

THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST SITTING WITH A PATIENT WHO IS EXPERIENCING SHAME: AN EXPLORATION OF SHAME'S EMERGENCE, SUBTLETY, AND MEANING

By Paula Branch Holt, 2013

This research project explores the experience of the psychodynamically, psychoanalytically, or analytically oriented therapist sitting with a patient who is experiencing shame. It is a study of the therapist's recognition of shame, how shame is perceived, shame's influence within the countertransference, and the influence of clinical orientation within clinical space.

This research used the qualitative approach of grounded theory. The data was collected through interviews with seven seasoned therapists who had long been immersed in the study of shame. The findings were organized by the patterns and discoveries found occurring in the data. The findings were structured toward locating a coherent and more central consideration of shame in psychotherapy and theory.

These interviews revealed unexpected common patterns in three areas: (a) the therapists' subjective/empathic use of their own shame experience in therapy, (b) the therapists' similar immersion in the overt or subtle cues of the presence of shame, and (c) in their therapists' primary dependence on direct experience despite an understanding of shame's academic theory. It was significant that signs of positive shame emerged in the experience of empathic connections with patients enhanced by each therapist's own shame work and recognition of vulnerability. Toxic shame was found to be experienced as an intrusion that can range from unpleasant to painful.

Keywords: Countertransference, contagion, hidden shame, therapist's shame, positive shame, toxic shame, vulnerability, right brain connection.