

**Institutional safe space and shame management
in workplace bullying**

Hwayeon Helene Shin

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Declaration

I, Hwayeon Helene Shin, hereby declare that, except where acknowledged, that this work is my own and has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other university or institution.

Hwayeon Helene Shin

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the question of how an individual's perception of the safety of his or her institutional space impacts on shame management skills. Shame has been widely recognised as a core emotion that can readily take the form of anger and violence in interpersonal relationships if it is unresolved. When shame is not acknowledged properly, feelings of shame build up and lead to shame-rage spirals that break down social bonds between people.

Some might consider the total avoidance of shame experiences as a way to cut the link between shame and violence. However, there is a reason why we cannot just discard the experience of shame. Shame is a self-regulatory emotion (Braithwaite, 1989, 2002; Ahmed et al., 2001). If one feels shame over wrongdoing, one is less likely to re-offend in the future. That is to say, shame is a destructive emotion on the one hand in the way it can destroy our social bonds, but on the other hand, it is a moral emotion that reflects capacity to regulate each other and ourselves. This paradoxical nature of shame gives rise to the necessity of managing shame in a socially adaptive way.

A group of scholars in the field of shame has argued that institutions can be designed in such a way that they create safe space that allows people to feel shame and manage shame without its adverse consequences (Ahmed et al., 2001). This means that people would feel safe to acknowledge shame and accept the consequences of their actions without fear of stigmatisation or the disruption of social bonds. Without fear, there would be less likelihood of displacing shame, that is, blaming others and expressing shame as anger towards others.

The context adopted for empirically examining shame management in this study is workplace bullying. Bullying has become a dangerous phenomenon in our workplace that imposes significant costs on employers, employees, their families and industries as a whole (Einarsen et al., 2003a). Teachers belong to a professional group that is reputed to be seriously affected by bullying at work.

Teachers from Australia and Korea completed self-report questionnaires anonymously. Three shame management styles were identified: shame acknowledgement, shame displacement and (shame) withdrawal. The likely strengths of these shame management styles were investigated in terms of three factors postulated as contributions to institutional safe space: that is, 1) cultural value orientations, 2) the salience of workgroup identity, and 3) problem resolution practices at work.

The first factor that was considered theoretically important in defining safe space for adaptive shame management was cultural value orientations. Horizontal collectivism (e.g., values that emphasise cooperation and sharing) was associated with adaptive shame management (e.g., acknowledgement of shame), whereas vertical individualism (e.g., values that emphasise competition and power achievement) was associated with non-adaptive shame management (e.g., displacement of shame).

The second factor considered as critical to defining safe space for adaptive shame management was the salience of workgroup identity, both in terms of commitment to the profession and a sense of belongingness. It was belongingness that proved most important in creating safe space that encouraged adaptive shame management.

There were striking cross-cultural similarities for values and workgroup identity. Differences emerged for the third factor that was considered critically important in defining safe space, i.e., problem resolution practice. The impact of disapproval on shame acknowledgement was similar in both cultures. Disapproval increased acknowledgement. However, emotional and social support for a person played different roles in the two cultures; support in a shame-producing situation increased displacement of shame among Koreans, while it did not significantly impact on any of the shame management styles among Australians.

Finally, evidence is provided to show that the experience of bullying either as bully or victim among teachers is related to how shame is managed. Bullies are more likely to displace shame in both Australia and Korea. Victims in Australia are more likely to withdraw, while those in Korea are more likely to acknowledge shame,

perhaps inappropriately. In workplaces where there is a history of bullying, those who design institutions need to be cognisant of the likelihood that bullies and victims already have shame management styles that do harm to others or do harm to themselves. Interestingly, some of the safe space factors appeared to be particularly effective for dealing with shame in some contexts and particularly ineffective in others. Among Australians who admitted to bullying, those who espoused a horizontal collectivism philosophy were less likely to displace shame. Among Koreans who admitted to bullying, disapproval of bullying was more likely to be associated with shame displacement.

The present thesis suggests that further consideration should be given to institutional interventions that support and maintain institutional safe space and that encourage shame acknowledgement, while dampening the adverse effect of defensive shame management. The evidence presented in this thesis is a first step in demonstrating that institutional safe space and shame management skills are empirically measurable, are relevant in other cultural contexts and address issues that are at the heart of the human condition everywhere.

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