

Abstract

Although shame has become increasingly well researched and systematically written about in the field of psychotherapy, the relationship between positive emotions and shame remains less explored. This research study set out to investigate how integrative psychotherapists working from a relational developmental model approach the expression of positive emotions to clients with a high degree of internalised shame. A grounded theory approach was chosen in order to capture emerging processes from the data. Semi-structured interviews were carried out and subsequently analysed in a three-stage process of coding. A contact phenomenon was identified whereby psychotherapy clients with a high degree of internalised shame were found to experience difficult or painful emotions, or to exhibit a range of dissociative responses, in reaction to the therapist's expressed positivity. Primary and secondary strategies with which the therapist may respond to this phenomenon were identified, and the interrelations between the various categories were described. It was argued that the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn from the study is limited. Nevertheless, a case was made that the study provided corroboratory evidence for existing theoretical models of chronic shame, and valuable insights for the integrative psychotherapist's clinical work with chronically-shamed clients.