

Jennifer Jacquet: 'The power of shame is that it can be used by the weak against the strong'

Jennifer Jacquet's book, *Is Shame Necessary? New uses for an Old Tool*, was inspired by guilt over what we are doing to the planet

Zoë Corbyn

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You study large-scale social dilemmas like overfishing and climate change - what inspired you to write a book about shame?

Profound guilt over what humans are doing to this planet. It led me to think about how I am being asked to engage with that guilt, which is primarily as a consumer - buy dolphin-safe tuna and organic food and don't buy palm oil. But, in the end, it felt to me hollow because what we really need is to change the system, and that is what led me to the possibilities of using shame.

How can shame help?

As we have turned to guilt as the primary tool to engage with many large-scale environmental and social issues we've wound up eclipsing shame in the process. But there are demonstrable positive results of shaming that society would find acceptable and we need to think through what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable use because shame is a tool at each of our disposals.

How effective can it be?

The real power of shame is it can scale. It can work against entire countries and can be used by the weak against the strong. Guilt, on the other hand, because it operates entirely within individual psychology, doesn't scale. You can't argue guilt put Wall Street on the road to banking reform. But Occupy Wall Street and the rhetoric of the 1%, a shaming campaign, has been an important, although inadequate, step in highlighting the type of behaviour the rest of society does not find acceptable.

But doesn't shame also undermine human dignity?

It is murky territory with a lot of liabilities, but there are many different types of shaming. Just because shame can be effective doesn't mean it's acceptable. We still care about individual rights and protection. Transgressions that have a clear impact on broader society - like environmental pollution - and transgressions for which there is no obvious formal route to punishment are, for instance, more amenable to its use. It should be reserved for bad behaviour that affects most or all of us.

Would you advocate shaming individuals?

A good rule of thumb is to go after groups, but I don't exempt individuals, especially not if they are politically powerful or sizeably impact society. But we must ask ourselves about the way those individuals are shamed and whether the punishment is proportional. I don't support any sort of physical shaming, like requiring shoplifters to carry signs stating that they stole. An effective example is the website run by the state of California that lists the names of people who don't pay their taxes. It targets only the top 500 delinquents, there are exemptions for exceptional circumstances, and people are given six months to pay up to avoid the exposure. It is a low cost, thoughtful programme. Since it was launched in 2007, the state has retrieved more than \$395m in back taxes.

You say shaming can be playful.

There is art to effective shaming. In Bogotá, Colombia, the former mayor, Antanas Mockus, hired mimes to fight bad driving. They ridiculed offenders and handed out thumbs-up and thumbs-down cards so people could shame bad drivers. Ridicule, humour, satire and concealed irony are such great tools not only for getting attention, which is so important, but making shaming more palatable and less serious. Mockus's mimes embody that spirit.

Shaming has become a problem on social networks like Twitter. How might we fix that?

We've always had gossip as a form of shaming, but it now has such scale and speed and the results can be pretty ugly and undesirable. We need to take a step back and ask: "Is this how I want to spend my attention"; and "who deserves to be a victim of something this severe?"

Jennifer Jacquet is an assistant professor of environmental studies at New York University. Is Shame Necessary? New Uses for an Old Tool is published by Allen Lane, price £14.39

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