



How Shame is Interpreted by Employees of Different Generations

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Abstract. Shame has many different meanings across discipline. Everyone who is coming from diverse backgrounds, can have different perceptions in interpreting shame. When people are working and being employees, shame plays an important role in shaping their behavior at work. This research looks at these differences in perceptions within multigenerational context, namely the Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z. The objective of this research is to obtain comprehensive results by examining people from different backgrounds and ages and understanding how impact on themselves and their relationships with other employees. This study uses a qualitative content analysis approach to obtain a clearer context from the 235 participants. As a result, the employees across generation associated shame with negative actions at work. They feel uncomfortable with these actions, and some of them are willing to make improvement so that things that are considered embarrassing are not repeated. Therefore, organizations can develop a work culture that encourages employees to reflect their shame into self-improvement.

Keywords: Shame · Generation Boomers · Generation X · Generation Y · Generation Z · Qualitative Content Analysis

1 Introduction

Everyone has a sense of shame. This feeling is defined as a strong negative emotion in which feelings from within are felt. Shame is often elicited by social events in which personal status or feelings of rejection are experienced. These feelings can refer to various aspects of the self, such as behavior or bodily characteristics, and broader identities [1]. Shame as an emotion regulates social bonds in humans and has strong associations with various kinds of behavior, prompting some people to call it "the master of emotion" [2]. Emotions in shame are interpreted as negative emotions experienced individual when he or she fails to comply with internalized social rules, including moral rules [3].

Indonesian has various meanings of shame. The Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI) divides the definition of shame into three different meanings. First, feeling very bad (despicable, lowly, and so on) for doing something that is not good (not quite right, different from usual, has defects or deficiencies). For instance, someone is embarrassed because he was caught stealing money or embarrassed because he came late. Second,

reluctant to do something because there is respect, a bit afraid, such as when someone who did something wrong then confesses to his boss or avoids other co-workers after being caught falling asleep during a meeting. Third, displeasure, low self-esteem, contempt. This happens, for instance, when a staff member is invited to attend a leadership meeting or when a friend gives them inappropriate treatment [4].

Meanwhile, in English there are two words that have a meaning similar to Indonesian, namely shame and shy. The first meaning of shame is disappointing or dissatisfying, and the second is discomfort caused by feelings of guilt or shame because of one's own bad behavior. Meanwhile, shy is interpreted as a feeling of nervousness and discomfort, and shyness with other people [5].

A person's background has a big role in forming shame, for example ethnicity and religion. The various ethnic groups in Indonesia give different meanings to each individual group. In the cultural context, there are two fundamentally different meanings of shame. First, associating shame with self-esteem, family honor and dignity. This interpretation is in line with the three definitions of shame in the KBBI, namely displeasure, low self-esteem, humiliation, and so on. This perspective usually applies to people in eastern Indonesia such as South Sulawesi and Sumbawa Besar [6].

Meanwhile, ethnic groups in western Indonesia tend to interpret shame as adherence to moral values or manners that apply in that society, such as the Javanese and South Sumatran tribes [7]. This is in line with the meaning of shame in other Asian countries such as the Philippines and Korea, which associate it with feelings of inferiority and discomfort over the guilt and stigmatization it has received. Associating shame with moral values is a common thread with its meaning according to Islam and Christianity, commensurate with the second definition of shame from KBBI, in the form of a feeling of reluctance or fear of violating religious orders.

The consequences of shame are unique, therefore their meaning within organizations are important. In contrast to other types of emotions, shame has a special ability to motivate changes in self. It plays an important role for employees who experience shame and their organizations. Moreover, shame has a wide variety of behavioral effects and is sometimes less well understood than other emotions. This makes many parties emphasize the need to determine what factors influence them so that organizations can effectively utilize this embarrassment into a more functional reaction. Understanding the meaning of shame is very important because its role is directly related to work, such as performance results and ethical behavior [8].

Shame is common in the workplace with all the organizational dynamics that occur. Positively, shame serves to remind us of our values and ensure that we behave appropriately. Shame can become negative when it enters into interpersonal relationships, triggered bullying, scapegoats, demotivation, self-esteem, and reducing pride and loyalty to the organization. Therefore, understanding how shame works in organizations may be useful for leaders [9].

How shame is managed within an organization can have a different impact on employee motivation. If performance is the main indicator in achieving goals, employees who tend to be embarrassed will be afraid that if they fail later they will feel humiliated. On the other hand, if self-development is the orientation, then employees can focus more on the process of doing the task, not the result, so that they are more likely to succeed.

The existence of motivation to avoid embarrassment encourages them to be able to show their self-quality [10].

In understanding shame in organizations, it is also necessary to look at the perspectives of different generations of employees. Each generation has a different approach to work and different preferences regarding the workplace they want (11). Multigeneration may provide a different perspective in interpreting shame. A study states that there are significant differences in emotions of shame and guilt between the older generation and the younger generation in terms of situations related to self, family and work (12).

As it is important to understand shame in organizations, this research was conducted to look more deeply at how employees of all ages in Indonesia interpret shame in their workplace. This study uses a qualitative approach to understand the perspectives of the Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z in interpreting shame with open questions so that the context of their responses could be analyzed.

2 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method. This method is used to obtain contextual analysis results on the meaning of shame in the workplace by employees from different generations. Qualitative research is used to explore and find out the understanding of human problems in interpreting things [13].

This research uses qualitative content analysis, this technique is used to analyze answers to questionnaires with open questions, interview transcripts, and group discussions [14]. The use of this qualitative content analysis technique provides ample space to see the overall context of the participant answers, so that there is an opportunity to get unexpected findings. Researchers use this method according to their objectives to identify categories or themes in a text [15].

The stages of qualitative content analysis used, starting from asking open questions to interpreting and presenting the findings. Through this process, the responses from the participants can be interpreted according to the context to provide flexibility for researchers in interpreting various phenomena from the answers given.

The determination of the sample in this study used a purposive technique, in which participants were selected according to criteria that were relevant to the problem under study. The number of participants is considered sufficient when it reaches a saturation point or the answers obtained look similar even though the participants come from different backgrounds [13].

Participants in the study were those who had worked or been employees for at least six months in Indonesia, were born between 1946 and 2012, and were born and lived in Indonesia. Therefore the participants were grouped into four different generations, namely Gen Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z. These four generations were chosen because they have experience in the world of work. The participants came from various different fields of work, as well as areas of residence and various ethnicities in Indonesia.

3 Results and Discussion

This study was attended by 250 participants from various backgrounds, but there were 15 participants who did not meet the requirements because they had never had formal

Table 1. Interpretation of Shame

Category	Total	Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z	
Do not meet expectation	132	27,8%	30,3%	20,5%	30,3%	18,9%
Make mistakes	112	23,6%	15,2%	24,1%	29,5%	31,3%
Breaking the rules or norms	72	15,2%	34,7%	25,0%	30,6%	9,7%
Do not confidence	41	8,6%	39,0%	14,6%	17,1%	29,3%
Relationship with colleagues	33	7,0%	6,1%	24,2%	45,5%	24,2%
Pride	11	2,3%	0,6%	1,3%	0,2%	0,2%
Physical Appearance	9	1,9%	0,4%	0,0%	0,8%	0,6%
Disinclined	9	1,9%	0,2%	0,2%	1,1%	0,4%
Annoying other people	7	1,5%	0,2%	0,0%	0,4%	0,8%
Get bad treatment	4	0,8%	0,2%	0,2%	0,0%	0,4%
Associated with the opposite sex	1	0,2%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,2%
Do not know, never, does not want to share,	43	9,1%	2,3%	3,0%	2,1%	1,7%

work experience. The selected participants are those who have worked formally for at least six months. Therefore, participants who met the requirements were 235 people. Data collection for this study was carried out in the period January-February 2022. Each participant gave their answers through a distributed questionnaire. All incoming data is then verified for compliance with the requirements of the participants. Research subject.

The analysis process was carried out by interpreting the answers from the participants to interpret their perceptions. The researcher read all the answers one by one, interpreted each ambiguous word with the help of the online version of the Big Indonesian Dictionary, and understood the context of their embarrassment situation by looking at their answers to other questions. For example, participant number 187 defined embarrassment at work as a silly mistake that was made, to another question asking about the most embarrassing act ever committed, he answered when he spoke wrongly in front of other people, but this did not interfere with his relationships with other people because when it's gone it doesn't have any impact. The process of understanding the participants' answers helps researchers to place their answers in the most appropriate category.

3.1 Interpretation of Shame

The majority of respondents feel ashamed at work when they commit a negative action. As seen in Table 1, the two categories that appear the most are unable to meet expectations or feel less competent, and when they make mistakes.

Shame and guilt are both emotions that arise from self-awareness, but they are actually different. Shame is an emotion that arises from a person's self-assessment of negative actions committed as a whole (not just bad actions or behaviors) due to violations of moral standards, thus triggering defensive attitudes and various other reactions as a

recovery effort to maintain a positive self-image [16]. The respondents seem to still often combine shame and guilt.

This phenomenon may occur when employees may anticipate the negative consequences of their unethical behavior and try to avoid it. Shame can act as a moral barometer preventing individuals from practicing unethical behavior within an organization [17].

For Boomers, they feel embarrassed when they have to complete a task but are unable to reach the target as expected (P79). Meanwhile, the majority of answers related to committing violations were due to arriving late or violating discipline.

For Gen Xers, the number of people answering wrong is as much as falling short of expectations. The majority were related to the trust given to them, such as participant number 164 who felt embarrassed when the printer he chose to print the invitations for their office activities turned out to be of poor quality so the results were not as expected.

Likewise, the majority of the answers from Gen Y participants also narrowed to the two categories above. Regarding making mistakes, participant number 160 revealed that he was embarrassed when one time he couldn't meet his work deadline, even though he had promised his boss that he would finish it properly.

Meanwhile for Gen Z, the answers of participants who fall into the category of making mistakes are significantly superior to other categories. The majority of answers related to mistakes made at work, such as participant number 11 feeling embarrassed when he miscalculated employee salaries which caused late payroll at the office.

3.2 Feelings After Doing Shameful Deeds

The shameful acts committed by the participants at work encouraged the majority of them to reflect and want to improve themselves so that this embarrassing thing would not happen again. As can be seen in Table 2, the two categories that appear the most are self-reflection and uncomfortable with oneself or feeling inferior about the actions one has committed.

A person's identity and values will be disrupted by the appearance of shame, when self-concept is associated with social standards and judgments [8]. This encourages employees to try to protect and improve the quality of themselves at work.

For the Boomers, the most significant impact after committing a shameful act is wanting to be better as part of their reflection process. Participant number 37, for example, feels ashamed of himself and his superiors, encouraging him to work hard forward to be better. The second most common category is feeling uncomfortable with yourself. Participant numbers 55 and 56 had the same answer, namely the emergence of bad feelings within themselves due to the embarrassing actions they had committed.

Different from the others, feeling uncomfortable with yourself or feeling inferior became the most dominant category chosen by the Gen Y participants. Participant number 5 felt insecure after doing something that made him embarrassed, while participant number 199 became embarrassed when other people found out the deed. Meanwhile the second most category is self-reflection. Participant number 103 said that this embarrassment made him more introspective so that this would not happen again. This was in line with participant number 101 who was determined to improve his performance at work.

Another interesting finding, Gen Z is the generation that mostly answers normally after doing something embarrassed. This contrasts with answers from older participants

Table 2. Interpretation of Shame

Category	Total		Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z
Self-reflection / Willing to create improvement	61	79%	20	15	13	13
Do not comfortable / inferior	47	61%	13	3	19	12
Guilty / disappointing / Failed	32	42%	10	9	8	5
Apologize	18	23%	1	8	6	3
Avoid other people	17	22%	2	6	3	6
Do not comfortable with other people	13	17%	3	2	5	3
Just normal	12	16%	0	1	3	8

such as Gen X, who is only one person, and Boomers, who do not even exist at all. Participant number 239 considered it normal that he was embarrassed because he was still a beginner. Participant number 25 also responded casually, he felt embarrassed but after that, “it’s okay,” he replied.

3.3 The Impact of Shame on Social Relationship

The most dominant answer category was mediocre or did not have much impact on relations with their colleagues at work. Only Gen Y has a different choice. The majority of Gen Y say the main impact on social relationships is making but they do self-reflection and become motivation to be better.

A small number of participants felt negative impacts, such as feeling their relationship had become tenuous (participant number 25), avoiding friends for a certain period (participant number 11) and feeling inferior when they met (participant number 71).

4 Conclusion

Employees across generations perceive shame in the workplace with actions that are considered negative. The majority feel embarrassed when they cannot meet the expectations of superiors or co-workers or when they make mistakes. Even though they come from different backgrounds, shame can increase the awareness of the majority of participants not to commit negative actions that have an impact on other people and the organization. Therefore, shame can have a positive impact on the organization. This is because after carrying out these actions, most of participants did self-reflection, feeling uncomfortable with themselves and feeling inferior to others. They tried to make this

moment as a learning experience by trying to improve their work performance, so they don't have to feel shame again in the future.

Many shameful acts committed in the workplace do not negatively affect relationships with other co-workers. This is because other colleagues are able to act professionally so that it does not become a mental pressure for the participants. The presence of other employees at work is actually an encouragement to be better so they don't do things that embarrass them.

Companies can make self-reflection as part of the employee's work culture. For instance, by requiring regular 1-on-1 sessions or coaching sessions between superiors and subordinates. Moreover, organizations need to make empathy as a value that must be practiced in the daily lives of employees. With a sense of empathy that is formed between employees, it can create a supportive work environment. Someone who feels shame would not receive humiliating action, but support to be able to improve and become a better person.

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