

## **Women, Shame, and Stigma: Responding to (In)justice Through Zine**

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

**Citation:**

WAITE, Sarah, DARLEY, Danica, EDEN-BARNARD, Julie, RUTTER, Natalie and TATTON, Sarah (2024). Women, Shame, and Stigma: Responding to (In)justice Through Zine. Sociological Research Online. [Article]

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## **Women, Shame and Stigma: Responding to (in)Justice through Zine**

### **Abstract**

Women, Shame and Stigma is a zine that has been co-created by academics to communicate and share the connections and commonalities of women's experiences across a Criminal Justice process. Utilising research findings and lived knowledge of policing, probation, and the prison system, the pages expose the complex continuums of shame and stigma and the gendered nature of systems in inducing and compounding women's experiences. In making the zine available, the authors have two primary aims. Firstly, to share the experiences of women in a creative and accessible format, enabling readers to visualise the depth of stigmatic and shameful experiences. Secondly, the authors hope to highlight the reflexive experience of this process, driving home its value as a method of knowledge construction and as an act of resistance towards the fast-paced, neoliberal academia that shapes our senses of accelerating time pressures (Sugarman and Thrift, 2020). The accompanying text piece examines and reflects upon the trajectory of the zine, with a view to sharing both the knowledge and experience with others.

### **1. Who developed the piece and for what purpose/s**

The zine was created by the authors as a way of exploring and communicating research findings and knowledge on women's experiences of shame and stigma across Criminal Justice processes of policing, probation and the prison in England and Wales. The inspiration came from the recognition of a need to advance alternative forms of knowledge and knowledge expression, disrupting the hegemonic, neoliberal forms found in academia (Henderson, 2020). Originating in the civil rights movement, zines are small, non-commercial magazines that represent a range of subjective aesthetics and are created through DIY techniques. Zines have been shaped by waves of grassroots cultural shifts, including the Riot Grrrl feminist punk movement which cemented their presence in activism (Zobl, 2009). Notably, the subversive roots of zines have been recognised as falling outside of institutional control and their slow process has been used as a tool of resistance against the fast-paced, formatted constraints of outputs often found in the 'knowledge economies' of academia (Sugarman and Thrift, 2017; Bagelman, 2016). Acknowledging the intersecting research themes, we came together to create a zine that bridged activism and academia, adopting zine-making as a feminist praxis (hooks, 1984; Gray *et al.*, 2022).

### **2. How and why it was developed**

The zine stemmed from a broader epistemological wish to open up academia, research and its findings to as wide an audience as possible. Having engaged in creative methods, we have seen the advantages this has brought to the people we are working with and to research (see Rutter, 2024). As academics wondered how often we found the time to do and reflect upon these things ourselves: it seemed important to do so. We established an online space for creativity where the authors came together over two months to develop a zine. What resulted was co-production that not only yielded accessible and collaborative output, but offered a safe space to share the themes of our work in a meaningful way and reflect on the highs and lows of the work we do.

An arts facilitator guided us through the practicalities and ethos of zines via an online workshop (Artizine UK, 2024). Inspired, we created a zine that enmeshed our knowledge, research findings, and subjective interpretation of the shame and stigma experienced by women across Criminal Justice spaces. Similar to the use of visual presentations in research around the social identity of teachers, (for example, Stenhouse and Bentley, 2018 and Maddamsetti, 2024) we found great value in zine-making as praxis as it created a safe space to collectively practice reflexivity and critically reflect on our work. This led to a '(co)construction and (re)negotiation of our identities as feminist academics, (Maddamsetti, 2024), establishing a community of practice, (Wenger, 1998). Consequently, we decided to develop our zine to form part of an interactive workshop at an academic conference with the aim of sharing our research findings and providing a creative and reflective experiential space for others.

### **3. How does the piece achieve its intended purpose**

The zine allowed us to communicate academic knowledge of shame and stigma in creative ways. We acknowledged the difficulties found in conveying the deeply stigmatic and shame-inducing experiences women have within the complex settings of policing, probation and the prison. It expressed a deeper, multi-layered level of complexity, which is often difficult to articulate in 'traditional' written form. Resistance and subversion underpinned our response to women's experiences and our response to knowledge generation, outputs and expression. Through workshoping, rather than implementing a didactic hierarchical approach, we shared zine-making as praxis. This produced critically immersive spaces, focusing on injustice and social harm, and allowing time to reflect upon and centralise the role of institutions in the production of shame and stigma. The time and space given to craft zines brings open and creative responses that actively challenge dominant systems.

Crucially, the zine-making process facilitates the production of equitable and organic forms of knowledge.

#### **4. Give context of the research on which it is based ( including any links to further resources)**

The zine exposes the crucial role notions of gender play in shaping system responses to women which induce and compound shame and stigma. The first page represents tensions between conflicting narratives of victimhood in intimate partner violence (IPV), demonstrating that whilst police officers often require women to conform to their concept of 'victim', victim-survivors do not recognise themselves in this narrative (Tatton, 2023). Survivors of IPV consider themselves to be resilient, resourceful with a significant capacity for love and forgiveness. The shame and stigma associated with accepting the traditional narrative of victimhood often prevents survivors from recognising the abuse and represents a barrier to help seeking and criminal justice outcomes.

The second page reflects upon the voices of women experiencing probation where feelings of shame stemmed from behaviours, such as substance misuse and mental illness, that had developed either as a consequence of, or as a way of coping with trauma (Rutter and Eden-Barnard, 2022). Women withdrew from communities and families because of the shame, which led to feelings of worthlessness and disconnection. Experiences of probation that supported the connection of shared experience lessened stigmatisation, enabling women to confront feelings of shame and feel they were deserving of connections. The following page ties stigma to systems of power and highlights women's experiences of social responsibility (Rutter and Barr, 2021). The page depicts how women subject to probation felt they were under constant surveillance, had external labels attached to their identity, were subject to shameful and stigmatising language through their experiences of criminal justice, playing a game in which progress may be made, but can be quickly ripped from beneath them.

The fourth page exposes women's experiences in an open prison (Waite, 2023). This page illuminates the greys of this prison environment and highlights the implicitly sanitised practices of silence women spoke of, implemented through the institution. This illustrates stigma and shame as a disciplinary power meaning women had to present in a gendered, neoliberal light, afraid of the consequences of a return to closed prison. The zine closes with a call to action, combining academic work alongside the lived experience of being a woman who has been in prison (Darley et al., 2023). This page proposes a reimagining of a system which offers a chance to reduce the shame and stigma that women experience. Suggesting

that by placing empathy at its heart, the zine argues that we can help to reduce some of the harms that systems create.

#### **5. An outline of the ethical procedures followed.**

The knowledge used to inform the zine were generated from drawing together the lived experiences and research findings of the authors across policing, probation and the prison settings. As feminist academics we recognise that we bring our whole selves to the subjective experience of knowledge creation and interpretation. We aimed to harness and embody feminist ethical spaces throughout the zine-making process. We recognised calls for spaces to be collective and slow in resistance to neoliberal academia (Gray, et al., 2022). This was particularly important to us as women often disproportionately shoulder the pressures of this accelerating capitalist culture, alongside the multiple facets of their gendered lives and identities. It was vital that we valued the subversive ethos of zines and ensured it did not become another academic weight. Crucially, we centred values of trust, joy, passion, and love underpinned by aspirations for social justice (hooks, 1994). Spaces contained a common understanding of respect for the might of unpolished, honest emotion and dialogue. Trusted spaces are powerful and ensure dialogue flows, generating a shared passion for creating something meaningful, free from pressure and expectation. Fuelled by social injustice and ignited by feminist ethics and resistance, we recognised the importance of challenging what knowledge should look like as well as the value of the ethical spaces in which this work is done.

#### **6. Accreditation of participants/artists/producers of the creative output (e.g. artist's name, a link to their website and/or social media, if they use it).**

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