

## Erotic Transference as a Social Defence

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### Abstract

This paper broadens the phenomenon of erotic transference from the realm of the individual into the realm of the social. While erotic transference is very well discussed and documented as dynamic in the therapeutic relationship, reflection in the writing of this phenomenon in social systems is absent. This paper argues that this absence may be explained, in part, through the dominance of vertical comprehension to the interaction of the horizontal and the vertical in our social and psychological understanding (cf Miller, 2003). Individual psychotherapy invites the vertical to be dominant. In understanding dynamics in social systems, such as organizations, we need to add the lateral dimension. The erotic is discussed as a social defence (pairing) against the anxieties provoked by the complexity of a given task. As with all basic assumption groups, this defence has the potential to create destructive psychotic relationships. Working with erotic transference in consulting raises the need for a relational approach and the use of parallel process, in order to contain psychotically acted out relationships in social systems.

*Key words:* group relations' conferences; erotic transference; lateral dynamics; social defences; mutuality; parallel process.

### CASE STUDY

A number of years ago, I was a member of staff at a group relations' conference with its primary task being to study unconscious phenomena occurring in the here and now during the temporary learning environment of the conference. A number of staff was brought together by the director, whom I knew quite well because we had worked together on previous projects. The staff consisted of five men, including the male director, and five women. Although I had had contact with the director and two other staff members in the lead-up to the conference, it was in our initial preparatory staff meeting when I met with most of these colleagues for the first time.

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Commencing staff work in a group relations conference is a bit like going into a secluded retreat, in some way cut off from the normal world, yet still working with the normal world as we hold it. A sort of 'magic mountain effect', named after Thomas Mann's novel *Der Zauberberg* (1962), can occur, in which neglect of the remote, outside world highlights the internal group process. We met for this particular conference in the outskirts of a small town, far removed from my daily life at home – away from my wife, my children, my practice, my friends. Entering the conference was an upheaval to my normal life. I had not anticipated the profound effect this had on me. I knew it was necessary to refocus on the here and now of the set task, but that change brought about a complexity of feelings in me.

I felt the loss of the normal containment of my life, whereas a new containment had not yet been established. The staff was just getting to know each other; we did not have a shared history apart from being 'in the field of group relations'. I was excited and anxious at the same time. Halfway through the first staff meeting, I fell in love with one of the women on the staff. 'I fell in love'; that is what I called it at the time, and it was mainly an erotic attraction, a sensuous stimulation I felt on my skin, in my mouth, as erogenous zones. The attraction of her presence that I felt from the moment we met did not settle and I could not distract myself from her. I was not only attracted by her appearance, but even more so by an immediate sense of both safety and challenge. Without a lot of contact, I projected a mate on to her, someone with whom I would feel safer at work. This was nevertheless an experience that Kernberg would refer to as very early stage or prerequisites for love, let alone 'mature love' (Kernberg, 1974). I caught her eye and she caught mine as well. We exchanged small flirtatious smiles. This continued for some time while we were getting our staff process working. The flirting went unnoticed by others and we were, or at least I was, excited by our deception.

I shared an enjoyable relationship with my wife. I was not particularly driven to have an affair. I was disturbed and puzzled by my experience of falling in love, but mainly I was frightened.

I knew only the director and two of the other nine consultants. All the other consultants were new to me, although I knew some by reputation as experienced group relations conference consultants, and two as authors. At the time I would place myself about in the middle on a scale running between being experienced and being a novice in the work. This would place me in the middle of this group as well. But then, the following insights began to strike me.

I was born as the fifth child into a family that extended to nine children, four boys and five girls. And at this conference I was in the

middle again of a temporary family with the same composition: one cannot be confronted by one's own life more than that. The metaphor of nine children with a father, the director, and an absent mother was in the room. I easily ascertained who of the other staff would represent my other siblings. Having had five sisters, I was used to being mothered by the oldest of them. One of the staff was going to be appointed by the director as his co-director. The woman I was attracted to represented my sister who is one year older than me, with whom I have had a loving relationship all my life, my favourite sister. As children we were very fond of each other; we were safe and secure around each other in that overcrowded family and we have maintained close contact all our lives.

In more than one way, choosing a soul-mate at the start of the conference, by falling in love with the woman colleague, was surely a repetition of my personal dynamic, of my particular way of making the world safer and less anxiety raising. The conference time would be less anxious and more manageable for me. A little professor in me had once more unconsciously found his way to survive a new situation.

I considered keeping these experiences and meaning for myself, but then, as a staff member, I was committed to consider all dynamics during the conference as 'material to work with'. When, at the end of the preparatory day, I reflected on all of this and revealed my feelings to my colleagues, I was very frightened. I did not think it was particularly professional to feel like this. I felt confused about the powerful mix of my family of origin and the staff for this event. I also felt ashamed and guilty for not paying much attention to the other staff members, except in trying to locate each of them *in loco* of one of my real siblings. I was expecting my father to disapprove and my siblings to be envious, irritated, and angry with me. I had seldom felt so anxious for being seen and being exposed.

During that meeting there was not much time left for further reflection on these issues, except for the mutuality of the attraction by the woman colleague. This made us suddenly a couple, which brought in a lot of new associations, interpretations, and insights. As staff, we obviously had some more work to do, and we started to explore what the couple might be carrying for the staff and the conference. While acknowledging that, the erotic attraction between the couple became something that went further than my personal transference repetition. It was a pairing dynamic expressing group related unconscious fantasies for surviving the anxieties provoked by the task of the conference. Whatever individual defence mechanisms were at work, the pair also acted out a social defence mechanism for the staff as a whole.

The conference commenced the next day and we took the erotic pairing issue in the following days to deeper layers of reflection. Some of the staff were envious, some angry, some admiring, some could not relate to it; we fought about it. Most could relate to anxieties for the work we were engaging, but they were quite different from each other. We spoke about the potential incestuous aspect of the erotic relationship, and how close we as the two staff members might get to acting out, and what we might mirror for the membership in the conference. We reflected on how the pairing was competitive with the director and his pragmatic, well thought-through marriage with his co-director: erotic, energetic, juvenile, and exciting life *vs* pragmatically running the family. Maybe the staff would like to be directed by the sexually attracted couple, as they provided a sexier dynamic than the boring director. We created an Oedipal inter-generational conflict on a group level, with teamed-up siblings.

Our discussion was fascinating, interesting, and at times scary. What could be considered an individual erotic transference had many elements that brought hypotheses and insights into a multiplicity of dynamics in our staff team and in the conference as a whole. We had many more hypotheses and associations, which I do not intend to address here. The overriding sense was that these dynamics were all aspects of the functioning of the conference system that we were engaging in, protecting us as staff members from our own anxieties.

While the conference continued, issues of love and attraction became increasingly prevalent in the reports from the large study system and from some small study systems. And, while we as staff reflected about these themes, we were left wondering about the chicken and the egg, leaving it eventually to the unconscious circular systemic dynamic that was at work. The erotic attraction was present both in the staff and in the membership in a powerful way. Instead of having to become real, the staff provided the containment, which in turn provided the conference participants with the safety to work and play with the symbolic meaning of the erotic, without going into psychotic acting out.

As the conference proceeded, I felt increasingly exhausted. This was beyond the aspects of late nights and early mornings that happened anyway during this conference. I felt heavy and tired from carrying so much. I felt frustrated for not consummating the erotic feelings I felt for my colleague and regretted at some point having revealed them. Would not it have been much nicer to have told no one and have secret meetings and sexual encounters at night between our rooms, I asked myself. Would not that have strengthened the ties with a workmate? Reflecting on this the next day with the colleagues, we could all see

that this potential slip into acting out came after our previous night's meeting, where we had difficult and partly unfulfilling discussions about what we could or could not bear. When the containment gets cracks, the psychotic acting out is near. An insight from experience! As a result I felt relieved and supported by carrying all of this with the staff as a whole. By sharing the tension, the erotic was held by all of us, shared, fought about, and worked with. In doing so, we contained both ourselves in our role as staff and the membership. It did not feel like an isolated burden, we actually shared the burden. And, as was reflected upon in the closing plenary, that containment was profoundly felt among the membership.

At the moment the conference ended, the functionality of the erotic dynamic for the learning in the conference revealed itself: I suddenly found the object of my desire pretty ordinary and normal, and also that the feeling was mutual.

#### THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF EROTIC TRANSFERENCE

Erotic transference is experienced, and has been explored, since the early days of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. When Freud (1915a) mentioned a new type of neurosis, which was related to the patient admiring the analyst, he called it a transference neurosis. In the exchanges with Breuer, who was frightened of the erotic responses of his patient Anna and wanted to quit analysis with her, Freud acknowledged that this transference was a powerful and frightening one. He related it to the analytic situation itself, recommending working with its symbolic meaning instead of running away from it. He also emphasized, humorously, that it should not be narcissistically attributed to the charms of the analyst (*ibid.*, p. 168).

There is an increasing number of studies about this subject, focusing on the power of the erotic transference dynamic as related to the psychotherapeutic situation itself and in the seclusion of the one-on-one consulting room. I found both Mann's book on the erotic relationship in psychotherapy (Mann, 1997) and Britton's chapter on erotic transference (Britton, 2003) particularly interesting. The *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy* discussed an interesting theme on the issue of erotic transference where several authors tackled the issue of the therapist's role (Schoenberg, 2000). In the *Transactional Analysis Journal*, the erotic was brought to the table in a case study by Hargaden (2001), further discussed by Erskine (2001), Sills (2001) and Cornell (2001). Hargaden recently wrote about love and desire in the therapeutic relationship, giving the theme more a historical context (Hargaden, 2007). Cornell addressed erotic vitality and disturbance in

psychotherapy in the *British Gestalt Journal* (Cornell, 2003). This was followed by O'Shea's exploration of what she called the erotic field, in which we 'need to be wise enough to understand that ours has become a culture somewhat afraid of eros and sexuality' (O'Shea, 2003, p. 110).

Knowledge about erotic transference and countertransference is increasing, helping us to understand both our clients and ourselves better in the therapeutic endeavour. However, as Britton mentions, 'Knowing more about tigers does not make them less dangerous. There are no tame tigers, and tiger trainers and zookeepers need to be the first to realize this' (Britton, 2003, p. 45). In mentioning the dangers, we enter the murky waters where naming and exploring the phenomenon is often experienced as opening a too-hard basket to reflect on. Hargaden mentions how, after her first publication, a number of colleagues 'had speculated that I must be talking about my unmet sexual needs' (Hargaden, 2007, p. 5). Another fear is that talking about erotic transference is making it *salonfähig* and is inviting the transgression. This is reminiscent of a 'don't mention suicide, it might lead to acting out' attitude. Better to be silent about it and put a heavy lid on it, so it will not be acted out. We should know better: the more repression, the more acting out, the more reflection and ownership, the healthier we can contain ourselves and our clients. Whatever the growth potential of including eroticism in psychotherapy is, authors generally agree that it is difficult for therapists to address. In exploring the current debate about the erotic, Mann mentions progressive and regressive views of erotic transference (Mann, 2003). The regressive view argues that the focus on looking backwards at early childhood experience is seen as avoiding emotional development, while the progressive view allows the dynamics of transformational object seeking between client and therapist to provide for new development.

Freud states that the objective of the dynamic of transference is not to find an object in real perception in correspondence with the one presented, but to *refind* such an object and to convince oneself that it is still there (Freud, 1925h, p. 237). Transference is the vehicle to get there; therefore, working with the symbolic meaning of the transference is essential. All forms of overstepping the world of the transferential reality into 'real reality', is a loss of learning potential (Wheelan, 1992; van Beekum, 2005). Stepping into reality kills off the transference, the yearning, and the learning.

When therapists transgress the erotic transference boundaries, deeper damage is inflicted on our clients. The fear of transgression has roots, and the literature rightly focuses on the many transgressions of the transferential dynamics in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Gabbard and Lester elaborated on many aspects of boundaries and

boundary violations, sexual and non-sexual (Gabbard and Lester, 2003).

Redding Mersky describes this in a subtle way:

Unlike projective identification, in which something unwanted or unknown in the client is projected onto the consultant or consulting team and later illuminated and worked through, an enactment involves an 'act'. Both psychotherapist or consultant and client jointly participate in the action. (Redding Mersky, 2001, p. 45)

Besides often irreparable damage to clients, there is also the negative fall-out regarding the profession from acting out psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, or consultants.

### ADDING THE LATERAL DIMENSION

In almost all of the writing about erotic transference, the phenomenon is individualized and, with that, isolated from the wider systemic context in which it takes place. One-on-one psychotherapy is mostly not meant to include a lot of broader systemic thinking. However, taking the system into account may shed a light on the occurrence and meaning of erotic transference as a function in the dynamics of the wider system in which it occurs.

When we work in a team, either as a member or as a consultant, the erotic is often in the room, with all the discomfort it may bring of having sexual feelings for a team member. This also raises the dilemma of how to interact about those feelings without being seductive or by blurring the boundaries.

Sanders (2004) and Mitchell (2003) argue that the erotic is in our lives as part of the whole family, not just in the part that is directed at the parents, but also in the sibling dynamics. Mitchell makes a case for a change of paradigm in psychoanalysis 'from near exclusive dominance of vertical comprehension to the interaction of the horizontal and the vertical in our social and psychological understanding' (Mitchell, 2003, p. 1). We are born not just to parents but, mostly, also to siblings. And when we extend the dynamics into the lateral, this does not stop at envy, hate, and competition among siblings; it includes love and eroticism among them as well.

Thinking of the erotic transference in families, teams, and organizations includes thinking into lateral relationships as well. According to Mitchell, classical psychoanalysis keeps the onus very much on the parental (father-mother) relationship and transference is mainly researched and analysed as a repetitive phenomenon from the child-parent relationship. Even then, the focus is almost always on the



interpretation of the dynamics in the child. It is about the little boy that wants to marry mum, more than about mum falling in love with her fourteen-year-old son and wanting to marry him.

Sirota raises the question that when the lateral dimension is highly ignored in the psychoanalytic consulting room, 'how then, might we be failing to take sufficient account of it in the group relations thinking and theory, in GR conferences and in the interpretations offered in the groups, organisations and institutions we consult to?' (Sirota, 2005, p. 146).

Maybe we carry a deeply rooted injunction to explore the lateral and the erotic peer-transference through our roots stretching to Wilfred Bion and Melanie Klein, who was Bion's analyst. Klein supposedly had advised Bion 'to abandon his concern with group analysis, as it was leading him away from psychoanalysis' (in Mitchell, 2003, p. 119). In more colloquial language: the father-children issues are more important than the children-among-themselves issues.

There are three areas in consulting work where erotic transference can be explored and studied:

- (1) between members of a client team;
- (2) between members of a consulting team;
- (3) between a member of a client team and a member of a consulting team.

The first two are directed at lateral dynamics, only the last one includes the vertical. The case study at the beginning of this article is described as lateral dynamic, but is worked with from both lateral and vertical dynamic understanding.

### EROTIC AND GROUP RELATIONS

Confirming my point, the group relations' literature is actually quite silent on the subject of erotic transference in groups and organizations. Although the phenomenon is not unknown in the practical work of group relations' conferences, it is rarely referred to. In the recent publication of presentations at the 2003 'Belgirate' meeting on group relations' conferences with the subtitle of 'reviewing and exploring theory, design, role taking and application' (Brunner, Nutkevitch and Sher, 2006), there is only one reference to transference, not to mention erotic transference. There are a number of recent articles that highlight generally the issues on valuing emotions in the workplace (Hoggett, 2002), or refer to emotional connectedness in organizations and groups (de Gooijer, 2003), or to enactment by consultants (Redding Merksy,



2001), but the articles keep their distance from eroticism and sexuality in terms of how it can occur in consulting work. Van Reekum (2002) gets close to the issue when writing about the role rumour plays in a case of supposed sexual transgression among members in a group relations' conference; however, the phenomenon as such is not addressed.

The closest we may get to the subject is with Nitsun's courageous recent book in which he extensively explores aspects of desire in groups (Nitsun, 2006). He suggests 'an interplay between desire as generated *in* the group and desire as developed in relation *to* the group' (*ibid.*, p. 2). He refers to group psychotherapy and group analysis, but his work is also useful in terms of a group relations' approach to consulting. Bion argues that, within a group, we are group animals at war. The popular conviction is that in love and war everything is allowed. Bion expands that, saying, 'the individual is a group animal at war, not simply with the group but with himself for being a group animal and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his groupishness' (Bion, 1961, p. 131). Supposedly, Bion has said elsewhere that it is an unconscious basic assumption that whenever two people meet together of any gender, the purpose of their meeting is to have sex. The war mentioned by Bion is about survival, in which sexuality and eroticism play a vital role.

Eric Miller (1993) in drawing the conceptual framework for working as a consultant to organizations, mentions the shared belief in the importance of transference and countertransference in the consultant-client relationship: 'that is to say, the consultant's feelings may provide significant evidence about underlying feelings within the client system' (*ibid.*, p.7). There are other accounts of consultants using their experience of countertransference and transference to gain insight in the dynamics of the client system (Sofer, 1961, Rice, 1963, Miller and Gwynne, 1972). An erotic component in this dynamic, however, is not explored. It is my view, however, that recognizing and working through an erotic transference is often central to the consulting process.

Bion's concept of the basic assumption group (Bion, 1961) includes pairing (BaP) as focusing on the future in an unconscious social defence against the difficulties and challenges of the present. Social defence theories move away from the individual into the social. They

... illustrate how a work organization produces a culture ... that institutes behaviors that protect the individuals from the anxiety, anger or boredom but which because of this, often detract from getting the work done in an effective way' (Long, 2006)

By this means of survival, a group behaves as if salvation will occur as long as a pairing between members of a group continues. The future is made dependent on projections on to the pair and vague hopes for improvement. Teaming two people up in an erotic transference encounter serves an unconscious group-drive for survival. When contained within the boundaries of the group, erotic pairing can be of great value for the group. Nitsun introduces the concept of 'the group as witness' (Nitsun, 2006, p. 194), which describes the group's functions as an observing and reflecting presence that provides a constructive and potentially reconstructive social process.

### CONTAINING THE PSYCHOTIC AND THE PERVERSE

Long's differentiation between neurotic, psychotic and perverse states of mind is meaningful, because she argues that these states of mind 'cannot be adequately conceptualized in terms of the isolated individual' (Long, 2002, p. 183). Long explores the three forms of relatedness first mentioned by Bion (1970): symbiotic, commensal, and parasitic, elaborated in Billow (2003). The *symbiotic relationship* is in the realm of the most normal daily neurosis; one depends on the other for mutual benefit. The *commensal relationship* is one where two people, who can be considered objects to each other, develop alongside one another but are somewhere avoiding an interrelationship, carrying a potential psychotic split. The two objects need another third object for the benefit of all three. The question as to whether that relationship will end up being creative or destructive is mainly dependent on the way the dynamic is contained. In the *parasitic relationship*, two objects depend on another to produce a third, which is destructive of all three. It characterizes mostly the perverted state of mind and is destructive in itself.

Erotic transference can be explored as part of each of those three types of relationships. In the neurotic way of relating we can think of social fancying and flirting, as a moderate level of a psychological game (Berne, 1964) in which the players can normally contain themselves. In the split and potentially psychotic way of relating, the transference is on the edge of being either acted out or contained. The players need a wider container in which their erotic dynamic is held and understood as part of a larger dynamic. Once in the parasitic way of relating, the transference is destructively acted out with social consequences such as abusive relationships, ending of careers, broken marriages, and other havoc wreaked on people's lives. Berne would refer to this level as a third degree psychological game, which ends in the courtroom, in the cemetery, in hospital, in a mental institution, or in jail (*ibid.*).

As consultants we can play with the neurotic/symbiotic; however, our role is to contain and work with the psychotic and the perverse.

### MUTUALITY AS A RELATIONAL *SINE QUA NON*

It is essential to undertake the aspect of mutuality in understanding erotic transference in groups, teams, and organizations. It is not about the neurotic, psychotic, or perverted dynamic in the other, the client, only. Instead, it is about the mutually constructed dynamic between other and self, be it a psychotherapist or a consultant. Friedman describes the hidden and not explicit collusion between the two when he describes Freud's heritage as the power of psychological seduction. 'By seduction I mean an arrangement whereby the patient is led to expect love, while the analyst . . . plans to provide a substitute for it' (Friedman, 1997, p. 26). I think this notion of providing a substitute for love is part of a myth we (psychotherapists, analysts, consultants) hold, which is basically meant to keep the onus on the client and to keep ourselves out of responsibility for the expectations of the client. We offer ourselves as a mirror or a projection screen, as if we are not involved. It might be an indicator for where we abandon our clients by denying our role in their struggle and allowing them to have a sense of impact. In a chapter on the analyst's fear of surrender, Maroda (1999) writes about the patient's wish to have influence in the analytic setting: 'Perhaps nothing is more critical to this sense of self-efficacy than the patient's desire to know that he has an emotional impact on his therapist' (p. 49). She quotes Aron: 'Both the patient and the analyst are motivated toward isolation and toward relationship, toward autonomy and toward mutuality, toward agency and toward communication' (Aron, quoted in Maroda, 1999 p. 50). Accepting mutuality and co-creation are the most central aspects of relational psychoanalysis and relational transactional analysis. Working relationally accepts shared responsibility by both client and psychotherapist or consultant for what is on and under the table, for the self-and-the-other in the work, for the inter-subjective space, for the two-and-a-half persons in the room (Van Beekum, 2006). Erotic transference deserves to be looked at as a mutually created dynamic.

### PARALLEL PROCESS

When the notion of mutuality is necessary to understand the co-creation of the erotic, the concept of parallel process is essential in understanding how the consultant(s) can contain erotic transference in groups and teams. The term is coined in an article by Doehrmann

(1976) and elaborated by many authors (Kahn, 1979; Gediman & Wolkenfield, 1980; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989). The interpersonal dynamic between team members of the client system can be paralleled in the consulting staff. Anxieties and resistances in the client system can reflect those in the staff. When that dynamic is not well contained in the consulting staff, the chance of acting out in the client system increases. When the consultants work with the issue between themselves in terms of understanding its symbolism for the client system, they actually provide the containment within which the team members can work dynamically.

The process of containment includes awareness of the unconscious dynamic of the hot potato transmission (English, 1969; Hinshelwood, 1987), in which disowned elements are tossed around as hot potatoes among those involved. It is based on children's games, with different names in different cultures, like the card game 'Black Peter', in which an unwanted card is pushed around among the players and the unlucky player who ends up with the unwanted card scores negative points. In consulting, the hot potato can end up in the possession of the consulting staff. Staff can only find meaning through researching what it is that is being pushed around. Doing so will invite clients to do the same. This demands that consultants have the capacity not only to work with observable facts, but also with their own subjective reactions. Or, as Bion wrote, 'In group treatment, many interpretations, and among them the most important, have to be made on the strengths of the analyst's own emotional reactions (Bion, 1961, p. 148)

Erotic transference in consulting needs to be considered a co-created and mutual dynamic, where the client's transference and the consultant's countertransference both need to be addressed. This includes exploring ownership of the potential mutual contributions to psychotic and perverse aspects of the client's and the consultant's relationships. Locating the pathological and the problematic on to the client, only, creates an unhealthy split, putting the onus on the client and leaving the consultant out of sight.

A relational approach creates not only a safe holding environment for the client's subjectivity, but allows the consultant's subjective experience to be brought in. As a result, the client can ignore or address this, depending on his/her needs. In this sense, the approach as it is practised in group relations' conferences and in psychodynamic consulting is increasingly more relational.

## EPILOGUE

The case study at the beginning of this paper includes many of the elements discussed in the theory. The erotic, as it occurred to the staff

and myself in the group relations' conference many years ago, can be considered a neurotic/symbiotic expression of relationship and had the potential in it to develop into a more serious psychotic split, not to mention parasitic perversity. In recognizing the mutuality of the creation of erotic transference on a group level, the consulting staff as a whole created the container within which the erotic attraction was prevented from being acted out by the pair and, because of the working of the parallel process, also by the membership.

This was informed by the acceptance of the systemic notion that dynamics in the staff reflect hidden dynamics in the membership, and vice versa.

Erotic transference can be worked with as an individual defence against personal anxieties. Putting the emphasis on the social is meant to reconceptualize individuality, rather than to replace it. In our work as consultants, it makes sense to consider erotic transference as a collective social defence against the anxieties for the work that needs to be done.

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