

The Role of Shame in Alcohol Dependence; Narratives from those in Recovery

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References: Potter-Efron, R. (1987). Shame and guilt: Definitions, processes and treatment issues with AODA clients. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 4(2), 7-24. Wiechelt, S.A. (2007). The specter of shame in substance misuse. *Substance Use and Abuse* 42 (2-3), 399-409. Dearing, R.L., Stuewig, J., & Tangney, J.P. (2005). On the importance of distinguishing shame from guilt: Relations to problematic alcohol and drug use. *Addictive Behaviors*, 30, 1392-1404. Luoma, J.B., Kohlenberg, B.S., Hayes, S.C., & Fletcher, L. (2012). Slow and steady wins the race: A randomized clinical trial of acceptance and commitment therapy targeting shame in substance use disorders. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 80 (1), 43-53. Murray, M. (2008). Narrative psychology. In J. Smith (Eds.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 111-132.). London: Sage. Crossley, M.L. (2000). *Introducing narrative psychology: Self, trauma and the construction of meaning*. Maidenhead, UK: McGraw Hill and Open University Press.

Brief Introduction and Rationale

A literature review suggested that despite the reported link between shame and addiction (Potter-Efron, 1987), our understanding of its impact on recovery is relatively unknown; in particular how those with alcohol dependence *experience shame*.

Whilst shame is found to be a hindrance to recovery (Wiechelt, 2007) and increases vulnerability to becoming dependant on addictive substances (Dearing et al., 2005), it has also been found that addressing shame may also enhance recovery (Luoma et al, 2012). This suggests that we need to develop a better understanding of people's experiences of shame in recovery.

This research aimed to analyse the stories of those in recovery from alcohol dependence and explore how shame was experienced and talked about in personal narratives.

Method

Narratives have been claimed as the principal way that humans give meaning to experiences (Murray, 2008), therefore a *narrative analysis* was used to consider both *what* was talked about by participants and also *how* stories were told.

Participants were adults (aged 18+) who defined themselves as being 'in recovery' from alcohol dependence. All were recruited from Alcoholics Anonymous Groups. Eight participants took part (5 males and 3 females), aged between 27 and 74, and ranging between 21 months to 35 years in sobriety.

The interview consisted of one main question, which invited participants to '*tell their story*'. A structured narrative analysis was used, which involved five stages: reading and familiarising, identifying narrative tone, identifying imagery and themes, weaving a coherent story and cross-analysis (Crossley, 2000).

Results: Themes

How was shame was experienced?

| Theme | Example quote |
|---------------------------|---|
| Having an addicted parent | 'because of her addiction you know, I couldn't bring people home...we didn't have the niceties of life' |
| Feeling inferior | 'I thought I was different to other people. I thought that other people were better than me' |
| Core shame | 'I just had a sense of shame of who I was, I just didn't think I normal or up to scratch' |

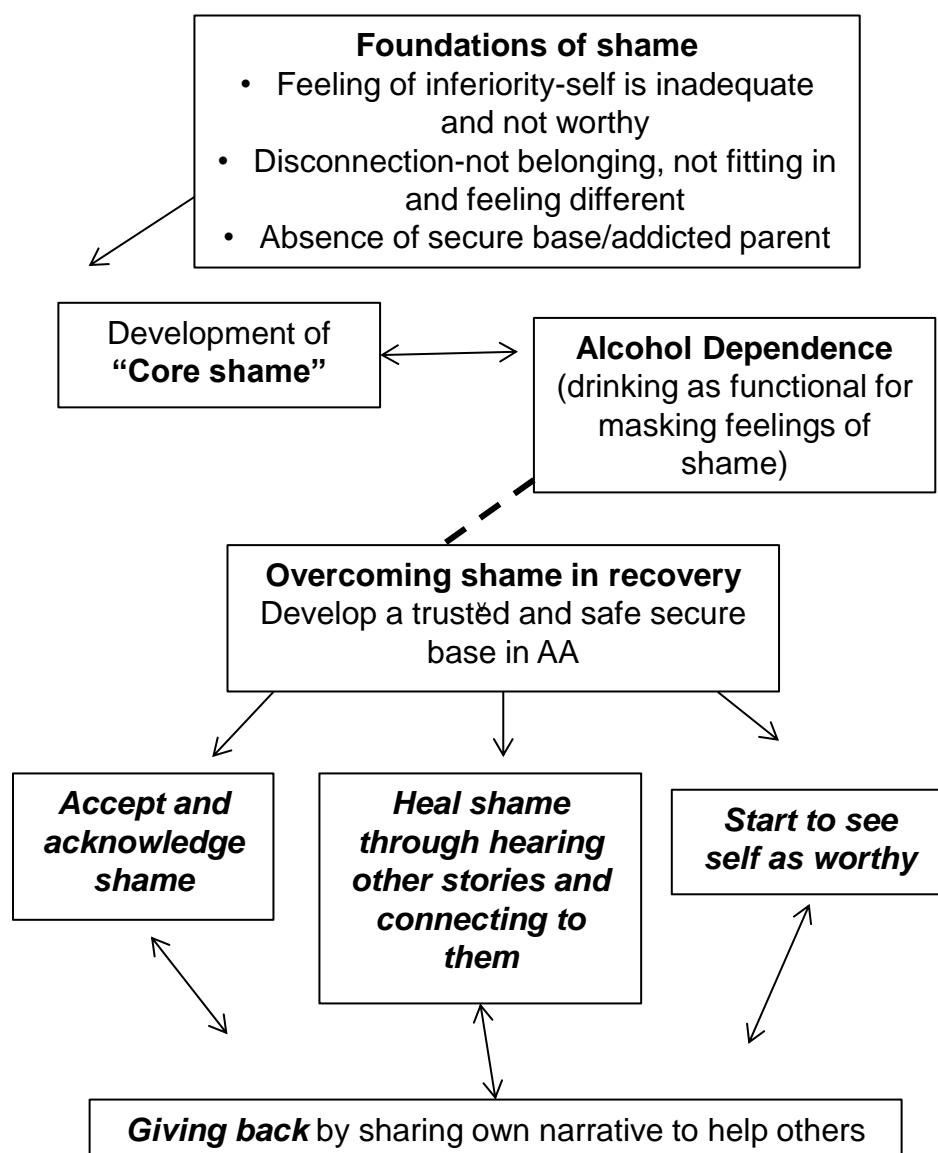
How was shame described during recovery?

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Healing through hearing | 'hearing other people tell their stories...it's not just me that's done that. It doesn't make it right, but it's suddenly not as shaming it's more normal' |
| Acknowledging and accepting shame | 'being able to talk about shame and articulate it It releases it, it ceases to have power over you' |
| Giving back | 'part of my recovery and staying recovered involves passing on and helping others' |

Conclusions

Shame was understood to have a role in the development of alcohol dependence and in recovery. Whilst shame often maintained dependence because drinking alleviated distress, shameful behaviour as a result of drinking did not appear to maintain drinking. Instead participants experienced 'core shame' - a painful, internal experience that developed prior to dependence. During recovery, participants reported the importance of acknowledging these experiences in a safe space that allowed them to construct an understanding of their shame and subsequently heal it.

Results: A Proposed Model of Shame



This model was developed to conceptualise shame, as described in the narratives.