A sense of self and shame

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Abstract: This paper identifies shame as an influence in the construction of self-identity or sense of self in an exploratory study of a small group of ex-residents of out-of-home care. This small group is a part of a larger cohort identified as The Forgotten Australians in a 2004 Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee. Broadly, this population can be defined as adults who during childhood spent time in orphanages, detention centres, reform schools, or any institutional out-of-home care provided by any government or non-government organisation, or any care which was not foster care prior to deinstitutionalisation in 1974 (SCARC 2004: p. xv). I have conducted a qualitative, empirical exploratory study into how these ex-residents constructed and narrated their story to another person for the first time. Shame was a significant emergent theme in the data which served to inhibit participants desire to narrate their stories. Each participant who described shame as an inhibitor also indicated they had at some time experienced identity issues. Although issues of self-identity are significant to this study, identity is not the key focus explored in this paper. Rather this paper sets out to link shame to issues of self-identity in this small sample of ex-residents of institutional care.

Keywords: shame, story, identity, sense of self, Forgotten Australian

Introduction
The following paper identifies how shame is linked to a concept of a sense of self or self-identity in a small sample of former care residents of a New South Wales orphanage and how this sense of shame influenced the construction and narration of their stories of lived experience. This small group are a part of a larger population, upwards of 500,000 children, identified as The Forgotten Australians in a 2004 Senate Community Affairs Reference
Committee (SCARC). Broadly, this population can be defined as those adults who during childhood spent time in orphanages, detention centres, reform schools, or any institutional out-of-home care provided by any government or non-government organisation, or any care which was not foster care prior to 1974 (SCARC 2004: p. xv). During the process of analysing the data of this pilot study, the theme of shame emerged, as a key mechanism contributing to and impeding on many of the participants desire to construct and narrate the story of their lived experience. The paper will provide a brief definition of shame and a description of sense of self; the methodology used in this empirical study and the strengths and weakness of this pilot project. The paper will then provide a discussion linking shame to a sense of self for a significant component of participants in this study.

**Shame**

Emotions play a major part in our everyday life. Michael Lewis (1992) argues that ‘it is difficult to construct a sentence or to look at a person without feeling some emotion’ (p.1). Shame is an emotion which can affect all aspects of human life. Shame can also be difficult to define. In attempting to identify shame Silvan Thomkins (1911-1991) says:

> If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, transgression and of alienation. Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes of the world a vale of tears, yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man [sic].... shame is felt as inner torment, a sickness of the soul....the humiliated one feels [them]self naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity and worth (Kosofsky, Frank & Alexander 1995: p.133).

The above quote becomes especially relevant when used in the context of the Forgotten Australians. As highlighted in the Executive Summary of the Forgotten Australians report ‘[t]he legacy of their childhood experiences for far too many has been low self-esteem, lack of confidence, depression, fear and distrust, anger, shame, guilt’ (SCARC 2004: p. xvi). This statement is supported in the analysis of data provided for this study.

Individuals construct and define the emotion of shame differently as will be evidenced in this paper. Differing life expectations determine different stimuli to emotion or feelings of shame and each person’s response to an event are specific to their unique history of lived experience (Lewis 1971). Individualistic life experiences and particularly relationships with significant others have an important bearing upon how individuals come to experience feelings of
shame. However, the experience of shame is often limited to the emotional traces it leaves on a person in terms of the prevailing sense of merit and worth in relation to others (Lewis 1992: pp. 33-35). In relation to this study, the majority of participant’s narrations contained strong references to shame and in some instances intense discourse of how that shame has affected their lived experience and their sense of self.

Sense of self
The traditional sociological self is shaped by the influences of the society in which we live (Bessant & Watts 2002; pp. 115-139), it is also organised around a concept of self. Poole (2003; p.123) whilst describing and contextualising ‘self’ in a process of socialisation refers to Meads (1934) symbolic interactionism which he developed from Cooley’s ideas of a sense of self from whence, Cooley argued, is constructed during our earliest social interactions. Mead advocated that the construction of a sense of self and the concept of me and I are essential to being human (Poole 2003; p.127). Cooley argued that a sense of self is organised around ones self-concept, emanating from family, culture and the society that one is born into. If an individual has restrictive access to any or all of the above, we could expect deficiencies in the construction of a sense of self as is evident in many Forgotten Australians (Penglase 2005, Fletcher 2006). For many Forgotten Australians separation from family, culture and to varying degrees society was commonplace (SCARC 2004). Further to these restrictions is shame. When combined with the aforementioned restrictions, shame is a mitigating factor for many ex-residents of institutional care in the construction and understanding of a sense of self as evidenced in this study.

Methodology
The participants for this exploratory empirical study were recruited from a regional area of Northern New South Wales. Each participant has experienced time in the same orphanage. Sampling for this research is described as ‘deviant’ or ‘extreme case sampling’ because of the size and vulnerability of the population (Neuman 2006). The Forgotten Australians constitute a vulnerable group because of the issues of abuse and trauma experienced as children. For many there has been exacerbation by the ongoing challenges of social integration (SCARC 2004; Fletcher 2006) and shame is a contributing factor in this regard. This research has been configured within a hermeneutical phenomenological framework (Neuman 2006). The research design allowed the participants to relate their story at their own pace and in any direction they chose. The research methodology for this project is
contained wholly within the qualitative paradigm and is centred on in-depth one-on-one unstructured interviews and phone conversations. The process consisted of an introduction and filtering interview which was conducted via a telephone conversation after a respondent replied to a newspaper invitation to participate in the study. The second discussion was a taped face-to-face interview with a minimum of two hours duration; it was during this second interview that the bulk of the data was gathered. There were several telephone conversations with each participant after the second interview to query and validate information. Due to the ethical implications of this research each participant was asked to select a pseudonym for the study. The geographical location by pseudonym is Bricksdale and the orphanage is referred to as The Chalet. Interviews were transcribed and in accordance with grounded theory methods described by Luborsky (1994) and Neuman (2006), key statements recurring through the text were identified. All data including field notes have been de-coded and de-identified to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

The sample for this research consisted of three females and two males. Although limited by sample size, this study makes an initial contribution to advancing understanding of the barriers and challenges that some ex-residents of care have overcome in order to articulate stories of their lived experiences. Given these limitations no claims can be made to generalisability.

**Findings and Discussion**

Shame emerged as one of the most prominent themes attributed to inhibiting or suppressing a desire to construct and narrate a life story amongst this sample of ex-residents of institutional care. Three of the five participants Lynn, Trevor and Will, explicitly referred to shame as a significant factor that inhibited their ability to disclose or recount their stories to other people. They also indicated that shame had, to a larger extent, influenced how they perceived their sense of self. The remaining two participants, Elizabeth and Gretchen, stated that they did not consider that shame had any significant or lasting influence on their lives. However, Elizabeth, although not explicitly identifying shame, alluded to the feeling on a number of occasions during her interviews. The fifth participant, Gretchen, said that although she did not consider that she was adversely affected by shame, she was aware that, other children experienced shame during their time in The Chalet. The identification of shame in this context is consistent with The Forgotten Australians report (2004) and Penglase’s (2005)
findings that shame is a common feeling of ex-residents of institutional care in Australia. For some, shame has been a constant companion and influence in their life Lynn explains:

…for a long time now I have not felt comfortable talking about my story, mostly because of the shame. I still do have a lot of shame. I think that when I spoke to you on the phone, I decided that I really wanted to do this [participate in the project] because I knew it would give me an opportunity to deal with some of the past.

In this dialogue Lynn indicates that she had been processing the desire to narrate her past experiences for some time. She has identified, that ‘for a long time’ shame has impeded on her desire to tell her story, she saw the opportunity to participate in this research as a possible opening to narrate parts of her life story which she has previously deemed too shameful to relate to another person. Lynn continued:

…at the orphanage we had public baths that is shame because you didn't have your privacy, we washed in a washtub that they called a bath that everybody bathed in and the water was dirty by the time you had your turn. It was cold you know. It wasn't a good experience...

Lynn uses words which bring to mind the above quote by Tomkins (cited in Kosofsky et. al. 1995: p.133) and the key words of ‘dignity’, ‘distress’, ‘humiliated’ and ‘naked’. Although Lynn remained focused during the interview process, she became quite passionate while relating this account of her orphanage experience and often expressed that she could feel herself healing as she was telling her story. She said that she ‘needed to own it’ referring to the shame. Lewis (1992: pp. 127-128) suggests that the simplest method to cope with shame is to ‘own it’ and permit it to dissipate over time. He lists a variety of methods to assist with this including laughter as used by Gretchen (discussed later) and the concept of confession or in the context of this research, storytelling.

Theorists have proposed that the desire to hide shame or to make it disappear is an important feature of the phenomenology of shame (Lewis 1992: p. 34; Bradshaw 1988). Lewis also implies that shame has the capacity to create confusion engendering an inability to think clearly or to talk and at times an inability to act which is supported in Lynn’s following dialogue:

This last ten years of my life have been so confused, I don't know if confused is the right word, it’s like I have been lost and I have been seeking my identity the whole
time. It has been very difficult to do anything sometimes…and that all comes back to the shame factor.

Here Lynn connects the concept of shame to a sense of self. Over time various scholars have observed the connections between identity and shame (Sabini & Silver 1997; Lindsay-Hartz 1984; Lewis 1971 & Williams 1993; Bradshaw 1988). Social identity theorists such as Cooley and Mead (Poole 2003) explore the construction of self in relation to symbolic interactionism, whereas Goffman (1963, 1961), links the development of a sense of self to interaction in various types of institutions (including institutions for children) and the associated stigma or shame. Others highlight the connection between an individual’s sense of self which is central to how they interpret their understanding of disapproval or rejection from others (Tangney 1991). In this context, Lynn has developed a sense of inadequacy which demands that she search for her elusive concept of self-identity.

Trevor emphasizes that his method of storytelling is in the form of ‘layers’ and this assists in protecting his vulnerabilities including his sense of self and shame. By having different ‘layers’ in his story he can selectively choose which ‘level’ he wants to reveal. In this way Trevor is choosing which construction of a self-identity he will reveal. In the following dialogue Trevor divulges and discusses issues of shame saying:

You know it’s really hard to talk about all that stuff…the worst thing that happened to me really was getting bashed in the mornings, for absolutely nothing. And that’s really degrading. They [the nuns] treated you like a dog. You know, not even treated like a human being. That’s what affected me the most I guess. I haven’t told anyone that before. Now I worry about if it is just the orphanage that has affected me like this, but I know if I don’t identify it I don’t know how I am going to end up in life …so if my story was worse I probably wouldn’t be able to tell it you know, shame has really played with my identity all my life.

Whilst narrating the above dialogue Trevor became slightly agitated and appeared to have moments of deep reflection. From this moment in the interview Trevor appeared to speak with much more deliberation and precision. It was during this time he identified shame and related that shame to self-identity as a major theme in his life experience saying that it has ‘played with my identity…when you’ve been institutionalised it takes away everything’.
In Will’s case, his interview transcripts indicated that shame significantly dominated his past experiences, impacting on his capacity ‘to be comfortable in my own skin’. Will stated that he has very strong recollections of the uncomfortable torments on the grounds of The Chalet School.

It was really hard going to school each day knowing that I was going to be teased and tormented simply because I lived at The Chalet. I would often not have lunch because I didn’t want to line up with the orphans at lunchtime. It was easier to be hungry than to be tormented like that...I was so ashamed of who I was and that I lived in the orphanage. It has shaped who I am and given me lots of problems in my life. For a greater part of my life I didn’t know who I was, I had lots of conflicting identities. You know, I’ve never really wanted to tell anyone about my life as a child because it was too hard to put together and explain.

In this quote, Will reveals the difficulties involved in each school day events that were directly correlated to where, and with whom, he lived. Will decided that self-imposed hunger was easier and more comfortable to cope with than the ridicules and torments of other children. Will also touches on the social construction of identity (Shotter & Gergen 1989 pp. 1-20) and its longer term effects, the constructing and narrating his story as well as the hardship entailed.

It is important to reiterate that both Elizabeth and Gretchen resided in the same institution as Lynn, Trevor and Will. They also attended the same school as the other respondents to this study. Interestingly, however, their interpretation of events and experiences of their time in The Chalet, and more specifically the narration of their lived experience to others is considerably dissimilar.

Elizabeth did not explicitly use the word shame during her interviews, she did however, use the term ‘embarrassed’ which as argued by Lewis (1971) constitutes shame. Elizabeth referred to activities where her profile was highlighted in an embarrassing way by saying: ‘when you went to school at [Bricksdale]...they treated you a little bit different to the others’. When asked to expand on this she said that on regular occasions she:

…would have welts from being slapped around the back of the legs with the feather duster and I would leave my socks down so that the others [adults/teachers] could see them and hopefully feel sorry for me, but they didn’t.
Gretchen recounts that she does not recall any specific knowledge of feeling shame prior to, during or after care. Gretchen informs us that she is, and always has been, very grateful that the orphanage was available to her at a time of great need. She says that ‘it was a place that took us away from the ongoing domestic violence of home’. Gretchen states that in regard to herself, she does not consider that she has experienced any form of discomfort in relation to her experiences at The Chalet, she says:

There was a lot of name calling and that kind of stuff at school and it did upset a lot of the kids but it really didn’t affect me, I would just laugh back at them.

This attitude supports Lewis’s (1992) argument that a person can use laughter as a mechanism to ‘own’ and ‘deal’ with any trace of shame which may have been experienced. Generally this action occurs at the same time as the incident or event. An individual will laugh at one’s self thus serving to place distance between the self and the emotional experience occurring. In this was, it is possible to neutralise the affect of this emotion (Lewis 1992: p.130-131). Although Gretchen may not identify the impact, shame has affected the way she, as with each participant of this research, responds to shame albeit to the taunts of the other children.

Conclusion
Shame was experienced by many children who spent time in institutional care pre 1974. It appears to be an enduring experience which to some extent still plays a significant part in the shaping of ex-residents sense of self. In terms of this pilot study, three of the five respondents have provided strong evidence to indicate that they have struggled with shame and that it has impacted to an extent on their sense of self. Whilst the remaining two respondents are confident in stating that shame has in no way impacted on their sense of self, however, the data analysis calls this into question. There is strong evidence to suggest that acknowledged or unacknowledged by the individual, shame has impacted on the care leavers sense of self. Importantly the resilience of many ex-residents in the ongoing struggle to participate in life is also acknowledged in this study.
References


