


# 'The fact that she just looked at me...' – Narrations on shame in South African workplaces



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**Orientation:** Shame has been internationally researched in various cultural and societal contexts as well as across cultures in the workplace, schools and institutions of higher education. It is an emotional signal that refers to experienced incongruence of identity goals and the judgement of others.

**Research purpose:** The purpose of this study was to focus on experiences of shame in the South African (SA) workplace, to provide emic, in-depth insights into the experiences of shame of employees.

**Motivation for the study:** Shame in the workplace often occurs and might impact negatively on mental health and well-being, capability, freedom and human rights. This article aims at gaining some in-depth understanding of shame experiences in SA workplaces. Building on this understanding the aim is to develop awareness in Industrial and Organisational Psychologists (IOPs), employees and organisations to cope with shame constructively in addition to add to the apparent void in the body of knowledge on shame in SA workplaces.

**Research design, approach and method:** An interpretative hermeneutical research paradigm, based on Dilthey's modern hermeneutics was applied. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of 11 employees narrating their experiences from various workplaces, including the military, consulting organisations and higher education institutions. Content analysis was used for data analysis and interpretation.

**Main findings:** The major themes around which shameful experiences evolved included loss of face, mistreatment by others, low work quality, exclusion, lifestyle and internalised shame on failure in the workplace. Shame is experienced as a disturbing emotion that impacts negatively on the self within the work context. It is also experienced as reducing mental health and well-being at work.

**Practical/managerial implications:** SA organisations need to be more aware of shame in the workplace, to address the potential negative effects of shame on employees, particularly if they are not prepared to reframe shame into a constructively and positively used emotion. Safe spaces should be made available to talk about shame. Strategies should be applied to deal with shame constructively.

**Contribution/value-add:** This article expands an in-depth understanding of shame from emic and culture-specific perspectives within SA workplaces. The findings are beneficial to IOPs and organisations to understand what shame is from the perspective of SA employees across cultural groups. The article thereby adds value to theory and practice, offering IOPs a deeper understanding of shame in the work context.

'It is no shame at all to work for money.' (African proverb)

## Introduction

The focus on disruptive workplace behaviours, such as bullying (workplace mobbing), workplace incivility and disruptive behaviour (Purpora, Cooper & Sharifi, 2015), intimidation in the workplace (Rosenstein, 2015), perceived workplace discrimination (Gassman Pines, 2015) and other behaviours as summarised by (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy & Alberts, 2007) as abusive language use, intimidation tactics, racial discrimination, ethnic jokes or sexual comments have been emphasised in research. Shaming has been defined as one form of disruptive behaviour (Felblinger, 2008) described as an important intimate emotion that involves the negative evaluation of the self in the context of others (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Negative evaluated emotions within the work context might impact negatively on mental health and well-being. It has recently been argued that

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shame needs to be recognised with regard to its positive potential and as a health resource in societal and psychological contexts (Mayer & Tonelli, 2017; Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017). However, this is only possible, if individuals and organisations recognise the perceived disadvantages and advantages of shame and are prepared to work with it constructively (Mayer, 2017).

Shame is often used as a (negative) motivator in organisations to enforce socio-cultural norms (Stiles, 2008). However, it might not be a sustainable strategy in organisations, due to the potential negative impact of shame regarding eroding self-esteem, self-worth and agency within individuals and organisations (Sen, 1985; Zavaleta Reyes, 2007). Sen (1985) argued in his capability approach that a basic capability or freedom in life is the ability to 'go about it without shame'. The statement has become a key sentence in human development research and freedom of shame has also been argued for in organisational contexts, due to shame's negative impact on mental health and career development (Wittenberg, 2016).

Human development and the increase of capability in individuals and organisations are important goals which matter in terms of creating mental health, freedom, constructive social relations, equality and positive and healthy work conditions. Therefore, it is important to nurture the ability to go about without shame in developing psychological mental health and subjective well-being (Alkir & Santos, 2009) in organisations.

The South African (SA) society suffers from a mental health and a human rights gap which urgently needs to be addressed (Burns, 2011). At the same time, employees struggle with redefinitions of social identities and transformation issues within organisations (Booyesen, 2007) and are prone to high occupational stress levels, ill-health and low organisational commitment (Viljoen & Rothmann, 2009).

The topic of shame, as one of the assumed underlying issues which need to be addressed in SA workplaces, has hardly been researched (see Mayer & Ley, 2016; Mayer & Tonelli, 2017). Shame in the SA society has been studied mostly regarding HIV (Kalichman et al., 2005) and sexual violence (Fleming & Kruger, 2013). Mayer and Ley (2016) and Mayer and Tonelli (2017) focused on exploring shame in SA workplaces and highlighted that shame impacts negatively on individual's personal self-evaluations. At the same time, often shame in SA organisations is used as a strategy to uphold ethics and morals (Mayer & Ley, 2016).

Shame has been studied internationally in the workplace, such as in schools (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2015; Mazzone, Camodeca, & Salmivalli, 2016; Stearns, 2015), in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Burke, 2015; Loveday, 2015) and in clinical or therapeutic settings (Stubbs & Soundy, 2013). Thematically, shame in the workplace is connected to topics of pride and bullying (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2015). Findings show that bullying often results in feelings of shame

which last longer than the bullying itself (Brousse et al., 2008). Shame is furthermore related to the idea of not meeting expectations (Fischer & Tangney, 1995), workplace violence (Somani & Khowaja, 2012), the experience of verbal abuse (AbuAlRub & Al-Asmar, 2013), abusive supervision (Daniels, 2015), guilt (Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison & Morton, 2012) and leadership, e.g. shame in the context of authority (Wang & Hooper, 2015). In this context, it has been argued that shame in organisational and institutional processes occurs as felt shame (signals a social bond at risk), systemic shame (showing disciplinary power), sense of shame (intersubjective surveillance and self-regulation mechanism) and episodic shaming (used to create conformity) – the so-called institutional shame – nexus serves the creation of institutional conformity and prescriptions (Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen & Smith-Crowe, 2014).

Tangney and Dearing (2002) note that shame is a destructive, negative and immobilising emotion that – according to Lewis (2004) – can become enduring, creating negative long-term effects. Research distinguishes shame from related concepts, such as embarrassment, pride and guilt (Tangney & Fischer, 1995; Wong & Tsai, 2007). It is also closely linked to humiliation, the feeling of public exposure and 'unmasking' (Torres & Bergner, 2012). Shame is an emotional signal that refers to the experienced incongruence of identity goals (Mascolo & Fisher, 1995) – therefore the ability of individuals to match their aim of self-definition, how to define themselves as who they are and how they define themselves in the context of the judgement of others (Vickers, 2013). Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite, and Braithwaite (2001) explained the dilemma of experiences of shame in a normative context in which individuals have to either define themselves according to the norm or face possible shaming due to the judgement of others. Because identities are created through social interaction and reconstructions of the self in the (social) context of others (Mayer & Flotman, 2017), shame is strongly connected to the definition of self in the context of others, therefore to identity, the core of a person's character (Davidhoff, 2002). Shame in the context of self and others is defined as a rank-based emotion, highlighting that (for example, in early Confucian culture) shame was instrumentally used and implemented in selected social ranks of society to increase the chances for peace within selected social strata (Clark & Nichols, 2016). Shame is often referred to in the context of bullying and work (e.g. Simons & Sauer, 2013), in African contexts, particularly to stigmatisation at work due to HIV (Department of International Development, 2007) and apartheid discrimination (Bailey, 2011).

## Shame in the global and South African workplace

Shame has been researched in and across various cultural and organisational contexts (e.g. Clark & Nichols, 2016; Mayer & Ley, 2016; Simons & Sauer, 2013; Sznycer et al., 2016; Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017). In various cultures, shame seems to be viewed as an influential emotion that can lead to feelings

of exposure, degradation, situational avoidance or silence and even result in suicide (Bryan, Ray-Sannerud, Morrow & Etienne, 2013). It seems to be associated with violation of the role or standard, the failure to meet (collective and personal) expectations and a defect that cannot be easily repaired.

Shame is referred to in terms of different ways of behaviour. Tantam (1998) indicated that different behaviours might lead to shame and that shame might even be triggered by staring. Often individuals do not enjoy talking about shame and it seems to be an emotion that tends to be feared, avoided or suppressed (Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017). It might be caused by the fact that talking about shame prompts individuals to feel shame, by the complexity of the construct itself and by a lack of a cohesive language to describe shame (Clough, 2010).

Generally, shame in SA is connected to apartheid, upholding apartheid structures that stand for inequality, relate to racial classification to shame (Tessman, 2001) and are responded to through humility, vulnerability and silence (Bailey, 2011). One SA study described shame in highly qualified individuals who need to generate income in low-status security industries (Sefalafala & Webster, 2013). Other studies focused on HIV workplace programmes and feelings of shame (Steenkamp, Von der Marwitz, Baasner-Weihs & Pietersen, 2015) or described how female breadwinners experience guilt and shame in fulfilling the breadwinner role in work–family life (April & Soomar, 2013). Employees' experiences in a slaughterhouse emphasised that butcher's experienced shame when killing animals (Victor & Barnard, 2016). Often, in these workplace studies, shameful experiences were not the actual focus of research, but rather a by-product of the findings (e.g. Victor & Barnard, 2016).

Shame has been asserted as being a frequent undercurrent issue in interpersonal encounters in organisational and social dynamics (Clough, 2010; Nathanson, 1987; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991), even though hardly any SA studies on shame in organisations and workplaces exist. Shame experiences are found in HEI contexts (Morley, 2003; Thelin, 2011) and impact on learning and teaching (Trigwell, 2012). However, research mainly focused on student and learners' experiences of shame (Oades-Sese, Matthews & Lewis, 2013), while leaving shame experiences of employees in HEIs rather unexplored. In the literature, shame is connected to academic failure in HEI students in London (Reay, 2002) and to unsuccessful social experiences in international students studying in American HEIs (Lacina, 2002). Lewis (2004) found that shame and bullying in employees in HEIs in the UK are connected to powerlessness, humiliation, inferiority and withdrawal. Jacobs and De Wet (2015) found in SA schools that educators experience shame when they are bullied. Shame also occurs when an academic career is disrupted or professors become unemployed or underemployed (Williams & Johansen, 1985). Narratives from Latina professors in HEIs show internalised shame because they were members of minority groups in US HEIs (Medina & Luna, 2000). Macfarlane and Saitoh (2008) emphasised that in Japanese HEIs, shame is used as a means of control and discipline, individual self-control, normative

social behaviour and the avoidance of conflict in the workplace, as described above for the Confucian socio-cultural context. However, shame is not necessarily used to suppress potential conflict. It can also be viewed as a health and coping resource if dealt with appropriately on an individual and organisational level (Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017). Shame in the organisational workplace can be addressed, for example, through the establishment of institutional safe places to support individuals in dealing with shame constructively (Ahmed et al., 2001). According to the authors, shame can also be used to transform the organisation and contribute to an improved organisational work culture (Ahmed et al., 2001).

This article therefore aims at gaining some in-depth understanding of shame experiences in SA workplaces. Building on this understanding, the aim is to develop awareness in Industrial and Organisational Psychologists (IOPs), employees and organisations to cope with shame constructively in addition to adding to the apparent void in the body of knowledge on shame in SA workplaces.

## Research purpose and objectives

Relating to the limited research on shame in the workplace in SA, this research asks the fundamental question of what shame employees experience in the workplace and thereby responds to the aim to explore shame in SA workplaces to add to a deeper understanding of the topic. This knowledge can become important for IOPs on different levels: firstly, IOPs gain new valuable insights into subjectively – often negatively – experienced emotions of employees and their thoughts about how to deal with it. Secondly, IOPs prepare themselves for managing shame experiences; not only in terms of the employees' shame experiences, but also with regard to managing shame in the IOP's practice and the consultant–consultee relationship (see Cavicchia, 2010). Thirdly, IOPs can prepare employees in organisations to use shame experiences constructively to build a peaceful, appreciative organisational culture.

## Research design

### Research approach and strategy

An interpretative hermeneutical research paradigm (Dilthey, 2011) created meaning through the analysis, description and interpretation of participant's narrated experiences of shame in the workplace. Utilising qualitative research methods, the analysis focuses on the micro-level of organisations, the employees (Salkind, 2012), aiming at a holistic understanding of the data through thick descriptions (Geertz, 1987).

## Research method

### Research setting

At the time of the interviews, participants worked in HEIs in SA in middle and senior positions. However, they were interviewed on shame experiences in workplace settings throughout their entire work life. Therefore, findings are not limited to the HEI context.

### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Access to the participants was gained through purposeful sampling. The participants were approached by the researchers and invited to the interviews on shame. Talks prior to the interviews on the topic were held to establish trust and contact. The researchers spent several weeks conducting pre-talks and interviews. Post-interview talks were held with several participants, as the topic triggered deeper reflections and the stimulation to talk more about personal experiences on shame. Pre- and post-interview talks ensured that the researcher roles had been well established and led to trustful relationships between the researchers and the researched. Both researchers and participants are employees in HEIs in SA, enabling the researchers to share in inside and outside views regarding participants' work contexts. The overlap in context and roles of the researchers as HE specialists and researchers was addressed through a reflexivity-based approach (McLeod, 2007), which includes critically reflecting on subjectivity and self-positioning throughout the entire research process (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). The researchers also discussed and explored how the researcher and the researched interacted with each other within the context of research (Wang, 2012).

### Research participants and sampling methods

The 11 participants were sampled purposefully, as being information-rich regarding the research objective. The sample comprised a diverse group of men and women from four race groups, as defined in the Employment Equity Act (Department of Labour, 1998), and included four white, two mixed race, two Indian and three African participants.

### Data collection methods and recording

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews in English. After individual discussions with participants about the project, seven final interviews were conducted face-to-face in the workplace, which were then recorded and transcribed verbatim. Four participants responded to the research questions in writing. Participants were asked three main questions relating to shame experiences in their workplace: 'What does shame mean to you?', 'Please define shame from your perspective' and 'Please narrate a shameful situation that you have experienced in the work context', as well as some biographical data. Data were stored electronically.

### Strategies to ensure data quality and integrity

The research was based on defined research ethics throughout the entire research. Research quality criteria included (according to Tracy, 2010), the definition of the 'worthy topic', rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics and meaningful coherence. During the research process, data quality was further ensured through informed consent, anonymity, rigorous analysis, constant comparison of data and the research topic throughout the analysis (Charmaz, 2011) and participants' voluntarily participation. Intersubjective validation – that means the

discussion of the various stages and outcomes of the process of analysis during different points in time of the research process – was conducted throughout the research study (Yin, 2009). The inter-validation process amongst the researchers included pre- interim and post-conversations about the research and its process and the observations from within the fields contributed to the integrity of the study.

### Data analysis

The researchers used content analysis (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006, pp. 322–326), which offered an accessible, theoretically flexible approach to analysing the data on shame, while aiming at understanding the phenomenon researched from a contextual point of view (McLeod, 2001). The researchers firstly developed themes, followed by the development of categories and codes, using an open coding approach (Mayring, 2010). Data were analysed by hand on paper and using Microsoft Word to construct tables for themes, categories and codes. Two of the three researchers were involved in the data analysis process, while the third researcher was mainly involved in the interpretation of findings. All procedures followed were aimed at ensuring quality data criteria, as described above, in data sampling and interpretation.

### Reporting style

Findings are reported in a qualitative reporting style, presenting in-depth information and data-rich excerpts of the interview transcriptions.

## Results

The study provides findings on the biographical data (Table 1) of the 11 participants. All participants, except one, were SA citizens. Five participants speak Afrikaans, three speak African languages and three speak English as their mother tongue. Six male and five female individuals participated, including three lecturers, six professors, one director and one administrative coordinator, ranging between 40 and 61 years of age.

Table 2 shows that 9 out of 11 participants relate to the topic of shame in the workplace. They refer to various shameful experiences they have lived through while working in different organisations. One African male lecturer highlighted that he did not want to talk about shame, although he had agreed to attend the interview on the topic. One female Afrikaans-speaking professor highlighted she had not perceived shame in the workplace. She would therefore rather relate shame to childhood experiences and the private realm. The interview is not evaluated in the context of this article as it does not refer to shame in the workplace. The other nine participants openly spoke about shame in the workplace, some of them relating to different incidents in different workplaces.

In the following section, deeper insights into emic perspectives of some of the participants are provided.



**TABLE 1:** Demographic information.

| No | Sex    | Age | Mother tongue | Cultural background†  | Nationality   | Position in organisation‡  | Highest level of education |
|----|--------|-----|---------------|-----------------------|---------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1  | Male   | 48  | Afrikaans     | Christian             | South African | Lecturer                   | Masters                    |
| 2  | Female | 46  | Afrikaans     | Afrikaans             | South African | Professor                  | PhD                        |
| 3  | Male   | 57  | Afrikaans     | Afrikaans             | South African | Professor                  | DPhil                      |
| 4  | Male   | 42  | Arubakati     | Congolese             | Congolese     | Lecturer                   | PhD                        |
| 5  | Male   | 52  | Tswana        | African               | South African | Lecturer                   | Master                     |
| 6  | Male   | 61  | Afrikaans     | Dutch Reformed Church | South African | Professor                  | PhD                        |
| 7  | Male   | 61  | Afrikaans     | Dutch Reformed Church | South African | Professor                  | PhD                        |
| 8  | Female | 54  | English       | Indian                | South African | Director                   | PhD                        |
| 9  | Female | 43  | N Sotho       | Sepedi                | South African | Professor                  | PhD                        |
| 10 | Female | 40  | English       | Indian                | South African | Administrative coordinator | Matric                     |
| 11 | Female | -§  | English       | South African         | South African | Professor                  | PhD                        |

†, The participants were asked to comment on which culture they belong to. 'Culture' was not a predefined concept. The participants were free to associate their 'culture of belonging' and thereby subjectively referred to differently defined cultures, such as religious cultures (e.g. Christianity), language-based cultures (e.g. Afrikaans), national cultures (e.g. Congolese), ethnic cultures (e.g. Sepedi) or racially/culturally based cultures (e.g. Indian); ‡, Positions as indicated by the participants. The positions indicated might include shades of these positions (e.g. junior and senior lecturers, associate, assistant and full professors); §, Not provided.

**TABLE 2:** Shame at the workplace.

| Theme                      | Category  | Work context  | Diversity markers†     |
|----------------------------|---|---|------------------------|
| Experience of loss of face | Loss of (professional) face of self in front of others  | Military (P1)‡  | Mixed race male        |
|                            |   | Consultancy company (P1)                                    | Mixed race male        |
|                            | Loss of (professional) face of colleague in front of others                                   | Medical company (P10)                                       | Indian female          |
|                            |   | Consultancy company (P1)                                    | Mixed race male        |
| Mistreatment by others     | Maltreatment by superior  | HEI (humiliation & suicide) (P9)                            | African female         |
|                            |   | Manufacturing (sex at work) (P9)                            | African female         |
|                            |   | Medical company (P10)                                       | Indian female          |
|                            | Disrespectful treatment of colleague in front of others                                       | HEI (work priorities) (P10)                                 | Indian female          |
|                            |   | HEI (superior locks office) (P10)                           | Indian female          |
|                            |   | HEI (screaming) (P4)  | African male           |
| Work quality               | Accusation of low work quality  | HEI (staring) (P11)   | Mixed race female      |
|                            |   | HEI (P1) (perform)  | Mixed race male        |
|                            |   | HEI (P2) (perform)  | White Afrikaans female |
| Exclusion                  | Exclusion from 'the elite' based on (sex, race, gender, personal issues)                      | HEI (P9) (perform)  | African female         |
|                            |   | HEI (P6) (outsider)   | White Afrikaans male   |
| Lifestyle                  | Shame due to being questioned about personal lifestyle at work with connection to performance | Private sector company (life bullying) (P7)                 | White Afrikaans male   |
| Intra-psycho-logical shame | Expected failure of performance   | HEI (P8) (discrepancy of inner view and outer expectations) | Indian female          |
| No talk about shame        | Has experienced shame, but does not want to talk about it                                     | HEI (P5) (shameful to talk about shame)                     | African male           |
| No shameful experience     | Never experienced shame in the workplace  | HEI (P2) (shame belongs into the private realm)             | White Afrikaans female |

†, These so-called diversity markers (here including race group and gender) were self-reported by the participants and categorised and named by the researchers as diversity markers; ‡, P1 means, for example, participant 1.

The findings are structured according to 8 themes, the 10 categories analysed and the codes which relate to shame in the specific work context (see Table 2).

## Loss of professional face of self in front of others

P1 refers to the loss of face in the military context which led to a very shameful experience:

'I was in the military. I was part of the peacekeeping force or a training exercise which was conducted in the Northern Cape. So I was the industrial psychologist that was attached to this specific battalion (...)' [P1, male, Lecturer]

'On this specific day, the commanding officer could not make it for this visit, so he asked the pastor and myself to go and visit the battalion. The pastor said his prayer and then asked if I also want to say something. Wow! I would take this opportunity to tell them also about the fact that I also picked up certain things as a psychologist in terms of how tentative our soldiers were when they had to engage the enemy. But I was not aware that many of them were not happy with this negative feedback I had given

to them. Some of them complained to the platoon sergeant, the news was communicated to the officer commanding off the battalion and on the morning when I returned in a good mood, he just said to me, 'come here I want to speak to you'. He pulled me aside, in hearing distance of everybody and people could actually hear he was scolding me, how dare I break the morale of the soldiers: I'm actually here to motivate people, but actually destroying [it]. I felt so shocked of hearing this and that he is attacking me in public (...) I could actually feel my shoulders going down and my head dropping, but then the next moment I was filled with rage. I said to him how dare you speak to me like that and I will go and speak to them but not to go and apologize as you said, but I will definitely go and speak to them, you know, he just walked away and did not say anything. In my rage I went to the sergeant major of the brigade and I said to him I want to speak to the troops right now. And he looked to me not quite sure. He was trying to find the officer commanding, he pulled all of them together and then I attacked them, but I was trying to explain why I had said what I said. From that day onwards he actually excused me from his order group. He said I was no longer welcome to attend these meetings and the exercise was still going on for three weeks. So I was lying there in my tent not

doing anything. But sometimes I still think about that experience and how I felt (...). There was this mixture of embarrassment, I felt humiliated, I felt ashamed and embarrassed. (...) I wrote the experience in a report, but I never spoke about my feelings and emotions and what I was thinking at the time.' [P1, male, Lecturer]

The participant referred to one of his most shameful experiences as an I/O psychologist, encountered in the male-dominated workplace of the SA military. The participant described his emotions intensely as firstly feeling depressed and sad, then depression turned into rage. The shame he experienced was a combination of embarrassment and humiliation. Interestingly, he kept the situation to himself apart from capturing the details in a report and never spoke about his feelings, but still thinks about the situation after many years. The situation shows that the narrator was shamed twice, by the superior shouting at him in front of others and secondly, by being excluded from meetings.

The same participant (P1) narrated another incident in which he felt ashamed due to not supporting a colleague who was criticised harshly in public in a different and consultancy-related work context. The shame experienced on behalf of the colleague was closely related to the self, as shame for the criticised colleague transformed into self-shame.

An Indian female explained that she felt ashamed by losing face in a communication situation at work. In this situation, she did not feel respected and treated according to her position held in the professional team (P10, South African female, 40 years, Administrative Coordinator).

An African female, South African female, 43 years, Northern Sotho and Sepedi background, Professor with a PhD (P9) narrated two different incidents in which she felt ashamed of herself and of others in two different work contexts. One of the narrations described how a colleague was repeatedly humiliated in meetings and who finally committed suicide. The participant recalled that in her opinion, the suicide was directly related to the shaming of the colleague in front of others repeatedly and over an extended period of time.

She also described another incident at a different employer:

'My first job was in a manufacturing organisation; I was the EAP manager. My first case was a woman caught sleeping with another colleague at the workplace. Being young and just coming out of university, entrusted with such a responsibility, the first case, I was told this incident that happened and the shame, you know, that I, we, went through ... because she was a woman and I identified myself with her. Ever since they were asking gory details in terms of what happened. So it was very humiliating and embarrassing looking at the age group, because the age group was the two employees (...) were more like my mother's and my father's age. This was even embarrassing, because – in our culture – you do not talk to an older person about sex like [you do when] talking to your peers. You are crossing boundaries and now I am in a role of a manager having to deal with a situation!' [P9, female, Professor]

Shame was experienced by the participant, as she had to confront a more mature woman in the workplace about a very sensitive issue. It was difficult for her as she psychologically identified with the colleague being an African woman in the workplace even though the woman was older than her. Dealing with irresponsible sexual behaviour at the workplace as a young employee from university made it difficult for her to confront the older woman. Adding to her own shame of having to deal with such a delicate issue was her own cultural background of respect as a young woman towards an older woman.

### Mistreatment by others

One Indian female (P10) described three different situations in two different work contexts when she felt shamed by her superior. In the first case her superior treated her disrespectfully and used personal information with management to discredit her. In the second scenario, now in an HEI, the participant felt shamed by her superior who in one instance confronted her about her work priorities and subsequently locked her into her office to work and focus.

A mixed race female felt ashamed being stared at:

'I was sitting in a meeting and in the meeting I made a suggestion to a very senior colleague and all she did was stare at me in this meeting with like ten people. I did not know what happened. I had no clue what was happening and in that moment I was shamed and feeling shame. (...) I can tell you what happened in this situation, but I cannot tell you what I felt, what for me was bad. Thought I was making a logical interaction with her and a useful comment and she ... just looking at me was a total disregard of me and she was looking at me and my experience was in an angry fashion. The fact that she just looked at me with all my colleagues! Seeing this was also what was shameful about this and the fact that she was senior was also shameful. What for me is interesting: at some point afterwards she phoned me and apologised to me which also said to me that something really happened there (...) I think that people often want to be angry with black people but they think they can be easier angry with me than black people and that has to do with what happens in the country and that has to do with how I am positioned in the country.' [P11, female, Professor]

'So something there happens for me that I get that anger, that shame. It is almost as if I have to be quiet – having to be quiet is my issue in the world. Maybe I play shame out in that way. And nobody reacted to me and that is the other thing: it was a white woman, a white senior woman.' [P11, female, Professor]

The participant tried to participate in a meeting of senior people and make a contribution. However, while talking she became aware that her white senior colleague just 'stared at' her in silence and did not respond verbally. She also became aware of others staring at her while she tried to contribute. The feeling of being stared at created shame and she experienced rejection as a person and her views. Being a black woman and who later got an apology from her white senior colleague made her bitter and also aware of the cultural 'angriness' towards blacks in meetings where there are mostly white people. The participant relates her shame

experience to the topic of race between her white, senior colleague and herself as a black, junior person.

### Shame and work quality

Three individuals from different cultures referred to shame they felt when not delivering quality work, did not perform well or when their performance had not been respected or recognised (P1, P2 and P9). P1 emphasised that he felt ashamed when he did not perform up to standard, while P2 and P9 both felt ashamed in performance discussions when both were downgraded by their superiors. P2 also felt ashamed of not being acknowledged. P9 narrated that she felt ashamed and disappointed and that she could not stop crying for the rest of the day in her office, as well as in front of her colleagues.

### Shame through exclusion

A white Afrikaans-speaking male (P6) experienced shame in the workplace when he felt excluded and rejected from certain 'elite' communities in the academic context that he did not describe in detail. His experience of out-group status-related to diversity issues, such as gender, age and race which made him feel ashamed of himself.

### Lifestyle

A white male Afrikaans-speaking participant felt ashamed when his work performance was linked to his personal lifestyle and questioned (P7):

'As a young newly appointed employee working in the private sector, I was called in by my supervisor and questioned about information he received regarding my private life. He apparently received an anonymous telephone call from a person telling him that I mix with the wrong kinds of people and that my behaviour, attitudes and lifestyle should be questioned and that it might impact on my work performance. I was highly embarrassed, unsettled and drowned in shame, devastated that another person, or life, could be so cruel towards me. I could not cope well with this unexpected confrontation and did not even have the courage of conviction to defend myself or even to establish facts there and then of what it was all about. After a week, I [though] established that the specific person, who was apparently jealous of me, fabricated data and tried to drag my name through the mud in the work context. I reported my findings to my supervisor, but did not know if he believed my version and facts. That resulted in an uneasy feeling every time we were together. This shameful incident left a big scar on my self-confidence as young employee. It was a relief when I was eventually employed by another organisation. Although long forgotten, it is still a haunting shameful experience I had to go through, although not directly created by my own behavioural mishap or self-inflicted negligence.' [P7, male, Professor]

The participant felt ashamed by accusations made by an anonymous person to his direct supervisor. Being young and driven in a new organisation, he felt ashamed that his personal lifestyle, such as choice of friends, might be linked to his work performance. He questioned the motives of

others and even life itself and could afterwards never establish sound trust with this supervisor or even management, as he was not sure to what extent the rumours were still held against him.

### Intra-psychological experienced shame due to expected failure

An Indian female participant (P8) felt ashamed due to the idea that she would fail in what she wanted to express in a public meeting. She also felt ashamed for feeling she was unprepared and that her talk was not up to standard. However, she received appreciative feedback and recognised that her own 'critical voice' shamed her and that the 'shaming' process she had to go through was based within herself and her self-criticism (P8).

## Discussion

### Outline of the results

As highlighted in international research on workplace behaviour (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007), shame is an underlying issue for many participants with regard to workplace experiences and interpersonal relationships within organisations (Clough, 2010; Nathanson, 1987; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991). This study shows that SA employees experience disruptive behaviour and shame in their workplaces in various ways on intra- and interpersonal levels and embedded within the social dynamics of the specific work contexts.

Participants of the study highlighted that they could talk about shame in the workplace (except two participants) and that they felt relatively comfortable to talk about it (see Felblinger, 2008). Shame, as addressed in this study, was mainly experienced as a negative, intimate and strong emotion of evaluating the self in the context of (imagined) others (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tracy & Robins, 2004), not (yet) as a health resource as suggested by Vanderheiden and Mayer (2017).

Shame in SA workplaces is related to topics such as loss of face, mistreatment by colleagues, (lack of) work quality and performance evaluation, experiences of exclusion and lifestyle. Findings show that many of the experiences were linked to questions around social ranks (Clark & Nichols, 2016), as in the context of performance evaluation, work quality, exclusion and differences in lifestyles (Simons & Sauer, 2013). Findings also show that shame is connected to experienced incongruence of identity goals (Mascolo & Fisher, 1995), especially in the context of the creation of employee identity, based on work quality and negative evaluations of superiors, or expected standards and evaluations of superiors or colleagues. When superiors' judgement and evaluations (Vickers, 2013) did not meet the self-constructed identity of employees (or were at least not expected to do so intra-psychologically), shame was rife. Participants mostly described shame as an enduring, negative, long-term effect emotion (Lewis, 2004) and

highlighted that years after shameful incidences often popped up again or were remembered with re-occurring feelings, while having almost never talked about it to others, as described in the military context or with regard to lifestyle accusations. All of the narrated shame incidences emphasised that the feeling of public exposure and being 'unmasked' were humiliating (Torres & Bergner, 2012). Narrations showed that shame experiences had a traumatic and long-term effect on a person and needed in-depth self-identity work. Besides the strong feelings (re-)experienced, shame was also strongly connected to self-definitions and the question of who the person is in terms of his/her identity core (Davidhoff, 2002). Shame experiences led, according to the participants, to reflection and redefinitions of the self and to crossroads where individuals had to rethink their core identity aspects and values.

In several cases, shame was caused by the violation of a role or standard or failure to comply with expectations (Bryan et al., 2013), such as intra-psychological shame, lifestyle, exclusion, work quality, mistreatment of others and experiences of loss of face. In one mentioned case, shame was experienced due to staring, as described in Tantam (1998). This shows that shame refers to various behaviours (Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017) and not only to verbal abuse, as mentioned by Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007), but also to other kinds of behaviour (Felblinger, 2008; Tantam, 1998) which include non-verbal behaviour that are experienced as shaming. These shame experiences may also be linked to suicide as narrated in this article and found in the literature (Bryan et al., 2013).

The findings do not relate explicitly and directly to shame based on previous apartheid experiences or spill-over effects from apartheid as mentioned in the literature (Bailey, 2011). It could be due to participants' focus on work, performance, achievement and work ethics in a professional context, rather than relating shame experiences to the historical and previous political system and its current impact. Race as a shame issue, as mentioned by several authors (Grote, Oliver & Rochecouste, 2014; Tessman, 2001), as well as issues of minority status (Medina & Luna, 2000) only played a role with regard to shame experiences in a mixed race woman who was stared at by a white colleague in the workplace. A line, however, towards apartheid has not been drawn in this event. None of the participants said that their shame experiences were directly caused by racial or apartheid-related experiences; however, one Congolese participant referred to the fact that he was a 'foreigner' and therefore being treated disrespectfully which made him feel ashamed. For him, shame experiences were related to the experience of exclusion and marginalisation, but not based in apartheid-related situations, but rather based on the fact that he is non-SA.

In this study, typical SA-related shame topics, such as HIV (Kalichman et al., 2005) and sexual violence (Fleming & Kruger, 2013) were not narrated. Participants described 12 shame experiences from HEI contexts and seven other

work contexts. Although not mentioned directly, shame was indirectly connected to experiences of bullying (as in Brousse et al., 2008) across contexts, as in the lifestyle narration or in the exclusion narration. As Fisher and Tangney (1995) emphasised, shame in most of the cases are related to feelings that a person cannot meet the expectations, as in the narration on intra-personal shame in which it is expressed directly. Shame was also narrated in the context of authority (Wang & Hooper, 2015), when a young, inexperienced IOP had to act in an authoritative position on an issue of consensual sex in the workplace, or in the case of work quality and inter-psychological shame. Shame with regard to qualification and job status discrepancies (Sefalafala & Webster, 2013), HIV (Steenkamp et al., 2015) or work-life balance and gender issues (April & Somar, 2013) or animal killings (Victor & Barnard, 2016) did not play any role in the findings, due to context-specific shame experiences and the fact that participants were holding high-status positions that matched their high educational standard. However, findings matched with shame experiences based on failure (Reay, 2002), such as work quality, unsuccessful social experiences (Lacina, 2002), as in the incidents of exclusion and lifestyle discrepancies and bullying (Jacobs & De Wet, 2015) in terms of disrespectful treatment of colleagues and subordinates by superiors, and repeated loss of face of self or colleagues in front of others.

Although previous research was mostly based on studying students, academic employees also experience shame in a similar way as students do (academic and social failure, maltreatment and feelings of loss of face). An important finding, as HEI specialists could sympathise with students' experiences, and may then be able to communicate and cooperate well across professional and hierarchical levels. This refers to the following statement emphasised by Creed et al. (2014) that shame in organisational contexts is experienced and felt: (1) if social bonds are at risk, e.g. loss of faith, mistreatment, exclusion or lifestyle; (2) systemic shame which shows disciplinary power (such as in the incident described with the person locked into her office); (3) sense of shame (e.g. in the category of work quality or intra-psychological shame); and (4) episodic shaming, e.g. as in the described military event or in the situation of exclusion or lifestyle event. All four aspects of the institutional shame-nexus of Creed et al. (2014) could be found on shame in SA workplaces and aim at creating organisational conformity and adherence to prescriptions.

## Limitations of the study

Limitations of this research include the limited number of participants and the specific organisational setting (participants currently working in HEI contexts), not allowing any findings to be generalised to a greater societal context. Methodologically, this study is limited to a qualitative research paradigm with limited methodological research methods applied. Only three overall and open questions



were asked and interviews did only allow for limited data due to restricted time frames of the research project. Theoretically, the literature research on shame was mainly based on Western research constructs confined to previous research and theoretical concepts published in English and German.

## Conclusion, recommendations and practical implications for Industrial and Organisational Psychologists

The aim of the article was to explore shame experiences in SA workplaces. Findings showed that loss of face in self and others increased shame in the workplace, as well as disrespectful treatment by colleagues and superiors and subordinates. Accusations of low work quality can lead to shame, as well as feelings of exclusion in terms of the community; the 'elite'; nationality or race; lifestyle questions; and intra-psychological shame experiences. Shame was connected to organisationally and contextually bound experiences. International research findings in professional work contexts and shame in the SA workplace seem to be congruent, more so than with previous SA studies, which have mainly focused on shame in various societal areas instead of professional and organisational workplace experiences.

Future research on shame in the workplaces in SA should explore shame with regard to diversity markers such as culture, gender, (dis-)ability, age, race and social group belonging in employees of different organisations. After shame experiences have been explored, behavioural coping strategies and reactions to shame experiences should be explored with regard to diversity markers.

Practical implications for IOPs and organisations include becoming more aware of shame as an (underlying) theme in SA work contexts, which impacts on mental health and well-being. Through this study, IOPs should be more prepared to confront shame experienced in SA workplaces and in professional consultant–consultee relationships. Based on these findings, IOPs can work with organisations to create an organisational culture which is not based on shame, but rather on an organisation-wide culture of high self-esteem, self-worth and agency: a culture that would employ the previously described capability approach, based on basic capability and freedom, increasing freedom and human rights in SA contexts.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

P.D. (Adjunct Prof) Mayer initiated the research and is the main author. Prof. Viviers and Mrs Tonelli acted as co-authors and helped with data gathering, writing up of the text, literature researches and finally refining the document.

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