

How Shame Affects Writing

Taryn Miller

Abstract

Shame has a big effect on our lives, yet no one ever wants to talk about it. Dr. Brene Brown—an American scholar, author, and public speaker—who is profoundly involved in researching topics of social work, defines shame as the “fear of disconnection” in her book I Thought It Was Just Me. She also discusses how much shame has to do with our fear of how others perceive us. However, she does not go into the role shame plays in writing. This study stems from Brown’s observations, but it goes deeper by examining how shame affects writers. The responses were mostly taken from college students at UCCS, with a few participants who have already graduated college. These older participants show that shame is universal. This shame manifests when writers have intrusive negative thoughts and feelings while trying to write, including telling themselves they are stupid, bad writers, not good students, etc. This differs from the guilt a student might feel from procrastinating on an assignment or not putting forth his/her best effort. The responses from the survey showed where shame in writing comes from and common coping techniques students use to handle it. Responses varied from the avoidance of writing to needing to take a break from writing when the shame became overpowering.

Keywords: shame; writing; Writing Center

Introduction

One survey participant defines shame as a sense of failure by stating, "I'm worried that what I poured my heart and soul into is actually mediocre and shallow". Others report feeling their ideas as "not good enough", and they often feel insecure about their writing if it is "really personal". Many people who feel strong shame during the writing process learn to avoid it by evading writing altogether. Because shame is considered an uncomfortable and often a taboo subject, it is not regularly discussed in either a personal or academic context. In such cases, the strange subject of shame leaves writers with no real outlet, thus leading to an avoidance of the source.

Some studies focus directly on shame and writing as a broad category, but this paper aims to narrow down how shame affects college students and their writing. If students trying to further their education want to continue to attend university or community college, they cannot elect to opt out of writing, even if they wish to avoid the task due to strong feelings of shame. This is due to the fact that they are required to write lab reports and papers while simultaneously fighting these intrusive feelings. It is imperative for college students to learn safe coping techniques in order to be successful and to grow in the writing process. On top of feeling shame in academic writing, college students also may face additional stressors leading to shame.

Current topics of research like race and discrimination are often linked with shame. Yet as powerful and relevant as these ideas are, they are not always applicable to the majority of struggling college students. In other words, the shame students feel in regards to race is not always connected to shame about their writing. Kathleen Woodward goes into more detail about shame in a cultural context by examining its presence in Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and explaining the ideas Toni presents in her article "Traumatic Shame: Toni Morrison, Televisual Culture, and the Cultural Politics of the Emotions". She also examines Sartre's idea that shame is meant to further one's moral development and in turn results in the feeling of guilt. As stated within the context of *The Bluest Eye*, shame teaches white readers about the horrors of racism and leads to true feelings of remorse (213). Although some researchers exist, such as Woodward, who study the topic of shame, a gap is present in this research, especially when it comes to the college student demographic.

Nevertheless, shame functions paradoxically. Bewes states: “There is nothing more shameful than the ability to feel shame, or the compulsion to write about shame...” (8); as well as (my addendum) sharing what was written about shame. Since shame is intensely painful to feel and to write about, voicing the shame is an even more horrifying thought to most people. Yet, as Dr. Brown suggests, sharing shame with others creates a vulnerability that leads to empathy, and “empathy is the antidote to shame”. Since empathy exists as a resolution for helping students to combat shame, it follows that educators of all types should be informed on how it feels for students to be trapped in a cycle of shame as they write.

As a future English teacher, I need to understand the shame in my own writing before I can understand how shame affects students and their writing. I run into multiple students on a daily basis at the writing center who immediately blurt, “My writing is really bad”. While repeatedly witnessing this mindset, I have come to the conclusion that finding healthy coping methods for college students who struggle with shame is important work. Shame will never be entirely eliminated, but a resistance toward shame can be learned.

I have spent the last year following Dr. Brown’s research and finding other sources to educate myself on shame. Where shame comes from, how it affects writing, and what can be done to build resilience against it are a few of the lessons I am able to share. In her research, Dr. Brown uses the terminology “vulnerability hangover” to explain the relationship between vulnerability and shame. The research discusses the shameful feeling one has after experiencing susceptibility. Because writing is a defenseless process, writers tend to experience shame. Writers often see their work as less successful which causes them to think thoughts such as “I am a bad writer.” Dr. Brown expresses ways to encourage people to acknowledge their shame—even though such practices are frowned upon. After discovering the limits of data on the topics of shame and writing, I sought to conduct a study to learn more about how shame affects writing.

Method

The interviews and surveys collected by numerous college students tested out how shame manifests itself during their writing processes. The survey consisted of eleven questions and was released on the internet. After creating the survey using Survey Monkey, I posted it to my Facebook account and requested that everyone with a few minutes to spare take it—over forty individuals responded. The questions had

predesignated answers for participants to choose from and a box to make additional comments. The specific demographic consisted of many college students at UCCS and graduates from other institutions. The survey took approximately two minutes to complete. The questions asked were age, gender, and general feelings of writing (love of writing, hatred of writing, or indifference to writing). For further details, I followed up with how often they write and if someone were to read their writing, which emotions would surface. To be more thorough, I investigated how the participants would feel if a peer read their writing before asking how they would feel if a professor did so. I asked the subjects if they ever thought their writing was not good enough, and why the thought occurred to them. I included several answers to this question and invited them to leave a comment so surveyors could be more specific. These answers included having a history of being told their writing was not good enough or feeling inadequate after comparing their own writing to another's.

I chose to give them multiple choice options because I wanted to avoid any confusion of what my questions were asking and eliminate no answer due to not knowing exactly why subjects feel insecure in their writing. Many of these predesignated responses were similar to the comments I often hear from clients in the Writing Center. These responses were related to "incorrect grammar/mechanics" (which nine participants chose), "I find it hard to put what I want to say into words" (twelve participants chose), "my writing has been heavily critiqued in the past" (four participants chose), "I feel like other people write better than I do" (seventeen participants chose), and "I usually don't feel insecure about my writing" (sixteen participants chose). I also left a comment box because I was sure that not every reason why students may be ashamed of their writing could be included. I ended the survey by asking the subjects how they coped with those feelings. The responses I let the participants choose from, were the following: "I don't write unless I absolutely have to" (which six participants chose), "I warn people who read my writing that it is not good" (eleven participants chose), "I tell myself to relax and keep trying" (fifteen participants chose), and "I take a quick break from writing and come back to it when I feel better" (nineteen participants chose).

I was careful to never use the word "shame" to avoid misconceptions and different interpretations of the word. Many people do not understand the difference between shame and guilt. According to Dr. Brown, *guilt* is related to behavior (i.e. "This writing is not good"), while *shame* is related to identity (i.e. "I am stupid; I am a bad writer"). Because of this confusion, I concluded that using the word "shame" would not be very

helpful in reaching my end goal. I could have offered a definition of shame and guilt at the beginning of the survey, but I also did not want to influence the way the participants were thinking about their writing experiences. Instead, I referred to feeling “insecure” about writing, which is a more neutral word. The word “shame” has some negative connotations, and I was afraid that particular word would cause surveyors to lose interest in the survey. The recent research conducted by Dr. Brown and others about shame has been groundbreaking because people have not been willing to discuss it in the past. By talking around the issue, I was able to persuade subjects to discuss it openly, even though they did not know the actual topic of the survey.

In addition to the survey, I personally interviewed two seniors at UCCS with different English disciplines. One participant described herself as being fairly comfortable with the writing process, while the other participant compared the writing process to being as painful as childbirth. I asked these participants the survey questions with the interviews ranging from ten to twenty minutes.

Results

As a result of the survey, women are more prone to anxiety about their writing than men. Twice as many women as men took the survey, and the majority of the women reported anxiety while several of the men had the opposite reaction to their writing. In fact, one man said he did not worry about the quality of his writing, and that he was always proud of his writing. I wished I could do an entire study on that one fact; studying this particular individual could yield some fascinating insight on successful coping methods.

I also found positive and negative emotions tend to surface at the thought of sharing one’s writing. The two most prominent emotions were a sense of uneasiness and excitement. Many subjects also reported feeling apathy. I am surprised to see the idea of a peer reading one’s writing tends to cause more anxiety than the thought of a professor reading the writing. I think this may be because students are usually only willing to turn in their written work to a professor once it is fairly complete, while peers often have the chance to read writing before major revisions take place. I would have liked the opportunity to study this more as well.

From the interviews, I found that the shame people carry around with them can become magnified during the writing process. This is especially true when writers who are usually successful have unsuccessful attempts at writing. For example, one

participant in the interview mentioned feelings of shame when she knows her writing is not its best but does not have time to walk away from it. Instead, she keeps writing material she thinks is sub-par, often triggering a feeling of apathy. Any struggles students have are more stressful than normal when a feeling of failure is added into the mix due to a piece of writing that is not “perfect”. To study more techniques on the situation, the participant presence would be a revolutionary edition to this study of shame and writing.

Within the results of the study I conducted, a few conclusions about shame and writing arose. First, I saw a gender difference in negative attitudes towards writing in general. Next, there was a strong emotional response (positive and negative) in accordance with sharing written works with others. Finally, I found shame originates and can magnify during the writing process. Overall, the topic of shame in writing has remained uncharted waters. Among the first explorations of the relationship between shame and writing, this study can be expounded upon widely and does contain its own limitations.

Limitations of Study

I felt limited by the lack of participants of whom I was able to persuade to take the survey and how few interviews I was able to gather. As many of the participants were peers, many of them were English majors and had a great deal of experience with writing. This was a limitation as the sample was not random enough. It would have been beneficial to survey students who were not familiar with the writing process. If I had less commitments and more than one semester, I would have loved to be able to take more time to gather more data.

I also would have loved the chance to observe writers during their creative processes. This was not an option I could have pursued, but I believe that I could have learned much from that type of experience.

Implications for Teaching/ Learning Practice

A good portion of students reported feelings of anxiety at the thought of showing their writing to their peers. Many students also reported a need to walk away from the writing once it became too stressful. One participant specifically mentioned she has to walk away whenever she gets too stressed. In fact, most subjects reported their primary coping mechanism for dealing with shame as a temporary rest from the writing. Thus,

the most common coping method for students was to walk away from the writing and, as a result, students should be encouraged to take breaks from writing.

As so many students reported anxiety at the thought of showing their writing to their peers, the collected data implies that students should not be forced to do so. Instead, students know when their writing is ready to be seen by others. The amount of thought and work placed into one paper over a semester will far exceed the expectations of three or four papers within the same amount of time. This amount of time spent on a paper would allow the student to choose a time where they were ready to share. This study indicates students need time to sit with their writing and severely negative emotional effects can arise if a student is required to show his/her writing to a peer before he/she feels it is ready. If students had agency in deciding when and by whom their writing will be read, it may decrease their anxiety.

Also, a problem arises if peers do not understand how to give effective feedback, or disregard the importance of it. In my experience as a student, peers can offer no feedback at all, or they can be extremely harsh. If students were trained to give feedback in the same way Writing Center consultants are (i.e. making comments such as: "As a reader, I am confused by this sentence" as opposed to "This doesn't make any sense"), then peer reviews would not be as likely to cause students shame.

Students often feel a lot of pressure when writing, and although part of this may be due to procrastination, teacher and peers should remind students to plan enough time in their schedules to distance themselves from the writing if they begin to feel anxious or overwhelmed. Time management is especially helpful when students can stop writing for the night and not think about the writing until the next morning. In an interview, one participant explained her process whenever she is too stressed to continue writing. She specifically mentioned when reviewing her writing after a break, she finds it is never as bad as she first thought. A break from writing can help to alleviate stress and help the writer see his/her work from a new perspective.

When I first began exploring the effects of shame in the writing of college students, there was little information to be found. Rather than viewing these findings as a conclusive research project, I suggest that this study ought to be the first of many. It is my hope that this study will open up opportunities for further inquiry on how shame affects students and their writing.

References

Timothy Bewes, "The Call to Intimacy and the Shame Affect." *Differences*, Vol. 22, No. 1. 2011.

Brene Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me*. Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated: 2007. Print.

Kathleen Woodward, "Traumatic Shame: Toni Morrison, Televisual Culture, and the Cultural Politics of the Emotions." *Cultural Critique*, No. 46, (Autumn, 2000). 210-240. Print.