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Shame on you: Love, shame and women victim/survivors' experiences of intimate abuse

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Love, shame and intimate abuse are often connected to one another through a web of complex emotions, beliefs, experiences, perceptions and stories. In this article, I consider how love and shame may converge for women victims/survivors of intimate abuse. While the work draws on data produced through 84 qualitative narrative feminist interviews, the central aim is to examine the effects of shame for women victims/survivors of intimate abuse through the stories that are told about it. Essentially, I argue that shame is worth exploring because it has some potent but also specific meanings for this population in intimate love relationships.

Abstract

The concept of shame is rich in implications for one's sense of self, self-regard, and personal identity ... [it is used] ... to describe the condition of someone's mental life ... [namely] ... the fear that 'one will be found lacking' (Shweder 2003, pp. 1113-1115).

With other forms of abuse, intimate abuse can produce profound feelings of shame, not just for perpetrators but also for victims/survivors. As a phenomenon, shame involves complex emotions including embarrassment, humiliation, guilt, fear, sadness and dishonour. Its powerful tentacles can reach beyond couples, families and social networks and have multiple effects.

In this article I explore love and shame in relation to women victims/survivors of intimate abuse. With reference to recent literature surveyed and 84 qualitative narrative feminist interviews conducted with women in Australia and Canada (2002–2004), I argue the love and shame can

co-exist to produce a cauldron of intense feelings, thoughts and behaviours, which mitigates many perceptions of and responses to women subjected to intimate abuse.

In the first part of the paper I discuss key terms used (women, love and romance, intimate abuse, and shame) before exploring some of the socially constructed determinants of shame. I then consider some of the meanings attributed to women described as either 'shameless' or 'having no shame'. I note the ongoing pressures on women to avoid being constructed (even obliquely) as 'bitch' or 'whore'. A discussion of some of the connections between shame and internalized oppression follows.

In the second part of the paper I focus on sexual scripts, especially scripts that instruct women to behave in specific ways. I pay attention to the contradictory instructions given to women about staying with partners through 'thick and thin', while also being told that they 'should (just) leave them' if partners become abusive. I note how these injunctions can intensify feelings of shame for victims/survivors of intimate abuse, and compound the confusion and trauma already being felt. Throughout the discussion, I urge readers to reflect on how they work with and against shame, especially for women affected by or at risk of, intimate abuse.

UNDERSTANDING WOMEN, LOVE, SHAME AND INTIMATE ABUSE

For all their differences, women constitute an ongoing category of people given their potential risks of being discriminated against and socially disadvantaged because of their gender (Jackson 1999; Segal 1999; Wetherell 1995). As a group, women are the predominant victims/survivors of intimate abuse (McPhail et al. 2007). Arguably, heterosexual women, particularly those with the fewest material resources and the least social status, are most at risk of intimate violence (Fraser and McMaster 2008). They are also the target audience or market that some of the most traditional and asymmetrical (or hierarchical) love stories are directed (Behrendt and Tuccillo 2004; Maushart 2001; Wetherell 1995).

Thinking about (sexual) love and romance

Women have a longstanding connection to love and romance, in part because loving others is central to orthodox notions of femininity, and romance is thought to be central to the dignified expression of women's sexuality (Jackson 1999; Wetherell 1995). Yet, love and romance are not straightforward, especially for women, but complex, contradictory phenomena that cross

cultural borders and change over times and places (Benjamin 1988; Fraser 2008; Wetherell 1995).

As code words, 'love' and 'romance' are signs saturated with meanings (Barthes 1978, Brown 1987). Even the more specific term, 'sexual love' is loaded with a wide range of socio-cultural, emotional, psychological, physical, material and political possibilities (Vellerman 1999). Stories told in the name of romantic love are many and varied, dominant and subordinated, represented, reclaimed and/or rejected (Sternberg 1998). Much may be said about love (and its many forms, i.e. romantic, passionate, companionate, everlasting and/or brief) including the possible co-existence of love and abuse (Fraser 2008). For the purposes of this paper, however, love is defined broadly as a complex genre of narratives, emotions, expectations, actions and conventions. Sexual love is used to refer to these narratives et al. between free and consenting sexually intimate adults.

Defining intimate abuse

As a term, 'intimate abuse' is most commonly applied to sexual intimates. Nash (2005, p. 1425) describes some of the dimensions of intimate abuse as:

... (a) physical abuse (i.e. hitting, choking, slapping, kicking), (b) psychological maltreatment or emotional abuse (i.e. verbal debasement of the victim or marital infidelity leading to loss of self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness), or (c) sexual abuse (i.e. forced participation in nonconsensual sex with a spouse) perpetrated by a male spouse (Tarrezz 2005).

With these forms of abuse are others, such as (d) financial abuse (i.e. denial of fair access to shared funds, 'sexually transmitted debt'); (e) religious/spiritual abuse (i.e. having one's religious/spiritual beliefs degraded); and (f) intellectual abuse (i.e. being denied the right to express opinions, participate in decision making, or identify reservations or opposition) (McPhail et al. 2007). Ordinarily, intimate abuse is steeped in shame, for all involved.

Conceptualising shame

Shame is popularly defined as 'the consciousness or awareness of dishonour, disgrace, or condemnation' (Wikipedia website: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shame>). Sometimes referred to as 'ignominy', shame is a concept evocative of many meanings and one in which many claims are made. Take for instance, the claim that there is genuine and false shame. Popular narratives of shame are most inclined to make this distinction. Reminiscent of the deserving/undeserving distinction so often applied in the provision of social welfare, genuine shame is associated with genuine dishonour, disgrace, or condemnation;

Determinants of shame (Shweder 2003)	Examples of determinants (Shweder 2003)	Examples as applied to women
Situational	Different protocols or norms affecting the experience of shame, such as the exposure of body parts.	Instructions to women to cover – or uncover – their heads, faces, upper arms, breasts etc. and penalties given to those that transgress.
Self-appraisal	Shame and perceived implications for identity, agency, self-regard and status.	Women 'losing face' when moving from 'married woman' to 'single woman', especially 'single mother'.
Somatic phenomenology	Shame and bodily feelings such as muscle tension, shortness of breath.	Experiences and attributions made about shame and 'pre/menstrual' or 'post/menopausal' women.
Affective phenomenology	Shame and existential feelings of the self, including emptiness, agitation, a sense of meaninglessness.	Some women's belief that 'without love – even 'bad love' – they are nothing'; or that if they are abused, they haven't 'loved enough' (Fraser 2008).
Social appraisal	Extent to which behaviour related to shame is socially baptised as vice or virtue, sickness or health, a sign of deviance or normalcy.	Double standard applied to women's expression of sexuality, especially through the concept of women's sexual reputation, but also the pathologising and criminalizing of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered sexuality.
Self-management	Coping with somatic and affective aspects of shame, such as retreating, withdrawing, hiding and/or attacking.	Gender socialisation still encouraging women to express shame through withdrawing and retreating whereas men are more encouraged to attack .
Communication	Use of symbols to express shame, including use of language, voice quality, facial expressions, postures and gestures.	Self-deprecating ways in which many women are expected to, and do, talk about intimate abuse; including their experiences of being victimised by intimates.

Figure 7: Conceptualising the determinants of shame

whereas false shame involves bringing it upon oneself (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shame>), and is therefore thought to deserve no sympathy. In other words, false shame, is the kind of shame where sufferers have ‘only themselves to blame’. It is a conclusion drawn most commonly when people are said to have ‘provoked it’ or ‘deserved it’; and/or an indictment made of people who ‘failed to read the early signals’ or ‘couldn’t see it coming’ (and should have).

In contrast, more scholarly accounts of shame make no such distinction between ‘real’ or ‘fake’ shame, preferring instead to enunciate its (potential) components (Figure 7).

As suggested in Figure 7, shame is embodied, managed and appraised. Communicated in and through bodies – bodies that are gendered, aged, classed and sexed – shame is expressed in relation to norms, protocols and roles. This means that socio-cultural expectations governing the expression of shame are not necessarily fair or democratic (Nassbaum 2006).

Being seen to have no shame and/or be shameless

From the interviews I conducted with women who had survived intimate abuse and/or witnessed it with others, I could see how clearly women understood how love and shame could converge, especially in intimate abuse. Specifically, I learned that the accusations of ‘provoking’, ‘deserving’, ‘failing to read the early signs’ and generally ‘bringing it on themselves’ are relevant to women victims/survivors of intimate abuse because they are the kinds of asperitions cast over them. From women such as Vera, Dallas, Jesobel, Emily and Vanessa that I interviewed, these asperitions were particularly important because they were examples of women who stayed with abusive male intimates and/or failed to protect children from their partners’ abuse. It is the kind of shame applied most often to women cast as doormats and born victims; the ‘kind of woman that has no shame’ (Fraser 2005, 2008).

For all of its productive possibilities – namely its potential to correct hurtful and harmful social practices – shame can be toxic, at least where women survivors of intimate abuse are concerned. It can be toxic because rather than focus on how perpetrators might be called to account for how they have hurt others, shame tends to be cast unfairly over victims, and in the process, undermines their dignity and sense of self-worth. In dominant terms, staying with a perpetrator can suggest women either have no shame or are shameless.

Being seen to have no shame can be as negative as being called ‘shameless’. Unlike the playful reference, ‘You’re shameless!’, the charge of shamelessness can have potentially serious consequences, especially when used to cast shadows over women’s sexual reputations. From some of the women who had

experienced intimate abuse, I heard how their past (sexual transgressions) were thrown in their faces, and how others around them may charge them with provoking their partners into violence. For instance, from Bree I heard that she regretted telling her abusive partner about her earlier sexual exploits because ‘... he always used them against me. He never let me forget about them’.

Dishonour and disgrace connect with the dominant discourses about femininity. As indicated in Figure 7, the double standard that has long governed men’s and women’s sexuality, notably the need for women to protect their sexual reputations. In contrast to men, women have been expected to be sufficiently receptive to men’s sexual advances so as to avoid the label of the ‘cold bitch’, but not so receptive to be designated the ‘dirty whore’. Even today there are strict rules given to women to follow (Behrendt and Tuccillo 2004; Fein and Schneider 1995).

From the interviews, but also from conversations with many students I teach at RMIT, I know that in spite of the raunch culture some say we are living within, the poles of bitch/whore are still part of the heteronormative landscape of most ordinary women’s lives. From the interviewees themselves, I also learnt that in arguments, the labels of ‘bitch’ and ‘whore’ may be used by their intimates, implicitly or explicitly.

Avoiding the labels of ‘cold bitch’ or ‘dirty whore’

Across social classes, women unable or unwilling to navigate their path through the quagmire of contradictory advice about how they might avoid becoming a bitch or whore are susceptible to many risks. First, there is the risk of being classified as a sexual deviant, i.e. someone who does not express the ‘normal’ range of sexual interests. Lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people are susceptible to these shaming categories (Plummer 2003). Then there are the potential penalties for women thought to ‘go too far’ sexually; who become ‘the town bike’, as Vera put it, and who are otherwise over willing to service men’s sexual demands. Some women perform this sexual servicing explicitly for money or material support, while other women, or at other times, capitulate to male intimate’s sexual demands irrespective of the personal consequences, because they ‘confuse sex with love’ and have an ‘insatiable appetite for love’, as Claire explained. Dallas and Kate noted how easily women could be shamed as ‘hussies’, ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’, even when their ‘sexually deviant’ behaviour was performed under great duress (Fraser 2008).

Then there were the testimonies from Brenda, Christina, Annie and Natalie who spoke about the potential penalties for the women who pursued careers and who refused to sublimate their intellectual and financial goals, but were then liable to being charged with emasculating their partners and/or neglecting

their roles as nurturing (and dutiful) wives and mothers. Apparently in-laws and extended friends and workmates were the main conduits for these kinds of messages, with the allegation of ‘cold bitch’ hovering over the women’s heads. Essentially, women were being accused of being so cold or ruthless that they would put their career in front of their family. As Lori told me, it was a choice rarely asked of men. And as Diana indicated, it was a no-win position for women making significant and essential financial contributions to the family only to then find their partners were sexually disengaging from them as a result (Langford 1999).

Shame and internalised oppression

Shame plays an important role in the reproduction of domination and oppression. Shame helps to perpetuate social and sexual inequality through ‘internalised oppression’, or the process in which members of economically and socially disadvantaged groups take on negative cultural stereotypes about themselves, including those that victim-blame (Mullaly 2002, 2007; Ryan 1976). Internalised oppression is evident when women take primary responsibility for the abuse perpetrated against them. It is evident when women engage in hyper forms of self-surveillance and self-censorship so as to be more socially acceptable, even if doing so involves many personal costs (Baines 2007; Gilchrist and Price 2006; Goffman 1963). It is a large part of young Samantha ended up becoming ‘... what other people would call ... the oppressed woman’.

Internalised oppression is evident when women feel ashamed of themselves for not approximating narrowly defined beauty ideals and then assuming they do not have the right to expect fair and decent treatment from others, because they are ugly, old and/or have let themselves go. It is why Bethany was so delighted that her current partner, ‘... didn’t care if she was 140 pounds or 200 pounds, he loves me all the same’.

LOVE, SHAME AND SEXUAL SCRIPTS

Although love and shame might be universal signs, they are affected by gender as well as other structural variables such as class, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality and geographical location. Social groups such as women, men, queer, older, rural and so on, are allocated different social roles; roles that produce a variety of sexual scripts (or templates) for the proper ways of behaving (Burge 2007; Jackson 1999). Consider, for instance, the social roles and idealised sexual scripts for the good nurturer, homemaker or breadwinner. Spare a thought for those trying to enact the scripts for good Catholic/Muslim/Hindu etc. Think about the possible rewards and penalties for conforming or deviating

from these scripts. Now think about whether words such as promiscuous, deviant and/or lesbian may still be used to stigmatise people. If the answer is yes, think about how this continues to be the case. Pause to reflect on how it was still possible for others to tell Colleen, a relatively young Canadian white woman, that if her husband was violent to her, it was because she ‘... was not a good enough wife’.

The shame of being desperate, bitter and/or tragic, single women

Across age and ethnicity, many of the women I interviewed understood that rewards were given for sexual and gender conformity. Conformity to hetero-coupledness was underlined. Romance was often used as a vehicle through which women were able to express themselves passionately and sexually. Some women expressed this through their hopes of meeting a rich man who would sweep them off their feet and help them live happily ever after. Even women with whom this seemed unlikely sometimes entertained this ideal. One woman, Christina, modified this script using feminist ideals when she spoke of the importance of ‘avoiding meaningless relationships’, and finding someone who would ‘support’ what she ‘wanted to do’. Some women bemoaned the fact that they could see through the romantic fantasy of finding ‘The One’ so as to ‘Live Happily Ever After’. Kate provided a good example of this, saying that there were times that she wished she could ‘... believe in the happily ever after thing’, so that she wasn’t thought of as ‘unromantic’.

The theme of love relationships precipitating a move from a less privileged social location to a more privilege position punctuated some of the women’s stories. For instance, Cecilia, Karen and Linda all noticed the extra privileges they received after marriage. Marcia, Barbara, Vera and Emily provided further evidence of it when they spoke of how these privileges were retracted post-separation. Marcia, Barbara, Vera and Emily all knew what it felt like to move from ‘respectable married women’ to ‘single mothers’. They noticed how they were no longer being invited to couple-oriented dinner parties. They noticed the ease at which women just like them were being classified as desperate, predatory, bitter and twisted and/or tragic. And they worried they would be next.

The shame of being a single mother

For many of the women, particularly older women with whom I spoke, the loss of social respectability was an important component of shame. For those subjected to intimate abuse and who, post-separation had to engage in complex processes with state authorities, such as the police, family court, income support staff and perhaps Child Protection Officers, the fall from grace could feel overwhelming. Many of the women I interviewed, especially

those in their middle and later years, knew that the status of single mother was precarious, liable to stigma and hardship, carrying an increased risk of poverty. It was a label many women were loathed to wear, at least not for any length of time.

As Langford (1999) explained, Western culture has a long history of suggesting that the cure for bad love is more love. It was through the hum of such messages that some of the women I interviewed were trying to find love or love again. Using any number of mediums, including the internet, the heterosexual women set about meeting men with a view of developing sexually intimate relations and/or finding a new spouse and/or father for their children. From their stories, and the stories told by the bisexual women and lesbians, the possibilities of feeling shame during dating seemed endless.

Across the 18–80 year age bracket, I heard about the risks of being left on the shelf and/or becoming an unloved spinster. I was surprised to hear this idea resonated with a few of the lesbians as well. I was particularly surprised to hear from young middle class Canadian women that the concept of the ‘old maid’ was still in circulation. It sat alongside other, more recent sexist and Americanised terms with which younger women were familiar, such as ‘skanky ho’.

From some of the older women post-separation, I heard that during their ‘repartnering phase’, new possibilities were emerging, including new possibilities for being shamed. They were the possibilities of being cast as being beyond their used-by date (i.e. someone who is too old to offer anything to a prospective lover), or a gold-digger (i.e. a younger woman who premeditatedly pursues men primarily for their money), or a cougar (i.e. an older, usually affluent woman who sexually preys on younger men). From Brenda, I learnt about the shame of being written off as someone that not even a professional matchmaker can find a mate for. In between the laughs that we shared, I sensed how ashamed she felt by this.

Across the board, women indicated how treacherous it could feel navigating their way through the shameful possibilities of dating. In the process, they indicated that even though they may modify, even play with dominant sexual scripts, they were not easy to ignore or shrug off (Dunn and Powell-Williams 2007). I do not doubt that the same might be said for single men in these situations. As authors of other articles in this edition have identified, the major difference is the gendered ways in which men and women may be shamed.

Trying to cope with the shame of abuse

While shame is a powerful mediator of identities (Goffman 1963), the effects of shame are not only political, social and cultural, emotional and psychological,

but also physical. Shame has many gestures and postures associated with it, as well as illnesses and conditions. Consider, for instance, the gesture of looking down with shame (hence the advice to ‘keep your chin up’). Consider too, how shame may be conveyed through gestures of disgust (such as recoiling or vomiting) and/or hiding (such as hands covering faces) (also see Webb’s article in this edition).

Like love, shame is a bodily experience that is often associated with heat, as in, blushing, reddening and burning and swelling (Shweder 2003). Both can precipitate great expressions of energy, inwardly and outwardly (Barthes 1978). For women taught that ‘angry women’ are ‘bitter, horrible women’, the tendency may be to direct this energy within, or risk providing further evidence that one is ‘unfeminine’ (also see Figure 7). Turned inwards, shame can join with other emotions and habits to form serious threats to health, including eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders and other anxiety-based conditions, which may further erode well-being and self-esteem (Mullaly 2007).

Similar to feelings produced through unrequited love, shame can induce feelings that can be physically painful. Shame can feel like acid reflux. For others, or at other times, internal narratives of shame can be scalding (and scolding). Shame can precipitate nausea and other psychosomatic ailments (Campbell 2002). Is it any wonder that such intense feelings play a role in dis-ease and dis-order within the body? What is surprising is the relative lack of attention given to these connections (Campbell 2002).

When people accept the shaming process they may adopt postures such as stooping, cowering, retreating, hiding and/or wanting the earth to swallow them up (Shweder 2003). When these postures become habitual they can appear on and through people’s bodies. For victims/survivors of intimate abuse, especially chronic forms of it, the shame they feel about being subjected to abuse may be ‘written on their bodies’ (Campbell 2002). The use of other coping mechanisms, such as gambling, alcohol and other drugs can compound the situation.

Shame can evoke so many intense emotions that attempts are made to block them, sometimes through alcohol and other drugs, and/or gambling. Even though denial may only be partially maintained, the numbing effects of substance use and/or gambling may offer some respite. The problem is, both coping strategies can so easily create additional problems. Distorted perceptions and erratic behaviour are not the only possibilities. There are also the dangers of gambling and drug taking becoming habitual and compulsive, to the point of chronic self-harm. For survivors of intimate abuse it can compound their sense of shame and provide even more obstacles to them ‘moving on’, ‘recovering’ and ‘being resilient’ (Fraser 2008).

The shame of denying abuse and/or carrying the secret

Shame can weigh heavily on hearts, minds and souls. Initial reactions can include feelings of shock and disbelief, where people first think, ‘This can’t be happening’ (to me); or, ‘I will wake and it will all turn out to be a bad dream, something that I imagined’. It is a message that comes through strongly in the research from Zink et al. (2006, p.859), exemplified by a participant whose experience of intimate abuse was first revealed to her when she thought, ‘What in the world is going on?’ Historically, women survivors of intimate abuse have been offered sexual scripts littered with denials and refutations of abuse, through excuses such as, ‘He didn’t mean to ...’, ‘He didn’t know what he was doing because he was drunk/drug affected/out of his mind’ and so on.

The tendency to incriminate abused women in the abuse inflicted against them has a long history and plays a major role in abuse denials. Unlike victims of robberies or fraud, many victims of abuse have to endure the indignity that they provoked or deserved the attacks (Harper and Arias 2004). As I have already suggested, it is not surprising that so many women find themselves wondering why abuse happened (to them) and what they might have done to prevent it. Many wrestle with these questions repeatedly. Some, including some who dissolve relationships with abusive spouses, may wrestle with these questions for years, even decades (Campbell 2002).

Shame and guilt are potent factors influencing whether abuse is identified and exposed. Through the keeping of secrets, or as one participant put it, making her best friend ‘take a vow of strictest confidence’, silence often surrounds intimate abuse, allowing it go unchecked for months, years, even decades (Mears 2003). Older women have been particularly outspoken about this (Allers et al. 1992; Mears 2003).

Secrets – especially those about intimate abuse – can be stressful to carry and can compound feelings of impotency and shame. The shameful secret of intimate violence can make women feel ‘crazy’, ‘heartbroken’, ‘dirty’, ‘unworthy’ and debilitated (Harper and Arias 2004). It can take a toll on all aspects of health (Campbell 2002). Tamara spoke about this when she talked about the shame she felt ‘... letting ... [her previous boyfriend] do almost anything he wanted to do to me [sexually] so that he wouldn’t leave [her]’. Her sense of shame was so strong it stopped her from telling her parents that she was being abused. Tonya and Samantha could relate. All three women submitted to their partners’ sexual demands, including those they found repulsive. All experienced physical assaults. All hung on. On reflection, they were all ashamed to admit how ‘desperate’ they were. It is the shameful sexual script of ‘being a desperate woman’.

The concept of the ‘desperate woman’ refers to women who cannot ‘catch

a man’ or ‘hold on to him’. It has such a strong hold over many people’s imagination that women who fail to do so, or who are believed not to be trying hard enough, may be socially shamed (Langford 1999). It is so strong that as Bethany told me the story about how she threatened her boyfriend with a knife when he said their relationship was over, she was more ashamed at the thought of people seeing her as a ‘desperate woman’ than a ‘violent woman’.

Feeling unlovable and the shame of being damaged goods

While shame cast is not always taken on by people, when it is, it can be preoccupying. It can meddle with time, sleep and appetite and interfere with concentration. It can undermine self-esteem and generate self-talk that is full of doubt and loathing. Prior experience of abuse can be so easily read as evidence that one is not loveable, or at least not loveable enough. It can also be interpreted, as Dallas told me, as evidence that rather than ‘give up’, she ‘should try harder’.

Listening to *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil*, and reading books such as *Women who love too much* and *The Surrendered Wife*, many ordinary women labour under the belief that good relationships take work and that good women do not ‘throw in the towel when the going gets tough’. Some write-off initial signs of abuse as hiccups, bumps in the road or phases. Some are right and the abuse somehow goes away. For those who find that it does not, there is often the search for reasons. Some attribute the bad behaviour to alcohol, drugs, work, financial or health difficulties, even in-laws. Some, especially those that have experienced abuse in childhood, try not to believe that they are the cause, even if they feel responsible given they are the ‘common denominator’ (Fraser 1998, 1999, 2005). Often this idea is reinforced by the forever love narrative, which Fiona spoke to when she said, ‘Loving someone is forever. It is not just about emotions. It is a decision’.

Endurance was a common theme in many of the stories told by women abused by intimates, expressed sometimes in the script of women ‘standing by their man’ (or woman). Olivia talked about this in relation to the shame she felt when her second husband smashed up their house and she returned to him. Jesobel could feel her pain as she too was angry at herself and bewildered by her own actions:

Believe it or not, *I went back to him*. After he had broken a bone in my arm and I was in Osborne House [a women’s shelter] for about 9 days. *I went back to him*. And to this day, I don’t know what the hell I was thinking of. *I went back to him*. (Jesobel)

Encouraged to do all that they can to revive and re-orient ‘their’ abusive

relationships, women like Fiona and Dallas were invited to join others in denying, minimising, excusing and/or trivialising (Fraser 2008, 2005, Jamieson 1998). The tragic irony is that in so doing, the violence often escalated, sometimes because abusive spouses misread their perseverance for submission. As Dallas and Jesobel explained, when abusive spouses witness 'cowering' they may become further enraged and attacking. Part of the attack can include the allegation that the abuse is due to the women being 'damaged goods'.

As Audrey told me, women that are 'damaged goods' are 'not quite right in the head'. In popular thinking, damaged goods are deeply flawed items with no hope of repair or recovery. It is a term commonly applied to women believed to be permanently scarred by violence and therefore, less attractive on the 'sexual market'. Apart from the possible sully of their sexual reputations, they are less attractive because they are thought to come with 'a lot of emotional baggage'. The potential shame of being seen to be damaged goods and having a lot of baggage is why some women later deny abuse ever happened, at least to prospective partners.

Shame for abuse survivors post-separation

From a few women I interviewed, I also learned that shameful feelings may intensify if victims/survivors see abusive ex-partners happily ensconced in new, apparently non-abusive relationships.

Across cultures, many women find themselves in a quandary if abuse sets into intimate relationships, and in ways not easily concealed. Sometimes this occurs when intimates escalate abusive/controlling behaviours and in front of others from whom they would have formerly hidden it. It can also happen when the evidence of the abuse on children who witness it, becomes too much to bear. In these instances, it can be extremely difficult, particularly for women who have vowed to stay with their spouses 'until death do us part' and have ties to communities (or religious affiliations) that disavow sole parenthood and divorce. Other factors that make leaving difficult include having few financial resources at one's immediate disposal, debt, limited labour market opportunities, young dependent children, few supports from family or friends, ill health (including sexually transmittable diseases), fear of reprisal post-separation, little faith that they will be safe and happy in women's refuges and/or be sceptical of the prospect of securing affordable public housing. Straight or queer, many women who survive intimate abuse do not just have to face psychological barriers to leaving but also structural, material and cultural barriers. And these barriers, singularly and collectively, can cast shame on them and their perceived identities.

SUMMARY

In this article I explored the concept of shame and many stories told about it. I noted how shame is socially constructed, psychologically and materially experienced, embodied and governed by gendered social conventions. I talked about how social conventions continue to prevail about the imperative of women loving men, and loving them sexually. Through various women interviewee's testimonies, I explored the shame women could feel by from being cast as 'having no shame' or 'being shameless'. With most walking the gauntlet between 'loving too much' or 'not (well) enough', I've illustrated how women struggled to avoid being constructed – even obliquely – as a 'bitch' or 'whore'.

I then explored some of the sexual scripts mediating women's sexual expression. Expounding how shame could operate for women designated as desperate, bitter, twisted and/or tragic, I discussed how hard it could be for single women, especially single mothers, as well as all the women at risk of being classified as 'damaged goods'. All the while I fore-grounded the risks of women victims/survivors of intimate abuse being shamed so that together, we might give more attention to the potential for love, abuse and shame to converge and produce some very unfair and toxic results.

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