

UNEMPLOYMENT, POVERTY AND SHAME

– EXPLORING THE FIELD

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Draft 06-09-02

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article was to explore the issue of shame among two groups that are in a disadvantaged position namely (i) the unemployed and (ii) social welfare recipients. In the past, these have been treated in a patronizing and humiliating way. Even today these groups can be said to be in a disadvantageous situation in several respects. The question is if this disadvantage also includes the kind of shame that runs the risk of becoming harmful, leading to adverse effects.

The study indicates that (i) unemployed people and social welfare recipients with severe financial problems are more exposed to the kind of shaming (insult and ridicule) that could become harmful, than employees without any financial problems; (ii) the occurrence of negative and/or derogatory attitudes towards the unemployed and social welfare recipients would seem to be sufficiently extensive to have a stigmatizing effect. This is particularly true of the public's attitude towards social welfare recipients; (iii) the unemployed and welfare recipients feel the negative attitudes of the public. This feeling is most tangible for those on welfare who, in many cases, are placed in situations where their reliance on welfare risks becoming visible to others; (iv) unemployment and living on social welfare are associated with shame that run the risk of being harmful.

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that individuals with high status and power do not behave in the same way as those with low status and little power. For instance, they speak more frequently and are allowed to interrupt others more often. They have a different look in their eyes and a different expression on their face. Their behavior expresses dominance and superiority and bears witness to a sense of self-confidence and pride whilst the embarrassed, protective attitude of low-status, powerless individuals suggests vulnerability, insecurity and shame.

Pride and shame are emotions, and emotions occupy an important place in classic sociological theory and in classic social science. Classic theorists like Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, George Simmel, Charles Horton Cooley, and Adam Smith showed that emotions are social phenomena that are of the greatest importance for the understanding of the relation between the individual and society. Furthermore, they are social forces that have a tremendous impact on people's lives. However, a characteristic of sociology, at least since 1930's until recently, has been an almost exclusive emphasis on the cognitive bases of social action (Barbalet, 1999). One might add that it probably applies also for social science in general. Emotion in general, and shame in particular, has not been of interest to modern social scientists though it played an important part for many classics in social science. As regards research on unemployment and poverty, shame has played an extremely small role. This is indicated by the lack of research on these topics in the

psychological database PsychINFO that covers over 2 million articles. As “key concept”, shame appears together with unemployment or unemployed only four times, and together with poverty or poor only five times.

In sociology, there are two detailed theoretical accounts of the sources of pride and shame. One, which may be designated interactionist, is associated with sociologists such as Charles Horton Cooley (1902/1922), Suzanne Retzinger (1991) and Thomas Scheff (1990, 2003). The basic idea in this theory is that shame and pride are markers of states in the social bond. Shame is an expression of insecure and uncertain social relations, and pride of secure and solid ones. The other detailed description of shame is the link that shame has with hierarchical aspects of society such as low social status, low social class, social subordination and inferiority.

A number of contemporary social scientists, including for instance Richard Sennett (1972, 1980), Sighard Neckel (1991, 1996), Thomas Scheff (1990), Candace Clark (1990) and Ullaliina Lehtinen (1998), have dealt with what one could term the shame of subordination and inferiority; Sennett does so, for example, in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). However, Adam Smith did it already almost 250 years ago in his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759/2000). Seen from the perspective of the lower social classes, the upper middle class has such a position that it can determine the criteria for assessing dignity and respect that create the norm against which the lower social classes are evaluated

and to which they are forced to adapt. The result of this assessment is that people from the lower social classes are not treated as equals.

It is claimed that making other people feel inadequate and experience a sense of shame has become an increasingly important element in the exercise of power in modern society. An individual who feels shame usually falls into line. This notion is found in the writings of many of those who are interested in the area of shame (Elias, 1939; Scheff, 1990; Sennett, 1980). It is argued that shame and shaming increasingly are used as a sanction against what is regarded as social deficiency and failure (Neckel, 1991, 1996). The general question that I will raise in this paper is if being unemployed and poor is considered a social failure that gives rise to shame and if unemployed and poor people are subject to disparaging attitudes.

The aim of this article is to explore the issue of shame in the unemployed and the poor. Before doing that I will propose a theoretical framework for this exploration. As will be evident, this framework is inspired by Charles Horton Cooley’s theory on Looking Glass Self and Thomas Scheff’s elaboration of it.

From a sociological perspective shame has been considered a self regarding feeling (Cooley 1902/1922, Scheff, 1990, 2003, 2005; Retzinger, 1991). As such, it is dependent on other people’s values and attitudes. I will take Cooley’s theory “looking-glass self” and Scheff’s elaboration of the theory as a point of departure for exploring the field in question. Cooley’s theory of looking glass self contains the following three steps (i)

the imagination of our appearance to the other person (ii) the imagination of the judgment of the appearance and (iii) some sort of self-feeling either pride or mortification (which is considered a shame variant). Scheff (2005) adds a fourth step namely (iv) the management of emotion. Furthermore, to Cooley's second step he adds that it is important to consider (ii_a) the degree of accuracy in our image of how other see us and (ii_b) the weight the actor gives to the point of view of the other, relative to one's own point of view. Cooley did not define shame but Scheff (1990, 2003) and Retzinger (1991) do. They define shame broadly as a class name for a large family of emotions. It includes many variations, from social discomfort and embarrassment characterized by weak intensity and transient duration to humiliation characterized by powerful intensity and long duration (Retzinger, 1991). These variations all signal threat to the social bond. This definition integrates self (emotional reactions) and society (the social bond) (Retzinger, 1991; Scheff, 2003). Scheff and Retzinger also make a distinction between normal shame and toxic or pathological shame. They are arguing that shame plays a crucial role in normal cooperative relationships, as well as in conflict. Following Erving Goffman they mean that normal shame and embarrassment are an almost continuous part of all human conduct. Manifestations of normal shame on the one hand, although unpleasant, are brief and a natural part of human life. Manifestations of pathological shame on the other hand are persistent and relentless (Scheff & Retzinger, 1997). Here I shall pay special attention to the harmful shame that is sometimes referred to as

"pathological", and I suggest that the feeling of shame has the potential of being harmful when the individual is the subject of ridicule and insult.

When exploring the field of unemployment, poverty and shame I will pay attention to four issues that are inspired by Cooley's theory of looking glass self and Scheff's development of the theory.

I shall first (i) ask the question whether the unemployed and social welfare recipients are more exposed to ridicule or insult, compared to those who are employed. Thereafter I shall concentrate on the following questions; (ii) Are there negative and/or condescending attitudes among the general public towards the unemployed and recipients of social welfare; (iii) Do the unemployed and recipients of social welfare themselves experience that the public has a negative and/or condescending attitude towards them. (iv) Is there a sense of shame among the unemployed and social welfare recipients that is related to their status as unemployed or recipients of social welfare?

In processing these questions and when examining relevant studies, I have used Retzinger's linguistic markers for shame (see Retzinger, 1991 pp.69-74). In some of the analyzed excerpts, the respondents describe their situation by using the word shame but often code words describing this feeling are used.

(i) Are unemployed and poor people more exposed to harmful shaming?

As far as I know, there are few systematic studies, which elaborate on the issue of whether individuals who are lower down the social hierarchy are also more exposed to harmful shame. In order to throw some light on the matter, I have processed data from the Swedish database Liv och Hälsa (Life and Health). I have made use of two questions, which were directed, to about 45,000 people aged 18-80. These questions are (i) Have you experienced during the last three months that anyone has ridiculed you in front of others? (ii) Have you experienced during the last three months that anyone has insulted your honor? In both cases the alternatives were "no, never", "yes, once", "yes, several times". Only the answers from people aged between 18 and 64 have been included.

Figure 1 examines three groups of people; employees with a good financial position, unemployed with severe financial problems and finally a group consisting of social welfare applicants with severe financial problems. The groups are compared with respect to whether they have been ridiculed or insulted.

As is apparent from figure 1, 16 percent of those employed and with a good financial position have been either ridiculed or insulted during the last three months. The corresponding percentage for those unemployed with major financial problems is 44 and for those applying for social welfare and with major financial problems, 52 percent.

The data thus supports the assumption that individuals who are lower down the social hierarchy are particularly exposed to shaming that might

be harmful. The situation is also probably aggravated by their lack of so-called "status shields". In cases where powerful individuals are exposed to harmful shame, the result is probably not as damaging because they possess the necessary resources to shield themselves off from the negative effects of shaming (cf. Hochschild, 1983).

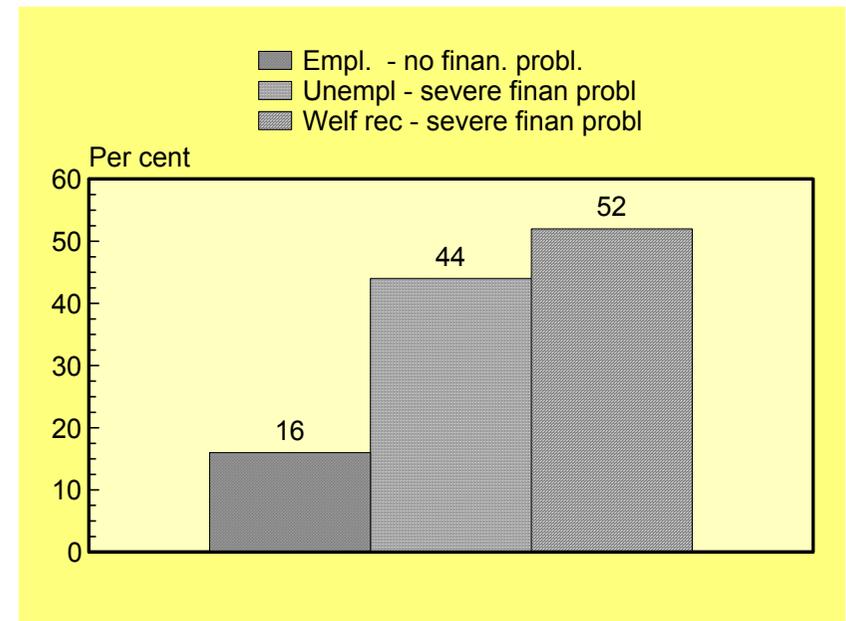


Figure 1. Experiences of having been ridiculed or insulted on some occasion during the last three months among three groups: those employed without any financial problems, those unemployed with severe financial problems and social welfare applicants with significant financial problems.¹

(ii) Negative Attitudes to the Unemployed and Social Welfare Recipients

Over 100 years ago, Thorstein Veblen published the book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. He described how money came to shape the way in which commercial societies evaluated their members in the early nineteenth century. Wealth became the conventional basis for honor and esteem (Veblen, 1899/1994). Ideas about status are still closely related to financial achievements. Poverty and unemployment are judged to be "deserved", with unemployment bearing some of the shame of physical cowardice in warrior eras (de Botton, 2004).

It has repeatedly been claimed that historically, people from higher social classes have regarded those from lower social classes with condescension and that they have perceived them as immoral, uncivilized, promiscuous, lazy and noisy. This is one of the themes in the Swedish historian Arne Helldén's book *Social Arrogans [Social Arrogance]* (1994) and the American economist John Kenneth Galbraith's work *A History of Economics* (1989). According to Helldén, the condescension or social arrogance shown by the higher classes towards the lower was above all a typical feature of aristocratic culture. In recent years, claims Helldén, social arrogance has reemerged after being toned down in the Swedish Welfare State. Galbraith maintains that the attitudes of the rich towards the poor have not changed in any noticeable fashion. The attitudes of the

elite towards themselves are that they need more money to work more whilst they think the poor should be poorer to be motivated to work. The views of the rich have been unchanged for 75 years, writes Galbraith (Galbraith, 1989).

Almost 30 years ago the British social scientist Dennis Marsden claimed that the old myths and tales about the unemployed being lazy, unwilling to work and indolent were still existent and that the notion that unemployment is due to personal qualities and inadequacies was common (Marsden, 1975). The belief that unemployment is the result of the personal qualities and attitudes to work among the unemployed themselves has been widespread (Gallie, 1994). However, the British social scientists Peter Kelvin and Joanna Jarrett maintain that the picture is far from unambiguous. They claim that sympathetic and unsympathetic attitudes to the unemployed exist side by side in society (Kelvin & Jarrett, 1985).

The number of studies that have systematically examined the attitudes of the public towards the unemployed is – to my knowledge – very limited. On the other hand, several studies have attempted in a more indirect manner to interpret current attitudes. Among the few systematic investigations is one by the Swedish sociologists Bengt Furåker and Marianne Blomsterberg on the attitudes of the public towards the unemployed (Furåker & Blomsterberg, 2003). The study shows that stigmatizing attitudes or attitudes that potentially have stigmatizing effects are relatively widespread in the Swedish population. Opinions like

¹ The term "severe financial problems" means that an individual both lacks a cash margin to cover unforeseen expenses and that they have had difficulty during the last three months in coping with running expenses such as rent and loan repayments.

“unemployment is mainly due to the individuals themselves” and “recipients of unemployment benefits could get a job if they wanted to” are common. Many think that society should demand more in return from those who are supported by unemployment benefits (Furåker & Blomsterberg, 2003).

The attitudes adopted by employers towards the unemployed are of considerable importance for the unemployed themselves. In 1992 an attitude survey was conducted amongst executives in Norway. It showed that Norway's employers were not negative towards the unemployed in general but that the negative attitudes were primarily directed towards the long-term unemployed (cited in Dahl, 1999). Another Norwegian study revealed that there was less chance of getting a job if the unemployment had lasted for six months or more (Larsen, 1995). A Swedish study (Åberg, 1998) reached similar conclusions. Employers do not hire those who have been unemployed the longest. They are seen as being of no interest in terms of employability. The negative attitudes towards the unemployed are based on the view that they are lacking in a number of important qualities such as motivation, good working practices, discipline, competence and flexibility.

Because of their unemployment, many of those who are unemployed find themselves in a difficult financial situation. Not all unemployed receive unemployment benefits. Thus, many of them have to rely on social welfare and social services for support. The benefits that they are entitled to, are in many cases by no means sufficient even for the absolute

necessities. Research into public attitudes towards social welfare recipients unambiguously indicates that a large proportion of the public have a negative attitude towards this group.

The British study by Peter Golding and Susan Middleton from 1982 revealed that almost one quarter of those interviewed thought that people applying for social welfare ought to be ashamed because they were living on taxpayers' money. A large percentage also believed that “sponging” was common in the social welfare system (Golding & Middleton, 1982). Perhaps the most striking result in the study was the extensive animosity towards social welfare recipients.

Swedish studies point in the same direction. Many people have a disparaging attitude towards social welfare recipients. The Swedish sociologist Björn Halleröd showed in his study that there is a widespread view that those receiving social welfare are not needy, that they cheat to receive benefits and that they are lazy and lack the ambition to change their situation. A large proportion of the population also believes that many social welfare recipients are dropouts (Halleröd, 1993). Another Swedish sociologist, Stefan Svallfors, found in his study from the early 1990s that seven out of ten wholly or partly agree with the statement: “Many of those receiving social welfare are not really poor” (Svallfors, 1996).

The dominant negative attitudes towards recipients of social welfare even seem to affect the recipients themselves. They are exposed to similar stories and rumors about social welfare recipients who, it is claimed, abuse the system, e.g. people who have managed to get hold of

large sums of money. Mark Rank, an American researcher, found that a large number of social recipients were themselves critical in their evaluation of other recipients (Rank, 1994). Their attitudes towards recipients were very similar to the attitudes of the general public. About 90 percent claimed that a lack of ambition and laziness were to blame for the situation in which other recipients found themselves. There were also many who felt that it was common for people to cheat the system and that they were in fact not in need of benefits (Rank, 1994). Peter Golding and Susan Middleton (1982) in Britain made similar observations.

(iii) Experiences of the Negative Attitudes of Others

Those who are unemployed and those receiving social welfare are aware of their vulnerable situation and their social disadvantage. A Swedish study showed that a clear majority of the unemployed felt that it was common that people believed that the unemployed were lazy, exploited the system, lacked enterprise and had themselves to blame for their unemployment (Starrin, Forsberg & Rantakeisu, 1999). Similar results were obtained for a group of unemployed who had applied for social welfare (Jönsson & Starrin, 1999) and a group of social welfare recipients (Starrin & KalanderBlomkvist, 2001). In another Swedish study carried out by Alm the following question was posed "Do you believe that people in general look down on those who are unemployed?" 30 percent thought that some people look down on the unemployed and 10 percent thought that most people did (Alm, 2001).

In order to determine how common the experience of negative attitudes from other people was, a number of Swedish studies posed the following two questions: "Have you experienced that others look upon you as less knowledgeable because you are unemployed?" and "Have you felt that others consider you lazy because you are unemployed?" For the first question, between 36 and 51 percent, depending on the population studied, responded that they had experienced this while being unemployed. For the second question, 37 to 61 percent responded that they had experienced the feeling (Starrin, Jönsson, Forsberg & Rantakeisu, 1998).

The unemployed can experience the condescending attitudes of other people in different ways. Negative attitudes need not to be explicitly stated. It might be a question of tone of voice or the way other people look at you. Inger, who was interviewed in a Swedish study, provides an example of this. She is a 30 year old single mother with three children. Since leaving compulsory school, she has been employed on and off. She has had two proper jobs, which together lasted six to seven years. Her most recent job was in a shop. She points out that she left this job voluntarily. She was the manager and the job was much too strenuous. Inger reported how it was to lose status. She can see the difference in people's attitudes towards her now when she is unemployed and involved in a supported training scheme compared to when she was a shop manager. She had noticed the difference when she phones authorities and the like. "When you phone and say: hello, my name is Inger Svensson

and I would like to ask about this or that. And they ask what your job is. And you answer, I am unemployed. You hear how their attitude changes. This is not true of all them but of some. You hear a different tone of voice when they ask: Are you working in a supported training scheme? A supported training scheme is almost worse than being unemployed” (Starrin, Forsberg & Rantakeisu, 1999, p.46).

A Swedish study asked welfare recipients whether they themselves had experienced derogatory remarks from other people who knew they had been or were on welfare. About four out of ten women said they had experienced this. The corresponding figure for men was about six out of ten. About three out of ten women and just over four out of ten men also said that they had experienced difficulties or problems in their contacts with private individuals, authorities, companies or banks because they were welfare recipients (Starrin & KalanderBlomkvist, 2001).

The American researcher Mark Rank found in his study that more than two thirds of those interviewed reported specific experiences of being treated in a different manner by other people when it was known that they were receiving social welfare (Rank, 1994). Attitudes ranged from manifest antagonism to more subtle forms of disapproval.

(iv) The Occurrence of Feelings of shame

How others regard those who are unemployed is significant for how the unemployed look upon themselves (Hayes & Nutman, 1981). If the unemployed see condescension in the eyes of others or hear a conde-

scending tone in their voices, their own self-esteem will probably be affected. And it is in the encounter with other people, authorities and society’s welfare institutions that the self-respect of the unemployed is tested. However when studying for example, shame and shame related feelings, it is important to consider the weight the actor gives to the point of view of the other, relative to one’s own point of view (Scheff, 2005).

As early as the 1930s, a study was conducted on the effects of unemployment on self-esteem. Two researchers, Bohan Zawadski and Paul Lazarsfeld (1935) analyzed 60 autobiographies written by unemployed people and classified them in four different groups: “the unbroken”, “the resigned”, “the distressed” and “the apathetic”. What characterized “the distressed” was not only that they were subjected to physical suffering caused by economic deprivation but that they were also exposed to suffering caused by a change in social status. They had experienced repeated belittling and had lost their self-esteem and sense of dignity, which resulted in great suffering. Most of them were also ashamed of their poverty (Zawadski & Lazarsfeld, 1935).

More recent studies show that unemployment still has a negative effect on one’s self-image (Perfetti & Bingham, 1983; Feather, 1982) and that a sense of shame is common among adult unemployed men (Eales, 1989).

In a Swedish study, it is shown that unemployment can erode self-esteem and give rise to shame (Jönsson, 2003). This process of erosion is described in detail in relation to the unemployed and poor. One of the individuals that was interviewed was a 40-year-old female immigrant with

two children. She had been unemployed for ten years. From time to time, she had been involved in labor market program. She had a university education from her home country. She said that she does not want to reveal to others that she is unemployed. Asked why not, she replied "Because it is shameful". She suddenly became upset and started to cry. She apologized and said she was so ashamed. "I am ashamed in my home country when they ask what I do in Sweden." She has not told her neighbors either that she is unemployed. "If you don't have a job, you're not worth anything," she said (Jönsson, 2003).

Questions about one's work such as "what are you doing?" are normal when people who have not seen each other for a while meet or when people who do not know each other, "test each other" to see if they have anything in common. Such questions may be experienced as embarrassing for those who are unemployed. It was embarrassing for Ulrika, who was interviewed in a Swedish study. It was difficult for her when the conversation turned to questions about work. "You shrink every time somebody asks you what you do. You feel disappointed and sad because you don't have a job. You are ashamed." (Starrin, Forsberg & Rantakeisu, 1999, p. 47).

Self-respect is tested in encounters with other people. It may be threatened, weakened, restored or reinforced. Self-respect is threatened when the conversation turns to unemployment. Calling the unemployed as a group into question is a threat to one's dignity even if the conversation is on a general level. The unemployed can counteract the threat to their own

dignity by entering into a discussion and claim there is a lack of jobs, and indicate that they have really tried to find work. If this fails, it is commonly the case that they restrict their social intercourse to other unemployed people. Eva, who was interviewed in a Swedish study, has started avoiding people who she thinks might ask her what she is doing now. Out of fear that her unemployment will be mentioned, she said that she sometimes makes diversions to avoid meeting people she knows. She has experienced panic when she has been together with many people, e.g. when she has been in a shop and there were many people there. "It feels as if they are looking at me and I just want to disappear" (Starrin, 1996). Shame occurs not only when one receives too little attention but also when one receives too much attention.

It has been suggested that for middle-class people more than working-class people, unemployment seems to be a circumstance that needs to be concealed from others (McFayden, 1995). Pretending to be employed is one strategy that has been noted among middle-class people. In the literature, there are stories about people living in middle-class areas who have avoided telling anyone outside their family about their unemployment (Warren, 1986; Starrin, 2001).

The loss of status is particularly tangible for certain groups in the middle and upper middle classes. This is the case for managers who have lost their job, a group that the American sociologists Katherine Newman has studied and that she wrote about in her book *Falling from Grace* (Newman, 1999). In a competitive culture, which is geared towards

achievement like the American one, a CV should have no gaps or stains, particularly for those intending to make a career. A resume must be tended carefully and kept alive. For the unemployed directors and managers that Newman interviewed it was therefore self-evident that they should try to conceal their unemployment in one way or another. One of the most common ways was to introduce oneself as a freelance consultant. They concealed not only their unemployment but also so-called unsuitable and more low-status jobs. Many of them went to great lengths to protect their resumes from the stain of unemployment.

It seems clear that the unemployed are aware of their vulnerable social position and that they have a strong desire to get out of it (Warr, 1987). McFayden summarizes her research survey by maintaining that there is a general perception of stigma amongst all age groups of unemployed, except for a minority of young people living in areas with high levels of unemployment (McFayden, 1995). As a stigmatized group, it seems that the unemployed are in a real dilemma. The deficits of character associated with unemployment and poverty such as laziness and lack of ability are not easy to disconfirm. If they have little opportunity to express and demonstrate their capacity to work, the unemployed may have little chance to disavow their stigma (McFayden, 1995).

The Shame of Poverty

Martha Nussbaum writes in her book *Hiding from Humanity* that one of the most stigmatized life conditions in all societies is poverty. The poor

are routinely shunned and shamed and treated as idle, vicious and of low worth (Nussbaum, 2004). As Adam Smith argued over 200 years ago poverty has not only an absolute aspect e.g. lacking the necessities of life but it also has a comparative and social aspect e.g. lacking items that are part of the social definition of a decent living-standard in any given society. In Adam Smith's society "a creditable day-laborer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt" (Smith 1776/1999 p.465). What is necessary in a decent society are not only those things that are necessary for survival such as food and shelter but also those things, which the established rules of decency have rendered necessary to the lowest rank of people. A decent society is thus a society that makes it possible for people to appear in public and participate fully in society without shame.

Despite the fact that present-day social welfare is in many ways a considerable improvement compared to the old poor relief system, living on social welfare seems still to be associated with a sense of degradation and humiliation. Research in Britain, the US and the Scandinavian countries over the last thirty years reveals a similar pattern. A large proportion of those who live on social welfare experience their situation as shameful. It is not just the difficult economic situation that produces a sense of shame. Feelings of shame may emerge in specific situations, when the question of social welfare is raised and above all, when negative judgments are uttered about social welfare recipients. Such feelings may

also arise in the encounter with social services, for instance when applying for social welfare.

More than 30 years ago the British researchers John Mayer and Noel Timms published their study entitled *The Client Speaks*, which may now be considered a classic (Mayer & Timms, 1970). This study revealed that many people experienced that living on social welfare was associated with shame. It was perceived as a shameful admission that they could no longer support themselves. Previously they had been able to take pride in the fact they had a job and that their wage was sufficient to cover the living costs for themselves and their family. The same theme recurs time and again in the interview extracts presented in the two researchers' study, namely how humiliating it is "to live off others".

A number of Scandinavian studies also show that it is common for feelings such as humiliation, degradation and shame to be associated with social welfare. A Nordic study by Ilse Julkunen indicates that about 60 percent of the clients interviewed found it difficult to go to the social welfare office. The primary reason was related to the shame attached to going there, of not being able to support oneself, the experience of having to beg, of feeling oneself to be a second-class citizen (Julkunen, 1992). In a Swedish study of almost 2000 social welfare recipients, a number of questions were asked concerning the feelings experienced in connection with visits to the social welfare office (Starrin & KalanderBlomkvist, 2001). The study found that 56 percent felt either shame or humiliation. And this feeling does not seem to decrease with the number of years one is

dependent on social welfare. On the contrary, the feelings of shame and degradation are stronger in those who have received social security over a long period (Starrin & KalanderBlomkvist, 2001).

Lotte and Lars, who were interviewed in the Swedish study, have been living on social welfare more or less the last ten years. They described how it feels like to be insignificant, to find oneself at the bottom of the social scale, to be a failure and have no value. "Yes, you're at the bottom of the ladder. You're classed more or less with the homeless. It's like you are not worth more than the dirt under your shoes. The looks you get... It serves you right; you can sit there in the dirt..." (Starrin & KalanderBlomkvist, 2001, Starrin, KalanderBlomkvist & Janson, 2003). Marie, who has relied on social welfare off and on for many years, said that "it's so dirty, so to speak, to go to the welfare office". Therefore, she does not tell anybody about it. She went on saying, "It's shameful, even though it's your right all the same... It's shameful to have to go to the welfare office" (Starrin & KalanderBlomkvist, 2001; Starrin, KalanderBlomkvist & Janson, 2003).

Those on social welfare develop different strategies for dealing with the negative attitudes of others. The most obvious one is to hide the fact that one is on welfare. Several of those interviewed by Mayer and Timms (1970) concealed their situation from their friends and even from their family. If this strategy of concealment is impossible then people either try to minimize their contacts with the general public or make an attempt to physically distance themselves from the image of the typical social welfare

recipient. The hiding strategy includes emotion management. They try to manage emotions like embarrassment and shame by avoiding it.

However, in certain situations it is difficult to conceal that one is receiving social welfare, as is the case when instead of receiving cash, an individual is given food stamps. A Swedish study shows that over seven out of ten women and more than six out of ten men had a sense of shame to a fairly high or very high degree when shopping with food stamps. Nearly three out of four women and almost six out of ten men had felt degraded (Starrin & KalanderBlomkvist, 2001; Starrin, KalanderBlomkvist & Janson, 2003).

Mark Rank's American study found that people choose different strategies to avoid revealing their dependence on social security. Some shop at odd times and others go to shops where many people use food stamps. Some ask others to shop for them. Many of those interviewed in Rank's study reported that quite a few of their friends were not aware that they were living on social security (Rank, 1994)

Per who was interviewed in a Swedish study told that after shopping with food stamps he chose to go out through the backdoor. He reported what it was like the first time he went to the shop and used food stamps from the welfare office. "It was the height of degradation," he said. Per went to the shop he usually goes to. He said he did not want to go to the checkout counter and display his food stamps. "I went behind the storeroom and told the manager that I was going to shop with one of those bits of paper (food stamps). It felt absolutely awful. No problem he

said and indicated a person who would deal with it. And then I went out into shop and got a basket and selected the things I wanted. I went back to the storeroom and then I could go out the back way (Starrin, KalanderBlomkvist & Janson, 2003).

Summary and Discussion

The aim of this article was to explore the issue of shame among two groups who are in a disadvantaged situation namely (i) the unemployed and (ii) social welfare recipients. With reference to the four questions I posed initially this study indicates that (i) unemployed people and social welfare recipients with severe financial problems are more exposed to the kind of shaming that risks becoming harmful than employees without any financial problems; (ii) the occurrence of negative and/or derogatory attitudes towards the unemployed and social welfare recipients would seem to be sufficiently extensive to have a stigmatizing effect. This is particularly true of the public's attitude towards social welfare recipients; (iii) the unemployed and welfare recipients feel the negative attitudes of the public. And this feeling is most tangible for those on welfare who, in many cases, are placed in situations where their reliance on welfare risks becoming visible to others; (iv) unemployment and living on social welfare are associated with shame that has the potential for becoming harmful.

I shall conclude this paper by discussing and interpreting the findings in light of an attempt to combine perspectives on emotion and perspectives on stress. There is an obvious interdependence between stress and

emotions that is often overlooked. Lazarus writes in his book *Stress and Emotions* that when there is stress there are also emotions – perhaps “we could call them stress emotions” (Lazarus, 1999 p 35). Shame belongs to that group of stress emotions as it usually arises from harmful, threatening and challenging conditions (Lazarus, 1999 p 36).

In spite of this, two separate lines of research literature on the field can be found, one in which stress have no bearing on emotions and one in which emotions have no bearing on stress (Lazarus, 1999). Lazarus argues that stress, coping and emotion belong together and form a conceptual unit, with emotion being the superior concept because it includes stress and coping.

I am suggesting that the stress that the unemployed and those living on social welfare are facing, apart from the stress that is caused by financial worries, can be conceptualized as mortification stress, dramaturgical stress and status stress. I consider all three to be shame-stress variants. (Mortification appears as mentioned earlier in Cooley’s Looking Glass Self and dramaturgy is central in Goffman).

I suggest that the first of these – mortification stress – is a kind of shame stress that results from the contemptuous attitudes of other people. However, the shaming of the unemployed and social welfare recipients does not only occur in the form of prejudiced and contemptuous attitudes from the general public. It also seems to have a structural side that is built into the regulatory system of the welfare state and routines for dealing with social welfare applications. The regulatory system that is

applied requires poor people to subject themselves to public examination and thereby relinquish their personal integrity. They are expected to provide the social welfare office with information of a private nature and they must accept that their “failings” are evaluated in order to qualify for financial assistance. Thus, in order to access material resources, social welfare applicants must relinquish their self-esteem and the chances of defending themselves against the stigma resulting from a change in status are extremely limited (cf. Neckel, 1991). Rønning (2005) and Solheim (2001) are suggesting that the treatment of the welfare claimants appears in many cases as an institutional humiliation.

Further I am suggesting that the other type of shame stress – dramaturgical stress – which the unemployed and welfare recipients are particularly exposed to is connected with one’s presentation of self and with strategies of monitoring other people’s displays (cf Freund, Meredith, McGuire & Podhurst, 2003). Dramaturgical stress has also to do with management of emotion by trying to avoid a sense of shame when interacting with other people (cf Scheff, 2005). Unlike mortification stress, dramaturgical stress is not about actual occurrences of shame and shame related feelings but anticipations and management of these emotions. Dramaturgical stress is heightened when individuals perceive their chosen face or performance in a given situation to be inconsistent with the concept of the self they try to maintain for themselves and others in that situation (Cockerham, 1978). Many skills of self-presentation imply emotion work (Hochschild, 1983).

People in subordinate positions who must cope with a social stigma by concealing their identity under cover of “normal” appearance or behavior are particularly vulnerable to dramaturgical stress (Freund, 1998). Partly because they lack status shields to protect their self from being attacked and hurt by those in power (Hochschild, 1983).

The third form of stress – status stress – implies a close relation between social status and shame and involves an evaluative component on how one’s social standing are in the eyes of the other and what is valued in society. Our social position on the societal ladder and our social status seem to be extremely important in a competitive and meritocratic society like ours. A meritocratic society is based upon the premise that people earn and get what they deserve. Our social status is dependent on what we can make of ourselves. If we fail to achieve social status for example a well paid job we might feel ashamed and status stress is provoked by for example recession, unemployment, redundancy but also promotion (cf De Button, 2004).

People’s social standing seems to directly affect their health. Marmot argues in his book *Status Syndrome* that the importance of where one stands relative to others in the hierarchy may be more important for health than absolute level of resources (Marmot, 2005). The higher the status in the pecking order, the healthier people are likely to be. Consequently, health follows a social gradient and Marmot calls it status syndrome. Those of lower status have poorer health and among those at the bottom of the social ladder of a meritocratic society, we will find the

poor, the long-term unemployed. I would suggest that they are exposed to such a strong status stress that they, with reference to Adam Smith (1776/1999), might not be able to appear in public without feeling ashamed because of their social standing.

In stress theory there is an assumption that the individuals' perception of their social situation may lead to an extraordinary mental and physical stress, which in its turn can initiate a pathological process. Mortification, dramaturgical and status stress occurs more or less in all social groups but I suggest that it is most tangible and painful for those who lack power and have low status and who are thus at a clear social disadvantage. There seems to be considerable evidence in support of the hypothesis that mortification and dramaturgical stress are unhealthy. One of the specific emotions that might be crucial for the understanding of the link between stressful external circumstances and ill health is shame (Scheff, 1992, 2001; Wilkinson, 1999).

In this paper, I have made a distinction between normal and harmful shame. Unlike normal shame, harmful shame has adverse effects. The working hypotheses have been that repeatedly being the subject of ridicule and insult increases the risk that the shame will turn out to be harmful and thus have adverse effects. As this study indicates, shaming of the unemployed and the poor seems to be widespread. Shame is central to social control and conformity (Elias, 1939; Scheff, 1990).

The adverse effects of harmful shame may lead in different directions. It may lead to psychosocial illness, including low self-worth, and thus

incapacitate the individual from fulfilling social roles such as being successful in finding a job. There is much to suggest that people who are exposed to harmful shaming in the form of insults and ridicules show more signs of mental problems than people who are not so exposed (see Dahlgren & Starrin, 2004). There are also studies showing that shaming is associated with psychological ill health among the unemployed (Alm, 2001; Breakwell, 1985; Jönsson, 2003; Rantakeisu, Starrin & Hagquist, 1997; Rantakeisu, Starrin & Hagquist, 1999; Starrin & Jönsson, 1998; Starrin, B, Rantakeisu, U & Hagquist, 1997) and welfare recipients (Starrin, KalanderBlomkvist & Janson, 2003). The adverse effects of harmful shame may also lead to social exclusion and marginalization expressed in violence, drug abuse and rage and hatred against the established society. It is suggested that shaming (e.g. humiliation, insult, and ridicule) is an important factor behind violence (Gilligan, 1996; Retzinger, 1991; Scheff, 2004) and that unequal societies tend to be more violent (Wilkinson, 2005) because unequal societies tend to create poor social relations. In both of these cases, the feeling of shame leads to a vicious circle. It may reinforce feelings of inferiority and furthermore contribute to confirm, consolidate and reproduce subordinate social positions (cf Scheff, 1990).

Though the shaming of the unemployed and the poor may have as its purpose to impress on the population the necessary work ethics for maintaining the capitalist order and the smooth running of the market system, I am suggesting that shaming of the unemployed and the poor

will not be productive in making them more work ready. The reverse is probably the case. I am suggesting, in line with Rønning (2004), that shaming that turns out to be harmful is counterproductive for society as a whole as well as the work that the welfare institutions are intended to perform. However, more research on what constitutes harmful shame and shaming is needed. There is also a need for systematic studies on the adverse effects of harmful shame and shaming in order to get a deeper understanding of the situation for people in disadvantaged positions such as the unemployed and the poor. Such studies will probably have strong implications for social policy and social work practice.

However, studying shame is not a simple task. There is a need for conceptual elaboration of what constitutes normal shame in contrast to harmful shame and a need for elaboration of methods for observing shame in different context.

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