

# EMOTIONS, INTERPRETATION AND THE PSYCHOANALYTIC COUNTERTRANSFERENCE.

The paper explores, within the framework of philosophy of psychoanalysis, a question about the epistemology and methodology of participant experience in anthropology: whether the emotional experience of the fieldworker can provide a 'legitimate means for knowing'. There is a recognised parallel here with the situation of the psychoanalyst *vis à vis* her patient; both analyst and anthropologist may be described as engaged in 'the struggle to know the other'. Alongside questions about the epistemological status of psychoanalytic theory, it is often asked whether psychoanalysis provides particular knowledge of the state of mind and mental functioning of the analysand.

I consider what the psychoanalytic theory of the countertransference might contribute to these discussions. First, I outline a philosophical framework in which to pose the question of, and provide a partial and very general answer to, how our emotions can provide knowledge about ourselves in our relations with others. I then go on to apply this to the situation of psychoanalysis, to show how the 'one-to-one' participant experience of the analytic setting can be shown to provide knowledge of both the analyst's and the patient's states of mind and of the relation between them. This relation is theorised using the psychoanalytic notion of the countertransference, which in mainstream British psychoanalysis is seen as the lynchpin of the clinical analytic method. I will consider how the idea of the countertransference might be applied in anthropology, indicating what I take (from a non-specialist position) to be important parallels and differences; I shall hope to provide a framework that anthropologists can apply to their own expertise. Lastly, I shall indicate an interesting consequence which consulting the countertransference might have for the fieldworker.

## **Philosophy: interpretation and emotion.**

The theorisation of the countertransference in psychoanalysis goes with a general shift in the second half of the last century within the social sciences in which the investigative standpoint of the detached observer as scientist has ceded to that of engaged reflective participant. This move towards qualitative understanding is driven by arguments about the form of knowledge and the methods of investigation appropriate to the study of human beings considered as rational reflective subjects. In psychoanalysis and anthropology, both 'observer-near' disciplines whose contexts bring observer and observed into close contact, the need to take account of how things are for other people as objects of study is more evident than in the positivistic social sciences. In these disciplines the potential usefulness of the observer's own experiences and of her interpretation of them has then more readily arisen as a topic in its own right. Interpretation thus becomes a prominent issue in the long-standing debate over the epistemology of the social sciences. It is argued that since these sciences' object of study is the human social world of individual actions and collective practices, the description of these phenomena must involve an account of their meaning for the individuals and collectivities studied, and to the extent that these meanings are not transparent to the investigator they are arrived at through a process of interpretation.

The origins of the interpretive tradition in the social sciences lie in Biblical hermeneutics, though with less emphasis on the deciphering of the correct meaning of a text and more on textual interpretation as a route to understanding the mind of the author. Interpretation as a method of investigating the material of social science became, in the hands of its 19<sup>th</sup> Century proponents, a psychological activity consisting of the exercise of the imagination in practices variously termed as 'Verstehen', 'intuitive insight', 'acts of divination' or, more familiarly, 'empathy'. But there was at that time no accompanying conceptualisation of these practices and consequently no methodologically serviceable description of what was involved in picking out and writing down the meanings supposedly accessed in this way. The philosopher Peter Hacker has suggested that it is Wittgenstein's work in the philosophy of language which provides the concepts of

meaning and understanding with a philosophical characterisation adequate to justify interpretation as the retrieval of hidden meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein in his later philosophy argues that language is a form of behaviour whose systematicity is owed to a loosely articulated but highly interconnected assortment of rules governing the behaviours through which human beings communicate.<sup>2</sup> As a form of behaviour, therefore, it is extremely complex, both in virtue of this systematicity and because, crucially, the rules that govern it are conventions agreed by subjects and not laws of nature. Linguistic behaviour is rule-following behaviour into which human beings are inducted as part of socialisation and it is something for which, so far as we know, only human beings have the intellectual capacity. Learning a language is a social activity in the strong sense: learning the rules for using words means learning to meet agreed norms of behaviour. Once the subject can use a term correctly according to these rules, can respond to its use by others, and can give some account of what it is to use the term correctly, he can be said to understand its meaning. Wittgenstein's account thus explicates both meaning and understanding in terms of social practice whose rules are publicly agreed and shared.

Brought together with the hermeneutical tradition of interpretation this account can be used to ground the methodological claims of the interpretive social sciences to investigate the meaning of human behaviours, activities and practices. Interpretation now becomes the linguistic articulation – the finding of the correct linguistic expression - of meanings embedded or implicit in individual actions and in social practices and institutions. Bringing these meanings into linguistic form is to bring them into the public arena of shared meaning and understanding where correctness of interpretation is, even if never conclusively established, nevertheless accessible to debate. The importance for methodology in the social sciences is that on this account interpretation is no longer conceived as the psychological activity of imagining, although imaginative projection may still provide a route to understanding. Rather, interpretation is a linguistic practice explained in the same terms as our ordinary attempts to understand and attribute meaning to the utterances, actions and practices of others. Furthermore this conception of interpretation also applies to our attempts at understanding ourselves. For as rational reflective beings we humans are continually engaged in interpreting both our experience of the world and reflexively, our experience of ourselves in the world. This is the picture of ourselves as 'self-interpreting animals' in the words of the philosopher Charles Taylor, who argues that this is what human beings are, constitutively: the capacity for self-interpretation is part of what it is to be human.<sup>3</sup>

Taylor's writing on self-interpretation, itself based in a Wittgensteinian view of meaning and understanding, offers a generalised framework within which to explore what is involved in clinical psychoanalytic interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Taylor's philosophical treatment of interpretation does not as it stands deal with unconsciously held meaning, but it does provide a theoretical basis for taking aligning psychoanalytic interpretation with interpretation in the social sciences.<sup>5</sup> Psychoanalytic interpretation, like interpretation in the social sciences, has lacked external theoretical justification and has consequently been notoriously vulnerable to familiar objections: that it amounts to no more than suggestion, or that interpretations in psychoanalysis do no more than offer an emotionally acceptable narrative to the patient. For Freud however interpretation was always seen as the elucidation of hidden meaning, of symptoms, dreams, actions and thoughts. Psychoanalytic interpretation is always an individual matter; it aims to help the patient 'put feelings into words' by articulating experience in terms of emotions. This may be put philosophically as the bringing of experience under emotion concepts in self-interpretation, an analysis given in more detail in the next section. But it at once raises the question of whether the understanding thus achieved can still be counted as knowledge. When interpretation yields understanding in a form that all can scrutinise, justification can be sought in public debate. But both psychoanalytic and self-interpretation, while yielding understanding to the individual in the sense of making his behaviour more intelligible to him are not in the same way publicly grounded and cannot, it is objected, lead to self-knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Hacker, "The Autonomy of Humanistic Understanding".

<sup>2</sup> Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, 67-72, 151-154.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, "Self-Interpreting Animals".

<sup>4</sup> See also Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man"

<sup>5</sup> Braddock, "Psychoanalysis as functionalist social science: the legacy of Freud's 'Project for a scientific psychology.'" 406-8.

The objection has more than one ground. It is held that the data on which the subject's self-understanding is based are not reliable since (as psychoanalysis itself shows us) introspection of one's own mental states is (contrary to the Cartesian thesis of the transparency of the mental) liable to mislead the subject. It is also argued that the subjective meanings which are the results of self-interpretation cannot be brought into the public domain for adjudication. While here is not the place to engage with these objections or the conceptions of the mental that lie behind them, partial answers will be found to emerge when we consider another objection to the claim that knowledge is to be got from psychoanalytic and self-interpretation, the objection that emotions are epistemically 'subjective' states.

The objection here is that the experience of emotion cannot lead to self-knowledge since emotional judgements, while describing a state of the subject, are not true because of any way things are in the world. As an example of a 'subjective' emotional judgement we may consider the sorts of judgement that are held about their innamorata by a person in love; notoriously, love is experienced independently of the objective loveliness of its object and judgements about the loveliness of the loved one do not reflect their objective properties but are dependent on the subject's feelings. However, current theories of emotion in philosophy allow two sides to emotional states of mind. Emotions are taken to be cognitive states, states representing the way the world is 'objectively' and as such are epistemically relevant.<sup>6</sup> What however is distinctive about emotions as cognitive states is their evaluative role in informing cognition: an emotion presents the way the world is or is seen to be, but at the same time presents it as being important for the subject. Emotion theorists say that in emotional experience the world is 'seen as' or 'construed as' significant towards the subject, in a way that involves more than the subject's having feelings about it. So to make an emotional judgement is to judge the world cognitively, under the aspect of the real, as being a certain way and to construe it, partly through the phenomenology of the emotion concerned, under the aspect of its importance for the subject.

It can be seen from this that the correct use of an emotion-term will not be 'subjective' in the sense of merely expressing how the subject feels. Rather, from the above, emotions are subjective in indexing the significance for the subject of what is cognised. How then does this help with the objection that the interpretation of experience in terms of emotion is, like emotions themselves, epistemically subjective? Recalling Wittgenstein's view of language, we see that emotion terms like other words are understood by getting hold of the rules for them, and that we learn these rules in social interaction, from other language users. The correct use of emotion terms in their application to others and to oneself is learned as part of language learning as a social and shared activity. Also, the rules for the use of words are interconnected: the concepts that words stand for all hang together. Our emotion terms do not stand alone but are articulated into language as a whole. Neither experiencing the feelings described by the emotion-term nor 'construing' the world as important depends solely on the state of the subject, therefore.

When therefore the individual subject reflects on her experience so as to interpret it to herself the emotion-concepts employed place her in relation to others, in the following way. In emotional 'construing' of her social and interpersonal environment, she employs emotion terms whose meanings, in the form of the rules for their use, convey cultural norms of social behaviours; self-interpretation thus ties individual emotional experience in to the socially held meaning of these terms. So, emotional judgements tell the subject about how the social world presents to her, and about herself, under concepts and on grounds that can, contrary to the objection seen earlier, be made publicly available through language.

Experiencing an emotion does more than orient the subject to the way the social world bears on his interests; it also orients him to the experience of other persons in that world and to their own sense of themselves as a subject, hereafter referred to as the subject's 'sense of self'. We may then distinguish two ways in which the subject's sense of self figures in emotion. There is a general way, deriving from the fact that emotion terms, like other psychological terms, are learned in both their first and third-person applications. Since part of what is involved in coming to use emotion-concepts correctly about one's own feelings is to learn also to apply them to others, our feeling an emotion can tell us something about how it is for someone else also to feel that emotion: we can make an imaginative move that allows us to see how

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<sup>6</sup> Lacewing, "Emotion and Cognition: Recent Developments in Therapeutic Practice".

they can feel in just ‘the way we do’. So, though notoriously this is a move that can fail to be made, our understanding of emotion terms does provide a way to help us understand how another person, whom we judge to be feeling an emotion, is affected. This applies quite generally to emotions.

Separately however from this general feature of emotions and their attribution, some at least of the moral emotions, such as pity or guilt, have a further characteristic. This is that the state of affairs that forms the content of the emotion, is seen as or construed as significant not only for the subject who feels the emotion but also, quite specifically, for the sense of self of the person towards whom the emotion is felt as the object of the emotion. Here it is intrinsic to feeling the emotion that we come more directly to understand the sense of self of the person towards whom the emotion is felt. We may see this from the examples I gave, pity and guilt. In pitying someone I both see their condition as pitiable, their reduced or compromised state as having the import for me that they deserve my forbearance, or my consideration; at the same time part of what is pitiable is the import for them of their reduced or compromised condition, for the way it reduces their sense of self, and this in itself forms part of the ground of the import of their state for me. Similarly in feeling guilt towards someone I see their condition as the result of some action of mine, so that its import for me is one of responsibility or self-reproach. But it is as much as anything the damage to their sense of self, the import to them of its hurt or diminution from my actions, which provides the import to me of my responsibility. Such ‘other-regarding’ emotions are particularly important for interpretation in self-interpretation and in psychoanalysis since it is in experiencing an emotion of this sort towards another person that we can come to know how their sense of self is affected. This is not however an intellectualist account; the emotion is experienced, not distantly contemplated, and the import which its phenomenology conveys is such as to put us in a psychological relation with the person that is its object. It can seem natural to couch such an account in terms of identification; one reason not to do so is, that the notion of identification is itself imprecise and a more rigorous account is needed. The basis of such an account, of identification as an exercise of the imagination, is given by the philosopher Richard Wollheim.<sup>7</sup>

To summarise, what this account of emotion and interpretation provides us with is the following. Human beings are linguistic creatures, whose language use is learned in the social activity of acquiring the rules for the use of words for organising and communicating experience. Emotions as epistemically contributing states provide knowledge of others through the orientation to them that the emotion provides. In ‘self-interpretation’ humans are continually engaged in reflectively bringing their own experience under emotion-concepts, bringing their cognitive and affective relation to the world under the articulated, conceptually interconnected, set of the social and particularly the moral emotions. Human beings, that is to say, not only interpret, look for the meaning of, their experience of others but turn this capacity onto their experience of themselves in the activity of self-interpretation. And some emotions orient us to the sense of self of the person towards whom they are felt, and put us in psychological relation with them. The account of emotional interpretation does not require all possible emotion-concepts to be available to an individual. Rather, since interpretation itself is a shared activity, new concepts can be learned from the interpretive input of others, such as therapists, helping find the right concept to articulate emotional feelings.

With this sketch of a defence of the emotions as a source of knowledge about oneself and others, and of the way that emotions inform interpretation and self-interpretation, I now turn to consider the psychoanalytic theory of the countertransference.

### **Psychoanalysis: the theory of the countertransference.**

Psychoanalysis is among other things a psychology of the unconscious mind, and schools of psychoanalysis vary significantly in their conception of the unconscious. Most would agree on some distinction between the ordinary psychological notion we have of the unconscious, even though this has come post-Freud to be informed by psychoanalysis, and the unconscious as Freud himself conceived it, the ‘dynamic’ or ‘psychoanalytic’ unconscious. The former is readily recognised; a person’s thoughts can be inaccessible to them consciously but ‘accidentally’, as the philosopher Sebastian Gardner has termed the

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<sup>7</sup> Wollheim, “Identification and Imagination.”

operation of ordinarily recognised psychological mechanisms such as lapses of attention or memory, or in conditions of cognitive overload.<sup>8</sup> The dynamic unconscious by contrast is the field of mental states which are ‘non-accidentally’ inaccessible to consciousness. These states are, according to psychoanalytic theory, made inaccessible to consciousness by mechanisms which operate to keep them that way, so as to protect the mind from painful thoughts. The force of ‘non-accidental’ is that here inaccessibility results from regulative processes organised towards the goal of maintaining mental equilibrium, in what Freud called the mode of mental functioning subserving the Pleasure principle.<sup>9</sup> States made inaccessible in this way cannot easily be retrieved into consciousness firstly because their absence from consciousness is functionally embedded, the defensive operations being maintained by the requirement to avoid mental pain, and secondly because such operations involve transformations of content through which the painfulness of unacceptable thoughts is neutralised, as a result of which their original content becomes unavailable.

The psychoanalytic conception of a dynamically inaccessible unconscious thus departs from the notion of ordinary accidental inaccessibility in two ways, one more radical in its nature and implications than the other. The more radical is the thesis that under the mode of function of the unconscious mind the content of thoughts is transformed; I shall have more to say about this later. Less radical is the theorisation of the defence mechanisms’ regulative role and of the principle of mental functioning they subserv. I have argued elsewhere that it is a recognisably functionalist conception of the mind.<sup>10</sup> It is also a conception which shows continuity with ordinary psychology; mechanisms of denial or projection are commonly recognised as ways in which a person may disown or fail to acknowledge their unacceptable thoughts, and the defensive function is often apparent. Moreover, such defensive configurations may, even when functionally embedded in character, be modifiable or even reversible in changes of circumstance. Much of what is achieved by ordinary self-interpretation comes from retrieval in reflection of what is unconscious in these ways. Thus in many forms of dynamically oriented therapy, and in some phases of psychoanalysis itself, material may be retrieved into conscious awareness through an interpretive activity of the therapist that builds on this continuity with ordinary reflective self-interpretation. Therapeutic progress can be made by the patient engaging with the therapist in joint reflective interpretation, and insight into the defences can be achieved as traits of character, without interpreting the defences themselves within the transference.

Psychoanalysis itself involves more than ordinary reflective insight however. It also involves transference analysis, the making of interpretations within the transference. There are significant differences between theories of psychoanalysis as to how the transference is to be understood, and also how it is to be interpreted.<sup>11</sup> What is generally agreed is that the clinical analytic setting facilitates the transferral by the patient onto his relation with the analyst of unconscious structures which repeat patterns of relating acquired in infancy and childhood. Transference is, as Freud himself considered, a general psychological phenomenon with manifestations in ordinary life, but is brought into salience, and so into interpretive focus, in the clinical setting. There is then a correspondingly broad view (though not one taken by Freud) of the transference as ranging over the entire therapeutic relationship and of transference interpretation as conceptually continuous with the activity of ordinary reflective interpretation just described.

The phenomena with which psychoanalysis is concerned and which psychoanalytic practice deals with go beyond the range of ordinary defensive configurations, to those which are ruggedly unresponsive to reality, deforming of real relationships, and intractable with respect to insight. Accordingly the work of transference interpretation is directed to making accessible to conscious experience those unconscious relationships in which the patient is situated, which are responsible for pathology by functionally perpetuating the defences. It is only inside the transference that interpretations can be ‘mutative’ (as Strachey puts it) on these unconscious relationships.<sup>12</sup> For it is only when these relationships are manifested in the patient’s communicative behaviour towards the analyst in the transference that they become available to the analyst for reflection and interpretation, and through this can revealed for what they are. As manifested in the transference, however, these relationships are in a disguised and distorted

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<sup>8</sup> Gardner, *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, 89, 213.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning.”

<sup>10</sup> Braddock, *op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Sandler et al. “Basic Clinical Concepts III: Transference.”

<sup>12</sup> Strachey, “The Nature of the Therapeutic Action of Psycho-Analysis.” 142.

form; they are yet to be interpreted and prior to this they are yet to be understood as transference manifestations. On the more radical view of the ‘non-accidental inaccessibility’ of the dynamic unconscious, part of the distortion arises from the transformation of content. What might then be said to be analytic about psychoanalysis is its mode of interpretation, as directed at decoding or deciphering meanings out of material which has been transformed by the unconscious, ‘primary process’ mode of thought.

This radical view of the nature of the unconscious and the conception of the transference that it yields, may be taken as definitive of psychoanalysis for its theorists and practitioners in the British clinical tradition, particularly that of object relations theory of both the Independent and Kleinian schools.<sup>13</sup> Object relations theory was formulated towards the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century among members of the British Psychoanalytical Society and their Scottish colleagues. Building on theoretical outlines in Freud’s own writing, notably in his “Mourning and Melancholia” of 1917, and significantly influenced by the work of Melanie Klein, herself a member of the British Society, these thinkers replaced Freud’s early instinct theory by a relational psychology placing the emotional character of the infant’s relation with the mother at the centre of psychic life and development.<sup>14</sup> The term ‘object-relations’ refers to the way that the subject’s patterns of emotional relating to others are represented in the mind, as between subject and object. The significance of this re-theorisation for the present discussion is that it made it possible to see a further side to the clinical interaction between patient and analyst. According to this new perspective the treatment setting does more than provide a favourable set of conditions for the emergence and interpretation of the transference; crucially, it provides for the patient’s object relations to be experienced as holding between him and the analyst in a way that is not only psychically real for the patient, something that Freud himself had recognised, but real also for the analyst. Until this point the analyst’s own feelings had been seen as arising from her own transference to her patient and as such were to be dealt with and understood, outside the clinical treatment of the patient, in the analyst’s own analysis. But it came now to be seen that the analyst, through noting and interpreting to herself her own emotional feelings, could use these to inform her of what the patient was unconscious of but nevertheless communicating to her in their unconscious object-relations. This self-interpretation by the analyst of feelings arising as indicators of the object relations into which she is drawn by the patient in the transference, provided ‘an instrument of research’ into the patient’s unconscious, in the words of the Kleinian analyst Paula Heimann.<sup>15</sup>

This ‘instrument of research’ of the analyst is the counter-transference as it was originally theorised in the British object relations school who favoured a restriction of what is to count as counter-transference to what the analyst can tell from analysing her own responses to the patient.<sup>16</sup> However, like the concept of the transference, the countertransference also has a broader usage embracing all unconscious communication between analyst and patient. A broad definition (though gesturing at a narrow sense) is given by Laplanche and Pontalis as ‘the whole of the analyst’s unconscious reactions to the individual analysand – especially to the analysand’s own transference’.<sup>17</sup> The broad application covers not only feelings of emotion, but also behaviours, fantasies, and other responses to the patient’s unconscious communication, including what Sandler has described as ‘role-responsiveness’ of the analyst’s behaviour, and which can be used by the analyst or therapist trained to a heightened form of ordinary reflective self-interpretation to orient him in his relations with the patient.<sup>18</sup> Lastly, the broader usage makes the analyst’s self-interpretive activity within the countertransference essentially continuous with the ordinary reflective responsiveness outside the clinical setting, in just the way described for transference interpretation broadly conceived.

In the terms of my previous section the counter-transference broadly conceived may be said to be the analyst’s own self-interpretive activity directed upon her consciously felt emotions and consciously noted responses, employed to reveal how things are with her patient unconsciously in the transference relation.

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<sup>13</sup> see eg. Mitchell and Black *Freud and Beyond. A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought*. Chs 4 & 5.

<sup>14</sup> for Klein’s work see Segal, *Klein*.

<sup>15</sup> Heimann, “On Counter-Transference.” 81.

<sup>16</sup> Heimann *ibid.*, Heimann, “Counter-Transference II”, Little, “Counter-Transference V”, Winnicott “Counter-Transference III”. See also Kohon, *The British School of Psychoanalysis and the Independent Tradition*.

<sup>17</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* 92-3. See also Sandler et al., “Basic Clinical Concepts IV: Counter-Transference.”

<sup>18</sup> Sandler, “Counter-Transference and Role Responsiveness.”

Also within the theoretical framework of that section we can defend the analyst's countertransference in its broad sense as emotional self-interpretation which is knowledge-producing in the clinical setting. The account given earlier of how emotions are used in interpretation of experience showed how in ordinary life we use our emotions in representing and evaluating our relations with others and in understanding ourselves. That general account of emotional interpretation left room for the fact that no-one is in possession of the whole range of emotion-concepts. The account is readily extended to show how some of the interpretive work done by the analyst in the transference involves finding the right concepts to articulate emotions and feelings that are unconsciously felt and communicated to her by the patient, in a way that is continuous with ordinary reflection. Thus it is that reflecting on the whole range of her own emotions towards the patient in the countertransference, as broadly conceived, will help the analyst arrive at knowledge of how things are with the patient.

Both broad and narrow applications of the counter-transference can be seen in an example from the work of the Kleinian analyst Pearl King.<sup>19</sup> She describes a short interaction in the analysis of a male patient in his early twenties. A moment of understanding had arisen between analyst and patient:

'I was feeling sympathetic to him and aware of the disappointment and humiliation he was feeling now and had felt as a child. I was uncertain who I was representing in the transference but I felt sure he was experiencing with me some moments of mutual understanding between himself and his mother that he must have experienced in his childhood and I interpreted this to him. I had been particularly impressed by his mood, as he was generally very negative and critical.'

Here we see the analyst's conscious feelings of understanding and of sympathy, as putting her in touch with how things are for her patient. The account goes on:

'After a short silence he moved rather impatiently to another position on the couch, as if wanting to leave the pain and insight behind in the former position. He then said in a different tone of voice that the trouble with this analysis is that he never really feels anything, he is really so different from all my other patients that I can't possibly understand him. I was stupid, and not able to get involved with him as Mr X. (a former analyst) had been.'

The analyst at this point is attributing an emotion to the patient; he is distressed by his painful feelings, indeed too distressed to bear them and this leads both to his disowning them and to the attack on her. The interpretation, made to herself at this stage, is about the meaning of this moment of understanding for him: an increased pain and also, an impasse of feeling, a 'double-bind that he had felt in as a child'. She continues:

'I then became aware of the discrepancy between my feelings and those that the patient was attributing to me. I could see that he was reacting to his own painful conflicts by the defence of denial and indifference, and was then accusing me of being indifferent to him. I remembered that he had complained that his parents were often both indifferent and unresponsive to his form of suffering as a child, and I felt he was now experiencing me as these indifferent parents. When I interpreted this to him, he responded with intense scorn and denigration. I was not very bright and rather limited. He was not interested in his family or parents – it was irrelevant. He didn't know why he paid to listen to all this stupid rubbish. I then remembered that he had a very clever mother, whom he loved, but with whom he felt stupid, and certainly not as clever as his older brother whom both parents idolised. I further realised that he had now reversed roles with me. He was his very clever mother and I was her stupid child, not as good as Mr X., and he was behaving to me as he felt his mother had done to him. He was showing me how he tried to deal with painful affects by identifying with the aggressor-mother and by projecting on to me his stupid and yet very vulnerable little boy self. he was thus unconsciously communicating to me the affective dilemmas of his childhood by reversing transference roles and the affects that had accompanied them. The sudden shift of affect also showed me how he had felt as a child on the receiving end of his mother's ambivalence and denigration of him, and how this had made his task of understanding his own ambivalence so seemingly impossible.'

The impossibility of understanding referred to here is both that of his early years in the 'double bind' with his mother, and as repeated in the transference where, since his own feelings were disowned - projected onto the analyst and left for her to experience and articulate.

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<sup>19</sup> King, "Affective Response of the Analyst to the Patient's Communications", 333.

Although this account does not include an explicit description of the analyst's feelings when under attack, or when placed in the double-bind, it is in this final passage that we see her registering in the countertransference something outside the range of ordinary self-interpretation. The discrepancy between what she feels and what is attributed to her alerts her to the fact that she is being allotted a role or place in the patient's relation to his mother, that of the stupid child that he can thereby avoid being and, instead, can side with his mother in denigrating. But, by placing the analyst in the situation in which the attributed emotion is discrepant with the felt emotion, he unconsciously communicated to the analyst what it had been like for him as a child when his mother foisted stupidity on him.

In the next section I shall go on to consider how the conception of the counter-transference, taken broadly as a developed form of ordinary self-interpretation on the part of the analyst which supports reflective understanding of the patient's unconscious communications, may be applied in the practice of anthropological fieldwork, and provide some illustrative material. It might then be asked whether there is any justification, beyond the theoretical and technical commitments local to the British object relations school, for retaining a 'narrow' sense of countertransference separate as a specifically psychoanalytic concept, rather than conceding it to be part of a general psychological phenomenon with a distinctive manifestation in the clinical setting. The justification for this separation lies, I have suggested, in a certain conception of the dynamic unconscious. As a distinction it signals a theoretically and clinically important issue in psychoanalysis which grounds a further and distinctive contribution to knowledge on the part of psychoanalysis, which is the theorisation of operations of psychic defence. I shall end by suggesting that the distinction is interesting for methodology in anthropology, and illustrate this with a final piece of anthropological material.

### **Anthropology: countertransference and fieldwork.**

I turn finally to consider the application of what I have said to anthropology, with respect to the practice of fieldwork. For psychoanalysis to be a reliable resource for the anthropologist in the field and in ethnography due notice must be taken of theoretical differences between schools, especially when these are glossed over by uniformity of psychoanalytic terminology. This is particularly important when, as is the case with the countertransference, a concept or theory developed within one theoretical framework, such as British object relations, comes to have a wider field of application in other schools or indeed outside of psychoanalysis altogether. It is necessary, as here, both to specify the theoretical orientation of any psychoanalytically based methodological innovations, and to clarify important theoretical commitments particularly with respect to the unconscious. With this caveat in place I continue now with the question that concerns us here, of how the theory of the countertransference as an 'instrument of research' which yields knowledge in the psychoanalytic clinical setting, might be used by the anthropologist to help provide knowledge from her emotional experience in the field.

To be serviceable the theory of the countertransference needs to be incorporated into methodology as a practice, and it is important to recognise the bearing on practice of professionalisation, both for training purposes and for establishing norms of good practice. Personal psychotherapy has been envisaged as a way to increase the fieldworker's self-knowledge and hence objectivity in the field, and more recently as expanding observational skills and sensitivities. But it may be argued that the recommendation of therapy for fieldworkers, whether practical or desirable, would not in any case provide training in use of the countertransference. First, in therapy the patient is precisely a patient, not a therapist and so, not in the right position to experience and employ the countertransference, and second, because any experiential component would need to be suitably professionalised by training. In particular therefore, personal therapy is not sufficient. Nor indeed is it necessary: there are other ways to provide training in self-observation in unconscious interactions, notably in training or supervision groups (such as 'Balint groups' for doctors).<sup>20</sup> Lastly, it must be borne in mind that therapy may have a destabilising effect on ego-defences which are adequate and perhaps necessary for activity in the field. As with any professional practice, then, structures for theoretical and practical training need to be in place, to deliver those parts of psychoanalytic theory

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<sup>20</sup> Balint, *The Doctor, His Patient, and The Illness*.



which might usefully be made available to potential fieldworkers. With this requirement in place it may be asked what psychoanalysis has to offer to methods in the field, which could be transmitted through training.

Here finally I turn to the question of what aspects of the countertransference might usefully be taken up and applied in the field. Drawing a parallel between analyst and anthropologist, the latter too can engage in self-interpretation through reflecting on her thoughts, fantasies and role-responsive behaviours so as to articulate and understand her emotional experience. This then corresponds to the broad sense of the countertransference, where we consider the totality of the fieldworker's emotional feelings as they arise in relation to the community she is engaged with. Her emotions can then orient her to what is communicated by members of the study community both consciously, and unconsciously through being 'accidentally inaccessible' to them. Accidental inaccessibility may here have the same psychological causes as elsewhere: being forgotten, being tacit through being un-articulated, or being subject to 'ordinary' defences of denial or projection, and it is an interesting empirical question what other causes might be identified in the field.

Assuming suitable training to enable her to discriminate these responses from feelings of personal origin, or feelings that realistically register the different environment of the field, what then will these 'field countertransference' emotions tell the fieldworker? From our philosophical account of the emotions we recall that emotions are cognitive states which present the social world to the subject as having a bearing for him, and through the condition of being able to use the emotion term of both himself and others, as enabling him to see how it is for someone experiencing that emotion. We noted further an important group of emotions where experiencing the emotion involves our seeing something about the sense of self of the person towards whom we feel the emotion, what it is to be in the state that elicits the emotion in us. It might be objected that this runs the risk of imposing alien emotional categories on cultural groups which do not possess them. However, as in psychoanalysis, interpretation needs to be confirmed, and my suggestion is that the emotional understanding of the other's sense of self gained by the worker will help in formulating equivalents of 'interpretation' – by questioning, direct or indirect, or by interpretation of practices – which make confirmation and disconfirmation possible.

An illustration of this comes from a paper by the anthropologist Jean Briggs written in part to integrate her own personally-acquired psychoanalytic knowledge with her fieldwork among the Inuit in 1963.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on this earlier work she writes:

'I experienced often painfully, the discrepancies between my behavior, and that of the Inuit toward me and toward other Inuit. I watched their reactions to my moodiness – their precipitate departures, sudden silences when I snapped, swore, or failed to smile – and discovered from sermons directed sometimes ostensibly at my three- and six-year-old sisters and sometimes directly at me, as well as from disapproving letters written to the Inuit catechist in Gjoa Haven that my behavior was perceived as impulsive, irrational, and aggressive. In discouragement I felt that the Inuit expected superhuman control of antisocial moods and superhuman benignity'.<sup>22</sup>

The Inuit conduct themselves according to two 'all-pervasive' values which Briggs's behaviour transgressed. She writes:

'The first of these is *nallik*-, which translates as nurturance/Biblical love/pity for mankind. *Nallik*- ideally requires feeding and protecting any human in need as well as suppressing hostility absolutely.' The second value is *isuma*, 'rationality. *Isuma* is demonstrated by control over impulsivity – not only antisocial impulses but any at all- as well as by the ability to think problems through calmly and judge accurately the consequences of actions and the likelihood of various outcomes of events. One consequence of - as well as evidence of- a well-developed *isuma* is the ability to act autonomously, self-sufficiently. A person who behaves in a *nallik*-like manner is a Good Person, and one who has *isuma* is an Adult.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Briggs, "In Search of Emotional Meaning".

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.,9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,10.

Returning to this a decade later the author comes to understand the way that *nallik-* is inculcated into young children, through forms of play that adults engaged in with their children.<sup>24</sup> ‘Games like: “Are you lovable? You *are*? Are you sure?”; “Who’s your daddy? *You* don’t have a daddy.”; “What a lovely new shirt; why don’t you die so I can have it?”....And: “Why don’t you kill your new baby brother? Like this!” (demonstrating the technique)’. As children’s games often do, feelings and emotions are aroused. These are not only feelings congruent with *nallik-*, such as protectiveness of the baby brother, a need to be loved, loving feelings for a father, but contrary feelings that are also stimulated: wanting to be rid of baby brother or of father, anxiety at not being loved. The game allows the child to connect feelings and emotions to values, while sustaining awareness of ambivalence towards them: ‘the awareness that one wants what one should not want, enjoys what one should fear, or fears what one should want – awareness in other words that one wants to break the law.’<sup>25</sup> Briggs suggests that this awareness heightens the sense of importance of values of conduct; in experiencing such emotions and their consequences in the play situation (such as retaliation for aggression, or hurt caused to another) the child comes to feel “it *could* happen to me.”

Briggs’s interest in psychoanalysis centres on what she describes as ‘Freudian ideas about the constructive role of conflict in psychic organisation’.<sup>26</sup> Her observations also provide ample material for demonstrating the thesis about the way emotion words are learned and emotional interpretation of experience is made possible. The games she describes are a concrete example of Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’, as applied to learning the meaning of emotion words. They provide a way for the child to discover through her own experience what it is like emotionally to be on the receiving end of certain socially undesirable behaviours, and to understand the emotional effect her own behaviour will have on the other person. The potential for emotional learning includes the other-regarding moral emotions. For the playful inducing of such strongly contrasting emotions, of love and hate, or aggressiveness and guilt, might be seen as enabling the child to experience an emotion like pity or guilt for feeling hate towards someone; by understanding from experience what it is like to be on the receiving end of hate – that the other person will also be hurt, diminished, or frightened – the hate can come to be replaced by guilt at having hurt, or pity at the frightened state of, the other person.

I said earlier that self-interpretation, bringing one’s own experience under emotion-concepts, was an activity continuous with some aspects of psychoanalytic interpretation in helping the analyst see how things are for the patient. I also raised the caveat that there is no place for, because no analogue of, therapeutic interpretation (and *a fortiori* not for transference interpretation) in anthropology. Since confirmation of the correctness of interpretation cannot come from a patient it must come from elsewhere.

Nevertheless we may take our psychoanalytic understanding of this material further. Briggs’s mention of her early emotional responses, categorised by the Inuit as childish, need not be seen as (nor does Briggs present them as) merely reporting her disorientation in the field. Rather, they show her as occupying the position of the child learning the value of *nallik-* (of which she had at the time an intellectual understanding) without benefit of a game in which to explore, safely with a parent, the consequences of non-*nallik-* behaviour. Her later understanding of the way *nallik-* is taught as a value, through emotional learning, may well owe something to her first-hand conscious experience of what the Inuit adults were helping their children to master. And, as her description makes clear, they did it so effectively that non-*nallik-* behaviour was rare: ‘I was surprised to see that children as young as five years were very ‘good’ and undemanding.’<sup>27</sup> We may say that this fieldwork allowed her to experience directly ‘how it was’ for the Inuit child, and for the child in the adult Inuit: something inaccessible to Inuit consciousness ‘accidentally’, because although known about it was unacknowledged or left implicit in practice. Reflecting, years later, she was able to understand how it was hidden, by observing the ambivalence in the games and its role in establishing the value of *nallik-*. We might say of Briggs’s ‘field-countertransference’, and it may be a useful way to think of field-countertransference anyway, that it extended over a matter of years.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.,12.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,13.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,10.

In summary so far then, I have offered a cautious account of what 'field-countertransference' might consist in and what it might contribute, one building on the idea long present in the anthropological world that the anthropologist is herself a 'tool' or 'instrument'. What I have added is an account of the countertransference which defines and justifies a practice of reflectively directing attention to one's own feelings, a practice whose epistemological credentials have been clarified as the coming to understand and to know oneself and the other, through the activity of self-interpretation. What that emotional understanding equips the field worker with is a principled basis for seeing how things are for the other from their point of view, and what it is that they may unconsciously (again in the broad sense) be communicating, through behaviours and actions which elicit emotion. Thus it is that feeling the emotion orients the fieldworker to how things are for the individual or group of individuals with whom she is in relation. This orientation then can be used to take her understanding of them further, by questioning or observation, informed by understanding of her 'field-countertransference' feelings.

### **'Narrow' countertransference.**

I turn lastly to consider the significance to anthropology of the narrow form of countertransference. Part of the impetus for the theory of the countertransference came from the need to explain what is happening when the feelings that the analyst experiences are puzzling or incongruous, and not readily articulated into the analyst's understanding of the emotional relation to the patient (although congruence with the analyst's conscious feelings and attitudes is not ruled out). Such puzzlingness or incongruity is seen to be itself a dynamically significant response to an unconscious communication of the patient, indicating that the analyst's conscious understanding of this communication is lagging behind his unconscious one. This focuses the analyst's self-interpretive activity on such feelings, understood as part of the unconscious communication between him and the analysand, as being determined by the object relations in which the two of them are engaged in the transference. These transference object relations are being kept out of consciousness by the operation of the psychic defences of the patient, in which the analyst is involved and from which he must extract himself so as to reflect and interpret to himself: so as to 'think'. Then, if all goes well, the analyst's self-interpretive activity will bring into consciousness a hitherto unconscious emotion which will form part of his orientation to the patient in the transference object relation: it will 'tell him' who in the unconscious relation being communicated to him by the patient he is being and so it will enable him to understand the patient's own situation.

In the terms of the philosophical account of emotion we looked at earlier, the emotion once consciously felt will present the import to the analyst of the object relation he is in, in the transference. Equivalently, it will enable him to construe his and the patient's relationship in the transference, and so to gain knowledge of what (unconscious) object relation it is. Although the relation is one only 'in the mind' of the patient, the very special conditions of the analytic setting allow it to be experienced as a real relationship. It is here that the analyst's countertransference will inform transference interpretations aimed at understanding the meaning of the patient's unconscious communications about that relationship. When the object-relationship is brought into consciousness, the object of psychoanalytic knowledge is the subject's inner psychic world. We can ask, therefore, whether there is any analogue of this situation which can be found in the anthropological situation and in particular whether the field countertransference might provide a window onto, or entry into, the psychic world of the other.

An important disanalogy is the fact that the anthropological enterprise is not a therapeutic one. What is to count as confirmation of the emotional understanding achieved by the fieldworker in self-interpretation cannot be the sort of confirmation available to the analyst from the patient's responses to interpretation or from the progress of therapy. The correct destination of these interpretations is then, not the object that provoked the feeling (individual, institution, etc) but the notes and writing up, as ethnography, of the outcome of reflective understanding. Confirmation of correctness of interpretation resides in the contribution of this data to the overall understanding achieved, from outside sources of knowledge and, perhaps, from endorsement by other workers.

Despite the disanalogy I want to suggest a way in which a properly psychoanalytic, narrow, countertransference, one indexing unconscious communication of the sort that can only be made conscious

through psychoanalytic transference interpretation, might have an anthropological application in fieldwork. Here another piece of psychoanalytic theory is needed. Freud held that there are two ways that the mind works, which are jointly constitutive of its nature as the organ of thought. One is the familiar cognitive and reality-oriented mode of rational conscious or accidentally unconscious thought, obeying what Freud called the Reality principle. The other obeys what Freud called the Pleasure principle, and is the mode in which the psychoanalytic unconscious works: here the mind's working is oriented to the maintenance of psychic equilibrium and the avoidance of mental pain. This thesis is absolutely central to the psychoanalytic theory of the mind, in introducing the conception of a radically different form of thought in which what is thought is thereby felt to be brought about. We may accordingly understand the operation of the psychic defence mechanisms such as projection, denial and idealisation, as transforming unfavourable representations into favourable ones, in ways that were illustrated in the psychoanalytic vignette given earlier. I earlier characterised the mode of function of the unconscious mind as that where the content of thoughts is transformed so as to render them non-accidentally inaccessible; this transformation, effected by the defences, is in the service of the Pleasure principle.

This psychoanalytic thesis is given a philosophical exposition as the 'archaic theory of the mind'.<sup>28</sup> Its significance for the present discussion comes from a feature to which Wollheim draws attention when he remarks that when figures, or persons, are represented in this mode of thought their 'characteristics include ambivalence: the pursuit of archaic sexual aims: and the alternation between an utter implacability and an unnatural radiance of character' adding that such figures are presented in a certain way, as having 'radical incompleteness or indeterminacy of character...deathlessness, or rather a permanent renewability of existence: an unlimited power to attract to itself novel significance through expanded associations: and a relative imperviousness to reality-testing'.<sup>29</sup> What Wollheim is describing here are qualities of thought that, when appearing in consciousness, signal the operation of the unconscious mode of thought. I suggest that we may add to these at least the following: an extreme urgency or an unnatural tranquillity, a sense of compulsion, of charm and seductiveness, feelings of beatific satisfaction and, equally, feelings of menace, strangeness, or alien-ness. (It is then plausible that these latter may at times contribute to the incongruity or alienness of the analyst's feelings experienced in the countertransference.) These are signs of unconscious functioning to whose significance the analyst will through training be alerted. The interesting parallel that this presents us with here is the question of what signs, detected by a suitably trained observer in the field, might alert her to the operation and content of an unconscious mode of thought in those she studies. The view that the meanings of cultural institutions and practices are to be understood in terms of the unconsciously held beliefs of their members is not a new one. But we might envisage the application of the narrow countertransference as providing an 'instrument of research' into such beliefs when these are non-accidentally inaccessible.

Since my intention here is only to sketch a promising line of investigation I shall explore this with an example. Galina Lindquist, a Swedish anthropologist herself of Russian origin, describes fieldwork conducted in the 1990's among traditional healers in post-communist urban Russia.<sup>30</sup> Focusing on her own experiences she sees their significance as placing her, an outsider ethnographer, within the power relationships of the community she was there to study. The experience she describes is a 'dysphoric' one: invited to be present at a session by a woman healer working in an urban healing centre, she found herself the subject of the session in which, she says, 'I quickly lost control of the situation'.

'The healer sat on the chair opposite to mine and locked my eyes in a firm grip of her gaze. 'I'll diagnose you. Don't be afraid; I'll only tell you the truth. You are not afraid of the truth, are you? God sent me to this earth to help and to heal, like He did His son, and I'll help you, however grave your problems are; but for this, you have to be totally open to me. Open up and believe; the truth is here to face; only by facing the truth can we be healed. Close your eyes now! I'll tell you truthfully about every problem you have; I'll start from upwards and go all the way down. Your throat *chakra* is terrible, you have adenoma of the vocal cords and it is unfortunate for you: you work a lot with your voice, but you won't be able to do it anymore soon enough. I see this clump sitting right there, inside your throat; and it is very bad for you, since your voice is your main working

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<sup>28</sup> Wollheim, *The Thread of Life*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>30</sup> Lindquist, " 'Being a Hostage to the Other': Levinas's ethical epistemology and dysphoric fieldwork experiences." 166.

instrument.’ (Lindquist adds ‘Which is certainly true! And I tend to have problems with bronchitis and with my voice, I thought, so she must be one of those who see!’). ‘I go further down, she continued, your liver is totally destroyed, you are taking too much tranquillizers (Lindquist says, ‘I breathed out inside myself, since that was not the case, so maybe she is trying to scare me, and, after all, she does not see...’) but - and here her face got distorted with pain, and her eyes filled with tears – the worst of all is that the count of cancer cells in your body is hundreds of times higher than normal. Perhaps you don’t have symptoms yet, but it’s only a matter of time: every normal person has cancer cells, but they do not multiply unless they are triggered, but with you, they have taken the better of you, the whole of you, and they are so many that it really hurts’ (now tears were rolling down her cheeks) ‘And all over you, I see the marks, the traces of bad energy left by all those healers that you met before. Cancer in this stage had slight chances to be cured; the only chance you have is to leave all the healers and let me treat you – God punish me if I’m lying – but let me tell you that I have quite a good record of treating cancer. In fact I’m the only healer in this establishment who dares to accept cancer patients. And I keep people alive for years. But my condition is that they only work with me, that it is only me and the energy of the disease, that I don’t have to deal with all those bad energies of these evil people, and these poisonous medicines. And if you do that, we’ll write a book together, because all my life is wedded to science, I could do everything for science...’

The anthropologist comments: ‘Now, in retrospect, I can view the emotions that overwhelmed me in these moments as a musical piece with several interlacing themes, likely familiar to those being caught in an act of violence. Indignation, helpless anger at the other person’s meanness and at one’s own stupidity for having put oneself in such a situation’. She describes her predominant emotion here as ‘visceral fear’ without an object, ‘an overwhelming sense of dread’, and describes too her attempt on returning to her apartment to purify herself from the ‘evil energies that I felt the interaction left me with’.

Writing on the background to her fieldwork in post-communist Russia as a society where old certainties and an old order have been replaced by ‘a new lawlessness, ruthlessness and cruelty’ there is, Lindquist notes, a deep preoccupation with power and powerlessness.<sup>31</sup> The practice of healing of the sort described here flourishes in such environments, where successful healers construct themselves as ‘persons of power’.<sup>32</sup> Thus in her own case too it is ‘culturally logical that, at the first encounter, the healer attempts to put the patient into the modality of dread’ and so, into a position of dependence on and powerlessness *vis a vis* the healer.

Lindquist analyses these transactions in terms of power relations and the emotions of fear and dread that, induced, manoeuvre her as the patient into a dependent position. But we may also see them as related to powerlessness as its effect; to be without power in a culture overrun by the strongest where might is right, is to live in the terror of the jungle. Considering Lindquist’s experiences from the standpoint of ‘field counter-transference’ we might say the following. First, the nature of the emotion was fear; it presented the situation to her under an aspect or import of threat; that threat might be interpreted as presented by the power play of the healer, displaced onto the apparent threat of cancer. This aspect is partly confirmed by her retrospective report of her emotions, in which the interaction is compared to an act of violence. Here, interpretation of the emotion remains within the ‘broad’ countertransference. Second, however, she ‘rapidly lost control’ of the situation, experiencing emotions alien to what is predicted on the balanced emotional judgement with which one approaches a treatment setting. This incongruity is a signal that the communication is being driven from something non-accidentally inaccessible to conscious awareness. Third, the mode in which the emotion occurs, its overwhelming and objectless nature, recalls the characterisation of unconscious material given earlier: an ‘alternation between an utter implacability and an unnatural radiance of character’. (Lindquist experienced only the former, but she earlier makes reference to the ‘extraordinary experiences that people share in their ethnographies tend to fall within the type ‘peace, love and understanding’; plausibly, such euphoric feelings appear on surrender to the power of the healer.) Here we can interpret that the emotion of dread which was induced conveys, in the form of unconscious ‘communication’, what is unconsciously experienced by those who inhabit a world of the powerless under continual threat of aggression. In this case, confirmation of this ‘counter-transference interpretation’ is available in Lindquist’s picture of post-Soviet society.

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<sup>31</sup> Lindquist, *Conjuring Hope* xiv.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

I should like to emphasise the tentative nature of these suggestions. Much more could be said about the three cases that I have been able only briefly to discuss. There are important questions about the cross-cultural applicability of emotion concepts; in particular the concept of a subject-referring emotion might be thought local to cultures having a certain conception of the self. More needs to be said about the ways that unconsciously held beliefs can be held collectively; this is a philosophical puzzle about which little has been written. In the account I gave of the psychoanalytic counter-transference I did not pursue the explanation in terms of the mental mechanisms of projection and identification, mechanisms which psychoanalysis holds to be in operation there. Nor have I dealt with the countertransference as it occurs in groups. These and other theoretical issues require exploration. With this in place, the thesis that a 'field counter-transference' can be defended as a model, as well as its implementation as methodology, would then need to be developed in the light of experience in the field. Only then can one assess the value of the psychoanalytic theory of the countertransference for coming to know the other.

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