

How Public Shaming Makes Real Change Harder

Shame is powerful.

When enough people get together to tell you that you're wrong, you're going to notice. When they're people who have things you need, you're probably going to change.

So I'll start this post by saying that I think shame is a really important tool in the social change kit. Violence, bigotry, dishonesty, authoritarianism – all of these things need to be countered with whatever we have at our disposal.

But shaming can backfire, particularly if you want to create long-term change.

Look at one increasingly common use of shame: punishing people who express trained (“casual” or unconscious) racial or sexual bias or prejudice in their speech or actions. With the social web, people can quickly mass-shame public officials who act or speak (carelessly or intentionally harmfully) out of casual prejudice. Every week we see some lout in office saying something obtuse, insensitive, ignorant, and damaging. Within hours it's headline news and the internet gathers its pitchforks.

Of course, this is often effective. Officials will issue retractions or apologies. But here's where the effect of shaming stops being positive.

Public shaming enforces outward compliance, not internal change. Shaming galvanizes opposition and makes people dig deeper into their own positions (to defend their egos, of course). And if these insensitive public officials are holding on to any actual deep-seated hatred or bigotry, they will find other new ways to express themselves.

Casual racism or casual sexism are real problems. But real solutions to real problems probably won't come from public shaming. These problems start in the heart and mind, so they're going to be solved there. Only you can change your heart and mind, so that puts some unique constraints on what other people can do to help.

I sometimes notice after the fact when I show unconscious prejudice. Maybe I'm just acting out trained roles and trained ways of speaking, but I know I'm not acting without prejudice toward all the people I meet. I don't like it. I want to become better at treating people as individuals, not as subjects of a racial or sexual or cultural class.

But I will continue to make mistakes in my relationships with people who are different from me. If the first reaction I get from the world around me is shame, though, I will become too afraid to change. Change requires that I look directly at my worst side and then do something about it. Doing something about a problem requires acknowledging that you

have it.

But anymore the “shame cost” of admitting prejudice is so high that many people turn a blind eye to their real problems. They comply publicly, use the “politically correct” terms and actions when the spotlight is on them, and continue to act out prejudice everywhere else. They’re blissfully unaware because shame is the only signal they have developed for noticing a problem. If they have never been the targets of shame, they will not find any ways to grow.

Real self-change takes introspection, then grace, and then positive action – in that order. I have to recognize that I have prejudices, for instance (introspection). Then I have to not beat myself up about it and not let it freeze me in my tracks (grace). Then I have to change (action).

As long as we jump straight to public shaming and enemy-labelling, most people won’t have the internal fortitude to take these steps to change. Public shaming should be a last resort when all hope of change is lost. But before that last resort, how many people would take change to heart if we weren’t making them out to be enemies?

To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, encouraging introspection, self-forgiveness, and action has not been tried and found wanting – it has been found difficult and left untried. Prejudice has to change like any other fault or flaw. And we all have enough work to do on ourselves that I doubt (if we’re being honest) that we’ll have much time left for public shaming.