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Understanding guilt, shame and social service use in a diversity context

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1   Introduction

Imagine the following scenario: An immigrant, single mother facing the challenges of adapting to a new culture is concerned about meeting the cultural expectations of the host society. How do these expectations affect her psychological well-being and to what extent do they contribute to the difficulties of her assimilation process? Now consider the perspective of a social worker or psychologist supporting them. How might they assess the situation and what emotional impact does this have and how does this influence their professional actions?

Even though this is a hypothetical scenario, it can be assumed that the protagonist struggles with a variety of thoughts and emotions, likely including feelings of shame driven by anxiety and fear of not conforming to expected behaviours. The shame may stem from a perceived deviation from cultural and societal norms and may trigger an internal struggle between assimilation and preserving her heritage (e.g., De Leersnyder et al., 2020). The fear of being categorized as culturally inappropriate is a heavy emotional burden. Guilt and shame, complicated emotions intertwined with diversity and cultural identity, play a central role in this context. How can an understanding of these emotions contribute to improved social work practice and ensure that interventions are culturally sensitive? From the professional's perspective, it is crucial to recognize how their own emotional response to the situation can shape the course of their intervention and decision-making process. This awareness allows them to navigate the balance between providing support and respecting the client's autonomy and cultural background.

Despite the central role of emotions in such contexts, it is notable that systematic research on these emotional experiences has not yet been sufficiently explored in social work. However, the discipline now recognizes the importance of emotions and has been increasingly focusing on them for several years (Ingram, 2015; Kommission Sozialpädagogik, 2018). What is still missing is a contribution on the different forms of guilt and shame and how these manifest themselves in relation to aspects of diversity. One aim of this paper is to fill this gap in order to enable practitioners and researchers alike to navigate the emotional complexities associated with diversity and to contribute to more comprehensive and tailored interventions and client-provider relationships. This paper builds on appraisal theories of emotion (e.g. Arnold, 1970; Moors et al., 2013). Appraisal theories suggest that emotions arise from how individuals evaluate events in relation to their personal goals, beliefs, and needs. In the context of social emotion theory (Mackie et al., 2004), this extends to how individuals appraise events through a social lens, meaning that they assess and experience emotions not just individually, but also based on their group memberships and social identities. This results in so-called group-based emotions, emotions that are experienced on behalf of one's group (e.g., social workers) and shaped by the group's position in relation to other groups (e.g., clients). These theoretical

frameworks allow for the exploration of how emotions like guilt and shame are influenced by both individual and collective social contexts.

1.1 Guilt

Guilt and shame are emotions that emerge relatively late in a person's ontogenetic development (e.g., Barrett, Zahn-Waxler, & Cole, 1993). To experience these emotions, a certain level of self-awareness is necessary, which infants and young toddlers do not possess. Additionally, a fundamental understanding of social norms and expectations that need to be fulfilled is required (Erikson, 1963; Kagan, 1984). Therefore, guilt and shame are referred to as self-conscious emotions (Tangney & Tracy, 2012), providing individuals with almost automatic self-relevant feedback on their social standing and how they are perceived in social contexts. Guilt and shame are considered higher cognitive emotions, likely shared with only a few other species, especially primates. Guilt feelings cannot be easily identified externally through facial expressions or body language. Shame, however, has some distinctive features, as we will explain later.

Guilt is generally defined as a self-directed, aversive feeling that signals a violation of social or moral norms or causes harm to someone (Lewis, 1971). Typical examples in the psychological literature are everyday situations, for instance forgetting important dates such as birthdays, betraying or harming another person. In social work, guilt is discussed particularly in relation to substance abuse (e.g. McGaffin et al., 2013) or in the field of child protection in relation to child abuse (e.g. Gibson, 2015 and see Chapter 2 below). Feelings of guilt arise when one feels responsible for these transgressions or norm violations (e.g. Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990). Feelings of guilt relate particularly to *behaviours* exhibited toward others. There is little evidence of strong feelings of guilt towards oneself, with exceptions such as guilt for not achieving a goal, e.g., dieting (Giner-Sorolla, 2001). Feelings of guilt therefore relate primarily to the social consequences of certain actions.

Essentially, guilt is a social emotion signalling our concern for the social world, including people we might have harmed or social norms we might have violated. Evolutionarily, guilt likely evolved to regulate, repair, and maintain social relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Harth et al., 2018; Tangney & Dearing, 2002;). Guilt can lead individuals to take responsibility for their actions and strive to reconcile with others. For example, individuals experiencing guilt are often more willing to confess their wrongdoing and make amends compared to those without guilt. Recent research indicates that people even employ self-punishment as a behavioural response to guilt when there are no opportunities for rectifying their misbehaviour (Bastian, Jetten, & Fasoli, 2011; Nelissen, 2012; Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009). In those laboratory studies it was observed that participants who believed that their poor performance in an economic game had caused financial harm to an interaction partner later imposed financial sanctions on themselves (Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009, Study 2). In addition, participants held their hands in painfully cold water for longer after recalling a situation in which they had excluded someone (Bastian et al.2011). Inbar et al. (2013) contrasted the guilt condition with a control and another negative emotional condition (sadness) and found that participants who wrote about a past guilt-inducing event gave themselves more intense electric shocks than did those who wrote about feeling sad or about a neutral event. Studies from the field of clinical psychology also show that guilt and shame, which coincide with the experience of self-criticism, can trigger self-harm by signaling that punishment is deserved. In an ecologically valid diary study, Lear et al. (2019) found that self-criticism and feelings of guilt were linked to the urge to self-harm. Overall, these and

other studies suggest that the experience of negative thoughts and guilt is associated with the urge to self-harm, especially when corrective action is not possible, whether in thoughts, words, or deeds. Then the guilt may even turn into an internalized experience of shame.

However, anticipating guilt can deter individuals from committing certain offenses altogether. Simply contemplating how bad one would feel engaging in a particular behaviour (e.g., cheating in a relationship, see Apostolou & Panayiotou, 2019) can prevent the actions and strengthen resistance to attractive temptations. Still, with regard to guilt being central in maintaining positive relationships, there are heated scientific debates about how *pro-social* (i.e., driven by genuine concern for others' well-being rather than simply reducing one's own discomfort) guilt feelings actually are. In addition to the tendency to want to make amends, psychology observes other behaviours. Individuals often downplay, deny, or, in extreme cases, devalue victims (known as victim blaming or victim-offender reversal). The term "moral disengagement" is used in literature to describe this phenomenon (Bandura, 1999). Guilt feelings are so aversive, i.e., they feel so unpleasant, that individuals have developed various strategies to prevent or regulate them as quickly as possible, even if it means further burdening the affected party. This process is well studied in the context of the so-called rape myth and the trivialization of sexual violence. Particularly, individuals who believe that the world is fundamentally fair tend to attribute at least partial blame to victims of violent crimes, such as rape (Bohner et al., 2013). In cases of bullying, victims are often assigned some degree of responsibility for the cruel behaviour of perpetrators. Studies in the school context have shown that bullying students who distance themselves more from their actions also report fewer guilt feelings and are less willing to protect other classmates (e.g., Mazzone et al., 2016).

In the following, we will briefly outline how guilt operates on various levels: *individual, interpersonal, and institutional*. Each of these levels has distinct impacts on the dynamics of social work and calls for tailored interventions. At the *individual level*, guilt is often related to personal feelings of responsibility or failure to meet societal or moral standards. For clients, this could mean feeling responsible for substance use, or family dynamics, which can lead to a sense of personal failure or wrongdoing. For social workers, however, guilt might be less about personal values and more about their professional commitment to provide effective support and help. They may experience guilt when they perceive that they are not meeting professional standards or expectations, potentially due to the complexity of cases. Interventions at this level might include reflective practices, supervision, and professional development opportunities that allow social workers to process these feelings and develop strategies to manage professional dilemmas. On the *interpersonal level*, guilt emerges within the dynamics of relationships between social workers and clients. In these interactions, guilt can arise from perceived or real judgments, power imbalances, or perceived failures in the client-provider relationship. For instance, a social worker's well-intentioned suggestion could unintentionally evoke guilt in a client by implying they are not doing enough. At the *institutional level*, guilt is connected to the broader structures and practices within social work organizations and systems. This could involve the recognition of historical wrongdoings, such as systemic abuses in out-of-home care or the marginalization of certain groups. Institutional guilt is a group-based emotion that reflects a collective responsibility for structural injustices, where the group norms in focus are justice, equity, and accountability. Interventions at this level require systemic changes, such as policy reforms, institutional apologies, or reparative measures that address past harms and promote equitable practices.

1.2 Shame

Like guilt, shame has a moral dimension that has been extensively discussed in the scientific literature. Shame is a self-focused and aversive emotion, but it differs from guilt in important ways. Unlike guilt, which focuses on behaviour toward others, shame is directed *toward the inner self*. Shame feelings arise when a person feels he/she is not living up to social or moral norms and expectations (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In other words, shame arises from the concern about whether *one is 'right'*. Shame is an extremely self-focused emotion closely tied to self-awareness. It is an emotional response to believing that one has failed in the eyes of other people or has perceived oneself as inferior. Compared to guilt feelings, which can lead to individuals taking responsibility for their actions and making amends, shame often results in withdrawal and self-deprecation. Several meta-analyses show a high correlation between shame and depression (e.g., Kim et al., 2011). Shame and withdrawal can form a destructive cycle, as persistent feelings of shame can lead to increased social withdrawal, thereby raising the risk of depressive symptoms. The constant masking of true emotions can trigger stress and further negatively impact health. The results of numerous psychological studies show a positive correlation between the tendency to feel shame and problematic alcohol and drug consumption in various groups of people, e.g. university graduates and prison inmates (e.g., Dearing et al., 2005; Hosser et al., 2008; Kulesza et al., 2013). The heavy use of alcohol seems to offer people a way to get over bad moments of shame and self-hatred. At the same time, there is a danger of a *negative spiral*, as self-harm and excessive drug use themselves often trigger feelings of guilt and shame. Because in many of these studies on shame, users of (illegal) drugs report that they feel shame and want to avoid contact and withdraw, despite their need to interact with others (e.g., Streck, 2012). Or, as another example, people with psychological problems, such as depression or substance abuse, report discrimination and stigmatization, for example, in the workplace (Lasalvia et al., 2015), which prevents them from publicly addressing the issue or seeking help. This connection between shame, stigmatization and withdrawal emphasizes the importance of a differentiated approach in social work, addressing not only the coping of guilt feelings but also focusing on addressing and processing shame to preventively counteract depression and self-harming behaviour.

Shame also operates at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional level. At the *individual level*, shame often involves a deep sense of inadequacy. Clients may feel ashamed for their own perceived shortcomings, which can result in withdrawal, self-isolation, and reluctance to seek help. For social workers, shame might stem from feeling they have failed to live up to their professional role or standards, especially when they perceive they are unable to address the needs of their clients adequately. Here, the norms salient are those of competence, moral adequacy, and perceived social judgment. On the *interpersonal level*, shame emerges within the dynamics of relationships between social workers and clients. In these interactions, shame can be triggered by perceived or actual judgments from others, creating a sense of being exposed or devalued. For instance, a client may feel shame when a social worker highlights an area of needed improvement. Similarly, social workers might feel shame when clients question their competence, fearing that they are being judged as inadequate professionals. The norms that are salient in this case might involve empathy, respect, and maintaining dignity in professional-client interactions. At the *institutional level*, shame is more systematically embedded within the structures and practices of social work organizations. Active shaming can occur when institutional policies or setups expose individuals seeking help to unnecessary judgment. For instance, institutions that do not offer anonymous counseling or make it visibly obvious who is entering a facility for help can create environments that inherently shame clients. Such settings might lead clients to feel stigmatized or publicly marked as "needy" or

"failing," discouraging them from seeking support. We will discuss these issues below with regard to racism and poverty.

2 Guilt, shame, and diversity issues: racism and poverty

Now that we have introduced the emotions of guilt (feeling that one has *done* something wrong) and shame (feeling that one *is* wrong) in general, we will explore more specific aspects of these two emotions in relation to the variety of relationships between clients and providers in social work. We will discuss both interpersonal and organizational aspects. Since the concept of diversity encompasses a variety of facets, such as gender, age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and more, we will take a closer look at the meaning of guilt and shame in relation to racism and poverty. Racism and poverty are particularly important when addressing diversity and social inequality, both of which are central to social work. Racism and poverty not only represent significant sources of marginalization but also intersect with other diversity factors or categories, intensifying the experiences of guilt and shame in both clients and providers. Additionally, there is a growing body of empirical research that highlights how these issues influence emotional dynamics in social work settings. By focusing on racism and poverty, we aim to provide insights into two of the most pervasive and structurally embedded forms of inequality, which are crucial for understanding the emotional complexities in diverse client-provider relationships. In addition, we will focus on some of the issues of responsibility and blame that the social work profession faces in relation to its professional history, but also in relation to current practice.

2.1 (White) guilt and shame related to privilege and racism

Guilt. In the area of social inequality and diversity, two different but related concepts regarding guilt emerge in psychology: existential guilt and white guilt. Existential guilt encompasses the remorse that people feel because of their identity. Usually, people do not think of themselves as advantaged; they take privileges for granted or even think of their advantage as justified (e.g., Harth et al., 2008). People have the tendency to perceive something as fair when it is positive for them (Tyler & Smith, 1998). For guilt to arise as one way to improve the situation of those in need, certain conditions are required: a clear assessment of the situation as unjust and a focus on one's own unjust privilege. In our own studies, for example, we were able to show that people who are reminded of the privileges associated with their group membership experience feelings of guilt towards those who are worse off for no legitimate reasons (Harth et al., 2008). These feelings of (group-based) guilt can be a source of motivation for the redress of past wrongs – even when one is not personal responsible for these actions.

White guilt, on the other hand, is a special case that is situated in the sociocultural context and deals with the emotional reactions of people with white identity to historical and systemic racial injustices. Aware of past atrocities such as colonisation and slavery, white guilt prompts individuals to confront their privilege and address systemic racial inequalities (Iyer et al., 2003). Thus, white guilt is a specific "racial emotion" (Brock-Petroshius et al., 2022, p. 4) people can feel, experienced as a dysphoria from seeing one's own racial group (*Whites*) as responsible for the oppression of people of colour. However, white guilt is a rather complex phenomenon, which is also criticised from several sides. Conservatives see it as a tool to manipulate white people. They see it as unfair to condemn all members of an ethnic group (*Whites*) for the actions of some and impose a collective guilt on them. Conservatives often argue that it is unfair to hold people responsible for historical events in which they had no part. Liberals acknowledge their responsibility and are less likely to deny structural racism,

but they see white guilt as an "emotional trap" (Spaniermann, 2022, p. 44) that keeps them from other emotions such as empathy and understanding. Interestingly, empirical research on white guilt also produced inconsistent results. Whereas some studies found that white guilt motivates anti-racist behaviour (Spanierman & Heppner, 2004), others find null or opposite effects. This is in line with the more general discussion about guilt as an highly ambivalent emotion. (White) guilt seems to trigger repair intentions about specific misdeeds, but is less likely to motivate people to invest in prosocial activities in general (see Harth et al., 2013). Brock-Petroshius (2022) asked white social work students about racism, their emotions and how they would react as social worker when being confronted with racism. They found that white guilt, unlike empathy, was not correlated with anti-racist attitudes and behavioural intentions among social work students. Several authors argue that guilt is to self-focused (for instance Iyer et al., 2003; Harth et al., 2008) in order to be predictive of support for promoting equality. Both existential guilt and white guilt deserve continued attention in the realm of social work, as they play significant roles in the inter-group dynamics between clients and social workers. While the exact consequences of these emotions may not yet be fully understood, it is crucial for social workers to be sensitive to them and their impact on peoples experiences and behaviours. Additionally, it's important to recognize the potential limitations of white guilt, in fostering meaningful change and promoting genuine equality. Therefore, further exploration and nuanced understanding of these emotions are essential for effectively addressing social inequalities and supporting marginalized communities, because guilt and shame play roles on each side, both for professionals and clients and can significantly influence the relationship between them.

Shame. From the perspective of a person belonging to a stigmatized group, as illustrated in the introductory example, the fear of discrimination plays an important role in her psychological well-being and emotions. Within social psychology, an extensive body of empirical evidence confirms that perceived discrimination has negative consequences on psychological and physiological indicators. Perceived discrimination reduces well-being (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002), feelings of control and self-worth (Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998), increases shame and anger (Hansen & Sassenberg, 2006) and triggers anxiety and depression (Cozzarelli & Karafa, 1998). Internalized shame, which is based on the experience of discrimination against one's own group, can therefore have a detrimental effect on various areas of life and make people who feel ashamed less willing to make use of support services. This dynamic not only hinders individual growth but can perpetuate cycles of marginalization, as those who internalize shame may avoid seeking support or opportunities for improvement. Refugees are often exposed to prejudice and discrimination in everyday life (Schmidt et al., 2024). Combined with low self-esteem, these experiences of racist events lead to significant internalized shame (Johnson, 2020). This is precisely why it is important for social workers to ensure that they do not activate further levels of discrimination, for example by making the client's own powerlessness even clearer by imposing certain conditions. One example could be that a male client with a different cultural background is urged to do something that he does not normally consider to be a male domain (Käkelä, 2019). Intercultural competence is required here in order to strike a balance between formal requirements and cultural fit. In view of these findings, we believe it makes sense to distinguish between the individual level of racism and the structural level, as many of these incidents can only be resolved structurally. It is necessary to understand the structural aspects of these emotions and how they influence the complex mechanisms of injustice and discrimination. Understanding and identifying these structural aspects increases the likelihood of achieving systemic change.

One approach that effectively integrates considerations of both interpersonal and structural levels is the intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1994). By recognizing the intersecting identities and experiences of individuals, this approach acknowledges how various forms of discrimination and oppression intersect to shape individuals' lives. This perspective not only highlights the importance of addressing multiple dimensions of identity, such as race, gender, class, but also emphasizes the complex interactions between them. In conjunction with this, empowerment-oriented practice (Chehata & Jagusch, 2023) complements the intersectional approach by fostering individuals' agency and resilience within the context of systemic inequalities. By empowering individuals and communities to *identify and challenge oppressive structures*, empowerment-oriented practice contributes to the dismantling of barriers and the promotion of equity and justice on both interpersonal and structural levels. Thus, it should be noted that the structures, including access to the support system, are not designed to shame potential clients. Therefore, it is essential to address these systemic factors of racial discrimination in social work practice. Interventions include, for example, ongoing training in intercultural competence and anti-racism, diversity issues and the implementation of culturally competent practices. Specifically, the introduction of clear anti-racism policies, the promotion of participation and empowerment can help to dismantle racist structures and ensure equal access to services for all people. At the same time, these measures should be scientifically monitored, because, as Paluck and Green rightly criticize in a comprehensive review (2009), the central impact factors of prejudice-reduction interventions remain unknown. Therefore, they call for a more rigorous and broad-ranging empirical assessment of prejudice reduction.

2.2 Guilt and shame related to socio-economic factors

As indicated above, feelings of guilt and shame can arise in social work contexts, particularly in situations where needs cannot be adequately met or sufficient positive change cannot be achieved. This may be due to limited resources or the overwhelming complexity of social issues, such as poverty or institutional childcare. What are the implications for the client-service provider relationship?

Poverty. Poverty, discrimination and social injustice can trigger feelings of powerlessness and *guilt among professionals* (Gil, 2013). In relation to social inequality and exclusion, attributions of guilt or blame on an individual level are criticized as individualization of social problems. Common narratives, for example in the press but also in social policy, often emphasize personal responsibility for their own life circumstances, true to the motto "Every man forges his own destiny". Social work approaches that see themselves as (power) critical deconstruct such narratives and point out the structural causes of social inequality instead (Anhorn et al., 2018; Kessl et al. 2007). For these reasons, in recent years educational science and social work have increasingly focused on the institutional factors that trigger shame and embarrassment. By doing so, social conditions of inequality or poverty and changed welfare state arrangements have come into focus as have punitive practices and labelling processes in educational contexts and reflections on the (non-)use of social services (for an overview, see Blumenthal 2023, 2018; Frost et al. 2020).

With regard to poverty, Bolay (1998) has also pointed out the connection between (*receiving*) *help and shame*. It can be assumed that the (voluntary or enforced) use of social services in a society in which the autonomous, high-achieving subject represents the 'guiding norm' or 'ideal' comes with consequences for service users who (supposedly) break with this norm. Accordingly, the situation of "receiving help ... represents a break with the prevailing

assumption of performance and equivalence. The possibility of shame and embarrassment is thus already structurally inherent in the professional help even before any concrete help is given (Bolay, 1998, p.36f.[1]) Receiving help can be accompanied by a feeling of failure ("I am not enough") - especially if the use of help is interpreted as a personal defeat, as a failure of one's own attempts to act (ibid.). Shame has therefore been discussed as an extremely "social emotion". As outlined above, shame illustrates the prevailing social standards and norms, thus also the assigned "social place" (social status) and the (lack of) prestige in societies. With other words: shame contributes to the (symbolic) reproduction of social inequality. Neckel, whose fundamental theoretical considerations on shame have been widely received in social work research, has also dealt with the relationship between status, shame/shaming and power, thereby focusing on social inequality and social conditions. Shame and embarrassment form different sides of a communication context and refer to an unequal distribution of power - "being able to embarrass someone [expresses] the power that I have gained over him/her[2]" while, on the other hand, the person who is embarrassed also experiences this as a loss of power and feels inferiority in their sense of shame (Neckel, 1991, p.17). As a result, feeling ashamed or embarrassed can go hand in hand with withdrawal and isolation. In addition, people generally reject help or accept it, but their self-worth suffers as a result. According to Bolay (1998, p. 32f), shame is closely associated with diminished recognition by others and a negative impact on self-esteem, making it a crucial factor in analysing power dynamics, status, and recognition.

Holger Schoneville, for example, has examined these connections between receiving 'help', shame and self-esteem. His research concerning food bank users shows that stigmatization and shame are topics that concerns the users and attacks their positive self-relationships (Schoneville, 2013; 2018). He emphasizes that we need to take into account the 'special features' of food banks and their role within different forms of welfare systems. In Germany, food banks are part of a "new charity economy" – including not only food banks but also soup kitchens, charity shops for clothes and so called social department stores (for more details see Kessl & Schoneville, 2024). Schoneville argues, that "the rise and establishment of the charity economy must be seen as a symbol for a shift within the welfare arrangement" based on the rise of the social investment and activation paradigms (Schoneville, 2018, p. 6). Although food banks "are neither a form of social investment, nor do they aim to activate their users in a direct way" they can be understood as the "other side of a welfare state that focuses on potential resources to activate and to invest in" (ibid). Food banks are based on "charity" (food donations and volunteer work) and can specifically evoke emotions of shame and disregard as emotional expressions of poverty and exclusion. Users do not receive a service to which they are entitled but become recipients of "charitable gifts". With other words: The new charity economy as a whole serves as a form of social support for those who are neither recognized as worthy of investment nor capable of being activated. On the other hand, food banks as other forms of 'charity support' have become an integral part of the activation paradigm itself. Their users are still within the focus of activation because these forms of insecure support can be seen as a structural means to push people into the labour market: "The stigmatisation and the attacks onto the self-esteem that comes with the charity economy would therefore be a functional part of the new welfare state itself" (Schoneville, 2018, p. 6).

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[1] Own translation

[2] Own translation

Social Class and Parenting. Another area of social work that could be reflected more strongly from a shame theory perspective is the (lack of) self-representation and self-organization of care receivers. It is therefore certainly no coincidence that, for example, in the child and youth welfare sector in Germany you will not find self-organized groups of parents whose children live (temporary) in out-of-home care institutions or alternative care (Düring, 2024). In terms of social norms, on the one hand, social expectations of parents or families are generally very high. However, it is still the mothers who do most of the care and child-rearing work (see also BMFSFJ, 2021). Women's and gender studies have often shown that (historically) enormous or even unfulfillable expectations have (always) been placed on motherhood in patriarchal societies. By locating reproductive work in the private sphere, "unsuccessful" care, education and/or upbringing is attributed primarily to parents or especially mothers. Existing social contradictions, on the other hand, are rarely addressed. Child and youth welfare statistics in Germany show that 55% of families receiving educational support also receive transfer payments. In residential care the proportion is even higher (Kostka, 2024). Living conditions of child and youth welfare service users (children and parents) are shaped by social inequality. In addition, access to support – at least in Germany – is necessarily linked to a formulation of deficits ("educational needs") and to deviations from "autonomous parenting" (Schrödter, 2020, p. 49). Shame, guilt and stigmatization are thus also structurally 'facilitated'. This fact may be helpful in understanding why foster parents organize, but parents whose children are (temporarily) in alternative care facilities do not (yet). Professionals who work in alternative care settings often complain that the parents do not make enough effort to 'look after their children' or to stay in contact with them. They underestimate how feelings of shame and failure haunt parents in this situation (Faltermeier et al., 2022). "The parents are so filled with feelings of guilt or shame that it leaves them speechless. These feelings often also make it difficult for the parents to change their situation." (Vierzigmann & Loderer, 2002, p. 64[3]). This dilemma described by Vierzigmann and Loderer illustrates the obstacles and problems faced by parents of children placed in alternative care. In one of our own studies (Harth et al., 2020), we built on this idea to find out whether parents actually experience feelings of shame and guilt when their child is in alternative care, and how this affects their relationship with their child. We used an online questionnaire to answer this question and found a significant correlation between guilt and relationship quality: the more guilt parents reported about their children being in foster care the less close they felt towards their children. This finding was in line with Faltermeier's (2022) assumption that parents distance themselves from their children due to feelings of guilt and shame. Parents may perceive themselves as having failed and withdraw. This withdrawal effect is reinforced by the stigmatization they often experience from society because of their situation as "childless parents". In such situations, parents often try to avoid further insults and injuries by avoiding confrontation with the situation (cf. Landeshauptstadt München 2012: 6). The parent who feels shame or guilt will hold a number of extremely negative and ultimately damaging beliefs about themselves. Practitioners should take these beliefs seriously and work with them. Otherwise, professional social work might appear as something to be feared, that makes them they feel inadequate, incompetent and worthless. These beliefs can have a devastating effect on working with service providers and their ability to offer adequate care for their child and parental work.

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[3] Own translation

2.3 Doing right - guilt, blame and responsibilities of social work professionals in past and present

Looking at the (culpable) actions of individual social workers, but also at the "misdeeds" of the profession in general, various areas can be identified in which aspects of complicity in inhumane systems or professional failures are brought into focus. Questions of guilt and responsibility are addressed concerning past, present and future. For example, researchers from the field of historical social pedagogy have investigated the complicity and active role of social workers and officials in the inhuman ideology and practice during the Nazi era in Germany (e.g. Amthor et al., 2022; Kappeler, 2000; Lehnert, 2003). Another example concerns the processing of violence against children in out-of-home care and forced placements. Public relations work and testimonies by those affected, research projects and political efforts have been carried out in recent years in different parts of the world with the aim of coming to terms with and recognizing injustice and suffering by children and families. You can find these activities for example in European countries - e.g. Austria (Bütow & Holztrattner, 2022), Switzerland (Hauss et al., 2018), Ireland (Haughton et al., 2021), Germany (see above) – as well as in Australia (Swain, 2018; Wright et al., 2021) and Canada (see a list of the truth and Reconciliation Commissions Reports at https://nctr.ca/). Over the last 20 years, lots of activities took place in Germany to investigate, to compensate and to raise awareness for the suffering of those children and youth who experienced humiliation, violence and abuse in out-of-home care institutions in the second half of the 20th century. In the beginning the focus was mainly on West Germany (here: the 1950s and 1960s). Survivors, civil society activists and researchers had to put much effort in claiming that also the wrongdoing of child and youth welfare institutions in the GDR must be included. At both a systemic and individual level, this involves questions of guilt, responsibility and reparation towards those affected (survivors) who experienced violence in the support system as children and young people. Often, the assumption of guilt and responsibility by those involved in the support system or the institutions is rejected (first) e.g. with reference to contemporary ideas of upbringing and punishment. As a result, demands by survivors for compensation for the injustice they have suffered are rejected or only partially met by institutions. This applies to demands for compensation in the form of monetary payments, but also compensation through apologies and a public admission of guilt (Baumgart et al. 2019; Düring, 2021; Schrapper 2021, Schruth 2021).

In recent years' questions of failures, responsibility and guilt in relation to child protection work have been discussed and examined. Causes were deaths of children who were known to the help system or who received help but nevertheless died from abuse and neglect. As a result, reports and serious case reviews were commissioned and expert committees were set up to identify the (structural and personal) causes of the failure of the support systems and their actors. Recommendations were also to be derived on this basis in order to improve child protection procedures (Bericht der Hamburger Enquete Kommission, 2018; Munro 2011). In this context, authors as Leigh (2017) or Warner (2015) draw their attention on the (side) effects of blame, crisis and reform within child protection services and the burdens social work professionals have to deal with. But it must be cleared out that not only in families (under supervision of care workers and local authorities) but also in child and youth welfare institutions themselves, violations of children's rights, including violence and abuse of power, are repeatedly reported. In some cases, however, it is still very difficult for those affected to be believed on the one hand and for things to change on the other. Given the knowledge of past mistakes and current risks, social work must face up to the challenge of taking responsibility and being aware of its own potential for power.

3   Conclusion

This article has explored the complex relationship between guilt, shame, and diversity issues within the context of social work practice. By delving into the emotional complexities experienced by both service providers and clients, particularly in relation to racism, poverty, and institutional dynamics, we have highlighted the significance of understanding and addressing guilt and shame for effective intervention and support. The examination of guilt and shame in various contexts, from interpersonal interactions to structural inequalities, underscores the need for nuanced approaches that consider both individual and systemic factors. Within social work - particularly in the German and UK contexts - the focus on emotions has only increased in recent years (e.g., Ingram 2015; Kommission Sozialpädagogik 2018). This is surprising, considering that social work aims to 'address life challenges and enhance well-being' (IFSW, 2014). However, little research has been conducted specifically on guilt and shame, with Frost et al. (2020) being a notable exception. We believe that this represents a promising direction that warrants further exploration.We would also like to emphasize the importance of fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and an interdisciplinary perspective in both research and practice within social work, especially with regard to cross-cutting issues such as emotions (Düring & Harth, 2025). Utilizing the basic principles of psychology regarding emotional knowledge can be of benefit to social work. Increased collaboration between disciplines can not only lead to a better understanding of emotions and their impact on social behaviour, but also contribute to innovative interventions and practical solutions. Therefore, it is critical to continue to promote interdisciplinary research and exchange between psychology, social work and related disciplines to fully realize the potential of this important intersection.

Furthermore, the intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1994) and empowerment-oriented practices emerge as promising frameworks for promoting equity and justice while challenging oppressive structures with regard to diversity. Moving forward, future research should continue to explore the multifaceted nature of guilt and shame in social work contexts, while practitioners must remain vigilant in addressing discriminatory practices and promoting inclusivity and dignity for all individuals. In doing so, social work can fulfil its transformative potential in fostering resilience, empowerment, and meaningful change together with and within communities.

With regard to the planning and design of institutions and services, it seems promising to us to involve those who are to use them more closely in planning and decision-making processes. This would redress the existing power imbalance between professionals and (future) users and, at best, reduce the potential for shaming and abuse of power.

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