

# **‘Vrot kolletjies’: Shame, silence and enactment in psychotherapy with impoverished clients**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how shame functions in psychotherapeutic encounters in the South African context, particularly in encounters between middle-class psychologists and their impoverished clients. Informed by intersubjective psychoanalysis, shame is assumed to be an intersubjective affective and cognitive experience, a painful feeling of humiliation or distress experienced in relation to a perceived self defect or deficit. In this personal narrative, the author uses several clinical vignettes and journal extracts to reflect on how shame is articulated and operative in psychotherapy in a particular South African context. It is suggested that shame is an almost inevitable part of the psychotherapeutic encounter, but particularly so in the new South Africa in encounters between black and white, rich and poor. Shame is difficult to articulate and is often not made explicit. Disavowed shame may potentially lead to depression, rage, anticipatory rejection, abandonment, ostracism and relegation to inferior status. Shame often also leads to enactments by client and/or psychotherapist and these enactments can often be understood as metaphors for the powerful and multi-layered dynamics that accompany and inform shame. To avoid the potential negative impact of shame on the psychotherapeutic relationship, it is necessary for the psychotherapist to be open to the unplanned and the unexpected as enacted by both parties. If shame is recognized and made explicit it may facilitate, rather than undermine, the therapy process.