

Transference

How past relationships emerge in the present

OUR research addresses the clinical concept of transference, and shows that Freud got it partly right. In fact, transference is not confined to the psychiatrist's couch: it is at work in our normal mechanisms for social interaction.

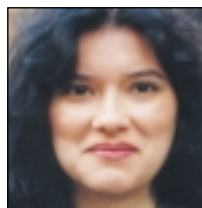
According to Freud (1912/1958), transference occurs when a client superimposes unconscious childhood fantasies about a parent on to an analyst. We do not concur with Freud's assumption that the content of transference derives from unconscious psychosexual conflict and defence, and know of no evidence to support this claim. But our research provides support for Harry Stack Sullivan's (1953) conception of transference (or 'parataxic distortion'), and shows that it occurs in daily life, not only in psychotherapy.

Significant others

Within the framework of social cognition, we have demonstrated that mental representations of significant others, developed in one's family and elsewhere, are linked to representations of self in memory, and are heavily laden with affect and motivation. Moreover, these representations are frequently activated and used in responding to new people that resemble a significant other (see Andersen & Glassman, 1996; Andersen *et al.*, 1997; Chen & Andersen, 1999).

Our work constitutes the first experimental demonstration of transference. It shows that the basic process of transference occurs consistently across individuals, even though the exact content is unique. A distinguishing feature of our research is that we solicit the unique content of significant-other knowledge from participants, and later use some of this content to portray a new person in an allegedly unrelated experiment. Using this procedure, we trigger the mental representation of this significant other and monitor its use in transference.

In effect, this procedure assesses



SUSAN M. ANDERSEN and **REGINA MIRANDA** argue that transference is a normal, everyday process.

transference in terms of how much participants 'go beyond the information given' (Bruner, 1957) about the new person. For example, say someone at pre-test described her father as 'interested in politics, athletic, and not very happy'. At a later time, she is presented with a description of another person indicating the person is 'interested in politics' and 'athletic', amongst other things. She is then asked to recall this description still later, and might express confidence that she had also learned he was 'not very happy', even though she did not learn this. The effect is not driven by the information presented, but by its relation to her own significant other. Hence, a mental representation of a significant other can be triggered by a new

person; this can lead to inferences about the new person that extend well beyond what was actually learned.

Although significant-other representations are chronically accessible and thus likely to be used willy-nilly — without being activated by cues in a new person — they are especially likely to be used when triggered by relevant cues in a new person (Andersen *et al.*, 1995). This triggering process can even happen non-consciously, when cues are presented outside of awareness (Glassman & Andersen, 1999). That is, even when we are unaware of having seen cues related to a significant other (for example if presented on a computer screen), these cues can still activate the significant-other

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Sigmund Freud and his siblings (1868). From left: Sigmund, Adolphine, Alexander, Anna, Paula, Mitzi and Rosa

representation and can lead to transference. In the real world this is analogous to not noticing a particular feature of a new person, but responding to it anyway.

Importantly, emotionally laden material is also triggered in transference. When we encounter a new person who resembles a significant other whom we like or love, we also tend to like the new person and evaluate him or her more positively. Participants' emotional responses, as reflected in their facial displays of affect, also reflect the global affect associated with the significant other. More pleasant facial affect is shown with a new person resembling a liked or loved significant other (Andersen *et al.*, 1996).

Moreover, closeness motives experienced with the significant other are also experienced with the new person. When we encounter a new person who activates a significant-other representation, we experience a similar desire to be emotionally close or to be distant from this new person. We expect to be accepted or rejected in similar fashion as well. These findings are noteworthy because the need to be close, or to feel connected to others, is arguably one of the most fundamental in interpersonal life (Andersen *et al.*, 1997).

The relational dynamics between the self and significant other are also elicited and enacted in overt behaviour in transference (e.g. Baum & Andersen, 1999). More specifically, transference plays out in overt interpersonal behaviour in conversations between strangers. When we encounter someone who resembles a significant other, we may actually elicit from the person the very kind of behaviour experienced with the significant other in behavioural confirmation of our expectancies (Berk & Andersen, in press). For example, if we found a previous

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Freud with his mother Amalie (1872)

romantic partner to be domineering, we may find that we elicit domineering conversational behaviour from a new person who resembles this significant other. However, we would not elicit this behaviour from a new person who does not resemble this significant other.

Transference also produces shifts in the working self-concept — how we see ourselves at the moment. In transference, then, we may more or less 'become' the version of ourselves we are with our significant other when we are with the new person, and the significant other is not there (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). If, for example, we typically see ourselves as adequate except with a particular relative, we may similarly come to see ourselves as inadequate with someone new who resembles this relative.

Much else of value

Overall, this research demonstrates one version of the clinical concept of

transference: it shows that transference operates by means of basic social-cognitive processing mechanisms and occurs in everyday interpersonal relations. It also indicates that transference is normal and non-pathological.

However, the work also has clinical implications because old interaction patterns can be inappropriate or even harmful at times when enacted with a new person. The research suggests it may be beneficial for therapists to help clients identify significant-other representations and problematic patterns with these others. Then clients can become more aware of these patterns when they occur in everyday relations, and can learn to identify relevant triggering cues in advance, thus ultimately learning to short-circuit such patterns before they occur. In this way, more adaptive and helpful responses may be formulated, practised, and integrated into one's life.

As indicated, Freud was unduly restrictive in assuming transference to be entirely neurotic and defensive, and its content to be psychosexual. Even though we have not directly tested the Freudian idea of unconscious fantasies concerning a parent being projected on to the analyst, it is evident that there is much else of value in the notion of transference. Behind the Freudian idea are more measurable cognitive processes that reflect the operation of emotionally laden significant-other representations in everyday interpersonal life.

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