



Deviant Bodies (ASEM)

Amie Levesque

Department of Sociology and Criminology

In the Advanced Seminar, *Deviant Bodies*, I assigned a final project in which students conducted a content analysis of data they collected from social media websites. I tasked students with collecting 50 pieces of data in the form of comment posts, short videos, or photos that illustrated body shaming related to a topic of their choice. Once they collected their data, students organized and coded it, and then wrote a 10-12 page analysis of the ways in which body shaming manifested on these social media websites. I required students to put their coded data into an appendix of their paper. Students utilized at least four scholarly sources they found in addition to assigned course readings to ground their thinking about the patterns they found and the conclusions they drew. In this assignment, I really wanted students to look for obvious and subtle examples of body shaming while thinking about them sociologically. I had four goals for my students:

1. Collect, code, and organize data collected on the internet.
2. Identify examples of body shaming, under a well-defined topic of their choice, and demonstrate how the examples illustrated body shaming.
3. Utilize scholarly research to both ground and shape student analysis of body shaming on social media sites.
4. Analyze data in a well-organized and concise essay.

Students presented a variety of types of body shaming, including colorism (shaming of dark-skinned Black women), bottom shaming (shaming of gay men who are penetrated in anal sex with men), tattoo shaming, muscle shaming of athletic women, fat shaming, breastfeeding shaming, and the shaming of transgendered bodies. In this paper, I analyze two student papers: one on tattoo shaming, and one about shaming the Black female body. Both students demonstrated an ability to meet my goals for their papers, but one student offered a paper that achieved these goals less well.

My student who wrote their paper on tattoo shaming organized their essay in a very concise way, defining body shaming, generally, and then linking that definition to tattoo shaming. According to this student,

While shaming constitutes any action that creates guilt, regret, or embarrassment within an individual who has done something wrong, the results are expected to be corrective behaviors taken upon the shamed to re-modify themselves to equate with the socially constructed standard of 'normal.'

For this student, shaming is a process associated with power in which people who do not fit within the norms of society are subjected to practices of shaming. This student then drew a sophisticated argument:

Tattoos have become statements to visually express stories, experiences, interests, and the trials and tributes someone has gone through. These tattooed bodies have become pieces of art visible by the public, but they have also become the target for public shaming. I argue that even though the act of tattooing has become more acceptable than it once was, the presence of the associated deviant stigma still exists. Tattoo shaming is not fading; it is changing to shame the tattooed individuals from a different social perspective, as well as shaming them in the career field by greatly hindering them from job access. There is a line of acceptability in terms of the tattoo(s) and it is dependent on the meaning behind it, its visual aesthetic, and where it is located on the body, in addition to the collective number of tattoos on the body.

This student clearly took the reader through the context of tattooing and then made a strong argument about the shifting meanings of tattoos within our society. The student then argued that the transforming stigma of tattooing, while accepted in some arenas, was largely present in the career world. This student went on to write a paper in which they drew on examples from websites like LinkedIn to illustrate body shaming of people with tattoos. The student also grounded their work within scholarly work, to show that researchers have documented employers in the healthcare, teaching, and legal professions who stigmatize people with tattoos on their bodies. Finally, this student did not just provide examples of body shaming, but provided deep discussion about *why* the examples they presented were indeed stories of body shaming. In providing data in which a commenter shared, "Never understood the appeal [of tattoos]. It's like me taking my new Merc [Mercedes] and me carving my initials into it," my student went on to analyze how this was shaming. They stated, "There was consistent repetition of how idiotic the tattooed person was for permanently marking their body and not thinking about the long-term consequences of their decision." In this part of the analysis, my student not only provided the example of tattoo shaming, but discussed why this example showed this type of shaming, a skill that many students are still developing.

Another student wrote their paper about the shaming of Black women's bodies. While this student's paper was good, it lacked the sophisticated analysis of the first paper I discussed. This student utilized some scholarly work to demonstrate the empowerment that Black

women find in their bodies—through their hair, their body shape, and the color of their skin. Where this student fell short was in the lack of analysis in the examples of shaming they presented. In other words, it was unclear how the student determined these were examples of shaming. In discussing skin shades, for example, the student argued, “Being a light skinned woman or man is seen as more beautiful, attractive and more approachable than dark skinned woman or man.” The student then neglects to show evidence from the data they collected. Later in this section of the paper, the student does add a comment, “Whites still seem to prefer and to find less threatening persons who look more like themselves. These preferred individuals tend to be lighter-skinned and economically better-off.” While this quote, taken from an online comment, does show the shaming of darker skinned Black people, this example came much later in the paper rather than being tied to the original argument made in this section about the shaming of darker skinned Black women.

Another way in which this student fell short in their paper was in presenting the data itself. The student wrote a compelling paper about body shaming of Black women, particularly by presenting articles that discussed the struggles Black women face with altering their bodies to fit within dominant and White standards of beauty in our society. The student added examples of data pulled from comments on websites, but only sprinkled them lightly throughout their paper without analyzing them more fully. This student had a really ambitious focus, in setting out to show how Black women’s bodies are shamed in society, but they were unable to deliver a concise presentation of the data. Rather, the student incorporated many types of shaming of Black women’s bodies, from hair, to skin color, to body size. This paper would have been better delivered if it focused on one of these themes, like hair or skin color. In fact, another student did focus on dark-skinned Black women’s bodies, and was very successful in their analysis through this approach.

Generally, the final assignment in deviant bodies was an exciting one for me to read. I found that students wrote on topics about which they were passionate. Many shared personal narratives of experiences with body shaming. I found students to be deeply engaged with their projects, but in examining one paper that exceeded my expectations and another that was less successful, I found areas of improvement in my delivery of this project. First, in student proposals of this project, I need to work more closely with those that fail to clearly define and focus their topic of body shaming. I anticipated that student discovery of scholarly sources would help to inform their understanding of their topic, but this was not always the case. As students uncovered more and more data, they struggled to narrow and focus their organization of that data. Some were more successful than others. Another area in which I can provide better guidance is in working more closely with students as they complete their data collection. Students would have benefited from discussing the data they collected in a workshop *before* they started to write their papers. This would allow students the time and space to manage their data into a more concise analysis.

Designing a project in which students gathered their own original data, organized and coded it, and then analyzed and grounded it within scholarly literature in a concise essay was a challenging task for each of these upper level students. However, the progress they made through their drafts and presentations really showed that many of them desired this type of deeper understanding of their social world. They examined interactions that they take for granted around topics with which they felt personally connected. Although I plan to tweak

some of the process before they submit their final papers in future courses, the above examples show that we can challenge students with these multi-faceted projects and many will be successful in a variety of ways.

