

Transference: Cleaning up the Past and Entering the Moment

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Defining the Issue

Faced with the deep uncertainty of our times, many of us desire not only to live better and more successful lives, but to find an expanded vision of who we are, through which we can fulfill our deepest potential and to contribute to the world. Knowingly or unknowingly, we seem to be moving collectively in the direction of this “wisdom perspective.” Whether it is yoga, bodywork, or meditation, all these tools are valuable in some way, and give each of us more power to work and live creatively.

The “wisdom perspective” invites us to embrace a level of being that transcends the personal self. This contrasts sharply with the traditional Western psychological model that identifies us with the personal self. But how can we create a solid foundation for moving beyond the personal self without having first developed a sufficiently healthy one?

As more of us move toward the “wisdom perspective,” we risk shortchanging ourselves of the tools offered by traditional psychology. This creates a serious problem. We are bypassing the basic issues that only traditional psychology can address. If turning towards the “wisdom perspective” is simply designed to cover up the dysfunctional beliefs of the personal self that we inherited from our families and our culture, then this equates to a new way of avoiding old issues. The bottom-line is that this doesn't work. As long as we keep ignoring them, our personal issues will remain in conflict. Our basic psychological issues deserve to be understood and healed, not just released or “transcended.”

The value of using traditional psychology to complement the wisdom perspective can be demonstrated by exploring one important psychological phenomenon: the concept of transference.

Transference: A Key Psychological Concept

Transference, in the broadest definition of that term, refers to the unconscious act of redirecting or projecting the feelings that we had toward our parents or early caregivers onto people in our everyday lives. To say that it affects our behavior constantly would be an understatement.

Imagine that your boss doesn't look you in the eyes and it instantly makes you feel exactly as your father did when he treated you dismissively as a child. Imagine walking into a job interview and finding that the person behind the desk talks constantly about herself, which unconsciously triggers the way you felt when your father incessantly lectured you without asking your opinions. Lastly, how many times have you been strongly triggered by someone, either positively or negatively, without knowing why?

The truth is that most of us react to these transference situations emotionally and unconsciously. The “wisdom-perspective” would advise us to detach from the situation at hand because our personal feelings do not reflect the objective facts. One of the common catchphrases of the wisdom perspective is “Don’t take it personally!” But what happens when we can’t help but do so?

If we understand the psychological concept of Transference, then we realize that the “real” situation we’re dealing with often triggers a “symbolic” one that is often unconscious, activating feelings that arise from our past. By addressing Transference, we begin to distinguish between what is real and what is symbolic, allowing us to return to everyday situations with awareness and choice.

Transference Exercise

Here is an exercise to be done in your own private time and space, designed to help decrease the negative effects of Transference in your life:

Step 1: List the people in your everyday world who “push your buttons.”

Step 2: Select one person on which to focus specifically.

Step 3: Perform a review of your feelings about this person. Ask yourself: “What happened in reality? Who in my past does this remind me of? How do I feel about that person?”

Step 4: Now visualize a boundary and separate the “real” person you’re dealing with from the “symbolic” person they trigger.

Step 5: Listen non-judgmentally to the feelings triggered by the “symbolic” person. For example, pay attention to the things you might have wanted to say or do to someone from your past, but which you never did. You may even want to write your feelings down concretely.

Step 6: Return to the “real” situation. What has changed?

This exercise should be repeated as often as necessary. It brings us back to the “real” situation with a greater sense of emotional freedom and clarity. The more conscious we become of our transference responses, their effect on us will increasingly diminish. We will not simply unconsciously react to a person or a situation, but we will respond productively with awareness and choice.

Concluding Reflections: Reintegrating the Wisdom Perspective

Since the phenomenon of Transference is so ubiquitous in our relationships, it is invaluable to remain open to addressing it. In working through these “symbolic” projections, we increasingly establish a clearer boundary between our internal thoughts and feelings and the external realities we face daily. We can then appreciate Transference situations not as areas of conflict, but as opportunities for growth.

This process not only fosters a more sturdy, healthy, personal self— a great accomplishment unto itself— but also facilitates our immersion into the joys of the “wisdom perspective” as well.

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