

European Accredited Psychotherapy Training Institute – Gestalt
Psychotherapy Training Institute Malta (EAPTI-GPTIM)

**Qualitative research on phenomenology of
changes in romantic relationships after the
experience of shame**

Professional doctorate in gestalt psychotherapy
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Inspiration for dealing with this subject



Or

How did I end up with this
subject?

Research problem

- Shame is present in partner relationships, even in ones that are functional.
- In dysfunctional relationships shame creates a specific dynamic that can have a destructive impact.
- Shame is hard to perceive in the moment when it happens because it is masked from the outside by strategies.
- Awareness of shame is lacking or absent at the time when it occurs

Research context

Previous studies have shown connection between shame and:

- various forms of maladaptive behavior, as well as mild to severe psychopathology (Tangney & Dearing, 2002);
- loneliness, low self-esteem, co-dependence and insecure attachment style (Wells, Glickauf-Hughes & Jones, 1999).
- Fear of intimacy (Lutwak, Panish, & Ferrari, 2003; Erzar, T. & Torkar, M. & Kompan, Erzar, K.,2010).
- Gestalt modality - internalized shame is an important limiting factor of marital intimacy and can also be a factor that destroys a relationship (Lee, 1993).

The relational approach is missing when researching the phenomenon of shame, i.e., examining the intersection of personal experience, relational experience, and the broader context."

"Purpose and subject of the research"



Subject

The subject of this research is shame that is internalized in the selves of partners, which inhibits the self and prevents the exchange of dialogue within the couple



Purpose

The motivation for this work arose from the need to contribute to the knowledge about internalized shame within the context of a couple's system

Key theoretical concepts and perspectives

01

Phenomenon and conceptualization of shame

- Shame
- Manifestations of shame and strategies of coping with shame
- Function of shame
- Unhealthy-internalized shame
- Mechanism of creating internalized shame
- Self-disintegration

02

Attempts to resolve shame - creative adaptations in individuals and in couples

- When relational needs for connection are not met
- Unfinished business and fixed gestalt
- Transfers
- Introjects

03

Shame in romantic relationships

- Shame and intimacy
- What can provoke shame in romantic relationships
- Couple's dynamic based on internalized shame
- The trap that shame can bring to a couple - impasse

04

Shame and support in romantic relationships

- Living with and without external support
- Quality of partner contact in crisis situations (relational support in couples)
- Presence of an intimate witness - opportunity for development and integration of the self

Research objective



Primary research objectives

... to explore the **experience of changes** occurring in partners and their relationship after **going through an experience of shame**, as well as **factors** shaping the passage through the experience of shame and **outcomes** of this process



(a) Phenomenology of changes - description of the subjective experience of changes in each partner individually, and in the romantic relationship



(b) Interpretation and understanding of these changes by relying on perspectives offered by gestalt psychotherapy theory.

Research questions



1. Self: Who does a **person** become during and after their own experience of passing through shame with their partner?



2. Relation: What happens to the **partnership**, or who do partners become during and after experiencing shame?



3. Factors: Which factors shape the passage through this experience and influence the outcomes of changes after experiencing shame?

The background features several overlapping, semi-transparent circles in muted colors: light beige, pale green, and soft pink. A thin, dark red line curves across the top and bottom of the frame. The text is centered in a bold, dark grey serif font.

Research methodology

General methodological framework

Empirical, exploratory, qualitative research

Primary source of knowledge and approach to the phenomenon: subjective perspective of participants who have experienced shame - phenomenological study

Sample

Purposeful sampling :



- 6 participants of heterosexual orientation
- 3 females and 3 males
- Age: 28-51 years old



- Longer than 2 years together
- Experienced shame in the relationship
- Experience with gestalt therapy

The researcher is simultaneously a therapist for four out of six participants.

Data collection method

Main instrument: In-depth semi-structured interview constructed for this research

Themes:



Contextual information



Description of the critical event, the situation that provoked shame, and the lived experience of shame



Changes after the experience of shame:

- (a) Experience of the consequences of prolonged presence of shame for oneself personally
- (b) Experience of the consequences of prolonged presence of shame for the relationship



Factors: capacity for communication in crisis situations, unfinished business; barriers/fears; support systems

Auxiliary instrument: drawings

the experience of shame, individual changes after the experience of shame and changes in the couple after the experience of shame

Data analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)


Process:

- Codes and themes were initially generated inductively
- Development of theme maps
- Interpretation of themes (drawing on narrative generation and gestalt theoretical concepts)

The entire process of data collection and analysis lasted for 10 months.



Phases of data analysis

- Transcripts analysis of the first two participants as case studies. 
- Initiation of the cross-sectional analysis: mapping of lower-order themes.
- Alternate analysis of individual transcripts and supplementation of the cross-sectional analysis: initiation of mapping higher-order themes.
- Finalization of the comparative analysis: integration of the obtained themes and the ultimate hierarchy of identified analytical categories.



The background features several overlapping, semi-transparent circles in muted colors: light pink, light green, and light grey. A thin, dark red line curves across the top of the image. The text 'Research findings' is centered in a bold, dark grey serif font.

Research findings

Research question 1:

**WHO DOES A PERSON BECOME
AFTER GOING THROUGH A
CHRONIC EXPERIENCE OF
SHAME?**

**I
SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS: CRITICAL EVENTS
INVOLVING THE EXPERIENCE OF SHAME**

Marijela:

Conflicts with husband involving insulting and humiliation of the participant

Teodora:

Attempts to hug or hold hands shoved away by the husband

Svetlana:

Attempts to initiate sex met with nonresponsiveness and ignoring

Dragan:

Caught flirting with his ex-girlfriend and lying to his partner

Janko:

Spying to discover partner's infidelity and shameful silence of several years

Ognjen:

Shame of having been professionally reprimanded in front of an extremely successful partner

**II
PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE**

Physical intensity of the experience of shame

Psychological manifestations of the experience of shame

Guilt and remorse

Loneliness, abandonment, non-belonging

Simultaneous collapse and relief

Shock, injury and humiliation

**III
CONSEQUENCES OF SHAME ON SELF-IDENTITY**

Loss of self-confidence and a feeling of inadequacy

Chronic exhaustion, disorientation and anxiety

Generalization of the negative view of self beyond any limits and depression

Reaching out and being rejected create shame, fear and arrest

Confusion of identity

**IV
PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AFTER THERAPY**

Awareness alone does not effect change

Floating between maintaining boundaries and repeating old patterns

Regression

Progression and regression in the attempts to develop new patterns of connection

Better setting of boundaries and partialization of shame

Exploring the extremes of distance and closeness in the relationship before reaching a good place

Advancement in readiness to expose oneself despite shame

Selected events for the experience of shame

I

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS: CRITICAL EVENTS INVOLVING THE EXPERIENCE OF SHAME

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Research question 2:

WHO DOES A COUPLE BECOME DURING AND AFTER GOING THROUGH CHRONIC EXPERIENCE OF PAIN?

**II
COUPLE DYNAMICS:
DANCE OF DISTANCING AND APPROACHING AGAIN**

Disbalance of power: dynamics of withdrawal and attempts to restore power

Rejection: minimisation and other manoeuvres in an attempt to meet

Hiding leads to mistrust, revealing leads to connection

Ambivalence and impossibility of lasting change

Chronic disbalance of power leads to distance and breakup

Opening up balances the power and brings the couple together

**I
SITUATIONS THAT PROVOKE SHAME**

Disbalance of power and a feeling of inferiority

Rejection when initiating

Discovering an unwanted aspect of self

Attacker-victim dynamic: cancellation

Partner's infidelity confirms own worthlessness

Partner's criticism and fear of failure yield shame

**III
STRATEGIES OF COPING WITH SHAME AND MAINTAIN COUPLE'S DYNAMICS**

Projecting partner's vulnerability and giving up on oneself

One-sided acceptance of responsibility because of the feeling of inadequacy

Tolerating the frustration and one-sided attempts at the resolution of the issue

Fixating on the positive and minimizing the negative aspects of the relationship

Deflection: creation of vagueness

Shifting the aggression

**IV
PERMANENT TRANSFORMATION OF THE COUPLE AFTER THE EXPERIENCE OF SHAME**

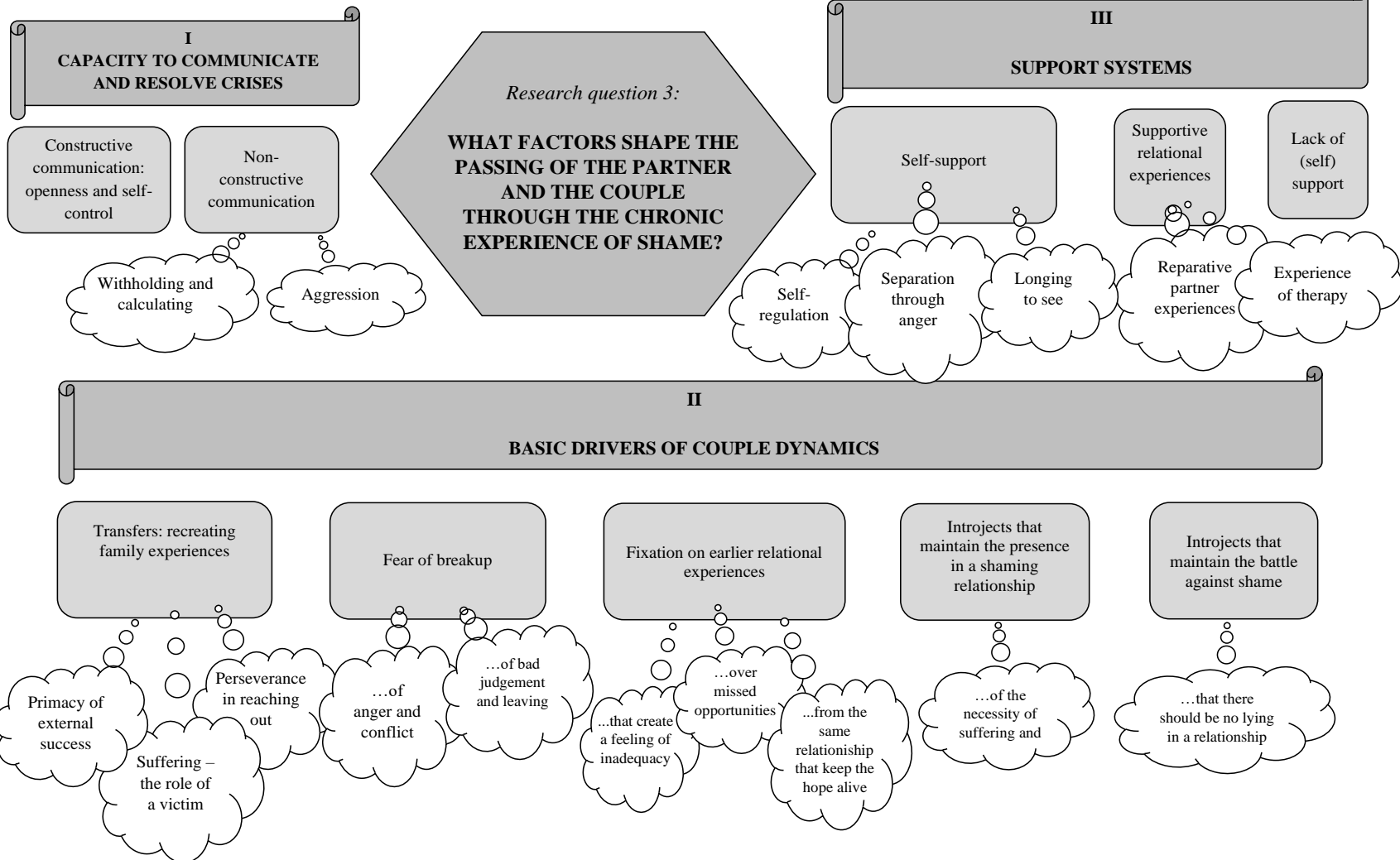
Long term retroreflection leads to being stuck in an unsatisfactory relationship without changes

Chronic sexual rejection leads to the transformation from a romantic relationship to a friendly one

Long term retroreflection leads to the dissolution of the relationship through impulsiveness

Long term rejection leads to permanent distancing

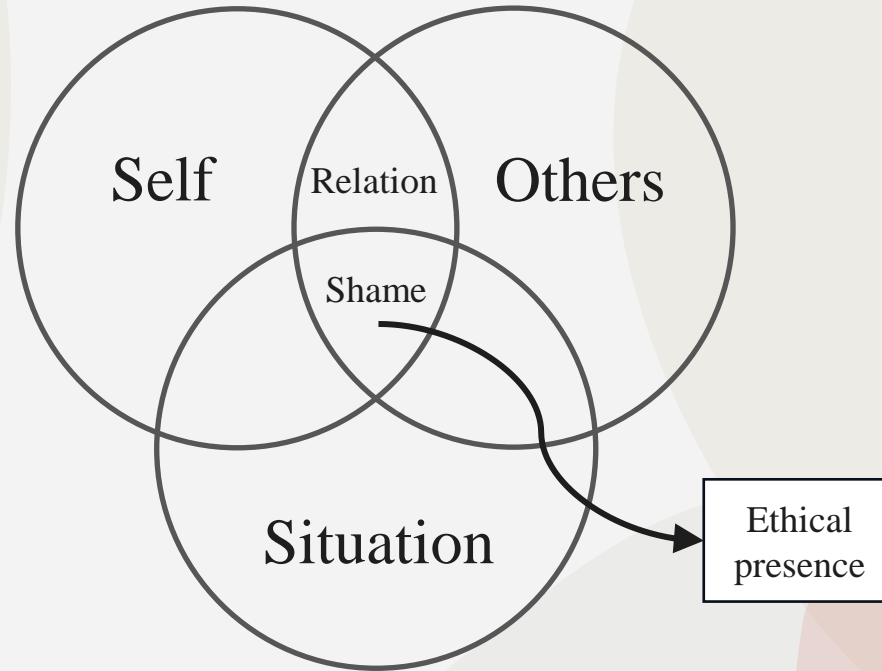
Coming together through a reparative relationship





Synthesis of data and discussion of findings

Model for the synthesis of results

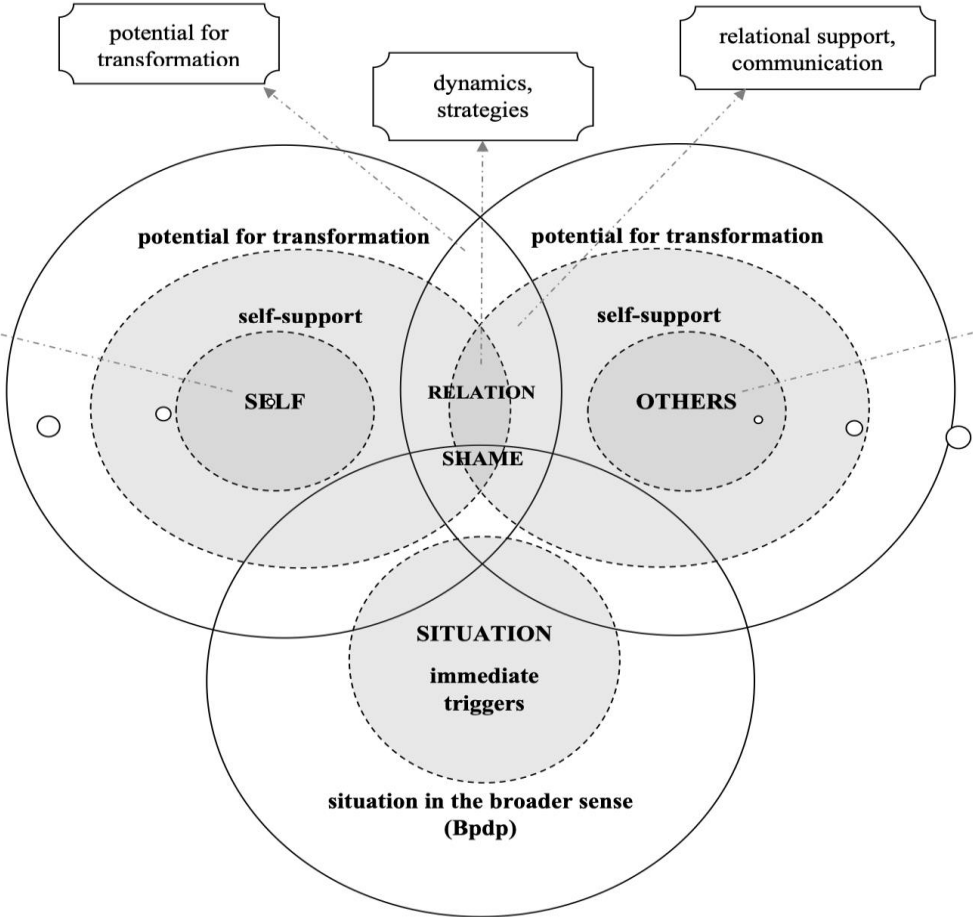


SOS model

Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac (2013), reconceptualization: Taylor, (2021)

EXPERIENCE OF SHAME THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE SOS MODEL

- transfer*
- fixations*
- fears*
- introjects*



- transfer*
- fixations*
- fears*
- introjects*



Situation

Layer 1: Immediate triggers/circumstances that provoke shame in the couple



Power imbalance



Rejection after reaching out



Revealing an undesirable aspect of the self

- Drastic attacker-victim relationship and cancellation
- Collapsed self-confidence and feelings of worthlessness in one of the partners
- Fear of failure provoked by criticism, which then creates a sense of powerlessness in the relationship.



Additional insight - Gender specificity: Power imbalance for both genders

Rejection solely of women

Revealing an undesirable aspect of the self - men

Situation

Layer 2: Broader context (basic drivers of couple dynamics)



Transfers

- Rejection and constant repeated reaching out
- Hiding internal values in favour of external achievements
- Suffering and repeating the role of a victim created in the abuse of power.



Fixation on previous relational experiences

- For missed opportunities
- which creates a sense of inadequacy
- For positives, which evoke hope



Fear of relationship termination

- Fear of conflict
- Fear of judgment
- and abandonment



Introjects

- Supporting the persistence of shame (one should sacrifice for great love, one should not give up)
- Supporting the passage through shame (one should not lie in a relationship)



Additional insights: - Participants did not refer to their own choice of partner and to their own responsibility for co-creating certain dynamics.

- The strength of unfinished business and fixed gestalts

Self in the experience of shame

Layer 1



Basic drivers of shame dynamics

- transfers
- fixations
- fears
- introjects



Experience of shame

- Physical (distress, pain, tension, survival fight)
- Psychological (shock, hurt, loneliness, abandonment, guilt, regret)



Additional insights:

Intensity of participants' experience of shame, one of the strongest experiences of the self.

- Experience of simultaneous breakdown and relief, disintegration and hope for a new beginning.

Self in the experience of shame

Layer 2: Self-support



Presence of self-support

- Self-soothing (self-regulation)
- Self-care, as anger facilitates separation from toxic relationships
- Longing to be seen by the partner and unrestricted emotional exchange



Absence of self-support and external support



Additional insights:

Longing for connection - Natural need of the self for growth and development, completion of painful unfinished business from the past in a more vital way (Wheeler, 2000)

Self in the experience of shame

Layer 3



Destructive potential of shame on personal identity

- Decrease in self-confidence and feelings of inadequacy
- Chronic exhaustion, disorientation, and anxiety
- Generalization of negative self-experience to absurdity and depression
- Reaching out and rejection create intense shame, fear, and paralysis
- Identity confusion



Constructive potential of shame - personal transformation after therapy

- Better boundary setting and compartmentalization of shame
- Progression and regression in the attempt to develop new patterns of connection
- Recovery process: exploring extremes of distance and closeness before reaching a better place
- Progress in readiness for exposure despite shame



Additional insights: *Chronic and prolonged exposure and being in shame cannot go "unpunished"; it permanently changes a person's personality (from more severe to milder consequences). New shame bonds are created - Every situation with a partner in which the feelings, desires, and way of being in the world of one person are not noticed, evaluated, or reacted to continuously, individually has the potential to create a new shame bond. (Wheeler, 2000).*

Relation (Couple's Self) in the experience of shame



Dynamics - dance of distancing and re-approaching

- Power imbalance
- Negative outcome: ambivalence (constant oscillation entering and exiting the toxic relationship)
- Positive outcome: exiting retroflection (less powerful partner) and opening up to the partner
- Rejection
- Hiding leads to distrust and distance, while revealing leads to closeness

Layer 1



Strategies

- Projecting the partner's vulnerability rationalizes abandoning oneself
- Unilateral assumption of responsibility due to feelings of inadequacy
- Tolerance of frustration and active attempts at unilateral problem-solving
- Disconnect from reality - split and fixation on positive aspects with suppression or minimization of negatives
- Deflection creates ambiguity regarding the reality of the relationship
- Shifting aggression



Additional insights: *Desensitization, deflection, projection, and retroflection (below are introjects).*

Adaptations: - *strong (to the point of self-annihilation), sometimes conscious, more often unconscious.*

- *fixed and rigid, long-lasting and resilient to change:* - *"We have grown together like a crooked tree."*

- *function - preservation of the partnership (even aggression)*

Relation (Couple's Self) in the experience of shame

Layer 2: Support



Relational - External support

- Capacity for communication and crisis resolution (capacity for ethical presence)
 - Constructive
 - Non-constructive



Supportive relational experiences

- Reparative partner experiences
- Therapeutic experience as a strong source of support



Absence of external support

Additional insight: Greater prevalence and diversity in patterns of non-constructive communication. The intimate witness has the quality of reparative experience for the person who reveals themselves (Wheeler, 2000).

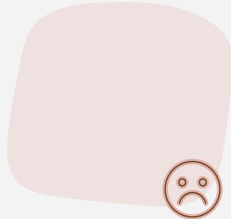
Relation (Couple's Self) in the experience of shame

Layer 3: Couple's potential for transformation after experiencing shame (five more lasting changes of the couple):

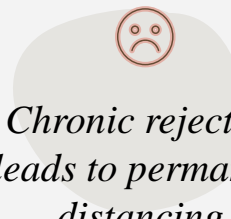


***Impasse** - prolonged retroflection leads to being stuck in an unsatisfying relationship without changes*

- Dual experience of the relationship (satisfaction and dissatisfaction)
- Chronic feeling of guilt that reinforces being stuck in the relationship



Chronic sexual rejection leads to a transformation of the relationship from romantic to friendly.



Chronic rejection leads to permanent distancing.



Long-term retroflection leads to relationship breakup through impulsiveness.



Closeness through reparative relationship



***Additional insights:** Dominance of negative adaptations. Is the destructive potential of shame much greater than the constructive?*



Implications for the psychotherapeutic practice

Implications for the psychotherapeutic practice

Research into the situations/triggers of shame.

Research on the dynamics and situation in broader sense

Research on the experience of shame and strategies for coping with shame

Work on support systems

Potential for transformation

Implications for the psychotherapeutic practice

Additional insights: 

- The research findings corroborate that support is crucial in determining the direction in which the potential for shame will develop: whether it leads to rigidification and diminishing of the self, or growth, development, and healing of the self.
- It is essential to develop a framework for a support system individually for each aspect of therapeutic work with shame.

Research limitations

- Complexity of the design.
- Relatively small and, by its characteristics, specific sample.
- Themes.
- Differences among participants.
- Variability of experience.
- Gestalt theoretical perspective and therapeutic orientation.
- Dual role: the researcher in this study is simultaneously a therapist to the participants.

Recommendations for further research

- A foundation for the initial step and a framework for future researchers who would like to continue exploring this topic, focusing on specific aspects of this study.
- An expanded and more diverse sample and comparative studies.
- Different theoretical and therapeutic paradigms.
- A study in the form of action research.
- Research of the practical implementation of therapeutic recommendations provided in this study.

Contribution to gestalt psychotherapy



Approach to the phenomenon: complexity and comprehensiveness, uncovering different layers and dimensions of the research phenomenon, and support from experience.



Empirical verification of Gestalt theoretical models and providing guidelines for practice.



Focus on the relational aspect of the phenomenon in the context of a romantic relationship.



Implications for practice through a comprehensive understanding of the entire process and support for individual phases of the process.

Thank you!

