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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, fought 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:

Ultimately I felt like a "slag" and that I was easy and worthless.

.. 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