

Stichting Centrum '45

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On countertransference and empathy in cases of survival guilt and survival shame
Lecture by D. Wepster at the 6th World Conference for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counselling (PCE conference)
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Introduction

You chose to attend my lecture titled: "On countertransference and empathy in cases of survival guilt and survival shame".

First let me introduce myself. I started my study of psychology in the early 1970's at Leiden University in Leiden, Holland and graduated in 1978. As a social psychologist I became especially fascinated in the interaction between people. Having grown up in the aftermath of the Second World War I grew interested in several questions:

- How does society deal with events of the Second World War, and
- How does society deal with people who were traumatized in that war?

During my studies in 1973 there was a public debate on whether to release captured and imprisoned, aging war criminals in Holland. Directly related to the then shocking and growing awareness of the problems of former inmates of the internment camps of WW II, Centrum '45 was erected that very same year in Oegstgeest near Leiden in the Netherlands. Centrum '45, (Dutch for "Centre '45"), became the national centre for medical-psychological treatment for members of the resistance and victims of war and organized violence. In order to realise its aims Centrum '45 offered and offers a broad range of therapies. After my studies I applied in the early 1980's for a position at the Centrum '45 and successfully. In due course I developed more and more insight in the complexity of the interaction between survivors and myself.

The insights gained lead me to emphasize in this lecture the necessity and possibility of the development of a hyperacusis to survival guilt and survival shame. In doing this I wish to cause awareness of the necessity and possibilities of empathy in these matters.

The roadmap of my lecture is as follows: As you see I shall start by defining shame and guilt followed by defining survival shame and survival guilt.

With a few examples I will illustrate what we are talking about this morning. I will give you some background information on the variety of people coming to Oegstgeest. In these examples I shall make it clear that the same phenomena are present in two categories of war victims:

- clients traumatized in World War II;
- clients traumatized more recently.

Thereafter I will present definitions of countertransference and empathy.

In a very short historical sketch I want to typify how bystanders (I mean everyone in the community, relatives, neighbours etc) in wartime reacted to survivors after 1945. In this on and ongoing encounter between bystanders and survivors ever since then a peculiar process took hold and there gradually grew awareness of various types of countertransference in these matters.

During my lecture I will plea for the development of a hyperacusis, in other words: a very keen hearing, to survival guilt and survival shame. And with this capacity of hyperacusis both bystanders and professionals are in my opinion helped in overcoming counter transference and more easily finding the royal way to empathy.

Finally then I will make clear in a vignette what problems I myself encountered in recognizing my own countertransference and finding my way towards empathy.

I'm looking forward to the discussion during the last 15 minutes of this meeting, in which I hope to become aware that I have gotten my message through.



Shame and Guilt

Shame, according to *Webster's* - no relation as far as I know- is defined as: '*a very disturbed or painful feeling of guilt, incompetence, indecency, or blame worthiness*'. Guilt, again according to *Webster's* is: '*the act or state of having done a wrong or committed an offence*'. A second definition adds: '*conduct that involves guilt, wrong doing crime and sin*'.

I believe that both shame and guilt to be a negatively experienced feeling related to a notion of failure.

A Dutch researcher *Helen Terwijn*, concludes in one of her studies (in my translation):

"Shame is a feeling of perfectness and falling short with fear of being rejected by others, with not belonging to, and with being on the outside".
(here from Goudsblom- see references)

I feel that guilt can be best described as 'a state of being' in which one is responsible for a shortcoming or wrong deed, sometimes with the obligation to bring relief to this state of being by penitence, good deeds and so on.

When we put these definitions here together we can see both an overlap and difference of meaning.

The overlap: as in shame, one has guilt suffering from a notion of all one's shortcomings or deeds. In both cases one can feel regret.

In shame however more than in guilt, personal opinions about what is right and what is wrong play a dominant role. In both meanings / definitions the notion of shortcoming is I repeat central. But both concepts seem to differ as well. When is one using shame and when guilt?

Van Dam, a Dutch researcher as well, described the difference between shame and guilt in the relation to the content of the characteristic cognitive of evaluation:

"When people feel guilty and have guilt, they refer to primarily their behaviour, their conduct negatively. They regret in fact that they have behaved like this.

When people feel ashamed they primarily evaluate their own qualities or character negatively. They are unpleasantly surprised now that is shown that there is a discrepancy between the image of themselves as they thought they were and who they appear to be."

In a recently published book *Shame and Guilt*, June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing came to similar definitions of both feelings. I would like to show you two sheets on which one you can see what they detected as differences and similarities between both concepts:

What is the difference between Shame and Guilt?

"Shame is regret.
Guilt is sin-regret."

"Shame is when you know you did something wrong and you are sorry you did it.
Guilt is when you did something that was wrong and you can't admit it."

"Shame is a feeling that you have when you are not happy of your individual outcome on a certain matter.
Guilt is when you've done something you felt you shouldn't have."

"Shame is the feeling that everyone else thinks you have done wrong and all know what you have done.
Guilt is the feeling that you know what you have done and by your standards it is wrong."

"Shame is when one has done something which contradicts their own morals or beliefs.



Guilt is when one has gone against their true nature."

"Shame is feeling guilty.

Guilt is feeling ashamed about something."

Key Similarities and Differences between Shame and Guilt

Features shared by shame and guilt

- Both fall into the class of 'moral' emotions.
- Both are 'self-conscious', self-referential emotions
- Both are negatively valenced emotions
- Both involve internal attributions of one sort or another.
- Both are typically experienced in interpersonal contexts
- The negative events that give rise to shame and guilt are highly similar (frequently involving moral failures or transgressions)

Key dimensions on which shame and guilt differ

	Shame	Guilt
Focus of evaluation	Global self: 'I did that horrible thing'	Specific behavior: 'I did that horrible thing '
Degree of distress	Generally more painful than guilt	Generally less painful than shame
Phenomenological experience	Shrinking, feeling small, feeling worthless, powerless	Tension, remorse, regret
Operation of 'self'	Self 'split' into observing and observed 'selves'	Unified self intact
Impact on 'self'	Self impaired by global devaluation	Self unimpaired by global devaluation
Concern vis-a-vis the 'other'	Concern with 'others' evaluation of self	Concern with one's effect on others
Counterfactual processes	Mentally undoing some aspect of the self	Mentally undoing some aspect of behavior
Motivational features	Desire to hide, escape, or strike back	Desire to confess, apologize, or repair

My conclusion is that shame is a consciousness of the obviously present shortcoming in one's own character. This consciousness is inner-directed. Shame is experienced in relation to one's own self, where as guilt is experienced in relation to the other and to the outside world and is in principle directed towards the outside.

Survival guilt and survival shame can be defined in view of the afore-mentioned definitions. Survival guilt may be described as the feeling that is forthcoming from the notion that one had fallen short in war circumstances. Situations in which loved / nearest ones died and you stayed alive for unqualified reasons. You have neglected to act at all and did not even

try to prevent the killing of loved ones / nearest ones. An inner conflict arises out of this in which one erects the supposition that one has no right to continue to live. One has no right to a future anymore. The net result is that one feels incompetent to enjoy life after the war. Feeling of freedom is thus felt as a betrayal to the murdered or nearest ones who were killed.

Survivors and bystanders appear to be preoccupied with typical questions like:

"What could I have done to prevent it from happening";

"Why didn't I do anything?";

"Why did this happen to me?"

I want to emphasize this by stating as *Niederland*, a New York psychiatrist who treated many Shoah survivors did in 1966:

"It is only because of the loss under these circumstances that the identity is disturbed. That only creates the guilt feeling".(transl. DW)

He notably differentiates this from consequences of biological inheritance. This much about survival guilt.

Now rises the question: What does the concept 'survival shame' mean?



I think that survival shame is excellently described by Elie Wiesel. In 1958 he published "the Night". In this memorable book he described the situation in a barrack in a concentration camp in 1945. His father called him and asked to bring him some water. Elie chose not to give an answer and remained silent. He knew then already for a long time that the least noise could enlarge the chance of being beaten to death by the SS guards. In retrospect he realised that

he didn't fulfil his responsibility towards his father in not answering his call. His father died in the same night and Elie came to think afterwards that he irrevocably had failed on such an important moment in both their lives.

The deeply felt shame about himself and about his being was the beginning of a development in his consciousness. A notion grew out of this, a notion of the discrepancy between what he thought to be and what he really seemed to be. He should have brought his father water. His own survival shame, the shame about himself was there and of the flip side survival guilt in relation of the behaviour towards his father. Out of the development of his own consciousness a notion grew that his shame was typical for many survivors, of which he was one.

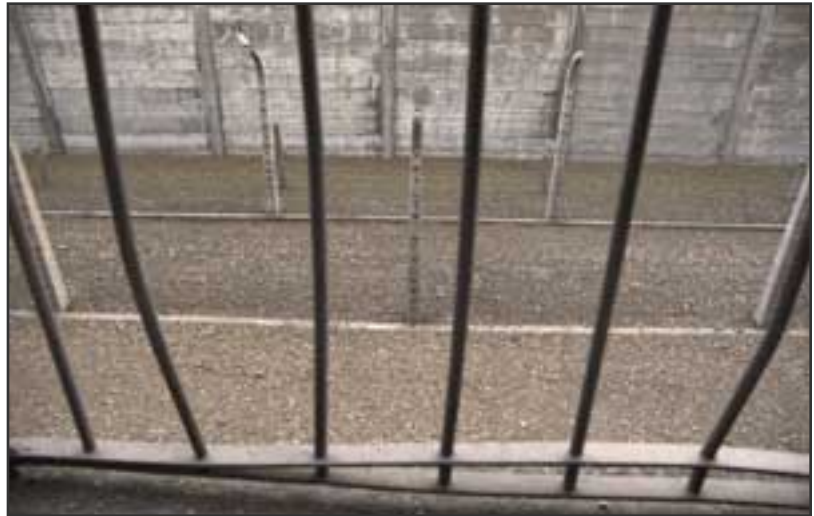
Primo Levi described the same in the *Drowned and the Saved*. He wrote about the situation of survivors of Auschwitz:

"that many, (including me), experienced "shame", that is a feeling of guilt during and afterwards, is an ascertained fact confirmed by numerous testimonies. It may seem absurd but it is a fact."

Survival guilt and survival shame will thus be defined here as concepts with that same overlap in the notion of having fallen a short. And with the same remark that survival shame should be used in relation to the qualities of ones own character and survival guilt in relation to conduct, behaviour towards others in the outside world.

Groups of victims of war and violence in the Netherlands.

In Centrum '45 we do meet problems with survival shame and survival guilt practically all the time. After the second world war there were about 250.000 Dutch war deceased to mourn. They died in Europe or in Asia. They were killed in concentration camps, died in battles, because of hunger, died of extortion or because of violence in the camps or were bombed, martyred or shot. Nearest ones were often



present during the death struggle, sometimes during torture, mostly at the times of the bombardments and always at the moment when death was reported. These bystanders often realised that death could have been there own fate. In my opinion one should be very focused on their signals of problems with their own surviving. These phenomena surface in groups of Jewish war victims, resistant fighters with Jewish, Dutch or Indonesian background, Sinti, former inmates of concentration camps, inmates of camps in East-India during WO II in Indonesia and immediately thereafter. They all report problems with surviving.

In the last years participants of the United Nation missions and fugitives from Afghanistan, Somalians, former Yugoslavians, Iranians and Iraqis who have lived several years in the Netherlands, do visit our Centrum. They too appear to have those typical feelings of guilt and shame in relation to their own survival. Many of these survivors and bystanders of violence in camps or outside camps keep on blaming themselves in a kind of repetitive behaviour of having not done anything or not enough to prevent the death of their loved ones. Family, friends and neighbours, they always seem, I repeat, to be preoccupied with those typical questions why they had not done anything or too little to prevent the irrevocable. I will give you a very powerful example of this awareness of having fallen a short.

The example of Mukakasana

Yolande Mukagasana is a Rwandan woman who lost her entire family in the 1994 genocide. In an IKON tv-documentary she reads a letter from a mother to her massacred children. Image below: [© camera rwanda \(*\)](http://www.camera-rwanda.org)



My dear children,

Forgive me for abandoning you.
Forgive me for not being able to lead you to adulthood.
Forgive me for letting you die so young.
Forgive me for not having had the courage to yield a machete to make your killers flee.
Forgive me. I am not worthy to be called Mother. I let you down.
I am going to live in a country that knows little of your sufferings.
In a while I will be laughing with people who are possibly involved in your death / share responsibility in your death.
I am going to seek protection by people who could or would not protect YOU.
I am a coward. More cowardly than your killers.
I have killed you.

If I had wanted to or had known more, I might have saved you.
It is my fault. I am responsible.
I alone am responsible for your death.
I already don't think of you anymore.
I am just thinking of the clothes I will get in Bujumbura.
And about the flight to a new continent.
I am eager already for laughs.
By others than you.

Do forgive me.

I will go on without comment.

Countertransference.

Psychotherapeutic treatments of traumatized clients as is being known for a longer time can bring vicarious traumatization to a therapist.
Each therapist who wants to feel and show compassion with his clients, should relate himself empathically to the suffering connected to the trauma of the client.
Often reaction to this transfer of the suffering is called counter transference.

Here I want to differentiate two types of countertransference. In extension on the work of Wilson, Lindy and Raphael I shall give you the essence. Each type will be illustrated by an example.



Type one reaction is marked by *avoidance*. The psychotherapist reacts counterfobic and is disconnected to the story of the client.

Effect of such a response is that the traumatic event is minimized in its meaning.

For example one searches for the cause of the effect in the pre-traumatic events in the life of the client.

A typical example of *avoidance* is the following: when imagine for a

moment a Jewish client is telling about the camp situation in the last world war as follows: “the winter of 1944 was very cold and rough in Poland”. When a psychotherapist interrupts him then and affirms as follows: “ that's true I know the winters in Poland are very cold. Nowadays people do have trouble to keep the frost out of the door” . One can easily see that the psychotherapist avoids here the feeling of shame and guilt that he would (or should?) have in the image of Poland during the winter of 1944. He denies as it were the story of the historical situation out of fear of the cruel stories which are connected to the image. He unconsciously sees his wish to help scramble with his associations with the extermination camps and the gas chambers.

It is not easy to experience the feelings in connection to the story of such catastrophically events. To connect those stories and feelings appears to be very difficult indeed.

Type two reactions are marked by *fusion* often as a result of *over-identification*.

In his need and willingness to help the psychotherapist strangles himself into that what is told.

Rescue fantasies flower and the borders between therapist and traumatized are diminished.

The guilt and shame feelings of the therapist himself are mixed with the feelings of the client. Role diffusion can not be avoided.

An example: when a psychotherapist himself is confronted with abrupt loss of a family member, and was not capable or had not been capable of working through his loss, the chance then is big that he has trouble in staying in his role as psychotherapist on the moment that he is confronted with problems of loss in clients. His own desire to comfort the other is taken over. The influence of the loss experience in his own life can be accentuated in a self closing response. He should be aware of the danger to focus exclusively on the



loss problems of his clients.

Bystanders

When one would like to go on, to make a sketch of unavoidable counter reactions in the society *Primo Levi* has to be seen as a major help. Notably in 1947, when he was on the age of 27 he had written: "If this is a Man?"

In a next book called 'the Truce' he is telling about the situations in January 1945 in Auschwitz when the first Russian soldiers came nearer the camp. He describes how they behaved themselves when they approached the mountains of dead bodies and dying prisoners:



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"they didn't greet us, nor smiled; they seemed impressed, not only by pity, but also by a confused restraint which sealed their mouths, and kept their eyes fastened on the funeral scene. It was the same shame which we knew so well, which submerged us after the selections, and every time we had to witness or undergo and outrage: the shame that the Germans never knew, the

shame which the just man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse because of its existence, because of its having been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things, and because his will has proven nonexistent or feeble and was incapable of putting up a good defence".

In the Drowned and the Saved he commented on this passage in his chapter *Shame*:

" I don't think that there is anything I need to erase or correct; but there is something I must add. That many, including me, experienced "shame" it is a feeling of guilt during the imprisonment and afterwards is an certain effect confirmed by numerous testimonies. It may seem absurd but it is a fact."

Never have I seen in such away described, in such a compact way brought under words, with more empathy and self knowledge what the psychodynamic is of that immense shame that exists since then and is transferred unavoidably since then in the interactions and meetings of bystanders and survivors.

Shame and guilt in Dutch society after the war.

It's only until recently that in the Netherlands the repression is really diminishing. Only four years ago the Netherlands the government saw itself obliged to start a mayor research how the interaction between home-comers and society, the bystanders in general, was after the war. In a book, *de Meelstreep*, published in 2001, researcher *Ossenbroek* sketches the emotion climate in the Dutch society after the war in the last quarter of the 20th century as follows:

"The existence of war trauma's was scientifically underscored and acknowledged.

The Netherlands went beyond the shame massively and war victims were encouraged to break the silence and speak out. The only shame that stayed and grew at the end of the 20th century was the shame about former shame, the guilt feeling that took possession of the state department and the society in general over what was done during the war and directly after the war. It was a collective feeling of guilt that was diminished by a collective penitence including public acknowledgement of guilt and regret." (transl. DW)

In our society one still is busy in searching for a position of empathy towards the war victims and transcending avoidance or fusion/overidentification. I could give you many examples of how in the Netherlands after the war 'even' psychotherapist fell into the traps of the so called counter transference. For reasons of time I would not do that.

Empathy

But is empathy possible here? To answer this question we must first define the term: empathy.

Kohut used two definitions. Empathy is in 1959 "*vicarious introspection*" and later on: Empathy is "*the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person*" in 1984. Regarding the discussion concerning counter transference and empathy *Van Strien*, a Dutch psycho-analyst said the following in a 1999 dissertation:

"empathy had a significant positive correlation with the readiness to put oneself open to countertransference feelings. Too much *emotional contagion* as well as *withdrawal of personal involvement* can be based on countertransference.

One can conclude here in my opinion that empathy is a good prevention against the rising of countertransference, that empathy helps the discovery of countertransference and that countertransference almost prevents empathy. One can speak of mutual influence between empathy in counter transference but they are in essence differentiated



phenomena." (transl. DW).

I would like to state here that reflection on the countertransference types helps one to find a real empathic response.

Vignette:

To elaborate further on this relation and the difference between empathy and countertransference and to illustrate the complex relationship, I will tell you about the treatment and the story of a client who I treated in early 1980's.

I came into contact with a half Jewish child survivor. His father and mother were resistance fighters during World War II until they were arrested in 1943. Mother lived for years in Auschwitz. His father lived in Vught, a concentration camp in the south of the Netherlands for more than a year. My client got into hiding. He was troubled with shame and anger about the thought that his grandparents had without any resistance been transported to the gas-chambers.



I was shocked by his way of telling the story and tried to convince him that his supposition "without any resistance" was historically false and properly said nonsense. I tried to bring him to a milder and more correct statement about his grandparents. He resisted my effort. It was a riddle to me why he kept to this 'myth'. Only until later I got the notion that he was probably keeping his psychological core of representation intact.

In this way he escaped full decompensation into unbearable feelings of fear. His own anxiety was externalized. He blamed the others in his shame about them. This way of reacting also came my way. He came into conflict with a court. A great fury came over him. He wanted that I informed the court about his case. I wanted to stay neutral in this situation. Then he reacted furiously and called me "a coward and worse than the Germans. All we reached, you put it on the edge", he said. He walked away, smashed the door and there was silence for a long period of time. My countertransference arose immediately. I thought I can't handle this, this is blackmail. I cannot stand this. All is well, but I don't let him insult me in such a way. It went well in the psychotherapy but I won't take this. Intervision helped me to find a way to deal with this situation. Colleges helped me in a most empathical way to work through my countertransference. After a period of time I invited my client in a letter. In neutral words I asked him to come to my office and invited him to speak about a possible follow up of the psychotherapy. This was sufficient to restore the contact. When he came he said in an emotional way: "out of myself I would not have come back". And to my surprise he shared with me his deep feelings of shame and he told me that he was the only child who had been able to get away. After the war my client did a research

and discovered that all the hidden children who had been betrayed during the arrest of his parents had been transported and were killed.

He had felt a deep shame about his own survival. He had been living and reliving this experience for years in loneliness. Why did he survive the war and not the others? Why didn't he do anything to prevent the betrayal of the other children? Although this questioning was done in fantasy of course. But it sure was there. These shameful questions kept him busy until today. I got started to comprehend that his shame and anger were fixed to that very concrete event. I had been overlooking this and kept him in the isolation in which he was for years. Working through my countertransference and anger his shameful feelings which were connected to war events, became available for us.

He had also been ashamed in having not done anything to put an end of the martyr of his father before his eyes. He was flabbergasted and had been paralyzed.

He had been in shame about himself and felt guilty towards his father. He was only 8 years old then. But his feelings were there during his lifetime. Only until the late 1980's he had not been able to discuss this with anyone. I could understand the formed split in his personality better and we could search for more adequate ways to put his anger about the Jewish history in the relation with others. Until then he had unproductive fights and quarrels with anyone, everywhere.

It helped me to listen to his shame and to become aware of my own feelings of guilt which prevented me to listen to him with empathy.

As a conclusion I would like to say that in my mind recognition or acknowledgement of your own feelings of shame and guilt is a necessary condition for the development of a hyperacusic for survival shame and survival guilt and a necessary condition for a real meeting with victims of war and violence. This should be also the lesson for us who are treating clients who are traumatized in more recent times as well.

I would like to thank you for your attention.

[Dirk Wepster](#)



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