

# Chapter 2

## Shame! A System Psychodynamic Perspective

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**Abstract** The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to existing knowledge about shame, through using the systems psychodynamic perspective. Firstly I explore the definition of shame, by building on ideas that illustrate the unconscious dynamics of shame in the context of culture. Then follows an overview of systems psychodynamics, which has its theoretical underpinnings in psycho-analytic thinking based on the work of Freud, Klein's object relations theory, Bion's work on groups, Jaques's and Menzies Lyth's work on organisations as social defences and envious attacks, and open systems theory. A case study is presented to illustrate how systems psychodynamics can contribute to our understanding of shame dynamics operating at the intersection of culture and race (In this chapter race is used in accordance with the South African construction of groups based on their skin colour using apartheid and post-apartheid values.), and how this enhanced understanding can impact the work of practitioners.

### 2.1 Introduction

Exploring the psychodynamics of our emotions often elicits thoughts about the destructive elements of these emotions, at the expense of a positive stance towards the value of these emotions. I see the so-called destructive elements of emotions as elements that can be worked with and processed for an enhanced understanding of one's reaction, in the service of achieving a more useful outcome—such as a conversation that integrates the complexities of the human condition (see Cilliers and May 2010). It is in fact by ignoring, repressing and denying these elements that we ensure destructive outcomes for individuals, groups and organisations.

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Therefore, I hold that by focusing on the so-called destructive (and constructive) elements of emotions, in this case shame, we can work with these elements in the service of integrating the complexities at the intersection between culture and race.

The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to existing knowledge about shame, i.e. how our understanding of shame, in the context of the intersection between culture and race, can be enhanced through using the system psychodynamic perspective. I first give an overview of the definition of shame, building in ideas that illustrate the unconscious dynamics of shame. Then follows an overview of systems psychodynamics, which is based on the work of Freud, Klein's object relations theory, Bion's work on groups, Jaques's and Menzies Lyth's work on organisations as social defences, and open systems theory (Fraher 2004). A case study is presented to illustrate how systems psychodynamics can contribute to enhancing our understanding of shame dynamics operating at the intersection of culture and race, and how this enhanced understanding can impact the work of practitioners.

## 2.2 The Dynamics of Shame

Shame is conceptualized as a social emotion, elicited by personal devaluation of one's action from the standpoint of others (Elison 2005; Fullagar 2003). Shame arises from one's own consciousness and is experienced in the presence of others, with a focus on the self as bad. It is a set of emotional reactions related to the perception of devaluation through self-monitoring, i.e. a person perceives his/her social status/acceptance by others to be lost, diminished or less desired (Elison 2005; Fullagar 2003; Morrison 2011). Shame involves perceived or actual reduction in social rank (Kane 2012). Thus, the self and self-consciousness have central roles in shame—in that shame is experienced when the (whole) self is experienced as flawed and intolerable (Lansky 1999, 2003). Lansky also describes shame as a moral emotion.

Research has shown a universal expression of shame (a shame display), viz. lowering of the eyes, decreased muscle tone of face and neck resulting in the lowering of the head, as well as using the face, body, words and actions to appear smaller and non-threatening and communicating retreat, surrender and appeasement (Elison 2005). This shame display signals appeasement to others. The intensity of shame is determined by the gap between the ideal self and the actual self. The individual evaluates the self, using the eye of the other (Fullagar 2003) to see how he or she falls short of his/her own ideals or expectations, resulting in feelings of failure or being inferior (Morrison 2011).

In the work of Freud (Lansky 1999) shame, on the unconscious level, is considered to be a signal anxiety about pending psychical painful feelings of being harmed through unbearable narcissistic mortification and incipient social annihilation. At its most unbearable, [shame also] signals loss of all connection to the social order, the ultimate form of separation—social annihilation (Lansky 2005,

p. 879). Shame as a signal anxiety instigates a defence against the painful awareness of negative affect or repelling idea or intrapsychic conflict, which the ego wants to resist. It is important to note that shame is not seen as a defence against drives or instincts, but against the painful awareness of not being worthwhile, or having a defective sense of self (Rizzuto 2014). Shame as a defence does not repress drive conflicts, but rather represses the awareness of drive conflicts pertaining to one's experiences of being inferior, unlovable, etc. (Lansky 1999) in the presence of internal or external objects (Morrison 2011; Rizzuto 2014). In this case shame has an emotion-regulating function, ensuring that the individual maintains the social bond in the context of the possibility of endangered status, lovability, or acceptance (Lansky 1999). Shame is experienced when the self is affected by conflict arising from narcissistic self-evaluation in the presence of significant internal and external objects (Rizzuto 2014). Thus, the experience of shame has a direct connection to internalised object relations (Rizzuto, 2014), where shame involves an internalised gaze of the self (based on the introjected the eye of the other), which judges the ideal self against the actual self (Morrison 2011). As discussed by Lansky (1999), shame results from defensive activity, emotion regulating activity and/or compromised object relations formation. The latter is discussed later in the chapter.

Literature suggests that shame and guilt are poorly understood concepts, and erroneously seen as belonging to the same category (Elison 2005; Lansky 1999; Tangney 2001). The large overlap between the two constructs in research and by theorists could be attributed to shame being one of the main affects associated with guilt (Elison 2005). Lansky (1999) also considers guilt and shame to be moral emotions. Shame in the adult psyche indicates conflict with ego-ideal (a set of standard, ideals and role expectation (Lansky 2005)) referred to as the conscience (Lansky 1999), whereas guilt is concerned with transgressions and punishment and indicates a fear of retaliatory punishment (Lansky 2005, p. 878). The ego-ideal is the early development of the conscience, linked to pre-oedipal dynamics. The later, post-oedipal development of the conscience results in the superego, which stands over and evaluates the ego (Lansky 1999). Further discussion of the differences and similarities between these two constructs does not fall in the ambit of this chapter.

In modern culture it seems that shame has expanded to shame-guilt, embarrassment and humiliation. Elison (2005) provides definitions for these concepts:

- Shame is the perception or expectation of devaluation of oneself by others;
- Embarrassment contains all the aspects of shame and public evaluation;
- Humiliation contains all the aspects of shame, public devaluation and the hostile intent of others. Lansky (1999) defines humiliation as the individual experiencing shame as deliberately inflicted by another; and
- Shame-guilt denotes all the aspects of shame experienced within the context of an offence.

The adaptive function of shame cannot be ignored. Stadter (2011) acknowledges the constructive aspects of shame to include the appeasement of others, the prevention of actions that elicit the perceived or inferred devaluation, the hiding of the

self when weakened or injured, modesty, social sensitivity and conforming to social/cultural norms. Elison (2005, p. 219) states that:

Shame is to relationships what pain is to bodily integrity. Just as pain is a warning that physical harm is occurring, shame is a warning that a relationship has been disrupted. Just as pain's negative quality motivates us to stop it or avoid it, shame's negative quality motivates us to stop it or avoid it. Both pain and shame serve to promote the event to consciousness, turn our attention to it, and motivate appropriate action.

## 2.3 Culture-Related Manifestations of Shame

The discussion thus far attempts to give a universal definition of shame. However, it does not ignore that the universal aspect of shame has different manifestations, with regard to character, substance and meaning, for different cultural groups (Shweder 2003). According to Shweder (2003) the different manifestation of shame across different historical periods can also not be ignored. Although shame is about being judged as defective by the other (universal definition), in one culture it can be about not being lovable (if one's lovability is valued in the culture) and in another about not taking up one's responsibility (if being responsible is valued in the culture) (see Shweder 2003).

Although the manifestations of shame vary across cultures, they do not do so randomly and endlessly. Shweder (2003) proposes a framework describing how the culturally valued aspect of the self can be clustered into three ethics, viz. the "ethics of autonomy", the "ethics of community" and the "ethics of divinity". Through the "ethics of autonomy" the self is conceptualised as an individual preference structure emphasising ever-increasing choice and personal freedom. The "ethics of community" emphasises how the individual's role in the community is intrinsically linked to one's identity, which is part of a larger collective with a particular history. In the "ethics of divinity" the self is conceptualised as a spiritual being connected to a sacred or higher order and is the bearer of a legacy that is elevated and divine (Shweder 2003). The relative weight of the three ethics within a culture affects the experience and expression of [shame], as well as the way [in which shame is] given meaning (Shweder 2003, p. 1121). Through language as an expression of culture, differences in the experience and expression of shame, and the way in which meaning is ascribed to shame, can be observed (Etezady 2010; Taylor 2015).

According to Fullagar (2003) shame is very much connected to the embodied performance of identity in relation to cultural norms, as it produces feelings of self-hatred, disgust and loathing that are not easily detached from the self as "cognitions". Thus shame denotes social rejection, which is either based in reality or imagined. The intensity of shame is influenced by the size of the devaluing audience, the importance of the individuals (friend vs. stranger) who form part of the devaluing audience, whether the devaluation is imagined or real, and the degree (intensity) of the devaluation, e.g. mere expression of disgust versus outright

rejection. These characteristics are influenced by cultural norms. Our judgement of the appropriateness of others' devaluation could dampen or intensify the experience of shame (Elison 2005; Lansky 1999).

## 2.4 The Theoretical Approach: Systems Psychodynamics

Systems psychodynamics allows for the study and interpretation of collective, interdependent, unconscious and conscious individual, group and intergroup processes resulting from the interconnection between different groups and subgroups within a social system (Czander and Eisold 2003). It also affords us the opportunity to attend to unconscious phenomena within people, the organisational context (tasks, structures, boundaries) and the complex interaction between the two (Amado 1995). In the following sections the different theoretical underpinnings of systems psychodynamics are explicated.

### 2.4.1 *Psycho-Analysis*

Although Freud is not known as a group theorist, he speculated about group and organisational dynamics (Freud 1921), which provided the theoretical foundation of systems psychodynamics. Bion (1961) proposed that psycho-analytic principles be applied to group phenomena in order to increase insight into dynamic, group processes occurring on both conscious and unconscious levels in different contexts, including groups and organisations. Systems psychodynamics further assumes conflict between rational behaviour as defined by the task(s) of the organisation and unconscious individual and group processes (Armstrong 2006).

#### 2.4.1.1 Basic Assumption

Bion's central assumption is that in every group two groups are occurring simultaneously, but to varying degrees, viz. the work group and the basic assumption group. Bion emphasised that both the work and basic assumption groups exist and both are necessary to ensure a group's activity. Bion used Kleinian concepts to illustrate that the basic assumption group originates in infancy, and to elucidate our understanding of the functioning of a group. According to Bion (1975) when group members' activity is related to reality and is rational, the group is involved in workgroup activity—which is similar to Freud's idea of the ego. Workgroup activity is obstructed, diverted and assisted by basic assumption activity, which is the psychic activity of the group that is irrational, primitive and lost in phantasy. The members of a basic assumption group show defensive or regressive behaviour

marked by primitive splitting and projective identification, depersonalisation and infantile regression, and the wish to avoid reality (Menzies Lyth 1981).

#### **2.4.1.2 The Organisation-in-the-Mind**

Through Bion's work one can be clearer about the object of attention and interpretation in psycho-analysis in the organisation, i.e. emotional experiences between the individual and the group, the group and the organisation (Long 2004). The relatedness that an individual has to an organisation, i.e. an individual's emotional experiences of the organisation, denotes the organisation-in-the-mind (Armstrong 2006).

#### **2.4.1.3 Object Relations Theory**

Object relations theory primarily emphasises the importance of an individual's relations with actual (external) and phantasised (internal) objects. These unconscious, internalised, relations between part self (e.g. I am only bad) and internal part objects (e.g. others are only bad) are connected by feelings and thoughts and result in interpersonal relationship patterns unconsciously chosen and re-enacted through our object relations (Lansky 2003; Stadter 2011). Thus, object relations theory presents a theory of unconscious internal object relations in dynamic interplay with current interpersonal (and intergroup) experiences. Essentially, object relations theory allows an analysis of the person and his/her relations with internal and external objects (Czander 1993; Klein 1985; Ogden 1983). The term object is used because the relations are not only with a person. The relations can be with a group, an idea, an organisation, a symbol and, in infancy, with parts of the body (Czander 1993, p. 44).

### **2.5 Shame and Its Roots in Infancy**

As stated, our understanding of shame can be enhanced by linking shame to unconscious phantasies based on internalised object relations, which has its roots in infancy (Rizzuto 2014). The infant has feelings about how the significant (m)other views him/her due to the actual behaviour of the significant (m)other, or to the infant's projections of his/her own feelings and fantasies. These two components of the infant's experience of the significant (m)other develop into a single representational construction of the significant (m)other as part objects in the psyche Rizzuto (2014). Morrison (2011) suggests that shame is the negative feeling related to narcissism, where narcissism involves the wish to be special to the significant (m)other. When this wish is satisfied by the significant (m)other, the infant develops a sense of self that is coherent, stable and well-esteemed. However, should the infant

fail to merge with or obtain mirroring from the significant (m)other, the self is experienced as chaotic, deficient or fragmented, opening the self to narcissistic vulnerability and shame. The break experienced by the infant of the mirroring of the significant (m)other results in pre-existing beliefs and unconscious fantasies about one's own value/worth, defectiveness or unlovability, which reverberate into adulthood.

### ***2.5.1 The Two Positions***

Klein's object relations theory also demonstrated that adulthood has its roots in infancy by showing that the earliest activities of the ego involved various defence mechanisms (such as splitting, introjection and projection) to exclude particular anxieties from consciousness (Klein 1985; Stein 2000). Klein also demonstrated that early development consists of two distinct, but overlapping, developmental positions, i.e. the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions (Klein 1985; Likierman 2001). The paranoid-schizoid position is marked by splitting, introjection, projection and projective identification, which ensure that others are perceived as part objects, i.e. either good or bad objects. In infancy the significant other is split into good nurturing or bad and withholding, resulting in the part objects (Robbins and Goicoechea 2005). The persecutory anxiety experienced in the paranoid-schizoid position is an intense source of shame, because the self is experienced as unlovable by the rejecting, exploiting and humiliating other (Lansky 2003). In the depressive position a person is able to perceive the other as a whole, separate object that is both good and bad (Brown 2003; Klein 1985; Likierman 2001). Thus the infant realises that it is the significant other who is both good and nurturing and bad and withholding. The self and the other are now organised by feelings and thinking states, and the self is experienced as separate from the other (Robbins and Goicoechea 2005).

The two positions stand in dialectical relationship with each other in that the positions create, negate and maintain each other into adulthood. In the dialectical interplay between the disintegrative tendencies of the paranoid-schizoid position and the integrative tendencies of the depressive position new psychological possibilities emerge creatively, without the descent into either total fragmentation or severe psychological rigidity (Robbins and Goicoechea 2005, p. 197). It is important to bear in mind that the depressive position cannot be completely maintained, because once the self-esteem is threatened (possibly through hidden shame) the person in his/her adult life tends to regress to functioning from the paranoid-schizoid position (Likierman 2001).

2.6 Socially Constructed Defences

2.6.1 Social Systems as a Defence Against Anxiety

Thus far, I have been discussing the psychodynamics of the infant. I consider this discussion necessary because it will elucidate the discussion of systems psychodynamics within organisations. Klein’s understanding of the relationship between the (m)other and the infant has been applied to the relationship between the individual. and groups (see Fig. 2.1), as well as between groups in the organisation (Powell Pruitt and Barber 2004).

These unconscious pairings between the self and its objects in the inner world affect daily functioning in three ways:

- Unconscious projection of the inner world onto external reality;
- Unconscious choice of relationships that repeat the inner dramas (transference and countertransference); and
- Through projective identification (Stadter 2011).

Klein’s ideas were later applied to adult behaviour in organisations by Jaques, Menzies Lyth, Miller and Rice. Jaques and Menzies Lyth built on the work of Klein, in particular the ideas of primitive anxieties and the defence mechanism mobilised in the paranoid-schizoid and depressive position, to develop social systems as a defence against persecutory and depressive anxiety (Long 2004).

The underlying assumption is that anxiety is specific to, and rises from, the nature of the work and from one’s interpersonal relationships linked to one’s position in the organisation (Jaques 1990; Menzies Lyth 1960, 1990). Individuals in organisations defend against the anxiety-provoking content and the difficulties of collaborating to accomplish a common task, by organising and using the structure of the organisation in the service of defence-related and not work-related functioning (Amado 1995; Jaques 1990; Menzies Lyth 1990). Thus, the organisation is being used by its stakeholders as an anxiety-holding system, and to prevent people

Infant’s relationship with mother	Individual’s relationship with group
- Struggles with fusing/joining and separating/isolation	
- Experiences both nurturance and frustration	
- Experiences strong ambivalent feelings	
- Experiences both love and hate simultaneously	
- Elicits defenses mechanism of splitting and projective identification to cope with ambivalence	
- Struggles with tension between engulfment and estrangement	

Fig. 2.1 Parallels between infants with mothers and individuals with groups. Source Wells (1985), p. 117



from experiencing the anxieties generated by their work and interpersonal relationships (Long 2004).

Thus, social systems as a defence against anxiety explicate the dynamics of a particular organisation by exploring the parallel between individual defences and the social defences used by individuals and groups in a social system. Of critical importance is that the use of projective and introjective processes alleviates persecutory (the other experienced as bad) and depressive (the other experienced as both good and bad) anxiety experienced within care-giving or dependency-oriented organisations (Jaques 1990; Menzies Lyth 1990; Powell Pruitt and Barber 2004; Young 1995). In other words, members of social systems employ social defences, separate from conscious behaviour, to deal with work and interpersonal relationships that may be psychologically demanding (Mnguni 2012; Powell Pruitt and Barber 2004; Young 1995).

### 2.6.2 *Social Systems as an Envious Attack*

Stein (2000) proposes that within systems psychodynamic thinking, social systems as defences against anxiety have been developed extensively, resulting in the defence against anxiety paradigm. A new paradigm, namely the social system as envious attack, has been proposed by Stein (2000). Although envy and defensiveness may occur together, they are conceptually entirely distinct (Stein 2000). Thus, it is proposed that social systems are characterised by both envy and defences against anxiety, simultaneously or at different times, levels and parts (Stein 2000).

Several authors have proposed that envy is a destructive phenomenon in groups, organisations and society (Bion 1985; Mouly and Sankaram 2002; Stein 2000). The conceptualisation of envy assists in focusing on modes of activity that are attacking, and not only those that are defensive, in a group, organisation and society (Bion 1985; Stein 2000). Czander (1993) proposes that envy underlies all conflict within organisations. According to Mouly and Sankaram (2002) envy threatens hope in organisations.

According to Mollon (2002), envy, jealousy and shame are intimately related. Through shame the individual become disconnected and feels inferior, misunderstood or excluded from the other, which could lead to the experience of envy and jealousy. Importantly, envy results when the desired other is experienced as separate and unavailable, while jealousy is experienced when we perceive that our desired place with the other will be or is being occupied by a rival (Klein 1975). Aloofness towards, contempt for, and devaluation of, the other could be defences against envy, shame and jealousy (Mollon 2002).

### ***2.6.3 Hidden Shame Buried in the Envious Attack***

Shame intersects with the manifestation of envy, in that the envious attack can also be understood within the social systems as a defence against anxiety. In this case the envious attack is a defence against the anxiety of the experience of unbearable shame and perceived deficit. The precipitating or trigger event behind an envious attack is “the searing, painful experience of shame”. This painful experience of shame results from the implicit self-comparison in the envious attack where the self is experienced as inferior, lacking or defective in the context of the other’s success, creativity or good fortune in general. This experience of shame denotes hidden shame embedded in the comparative aspect of the envious attack. Thus, the envious attack as defence against the anxiety about the experience of shame is an attempt to deal with and/or expel the unbearable feelings of shame (Kane 2012).

Related to the concept of hidden shame is the expression of contempt as a defence against shame. The expression of contempt is an attempt by the individual to keep shame from consciousness by locating it into another through projective identification (Kane 2012). Projective identification refers to an unconscious interpersonal interaction in which the individual splits off and puts part of him/herself into an external object (the other)—the recipient of the projection. The recipient of a projection reacts to projected feeling as if unconsciously identifying with the projected feelings (Ogden 1983). Czander (1993) also proposes that projective identification requires unconscious collusion between the projector and the object or recipient, i.e. willingness on the part of the other to accept and behave in accordance with the projections.

Now how does projective identification relate to hidden shame? A person defends against the awareness of shame based on internalised object relations by projecting shame into a recipient (an external object). The recipient then identifies with the shame and behaves as a person who experiences shame. The projector is then free from shame and can hold onto contempt for the recipient who identified with the shame. In this way the projector’s shame remains hidden and unprocessed. Although the example is of an individual, projective identification can occur between an individual and a (cultural) group, between (cultural) groups and between a group and an organisation. It would be useful to think about how groups around you and in organisations could be using projective identification to ensure that their shame remain hidden in the intragroup and intergroup interaction.

## **2.7 Case Study**

Research in a historically black university (HBU) in South Africa explored the intergroup psychodynamics between students, lecturers and management from the lecturers’ perspective (May 2010). A qualitative research method based on hermeneutic phenomenology, using a single case study design and the systems

psychodynamic perspective, allowed for the exploration of the lecturers’ (emotional) experiences of their relationship with students and management in a particular HBU. Through convenience sampling (Endacott 2005), nine lecturers (eight white and one black lecturer) from a department at an HBU participated in conversations about their experiences at that institution (Table 2.1). Data collection entailed hermeneutic conversations with the nine lecturers from the HBU. Each interview started with a single open-ended question—namely, please tell me the story of your experiences as a lecturer at this university. Questions based on what the lecturers said were generated thereafter. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the analysis, interpretation and reporting of the findings, the interpretive stance proposed by Shapiro and Carr (1991) was used. This analysis and interpretation entailed a collaborative dimension. The analysed data was sent to the lecturers to ascertain whether the analysis was a reflection of their experiences, and to experts in the systems psychodynamic perspective to ascertain whether the interpretations were plausible. With regard to ethics, informed consent was verbally obtained from the lecturers by describing the project and explaining that the data would be interpreted through the systems psychodynamic lens. The lecturers’ confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by storing the audiotapes and transcripts of the data safely, and excluding certain identifying aspects from the data (see Christians 2005).

The findings of the research suggest that the relationship between students, lecturers and management was buried in different layers of difference (race, power, authority, white/black culture, socio-political aspects and language) (May 2010, 2012). Given the polarised South African socio-cultural landscape (see Mnguni 2012), I suggest that the South African white groups adhere more to the “ethics of autonomy”, whereas the South African black groups adhere more to the “ethics of community” (see Shweder 2003). This suggests cultural differences between white and black people in South Africa. In the discussion of the findings I will focus on how the intersection between culture and race amplified the split between the three stakeholders trenching the shame dynamics operating between the students and the lecturers.

The HBU, as a social system, recruited members or subsystems (black students, white lecturers and black management) into new roles through which they could enact envious attacks on behalf of the HBU generally, and the three stakeholders

**Table 2.1** Biographical information of the sample (*N* = 9)

Race	Gender	Position	Age
White <i>n</i> = 8	Female <i>n</i> = 6	Management/Senior lecturer <i>n</i> = 1 Senior lecturer <i>n</i> = 1 Lecturer <i>n</i> = 4	Above 40 <i>n</i> = 2 Between 30 and 40 <i>n</i> = 1 Below 30 <i>n</i> = 3
	Male <i>n</i> = 2	Senior lecturer <i>n</i> = 1 Lecturer <i>n</i> = 1	Between 30 and 40 <i>n</i> = 1 Below 30 <i>n</i> = 1
Black <i>n</i> = 1	Male <i>n</i> = 1	Lecturer <i>n</i> = 1	Below 30 <i>n</i> = 1

*n* number

specifically (see Stein 2000). The envious attack results from desiring that which is perceived to be good and desirable across diversity characteristics, with particular reference to the intersection between culture and race. For example the black students may have experienced the white lecturers as withholding their knowledge. As suggested by May (2010) the HBU, through its subsystems, launches

- A violent, envious attack on learning, thinking and creativity;
- A deeply damaging attack on linking between the three stakeholders at the intersection between race and culture; and
- An envious attack on all forms of leadership at the intersection between culture and race.

The above discussion gives us some clues about how hidden shame dynamics operated among the three groups in the HBU. In order to obtain even more clarity, I emphasise the relationship between the students and the lecturers to illustrate the hidden shame dynamics operating in this relationship. The mother-infant relations are reconstructed in the lecturing and learning relationship. In the lecturing and learning relationship the lecturers provide opportunities for the students to take in and retain knowledge through learning. However, the students could experience teaching and learning as a threatening attack on their sense of self. It is important to bear in mind that the lecturing-learning relationship is also marked by oscillations between satisfaction and frustration, resulting in a non-pathological cyclical recurrence of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive position (Windland 2003).

Perhaps the students experienced learning, tests and examination as a threatening attack on their sense of self. The students' possible experience of an attack on their sense of self was especially evident from the description of a department as "the Vlakplaas of the university", as mentioned by some of the lecturers (May 2010). Vlakplaas was the base of operations of an apartheid-era security police hit squad. Furthermore, students could have experienced learning as an attack by the lecturers on their sense of self, due to not-knowing and the unconscious demands of tests and examinations, which are intrinsically linked to issues of competition, rivalry, envy, grandiosity, denigration and contempt (Mollon 2002). The findings suggest that examinations and tests entrench an aggressive retaliation from students towards lecturers, for an experienced attack against their sense of self. Students may experience shame as a signal anxiety, instigating a defence against the painful awareness of possible incompetence or inferiority in the presence of the external object (the lecturers). It seems that shame as a defence operating in the relationship between the students and lecturers perpetuates a destructive attack from (black) students against (white) lecturers as a way of defending against shameful, forbidden aspects related to failure in relation to (white) lecturers (May 2010, 2012). It is proposed that these overwhelming feelings experienced by the students could be compounded by the complexities linked to cultural, socio-political and socio-historical factors (Abdi 2002) and other diversity characteristics (Cilliers and May 2002; May 2012; May and Cilliers 2002; Powell Pruitt and Barber 2004) especially race, inherent in the relationship between students and lecturers. In other

words it would be useful to explore internalised object relations between the students and lecturers at the intersection of culture and race and how these impact on shame as a defence against the awareness of incompetence or inferiority.

Through the envious attack the students possibly projected hidden shame into the lecturers, and the lecturers may have identified the projections and behaved as if they were shamed, linked to their apparent inability to provide an optimal learning—lecturing context for the students. In this unconscious collusive communication through projective identification, the students can hold onto contempt for the lecturers who identified with the shame. In this way the students' shame remains hidden and unprocessed.

This could be an instance where the lecturers experience shame resulting from narcissistic self-evaluation (through the eye of the other), which could result in social annihilation from the management of the HBU and their peers in education. In other words the lecturers' ego-ideal (a set of standard, ideals and role expectation) (Lansky 2005) may be under threat due to experiencing themselves a being seen as bad lecturers by students, management and peers. The lecturers probably also projected their shame into the students, the students identified with the shame, the lecturers could be free of the shame and hold onto feelings of superiority and competence. Thus, the students' non-achievement or underachievement became a (k)not of achievement, because the processes of learning and lecturing were primarily impacted by destructive psychodynamics—the ricocheting of primarily negative projections back and forth between students and lecturers (Cummins 2000).

In an ideal situation the lecturers should then introject and transform the hidden shame for the students. In other words the other should attempt to understand the communication about hidden shame, i.e. think about it, and in so doing provide containment for the student (Ward 1993). The other should provide reverie, a calm receptivity towards the communication—a willingness to introject and make sense of the communication (Biran 2003). The lecturer has to maintain nurturing in the face of hidden shame, envy, and jealousy that can arise when the students experience frustration, apprehension, fear and loss when they have to learn with others in the lecture hall and compete with others in the examination hall (see Ward 1993). Thus, the lecturers demonstrate to the students that the hidden shame, i.e. the defence against the awareness of inferiority and incompetence, can be understood, thought about and tolerated. The students internalise this supportive container and hold the internal destructive elements. Through this process the student begins to develop his/her own capacity for reflecting on his/her own state of mind. In this case the student introjects and identifies (introjective identification) with the containing object (the lecturer) (Biran 2003), apparently “correcting” some of the compromised object relations.

In order to capacitate lecturers to provide a containing environment for students, it is imperative that management creates holding environments for lecturers to deal with their hidden shame resulting from their narcissistic self-evaluation. In psychology, thought is often given to care for the practitioner. In the same way, care for the lecturers should be encouraged by creating spaces where lecturers can work, using a systems psychodynamic perspective, with their experiences and the challenges they face from different stakeholders. Of course these lecturers may discover



**Fig. 2.2** Essays on shame (Siopis 2005)

how they collude with the system's psychodynamics. This could be painful and disturbing, but also liberating and filled with learning (as this research project has been for me). In this way, internal holding environments (Alford 2002) (pertaining to the intra-psychic wellness of the lecturers and to physical spaces in the university) for difficult conversations will be created.

## 2.8 Conclusion

It is clear that systems psychodynamics has a contribution to make to our understanding of shame. I present a painting (Fig 2.2) by the South African artist Siopis (2005). The painting illustrates the intrapsychic dynamics of shame, with its roots in infancy often hidden from the self and others. The painting was part of an exhibition entitled "Three Essays on Shame", exploring the significance of shame in wide cultural themes, held in the Freud museum in London from 4 June to 10 July 2005. I offer this painting as an image for further reflection and meaning-making about what other dynamics the (white) lecturers may see and experience when unconsciously looking at the (black) students and (black) management. To me, in this painting the internalized object relations (represented by the child in an adult or an adult within a child) operating at the intersection between culture and race do not look overwhelming, or result in social annihilation. Perhaps the individual or the individual as representation of cultural groups has made time to be in the presence of, and process, the intrapsychic and intergroup shame dynamics?

Through systems psychodynamics it is evident that practitioners can create holding environments in which shame dynamics can be processed in order to ensure the intra-psychic and intergroup wellness of individuals, groups and organisations. To do this, interventions from positive psychology can be used. However, I highlight how systems psychodynamics encourages the creation of holding environments (psychic and physical) to process by being in the presence of apparently destructive elements such as shame. Perhaps positive psychology has something to learn from system psychodynamics about being in the presence of, and surviving, apparently destructive elements such as shame?!

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