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Exploring paralysis in the face of shame:
An example of pluralism in qualitative analysis

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Aim:
To explore the value of pluralistic approaches to qualitative analysis, illustrated by data from a project on managing experiences of shame.
Growing interest in pluralism

- Multi-layered, multi-perspective analyses can address complexity (Frost, 2011)
- Minimises ‘methodolatry’ (Chamberlain, 2000)
- Concerns about epistemological inconsistency between differing methodologies
  - However, relativist position means we can adopt a ‘both, and’ approach to epistemology? (Frost & Nolas, 2011)
Managing shame

Investigated experiences of managing shame among 50 university staff & students via written narratives & open-ended questionnaires

Intensely private, embodied experience - yet profoundly social:

- constructed by powerful social norms & accompanying discourses
- being positioned as ‘shameful’ silences & marginalises
Analytic dilemma

- To treat accounts as attempts to represent embodied experiences of managing and repairing shame & the personal meaning of these

OR

- To use accounts to explore the discursive contexts within which participants were positioned as shameful and the discursive resources available for repositioning themselves
Solution

- Thematic analysis of experiences of managing and repairing shame

AND

- Foucauldian informed analysis of discursive resources available to participants for constructing and resisting shameful ways-of-being
Being disabled by shame

One of three overarching themes identified via the thematic analysis
Discursive constructions

- Shame as a moral imperative
- Shame as weakness:
  - lack of confidence in one’s own judgements
  - inability to resist a critical attack
- Shame as appropriate submission to the judgement of the ‘wise’
An example:

Called ‘slag’ (when aged 13 yrs) after being pressured into sex act that was then disclosed to others:

...naively I went outside with him, it was a rather unpleasant experience when he removed his penis and asked me to touch it, but I wasn’t keen but felt obliged to do so, regretting it very much...I was mortified by the fact that he felt it necessary to tell everyone.
An example...

Shame constructed as a humiliating, critical attack:

**Narr:** It was very humiliating... I was bullied for a further 2yrs after this incident and it took a long time to come to terms with the shame.

**Afterwards?:** I felt stupid & powerless.... Ultimately I felt like a “slag” ... because that was the name I was called.

**Was there anything that anyone did or said that made you feel worse?**

People laughing at me
An example:

This construction positioned her as weak for not resisting shame:

*Is there anything you didn’t do but wish you had done to avoid or reduce feelings of shame?*

*Stood up for myself, fighted back instead of just accepting the situation.’*

*What would you think of someone...in....the same situation....but who didn’t feel any shame?*

*I would admire their strength to not feel shame*
An example:

However, shame also constructed as an *appropriate* response based on reflection on her behaviour:

*In this story, what particular aspect of your circumstances, your behaviour or yourself was shameful?*

The sexual aspect, him exposing himself and me for touching him

*Why did you judge this aspect to be shameful?*

It felt wrong, I barely knew him yet there I was touching him, even though I didn’t want to.
An example:

Additionally, she does not have the same power as others to speak & define her situation:

\[ \text{Ultimately I felt like a “slag” and that I was easy and worthless.} \]

\[ .. \text{ he was 16/17 and very confident and good looking. I, on the other hand was incredibly inexperienced, I believe I had only kissed a boy once.} \]
Being disabled by shame

What did you do or say when you began to feel shamed?

I couldn’t I was so shy the sheer humiliation made me mute, also I believed it was true so what could I say.

Trapped between contradictory constructions of shame & silenced…

Until later when access to alternative discourses:

it took many years to realise I wasn’t a bad person and that I had done nothing wrong

…it made me realise that rules about male/female sexuality are based on hypocrisy
What enabled a pluralistic approach?

- Two separate analyses
  - avoided decisions about moving between different perspectives on data
- Both approaches theorised individual experience / complex constructed subjectivity
- Both approaches concerned with meaning-making
What were the challenges?

- Time-consuming & challenging for lone researcher to conduct two analyses
- Challenging to pull findings together
- Use of open-ended questionnaire
Conclusions

- It is possible for multiple analytic lenses to enhance data interpretation.

- Addition of discursive analysis to analysis of experience illuminates:
  - the multi-faceted, contradictory & fragmented nature of subjective experience
  - Keeps sight of both (a) aspects of experience which are meaningful to participant & (b) the social construction of experience.