“Shame Must Change Sides”: Embodied Shame and Structural Injustice after Sexual Trauma

Experiences of sexual trauma are often accompanied by pervasive feelings of shame. Survivors frequently describe this shame not just as a belief or emotion, but as something which reshapes how they inhabit their bodies and relate to others. Despite this, shame is often treated as an individual psychological response, rather than as something shaped by broader social conditions. This raises the question of how shame comes to attach so persistently to survivors in the first place. This paper argues that shame after sexual trauma is best understood as both an embodied and a structurally formed phenomenon. Drawing on phenomenology, in particular Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body schema and Lunda Dolezal’s account of body shame, I argue that shame functions at the level of bodily self-experience, constraining agency and contributing the phenomena such as silence and non-disclosure. At the same time, drawing on Iris Marion Young and Sandra Bartky, I argue that shame is shaped by gendered social norms which influence how sexual violence is interpreted and how shame is distributed. Finally, I suggest that understanding shame as structurally produced may open up possibilities for its transformation through narrative and relational practices.