

Thinking about contextual deprivation in mother-infant work in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper is based on a 12 week New Beginnings group intervention for mothers and their infants in a shelter in Johannesburg, South Africa. Contextual deprivation loomed large in the therapeutic encounter and preoccupied both participants and therapists. At times, this preoccupation hindered the participants' and therapists' capacity for reflective functioning. This paper argues that contextual deprivation functioned at times as an anti-analytic third in the therapeutic process, interfering with thoughtfulness. A close reading of the beginning of two consecutive sessions that took place toward the end of the intervention reveals how central deprivation was and how, through the therapeutic group process and the therapists' working through of challenging countertransferential material, the rigidity of deprivation in the minds of the therapists and group members was shifted. Although the contextual deprivation remained unchanged, there appeared to be more capacity for flexibility in thinking about it.