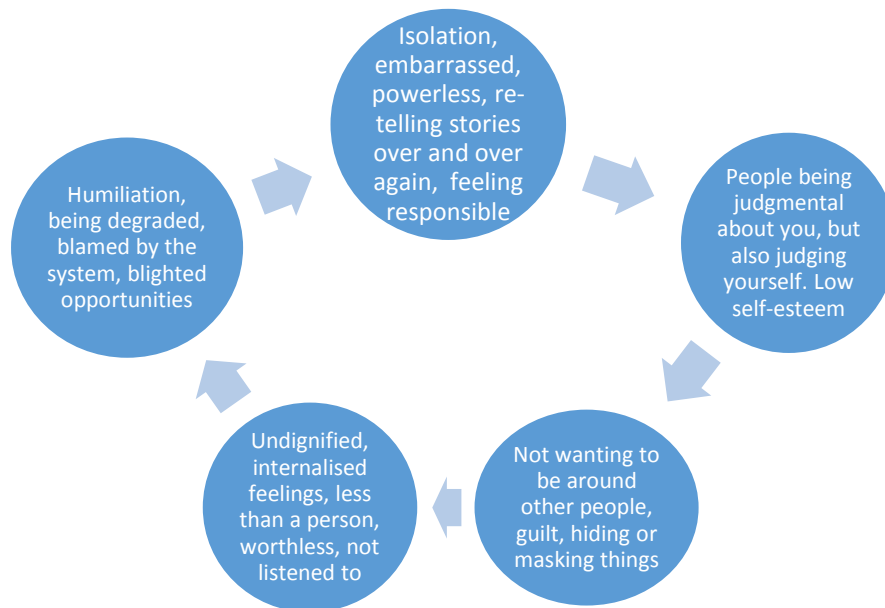


First Giving Poverty a Voice Social Worker Training Programme Study Group Wednesday 30 April 2014

What does the word 'shame' mean to us?



Rationale for theme of poverty and shame: Understanding the link between poverty and shame helps us to understand the emotional side of poverty and relations with social services. It also links with recent research (including *The Spirit Level*, which considers the impact of inequality beyond purely economic calculations), the impact of media representations of the poor, political rhetoric and 'povertyism' (discrimination against individuals living in poverty).

Poverty and Shame: Recent research – Elaine Chase: 'We conducted a study of poverty and shame across the world and found that everywhere individuals living in poverty are made to feel ashamed. This led us to consider how our findings impact upon anti-poverty policies and projects.'
[Film Screening – Poverty and Shame in the UK]

Discussion – Poverty and Shame: Experiences/Observations

- There is **disrespect** for the poor amongst the affluent, as though those who do not experience poverty are unaware of how the other half lives. Families living in poverty are often **judged**. Judgement, disrespect and ridicule exacerbates feelings of shame.
- The poor face **discrimination from professionals**, such as the Jobcentres. Professionals that are supposed to help often don't. No one seems to care that you are trying to do your best. You receive **bad treatment** from jobcentre staff, suffer lack of respect, feel invisible; you get treated better as a consumer ("you get more respect in Tesco" – one participant)
- **Media representations** perpetuate shameful stereotypes. **Politicians** also espouse views of the poor that are discriminatory and validate negative attitudes that make people living in poverty feel

ashamed. **How do you turn around these perceptions and comments?** How do you make people understand everyone's journeys and struggles, that we are not lazy but constantly trying every day?

- One option is being involved in campaigns and research projects that challenge negative stereotypes (such as the Mayes' involvement in the Poverty and Shame in the UK film).
- Feeling ashamed about having to go to the **jobcentres**
 - *"There is a pillar in front of our JCP that I stand behind so people on the buses going past can't see me waiting outside"* – one participant
- **Unreasonable or unattainable expectations** that set you up to fail. For example Jobcentres starting you on courses they won't pay for and which you can't afford.
- **Sanctions** and appeal system is shaming, they make you feel you are a criminal or have done something wrong. Nobody believes your word over jobcentre staff.

Discussion – Social Work Practice and Shame: Experiences:

- Violations of **trust and confidentiality** (one participant described how meetings were called for her in a domestic violence situation – the advocate relayed the content of the meetings, including everything our participant had said, to her partner)
- **Case conferences are shameful experiences:** Feeling lost, invisible, powerless, not included at case conferences. The meeting may be about you and your life but you are excluded from the discussion. Sometimes families do not understand what is going on at the conference, or even why it is being held at all. Feeling stupid because you don't understand.
 - *"You sit at the table and listen, but you are not allowed a choice or an input that's going to have any impact. So you are sat there observing what everyone else is doing with your life, and your children's life (who potentially have no rights) on the basis of strangers around the table. It is degrading, humiliating. Everything is taken away from you."* – one participant
- **Reports** written about you by people who have had little or no engagement with you (psychiatrists/psychologists), which are impossible to understand or which you can't even see yourself in (or which you don't think reflect you).
- Social workers reading about you (for example case notes) and thinking that they know you, **without taking the time to get to know you**
- Shame of having **professionals involved in your life**
- **Power imbalances and professionalism** inhibit people coming together and working together and make families in poverty feel shamed and unequal. It feels too hard to work side by side with social workers and be talking from the same place.
- **Prejudgement:** Being treated **like you have done something wrong**, feeling like everyone is against you; meeting with professionals where they **don't believe your side of the story** or treat you like a liar; social workers **overlooking your child's needs** (particularly if they are a 'invisible' needs like learning disabilities/autism) and instead blaming you as a parent; **professionals thinking that it is a waste of time** to provide support because families choose to be poor; **decisions** made before meetings

Discussion – Positive Practice

- **General points**
 - Social workers need to be **approachable** – parents are scared to ask for help for fear of losing their children. Social workers can **respect** families with little gestures like saying 'good morning, how are you?' when they arrive, breaking the ice, saying 'I'm here to help you, not to take your children'.
 - Being mindful of what you write about the families you work with. Going through reports you write about families with the families.

- **Approach to families**
 - Treat each family as unique, avoid tick the box exercises.
 - Take the time to **get to know families** by spending time with them (one social worker went fishing with a participant and his sons to see how he was as a father, by the end the social worker was greatly impressed by how well the participant was able to look after his children).
 - Seeing the child as part of the family, rather than separate to the family (Team Around the Family meeting more positive than Team Around the Child)
 - Couples should have an advocate each (not the same advocate) if there are domestic violence issues
- **Understanding and support**
 - More explanation of all meetings, processes, procedures, requirements and expectations, so that families know what is happening in their lives, their responsibilities and their rights.
 - **Parent Advocate Service** (pilot: Lewisham Council) – parents who have been through the social work system are assigned to support parents currently going through the system.
 - Benefits – Parent Advocates (PA) are not professionals, so parents feel more comfortable with them; PA understand what parents are going through because they have been there themselves; PA trained to be able to explain conferences, procedures and processes in a way that is understandable, before they occur
 - **Improving case conferences**
 - Acknowledge conferences are always going to be shaming in some way, but trying to minimise that in whatever way possible.
 - Take time to explain
 - Don't overlook learning disabilities! Individuals with learning disabilities really do struggle to understand without appropriate support
 - Go through reports with families beforehand.
 - Better chairing of conferences – chair speaks to parents first, give them an opportunity to speak first. When the conference is over, ask parents if they have any concerns
 - Give parents a 'Jargon Buster' (a document, like a glossary, that parents can use to understand the jargon that professionals use)
 - Query: is this tinkering around the edges? Should the whole case conference system be overhauled?
- **Teaching and training**
 - Training of social workers to help them relate to families has to start early. Prejudiced ideas should be identified and challenged early on.
 - Programmes to sensitise institutions, such as schools and teachers, about issues of poverty and the difficulties that families might be facing.
- **Expectations and acknowledgements**
 - Avoiding ridiculously high expectations that most families couldn't live up to (one social worker on a house visit accepted and understood that a teenage boy's room would be a mess and didn't consider this a sign of bad parenting). Also avoid imposing middle class ideals onto all families.
 - Recognition of positive steps that families make (not just focus on negatives) and making expectations manageable (not setting individuals up to fail)

Other observations

Families in poverty also need to realise that sometimes social workers are trying their best in a system that is broken. Many social workers experience professional pain where they want to see change in their profession but feel their hands are tied by the system or the legal framework. We need to call for a paradigm shift within the social work system.