

Exploring Shame in Childhood

Written by Lyn French, Director of A Space for Creative Learning and Support

This resource is used in conjunction with 5 cards drawn from the **Emotional Learning Cards** series, *What do you Feel?* Purchase the cards online at: www.inivacreativelearning.org



Yinka Shonibare., *Dysfunctional Family*, 1999

Introduction

This resource is designed as a starting point for thinking about some of the common roots of shame. Shame differs from guilt. Guilt is evoked by an action: when we do something, say something or think something 'bad', usually in relation to another individual or a group, then guilty feelings are triggered. Shame describes what we feel when we imagine that we are 'bad' - we feel shame literally about *who we are*.

Shame is unhealthy and serves very little purpose. It may prompt us to make positive changes however, as our shameful memories often evoke the most painful feelings, they are usually repressed and we keep them secret. Shame then becomes damaging as we hide parts of ourselves from others. We may even try to get rid of our shame by acting superior or aiming to be as perfect as we can all of the time or rejecting others who in some way represent what we are ashamed about.

The most effective way of processing shame is to acknowledge its source openly and honestly, understand its context and use this understanding to deepen our awareness of human nature. The words 'human', 'humiliating' and 'humble' share the same root. To be human is to suffer humiliation from time to time which, in turn, teaches us about humility provided we do not keep our pain a shameful secret.

Using the Emotional Learning Cards to explore the roots of shame in family and childhood

This resource is used in conjunction with 5 cards drawn from the Emotional Learning Cards series, *What do you Feel?*

For each card we have developed questions, comments and suggestions for activity that will support a professional who is exploring the concept of shame with a young person or adult. Each section starts with a response to the work depicted on the card; then allows for an exploration on the topic before leading to a more personal reflection from the participant. The text in *italic* indicates a moment when you might ask the participant to respond with their thoughts.

Through the use of the cards and the guidance within this resource, it is possible to sensitively explore shame and to acknowledge how it can be rooted within our childhood experiences.

Artist: Anish Kapoor, *1000 Names*, 1982



Reading the image:

This artist's sculpture is made up of red cones forming a sphere.

What does its shape and colour suggest to you?

Exploring the topic:

The cones could be seen as pushing through the wall, like a thought that keeps forcing its way into our mind. Sometimes, when we really don't want to remember a time when we have embarrassed ourselves or we want to forget something about our family history, it repeatedly pops into mind or keeps coming to us in our dreams. We may blush a deep red, even in our imagination, if we recall a shaming experience or if we feel ashamed about something and we fear exposure.

Give examples of some of the sources of shame in childhood, in adolescence and/or in adulthood. Think about the common roots of shame as well as the less obvious.

We might want to protect ourselves from acknowledging our own shame even in our private thoughts. Sometimes we distance ourselves from shame by attacking others, criticising them for the very things we feel most ashamed of in ourselves.

Give examples of how individuals or groups set themselves up to feel 'better than' or superior. What happens to the parts of themselves which they hate or want to disown?

Personal Reflection:

What memories trigger shame when you look back on your childhood and your adolescence? What about your present life?

Artist: Franklyn Rodgers, *At Last*, 1991



Reading the image:

This photograph depicts a man who seems to have been immersed in water coming up for air.

What does this image, and its title, suggest to you? Why might the man have immersed himself in water for so long? What might the artist be trying to tell us?

Exploring the topic:

We all have private thoughts, memories and feelings that we may be tempted to hold in like unreleased air. These can be shameful secrets that we don't want to remember, never mind think about. They may relate to our current lives or even to the more distant past, perhaps to our parents or even grandparents' histories.

Common experiences that we may have in our personal histories could include a family suicide; an abandonment such as a parent or partner leaving; academic failure; bankruptcy or addictions; hurting or hating someone and rejecting them cruelly. Hidden experiences from the past or present that we have tried to bury can make us feel as if we have come from 'bad stock' or there is something wrong with us. What is wrong is how we have expressed our pain. Hurt and fear can come out as anger and even hatred towards whoever has caused the pain. Jealousy or envy can cause us to push others away, often cruelly. We aren't responsible for the things that have happened in our family's past but we are responsible for trying to

understand and make sense of aspects of our history and for trying to do things differently.

What do you think would be the hardest secret to let out? What could you say to someone who has what they feel is a shameful family secret to help them come to terms with it?

We also have more everyday secrets. For example, we may be jealous of the kinds of relationships others have or envious of their successes, wealth, looks or status. We might wish they'd lose out just for once so they could know what it feels like. We can even feel this way about our own family members like our brothers and sisters or step-siblings.

Discuss what you think sibling rivalry means. How does it play out in peer groups throughout life?

Personal Reflection:

Do you have a shame-based secret that you're holding onto that is hard to talk about? Have you told anyone this before? How does it feel, holding on to it for so long? Do you want to share the secret?

Artist: Leticia Valverdes, *Real Postcards- London*, 2006



Reading the image:

This artist has created a photograph which features an empty figure-shaped space in the middle of a bridge.

What kind of person does the figure represent? Why might they be shown as an empty space? What might the bridge signify?

Exploring the topic:

The blank, white space could remind us that we may never hear the unspoken stories of our parents or our ancestors who came before them.

However our histories make themselves felt in different ways. For example, 'do's and don't's' – that is, family rules or ways of doing things - can be passed down the generations. Often these spoken or unspoken 'rules' are formed in reaction to something painful that has gone before. If, for instance, a family member has been in prison, the shame around this event can lead to an unspoken rule that everyone must aim to be on best behaviour at all times to cover up what is felt as a 'bad stain' on the family's reputation. It is impossible to live without making mistakes or without expressing our messy or uncomfortable feelings from time to time. Trying to be 'too perfect' can make us feel extremely self-critical and even ashamed if we do make errors or behave in ways that we wished we hadn't. This, in turn, makes it hard to learn from our experiences as we feel too much shame to look at our role in them.

What are some common 'do's and don't's' and unspoken rules in families?

Personal Reflection:

Are there stories in your family about your grandparents or other relatives that are never spoken about? What are some of the family rules that you grew up with? Were these rules reasonable or did they make you feel very bad about yourself if you broke them?

Artist: Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Dysfunctional Family*, 1999



Reading the image:

The cloth figures in this sculpture are grouped together like a family.

What do they look like to you? Why might the artist have made them this way? What kind of family is this?

Exploring the topic:

Perhaps the artist is highlighting how we can all feel our family secrets mark us out as different from the so-called norm. The aliens are made out of what looks like African material. Maybe the artist is telling us how our culture of origin can make us feel 'foreign' in the eyes of others and that we might feel we're always seen as 'the other' or 'the outsider'.

Some of us feel ashamed of our cultural background perhaps because of the lack of status attached to it by others. In any country, nationalities can be ranked formally or informally according to explicit and unspoken hierarchies or class systems. Or we may carry shame about the colour of our skin, how we look, our financial circumstances or even where we live. It is unhelpful to deny difference or to skirt around it or even to pretend that 'everyone is the same- we're all human'. People suffer from being treated differently or from feeling they do not fit in.

How do we deal with difference in a meaningful way that isn't patronising or doesn't play down its significance?

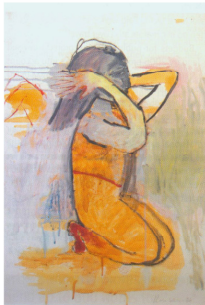
All family relationships are complex. Each of us carries some unresolved and maybe even unacknowledged shame around our different roles. If we acknowledge this and try to understand it, we can move on.

Give examples of what oldest born, middle, youngest or only children might feel ashamed of. What about daughters/sons? husbands/wives? step siblings or step parents?

Personal Reflection:

Describe what triggers shame about your family roles or your relationships with family members or anything about any of your family members that might cause shame.

Artist: Kate Walters, *I Can't Hear You*, 2006



Reading the image:

The female figure in this painting is kneeling down with her hands over her ears.

What does this suggest to you?

Exploring the topic:

The picture seems to convey a sense of distress. We can imagine someone in the background who is threatening her. Perhaps someone is shouting harsh words at her. If we are always criticised or told we are bad or wrong, it can destroy our self-esteem and leave us feeling ashamed of who we are.

What drives people to criticise those closest to them?

We know that people who attack others verbally or in other ways are usually hurting inside and trying to get rid of their pain by making others feel worse than they do. Or they are full of unexpressed anger about being treated unfairly or by how unfair the world can be.

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What are some common life experiences that can leave people feeling hurt, angry or frustrated? What do they feel afterwards if they express this in ways that hurt others? What kinds of hurts are often experienced in family relationships?

Personal Reflection:

When have you been criticised or been seen as 'not good enough'? What did you feel at the time? Were you left with any shame? What did you do then? What would you do now?

What did you think of this resource? We want to hear from you...

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About Iniva Creative Learning

Iniva Creative Learning is a not-for-profit partnership between A Space (arts and therapy service, Hackney) and Iniva (the Institute of International Visual Arts). We share a commitment to producing art-based resources and delivering initiatives which promote emotional learning, personal development and psychological growth.

Emotional Learning Cards

It is now widely recognised that well-being in every part of life depends on successfully building understanding, insight and emotional resilience. **A Space** and **Iniva** have been co-publishing **Emotional Learning Cards since 2008** and they now occupy a leading position in the growing fields of **emotional learning and psychological therapies**.

Each boxed set of Emotional Learning Cards includes 20 cards:

- **On the front:** visually rich images of a contemporary artwork by a variety of culturally diverse and emerging artists known for their engagement in social or political enquiry.
- **On the back:** open questions and discussion prompts around the theme 'What do you feel?', 'Who are you? Where are you going?' and 'How do we live well with others?' for group or one-to-one use. Suggestions for using the cards in different contexts such as school, home, gallery workshops and individual or group therapy settings are offered in a **fold-out leaflet**.