison of individuals from the white, black and coloured groups, coloured identity did not have a significant relationship to shame and, therefore, the following has been assumed: This means that if a case has been made for the apartheid-institutionalised shamed coloured individual, that a current non-significant relationship with shame suggests that his group has been re-negotiating a non-shaming self-standpoint that is in contrast with the intended standpoint of the ‘other’ who creates the shaming experience.

Ahmed et al. (2001, 13) highlight the fact that Nelson Mandela, who was shamed by being declared a terrorist and by being detained for almost 27 years of his life, managed to transform his shame through his individual actions. The authors highlight (Ahmed et al. 2001, 14–15) that Mandela managed to transform the experienced shame by opening up through, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and by telling his story and hence to reintegrate into society.

Besides historical-political issues of shame and race, shame has been associated with ill health and depression (Lauer 2006; Brown et al. 2010). Jilek-Aall (1999, 382) emphasises that, for example, epilepsy in traditional African cultures (such as is apparent in Tanzanian society) provokes “ambivalent feelings in those witnessing it” and creates “an atmosphere of fear, shame and mysticism”, having mainly been interpreted as caused by ancestral or evil spirits. However, epilepsy not only creates shame in the witnesses but also in the family and the epileptic person him/herself, particularly when treatment does not help (Jilek-Aall 1999). The author maintains that health education about epilepsy should help to dispel feelings of shame, guilt, fear and anxiety in the individuals and families affected.

HIV/AIDS is one topic that is strongly connected to shame in African contexts (Lauer 2006). By measuring AIDS-related stigma in South Africa, Kalichman et al. (2005, 137) were able to point out that AIDS is connected with “shamefulness of the behaviour of people with AIDS” and that AIDS stigma is generally related to shamefulness.

Besides AIDS, rape and domestic violence have been described as being associated with shame, guilt and fear of blame (WHO 1999). In the South African context, Jewkes and Abrahams (2002) have found that a high number of cases of rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and sexual coercion are not reported publicly, which might be related to these feelings of shame, guilt and fear of blame, as well as other highly complex socio-economic circumstances.

Murray (2014) researched the representations of shame, gender and female bodies in selected contemporary South African short stories and emphasises that shame is often connected to the female body. In her analysis she points out that female protagonists are the objects of shame when it comes to, for example, breastfeeding that does not work out as it is supposed to be, or child birth and generally, according to Mitchell (2012, 1), when it comes to “shame’s displacement on female body”. Murray (2014,12) comes to the conclusion that South African short stories reduce women’s femininity to the context of the patriarchal society by reducing women’s bodies and femininity as such “to be shameful”.

Other topics that relate to feelings of shame and guilt in combination with gender and, particularly, femininity and female bodies, are, for example, topics such as the termination of pregnancies in the South African context (Subramaney et al. 2015)

6.3 Shame in South African Workplaces

According to Poulson II (2000), when expectations are not clearly communicated to employees, or the psychological contract changes or is violated, when goals are set for employees rather than with them, then the stage is set for shame to be triggered in employees.

Potential triggers of shame responses brought about by organisational practices and policies arise from termination, failure to gain promotion, negative performance appraisals and the like (Poulson II 2000). Informal organisational practices may also have a great impact, as well as behaviour such as bullying, discrimination, harassment and exclusion.

Managerial practices that feed into a manager’s power and an employee’s powerlessness, such as warnings and reprimands, can lead to an individual’s accumulated shame according to Poulson II (2000). Even when programmes are intended to empower employees in the workplace, they are expected to give up key aspects of their power at the door.

With regard to work contexts, Scandinavian research has pointed out that shaming experiences often derive from unemployment (Rantakeisu et al. 1997). Accordingly, long-term unemployed individuals experience more shameful situations than short-term unemployed individuals and the experience of shame contributes to the health-related consequences of unemployment. The authors found that particularly unemployed individuals who live in a more shaming environments show more mental disorders than others (Rantakeisu et al. 1997).

In the South African workplace, little research has been conducted on shame and work contexts. However, a study by Sefalafala and Webster (2013) has shown that shame in the workplace can be connected to low status occupations, for example when security guards hold a university degree and are forced to work for a low income in the dangerous and low status security industry.

6.4 The South African Work Context of Higher Education

HE has undergone many changes since the end of apartheid in 1994 (Louw and Mayer 2008), particularly with regard to internationalisation strategies, as well as transformation in terms of cultural, racial and gender policies.

A number of authors (e.g. Bitzer and Botha 2011) have shown that historically shame was used structurally in HEIs to dehumanise individuals of African descent in terms of their cultures and languages. In the present day, research is required on transformation, which needs to be addressed by interviewing students about their experience of the organisational culture.

South African universities have been publicly labelled “universities of shame” owing to the racial incidents that have occurred at universities across the country, highlighting the fact that “pervasive racism”, such as that which happened at the University of the Free State where students forced black cleaners to “run and drink urine”, still exists (University World News 2009).

Another issue that has been identified as shameful in the context of HEIs is the topic of plagiarism (Mail and Guardian 2015). Recently, the Minister for Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, has highlighted that plagiarism is one of the worst possible assaults on HEIs and needs to be shamed as academic fraud (Mail and Guardian 2015).

Besides the specific topics of shame in HEIs, other issues that are experienced as shameful in the broader society are addressed in the context of HEIs: the Department of Higher Education and Training (2012), for example, released a policy and a strategy framework on HIV and AIDS for higher education to strengthening the comprehensive and effective response of HEIs towards the pandemic and free the HEI sector from the stigma and discrimination related to HIV and AIDS.

6.5 Contribution, Aim, Purpose and Research Questions

This chapter contributes to an in-depth understanding of the experience and management of shame within the HE South African work context. It contributes by helping to fill the void in the scant literature on shame within Southern African work contexts.

The purpose of this study was to focus on the concepts of shame in a selected work setting and to understand shame within a situational and cultural context from an emic, in-depth perspective.

The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of shame as an intensive emotional concept in the workplace. The study aims to explore the culture-specific interlinkages of shame experiences and their management in the South African work context to contribute further to the international discourse on culture, emotions and shame.

The research questions leading to the fulfilment of the aims are the following:

1. How do individuals define shame?
2. What situations are experienced as shameful in the described context?
3. What are the personal strategies of individuals for dealing with shame?
4. What are the strategies for dealing with shame on organisational levels?

6.5.1 Research Methodology

This qualitative research study on shame in the South African HE work context adopted an exploratory and descriptive approach. It is located within a social constructivist (Berger and Luckmann 2009) perspective, incorporating the fundamental assumptions of creating of meaning by integrating the participants' experiences and reflections on shame and the theoretical preconceptions and hermeneutic lenses (Dilthey 2011) of the researcher.

6.5.1.1 The Sample

Eleven individuals in total participated in this research study. The only sample criterion was that participants should be working in HEIs in South Africa at the time of the interview. All the participants occupied middle and senior leadership positions in HE either in academic or administrative positions.

The participants were purposefully sampled as being information-rich regarding the research objective. The sample comprised a diverse group of men and women from four race groups, as defined in the Employment Equity Act (1998), and included four white, two coloured, two Indian and three African participants.

6.5.1.2 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and the observations of the researchers at one HEI. The interviews were either conducted face to face or in written form. In the former case, the researchers asked the participants four questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the latter case, the questions regarding biographical data and the four interview questions were sent to the participants via email in order to elicit a written response. Seven of the interviews were face-to-face interviews, while the responses to the other four interviews being received in written form. With two participants who decided to write down their interview responses, one follow-up session each was held to talk about their responses and explore them on a deeper level.

The researchers used an abductive reasoning approach (Kelle 2005), which diverted from the classical and traditional inductive reasoning perspective (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and theoretical agnosticism (Henwood and Pidgeon 2003). The interview questions were developed based on the concept of shame being explored and on an extensive literature review on shame.

The interviews contained questions on the biographical data, such as age, mother tongue and position in the organisation, as well as five questions on shame, such as “What does shame mean for you? Please define”, “Please narrate a shameful situation that you have experienced in the work context”, or “What are your personal strategies for dealing with shame?” and “How are situations that you experience as shameful in the workplace dealt with on an organisational level? Please explain what you observe and how the organisation could ideally deal with shame in the workplace.” These questions were extended and probed as the dialogue between the researchers and the researched naturally evolved.

6.5.1.3 Data Analysis

The researchers used a constructivist grounded theory (GT) approach to analyse the data (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). In this approach, social constructionist epistemological assumptions are applied while incorporating classical GT methods as a flexible guide rather than a rigid set of methodological rules (Charmaz 2011).

Both researchers analysed the first interview, commencing with line-by-line deconstruction and labelling of text, creating numerous codes. Through constant comparison between data and context, codes were integrated and delimited into meaningful categories and explained by writing of memos. Interviews were added as the analysis progressed and the GT strategies of coding and memoing continued to guide the development of meaning categories across interviews.

Constant comparison between interviews led to data saturation after a number of interviews were analysed and no new categories of analysis emerged. Through intersubjective validation processes between the researchers and subsequent comparison of categories, text and research constructs, the primary themes were arrived at.

The researchers focused on seeking categories and themes reflected in the topic of shame in the workplace. The intersubjective validation allowed an in-depth reflection and analysis of shame in the workplace.

6.5.1.4 Research Ethics

Consent to participate was given by all interviewees. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and could withdraw participation at any point in time. Rigorous analysis was attained through the iterative GT strategy of constant comparison (Charmaz 2011) and the intersubjective validation of the initial analysis (Yin 2009).

6.6 Research Findings

With regard to the presentation of the findings, it is important to note that many more individuals were invited to participate in the interviews on shame in the workplace through sampling procedures; however, several of the invited participants declined, stating, among other things, “I do not have experience of shame in the workplace”, “I cannot think of any shameful experiences”, “That is a difficult topic”.

These reactions show that the topic of shame is not an “easy” topic to deal with; it might even be connected to feelings of anxiety, insecurity or irritation.

With regard to the interviews that were conducted, participants stated that they were excited about participating, but were “not sure of what to expect”, that they were a bit anxious, and that shame was not an easy topic to talk about. However, during the course of the interviews and whilst exploring the topic of shame, participants seemed to become aware of various situations that they had experienced as shameful in the workplace.

It is important to note that some participants did not classify themselves according to the generic race group classification system as noted in Table 6.1, but

Table 6.1 Demographic information

No.	Sex	Age	Mother tongue	Cultural background	Nationality	Position in organisation	Highest level of education
1	Male	48	Afrikaans	Christian	South African	Lecturer	Masters
2	Female	46	Afrikaans	White Afrikaans	South African	Professor	Ph.D.
3	Male	57	Afrikaans	Afrikaans	South African	Professor and HOD	DPhil.
4	Male	42	Arubakati	Congolese	Congolese	Lecturer	Ph.D.
5	Male	52	Tswane	African	South African	Lecturer	Master
6	Male	61	Afrikaans	Dutch Reformed Church	South African	Professor	Ph.D.
7	Male	61	Afrikaans	Dutch Reformed Church	South African	Professor	Ph.D.
8	Female	54	English	Indian	South African	Director	Ph.D.
9	Female	43	N Sotho	Sepedi	South African	Professor and HOD	Ph.D.
10	Female	40	English	Indian	South African	Administrative coordinator	Matric
11	Female	N/A	English	South African	South African	Professor	Ph.D.

rather viewed their cultural backgrounds from a religious, language or South African perspective.

Finally, the feedback after the interviews was such that participants said they had enjoyed talking about these “private issues”, that they could even use the interviews to clarify these issues, that it was the first time they had ever talked about it with someone and that they had increased their future self-awareness with regard to shameful situations and experiences.

6.6.1 Defining Shame

In the participants’ personal definitions of shame seven themes were prominent (Table 6.2):

Table 6.2 Definition of shame

Category of definition	Number of codes/number of statements in codes	Codes
Exposed	5/11	Caught out (3) Vulnerable (3) People talk about (3) Disempowered (1) Unsafe space (1)
Personal	4/8	Self-criticism(4) Reputation (2) Personal reaction (1) Perception (1)
Repressed	7/8	Can haunt you (2) Deepest part of forgotten history Like to forget Buried in the past Not reminded Buried in the past
Error in judgement	4/6	Done something wrong (3) Allowed something to happen Did not behave appropriately derail
Understanding	5/5	Cannot connect Difficult to define Do not have a definition No description of shame Not sure what shame is
Not good enough	5/5	Not man enough Not enough publications Not enough time Not the right journal Too white

During the initial stages of the interview some participants were not sure of their understanding of shame and/or could not connect to shame and found it difficult to define. As the interview progressed, the participants talked through the situations they had encountered at work, how they had dealt with them and how organisations could assist employees. In the end they were able to describe what shame meant to them. In essence, shame was defined as a feeling of being exposed, personal, repressed, an error in judgement and not being good enough.

The intrinsic feelings of shame related to errors in judgement either by feeling they had personally done something wrong or allowed something to happen. Self-criticism and the wish not to be reminded of experiences that were perceived as shameful were often recounted, as is evident in the following statement by participant 1: “I felt deeply ashamed of myself you know at that time I still do I was actually thinking perhaps I must have a conversation with him and ask him whether he still remembers that day.”

Extrinsically, shame is defined as being exposed whether to colleagues, family or the broader community. A number of participants defined it as displaying their vulnerabilities, like participant 6: “Being caught out, found out, exposed, and being vulnerable in unsafe spaces – whether for who I am, for who I am not, for what I did or didn’t do.”

6.6.2 *Shameful Situations at Work*

The participants shared a wide range of shameful situations at work both outside the higher education environment and within. These were in the following contexts

- higher education
- military
- corporate
- religious organisation
- school
- university
- statutory body.

Predominantly, the participants relate competence to shameful experiences in the workplace. These experiences refer to inner self-doubt, founded or not, and others questioning their competence. As participant 8 notes:

I was unexpectedly asked to join a Senate meeting by the Vice Chancellor and I had to literally run out of my office and go to Senate with no idea what I was going to be asked. As I entered the room I physically experienced a crushing feeling as a room full of predominantly white men turned around to see me enter the room. I struggled to find one familiar friendly woman or black person other than the vice chancellor. For those few moments I felt dis-empowered. My critical inner voice tries to sabotage me during my address and unbeknown to my audience I had to manage two conversations, i.e. with my inner critic and with members of Senate.

Participant 11 felt she was adding value to the conversation and confident of her own competence; however, her competence was being tested, creating a shameful experience for her in the workplace: “I thought I was making a logical interaction with her, a useful comment, she just looks at me. It was a total disregard of me, and she was looking at me. My experience was in an angry fashion. The fact that she just looked at me, with all my colleagues seeing this, was what was shameful about this. The fact that she was senior was also shameful.”

There is also an element of feeling exposed as the participant notes her senior colleague just looking at her. In another incident, participant 9 experienced shame in that colleagues wanted her to provide details of a case she was working on

I did not know that I would ever encounter something like that. It was just a first case, a first job. I could not even sleep, because I was thinking about it. That such an older and mature person could make such a stupid decision, you know. At the same time I am embarrassed with the fact that the gossips within the office, and some other people, would like to know, from me, whether she admitted things. I was kind of under pressure to say she admitted or whatever because they wanted to know the gory details of what is happening and why.

In other situations participants experience shame when they do not support another colleague.

Participant 1 remarked:

Our colleague was attacked by this group and, we were so shocked, we weren't ready for this, we weren't prepared for this. All of us just kept quiet and there were times when he actually looked at us. He looked back at the audience, at the participants. We did not intervene, we did not say anything. At the end of the session, he again looked at us, and I felt so the deeply, deeply, disappointed, in myself, that I did not stand up, and protect my colleague so to speak. At least help him, because, I could see that he did not know how to deal with a situation.

Exclusion of the individual seems to play an important role, either by informing the individual to physically remove themselves “to go home” or to resign, omitting to invite them to be part of a group or to ignore input from a team member in a meeting.

It is interesting to note that an individual who has felt shame may also use exclusion as a coping strategy for shame in avoiding the situation or individual that has shamed them. Participant 3 recalls “I went out of my way not to have too much contact with her but to let her know that I was not like that in terms of what I did and what I was.”

6.6.3 Personal Strategies to Manage Shame at Work

The findings reveal that the participants had various personal strategies for dealing with shame in the workplace. Table 6.3 provides an overview.

Altogether five categories could be found within the theme of personal strategies for dealing with shame. These range from inner strategies (attitude), to

Table 6.3 Shameful work situations

Category of definition	Number of codes/number of statements in codes	Codes
Competence	15/15	Critical inner voice (3) Feel stupid (2) Did I make a mistake (2) Hasty comment(2) Shameful data (2) Check the data (2) Made a suggestion Thought to be logical(1) Useful comment(1)
Exposed	9/9	Looking at me (5) Sitting in a meeting (1) Tell the community (1) Tell the organisation (1) (asking for information) (1)
Not being supportive	7/7	No support (5) Colleague looked at us(1) We kept quiet(1)
Exclusion	6/6	Disregarded me (1) Go home (1) Resign (1) Not included in annual celebratory dinner (1) Stay in tent (1) Avoided her (1)

communication strategies, physical expression strategies and the context to the impact of future actions (Table 6.4).

With regard to inner strategies, it is important in the context of shame to self-reflect, to be positive, to analyse and understand and make sense of the shame experienced. It is important to rationalise constructively, not to let the emotions take over and worry, to sort yourself out and digest the experiences.

Participant 3, a 57-year-old Afrikaans-speaking male professional, stated: “I rationalise constructively by convincing myself that I had a right to act in a certain way. If I cannot do that, I apologise to the person(s) and feel better afterwards.”

In terms of the communication strategy, it needs to be emphasised that taking a third person into mediate and apologising to the person who is shamed are the most important strategies, followed by a statement that others should not be confronted about shameful issues. Further on, discussions are appreciated, action should be taken, discussion with other people about the topic should be held, and people involved should talk in a “good way” to each other. Besides the talking strategies, one participant highlighted the fact that he had to write a report about the experienced shameful situation (participant 1): “I was told to write a report” and “I was to go for a walk”.

Table 6.4 Personal strategies to manage shame at work

Category of strategy	Number of codes/number of statements in codes	Codes
Inner strategies (attitude)	13/15	Self-reflection (2) Be positive (2) Make sense of shame (1) Analyses (1) Consider implications (1) Rationalise constructively (1) Read books (1) Sort yourself (1) Do not worry (1) Digest (1) Swallow it (1) Denial quietly (1) Blame yourself (1)
Communication strategies	8/13	Take a third person it (3) Apologise (3) Do not confront the person (2) Discuss with others (1) Take action (1) Talk to person (1) Speak in a good way (1) Write report (1)
Physical (expression) strategies	4/5	Cry (2) Sing and hum (1) Walk (1) Breath (1)
Context-bound	3/5	Change context (2) Adjust to context (2) Withdraw from context (1)
Impact on future actions	2/2	Next time, count to ten! (1) Learn from mistakes (1)

Only in four codes is the need for the physical expression of the strategy to deal with shame reported: in crying, singing, walking/jogging and breathing whilst counting up to ten. Another personal strategy is based in the context of the situation: change the context where the shame happens and is experienced, adjust to the context and withdraw from the context (Table 6.5).

Finally, one participant shared that another strategy for dealing with shame is to make plans for the behaviour in shameful situations and to learn from the mistakes made.

Table 6.5 Organisational impact on managing shame

Category of Organisational context	Number of codes/number of statements in codes	Codes
Leadership	7/9	Should use shame to motivate and change behaviour (2) Decision-making is with the superior (2) Create opportunities to speak (1) Support from superiors (1) Get advice from leader (1) Wrong doers must be confronted (1) Sympathise with “victim” (1)
Personal strategies	5/8	Be self-aware and humble (2) Avoid embarrassing situations by complying with norms (2) Fix it yourself and take account for actions (2) Perform according to standard (2) Wand off negative thoughts/feelings (critical inner voice) (1)
Strategies of organisation	4/7	Disciplinary processes (3) Employees assistance programmes (2) Counselling in organisations (1) Should take a stand (1)
Neglecting of organisation	3/3	Does not deal with shame (1) “Dream on”—no salvation! (1) Does not support to resolve (1)
Colleagues	1/2	Support each other (2)

6.6.4 Organisational Impacts on Managing Shame

Having been asked for their view on the strategies of organisations for dealing with shame, the participants referred to five categories: personal strategies for dealing with shame, the negligence of the organisation in dealing with shame, strategies of the organisation for dealing with shame, leadership, and colleagues.

In most of the statements regarding the organisational strategies for dealing with shame, participants highlighted the fact that leadership is important in the context of shame in organisations: in the opinion of the participants, on the one hand leaders should use shame to motivate and change individuals’ behaviour at work and to confront “wrong doers” (participant 3). On the other hand, leaders should create opportunities to talk about shame, support employees in dealing with it, sympathise with the victim, help to make decisions when dealing with shame and support employees emotionally.

Besides the leadership strategies applied in the context of shame, participants felt that they needed to use personal strategies to deal with shame in organisations. They felt that they needed to be self-aware and humble when dealing with shame

and avoid shameful situations by recognising and complying with the norms of the organisations and context. They felt they are self-reliant in dealing with shame in the workplace using their own competences and taking account for their actions. In the workplace, shame is particularly linked to performance, and performing up to the expected standard helped the participants to deal with shame and avoid shameful situations. Finally, another personal strategy within organisations is to “ward off negative feelings” and calming down the “inner critical voice”.

Participant 7, a 61-year-old Afrikaans-speaking professional stated: “Part of my survival strategy throughout my career was to minimise possible embarrassing situations or situations that might lead to me being ashamed.”

Participants felt that organisations should have strategies in place to help employees deal with shame, such as disciplinary processes (particularly when shame is connected to bullying), employee assistance programmes and individual counselling. Finally, participants requested that organisations should take a clear stand in their approach to dealing with shame in the workplace. However, three participants maintained that organisations neglect to deal with shame, that they do not have proper procedures in place and do not deal with shame, even though they should.

Participant 6 emphasised: “Dream on! In this anxiety producing machine we call higher education, there is no “salvation”—and one has to muster courage to live self-aware and humble.”

Finally, one participant shared that colleagues’ support can help in dealing with shame successfully and resourcefully and that colleagues are needed to provide support to deal with shame within organisations. However, in terms of the overall picture painted by the data, most of the participants do not take colleagues as a resource for dealing with shame into account. They see it is a personal and a leadership topic.

6.7 Discussion

In terms of discussing the findings in the context of the literature review, there is evidence to show that shame is systemic (Mason 1992, p. 175). However, in the South African workplace shame is often described as destructive, negative and immobilising (Tangney and Dearing 2002; Wong and Tsai 2007). Embarrassment and guilt are often emotions closely related to experiences of shame and not as clearly demarcated from each other, as Tangney and Fischer (1995) and Wong and Tsai (2007) suggest.

In this study there is evidence of the normal shame Poulson II (2000) alludes to in the workplace where shame is often related to embarrassment, and “systemic shame”, to experiences outside of the work environment, which, in turn, is often associated with both culture-specific perspectives and across cultures (Westerman 2004).

In this South African sample the distinction between western and eastern cultures and individualistic and collectivist cultures was not as distinct as Poulson II (2000) suggests. This could suggest that Julius’s (2004) comparisons of individuals from white, black, Indian and coloured groups may currently be in the process of being renegotiated. To a non-shaming self-standpoint across all cultural groups in South Africa for a more inclusive society away from the stigma of South Africa as a “place of shame, violence and disconnect”. There is still much work to be done, where the South African workplace could play a role in “normalizing” South African shame tendencies.

White shame in particular appears to be transforming. It is interesting to observe that only one of the white participants referred to her cultural background as “white Afrikaans” while the other participants referred to their cultural background in terms of language and/or religious affiliation. It is possible that these participants are experiencing the white shame Bailey (2011) mentions with regard to apartheid where the participants experience shame on this level by not identifying with colour and thereby ignoring the shame of the past and moving on—a coping strategy not unlike the voluntary exclusion one participant used as a coping structure for her shame.

In contrast and to confirm Julius’s (2004) research, one coloured participant made it clear that she would not bend the knee to shame and could not identify with the feeling especially in the work context where she was of the opinion people are there to work and need to leave these issues behind.

In this South African context, the social learning on how to deal with shameful experiences by talking them through, such as the former South African Defence Force conscripts did (Baines 2008), thereby vanquishing these feelings and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in the past to reintegrate society (Ahmed et al. 2001), seem to be reflected in the current South African workplace. Here individuals use communication strategies to deal with shame and guilt from a positive psychology perspective to cope and build resilience towards shameful experiences in the workplace.

From an organisational perspective and, more particularly, in the context of higher education, the findings of this study are inconclusive. The participants of this study refer to individuals coping with shame in the workplace with little emphasis on how higher education contributes, especially in light of the view that historically higher education was used to dehumanise individuals of African cultures and languages from students’ perspectives. In terms of employees, within the system reference is made in the literature to pervasive racism (University World News 2009).

Some participants noted that leadership should use shame to motivate and change behaviour. If shame were seen as a positive factor in motivating the workforce we could also ask ourselves whether this would produce the desired outcome in the South Africa context, where some people will not bend to shame and do not acknowledge that it exists in the workplace.

6.8 Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to focus on concepts and experiences of shame in the higher education work setting in South Africa and to understand shame and strategies for dealing with shame on both the personal and organisational level in a situational and cultural context from an emic, in-depth perspective.

The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of shame as an intense emotional concept in the workplace and to respond to the four research questions.

In conclusion the following can be highlighted:

It may be concluded that participants define shame in the work context as a deeply personal feeling of not being good enough, where possible errors in judgement on their part may leave them feeling exposed to shameful experiences. These, even if repressed, may resurface with negative connotations or as a catharsis evident in the participants' positive expressions of the interview as a vehicle for future self-awareness with regard to shameful situations and experiences.

An attack on an individual's/employee's competence both intrinsically and extrinsically, whether founded or not, is of particular importance to the participants of this study and appears to be the predominant trigger for a shameful situation at work.

Not supporting a colleague or not feeling the support of colleagues in a situation that is experienced as shameful also triggers shame within the individual.

While competence and support appear to be the triggers of shame, exclusion seems to be the result of a shameful experience, in essence removing the "culprit" from the situation, thereby enforcing shameful experiences in the workplace. On the other hand, individuals may also voluntarily remove themselves from the situation as a coping strategy.

Other personal strategies to deal with shame include particularly inner strategies of the individual which are not necessarily shared with others or the context. Following inner strategies, communication strategies, which refer particularly to third party intervention and apology, are used. The physical expression in dealing with shame seems to be less important; however, the change of context through withdrawing, adjustment or change of context are considered. Anticipation of the future can also have an impact on the strategies being applied at the present moment.

In conclusion, with regard to the organisation and according to the participants, leadership is very important when dealing with shame in organisations in combination with personal strategies for dealing with it. Participants felt that the organisation should have procedures in place to deal with shame, but were also aware that organisations often do not deal with shame and prefer to neglect the topic. One participant stated that they would like to experience colleagues' support in dealing with shame. Leaders and the self-responsibility of the individual seem to be the main players in the context of shame. Interestingly, participants expected leaders to, on the one hand, use shame to uphold morals, ethics and principles in the

organisation, while on the other hand, expecting leaders to support employees to deal appropriately with shame by providing advice and emotional support.

6.9 Theoretical and Practical Recommendations

The topic of shame in the workplace is important for employees working in South African workplaces. It is a topic that is not easily approached as it is linked to feelings of anxiety and insecurity.

On a theoretical level, more research is needed within the organisational context in South Africa with regard to the definition and experiences of shame and shameful experiences. Research needs to address the impact of cultural heterogeneity and shame in the workplace, as well as the differentiation of concepts of shame, guilt and embarrassment in various cultural and organisational contexts within South Africa.

On a practical level, employees and organisations need to increase the awareness of shame in the workplace as well as its impact on employees and organisations. Context- and culture-specific training and programmes should be developed to create awareness and develop strategies for employees (personal) and organisations (programmes) to deal effectively with shame in the workplaces. Such training should approach shame as a resource of personal and organisational development and needs a transcultural and South African-specific approach to dealing with shame by including various cultural perspectives on shame in the South African organisational context. Organisations need to develop their leaders to tackle the topic of shame and acknowledge its existence in the work context to develop an organisational culture that deals with shame on a competent, open, resourceful and awareness creating level.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

The interview was audio recorded with the participants’ written consent. The process started with questions concerning biographical detail:

Sex:

Age:

Mother tongue:

Cultural background:

Nationality:

Position in Organisation:

Highest level of education:

Questions were asked in the following order from all of the participants

1. What is shame for you? Please define.
2. Please narrate a shameful situation that you have experienced in the work context.
3. With regard to shame and culture: Please explain how your culture influences the experience of and the dealing with shame.
4. What are your personal strategies to deal with shame? (What do you say, do, think, and feel?)
5. How situations that are experienced as shameful are dealt with on an organizational level?

The participants were asked if they wanted to add anything after which the interview was concluded and audio taping stopped.

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