

Transference and Countertransference

Let me preface this post by acknowledging that it is way too long. I just could find no way to shorten it and still accomplish sharing my thoughts on this subject. I beg your indulgence.

I often find myself in need of simplifying a concept for me to refine and clarify. Instead of looking at it from a distance using someone else's binoculars, I need to bring it into a place where I have a home-field advantage. While examining the concepts of Transference and Countertransference found in Shared Wisdom (Cooper-White, Pamela, Chapter 3), I began to apply my simplification process to better understand the idea as it has been presented. Freud's comment on page 9 helped to provide some constraints for my analogous interpretation. From Freud's 1915 "Observations on Transference-Love," 164, he writes: "Our control over ourselves is not so complete that we may not suddenly one day go further than we intended. In my opinion, therefore, we ought not to give up the neutrality toward the patient which we have acquired through keeping the countertransference in check."

In answer to our question for the post, I believe that there are significant repercussions for us, as caregivers and the people within our care, if we ignore the concepts of Transference and Countertransference. Not seeking understanding in these matters could do a great deal of harm to those in our charge. Just as we cannot ignore self-care, we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of overlooking the boundaries and choices we make when interacting with those who reach out to us in times of need.

I write a great deal of classical music, so I would like to explain Transference and Countertransference by using musical analogies. I realize that this may not translate well for some people not versed in music, but it brings focus for me.

Imagine for a moment two musicians facing each other. One plays the violin (the patient), and the other (the doctor) plays the cello. The Violinist starts trying to make a connection with the Cellist by playing a single note. There are four possible scenarios with this encounter (well, probably many more, but I envision four possible ones for this example)

Scenario 1 (Common Dialogue)

1. The Violinist plays the single note to make a connection
2. The Cellist responds by playing the same note an octave lower
3. The Violinist senses a connection has been made and that the Cellist is listening and paying attention. So, the Violinist intensifies the conversation by adding the third
4. The Cellist responds with a third an octave lower
5. Sensing that the Cellist understands the level of the conversation, the Violinist plays the fifth
6. The Cellist acknowledges the heightened level of conversation by also playing the fifth
7. Having reached a level of shared empathy, they add the octave together

Scenario 2 (Emotional Dialogue)

1. The Violinist plays the single note to make a connection
2. The Cellist responds by playing the same note an octave lower
3. The Violinist senses a connection has been made and that the Cellist is listening and paying attention. So, the Violinist intensifies the conversation with an emotional response by adding the minor third
4. The Cellist, in empathetic response, plays minor third an octave lower

5. Sensing that the Cellist understands and that this space is a safe place to share, the Violinist plays the fifth
6. The Cellist, acknowledging the new level of conversation and accepting the responsibility for keeping the space safe, encourages the Violinist to continue by also playing the fifth
7. Have reached a level of shared empathy, they add the octave together

Scenario 3 (Transference)

1. The Violinist plays the single note to make a connection
2. The Cellist responds by playing the same note an octave lower
3. The Violinist senses a connection has been made and that the Cellist is listening and paying attention. So, the Violinist intensifies the dialogue with an emotional response by adding the minor third
4. The Cellist, in empathetic response, plays minor third an octave lower
5. Sensing the empathetic response and trying to feed a deeper need, the Violinist changes the tone of the dialogue by adding the fourth instead of the anticipated fifth.
6. The Cellist, seeking to return the conversation to a proper format, plays the fifth in hopes that the Violinist will appreciate that the Cellist has acknowledged the response and found it inappropriate.
7. Sensing that the Cellist has found the last response inappropriate, the Violinist resolves the fourth to the fifth.
8. Have reached a level of shared empathy, they add the octave together

(Note: If the Violinist refuses to adhere to resolve the dialogue, the dialogue should probably be discontinued)

Scenario 4 (Countertransference)

1. The Violinist plays the single note to make a connection
2. The Cellist responds by playing the same note an octave lower
3. The Violinist senses a connection has been made and that the Cellist is listening and paying attention. So, the Violinist intensifies the dialogue with an emotional response by adding the minor third
4. The Cellist, in empathetic response, plays minor third an octave lower
5. Sensing the empathetic response and trying to feed a deeper need, the Violinist changes the tone of the dialogue by adding the fourth instead of the anticipated fifth.
6. The Cellist sees the new chord progression as an opportunity to inject his/her personal experience and preferences into the dialogue rather than trying to get the Violinist to return to the original dialogue. Rather than keep this impulse in check, the Cellist broadens the dialogue by playing the sixth (a chord progression that he often embeds in his own music), thereby changing his/her participation level in the dialogue. The Violinist and the Cellist now have a 'shared' story, even if it is not a 'common' story. The dialogue is no longer about just the Violinist but also about Cellist.
7. Sensing that the relationship is no longer uniquely Violinist, but instead 'strings,' both Violinist and Cellist form a relationship that is counter to the original dialogue.

(Note: In this scenario, unless both parties are willing to return to the original conversation, the dialogue cannot be resolved satisfactorily to both parties.)

Doing this exercise was successful in giving me a foundation for a better understanding of Transference/Countertransference. While it does not engage with the complexity of the processes, it did allow me to better grasp the material in the lecture and the information from C-W².

If you would like to hear how this works, you can find these examples at

<https://music.revwalk.org/2021/09/08/transference-and-countertransference/>