
Parent–Child Dynamics in Community Conferences — Some Questions for Reintegrative Shaming, Practice and Restorative Justice

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This paper discusses two aspects of *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (Braithwaite, 1989) concerning the parents of young offenders in reintegrative shaming ceremonies. First, the paper tackles Braithwaite's assumption that parents of young offenders are substantively similar to any other participants in the ceremony. Two sources of evidence are drawn upon: psychology literature regarding parental self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989; Coleman & Karraker, 1997) and qualitative observations of 34 community conferences in Tasmania, to suggest that in community conferences parents are likely to feel personally judged by other adult participants and even "on trial". Second, the paper considers the dangers inherent in Braithwaite's assertion that directing shame at parents of young offenders can be conducive to reintegrative shaming. The dangers discussed include the stigmatisation of parents, in some cases critical damage to the confidence of parents in their parenting abilities, and the disruption of parent–child relationships. Ultimately, shaming parents may worsen the environment of the young offender concerned.

In 1989 New Zealand began diverting youths who had admitted to a crime, other than murder or manslaughter, away from court into a community based forum called family group conferences, now generically known as conferences. Conferences usually involve an independent facilitator, a police officer, the youth and his or her parents, guardians or significant others, the victim and the victim's supporters. The group discusses the impact of the crime and then agrees upon a pragmatic solution for the youth to repair the damage they have caused the victim and the community. Conferences were developed in the international backdrop of the formation of "restorative justice", a new perspective on criminal justice which seeks amongst other things the emotional and material reparation of victims, offenders and communities (see Braithwaite, 1999; White & Haines, 2000; von Hirsch & Ashworth, 1998; Daly & Immarigeon, 1998; Bazemore, 1997; Walgrave, 1995).

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A dominant feature of Australia's emerging restorative ideology is John Braithwaite's (1989) theory, "reintegrative shaming". This theory, which sparked the nation's largest sociological experiment to date¹, undoubtedly contributed to the spread of community conferencing into every Australian jurisdiction, although only some jurisdictions explicitly utilise reintegrative shaming.²

Braithwaite's (1989) *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, now a classic text, took the threads of dominant criminological traditions and particular sociological observations and wove a new theory which explained how informal social controls can be used to curb criminality. The theory suggests that shame can be used constructively to discourage criminality when elicited in ceremonies attended by the offender's "community of concern", or significant others, and in the backdrop of an overarching affirmation of the offender. However, the use of shame without socially embedded forgiveness may lead to stigmatisation and, ultimately, increased criminal behaviour.

Notwithstanding the enormously powerful contribution that this book has made to our understanding of crime and productive responses to it, we want to develop some critical reflections on one aspect of this text: the portrayal of the biological³ parents of young offenders. It is recognised that Braithwaite's own position on this matter has changed since the publication of *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (see, e.g., Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001; Harris, 2001); however, precisely because of the weight and importance given to his 1989 text, we feel it is important to pursue what we see as a significant weakness in it.

Braithwaite (1989) appreciates that especially for young offenders, parents are often the most important members of the community of concern. However, Braithwaite's depiction of parents within ceremonies is one dimensional and simplistic: loving onlookers innately similar to any other member of the community of concern other than for the degree of attachment they feel towards the youth. He makes no distinction between the parents of a young offender and any other type of supporter, such as the professional colleagues of an adult white-collar offender. The first half of this paper argues that the especial depth of parent-child relationships differentiates parents from all other supporters. Parents often feel responsible for the actions of their child and hence "on trial" during a reintegrative shaming ceremony. This argument is drawn from the rapidly expanding⁴ psychology literature that describes some of the unique aspects of parenting and its impact on self perception (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1989; Coleman & Karraker, 1997) and the observations of community conferences made during a study under way in Tasmania.

Braithwaite (1989) acknowledges that supporters of an offender may experience shame during a reintegrative shaming ceremony without developing his theory to account for different magnitudes of shame. Far from recognising that people who are intimately bound with an offender, such as the parents of a young offender, may experience a great deal of shame, Braithwaite concentrates on the benefits of deliberately directing shame at "collectivities" (p. 83) — including families and companies. He asserts that the shame directed at collectivities is "often" (p. 83) transmitted to the offender "in a manner which is as reintegrative as possible" (p. 83). It is beyond the bounds of this discussion to consider whether this is true in the white collar setting. However, the second half of this paper argues that

there are serious dangers in directing shame at some parents. The discussion reviews the empirical evidence regarding the impact of negative feedback upon abilities in general (Bandura, 1989) and the correlations between low parental self-efficacy and inadequate and even abusive parenting behaviours (Egeland & Erickson, 1987; Mrazek, 1993). It is suggested that shaming parents with low self-efficacy may not only undermine the aims of reintegrative shaming ceremony but also actually escalate problems for the youth concerned. Implications for restorative justice and best practice for community conferences will be considered.

Braithwaite's Portrayal of Parents in Crime, Shame and Reintegration

This article was prompted by the earnest comment of the father of a teenage youth during a community conference attended by the author. After committing himself and his son to a very generous act of reparation the father stated, "We're not bad people". It was interesting that the father felt that it might be in question whether he and his wife were good or bad and that, from the perspective of the researcher at least, the actions of the son were somehow an extension of himself. This "shame" appeared more intimate, more personal than the portrayal of family shame in *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*.

Braithwaite (1989) devotes much attention to families in his book.⁵ The empirical link between low crime rates among juveniles and attachment to families is quickly discussed and then used to develop his hypothesis that our social bonds can be drawn on to change the context of shame from stigmatising to reintegrative (1989, pp. 28–29). Apart from providing the "most important" (1989, p. 30, see also p. 100) kind of social bonding, families can begin the process of socialisation of children which will be "taken over" by wider society and form the basis of social control (1989, pp. 82–83).

However, it is suggested that when Braithwaite (1989) begins to describe families within the walls of a reintegrative shaming ceremony (hereinafter a "conference"⁶) he does not adequately recognise the tapestry of emotions which families, and in particular parents, might feel. At one point he uses a hypothetical example of a child being disciplined in a caring family as an analogy for reintegrative shaming (1989, p. 56). Does he assume that the father in the analogy — confidently and adeptly dealing with his naughty child — would feel largely the same inside a conference in the presence of analytical, even angry, adults?

Braithwaite recognises that often supporters of an offender, including families, will feel shame in a conference and this is most apparent in the final point of his list of reasons why and how shaming works:

The effectiveness of shaming is often enhanced by shame being directed not only at the individual offender but also at her family, or her company if she is a corporate criminal. When a collectivity as well as an individual is shamed, collectivities are put on notice as to their responsibility to exercise informal control over their members, and the moralising impact of shaming is multiplied ... a shamed family or company will often transmit the shame to the individual offender in a manner which is reintegrative as possible. From the standpoint of the offender, the strategy of rejecting her rejectors may resuscitate her own self-esteem, but her loved ones or colleagues will

soon let her know that sinking deeper into the deviant role will only exacerbate the shame they are suffering on her behalf (1989, p. 83).

Yet if we look closely at this paragraph it appears that his depiction of the shame felt by supporters is a relatively one-dimensional, not to mention optimistic, construct. Braithwaite gives us two categories of supporters to consider: families, presumably for blue-collar cases, and companies, for white-collar criminals. "Families" seem to encompass all relatives from distant cousins, to in-laws, to parents. "Companies" basically refers to colleagues. Braithwaite intimates that the shame felt by the collectivities are very similar because they suffer *on behalf* of the offender. From the tenor of *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (1989; see p. 25) it can arguably be assumed that Braithwaite imagined a long continuum of relationships appearing as supporters, ranging from strangers/acquaintances on the one hand to twins, parents and spouses on the other.

However, it seems that Braithwaite does not entertain the impact of the unique nature of the child-parent relationship upon the conference dynamics. Unlike any other human relationship, a child represents to a large degree the product of his or her parents' genes, parenting skills, lifestyle and values. For instance, the parents of famous adults are often given special recognition, perhaps because the achievements of the child reflect positively upon the quintessence of the parents.⁷ Conversely, the wrongdoings of a child reflect negatively upon the parents, as vividly captured on film in a recent documentary where the mother of a murderer apologised repeatedly to the victim's parents (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1999).⁸

In a conference countless issues arise that reflect in some way upon the parents. For example, the irregular sleeping patterns and alcohol abuse of a youth raise questions about parenting skills and competency. Poor academic performance may suggest inherited learning disabilities that perhaps embarrass the parents. Or, an apparent inability to empathise with a victim or comprehend the wrongfulness of an offence may mirror the values of the parents or the example they have provided.⁹ Most parents, it is argued, will be quite aware of these and similar "questions" — however inaccurate — that are rising in the minds of the adult participants in a conference.

In contrast, in the white-collar scenario, though the colleague might feel a little embarrassed that the offender was ever employed or that better regulations were not in place in the company, they can feel fairly certain that the problems do not reflect upon their genes, lifestyle, values or personality. There is no such distance for parents. Unlike the professional, they cannot hide behind the corporate veil if their daughter curses in a conference and admits she vandalised a car for fun. In a conference parents' are generally aware that they are perceived to have a very close proximity to the root of the problem. As well as suffering on behalf of their child, sensing their discomfort, shame and fear, it is suggested that parents are likely to be suffering personally. They are not just a part of a "collectivity" that has been "put on notice" (1989, p. 83). They may feel blamed by others in the conference, guilty that they had not prevented a situation, worried that they will not be able to avoid future problems and so on.

The Psychology of Parents and Parenting

An analysis of psychology literature supports the proposition that parents may feel on trial and possibly personally threatened in a conference. In recent years a great deal of research has been conducted into the self-esteem of parents of young and adolescent children (Binda & Crippa, 2000; Coleman, 1999; Seefeldt et al., 1999; Bachicha, 1998; Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Buxton, 1996; Gross et al., 1995; Whitbeck, 1987). Much of the research has built upon the work of Albert Bandura and his theory of self-efficacy (1977, 1982, 1989), which by all accounts has made its influence felt in several disciplines (Gecas, 1989). Self-efficacy refers to our perceptions of our ability to achieve goals or perform tasks (Bandura, 1989). Further development of this theory has settled upon three grades of self-efficacy, which cover every aspect of life: the task level, the domain level and the general level (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). To use parenting as an example of the boundaries of these levels, a father may feel confident that he knows how to feed his child nutritiously (task level), fairly sure that he is a good parent (domain level) and happy that he is a competent human (general level).

Self-efficacy establishes perceptions of our ability, for instance, to cook eggs, to cope with social interaction, or to succeed in life (Bandura, 1989). Obviously our confidence with different capacities impact to varying degrees upon our self-perception. Of the countless abilities, narratives, labels that we can acquire, Coleman and Karraker (1997, p. 47) suggest that parenting, “represents perhaps the most taxing social role encountered in young and middle adulthood, placing significant intellectual, emotional, and physical demands on today’s mothers and fathers”.

Coleman and Karraker (1997) go on to consider the causal relationship between low parental self-efficacy and clinical depression that has been found by a strong body of studies (see Maddux & Meier, 1995; cited in Coleman & Karraker, 1997, p. 68). Whereas one might assume that clinical depression would lead to low parental self-efficacy, they postulate the reverse. Coleman and Karraker suggest that because parenting is so “highly esteemed”, perceived failure can trigger depression in extreme cases (1997, p. 68). More than just a taxing social role, “parenting becomes tightly bound with most individuals’ conceptions of self” (1997, p. 68).

Coleman and Karraker (1997) acknowledge their hypothesis that perceived failure as a parent can help trigger depression will need to be tested (and obviously with carefully constructed designs). Nevertheless, their perspective highlights plain differences between parents and most other members of the community of concern. For most parents success in parenting is an important life-goal. The most obvious way for parents — and indeed onlookers — to gauge that success is the development of their children into valued, appreciated individuals. In the eyes of most parents the criminal behaviour of their child will suggest that, *prima facie*, they are “not succeeding” as parents. And in a conference parents are aware that this presumption exists in the mind of the other adult participants. It is difficult to imagine a sibling experiencing an equivalent sense of assessment, let alone a colleague (including Braithwaite’s, 1989, stoic Japanese variety) in a conference involving an adult white-collar criminal.

Qualitative Observations of the Behaviour of Parents in Conferences

Recognising the difference between parents and other members of the community of concern is of practical importance. If it is a common experience for parents to feel on trial in a conference this sheds new light on their behaviour. A limited but continuing study of the Tasmanian community conferencing program has included the observation of 34 conferences to date. The study essentially adopted the methodology used by Daly et al. (1998) and observation instruments adapted from Daly et al. (1998) and Strang et al. (1999).¹⁰ Initially we interpreted the bulk of parent behaviour in terms of democratic decision making in each conference (see Daly et al., 1998, p. 10). However, as noted at the beginning of the paper, the comments of the father of a young offender — “We’re not bad people” — drew our attention to the fact that many parents are concerned about how they are perceived in relation to the criminal acts of their child. Qualitative observations revealed four categories of parent behaviour in conferences that could be interpreted as reactions to feeling on trial: (a) apologies by parents to conference participants, (b) onerous or magnanimous undertakings offered by parents, (c) “defences” to perceived assumptions that they are inadequate parents, or, that their child is “bad”, and (d) denial of their child’s culpability, and, disinterest in the conference. Some parents exhibited more than one behaviour during the course of a conference.¹¹

Apologies by Parents to Conference Participants

Apologies by parents only occurred in five of the 34 conferences. In one sense they are the clearest evidence of a sense of personal responsibility among parents for their child’s behaviour, though the apologies have been too general to discern for what the parents were apologising. Three parents in three separate conferences apologised to the victim — “I’m sorry for what happened”. The third parent, a mother, addressed her apology to the entire conference including the researcher in the following way: “I’m sorry about all this”. The mother was very calm and the facts that had come out in the conference had suggested that she and her husband, who was not present, were devoted parents trying to cope with a wilful son. It was difficult for us to understand the essence of the apology, whether it was an apology for not “doing more” or simply an acknowledgment that she was responsible for her 12-year-old son’s behaviour. Notwithstanding the ambiguity of the apologies, no other supporter of a young offender has offered any sort of apology in the 34 conferences observed.

Magnanimous Undertakings by Parents

The second behaviour might be called the magnanimous undertaking, where a parent in some way generously commits themselves to helping their child complete an undertaking. Generous commitments by parents were witnessed by the researcher on four occasions. The first occasion involved the father described at the beginning of this discussion. In the second conference, the parents of two young offenders insisted that their jobless sons repay the cost of the streetlight that they had vandalised even though the corporate victim was content with other undertakings.

The boys were to repay the victim out of their pocket money. The third occasion involved a father who committed himself to provide and install a new security system for the owners of a shop that was damaged by his son. Finally, another father suggested that he and his son would sand and re-varnish 45 fence posts that were spray-painted by the son. Whilst cognisant of Palk et al.'s (1998) discourse on the passivity of offenders and the potential that such action might deny youths the opportunity to autonomously agree upon reparation, it is suggested that the parents might be meeting their need to publicly atone for their responsibility by committing themselves to their child's undertakings.

Parent "Defences"

The third category concerns the different ways that parents appear to defend themselves in conferences. In at least nine of the 34 conferences, parents made comments that in some way diminished their degree of responsibility. The most obvious comments of this nature are attacks by parents upon their child. The attacks might be as simple as highlighting the difficulty the parent faces in controlling their child, for example "I never know where he is — he stays with his friends half the time". The researcher noted five occasions where parents have stated at a conference that they "do not get on with" their child.

It was interesting to note in these conferences how the parents would express their disapproval of their son or daughter's comments. Often the parents would "tut". One mother would engage eye contact with other adults and roll her eyes upwards or shake her head, perhaps searching for understanding of the hopelessness of her situation. That conference involved the mother and her son, a facilitator, a police officer, six professionals of various sorts and the researcher. It seemed that the presence of so many strangers intimidated the mother. Not only did the restorative principle of deprofessionalisation (Zehr, 1990) seem highly relevant to this conference¹², but it also appeared that the mother would have benefited from the presence of supporters for herself. On another occasion, both the mother and father of a teenage boy burst into tears, stood and faced the shop-owner victims and yelled "You have no idea what we have been through. We have tried everything!" Interestingly, the demeanour of one of the victims instantly changed from aggression directed at the youth to empathy for the mother, whom she escorted from the conference room. These parents and two others also complained about the lack of support they received from government services, again defending themselves.

Other attacks are more severe (see also Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994; Garbarino, 1999). We attended two conferences involving the same youth and his mother. In the first conference the mother actually admitted that she took her son to a department store to shoplift. It was identified that she had a drinking problem. In the second conference, involving shoplifting from a petrol station, the victim stated that he had seen the mother at the time of the offence near the store drinking alcohol. The mother blankly denied she had been near the store and, knowing that only the police officer and the researcher knew the details of the previous conference, expressed a great deal of disappointment in her son. In this instance especially, the expression of disappointment seemed to at once maximise the child's responsibility and minimise the mother's responsibility.

Body language alone can intimate a stern sense of disapproval. One conference involved an intoxicated father who stared and frowned accusingly at his son for the entire time that the two victims described the impact of his son's vandalism. The comments made by the father focussed on his 11-year-old son's "choices" and appeared to minimise the father's proximity to this aspect of his son's life. In contrast, the father was happy to point out that his son's athleticism mirrored his own as a youth.

A subtle attack is the highlighting of psychological or behavioural problems suffered by the parent's child. Admittedly such diagnoses may be highly relevant to a community conference and in the eight conferences where psychological issues have been raised three parents broached the topic with sensitivity. However, other parents have mentioned diagnoses, particularly attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, with surprising ardour and frankness. Possibly these parents are simply accustomed to such conversations. However, it is suggested that in some instances diagnoses are presented by parents as, amongst other things, reasons why the offence committed by their child does not reflect upon themselves — a clinical explanation of their blamelessness.

The most subtle defensive comments are positive statements about the offender or the family which reflect positively upon the parents, such as "She's a good girl; she does well at school and helps out at home". Parents may also mention how well adjusted their other children are. One parent thought it necessary to point out that the only member of her family with a "criminal record" was her own father who had committed a traffic offence in the 1960s. With no criticism of parents who make such comments intended, it is suggested that laden within these statements is a message to the other adults at the conference that the parents feel confident in parenting and that the offensive behaviour by the child was an aberration.

Denial of Child's Culpability and Disinterest in the Conference Proceedings

This final category of parent behaviour is broad and perhaps the weakest in terms of supporting the argument that parents feel on trial. Still, it is worth pondering whether vehement defences of children by parents — or even simply suggestions that other youths were more to blame — might be partly motivated by a desire to lessen the parents' fault. Behaviours of this type were observed in 13 conferences. Likewise, are those parents who do not attend conferences, mostly fathers, avoiding perceived allegations of personal inadequacy? The most recent conference attended concluded with a mother stating that her husband chose not to come to the conference because he felt "too embarrassed to meet you all after what [my son] did". One academic has questioned whether in some cases parents are less threatened by accompanying their child to a court, where they feel certain that little attention will be paid to them, than to a conference (R. Burton Smith, personal communication, March 9, 2001).¹³

In summary, Braithwaite's (1989) portrayal of parents in conferences does not appear to adequately capture the multifarious aspects of parenting that empirical research is only just beginning to explore. Psychologists tell us that our confidence in those spheres that are highly esteemed by society and ourselves is intertwined with our self-perception (Bandura, 1989). Parenting is one such sphere (Coleman & Karraker,

1997). Hence, the fate of a young offender in a conference has a potentially greater impact upon parents than any other member of the community of concern. Nor does Braithwaite's (1989) account appeal to qualitative observations of the behaviour of parents in juvenile conferences. Parents very often behave in a way that is entirely in keeping with individuals who perceive the actions of the young offenders as an intensely personal reflection upon themselves.

Perhaps it is too much to expect that Braithwaite (1989) could have foreseen this distinction since he wrote *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* when the restorative justice forums, especially conferencing, were nascent. Though Braithwaite may not have developed reintegrative shaming in a theoretical vacuum, the minutiae of conference dynamics are easier to observe in real life. Nevertheless, it is suggested that a deeper understanding of the factors shaping parent behaviour in conferences holds intrinsic value.

More important, however, is the argument presented in the second half of the discussion that in some instances ignoring the parent's perception of being on trial may (a) stigmatise parents, (b) damage the confidence of already diffident parents (Bandura, 1989), or (c) put unnecessary strains on adolescent–parent relationships. This argument is presented in light of Braithwaite's (1989) assertion that directing shame at parents is an effective technique for reintegrative shaming. The concerns raised here have not been adequately recognised in any of the “emerging ideologies” (Bazemore, 1997) of the restorative justice literature.

Directing Shame at Parents in Conferences —Theoretical Concerns

Stigmatising Parents?

Braithwaite (1989, p. 83) suggests that directing shame towards families is useful because it alerts them to their responsibility to control (informally) their members and that informal control will “often” be transmitted in a way which is as “reintegrative as possible”. Even on Braithwaite's (1989) own theoretical grounds, that is without importing the parental self-efficacy literature, there are reasons to be concerned for the treatment of parents in conferences. Braithwaite does not tell us whether the shame to be directed at parents is to be any different from the shame directed at offenders.¹⁴ He notes elsewhere in *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* that “reintegrative shaming is not necessarily weak; it can be cruel, even vicious” (1989, p. 101). The reason why reintegrative shaming is positive, Braithwaite argues, is that, unlike stigmatisation, it is for a set period, positive bonds are maintained and it ends in forgiveness (1989, p. 101). However, two questions spring to mind. First, though the shaming of a parent may be finite in that it is confined to the conference, if the community of concern belongs, in a sense, to the young offender how are positive bonds to be maintained with the parents? It is perhaps expeditious to assume that the community of concern that has appeared in support of the young person also enjoys a significant bond with the parent. The football coach might be an acquaintance of the parent. The aunt may actually be the estranged sibling of the parent. In short, the community of concern for the young offender may be very different from the community of concern for the parent.¹⁵

Second, where does the termination of shame by forgiveness occur for the parent? At no point does Braithwaite address this issue. Thus we have the basic ingredients for disintegrative shaming for parents in conferences; shaming, potentially no community of concern with which to maintain “bonds of love or respect” (1989, p. 101), and no formal forgiveness. Harking back to the conference involving the mother who had aided and abetted her son’s shoplifting, at one stage the victim, the police officer and the facilitator took turns in questioning the mother. The questions became more insistent. Eventually the mother, who had no supporters, stared at the ground for several minutes, ignoring all further questions from the slightly exasperated participants. Perhaps this episode stigmatised the mother and contributed to her apparent involvement in the second offence perpetrated by her son?

This conference was highly complex and the particular scenario described may have been not a fair example to use. Nevertheless, even in a *reductio ad absurdum* fashion it highlights a weakness in *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, which advocates the shaming of parents without affording them the essentials for reintegration: people who love them and a point of forgiveness. Is it impossible to imagine a master status of “bad parent” (Suchar, 1984; as cited in Braithwaite, 1989, p. 55)?

Consequences of Damaging the Confidence of Parents with Low Parental Self-efficacy

Whilst many parents may well transmit the shame directed at themselves in a conference positively to their child, it is argued that Braithwaite (1989) does not recognise the risks involved in shaming those parents who already feel inadequate in their role — in Bandura’s (1989) terminology, parents with low self-efficacy. It is argued that the risks include, if not stigmatising such parents, then damaging their parental self-efficacy and thereby negatively affecting their parenting skills and worsening the situation for the young offender. Coleman and Karraker (1997) begin their excellent meta-analysis of the parental self-efficacy literature by stating that most parents have a healthy confidence in their abilities, resolutely face the challenges of parenting, try to adapt to challenges, and generally enjoy parenting. A minority of parents, however, “lack adequate parenting skills, feel exceedingly burdened by the responsibility and work involved in childcare, and perceive very little of their parental experience as enjoyable” (Coleman & Karraker, 1997, pp. 47–48).

It is argued that this minority of parents with a low parental self-efficacy are vulnerable in conferences. Research indicates that most people can be affected by negative information about their capacities.¹⁶ In one experiment Bandura and Jourden (1991) increased and decreased the performance of participants in an organisation task by feeding them, respectively, positive and negative information about their abilities. Clinical experiments have found similar dynamics in a huge variety of areas, ranging from the acquisition of new motor skills (Jourden et al., 1991), to complex decision making (Wood et al., 1990), to smoking cessation (Baer, 1986, as cited in Coleman & Karraker, 1997, p. 54) to athleticism (Feltz, 1982).¹⁷ Bandura (1977, 1989) suggests that self-efficacy develops from various types of information we receive about ourselves and the weight we feel we can attach to that information. The sources include (a) our previous performance (triumphs and failures), (b) estimations of our abilities drawn from our observation

of others, (c) encouragement from others, and (d) the degree of negative physiological arousal we associate with a given area. The merit we attach to the information is influenced by the context in which it is set.

A conference has the potential to present negative information to parents about their parenting skills, especially if the conference participants deliberately shame them as Braithwaite (1989) proposes. Parents may be vividly reminded of their past “failures” if their child has a long criminal history, for example. The conference may not offer any encouragement at all for the parent and may even involve quite the opposite. Perhaps many parents could cope with this situation since they can draw upon long term successes to easily counterbalance the negative information about their parenting skills. However, those parents who are not only unconfident about parenting but feel generally inadequate may not be able to dismiss the information so easily, particularly since low self-efficacies cause individuals to “assume more responsibility for failure than success” (Jerusalem & Mitag, 1995, as cited in Coleman & Karraker, 1997, p. 55). Parents with low self-efficacy probably feel a great deal of negative physiological arousal in a conference. (This may well have been the reason for the alcoholic drinks one father had before his son’s conference.) It is also reasonable to assume that parents with a low self-efficacy would attach a great deal of weight to perceived or actual criticisms in the official¹⁸ context of a conference, especially criticisms from an authority figure like a police officer or a professional.

Consequently, directing shame in a conference at the very parents most in need of personal affirmation might rock their already weak confidence in their abilities. There is every reason to believe that the consequences of that will flow onto children in the form of worse parenting, ranging from “everyday negativity and/or disinterest” to child maltreatment in extreme cases (Coleman & Karraker, 1997, p. 48). For instance, abusive mothers tend to have low self-efficacies (Bugental et al., 1989) which other studies have found to be correlated with defensive and controlling behaviours (Donovan et al., 1990), maternal perceptions of child difficulty, passive coping style in parenting (Wells-Parker et al., 1990), and use of coercive discipline (Bugental, 1991; Bugental & Cortez, 1988). Contradicting Braithwaite (1989), it is argued that in some instances directing shame at families in conferences will actually result in an utterly negative transmission of shame.

Perhaps this last statement is not a true contradiction because of Braithwaite’s (1989, p. 83) caveat that “often” directing shame at families is positive. It is difficult to approximate what percentage of parents appearing in conferences have a low parental self-efficacy. From their meta-analysis Coleman and Karraker (1997, p. 47) suggest that “a minority” of parents suffer a low parental self-efficacy. However, it is tentatively suggested that conferences involve a higher than average proportion of parents in this category. Low parental self-efficacy is correlated to, amongst other things, economic strain, unemployment and low social support (Coleman & Karraker, 1997; see 75). These same stresses are also highly correlated to criminality, as noted by Braithwaite (1989; see also Gale et al., 1993). If low parental self-efficacy and criminality are correlated to the same factors, perhaps conferences — even the whole criminal justice system — naturally engage parents with low confidence in their parenting abilities.

The correlations between low parental self-efficacy and poverty, unemployment and inadequate social support are alarming — especially since parents with low self-efficacy tend to accentuate the negative effects of life adversities (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). First, they suggest that in many instances the parents most vulnerable to stigmatisation and criticism in conferences are also the parents of the youths most at risk of re-offending and embarking on a life of crime. Second, the correlations could be interpreted to indicate that these same youths lack the strong social bonds that Braithwaite (1989) emphatically argues are so important in controlling crime informally. Finally, following on from the second point, where such youths lack adequate social support it will also be difficult to find significant others to constitute their community of concern in conferences, thereby hampering hopes for reintegration to occur.

It should be noted, however, that parents facing multiple life-stresses can and do maintain healthy confidences in their parenting abilities. More important, when parents maintain a high parental self-efficacy they can actually counteract socio-economic adversities and steadily promote the well being of their children (Elder, 1995; Gondoli, 1995). Hence, high parental self-efficacy is beginning to be seen as a factor which can counter the negative effects of the “most thoroughly researched correlates of parenting quality” (Coleman & Karraker, 1997, p. 47). Likewise, it is suggested that parental self-efficacy should become a major focus of research in youth conferencing and restorative justice.

Other Risks of Directing Shame at Parents

Tackling Braithwaite (1989) first on his own theoretical terms, he points out that one of the strengths of a reintegrative shaming ceremony is that by involving the offender’s community of concern it becomes more difficult for offender to “reject her rejectors” (1989, p. 14) and criminal subcultures seem less attractive. However, if a youth witnesses some type of attack upon their parents what effect does that have upon what he calls the “social embeddedness” of shame (1989, p. 55)? On the one hand, if the youth has a strong bond with their parents they may decide now to reject their parents’ rejectors. On the other hand, if the youth has poor relations with their parents, witnessing criticism of the parents might highlight negative features of society — controlling, critical — and make the homogeneity and acceptance of criminal subcultures seem very attractive.

Second, in the very least it is easy to imagine some of the tensions created by a youth witnessing the shaming of their parents. Perhaps a teenage boy may lose confidence in his parents’ ability to raise him and become more rebellious (even taunting his parents)? Certainly Sameroff’s (1977, 1983, 1989, as cited in Sameroff & Fiese, 2000) influential transactional model of child development, a multi-directional paradigm, recognises that children and parents influence the behaviour of each other in their interactions, or “transactions”. Or, if Whitbeck’s (1988) findings are true — that boys’ self-efficacy is affected by their perception of the self-efficacy of their parents — perhaps the aim of the conference to repair the young offender’s self-esteem will be undermined?

Conclusion

Braithwaite's (1989) theory of reintegrative shaming has heavily influenced the acceptance of community conferencing for juvenile offenders by legislators across Australia. This paper has questioned whether the theory, which bravely encompasses all forms of crime, needs to be refined in its portrayal of parents of young offenders in reintegrative shaming ceremonies.

First, the theory does not recognise that, in addition to concern for their child, parents are likely to feel that their parenting skills are on trial in a conference. Parents may even feel on trial as individuals because success in parenting is tightly bound with their overall confidence and self-perception (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). A number of behaviours of parents observed in conferences support these propositions and suggest that parents feel a need to vindicate themselves for the actions of their child.

Second, Braithwaite (1989) at one point encourages the direction of shame towards the supporters of young offenders in conferences without any appreciation for the negative effect that this may have upon those supporters. This paper has considered the impact of shaming parents who already feel inadequate as parents and are unlikely to have the strong interdependencies (Coleman & Karraker, 1997) which Braithwaite (1989) considers so important in crime prevention. Perhaps in some instances such parents may be stigmatised by the experience, particularly if they lack a community of concern and if there is no termination of the shame by forgiveness. Alternatively, drawing on Bandura (1989), directing shame at a parent with low self-efficacy may damage an already jaundiced confidence and hence worsen parenting techniques (Bugental, 1991; Bugental & Cortez, 1988). It is suggested that witnessing the shaming of parents may have a negative impact upon children; affecting their perception of society, losing confidence in their parents and thereby affecting their own self-esteem (Whitbeck, 1988).

Joining the calls for the theoretical development of restorative justice, this paper suggests that the construct of parents in conferences needs to mature to account for parent-child dynamics and the ways in which this impacts upon the outcomes of a conference and restorative goals. Recognising the importance of parental self-efficacy in countering socioeconomic adversities (Coleman & Karraker, 1997), research could address how damage to parental self-efficacy can be avoided in conferences and whether building parental self-efficacy in a non-therapeutic fashion can be a realistic restorative goal.¹⁹ Perhaps an immediate reaction to some of these concerns for conference facilitators is to attempt to include people who have a meaningful bond with both the young offender and the parents. Facilitators may also choose at times to allow parents to "defend themselves" in a non-aggressive manner, or even prompt parents to do so. Finally, future research might also address how parent-child dynamics affect conferences involving adult offenders.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr Roseanne Burton-Smith, Rick Snell, Prof Kate Warner, Assoc Prof Rob White at the University of Tasmania, Dr Kimberly Cook

at the University of Maine and Senior Constable John Lennox for their very helpful comments and insights. Any errors or omissions remain my responsibility.

Endnotes

- 1 The Reintegrative Shaming Experiment (RISE) (see <http://www.aic.gov.au/rjustice/rise>).
- 2 Two prominent models of conferencing exist, the Wagga model and the New Zealand model. See Daly and Hayes (2001) for a succinct summary of the development of conferencing in Australia.
- 3 The discussion is limited to biological parents because (a) the research into parental self-efficacy has focussed upon biological parents to date and (b) only 5 of the 34 conferences observed by the researcher have involved non-biological parents.
- 4 See for example references provided in Coleman (1999).
- 5 Perhaps the importance of the family cannot be understated in *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*. For instance, the title of the central chapter implies that healthy families are a micro-model for effective criminal justice.
- 6 Braithwaite wrote his theory before learning of conferencing in New Zealand but has explicitly accepted that community conferences meet his concept of a reintegrative shaming ceremony (Braithwaite, 1999). It is important to note that reintegrative shaming can occur regardless of whether the individuals in a process, such as a conference, are aware of the theory or deliberately attempt to apply it.
- 7 A sentiment captured in an ancient Aramaic compliment "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you" (Luke, 11: 27).
- 8 The mother also mentioned that she felt unable to apologise in the courtroom – perhaps this can be incorporated into the "caricatures" (Daly & Immarigeon, 1998, p. 21) of the inadequacies of the criminal justice system in restorative literature?
- 9 Perhaps parents of very young offenders feel these sentiments more keenly? The *Youth Justice Act 1997 (Tas)* and its Australian counterparts all recognise the decreased culpability of very young offenders. Arguably this implies, inter alia, greater parental responsibility.
- 10 Details of the methodology can be obtained from the author.
- 11 It must be emphasised that these "categories" are entirely based on the researcher's interpretation of parent behaviour. A recognised flaw of this qualitative data is the lack of information on how the parents themselves perceived the conferences. Notwithstanding, perhaps it is worth noting that one conference facilitator, who has conducted over 300 conferences, agrees with the thesis that parents feel "on trial" and has witnessed similar behaviours to the researcher (J. Lennox, personal communication, 11 July, 2001). Senior Constable Lennox aided in the introduction of "Wagga" style conferences into Tasmania in 1994 and currently trains police officers state wide to participate in conferences.
- 12 The tea and biscuits immediately after the conference was very much dominated by the in-house conversation of the professionals (including in this sense everyone but the mother and her son).
- 13 Dr Burton Smith lectures in Social Development at the School of Psychology, University of Tasmania.
- 14 See Harris (2001) for a more developed concept of shame and its relationship to shaming.
- 15 One uplifting conference included the aunt of the young offender who was also the sister of the mother. Enjoying an evidently strong bond with both individuals, the aunt/sister was able to overcome tensions that existed between the mother and son.
- 16 The similarity between the concepts of stigmatisation (Braithwaite, 1989) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989) could be explored by future research.
- 17 The level of interest in parental self-efficacy led to the development of several instruments to gauge the self-efficacy of parents. See, for example, Bachicha (1998).

- 18 As noted, though restorative forums are supposed to be informal to some extent, perhaps some parents find conferences more threatening than a youth court because, inter alia, they can be required to participate.
- 19 Would the agreement in a conference that the parents of a young offender attend a program designed to develop their parenting capacities, such as *Good Beginnings* (see <http://www.goodbeginnings.net.au>), negate the principles of restorative justice?

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