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Making space for solidarity: The transformative role of shame in challenging racialised hegemony

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Abstract

Using an affective framework, this article explores the role of shame in stimulating non-migrant citizen solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees across the UK. Combining research on shame with ongoing discussions of solidarity and influential work by Bourdieu, the productive potential of affect is discussed. This paper argues that shame is an affect capable of creating a “rupture” in an individual or organisation’s habitus. This rupture is evidenced as resulting in structural change in the organisations as they reckon with actions that fall into structures of racial domination. Findings from 15 research interviews with active individuals in migrant justice organisations are analysed in relation to shame and solidarity. Data is from a wider project, utilising participatory methods alongside in-depth interviews looking to understand the work of organisations supporting asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. This paper develops the burgeoning theoretical field of affect within Geography and Sociology, arguing for shame as a useful affect in challenging implicit racial hierarchies in the process of creating transformative solidarity. Shame is an affect too often dismissed as unproductive and, as a result, its use within social movements has been significantly under-researched. This paper argues against this representation of shame and instead explores its power in challenging hegemonic social relations. As an activist researcher, this theoretical development is part of a wider desire to interrogate the nuances of solidarity, to help myself and other activists to understand its importance and formation.

KEYWORDS

affect, racial hierarchies, refugees, shame, solidarity, United Kingdom

1 | INTRODUCTION

For organisations working in solidarity with individuals systematically marginalised as a result of their race and immigration status, it is essential these actors are not perpetuating the hierarchies they are attempting to fight. By setting up hierarchical care/receiver-based relationships to discursively constructing migrants as second-class citizens (Ticktin, 2011), organisations working with migrants can perpetuate racial hierarchies in numerous and unrecognised ways. In situations

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such as these, organisations represent what Gramscian academics describe as a “false alliance” (Mayo, 2015). They present as solidarity but instead perpetuate hegemonic social relations instead of transforming them. In recent years, there has been increasing attention placed on how these false alliances both operate (Ahmed, 2006) and form (Roy, 2014). In this paper, focus is placed on how organisations and individuals may recognise their own actions which play into this idea of a false alliance. Utilising both the work of Bourdieu (1977) and literature on affect, this research explores the affect of shame to understand how it may elucidate actions of organisations or individuals which unknowingly fit into the categorisation of a false alliance. This paper offers a theoretically innovative approach for reassessing the value of shame. It argues that shame is a useful affect that allows non-migrant citizens to recognise the realities of hegemonic racialised structures and, as a result, be able to better act in solidarity to resist them.

The article will first review literature focused on solidarity and affect, with particular focus on shame in relation to the work of Bourdieu. A case study, based on 15 in-depth interviews with UK-based migrant justice organisations, will form the basis for a discussion on the place that shame holds in the formation of solidarity. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the potential for shame to create new spaces of solidarity, alongside a suggestion of shame’s limitations and ideas for future research.

2 | AFFECT AND POLITICAL ACTION

Solidarity is a term utilised by a range of actors, from activists working in refugee camps to European officials evoking solidarity between nations to justify policies curtailing migrant movements (Mitchell & Sparke, 2020). Recent work by scholars such as Featherstone (2012) has built new visions of solidarity by interrogating what true solidarity is and its formation. For Featherstone, solidarity is defined as “a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression” (2012, p. 5). Featherstone, echoing the work of Gramsci (1971), describes how solidarity is essential for challenging hegemonic structures with this transformative potential of solidarity a key element of its definition. When solidarity fails to challenge hegemonic structures, be they racialised, gendered or otherwise, it falls into the idea of a false alliance. In recent years, geographers have called for a better understanding of what solidarity “looks and feels like from the insiders’ perspective” (Sundberg, 2007, p. 145), and for this the burgeoning work on affect becomes incredibly useful.

The affective turn in geography, alongside other disciplines, signals a shift in perspective within academia towards a focus on lived experience and understanding how these experiences are felt within the body (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Affect has been defined as “those forces – visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1). Affect is the embodied feeling we have before it is ordered into familiar ideas of emotion (Gibbs, 2010). For example, before we acknowledge a moment of shame, we feel the affect within our body, as we blush (Probyn, 2005) or withdraw into ourselves (Dimitrov, 2015).

Within all political movements, affective responses to different situations, events and moments are essential in growing and sustaining movements, alongside motivating people to carry out collective actions (Clough, 2012). Previous research has often identified the most prominent affects in various social movements, for example, hope in conducting political campaigns (Airas, 2018). In recent years, the impacts and nuances of affects within social movements have been further explored. Gould (2012) and Russo (2017) explore the importance of negative, melancholic affects such as despair and heartbreak within social movements. For Gould, she finds how the ACT UP movement in the US, fighting for the rights of those with AIDS during the 1980s and 1990s, did not allow space for activists to feel and discuss their moments of despair and how this restriction contributed to the movement’s undoing. Russo interestingly explores the pedagogical potential for negative affects, focusing on feelings of heartbreak, evidencing that when space for certain affects are nourished, this allowed for activists within a movement to recognise their complicity within the reproduction of geographical racial hierarchies present in their city. Similarly in this article, affect is discussed regarding its potential for elucidating racialised hierarchies that activists had not appreciated their role in reinforcing.

2.1 | Shame and (re)building solidarity

Shame is an affect which, in terms of its uses within social movements, has been significantly under-researched. Interestingly, much of the original literature on affect discussed shame. However, this was mostly in regard to the place

of shame within queerphobia or misogyny (Sedgwick, 2003), reinforcing heteronormative power dynamics and the subsequent work of queer or feminist movements in resisting that shame (Probyn, 2005). This important work, both academic and activist, in countering shame has led to an almost dogmatic approach, with some academics describing shame as the “most depoliticising, isolating and disgraceful affect” (Dimitrov, 2015, p. 61). I will argue against universalising statements such as these, looking to reassess the value of shame, often dismissed as only having negative impacts.

In fact, if the environment and conditions are suitable, the present article shows shame's potential to instead have a long-lasting politicising impact on a person. In this research, shame is evidenced as an extremely useful affect, allowing organisations that are falling into behaviours that perpetuate racial hierarchies to recognise these behaviours and change them. This recognition and, more importantly, subsequent change are essential in allowing these organisations to develop genuine solidarity where once they may have been a false alliance.

In situations such as these, it is useful to turn to the work of Bourdieu and habitus (1977). Habitus describes the socialised “rules of the game” to which everyone is subject. These rules of the game restrict those without certain capital – social, cultural, economic or otherwise – from accessing further forms of capital. In doing so, the habitus becomes self-perpetuating. In the words of Bourdieu, it is formed of “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (1977, p. 72). For authors such as Shotwell (2011) developing the work of Bourdieu to understand race, habitus forms part of a wider understanding of how implicit forms of knowledge become entrenched. Shotwell argues that unrecognised, implicit forms of knowledge are particularly impactful in reproducing racialised and gendered categories. Shotwell finds the pervasive ontology and practice of imperialist capitalist societies existing in everyday implicit, common-sense racism (2011). From organisations adopting a “racial habitus” (Perry, 2012), which benefits white individuals, to teachers organising their curriculum to unwittingly reinforce unequal social identities (Cui, 2017), there are numerous examples of the ways in which one's habitus can lead them to, in Bourdieusian terms, “embody [racist] history” (Probyn, 2005, p. xvi).

For migrant-solidarity organisations discussed in this research, power had been hierarchically centred almost exclusively in the hands of non-migrant white individuals. In each case, certain (or indeed all) forms of capital were facilitating these individuals holding this power: from increased economic capital allowing individuals more free time to work voluntarily, to social and cultural capital which designated certain individuals a “safer” pair of hands when dealing with sensitive areas of the organisation such as in financial decision-making. These forms of capital work in varied and subtle ways. Participants in interviews spoke candidly about the fact that their social capital allowed them to bypass bureaucratic processes to facilitate an organisational outcome in their favour. Alternatively, cultural capital may allow an individual to speak in a language and form which befits the hegemonic imaginary of a responsible, efficient individual, thus facilitating their positioning as someone worthy of decision-making power. This was seen most starkly in financial decision-making, where organisational roles administering significant sums of money are most often restricted to individuals deemed responsible or proficient. Inevitably they are within privileged societal positions as a result of their access to certain forms of capital – cultural, social and economic.

Importantly, not only is a person's habitus invisible to them but, further, the “habitus is one of the mechanisms that mediates what is and is not noticed” (Threadgold, 2020, pp. 58–59). Therefore, not only are people not able to notice their own habitus, it prevents them from noticing the behaviour of others around them which have become embedded into societal norms; even if those behaviours may have results the individual is explicitly opposed to. When immersed within the game, it becomes one's complete reality, governed by its own set of rules.

It is at this point of immersion that shame presents a productive possibility in making the rules of the game noticed and resisted. Shame's visceral strength can disrupt the habitus, making visible what was once invisible as “the feeling body outruns the cognitive capture of the habitus” (Probyn, 2005, p. 55). What is vital in Shotwell's analysis of shame, is that this disruption of the habitus takes on a multi-scalar response where, for example, “shame for one's nation can collapse into a seamless application to the self” (2011, p. 93). Shotwell's claim, evidenced in this research, is that shame allows individuals to have a “re-identification in process” (2011, p. 95), where they see how their actions fit into wider structures of racial domination or nationhood. For Gilroy (2004), it is this structural element to shame that allows it to be described as productive, in contrast to guilt, for it is in shame that Gilroy argues individuals can recognise the “brutalities of colonial rule enacted in their name and to their benefit” (p. 108). Guilt, Gilroy argues, alienates individuals from their complicity within structures of racial domination so that an individual instead distances themselves from the consequences of racial-capitalism and its imperial legacy. This research, therefore, develops and builds upon the conceptual work of Gilroy and particularly Shotwell by giving empirical evidence and nuance to the opportunities these authors propose shame can present.

3 | METHODS

Fifteen semi-structured online video interviews, with ethical clearance in place, were conducted between February and June 2021. Each participant was a volunteer, including trustees and secretaries, representing nine UK-based organisations explicitly working in solidarity with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. This case study also draws upon my personal experience of volunteering directly or in partnership with the organisations in the study over the past 5 years. The functions of the nine studied organisations ranged from social community spaces, emergency support for destitute individuals to political campaigning groups. Interviewees were asked to reflect on racial hierarchies in their organisations and moments in which they, or those around them, had experienced a shift in perspective on issues relating to migrant justice. From these discussions shame organically came up, with multiple interviewees explicitly mentioning it. This paper focuses on three interviews, as for each of them shame presented a moment of profound change. Anonymised interviews were transcribed, combined with fieldwork reflections, then analysed thematically.

Both my personal experience, and the ways in which my participants relay their experiences of shame, will be impacted by my positionality. Despite a recent family history of seeking asylum, I now occupy a privileged position within society as a cis white, middle-class male. As someone actively involved with the organisations being discussed in this study, participants may have felt more comfortable discussing emotional, traditionally sensitive topics. Indeed, one participant in this study remarked after the interview that, as he knew me as an activist, he felt more comfortable opening up to me. Despite the obvious benefits of my involvement, primarily in the form of rapport, trust and access with participants, it is also important to be aware of the ways in which my involvement may have impacted the results. Participants will have been aware of my politics and social views and they may have therefore given answers they knew I would be responsive to. For those with shared views, this may mean they felt able to express the depth of their radical political outlooks, whilst for others, they may have felt more comfortable speaking to a researcher whom they considered “neutral”.

4 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION ON SHAME

It really struck to the core for a lot of people who were involved, it provided the impetus for such a deep re-think and such an effort to educate themselves. (Chris, 21/04/2021).

In what follows, the empirical evidence from the interviews is broken down into three key discussions of how the visceral affect of shame manifests over time from anger, displacement to acceptance and structural application. This is followed by a discussion of the individual dispositions that facilitated the impact of shame evidenced and, finally, the individual and organisational changes that resulted from the experiences of shame.

4.1 | Process of shame

The experiences of three interviewees are now drawn upon for whom shame provided the impetus for self-reflection over their involvement in a false alliance. Chris, Craig and Henry spoke clearly about shame in relation to actions recognised as racist following a process by which they or their organisation were “called out” or, as phrased by Shotwell (2011, p. 75), “called to account” by an individual.

When participants use the term “shame” when discussing their experiences, there was profound emotional weight behind their words – both how experiences were described, but also the tone and body language of participants. I have tried to be cognisant of assigning additional meaning to participants’ words beyond their intention. In consideration of this, shame was used explicitly by each of the participants when describing their experiences; for example, “I felt all of the classic emotions ... indignant, denial ... shame and embarrassment” (Henry 10/04/2021) and “feeling a lot of shame, remorse” (Chris).

For two of the interviewees, Craig and Henry, they personally experienced being called out, whilst Chris was a member of an organisation where others were called out. Craig and Henry are both white British, whilst Chris is a British person of colour. In Chris’s interview, the people being called out are all white. Further, the individual doing the calling out in each of the interviews had lived experience of migration. In Craig’s case, he was called out for a specific instance where, in a mailout to garner support for asylum seekers in detention, he portrayed individuals in detention without

agency or dignity. Whilst this specific instance was the cause of Craig being called out, he reflected that his organisation was “not solidarity”. For each participant, their organisation’s decisions were being made for refugees by non-refugees ranging from campaigning strategy to everyday operations. This hierarchical relationship is often discussed regarding larger scale NGO and charity sectors (e.g., Cantat, 2019), where organisations speak for and depoliticise those they are claiming to serve.

In the case of Chris and Henry, calling out resulted from racist organisational practices unresolved because the majority of power in the organisation was held by white, non-migrant individuals. Campaigning and decision-making were carried out on behalf of, rather than with, those impacted by migration systems. This was particularly important as both the organisations espoused an ethos of migrant-led, solidarity work which their actions contradicted. In this moment, the espousal becomes what Ahmed terms a “speech act”, which allows organisations to perform as holding certain values without the material commitment to them (Ahmed, 2006). These speech acts reflect a common humanitarian paradigm in which action is carried out to assuage guilt rather than to create genuine change (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021). For migrant-led organisations in this study and beyond, this is achieved by having individuals with lived experience of migration present in the organisation, even pushed to the front in public whilst their levels of genuine decision-making power are restricted. The moment of shame experienced by the interviewees enabled them to recognise this exploitative paradigm concealed behind an organisational habitus which facilitated it going unchallenged.

In each interview, using phrases such as “struck to the core” (Chris) or “it was a big thing in my life, not just my activist career” (Craig), participants clearly showed the depth of feeling that was invoked from the process of being called out. As discussed, an individual or organisation’s habitus is invisible to them, and in these interviews, participants clearly communicated the power of feeling necessary to make it visible. For Chris, witnessing this process second hand, he describes his profound feelings of relief at not being one of the individuals implicated by the calling out. Whilst this relief is understandable, it does also present a potential issue where experiences of shame are seen as something to avoid. As such, individuals may be hesitant to carry out a process of calling out that may evoke feelings of shame, and for individuals experiencing shame, there is an increased chance of them trying to refuse or avoid these feelings.

In each interview, individuals described a certain amount of resistance following this recognition of their habitus. For Craig, his initial response was anger, although this eventually dissolved into “shame about not being the person who I thought I was”. For Henry as well, he describes how there was “denial” alongside “shame” for him. These descriptions from Craig and Henry show that, whilst shame did cause a rupture in their habitus, this rupture and its impacts were not as instantaneous as the term implies.

In Henry’s case, he and others attempted to assuage their guilt through a series of gestures. Henry described a clear example of this when they gave a letter of apology to the individual who had called them out. Henry, reflects that “those things didn’t actually change that emotional response, what changed my emotions were kind of that sense of things being different now”. Henry could recognise that this response did not feel right; however, there was no definitive sense of where to go next. For Henry, and others implicated in the calling out, their actions reinforcing racial hierarchies were revealed to them, but that did not make resolving them inevitable.

Craig similarly tried to justify his actions to himself as a short-term solution to the guilt he was feeling. For Craig, however, “it took probably about a year or two years of thinking about this and getting it in the end”. His habitus, through which he perceived himself as an anti-racist activist, had been ruptured; however, just because the once invisible “rules of the game” were now visible did not mean he immediately knew the changes needed. Craig’s experience shows the durability of the habitus alongside the difficult process of challenging dominant forms of habitus, even when people want to.

In my personal experiences of shame, the process was similar. Despite the calling out not being as forceful as participants experienced in this article, feelings of shame stuck with me and, whereas initially I had dismissed them, their persistence forced me into longer term introspection of my actions. In my case, this was a result of an individual feeling that I had given less importance to issues facing female migrants. At the time, I resisted this accusation, but shame and its visceral affect periodically returned me to it, allowing me to reassess my behaviour.

What is clear is that short-term responses were not satisfactory due to the structural nature of the response that shame had precipitated. Reflecting on their behaviour using terms such as “structurally racist” (Henry), “white supremacist” (Henry) or “replicating colonial relations” (Craig), interviewees clearly show how this reflection led to them placing their behaviours within wider structures of racial domination. The enduring impact of shame forces individuals to look beyond their own feelings instead of understanding them in isolation. It is this exact reason that authors such as Shotwell (2011) and Gilroy (2004), amongst others, argue for shame as an affect to be sought over guilt. Whilst individuals may look to assuage their guilt with short-term solutions, the productive power of shame comes from its enduring affect forcing individuals to understand their actions within wider structures of domination.

4.2 | Individual disposition

In each interview, one thing consistently emphasised was that the individual who had been doing the calling out was a strong, confident individual. Using terms such as “forthright” (Chris and Craig) or “strong in their views” (Chris), interviewees made sure to bring up their character. The significant emphasis placed on these qualities shows the strength required to actively oppose the organisation’s habitus. Perhaps individuals without such strength of will would have been aware of the racist actions but unable to speak against it. Beyond the required confidence to go against an organisation’s habitus, Henry also makes the point that, if the individual doing the calling out is someone who accesses the service, they may “potentially burn bridges they were relying on” (Henry). For many migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who are systematically marginalised economically and socially, solidarity organisations provide vital, potentially life-saving support, and therefore the individual is putting a lot at risk by calling out the organisation. In these instances, responsibility is being placed onto individuals already marginalised within society as a result of systemic, government-enforced violence. If this is the only way in which shame can be productive, then this should be considered a serious limitation as it continues an exploitative paradigm for both the risk and labour to be placed on the backs of those already forced into vulnerable positions.

Beside the confidence required by the individual carrying out the calling out, there was also a need for the individuals being called out to see themselves as anti-racist. Craig, for instance, explains how he felt at the time “shame, I had a self-image of a confident principled activist”. Linking back to the discussion by Sedgwick (2003), she describes how a precondition of shame is a positive affect. In this instance, that positive affect is personal pride as an active anti-racist. Interestingly, traditional conceptions of shame see it as occurring when “our bodies are exposed as less than human” (Dimitrov, 2015, p. 68). In this research, however, shame is not resulting from the participants being positioned as “less than human”, but as a result of them carrying out the process of positioning certain individuals as “less than human”. Shame is being felt as a result of being the perpetrator, not the victim. What should be clear from this analysis are the limitations of shame. The positive, transformatory potential of shame will be reduced, or completely removed, unless the individual views themselves as anti-racist.

4.3 | Rebuilding solidarity

In the interviews with Henry and Craig, their experience of shame led to changes in behaviour as a result of recognising how, and why, their actions were inadvertently reinforcing racist hierarchies. This experience, which formed part of their own personal development as activists, led them to placing increased value on organisational structures which prioritise promoting lived experience and removal of hierarchies. Henry, for example, reflected how those with more time, due to increased economic capital, had greater decision-making power. This evaluation of the organisation’s habitus was made possible due to the experience of shame by Henry, and others, which made the habitus visible and able to be resisted.

This resistance was achieved in a number of ways: the organisation, upon recognising how power had become concentrated, re-asserted its desire to be a non-hierarchical organisation through the creation of working groups with genuine decision-making power. Amongst these groups was an anti-racist working group, developed with the purpose of holding the organisation to account regarding its anti-racist values. In the time that I was involved with the organisation, I had conversations with individuals who accessed support and volunteered with the organisation. From these conversations, people often discussed how much better this organisation was at listening to the community, and providing them with decision-making power, in comparison to other migrant support organisations.

For Craig, his experience of shame formed part of his development as an activist and, after a few years, led him to become a founding member of an organisation which is predominantly migrant led, of which he is a key member. There was recognition that his position within the organisation and the culture of the organisation was one which would not allow for change. Craig chose to leave the organisation, instead focusing energy on founding a different organisation which prioritised the voices of those with lived experience, with that founding culture staying strong today evidenced by the majority of its executive committee being individuals with lived experience of migration.

In Chris’s interview, he discloses how, once changes started to happen, there was significant support from volunteers.

There was a lot of buy in from volunteers who had signed up for what in name was all about solidarity and being migrant-led but actually up to that point much of that was on paper. (Chris, 21/04/2021).

Within the organisation itself, people were looking for change; however, its organisational habitus had prevented that potential change from being voiced. It was only following this rupture that the organisation could begin to develop the qualities that everyone wanted, but had been unable to move towards. Chris shows the place of shame in working to transform an organisation's habitus that had previously prevented change. The difficult experience of an organisation having to reckon with this moment of shame eventually led to longer term personal and organisational shifts.

5 | CONCLUSION: MAKING TIME AND SPACE FOR SOLIDARITY

Utilising lived experience of activists interviewed alongside my own, shame's power is shown in its ability to cause a rupture to an individual or organisation's habitus, allowing them to recognise the social rules they are following which reinforce the subordinate positioning of marginalised groups. This work brings together theoretical debates on affect with habitus, allowing for potential novel discussions of how people react to different provocations, suggesting the existence of more than just one dominant habitus.

In each of the interviews, experiences of shame had led to a recognition of how their actions were inadvertently reinforcing racial hierarchies. This recognition opened up new space for solidarity, and the organisational changes discussed show how shame ultimately led to individuals and organisations being able to better challenge racial hierarchies in their organisations and beyond. Activists realised that whilst they thought solidarity had been achieved, shame provided a moment which allowed them to realise their complicity within a "false alliance". Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) discuss the need for organisations to make "time for solidarity", in the form of self-interrogation and discussion. Drawing together this work alongside the discussions in this article, it may be useful to develop research around how shame can be incorporated into these processes of self-interrogation and discussion.

The uses of shame, as it is discussed in this article are, however, limited by the fact that they only occur as a result of "calling out" from powerless, at times vulnerable, individuals towards those holding power within their organisations and society. This represents a problematic paradigm, where the risk, labour and responsibility for progressive change is pushed onto those who are subordinated in society. Whilst the potential of shame is argued in this article, if that potential is only recognised through this avenue, then its limitations are profound. Future research would be useful to uncover if the transformative potential of shame can be replicated without the need for vulnerable individuals bearing the responsibility of its elicitation.

Until this further research is done, recommendations for organisations working with migrants would be that a need for shame or calling out can be removed by ensuring that those impacted by oppressive structures are at the centre of decision-making processes. If those who are, more often than not, the ones forced to be doing the calling out are instead given decision-making power, this can move organisations towards being more considered and emancipatory in their approaches.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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