

Abstract

The aim of the present qualitative heuristic and hermeneutic phenomenological study was to create a broad and accurate picture of the shame affect and provide both a description of the experience of the torment of shame, and ways out of shame.

Five experienced psychotherapists, interested in shame, working as supervisors, trainers, managers of counselling and psychotherapy services, and writers of psychotherapy books, participated in seven semi-structured interviews totalling seven hours. The interviews focused on the use of metaphors when working with shame issues in therapy, supervision and training, which yielded 2155 metaphors. A thematic analysis was conducted on the 301 rated strongest metaphors in the data, which were coded and put into themes and sub-themes. This was condensed into a detailed discussion on the 22 most poetical and striking multi-layered conceptual metaphors offering the richest descriptions of the nature of shame and ways of dealing with it.

The analysis initially produced a picture of the phenomenon of shame as a complex process, made up of negative, positive and middle-ground metaphors about defences which were called 'bridging' metaphors. This showed shame as an experience of Isolation, Powerlessness, Sensory agony, Self-consciousness and Woundedness, with multiple ways of presenting itself (or camouflaging itself). The analysis also showed key consistent themes of ways out of shame as a secure Relationship, involving core conditions of warmth, non-judgementalism, empathy and trust; Knowledge, involving curiosity, vulnerability, recognising, exploring and understanding; Creativity involving imaginative/unorthodox use of language, inner and outer dialogue and image, creative adjustments and strategies; and Acceptance, involving acknowledging and accepting shame compassionately, with good humour, as a normal part of life. Defence mechanisms, both helpful to protect us, and unhelpful, to maintain stuck shame positions, were identified. Shame work involves becoming familiar with the deep and wide phenomenon of shame, talking about it, understanding the defences that hold us in shame, working through and reconciling to the reality of shame.

The researchers' metaphorical journey of exploration through the multi-faceted landscape of shame with the participants and her own seven year study of the heuristic shame experience led to healing and crystallisation. The metaphors were integrated into a map of the territory of shame, held together in the wisdom offered in 09's metaphor: "*Love is the antidote to shame*". The concepts of "The Four E's of Shame: Entering, Engaging with, Expressing and Embracing shame", and also "Creative Assertiveness" were introduced. 397 words