

Abstract

Shame is common and a universal part of the human condition. There has been much theorising about shame, but negligible research on the Black African experience of shame within the therapeutic relationship.

This qualitative research study looked at how the black African female experiences and conceptualises shame within their culture and gender and how shame issues present in psychotherapy training and within the therapeutic relationship. The research also explored what approaches are helpful in working with Black African shame and the impact of shame in the therapy process itself.

Four psychotherapists were interviewed and data was analysed using the heuristic approach. Findings indicated that shame presented itself from an early age within their culture but there was a distinct lack of awareness and language about it. Shame had no voice and was masked through the expectations of how a woman behaved and dressed, within her culture. In working with shame, the therapeutic relationship was identified as being a helpful and supportive space to explore their feelings, thoughts and processes. Being part of a minority evoked shame through being black and there was a collective sense that being female also evoked feelings of shame.

Psychotherapists are encouraged to pay attention to the dynamics of shame in their interactions with the experiences of the Black African female and strive to understand the impacts of culture on their core sense of shame. A secure attachment needs to be developed in order to offer a reparative relationship with a core sense of shame.