



**SARAH SMITH**

**TENDER FEELINGS: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY IN  
UNDERSTANDING THE INTERSECTION OF SHAME AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT  
VIOLENCE IN IRELAND**

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**SUPERVISOR: ANCA FILIP**

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## ABSTRACT

The rise in anti-immigrant violence in Ireland warrants exploration to understand the psyche of perpetrators and inform effective psychotherapeutic intervention. By re-examining psychoanalytic theories of violence, beyond guilt, shame emerges as a potent driver of anti-immigrant violence. The narcissistic pain of chronic shame can fuel aggression towards immigrants, exacerbated by contemporary online humiliation narratives and right-wing, extremist ideologies, transforming rage into contempt, as seen in the Dublin riots of November 2023. Psychotherapists must recognise concealed shame beneath violence alongside experiences of social exclusion, criminality, trauma, prejudice, and an array of complex emotions and psychic defences to work with anti-immigrant violent perpetrators. This dissertation offers a fresh perspective on psychoanalytic theories of violence, highlighting the moral emotions behind contemporary anti-immigrant violence in Ireland.

## GLOSSARY

**Anti-Immigrant:** Marked by negative attitudes, opposition, or hostility towards immigrants, often arising from perceived cultural differences or threats to national identity. Such attitudes may stem from group-based distinctions or conflicting cultural worldviews. (Havermans & Verkuyten, 2021)

**Far-right extremism:** A broad term encompassing both the radical and extreme right. The extreme right is often defined by a combination of these traits: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, a demand for a powerful state, and anti-democratic beliefs. However, not all these traits are always present; the rejection of democratic principles or equality is often a key factor in identifying something or someone as extreme right. (European Commission, 2019)

**Jouissance:** Lacan distinguishes jouissance (enjoyment) from pleasure. The pleasure principle limits enjoyment, urging minimal enjoyment, while subjects attempt to transgress these limits, leading to pain. Beyond the threshold of pleasure there is pain, which Lacan terms as jouissance or "painful pleasure." Jouissance expresses the paradoxical satisfaction and suffering a subject derives from a symptom. (Evans, 1996, p.93)

**Name-of-the-Father:** Lacan's term that initially referred to the symbolic father's prohibitive role in the Oedipus complex (laying down the incest taboo). The Name-of-the-Father became the fundamental signifier enabling normal signification, by conferring identity and signifies the Oedipal prohibition. Its foreclosure, which is the exclusion from the symbolic order, results in psychosis. (Evans, 1996, p.122)

**Passage à l'acte:** Originally from French psychiatry, this term refers to impulsive, violent, or criminal acts that can signal the start of an acute psychotic episode. Initially used by French analysts as a synonym for Freud's "acting out", Lacan later differentiated the two. While both are reactions to anxiety, acting out remains within a symbolic realm, a message to the "big

Other." In contrast, passage à l'acte signifies an exit from this symbolic scene into the "real," representing a flight from the Other and a dissolution of social bonds. Though not always indicative of psychosis, passage à l'acte involves a temporary dissolution of the subject, who, for a moment, becomes a pure object. (Evans, 1996, p.140)

**The Pale Criminal:** In the psychoanalytic context of Freud and Lacan the "pale criminal" is a metaphorical representation of an individual, burdened by a severe superego and unconscious guilt, who may paradoxically seek relief through criminal acts. The criminal's pallor symbolises an outward appearance that belies an inner world troubled by guilt. (Costello, 2003)

**The Real and The Symbolic:** Lacan's Real is that which exists beyond language and symbolisation, resisting complete expression. In contrast, the Symbolic order is the realm of language and social constructs and moral rules. The Real disrupts the Symbolic, because it cannot be fully integrated into it (Evans, 1996, p.162, p.203)

**Violence:** Violence and aggression are behaviours or actions, whether verbal or physical, that can harm or injure, regardless of physical harm or intent. (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2015)

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In November 2023, riots broke out in Dublin city and a surge in anti-immigrant violence and harassment in Ireland ensued, with subsequent racist intimidation attacks involving acts of physical violence towards asylum seekers (Gallagher, 2024). This surge in anti-immigrant violence is part of a broader global immigration trend, with one billion migrants worldwide, many displaced by conflict (WHO, 2020). Research in Ireland indicates that economic downturn (Gusciute et al., 2021) and COVID-19 health anxiety (Daniele et al., 2024) may have worsened anti-immigrant sentiment. Contemporary trends also show declining positive views on immigration, with increased prominence of politicised attitudes towards asylum seekers (Laurence et al., 2024). Moreover, anti-immigrant violence is often linked to extremist ideologies, with a notable increase in far-right violence globally (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019). Contemporary discourse on social media platforms appears to have fanned the flames of radical, extremist ideology resulting in subsequent attacks on properties that the Irish government provide to house asylum seekers (Carragher, 2024; Gallagher, 2024;). Psychotherapists may increasingly encounter the impact of this violence in therapy, working with immigrants (Murphy et al., 2021), anti-immigrant individuals, or offenders who perpetrate violence against immigrants. A fresh perspective on the psychical processes and emotions driving anti-immigrant violence, drawing on psychoanalytic theories and current research, is needed to explore psychotherapy's potential in healing the deep psychic wounds underlying such violence. This dissertation explores the violent perpetrator psyche and the moral emotions fuelling anti-immigrant violence, as well as relevant psychotherapeutic approaches.

## **Aims and Objectives**

**Title:** Tender Feelings: Exploring the Role of Psychotherapy in Understanding the Intersection of Shame and Anti-Immigrant Violence in Ireland

**Aim:** To explore the role of psychotherapy in meeting the contemporary challenge of anti-immigrant violence within the therapeutic encounter

### **Objectives:**

1. To explore how psychoanalytic theories on the origins of violence intersect with moral emotions, as a trigger of anti-immigrant violence perpetration
2. To explore the psychotherapeutic interventions that may be applied, within the therapeutic encounter, when meeting key moral emotions as a precursor to anti-immigrant violence.

## CHAPTER 2: PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC THEORIES OF VIOLENCE, GUILT AND SHAME

### 2.1: Psychoanalytic Theories on the Origin of Violence

In order, to explore the role of psychotherapy in meeting the contemporary challenge of anti-immigrant violence, within the therapeutic encounter, an exploration of the origins of violence is warranted. Almost a century ago, Freud (1930/2001, p.112) addressed the origins of aggression and violence arguing that humans have an innate aggressive drive. Freud theorised that this “lust for killing” (1927/2001, p.10; 1930/2001) could resurface from unconscious drives, originating in repressed childhood experiences to form the core of violent behaviour (Freud, 1930/2001; Freud, 1920/2001). The death instinct theory saw the beginning of Freud’s (1920/2001) view of aggressiveness as an independent instinct arising from conflict between the death instinct (Thanatos), orientated towards self-destructive behaviours, and the life instinct (Eros) orientated towards pleasure (Krahé, 2021, p.51). This psychic death and life conflict can be alleviated by projecting the self-destructive force outwards towards the other in the form of violence (Krahé, 2021, p.51). According to Freud this is a way of releasing pent up aggressive energy to maintain balance in a cathartic manner (Krahé, 2021, p.52). Thus, Freud believed that at the core men are predestined (Hopkins Burke, 2016) as “(...) creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. (...) *Homo homini lupus*<sup>1</sup>.” (Freud, 1930/2001, p.111), an instinctual built-in element of human nature (Krahé, 2021, p.51). Later Freud viewed our inhibitions, enforced by the superego, as important in preventing the acting out of aggressive impulses leading to the moral emotion of guilt (Freud, 1930/2001, p.123; Lilly et al., 2019, p.32). Considering Freud's perspective, it can be posited that anti-immigrant violence

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<sup>1</sup> *Homo homini lupus* (Man is a wolf to man) is a Latin proverb referring to human nature as inherently aggressive.

represents the failed resolution of the inner conflict between the id and the superego, fuelled by guilt to produce violent expression (Freud, 1930/2001, p.112; Hopkins Burke, 2016; Krahe, 2021, p.52; Lilly et al., 2019, p.32). Furthermore, anti-immigrant violence in Ireland took the form of overt criminal acts, both during and in the wake of the Dublin riots. When viewing these violent acts from the Freudian standpoint, anti-immigrant violence may represent the attempts of the "pale criminal" (Costello, 2003, p.2), burdened by a strict superego, to alleviate their guilt. Committing forbidden acts "precisely because they are forbidden" (Costello, 2003, p.2) and incurring punishment at the hands of the Irish authorities purged pre-existing guilt. This guilt can then be rationalised and discharged acting as a catalyst for violence, rooted in Oedipal phantasies of patricide and incest (Costello, 2003, p.16).

Psychoanalytic drive theory went on to influence many modalities of psychotherapy in their orientation towards guilt as an emotion, however, in more recent times there has been a shift towards understanding shame (Gilligan, 2003; Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 13/116; Yontef, 2006, p. 351). While Freud did not specifically distinguish shame from guilt, he acknowledged shame as a reaction formation against overt displays of sexual behaviour, while potentially misinterpreting his patient's shame experiences as guilt (Lewis, 1971, as cited in Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 12). Nevertheless, the contemporary, multi-dimensional context of anti-immigrant violence necessitates questioning if we are simply predestined to act out violent tendencies due to an innate sense of guilt, or if other factors are at play.

Beyond theories on guilt as a catalyst for violence, Freud's theories on aggression provided fertile ground for the frustration-aggression hypothesis, which posits that aggression is a drive activated by unmet needs (Krahe, 2021, p.52). Krahe (2021) explains that "a drive... serves as a goal-directed energising force directed at terminating a state of deprivation" (p.52). However, frustration does not always lead to aggression as some individuals will

instead respond by withdrawing or crying (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 92). Understanding violent anti-immigrant behaviour therefore requires an exploration of the source of violence, potentially through a broader view encompassing negative emotions shaped by cognition, experience, and decision-making (Krahé, 2021, p.71). Gilligan (2003) argues that insults and humiliation, with their associated feelings of shame, are potentially more potent triggers of aggression than frustration or guilt, challenging the Freudian view. To get to the root of violence it therefore seems imperative to question if the anti-immigrant violent perpetrator is indeed the brutal creature of the Freudian school of thought, completely at the mercy of the primordial soup of childhood desires housed in the unconscious, wracked by guilt like the pale criminal (Costello, 2003). It is crucial to tease out the specific moral emotions (Macías-Vasileff et al., 2024) that trigger anti-immigrant violence in perpetrators, providing a more nuanced understanding beyond traditional psychoanalytic views.

From a psychodynamic perspective, when shame, becomes deeply ingrained it often roots itself in infancy before verbal awareness is established, becoming internalised (Yontef, 2006, p.357; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967). Deeply engrained, or chronic shame, may have numerous origins including stemming from the early traumatic experience of punitive parental discipline that damage a child's self-esteem through the assertion of power or love withdrawal (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967). Research suggests that individuals with "unrealistically high and fragile self-esteem" (Krahé, 2021, p.115) are more likely to act-out aggressively through violence to restore a positive self-view, to avoid the deep pain of narcissistic injury (Kohut, 1971). Through a Lacanian lens, acts of anti-immigrant violence could be interpreted as a revolt against the established social framework (Symbolic order) (Costello, 2003, p.163, Evans, 1996, p.203), potentially the structures designed to integrate diverse immigrant populations in Ireland. The perpetrator's violent behaviour represents a challenge to the symbolic authority of societal laws (the Name-of-the-Father) (Evans, 1996,

p.122) where the imago of the father embodies both authority and prohibition (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 436). Seeking an illicit form of satisfaction (Jouissance) (Costello, 2003, p.163; Evans, 1996, p.93) through transgression of the limits set down by the Irish authorities those with anti-immigrant views lashed out violently. With Lacanian theory in mind, one might interpret anti-immigrant violent perpetrators as dismissing the possibility of peaceful coexistence and rejecting the moral and legal systems that promote inclusion. Functioning outside the societal norms, anti-immigrant violent perpetrators engaged in violent acts, may point to a desire to impose their prejudices upon reality (the Real) (Costello, 2003, p.163; Evans, 1996, p.162). What remains unclear from the Lacanian view is, in this rejection of the moral structures that hold society together, what specific moral emotion triggers a person with anti-immigrant views to embark on a violent “passage à l’acte” (Evans, 1996 p.139-140), falling off the stage and traversing into the Real. Reconciling Lacan's passage à l'acte (Evans, 1996 p.139-140) and Freud's views on violent origins with shame as a trigger for anti-immigrant violence necessitates understanding the perpetrator's psyche.

## 2.2: The Psyche of the Anti-Immigrant Violent Perpetrator

Combining a psychoanalytic understanding of the mental processes of violent perpetrators (Lilly et al., 2019, p. 31) with the psychology of anti-immigrant sentiment may offer insight into the psychological origins of violence against immigrants. Psychodynamic theories on violent behaviour draw from Freud's concepts of repressed "primal phantasies" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p. 286), and the laying down of the personality structure, to suggest that disruption to psychosexual development can lead to adult neuroses and violent, antisocial tendencies (Hopkins Burke, 2016, p. 112). Furthermore, Aichorn (1925 as cited in Hopkins Burke, 2016, p. 112) theorised that we are born asocial, and it is only through nurturing parents we learn to be in society. Acting on the pleasure principle, children with an underdeveloped ego and superego may develop latent delinquency, due to repressed

unconscious drives, potentially leading to violent, criminal behaviour (Hopkins Burke, 2016, p. 112-113). Outward hostility towards authority (Lilly et al., 2019, p.32), in this case the Irish government, potentially stemming from delinquency, was arguably seen in the Dublin riots against Gardaí and anti-immigrant arson attacks on direct provision housing (Carragher, 2024). In the absence of nurturing parents, Aichorn's (1935) attempts to compensate for this lack of parental love through his work with delinquent boys resulted in the gradual discharge of the repressed libidinal urges that lay beneath their aggression, with movement along a continuum from "tears of rage, then to a period of sensitivity, and finally acceptable behaviour" (p.137). This allowed for the repressed libidinal energy of the "tender feeling" (Aichorn, 1935, p.138) to find a more appropriate object in friendship, allowing increased socialisation. The contents of the Freudian unconscious are said to be "strongly cathected by instinctual energy" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p.474) and, propelled by this energy, attempt to return to conscious awareness, calling to mind the nature of a strong, surge of emotion that activates violent behaviours as a means of defending the integrity of self against a perceived threat (Tomkins in Sedgwick et al. (Eds.) (1995), p.137-140). The experience of parental neglect and emotional deprivation may well be a catalyst for a host of challenging emotions including a lack of self-worth, which could give rise to strong negative emotions being carried forward into adulthood. As seen in the concept of the pale criminal, these violent perpetrators may be consumed by a sense of guilt, laid down by childhood experiences (Hopkins Burke, 2016, p. 112; Costello, 2003), or a whole array of other emotional triggers. Holding Freud and Lacan's views on the origins of violence and Aichorn's (1935) work with delinquents in mind, prompts the psychotherapist to endeavour to identify the "tender feeling" (p.138), or moral emotion, that is attempting to return to the realm of consciousness through anti-immigrant violence, so that it can form part of the work of therapy.

Media reports on the profile of the individual's rioting in Dublin, and involved in subsequent anti-immigrant attacks (Hayes, 2025; The Irish Insider, 2024), emphasises theories on the pressure put upon youths in lower classes by the unobtainability of the status and respect afforded to the middle-class (Cohen, 1955, as cited in Lilly et al., 2019, p.70). The fact that they are excluded from these opportunities, gives rise to a subculture, adopting values that drive delinquent behaviour. Certainly, not all the violent perpetrators participating in the Dublin riots were youths, many were male adults with a history of violence and criminality. Braithwaite (1989) argues that punishment can shame violent perpetrators, triggering repeated violence through "disintegrative shaming" (p. 55) that creates social outcasts and fuels further criminality (Lilly et al., 2019, p. 157). The concept of a lack of respect as a driving factor in violence perpetration raises a strong association between feelings of shame and the drive to counter this by restoring pride. Perhaps, through violent displays of dominance and the associated psychic fulfilment of the need for belonging, a sort of arrogant pride (Sanderson, 2015) is temporarily restored for the anti-immigrant violent perpetrator who experiences shame as a trigger. Transgressing the Name-of-the-Father, and rejecting the Symbolic (Evans, 1996) thus manifests as those with anti-immigrant sentiment joining a group of violent rioters to obtain "(...) its offer of friendship, excitement and protection" (Lilly et al., 2019, p.70), a form of Jouissance (Evans, 1996)

Gilligan (2016, p.133) highlights that shame, particularly in those lacking healthy pride sources like education or employment, can trigger violence to restore dignity. Violent criminals often adopt an inverted morality, where violence becomes a symbol of strength, leading to the idolisation of those who defy societal norms (Gilligan, 2016). This offers a potential understanding of the surge of anti-immigrant rhetoric in Ireland, as social media provided a platform for figures who defy societal norms to spread fear and misinformation about immigrants in various Irish communities (Carragher, 2024). Akhtar (2018) further argues

that, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, as immigrants enter a country there are “psychic consequences that range from prejudicial repudiation through the thawing of ‘unmentalised xenophobia’ to ‘assimilative internalisation’” (p.60). Recent studies have also shown that Irish residents may mask negative feelings about race, ethnicity, or EU origin of immigrants (Creighton & Fahey, 2022; Doebler & Shortall, 2018). Anti-immigrant violence in Ireland may reflect unconscious prejudices within the Irish psyche, exploited by those spreading hate online to shape perceptions and incite real-world violence (Carragher, 2024). As a form of collective violence (Krahé, 2021, p.328), it may stem from the collective unconscious, with deindividuation (Le Bon, 1969, as cited in Krahé, 2021, p.322) evident in crowd behaviour during the Dublin riots. This violence may represent the projection of the shadow (Jung, 1959), where rejected traits like criminality (Costello, 2003, pp. 29, 48) are projected onto immigrants, with integrating the shadow offering a path to addressing these unconscious roots of violence.

Anti-immigrant views are often associated with the prejudice inherent in right-wing political extremism, though not exclusively, and Tomkins (1995, as cited in Gilligan, 2003) suggests that right-wing ideologies are characterised by a heightened sensitivity to shame. Online echo chambers and far-right humiliation narratives can be leveraged to incite anti-immigrant violence by transforming internalised shame into outward righteous aggression towards out-groups (Hejdenberg & Andrews, 2011, as cited in Homolar et al., 2021; Kazlauskaite et al., 2022), to restore feelings of pride. This outward projection in the form of violence may mirror the life and death conflict theorised by Freud (1920/2001). The rise of anti-immigrant violence is also increasingly understood through the lens of trauma, with contemporary research highlighting the complex interplay between personal, collective, and historical trauma and susceptibility to extremist ideologies (Buljubasic et al., 2021; Gerodimos, 2022; Lewis & Marsden, 2021; Schmitt et al., 2022; Schumann et al., 2022). Within this

framework, shame narratives emerge as a potent tool for mobilising violence. By exploiting historical or intergenerational trauma, and by labelling immigrants as a source of contemporary shame, extremist groups can cultivate a sense of righteous anger (Hopkins Burke, 2016) and victimhood. This narrative, in turn, can transform internalised shame into outwardly directed violence. Labelling theory shows how the social construction of immigrants as a threat (Hopkins Burke, 2016, p. 14) could fuel shared righteous anger, defending against unconscious shame. In online echo chambers, projecting internalised weakness onto immigrants could foster hostility and dehumanisation (Bohleber, 2003, cited in Homolar et al., 2021). Furthermore, individuals experiencing narcissistic rage in response to humiliation and shame, exhibit a lack of empathy for their perceived adversaries (Kohut, 1972 as cited in Homolar et al., 2021; Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 93) and it is arguable that it is this outward projection of internalised shame that is being expressed through anti-immigrant violence in Ireland.

### 2.3: Shame as a Precursor to Anti-Immigrant Violence

By exploring the psychoanalytic understanding of the origins of violence and the psyche of perpetrators, within the contemporary context of anti-immigrant sentiment, a window is opened upon a vista of the deep-seated role of moral emotions. While Freudian guilt and the Lacanian break from reality both offer arguments for the source of violent acts, shame also emerges as a strong catalyst for violence, particularly when married with the nuances of the far-right ideologies inherent in anti-immigrant rhetoric. Exploring the specific mechanisms by which shame incites anti-immigrant violence offers a critical focus for therapeutic inquiry.

Shame, ranging from embarrassment through to humiliation and mortification “forces us out of language and into the body” (Longhofer, 2015, p.160), and is a powerful and painful emotion (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 92). Distinguishable from guilt which arises from

self-reflection, it is a social and moral emotion triggered by self-evaluation, which often lies outside the realm of conscious experience in the unconscious mind, manifesting somatically (Longhofer, 2015, p.160; Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p.24). Shame can be considered deeply intertwined in our very being, influencing much of how one behaves (Yontef, 2006, p.351). When shame is touched upon, one experiences an activating of the primitive parts of the brain which can hinder therapeutic progress (Longhofer, 2015, p.161), raising the question of its potential for healing, particularly in violent perpetrators. Some people defend against shame by any means necessary (Sedgwick et al (Eds.), 1995, p.137-140; Yontef, 2006, p.356) by attacking and acting out violently towards the other (Gilligan, 2003). In this case “(...) self-righteous anger can help the shamed person regain some sense of agency and control” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 93). Anger is the antidote to shame, potent and filled with power, whereas shame is useless and impotent (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 93). Tomkins (as cited in Sedgwick et al. (Eds.), 1995, p.137-140) argues that some experience shame as a withdrawal, shielding oneself against the judgement and gaze of the other (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 92; Yontef, 2006, p.355). In shame-oriented individuals the exposure of their perceived inadequacies is emotionally unbearable, painful and deeply wounding (Sedgwick et al. (Eds), 1995, p.137-140; Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 92) triggering “a learned sense of not identifying with the self as is” (Yontef, 2006, p.354). Perhaps then, it is to be expected that restoring pride becomes the foil to shame. While healthy pride fosters self-confidence, narcissistic pride often coupled with contempt (Gilligan, 2016; Kazlauskaitė, 2022; Levine, 1997; Lilly et al., 2019; Yontef, 2006) may manifest as grandiose violent displays, producing a “corrosive effect” (Sanderson, 2015, p.157). Narcissistic pride, a response to shame, obstructs empathy and fuels contempt (Sanderson, 2015, p.157) and violence, as observed in Irish anti-immigrant attacks, highlighting the complex interplay between shame and contempt (Sanderson, 2015, p.157; Sedgwick, et al.

(Eds.), 1995, p.137-140). Shame-oriented individuals may cope by devaluing the source of their shame through contempt and opposing the perceived authority figure responsible for it (Sedgwick et al. (Eds), 1995), such as the Gardaí and the Irish government's immigrant housing plans in this context. While effective short-term, this defence is fragile, as new situations can trigger a resurgence of original shame (Sedgwick et al. (Eds), 1995). The shame underlying anti-immigrant violence is often chronic, reflecting a pervasive sense of being inherently flawed, often operating outside conscious awareness (Sanderson, 2015, p.156; Yontef, 2006, p. 356).

However, there are several preconditions necessary for shame to transform into acts of violence. Firstly, the presence of “imagery of a “disapproving other” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p.93), perhaps provided by the online rhetoric of shared humiliation in the case of anti-immigrant violence in Ireland. Secondly, the “impaired capacity for empathy that accompanies shame” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 93) and thirdly a focus on the “presumed evaluations of others” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 94). Contrary to the concept of the pale criminal (Costello, 2003), so burdened by a guilty conscience that they are driven to discharge their guilt through eliciting punishment for their crimes, there is a strong argument to be made that guilt does not appear to cause people to lash out in criminal violence. Unlike adaptive guilt, which involves empathic understanding of others and self-evaluation based on our impact on others (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 95), shame is a moral emotion linked to problematic symptoms and the perception of others as critical (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 127). In the case of violence against immigrants, the rage inherent in the violent acts of the Dublin riots may have served as a potent method of discharging chronic shame (Sanderson 2015 p.156)

## **CHAPTER 3: PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS FOR SHAME-BASED, ANTI-IMMIGRANT VIOLENCE**

Working with anti-immigrant violent perpetrators requires psychotherapists to understand the complex interplay of shame, guilt, contempt, trauma, and prejudice. Psychotherapists must recognise shame as a concealed, nonverbal undercurrent beneath manifest violence, noting cues like anger, withdrawal, and posture changes (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 173-175). Shame also hinders self-awareness (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 91-92), creating a barrier as confronting, crippling shame is precisely what the client seeks to avoid.

### 3.1 Prejudice in the Psychotherapeutic Encounter

If anti-immigrant violence presents in the therapeutic encounter, prior to any attempt to work with the complex interplay of other emotions, experiences and beliefs that may accompany shame, psychotherapists should firstly examine their own prejudices. Akhtar (2018) argues that a psychotherapist's psychosocial experiences and political orientations, especially their own immigrant status or experiences with immigrants, can significantly influence their emotional attitude towards clients and the therapeutic relationship (pp. 61-62). A particular challenge lies in addressing entrenched prejudices such as those inherent to anti-immigrant violence, where initial identification with aggressive ideologies may be subtle, necessitating robust containment when surfacing within the therapeutic space (Slater, 2014). This underscores the necessity for self-awareness to ensure that the psychotherapist's biases do not impede their ability to offer unbiased and ethical care.

### 3.2 Shame and Anti-Immigrant Violence

Another obstacle to working with anti-immigrant violent perpetrators may emerge within the therapeutic encounter in the form of violent outbursts from the client. Shame can trigger "shame-to-anger transformations" (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p.174) manifesting as violent transference. In such instances of emerging violence, the psychotherapist's capacity to

regulate emotional intensity and relational distance is paramount (Slater, 2014). Furthermore, psychotherapists, despite their role, can experience shame in the face of client violence (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 178), potentially leading to negative countertransference. In these cases, it becomes vital for the psychotherapist to acknowledge the client's harmful expressions of shame through violence without jeopardising the therapeutic alliance (Weikert, 2010). Moreover, understanding the social context of masculinity (Connell, in Weaver, 2008, as cited in Weikert, 2010), with its emphasis on power and emotional suppression, is crucial for engaging male, violent clients who may resist vulnerability. Throughout the therapeutic relationship, the psychotherapist must navigate the ethical complexities of emotional attunement, particularly when confronted with a perpetrator's violent acts against immigrants, and strive to maintain unconditional positive regard (Weikert, 2010). Psychotherapy readily evokes shame through self-focus and transference of early relationship patterns (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p.172), demanding careful interpretation of transference, countertransference, and psychic defences when encountering anti-immigrant violence (Slater, 2014). Critically, the psychotherapist's self-awareness of their emotional responses to client violence is vital for therapeutic integrity and safety (Slater, 2014) and for nurturing the strong therapeutic relationship crucial for change (Weaver, 2008, cited in Weikert, 2010).

Rogers (1967) argues that while individuals can gain some awareness of their repressed feelings, true emotional acceptance requires a caring and accepting therapeutic relationship. Rogers (1957, p.26) suggests that Freud, lacking such a relationship during his self-analysis, perhaps struggled to fully accept and integrate the shadow aspects of the psyche, viewing them as enemies to be controlled rather than as integral parts of his personality. By bringing repressed feelings of shame and associated violent acts into the light, psychotherapy may

support the anti-immigrant violent perpetrator in processing these feelings and moving towards change.

The challenge of identifying shame is further complicated when shame meets rage and violence in the therapeutic encounter. As discussed, while shame initially directs hostility inward, its aversive nature often leads to outward blame in a bid to protect self-esteem (Gilligan 2003, 2016; Lewis & Marsden, 2021; Nathanson, 1992, as cited in Sanderson 2015 p.155; Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 91-92). The projection of shame outwards could manifest in the case of overt anti-immigrant violence as righteous fury or rage, rooted in humiliation, or may appear as subtle passive aggression (Hejdenberg & Andrews, 2011, as cited in Homolar et al., 2021; Kazlauskaitė et al., 2022; Sanderson 2015 p.155). Shame-based violence, often seen in racism, operates unconsciously and is highly sensitive to rejection or abandonment cues, making it difficult for individuals to recognise shame as “emanating from within” (Sanderson, 2015, p.156). The anti-immigrant violent displays in Ireland may have appeared to the perpetrators as a justified response to being shamed by immigrants entering the country, reinforced by the resulting temporary high of pride following the violent act (Sanderson, 2015). Sanderson's (2015) depiction of shame-based rage as a primitive defence, where individuals feel compelled to annihilate those who expose their shame (p.157, p.204) due to underlying feelings of impotence and powerlessness, calls to mind Lacan's passage à l'acte (Evans, 1996, pp.139-140). The violent anti-immigrant act may represent a flight from the Symbolic into the Real in a desperate attempt to resolve a collapse in the symbolic and defences against a fundamental sense of lack (Evans, 1996, pp.139-140). As shame obstructs symbolic processing and self-awareness (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p. 94), it could be argued that anti-immigrant violence offers a destructive release, allowing the perpetrator to disavow shame, but only serves to reinforce early psychic wounds (Sanderson, 2015, p. 157-158). Therefore, it is arguable that violent anti-immigrant acts are not, in fact, the cathartic release

of Freud's death instinct theory (Krahé, 2021, p.51/52) but a driver of a vicious cycle of repeat violent offending. However, the therapeutic focus on shame as the root of violence (Sanderson, 2015, p. 157) could align with the Lacanian frame of guiding the client back into the symbolic realm to articulate their experience, thereby interrupting the destructive cycle of violence perpetration against immigrants.

Working with the shame-based rage underlying anti-immigrant violence necessitates a careful, titrated approach, prioritising the concealed shame over the violence itself (Sanderson, 2015, p. 167). Psychotherapists must recognise violence as a defence against annihilation from a perceived threat to the self and a means of regaining agency, guiding clients to distinguish between legitimate anger and shame-based anger (Sanderson, 2015, p.158, p. 163). Addressing narcissistic pride and justifications for violence is crucial, alongside the cautious management of rage discharge to prevent perpetuating the shame-violence cycle (Sanderson, 2015, p. 163/167). This gradual process involves navigating shame-based violence to facilitate reconnection with early shame experiences and the development of healthier cognitions (Sanderson, 2015, p. 163/166).

### 3.3 Trauma, Shame and Anti-Immigrant Violence

The perpetration of anti-immigrant violence may also be rooted in a complex interplay of trauma and shame, and it is noteworthy that there is often a link between trauma, extremism and far-right radicalisation (Buljubasic et al., 2021; Gerodimos, 2022; Lewis & Marsden, 2021; Schmitt et al., 2022, Schumann et al., 2022). Trauma, particularly childhood experiences, can lead to maladaptive coping strategies later in life and a predisposition towards anger and violence (Allen et al., 2017) sometimes directed at marginalised groups. Anti-immigrant violence could be an attempt to regain a sense of power or to reenact unresolved trauma (Levine, 1997), a pattern seen in some violent extremists with histories of childhood trauma (Lewis & Marsden, 2021). Shame further compounds these psychic

wounds, fostering isolation for the perpetrator (Bragin, 2021) and projection, perpetuating a cycle of violence, especially in traumatised individuals more susceptible to shame (Sanderson, 2015). Effective therapeutic intervention may therefore also necessitate holding space for a trauma-informed approach (Horowitz et al., 2015), recognising the profound impact of trauma, alongside shame, and the potential link to anti-immigrant violence perpetration. This approach requires exploring the client's trauma history, shifting the focus from psychopathology to lived experience and exploring the underlying shame, fear, and anger that can precipitate violence (Horowitz et al., 2015, p.194). Mindfulness and somatic techniques, with grounding exercises (Levine, 2008; Rothschild, 2000), can help clients track shame-based feelings stemming from the trauma of childhood violence, fostering self-acceptance, self-esteem and reconnection with the tender feelings (Aichorn, 1935), of "hurt, disappointment and vulnerability" (Sanderson 2015 p.167). A key aspect of intervention, as with any trauma-informed approach, is the establishment of trust and a safe therapeutic space (Kluttig, 2009), which is crucial for the client to begin to address both their trauma and their anti-immigrant violent behaviour.

### 3.4 Integrative Psychotherapy for Shame-Based, Anti-Immigrant Violence

Narrative Exposure Therapy (Kluttig, 2009) can help clients to process trauma and break cycles of violent re-enactment by collaboratively constructing written narratives of their traumatic experiences, allowing for controlled integration of traumatic memories.

Furthermore, the act of verbalising a traumatic experience or event that caused shame helps put cognitive logic on what is a powerful, non-verbal experience often accompanied by irrational beliefs and distorted thought patterns (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p.175-p.176), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) may be an effective intervention for some violent perpetrators. CBT allows for the reframing of shame-based cognitions (Beck, 1983 & Ellis, 1962 as cited in Tangney & Dearing, 2002, p.175) and may be a crucial step in breaking the

cycle of shame-based violence. However, while CBT may address cognitive distortions related to shame-based violence, it may not reach deeper emotional issues tied to masculinity (Weaver, 2008, as cited in Weikert, 2010), noteworthy since many of the anti-immigrant violent perpetrators in contemporary Ireland were likely male according to media reports (BreakingNews.ie, 2024; Echolive, 2024).

Alternatively, Person-centred therapy (PCT) offers a potentially valuable approach, focusing on the individual rather than their categorisation (Weikert, 2010). Rogers (1967, p.195) argues that a client who prioritises one need, such as aggression, does so to the detriment of others and this will result in disharmony and impaired relationships. This is relevant for understanding anti-immigrant violent perpetrators who may be defensively organised, driven by an extreme need for power or control that overshadows empathy and connection with others (Rogers, 1967, p.195). Rogers (1967) contends that a safe therapeutic alliance is essential to help the perpetrator move beyond rigid defences, become attuned to their needs, and develop healthier interpersonal responses (p.195). This therapeutic process fosters the self-awareness and emotional regulation necessary to promote healing and diminishes the propensity for violence (Rogers, 1967, p. 195), though maintaining the core conditions of PCT with violent offenders can be challenging (Weikert, 2010).

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

By exploring the role of psychotherapy in meeting the contemporary challenge of anti-immigrant violence in Ireland this dissertation has revealed an intricate tapestry of emotions, beliefs, experiences, and psychosocial factors. From a psychoanalytic perspective, anti-immigrant violence may arise from unresolved guilt, with the perpetrator's passage à l'acte resulting in social disintegration, as seen in the Dublin riots. However, when inquiry is ventured into the specific moral emotions that trigger anti-immigrant violence in Ireland, shame emerges as a potent driver, amplified by extremist rhetoric and unconscious prejudice. The complexity of emotional turmoil behind anti-immigrant violence is further compounded by the intermingling of contempt, fear, trauma history, socioeconomics, and susceptibility to extremist shame narratives. When humiliated fury (Kirchner et al., 2018) triggers anti-immigrant violence in shame-oriented perpetrators, who may carry histories of marginalisation, trauma, and repeat offending, fostering change through psychotherapy becomes exceptionally complex. Many who could benefit from therapy never access it, often due to shame (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), while progress depends on helping clients to connect shame with subjective experiences of social exclusion and broader societal inequalities to foster change. Psychotherapists face obstacles working with anti-immigrant violence perpetrators, including violent outbursts, navigating their own shame, and managing transference. The social context of masculinity, maintaining positive regard, and the risk of therapy reinforcing shame and violent defences further complicate the process. Moreover, therapeutic models, such as CBT, may fall short in addressing deep emotional wounds tied to early trauma. Shame often hides in the shadows, as a tender feeling beyond conscious awareness, making it challenging for psychotherapists to detect, especially when masked as violence. Psychotherapy may help clients identify shame as a trigger for violence (Shaw, 2024), but its effectiveness in anti-immigrant cases is unclear. Future research in Ireland

could explore how shame interacts with masculinity, socioeconomics, and vulnerability to extremism, while examining how psychotherapy can more effectively engage perpetrators of anti-immigrant violence to inform an integrated approach across clinical practice, social policy, and mental health services (Laurence et al., 2024).

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