

Transference, Social Atom and Spontaneity

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In recent years I have found it helpful on many occasions to assist people toward greater spontaneity in their lives by becoming more conscious of the constant re-enactment of old responses and patterns of behaviour. These are often referred to in psychotherapy as transferences. In training others to carry out these functions I have discovered that although most are able to understand the concept of transference, in real life they find it difficult to identify. Strangely, though, when I introduced the concept of 'social atom behaviour' there was a greater appreciation of this way of thinking and manifestations of a far greater ability to identify it. Since the terms 'transference' and 'social atom behaviour' seem to describe similar phenomena, and knowing somehow that they could not be used interchangeably, I began to investigate the relationship.

Transference

The term 'transference' was coined by Freud or others near him. Freud defined it as a

transference of feelings upon the personality of the physician (cited in Moreno 1959). Others have been more forthcoming. Williams (1989) states that:

"Transference is the term used for an emotional reaction 'brought across' from an old relationship towards an authority. When that sort of reaction occurs between peers it is usually called displacement - the irrational aspects of any relationship between two people. All transference, therefore, is displacement, but not all displacement is called transference. It is convenient to define transference as displacement that occurs in a hierarchical relationship."

Another definition I have stumbled across and cannot properly attribute is more succinct:

"Transference is the lively re-enactment in the present of behaviour that belongs to earlier relationships."

There are in fact almost as many definitions and descriptions of transference as there are psychotherapists. In general terms we could

say that transference and countertransference are words that are often used to describe dysfunctional interactions between people. Transference refers to a warm up or response triggered in a person which includes thoughts feelings and actions and carries with it significant and dominating elements learned in previous experiences and carried over into the present. Since much of our current behaviour is previously learned there is a good deal of discussion in the literature as to whether or not the term transference should only refer to those responses which are not only dysfunctional in the present but also carry a very strong load of feeling and indicate previously unresolved conflict, or whether the term should be used to describe all previously learned behaviour.

Generally in psychotherapy the term 'transference' refers, as Freud originally intended, only to those problematic or neurotic responses which are a result of hugely conflicted and therefore unfinished experiences in the past. 'Countertransference', of course, refers to the response or perceived response of the other in any interaction which triggers or perpetuates the transference.

Moreno did not like these terms. He pointed out that as well as the transference, the unconscious fantasy which is projected, in his observation there is another process where "*the patient sizes up the man across the desk and estimates intuitively what kind of man he is*" (Moreno and Moreno 1959, p.6). This is what he called 'tele' and occurs through that part of the ego which is not carried away through auto-suggestion. His principle objection seems to have been to the notion that the patient is transferring while the therapist is simply analytical and objective. He maintained that transference is an interpersonal phenomenon which works both ways. In other words both the patient and the therapist are caught in the same dynamic.

The difficulty with the terms transference and countertransference from a personal or professional development perspective is that the identification of these elements and the use of these terms is largely restricted to therapy or supervision settings. That is, identifying and naming it as such is not much use in ordinary everyday life, because there is no contract to explore and work through the transference in the relationship. This point was brought home strongly to me when I accused a person with whom I was in a social relationship of being in a transference with me. She responded by saying with passionate rejection, "*I don't care what you call it, it's all I've got*".

The identification of the transference provides the therapist or the supervisor with an understanding of the dynamic and also, in therapy, an implied contract to work through it as part of the process. In everyday life this is not the case. Furthermore, in supervision and other professional growth activities there is no such contract, although I would argue that in supervision the identification of transference in the professional/client relationship is an important aspect. Generally, however, there is no mandate to work through it and in everyday life the person seeking personal or professional development but who is not quite so much in the line of what has traditionally been called therapy is left without concepts to assist in that development. This is where the concepts of social atom and social atom repair come in.

It is also interesting to note that descriptions of the phenomenon we are referring to as transference also occur in other contexts.

W.B. Yeats, the Irish poet, says:
"*... .. no people hate as we do in whom the past is always alive*". (in Foster 2001)

Mary Oliver, a wonderful American poet, in a poem simply called "Robert Schumann", says:
*"... ..And now I understand
Something so frightening, and wonderful -
how the mind clings to the road it knows, rushing
through crossroads, sticking -
like lint to the familiar"*. (Oliver 1992)

Clearly both of these authors are referring to the effects of the past on the present and in the case of Mary Oliver I can think of no more adequate description of transference. This raises another aspect of the transference discussion. Does transference refer only to those experiences from the past which are unfinished or can it refer to any experience from the past? This is precisely the problematic area when considering the relationship between transference and social atom behaviour. Somehow Mary Oliver's brilliant lines seem to belong more accurately with 'social atom behaviour'.

Social Atom Behaviour

The term 'social atom' was coined and developed by J.L. Moreno. It refers to the network of significant relationships at any moment in our lives. Within that network of significant relationships roles and role relationships emerge and represent the life force within the individual. This, according to Moreno, was primarily creative. The original social atom is of course the family of origin with perhaps some significant additions. The social atom of any person is potentially in a continuous state of development through exposure to situations and relationships in which something new is called forth. So it is not just in the original social atom that roles and role relationships develop.

In Moreno's theory roles emerge in any individual in response to other persons or events which they encounter. Furthermore, it is not just the role which is internalised or learnt but also

the role relationship or role system. That is, both the perceived role which triggered the response and the response role itself are internalised as a system. So that when that perceived role is again encountered or perceived, the learned response tends to emerge. These roles and role relationships have now become part of our role conserve of learned and internalised ways of managing the world.

When a new role emerges in us in its first manifestation, it is a spontaneous, creative living response. When that role is repeated in another situation that is somehow perceived to be the same as the original, then it lacks spontaneity, creativity or indeed life. It is often simply a repeat of that which has already been internalised and therefore does not take us forward in our development. We have not developed anything new. Of course we all need a conserve of roles and role relationships to manage our lives. We do not want to start afresh in learning how to be in the world each morning when we wake. However, there is a tendency to perceive situations around us as being the same as the original situation in which the role developed. We could say that unconsciously we perceive the current social atom or elements of it to be the same as or similar to the earlier social atom. We thus repeat social atom behaviour. Our responses lack spontaneity. So what is spontaneity and how does this relate to transference?

Spontaneity

'Spontaneity' is properly a Morenian concept although it was never defined by Moreno. It was and often is referred to as the 'S' factor. The operational description suggests that it relates to the ability to bring forth something new in response to an old situation or something adequate in response to a new situation. Spontaneity, it seems, includes elements of newness and elements of adequacy. Yet this description somehow lacks something. It

somehow does not capture something vital about those moments when we are truly spontaneous, truly flowing, truly alive.

For me spontaneity is the urge to live - the spark inside which prompts us to move forward unconflicted and non-anxious. The prompt which urges us beyond the known! The unconscious spark which propels us out of the conserve toward a freedom seldom experienced. Spontaneity enables us to be in the moment fully with all that we are and all that we have experienced. We are aware of nothing but our urge to live and yet we are aware of everything. In this sense perhaps we have recaptured something of what Moreno referred to as the "stage of all identity".

Once again literature captures such moments in a way that only literature can. David Whyte is a poet who takes his perspectives on creativity into many international companies. In a poem called "Out on the Ocean" he describes an experience of being five miles out to sea in a storm.

*"the blades flash
lifting veils of spray as the bow rears
terrified then falls*

*with five miles to go
of open ocean
the eyes pierce the horizon*

*the kayak pulls round
like a pony held by unseen reins
shying out of the ocean
and the spark behind fear
recognised as life
leaps into flame."*

It is this spark behind fear that in some sense I recognise as spontaneity. David Whyte continues:

*"Always this energy smoulders inside
when it remains unlit
the body fills with dense smoke." (Whyte 1994)*

He goes on to discuss these lines saying that we cannot neglect our interior fire without damaging ourselves in the process. If the flame is not lit, he says, the body fills with smoke and the toxic components of the smoke are resentment, blame, complaint, self-justification and martyrdom. To these I would also add envy and grandiosity.

The flame of creativity must be lit. Spontaneity provides the spark.

Social atom behaviour, by and large condemns the spark to dark recesses where it is seldom lit. And so the body fills with smoke.

Social Atom and Spontaneity

What I am here calling social atom behaviour lacks spontaneity. It is behaviour which has been generated in previous social atoms and is now re-enacted largely in order to deal with anxiety. It is often brought into situations where normally it would be described as adequate. Once we realize how lacking in spontaneity it really is, we would have to describe it as coping behaviour at best.

Social atom behaviour then consists of roles and role relationships brought over from earlier relationships. Its primary defining characteristic is its lack of spontaneity. However it is not necessarily fragmenting. Social atom behaviour is not only more easily recognised but it is also a much larger and more comprehensive notion. Further, it is not nearly so pretentious. It is not surrounded by reams of learned documents and a good deal of mystery. It is an enabling concept in that all behaviour can be addressed.

The terms social atom and social atom behaviour

allow us to conceive of development and growth and indeed healing in a profoundly larger perspective than do the current usage of the terms transference and countertransference. Any piece of behaviour which is being repeated without re-enlivenment may be described as social atom behaviour. When it is not producing much in terms of enlivenment and development it can be thought of as a response which needs to be examined if further development is to occur.

Diagram 1 sets out how Transference, Social Atom and Spontaneity might exist in relationship with one another. This diagram is not in any way intended to be definitive but does provide a useful starting point for discussion.

On balance I suggest that it is probably wise to consider social atom behaviour and transference as two separate concepts which have some elements in common. We might say that all transference is social atom behaviour, but not all social atom behaviour is transference. This makes social atom behaviour by far the more useful concept since it enables a greater range of potentially problematic behaviours to be identified. It also opens up a greater number of situations where these behaviours may be addressed.

Distinguishing Transference and Social Atom Behaviour

One day wandering along the corridor of a psychiatric hospital I said to a patient, absent mindedly, "Giddy, How are you?" He said to me with some venom, "What do you care? You don't care how I am. You might as well say go fuck yourself."

This is an example of social atom behaviour. It is part of my conserve of roles - built up over a period of time (we might call it the 'absent minded greeter'). It is acceptable and accepted generally. However, it totally lacks spontaneity. In the situation it is neither a new response to an old situation nor an adequate response to a new situation.

The question is then could we refer to this bringing forward of an old response on my part as transference? I think not. There is very little element of conflict or unresolved difficulty about this. It is not perceived by most as being in any way inadequate. However, it does lack spontaneity. So if we want to conceptualise any adjustment to this way of responding in terms of a theory, we must go to Moreno and consider it in terms of social atom repair or perhaps better 'social atom development'. Here we see that the term social atom repair can refer to behaviour

PROGRESSIVE		COPING			FRAGMENTING	
Well Developed	Developing	Moving Away	Moving Towards	Moving Against	Diminishing	Fixed
<i>SPONTANEITY</i>		<i>SOCIAL ATOM BEHAVIOUR</i>				
		←----- ----- -----→			<i>TRANSFERENCE</i>	

Diagram 1: Mapping Transference, Social Atom and Spontaneity (onto framework from Clayton 1994).

which is normally accepted as adequate and yet on closer inspection is seen to be totally lacking in spontaneity (i.e. adequate and related to this present moment). Whereas transference would normally refer to behaviour which is seen in some way less than adequate or perhaps not totally relevant to this moment.

Another example of social atom behaviour is Joan. She has organised and put together a study day for a group of people which has been exciting and stimulating for them. One of them makes a speech at the end of the day in which they thank her for her work. In response Joan stands and without acknowledging the gratitude the group feels towards her moves in to acknowledging other people whose contribution to the day had been minimal.

Now we could argue whether this is appropriate or not. I personally do not think it is adequate for an adult to completely ignore the effort that has been made to acknowledge the work that has been done. An opportunity for people to say thank you makes space for finishing this experience and moving on. A further factor is that those of us who know her know that this is a pattern. Joan never seems able to accept the compliment given to her and the thanks. She always seems to feel the need to redirect it to other people.

Is this dysfunctional? Hardly. Is it transference? That's debatable. She feels no need to do anything other than what she is doing. It is clearly social atom behaviour. It lacks spontaneity and does not relate fully to the situation in which it occurs.

Should we engage in some social atom repair? I don't know. Depends on how you think about it and what your relationship is with her. As a friend you might like to see her accept compliments in a fuller way and really let them

in, but feel contented that she is happy. As someone involved with her personal development, we might think that Joan needs building up so that she is able to value her own contribution more fully and thus move on to making greater contributions in a variety of ways as she develops more confidence and greater acceptance of her own abilities. The point is by naming this as social atom behaviour we have a greater understanding of Joan and a wider range of options for relating to her. If we see it as transference our options are more limited.

Perhaps we might think of social atom behaviour as all behaviour that forms the conserve we have developed over time and is now enacted either with or without spontaneity in the present. Transference refers only to conflicted aspects of the social atom responses that are enacted inappropriately in the present.

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