

# **When virtuous ('deugsame') women flee: A reflection on dread and flight in group therapy in one South African setting**

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## **Abstract**

The literature strongly suggests that low-income South African women are psychologically at risk and that, for various reasons, the treatment of choice should be group therapy. In this paper I reflect on my experience of supervising graduate students' clinical and fieldwork with women in a low-income semi-rural community. In this community it seems that despite everyone's good intentions, group participants, therapists and the supervisor have unconscious but unspoken fears regarding the group encounters. I argue that Bion's notion of the 'nameless dread' is useful in understanding the group dynamics that seem to be typical of group therapy in this particular context. Nameless dread is thought to be communicated through projective identification, where therapists and participants constantly but unconsciously 'nudge' each other to act out in accordance with their respective internal states. Instead of projections being contained by being metabolized, therapists and participants defend against their anxieties through enactment. The participants do this by not being emotionally present, by literally not attending the group or dropping out of the group (Bion's 'flight' response). Similarly, there are also enactments on the part of the group therapists and supervisor. These enactments often involve an unconscious emotional abandonment of the group, but also consciously deciding to give up on trying to keep a group going. I reflect on whether or how group therapy can be an appropriate psychological intervention for low-income women in South African contexts, but also argue that psychoanalytic theory is useful for understanding the dynamics of such groups.