The Call from Inside the House: Shame, School, and Self-Misinformation

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Education in news and media literacy has become a fast-growing component of the K-12 educational landscape. As "fake news" and fears about media misinformation have proliferated, especially within the last ten years, parents, teachers, and school leaders have recognized the importance of teaching young people how to identify what is true and what is not. School-based media literacy exercises will often have students learning how to verify and fact-check sources, identify fallacies such as confirmation bias, explore the history of propaganda and sensationalist "yellow journalism," and create litmus tests and checklists for validating news stories. The message to young people, who are particularly vulnerable to misinformation, especially through digital and social media platforms, is generally consistent: What you see and hear isn't always true.

While educators have identified and responded to the need to manage the media literacy and "fake news" problem, however, there is still a dimension of misinformation among youth at school that goes primarily unaddressed. Although students in K-12 spaces are increasingly being taught to manage the misinformation that they come across in the world around them, they are generally not taught to recognize or address the misinformation that comes from *within* them. In other words, students are not often taught how to hear, respond to, and navigate the internal voices that shape their interpretations of and their relationships with their selves. Just as students need to be able to recognize when they are engaging with an untrue or false external source of information, they also need to be able to recognize when *they themselves* may be their own source of misinformation about their identity, character, and social roles.

In this essay, I will explore how shame, the emotional experience of being fundamentally defective, broken, or "not good enough," can be a source of internal misinformation about the self. First, I will define shame and briefly outline some general philosophical understandings of shame. Then, I will dis-

cuss how shame can be a form of misinformation, and the role that a student's formal education can play in their experiences of shame. Finally, I will propose that, in order to address the shame that may misinform students about themselves, educators should seek spaces in which they can prioritize fostering social connection and community between students who may feel isolated.

AN OVERVIEW OF SHAME

Shame is a complex experience that has historically been tricky to define. As psychologist Gershen Kaufman suggests, the language of shame can be elusive. Although we might be able to explain the core conflict of shame as feeling "worthless," "inadequate," or "inferior," those words alone don't seem to acknowledge the depth of what it is actually like to experience shame, and shame in general sometimes seems to be beyond language entirely.[1] Kaufman describes shame as "the experience of being fundamentally a bad person. Nothing you have done is wrong, and nothing you can do will make up for it. It is a total experience that forbids communication with words."[2] He states that "contained in the experience of shame is the piercing awareness of ourselves as fundamentally deficient in some vital way as a human being." To live with shame is to "experience the very essence or heart of the self as wanting."[3]

Scholars such as John Bradshaw have elaborated on these definitions of shame, noting that there are different *types* of shame and shame experiences. While it can often be a painful experience, shame itself can also serve as a positive reminder of our own limitations, an assurance that we are not perfect and that we will sometimes fail or need help. According to Bradshaw, "shame is the emotion which gives us permission to be human."[4] At the same time, however, Bradshaw identifies a "toxic" dimension to shame. "Toxic shame" is shame that has become one's whole identity. To have shame as an identity is "to believe that one's being is flawed, that one is defective as a human being." Because the experience of toxic shame is so painful, individuals often respond to it by creating a "cover-up," or a false self. Bradshaw explains that "since one feels his true self is defective and flawed, one needs a false self which is not defective and flawed. Once one becomes a false self, one ceases to exist psychologically. To be a false self is to cease being an authentic human being."[5]

June Price Tangney, a preeminent researcher of shame, calls shame (along with guilt, embarrassment, and pride) one of the "self-conscious" emotions. The central feature of these emotions is that they are both personal and interpersonal, and involve some form of self-reflection or self-evaluation. The self-conscious emotions arise due to our interactions with socially shaped standards and norms, and they motivate and inform the way we respond to others. Tangney defines shame as "an acutely painful emotion that is typically accompanied by a sense of shrinking or of 'being small,' and by a sense of worthlessness and powerlessness."[6] Tangney also notes that shame can occur in the presence of others or alone, and that an active, physical audience is not a requirement for feeling shame.

Krista Thomason is one scholar who has attempted to categorize the varying definitions and accounts of shame. Her first category is what she calls the "traditional view" of shame. This traditional understanding of shame is rooted in the works of Plato and Aristotle, both of whom believed that shame—especially *aidos*, or prospective shame—is a noble social and moral safeguard that prevents individuals from acting dishonorably.[7] In the traditional view of shame, shame is essentially the uncomfortable experience that arises when we fail to live up to our ideals and values, and it is a valuable and constructive emotion of self-assessment.[8] John Rawls, who defines shame as "the feeling that someone has when he experiences an injury to his self-respect or suffers a blow to his self-esteem,"[9] builds on this traditional view of shame, noting that individuals feel "moral shame" when they value but lack those excellences that are related to moral virtues, such as courage, temperance, and patience. Rawls expands the traditional view of shame, however, by also making space for the idea that shame is not exclusively useful or helpful. In addition to moral shame, Rawls identifies a type of "natural shame" that "is aroused by blemishes in our person, or by acts and attributes indicative thereof, that manifest the loss or lack of properties that others as well as ourselves would find it rational for us to have," such as beauty or wit.[10] "Natural shame," therefore, is a type of shame that may not do us any good—shame over one's weight, height, crooked nose, or other factors outside of our control that do not speak to our character or

virtues.

Thomason calls a negative view of shame the "pessimistic view." While many philosophers uphold a traditional vision of the helpful moral role that shame can play in human lives, others have noted the potential for shame to be "dangerous and psychologically crippling."[11] Martha Nussbaum, for example, describes her conception of "primitive shame" as the type of shame that results when we identify ourselves as imperfect and nonwhole beings. This type of shame begins in infancy, as soon as children begin to recognize and understand a difference between themselves and others and encounter their own imperfections as they realize that their needs are being met by those around them. According to Nussbaum, "shame involves the realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate. Its reflex is to hide from the eyes of those who will see one's deficiency, to cover it."[12] Nussbaum argues that shame emerges gradually over the course of a person's first year of life, culminating in a full-fledged emotion at the point where an individual fully gains a recognition of her own separateness. This raw, painful, primitive shame lies at the core of our flawed humanity and is a "threat to all possibility of morality and community."[13]

John Kekes is another philosopher who has advanced this negative view of shame. Kekes argues that shame is harmful because it doesn't just helpfully *alert* us to our shortcomings, but it makes us feel *deficient* due to them. This feeling of deficiency is often so strong and "unimpeachable" that it becomes self-destructive and undermines "our confidence, verve, and courage to navigate life's treacherous waters"—and ultimately, our self-respect.[14] Because of this, "shame threatens to diminish our most important resource. It jeopardizes the possibility of improvement by weakening the only agency capable of effecting it."[15] In Keke's view, an underlying thread throughout any experience of shame is not that one had made blameworthy choices, but that one has lost self-respect.[16]

The counterpart to shame, generally, is understood to be guilt, which bears some similarities to the experience of shame but also some critical differences. While shame is a holistic judgment of one's whole self ("*I* am bad"), guilt is usually experienced as a judgment of one's actions ("*That thing I did* was

bad"). According to Tangney, shame is associated strongly with anger and generally motivates "interpersonal avoidance or interpersonal hostility aggression."[17] Guilt, however, is associated with empathy, and "people experiencing guilt are relatively free of the egocentric, self-involved process of shame. Instead, their focus on a specific behavior is likely to highlight the consequence of that behavior for distressed others, further facilitating an empathetic response."[18] Overall, Tangney's research consistently finds that guilt—but not shame—is correlated with "enhanced empathy, a tendency to take responsibility, and constructive responses to anger." Tangney notes that these findings "really raise questions about the 'moral,' self-regulatory functions of shame."[19] Ultimately, the research on shame suggests that it is a complex and unpredictable experience that, while it may sometimes serve as a moral guide, is also risky and capable of great harm. Shame, overall, is something that educators ought to be prepared to recognize, manage, and carefully navigate alongside their students in classroom spaces.

SHAME, IDENTITY, AND MISINFORMATION

Returning to Krista Thomason's work, Thomason proposes a conception of shame that is rooted in identity. Thomason defines shame as an experience of tension between one's identity and one's self-conception. Shame is what we experience when we feel like we are defined by some part of our identity that we do not identify with or do not want to identify with. Thomason defines "self-conceptions" as "my own sense of who I am" and notes that self-conceptions can be local and dynamic, or static and global.[20] According to Thomason, a self-conception is how we understand ourselves, or represent ourselves *to* ourselves either in general or in a particular moment. Identities, however, extend beyond self-conceptions. Our identities include our self-conceptions, but also include "contingent features of our individual histories as well as the way we come across to others," what Thomason calls our "nonvoluntary identities." Our identities may include multiple facets of ourselves and our experiences that we may either choose to embrace or resist—facets such as our gender or sex, our race or ethnicity, or our family history. Because the way that others perceive us can also be part of our identity, identities are social and are partially socially constructed. Therefore, while our self-conceptions are an important part of

our identities, we also cannot always ignore what others think of us, even if we may disagree with someone else's assessment of us. The tension between our self-conceptions and the socially constructed facets of our identities is a challenge that we must always be prepared to recognize and negotiate. When we fail to adequately negotiate this tension, in Thomason's view, we are susceptible to shame. Shame, in this conception, occurs when we feel overshadowed and defined by an aspect of our social identity that we do not necessarily embrace.[21]

Shame, as a tension between one's self-conception and overall broader identity, can be an overpowering emotional experience, and can certainly warp the way that young people understand themselves and relate to others. The internalized shame that misinforms individuals about themselves may be thought of as a form of "imposter phenomenon," which is an "internal experience of fraudulence despite one's external success."[22] This warping of one's self-conception may also be considered a type of "self-misinformation:" an internal misinformation, where the "data points" that an individual is using to understand herself are untrue or incomplete.

A great deal of young people's identity formation is done at school, both in formal learning spaces such as the classroom, and in informal, unsupervised spaces such as the cafeteria or playground.[23] Shaming practices have always been a part of schooling in the United States, with early Colonial examples of "dunce caps" and beatings in front of the class eventually giving way to things like behavior charts, lunchtime isolation, "publicly posted grades, honor rolls, class rankings, and valedictory speeches."[24] In the classroom, factors such as teachers' chosen instructional methods may also induce shame and influence students' self-conceptions and identities. For example, when teachers teach math by having students memorize lists of equations, which are then marked as correct or incorrect, students are more likely to struggle with mathematics and come to believe that they are not "math people," which then may become part of both their private self-conceptions and their public social identities in the classroom.[25] It is therefore possible for a student who likes numbers and enjoys problem-solving, but who struggles with memorization, to internalize a vision of herself as a bad mathematician—even though that may not be true

at all. Alternatively, when math teachers leave space for mistakes, exploration, and questioning, students are more likely to understand themselves to be capable mathematicians. Similarly, in the art domain, "teaching strategies in art classes that do not leave space for self-expression may discourage students to understand themselves as artists, to engage in visual art, and to further explore their artist identities."[26]

For many students, the grades they earn in school can also impact their burgeoning self-conceptions and identities.[27] These grades themselves can be misleading for students who are learning how to understand themselves and navigate their own internal voices, and for those students who have "bought in" to the markers of academic success, "academic failure indicates that they are worthless."[28] For example, a high school student in a Chemistry class may work hard all semester, study diligently, stay after class to ask her teacher questions, and then still earn a D in the course. The genuine effort that the student put into the class is then overshadowed by this perceived public mark of failure. Although the student may have held a self-concept of herself as "smart" or "hard-working," that self-concept has now been challenged. The student worries that her peers will find out what grade she earned. She will have to explain it to her parents. She wonders what her other teachers will think of her. She is aware that the grade may affect competitive college admissions. That grade has turned into a private and public source of shame, with the student at risk of internalizing the essential messages of shame—I am bad. I am stupid. I am unworthy of success. However, although the student now deeply feels these things to be true, that does not mean that they *are*. Her shame has misinformed her about herself. She's been misinformed on her own character from within, and her feelings about herself don't necessarily reflect the reality that she is not "stupid" at all, but is just struggling in a difficult discipline. Now, however, the student carries a misinformed opinion of herself; and because that sincere belief comes from within, what Kekes calls an "unimpeachable" source, the student may be at risk of holding those beliefs long-term.

What, ultimately, does it mean for a young person to develop an "informed," rather than a "misinformed" understanding of herself? Generally,

an informed understanding of the self arises, at least partially, from the ability to navigate and challenge shame rather than be consumed by it. For this, students must be socially connected to their peers and to their broader school communities. A student who is isolated and alone is susceptible to the internal, quiet, persuasive messages of shame, because her own critical voice is all she hears. A student connected to her community, meanwhile, is not constrained by her own self-conceptions being her sole or primary vision of herself. She can also see herself as her peers, teachers, coaches, and parents see her. She knows that her identity is broader than just what she feels inside, and she has other "data points" around her—encouraging words from her friends, other activities where she can experience success, opportunities to help or teach others during the school day—to help her understand who is she, and the role she plays in her community. Shame is a form of self-misinformation because it is powerful enough to convince us that our own inner, most critical perceptions of ourselves are *always true,* and young people, due to their own emerging sense of self, are particularly vulnerable to these feelings. A shamed understanding of oneself, ultimately, is an incomplete or limited understanding of oneself. In order to support students in navigating the world around them authentically and unashamedly, educators ought to prepare students not just to identify and address the misinformation in the world around them but also the misinformation that comes from within—the "call from inside the house." Keeping this in mind, it's important to recognize that the community-building aspects of school—organizations, clubs, sports, music, elective courses—are just as critical for students' overall growth as academics. Social spaces provide opportunities for students to become connected instead of isolated, which is a meaningful way to insulate against the most harmful effects of shame. Schools ought to promote student involvement within the school community by providing a variety of extra-curricular opportunities, and seeking especially to identify and reach those students who might be most at risk of feeling disconnected. The academic and developmental benefits of student participation in extra-curricular activities have long been understood.[29] However, the opportunity to challenge the isolation that so often feeds into student shame is another reason why healthy social communities within schools should be prioritized and maintained.[30]

CONCLUSIONS

Research suggests that, for adolescents especially, the peer-to-peer relationships they develop at school are particularly important for helping navigate new challenges while developing a sense of connection and authenticity.[31] When young people feel alone and isolated in their social worlds, they are more likely to draw limited or incorrect conclusions about themselves. Shame—a holistic evaluation of oneself as bad or wrong—is a powerful experience, and it thrives when individuals feel alone and disconnected. The systems of formal schooling, which so often reduce students to behaviors or grades, and focus so heavily on ranking and categorizing, have the potential to mislead and confuse students about themselves, their abilities, and their roles in their community.

While students can be educated about misinformation on the world around them, it may be more difficult to counter the effects of internalized shame, imposter phenomenon, and the misinformation that comes from within. However, addressing shame in the classroom may be just as critical as teaching media literacy. Shame and self-misinformation harm students by limiting their autonomy and open futures. When students spend their time at school grappling with feelings that they are "unworthy, a lesser person, then self-respect and self-assurance, central ingredients of thoughtful autonomy, are undermined," and "the task of cultivating a student's independent thinking and value formation so she is capable of rational decision-making is replaced by cultivation of fear, self-disparagement, and self-protection."[32] It should be important to educators that as students mature, they are not developing shamed visions of themselves—which will ultimately be inaccurate, incomplete, misinformed, and limiting—but healthy, holistic, and honest ones that will empower them to confidently navigate the challenges they face.

Combatting shame requires connection, and schools should seek ways to foster and build student community, so that students do not suffer from the isolation in which they are vulnerable to developing misinformed and incomplete conceptions of themselves. In a post-COVID-19 world in which students have grown used to relying more heavily on social media for socialization, fostering

connection is especially important, as research suggests that social media usage actually has the potential to create a greater sense of isolation and alienation in young people.[33] Moving forward in the K-12 educational landscape, educators ought to view the fight against misinformation as multifaceted, and aim to not just teach students to navigate "fake news," but to challenge the persuasive internal voices of shame that can misinform their growing senses of self.

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