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Significant Others and the Self

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We subscribe to the assumption that the self is fundamentally relational—that is, entangled with significant others —such that key elements of the self are experienced in relation to significant others, even when others are not present. In our social-cognitive model of transference, transference occurs when a mental representation of a significant other is activated by cues in a new person that resemble the other. As a result, the self in relation to this significant other is activated, eliciting changes in affect, expectancies, motivations, and behaviors, as well as in the nature of the working self-concept, all reflecting the version of the self one is when with the significant other. Moreover, when people experience a threat to either a significant-other relationship or the self in the context of an encounter with a new person who triggers transference, this sets into motion self-regulatory processes, which play out in relations with the new person. Overall, we argue that the evocation of prior experiences with significant others tells us something about the nature of the self, affect, and self-regulation that has implications for both resiliency and vulnerability.

Our approach to the self and self-regulation is grounded in our interpersonal social-cognitive theory of the self, which draws on social-cognitive, personality, and clinical theory (Andersen & Chen, 2001). Its main thrust is that significant others are influential in shaping self-definition, self-regulatory processes, and personality as it is expressed in relation to others. We argue, in particular, that an individual's repertoire of selves, stemming from the significant others in his or her life, is a major source of the interpersonal patterns that characterize the individual. In this sense, people may have as many selves as they have interpersonal relationships (Sullivan, 1953; see also Kelly, 1955). These relationships capture a profoundly important sphere of the self, a sphere that includes shared realities with relationship partners (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Baldwin, 1992; Hardin & Higgins, 1996)

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but that is unique nonetheless given the idiosyncratic meaning of each relationship to the individuals involved in them.

We define a significant other as an individual who is or has been deeply influential in one's life, and in whom one is or once was emotionally invested, including members of one's family-of-origin and people encountered outside of family relations. We assume that self-knowledge is linked in memory to knowledge about significant others, with each linkage representing not only relatively unique aspects of the self-other relationship but also the self one has a readiness to experience, or to become, with the significant other, in other relevant contexts. We refer to each self-with-significant-other as an "entangled" self to convey the continually reverberating and resurfacing ties that bind the self to significant others (Andersen & Chen, 2001).

The Entangled Self

The concept of the entangled self emerged out of our research on transference, the phenomenon whereby assumptions and experiences associated with past or present significant others resurface in relations with new others (Chen & Andersen, 1999). This research has yielded the first experimental evidence for transference. The theory of the entangled self extends this work by considering the implications of transference for the nature of self-knowledge, self-regulation, and personality (Andersen & Chen, 2001). The theory is grounded in assumptions that derive largely from the literature on the role of social constructs in information processing (Higgins, 1996a; Higgins & King, 1981; Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, & Tota, 1986; see also Kelly, 1955). It assumes that mental representations of significant others are stored in memory and that transference reflects basic social-cognitive processes—namely, the activation of a perceiver's mental representation of a significant other in an encounter with a new person, leading the perceiver to interpret and remember the person in terms of the activated representation, and to respond emotionally, motivationally, and behaviorally to the person in representation-derived ways.

It further assumes that significant others are profoundly important in people's lives. Mental representations of them are influential because they are laden with affect and because they define the manner in which one's expectancies, affects, motives, and behaviors in relation to other people arise—whether the other person is a new boss, neighbor, love interest, or acquaintance. We assume as well that significant-other representations are linked to knowledge representing the self one is in relation to significant others. The existence of such linkages implies that the activation of a significant-other representation should spread to aspects of the self that are associated with this other.

Research supports these assumptions and demonstrates that, when a significant-other representation is activated with a new person, transference occurs, leading one to become in this new interpersonal context the version of oneself one typically is with the relevant significant other (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). This shift also gives rise to a variety of other self-relevant processes, including affective experiences that may involve emotional suffering, as well as protective, self-regulatory responses. In terms of the latter, self-regulation emerges when a threat to the self occurs in the context of transference so as to repair damage to the self. Threats to the relationship in transference similarly provoke protective, self-regulatory processes. In short, transference sets in motion a variety of self-relevant processes, among them self-regulatory mechanisms. Overall, the data de-pathologize transference by showing it

is a normal, rather ubiquitous phenomenon that does not necessarily lead to suffering.

Contextual Activation

Our entangled-self theory also rests on the widely-held idea that one's entire pool of self-knowledge is unlikely to be operative at once; rather, only a subset is in working memory at any given moment (e.g., Linville & Carlston, 1994). Contextual cues determine the particular elements of self-knowledge that are brought into working memory, implying that the self is essentially constructed anew in each context. In our view, when contextual cues activate a significant-other representation, the working self-concept shifts toward the self one is with the significant other.

Research has shown that significant-other representations are chronically accessible, which means that even in the absence of transient, contextual cues, these representations have a high activation readiness (e.g., Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995). Still, our work has shown that cues emanating from a newly encountered person that overlap in some manner with stored knowledge about a significant other may provide additional contextual activation. In our view, such contextual cues are ones that people are likely to encounter in their daily social interactions (Chen, Andersen, & Hinkley, 1999). Thus, in our experimental work, we rely on these ecologically valid cues to transiently activate transference. That is, we manipulate the interpersonal context so that participants are faced with a new person who is or is not characterized by descriptors that they provided in an earlier session to describe a significant other.

In our model, variability that derives from whether or not contextual cues set transference into motion is a major source of contextual variability in the self. Put simply, the self should be determined, at least in part, by whether or not cues in a new person overlap with knowledge stored in memory about a specific significant other. Just as non-interpersonal contextual cues, such as those within a professional setting, are likely to elicit the self one is at work, a new person may constitute a "context" that activates a relevant significant-other representation and, accordingly, the associated self-with-significant-other (Andersen & Chen, 2001).

As this suggests, our assumptions about the self are compatible with the social-cognitive model of personality (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). This model conceptualizes personality in terms of IF-THEN relations, with IFs referring to situations or contexts and THENs referring to the particular behaviors that are elicited in them. According to this model, personality reflects an individual's overall pattern of IF-THEN relations. Our theory parallels this model in the idea that variability in responding across situations is fundamental to personality (see also Higgins, 1990; Mischel, 1999). However, it is more targeted in that it emphasizes IFs that are interpersonal—namely, new people, who, by virtue of their resemblance to a significant other, activate significant-other representations and bring to the fore the relevant entangled selves (Andersen & Chen, 2001). An individual's repertoire of entangled selves represents a major source of the interpersonal patterns that characterize his or her personality across different contexts.

On another level, like the more global IF-THEN model, our theory captures both idiographic and nomothetic elements. It is idiographic in recognizing that the individual's unique construals and meanings lie at the heart of personality and behavior. Indeed, our theory requires an idiographic approach because significant-other representations are, by definition, idiosyncratic in content, so that both their

substance and the cues that will best activate them are likely to be unique to the individual. Yet, it is nomothetic in that it focuses on generalizable social-cognitive processes as the mechanisms by which such representations are activated and used. As well, we assume that self-regulatory processes in transference are general (i.e., nomothetic), even though the unique meanings that derive from the significant-other relationship give them their impetus by defining what is threatening in transference and provokes self-regulation.

Basic Evidence

Initial research on transference focused on inference and memory effects, demonstrating that people rely on stored knowledge about significant others to fill in the blanks about new others (Andersen & Cole, 1990). Specifically, after encountering a new person who was characterized by descriptors that participants had generated weeks earlier about a significant other, participants are especially confident that they were presented with descriptors about this new person that were not in fact presented, but that do characterize their significant other (e.g., Andersen & Cole, 1990). Studies have shown that neither the self-generated nature of the significant-other descriptors, nor a reliance on generic categories or stereotypes, can account for these robust effects, which also emerge when the significant-other representation is activated on the basis of descriptors presented outside of awareness (Glassman & Andersen, 1999).

Research has also shown that the activation of a significant-other representation elicits affective responses typically experienced in relation to the significant other, in accordance with the theory of schema-triggered affect (Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986). Specifically, a new person who resembles a positive significant other, and thus activates the representation of this other, is evaluated more positively than a new person who resembles a negative significant other (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994). The overall evaluation of the significant other is thus applied to the new person. Moreover, people's motivations to approach and to be emotionally open with significant others, or to withdraw and be closed and distant, as well as their expectations regarding acceptance or rejection from significant others, come into play as a function of the affect associated with the relevant significant other (e.g., Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996). Thus, in transference, people want to be emotionally close to new others who resemble a positive versus a negative significant other, and also expect to be accepted rather than rejected by them. Parallel effects have been demonstrated when examining people's facial expressions, which show positive affect when reading descriptive cues about a new person who triggers a positive versus negative transference. To further concretize the evidence for transference, research has shown that when a new person activates a significant-other representation, interpersonal behavior during an unstructured telephone conversation reflects the relationship with the significant other (Berk & Andersen, 2000). Specifically, using a variant of Snyder, Tanke, and Bersheid's (1977) classic paradigm, we assessed the conversational behavior of a target person during an interaction with a perceiver who was experiencing a positive or negative transference. Evidence for behavioral confirmation emerged such that the target's conversational behavior came to reflect the affect associated with the significant other, as coded by blind judges who could not hear the perceiver's contributions to the conversation.

Finally, research shows that when a new person activates a significant-other representation, this activation spreads to elements of the self that are linked to the

relevant significant other, resulting in an influx of self-with-significant-other features into the working self-concept (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). In short, encounters with new people who bear some resemblance to a significant other lead people to view themselves, in part, as they are when with the relevant significant other.

Self-Regulation

We argue that self-regulatory responses occur in transference because significant others and relationships with these individuals are imbued with special emotional resonance. Various forms of evidence support this claim.

Research demonstrates that shifts in the content of the working self-concept toward the relevant self-with-significant-other are accompanied by shifts in self-evaluation (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). Namely, people evaluate themselves in a manner that parallels the overall positive or negative affect associated with the relevant significant other. When one encounters a new person who activates a negative significant-other representation, negative elements of the self are brought into working memory, instigating a negative shift in self-evaluation. However, in such cases, compensatory self-enhancement also occurs in response to this threat to the self. Specifically, aspects of the working self-concept that do not shift toward the relevant self-with-significant-other are judged to be overwhelmingly positive. We argue that such self-enhancement reflects a protective, self-regulatory response, much as observed in self-affirmation theory (e.g., Steele, 1988) or in terror management theory (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992; Hinkley & Andersen, 1996).

Research has also shown that individuals may engage in compensatory relationship enhancement in transference as a response to threat (Andersen et al., 1996). When one's overall positive feeling toward a significant other and one's relationship with the other are threatened due to encountering negative aspects of the significant other in a new person who resembles the significant other, compensatory enhancement of the other occurs. Namely, participants' immediate expression of facial affect upon exposure to negative features that characterize a positive significant other is especially positive. Thus, things we do not like about a positive significant other but have somehow managed to integrate into our overall understanding of him or her and perhaps repeatedly worked to minimize in our minds (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1993), yield not negative affect in transference, but positive affect. Presumably this response—in which flaws become charming—is so well-practiced that it readily emerges as a relationship-protective response in transference.

Examining the intersection between our theory and self-discrepancy theory (e.g., Higgins, 1987, 1996b) provides yet another framework for conceptualizing self-regulation in transference. In that model , a self-regulatory focus that is attuned to attaining (or not losing) positive outcomes stems from ideal self-standards, while a focus attuned to avoiding (or preventing) negative outcomes stems from ought self-standards. Either self-standard can be held from a significant other's standpoint. Such self-standards should be stored as part of the linkages between significant others and the self, such that activating a significant-other representation should not only trigger transference but should also activate associated self-standards and self-regulatory focus. For example, when a woman's representation of her mother is activated, the mother's ideal self for her and the mother's perception of her actual self should be activated, thereby making salient self-discrepancies held from her

mother's perspective, which in turn should elicit the affective and motivational consequences predicted by self-discrepancy theory.

Our research shows that the activation of a significant-other representation does indeed lead to the activation of the self-standards most closely associated with the significant other and any associated self-discrepancy (Reznik & Andersen, 2001). The evidence for this is mainly that depressive affect occurs in transference among people with ideal self-discrepancies, while agitation-related affect occurs among those with ought self-discrepancies. These data demonstrate the confluence of processes based in self-discrepancy theory with those based in transference. Evidence also suggests that transference can trigger self-regulatory focus, in that ideal-discrepant individuals become more poised to engage with the new person while thinking about interacting with him or her than when no longer expecting to do so, whereas ought-discrepant individuals are more likely to wish to avoid the other while thinking about interacting rather than when no longer expecting to interact.

Implications

We believe our work has implications for both vulnerability and resilience, even though it has focused on "normal" processes that do not necessarily involve suffering. In terms of resilience, interpersonal motivations, such as the need to connect with others, are clearly activated in transference, and evoke a willingness to reach out to others in a positive way—when the activated significant-other representation is of one that is positively regarded. More concretely, in a positive transference, people may be more likely to give others the benefit of the doubt, and to assume congeniality and reciprocity. Thus, transference involving a positive significant other may be important in resilience because it includes the re-emergence of a positive relationship, and this process may facilitate the continued formation of benign and trusting bonds. In this sense, just one positive relationship—characterized by love, trust, and mutual respect—may begin the process of forming multiple, positive models of self-other relations to which one can later refer.

Other factors can prevent one from being motivated to find, develop, or maintain new and healthy significant-other relationships, or from having the resourcefulness or good luck to be able to do so. Indeed, transference itself may pose obstacles by promoting self-fulfilling prophecies in the kinds of relationships one fashions and, if one is used to maladaptive significant-other relationships, this can become self-defeating. Thus, people suffering from maladaptive relationship patterns might benefit from taking part in any activity—such as sports, band practice, mentoring, collaborative work arrangements, or community service—that offers opportunities to develop working relationships involving a degree of trust, mutuality, respect, and affection, which can then serve as the foundation for forming new, positive models of relating with others. Under these conditions, we would assume new, more healthful significant-other representations and associated representations can form, becoming the basis for new experiences of transference.

Of course, it is not only the positivity or negativity of significant-other relationships that determines whether or not transference becomes problematic. Some relationships in which one loves the significant other nonetheless involve maladaptive interpersonal patterns, including self-destructive affective responses, self-evaluations, and actions. In this sense, even a positive transference can lead to suffering. Hence, at the very least, many significant-other representations are likely

to be ambivalent—and in various ways. The nuanced view, then, is that the precise nature of the relationship or how one experiences the self in that relationship is most relevant to vulnerability versus resiliency in transference. For example, the standards one believes that significant other holds one to may lead one to despair, even if one feels great love for this other. Replaying the pattern of loving and yet sinking into despair in response to the other is maladaptive, and yet can stem from a largely positive transference. This example reflects one way in which our work on transference can speak to clinical assumptions about how human suffering may derive from superimposing memories about past relationships onto new people. We have identified basic social-cognitive mechanisms by which interpersonal patterns are transmitted from one relationship to the next, and our work suggests that whether this is problematic or not is likely to depend on the particular content and dynamics of the significant-other representation and relationship. Indeed, some of these dynamics may include over-learned, potentially counterproductive self-regulatory patterns, developed to cope with threat in the relationship.

We cannot know for certain from our existing research, of course, that healthy relationships are at the basis of resilience simply because they offer positive self-other models that one carries around in one's head and can tap in relevant situations. We also cannot argue definitively from our data that such relationships are at the basis of the emotional resources needed to engage in self-protective strategies in the context of a negative transference. But our work is generally consistent with these ideas. For example, the fact that normal people, when experiencing a negative transference, engage in self-protective processes, suggests that such self-regulatory processes are perhaps associated with effective functioning and with resiliency in the face of difficulty. Such an assumption is indirectly supported by empirical evidence showing that people suffering from conditions like depression or low self-esteem tend to show less self-enhancement (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988).

In our work, normal college students responded to a negative transference by emphasizing positive self-aspects. Such a response may buffer the self-esteem threat inherent in the influx of negative aspects of the relevant self-with-significant-other into working memory. If such a self-protective compensatory response were to break down, the accessibility of negative self-aspects might lead other aspects of the working self-concept to become similarly negative, precipitating a situational drop in self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In this sense, the self-protective self-regulation we have observed in transference may be valuable in resilience. At the same time, there is likely a point beyond which self-protective strategies cease being adaptive, such as may be the case among narcissistic individuals, who appear to use them in extreme form and to have very troubled and troubling relationships (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2002). Hence, it may be at the edges of experience—with not enough or with too much self-protection—that vulnerability or resilience arises in transference.

Similarly, we also assume that relationship-protective self-regulation in transference can also be healthful in transference under some conditions, and problematic in others, with its severity again being critical. Believing that a significant-other relationship is healthy, even while it involves counterproductive and self-defeating patterns, could lead one to discount negative evidence in the context of transference that might otherwise lead one to expect problems. Indeed, this could lead one to repeat maladaptive relational patterns. For example, if a loved one were negligent, rejecting, or even abusive, habitually implementing relationship-repair strategies in relation to such cues could become the basis for being drawn into and maintaining

destructive relationships. Hence, even as one disparages qualities that one cannot abide, one may respond to another person in transference by turning a blind eye to these very qualities. At the same time, relationship-protective processes can also be helpful in enabling one to give relatively benign individuals the benefit of the doubt. When we find ways to accept the flaws in otherwise decent people, it makes our lives (and theirs) easier, and we can better navigate annoying, but relatively benign, transference relationships as well. We also assume that under some circumstances, people may not engage in the self-regulatory responses in transference described here and that this may allow vulnerabilities to arise in transference. For example, individual differences associated with chronic negativity in self-views, such as low self-esteem and depression, should preclude self-protective responses to a negative transference experience due to a depletion of the cognitive and emotional resources needed to do so. We are currently testing this, which should tell us about what happens in transference when self-protective processes break down. We assume that if such self-regulatory processes were not marshaled in the original significant-other relationship—that is, if one surrendered to the painful experience at the time—self-regulation will be less likely in later transference experiences. Likewise, if the disappointment in the transference with the new person is sufficiently profound or the lure of same leads to a sufficiently pervasive renunciation of potentially buoying social resources in the interim, we assume that this too could contribute to a breakdown in self-regulation.

On another note, just as positive transference may facilitate the development of social bonds, negative transference experiences may disrupt relationship development. For example, a negative transference may lead to evaluating new others unfavorably, expecting to be rejected, and having little motivation to be close. And the self-protective processes we have observed could play out in the form of retreating from a new other or even of breaking off ties with him or her once involved. Hence, if the negative transference is misplaced, the impenetrability that may accompany the self-bolstering may be as counterproductive as is breaking off the relationship. And yet, when the negative transference involves a fairly accurate assessment of the person, distancing or exiting may be the most adaptive response, which highlights the complexities of these questions. And, to be clear, the issues of negative self-experiences in transference should not be limited to negative transference, because even in a positive transference, undesired or feared aspects of self may be evoked, setting into motion self-protective processes that could preclude relationship development. When feared aspects of the self are ones that might be helpful to explore or valuable for one's own growth, nixing such relationships in the service of self-protection may run counter to resilience, whereas when the threat to the self experienced is veridical, it is a sign of strength to have the capacity to exit such relationships or to avoid them to begin with.

Finally, these processes may be relevant to remediation and prevention. For example, as one becomes aware of typical patterns and their consequences, one can learn to become vigilant to cues that set a given pattern in motion and, in so doing, can expand the ephemeral moment of freedom between these cues and the problematic assumptions and responses they elicit, so as to be able to practice making the hard choice of responding differently. When attention and monitoring reveal the urgency of changing one's habitual patterns because their consequences are self-defeating or debilitating, this can catalyze the motivation needed to resist these old habits. And keeping on track with such plans and aspirations is likely to be most assured when they can increasingly be integrated into one's overall sense of identity,

so that one is less and less attracted to the cycle of one's problematic, though familiar, old ways.

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