

“I Don’t Like It When People Like Me”

Erotic Transference and Countertransferential Resistance in Adolescent Counseling

Christina Tesoro

Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College

October 23, 2017

INTRODUCTION

I am currently placed at a non-profit organization hosted within a high school on Grand Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The non-profit is an organization that provides services in many aspects of the social work sphere, including housing, elder care, afterschool programming, and job readiness. At the campus where I am placed, I am responsible (as part of a team comprised of three other interns and our task supervisor) for developing social emotional learning curricula and running groups after school Monday through Friday. Interns also serve as individual coaches/counselors to students in the COMPASS afterschool program. We are to build a caseload of twelve students, five of whom will become our “intensive” caseload of students to be met with on a weekly basis. The other seven students will be seen either biweekly, or once a month at minimum.

My first session this year was with a high school junior named Sam¹, who would go on to become the first student on my “intensive” caseload. Quite early in our relationship, Sam expressed interest in my life, my romantic relationships, and what I did outside of the school in a way that piqued feelings of discomfort and anxiety in me, as they seemed to reflect transference of an erotic nature that I was very unprepared for so early in my social work Masters program. This paper will explore erotic transference as it operates when working with adolescents, as well as how discomfort and anxiety as a response to erotic transference, and the ways in which my own experience of gender and sexual violence in the past all contributed to my countertransference and how it impacted my therapeutic alliance with Sam.

INITIAL MEETING & INTERN’S HISTORY

Sam is a fifteen-year-old African American junior in high school. He appears to be healthy and active, and is involved in extracurricular activities both at the school and plays sports casually (soccer, basketball) with his friends. He currently lives with his grandmother in Brooklyn, and has brothers who do not reside with them. As of yet, I have not been able to broach the subject of his home life or parents, as we have only met

¹ Name has been changed to protect client privacy.

twice and usually spend time talking about school and his creative pursuits. However, in terms of his presence in the school, Sam is very highly regarded by many among the faculty. When I visited the guidance office to request Sam's attendance records and grades, the administrator there warmly informed me that Sam is a "great kid, a really great kid." Other teachers and administrators corroborate this assessment, and Sam himself reports that he frequently offers to stay after school both to help teachers perform any tasks with which they may need assistance before heading to his afterschool programming.

Sam and I first met in an informal and impromptu session, due to the fact that we didn't yet have enough students by mid-September to run a full group. Instead of wasting the day, our supervisor, D.S., suggested that each intern meet with one of the students in attendance for a brief introductory session. Sam and I met again for a more official initial assessment once it was confirmed that Sam would be part of my caseload. As a junior, he is technically out of the age range for the COMPASS after school program, which is supposed to serve 9th and 10th graders exclusively. Our social emotional learning sessions, however, are presided over by Principal V., who (according to D.S.) "snuck" some 11th graders in. After meeting Principal V., it is clear that there was no *maliciously* manipulative intent behind this action; rather, she wants every student who is interested and engaged with our programming to be able to benefit from it, even if they are outside of the age range dictated by the DYCD² (our funders)³. In the two weeks that it took to confirm whether or not Sam would be on my caseload, he asked me several times during our social emotional learning group "When are we going to talk again?" There were about two weeks in between our informal meeting, and our first initial assessment. Sam and I were scheduled to meet on this Friday (10/20/17), but Sam forgot the appointment; when I saw him in the hall later, he asked if we could meet Monday this week as well as Friday to make up the time.

² Department of Youth & Community Development

³ Privately, I agree with this decision, especially since I've worked with high school juniors in the past (my writing mentee was a junior when I met her), and have observed that junior year is perhaps the most challenging and stressful year in a student's high school career. (Moreover, it's nice to be able to work with students who actually want to be part of our program.)

At the start of our informal meeting, I approached Sam with some trepidation, being caught somewhat off-guard by D.S.'s suggestion to meet so early on in our field placement. Sam and I sat in the art room (which is where the afterschool program takes place) and the other interns relocated to nearby classrooms in order to speak privately with their students. My first impression of Sam was that he seemed to be shy: he didn't make much eye contact, and sat with his body tilted slightly away from me at the beginning of the session. However, he was responsive to the questions I asked, and after a few moments, easily opened up. I have some experience working with adolescents, as I've worked both as a youth counselor at the Ali Forney Center in the past, as well as a writing mentor through an organization called Girls Write Now, and also as the rape crisis health educator at Mount Sinai's Adolescent Health Center. Because of this, I felt fairly confident starting this placement. The roles that I was used to in those former positions, however, were categorically different from my role as a social work intern, so I would be lying if I said I didn't feel at least slightly nervous.

It is also worth noting that most of my experience with adolescents has been with homeless LGBTQ+ adolescents (generally around ages 19-20) in emergency housing, who usually were in crisis and (in my experience) too overwhelmed to form close bond with the youth counselors. As a writing mentor, I worked with cisgender girls (age 16-17), and as a health educator, my patients were (if I had to estimate), probably 95% young women (averaging 16-18 years of age) coming in for birth control counseling and STI testing. I mention this because, as I will later demonstrate, one of the issues I am concerned about in the context of my work with Sam is erotic transference. Erotic transference is something I've encountered in the past solely with cisgender male adolescents (even when I was surrounded by queer youth of all genders). In experiencing erotic transference, those encounters in my previous work⁴ were very brief and contained, since none of the positions I've held in the past were conducive to long-term one-on-one counseling relationships.

⁴ I had a student walk me to the train after I led a teen dating violence awareness workshop and ask for my number, for example, or had patients flirt with me during the sexual history and risk assessment that was required as a part of Mount Sinai's HIV pre-testing (which was awkward and unfortunate timing, to say the least).

I also have concerns about my own countertransferential discomfort and unease, which is informed by my past history of sexual assault and harassment. As Celenza (2009) notes, “Even in the therapeutic matrix, the therapist-patient dyad is influenced by societal views about current power structures between males and females.” She adds that the female therapist’s countertransference might “inhibit the development of the patient’s sexual transference” possibly to the detriment of the patient, as erotic transference might serve a specific and useful function (p. 301). Furthermore, in summarizing potential avoidance of erotic transference, Krausz (2016) writes, “these defenses remain in place for the analyst when she has both a personal and professional institutional history that has precluded her use of transference and countertransference” which resonated with me in terms of my inability, in my own adolescence and young adulthood, to advocate for myself in sexual and romantic situations, as well as and subsequent internalized victim-blaming after instances of boundary violation. (p. 25).

CLIENT’S EGO STRENGTHS AND DEFENSES

In our first meeting, Sam and I were able to establish some common interests early on, and conversation flowed more easily than I had anticipated. I was pleased and excited by this, because it felt like I was doing something right. In our first session, the purpose of which was to serve as an introduction both to the program and to each other, we discussed many of Sam’s interests and hobbies. He told me that he took part in a music and dance program last year, though not one that was part of the COMPASS program. He also told me that he liked to dance at “family parties,” though when I asked him to describe what kinds of parties they were, he amended his statement, mumbling instead that they were “parties at his friends.’ houses.” Privately, I found this amendment curious, and it struck me that perhaps he was seeking my approval or trying to present me with a picture of himself and his extracurricular life that he thought I wanted to hear, though he couldn’t possibly know what preferences or judgments (if any) I had with regard to how he spends his time. There have been a few other moments similar to this, where Sam pauses to assess my reactions to what he is telling me; this, I feel, belies a vulnerability that I want to be very careful of as our student-counselor relationship develops. I am highly unfamiliar with adolescent boys, though I suspect (and later spent

some time discussing with D.S. as well as my field instructor, L.B.), that they may be even *more* vulnerable than adolescent girls, given the way they are socialized *against* experiencing, verbalizing, or portraying feelings of affection, tenderness, insecurity, and fear. Similarly, cultural depictions of African American boys and men, and their position with regard to hegemonic masculinity as filtered through a lens of white supremacy as it intersects with the United States' history of slavery, in particular seem to perpetuate the "single story" of an objectified and threatening physical strength, rather than allowing space for a subjective interiority that includes gentleness and affirmation (Adichie 2009).

We discussed Sam's goals for the program as well as his goals for the future. Sam stated that he wants to finish high school and go on to be "a lawyer...or a rapper," the latter half of the statement again said with what I perceived as shyness and apprehension for how I might react to this aspiration. At my encouragement, he started to become more animated in talking about these goals. He said that he is interested in movements like Black Lives Matter, and wants to use his position in the world and the art that he wants to create in order to make a difference in bringing about equality for all people, because "it's not right that anyone should be judged by the color of their skin and who they are." I told him that I hoped one day he would show me some of his writing and disclosed some of my former work as a writing mentor. We talked about the power of the written and spoken word as a form of political activism, a theme that has come up again in our second session and we will likely return to throughout the year.

Sam identified the presenting problem that he would like to work on in session as "stage fright," though generally, students who take part in the COMPASS program have been identified as struggling with attendance, lateness, and unsuccessful academic habits. Sam also described to me a bit of his academic past, starting that when he was younger he used to cut class and did not take school seriously, spending time focusing his energy and attention on video games (in ninth grade) and girls (in tenth grade). When I asked him what changed, he described community involvement in his grandmother's church, as well as a burgeoning understanding that he is rapidly approaching young adulthood and has started to realize his desire to "make something of himself" in the world.

It has been difficult so far for me to identify the forms that Sam's resistance might take, as with a little encouragement and genuine curiosity, he seems eager to open up and

to talk to me. I have not yet been able to identify very many Sam's ego defenses, except perhaps for a slight tendency toward intellectualization (he tends to talk about many topics very rationally, rarely citing any emotional response to material, even the things that trouble him – such as the necessity for the Black Lives Matter movement – or that he loves – such as the rappers he takes inspiration from, or the church community that supports him). I also detected perhaps a tendency toward asceticism, as when Sam felt the need to assure me that the rap he listens to “is not *only* about sex and money, but *important* issues too,” (emphasis mine) although to be fair, it is not clear to me how much this tendency was dictated by my identity as an older, female adult, and the nebulousness of my role as a teacher/counselor/professional (Goldstein, 1995, p. 83).

Sam also related to me a story about performing when he was in elementary school. He told me that he went to an elementary school that placed a lot of emphasis on creative and performing arts, and as a second grader had to stand up in front of the school on stage to perform. He described the incident as “terrifying” and stated that his mind seemed to go “totally blank,” and said that he has not performed since, except for his grandmother's church's choir. He stated that he doesn't go to church regularly anymore, but still does go occasionally, especially because it makes his grandmother happy. He also reported that the church was one of the first places that gave him a sense of community, and showed him that he was surrounded by people who were rooting for him and believed in his potential. It is clear that even now, though he is not a regular attendee, he remembers that environment fondly, and it had a very strong positive impact on him in terms of how he is creating his identity and self-concept.

Though I've only met him individually twice, I have been very impressed by Sam's maturity, self-awareness, and insight when it comes to his own positionality and social identity. To this end, his strongest ego strength seems to be his “sense of reality of the world and sense of self” (Goldstein 1995, p. 58). At this stage in my assessment, I would say that he seems to have intact ego functions, a high sense of self-worth, and a remarkably strong self-concept for someone his age. In our last meeting, for example, we discussed the artists from whom Sam draws inspiration, and he mentioned Logic and J. Cole. Most compelling to me, however, was his reasoning behind why he was drawn to each artist: “J. Cole is very world-oriented, he raps about the world and social things, and

Logic raps more about himself and what's going on with him" Sam told me, demonstrating to me his own awareness of his positionality in a larger society as well as the equal importance of his own interior world. Developmentally, adolescents of Sam's age range are becoming aware of themselves as individuals situated within a larger environment, but Sam struck me as moving quite easily between being introspective, and also aware of – and critical of – the constructs and forces that shape the environment around him.

EROTIC TRANSFERENCE & COUNTERTRANSFERENTIAL RESISTANCE

Even as early as our first session, however, I began to wonder if he was perhaps a little too eager to “get to know me” and if his curiosity about me, and seemingly immediate affection for me, might be serving, if not as an ego defense, then at least as a distraction from the work that he has stated he wants to accomplish this year. For example, during our first meeting (in which he asked me several personal questions, such as how old I am, whether or not I'm married, etc.) Sam said to me, “One day I'm going to write a rap about you. I'm going to mention you in my writing.” In the moment, I was charmed by this, and jokingly told him, “When you do that and when it's on the radio, you'll have to let me know, so that I can play it for all my friends and say that I knew you when and that this song is about me.” At the end of our first session, Sam wanted to hug me good-bye, a position in which I was immediately uncomfortable and worried about the appropriateness of such a gesture. We were in the hallway and had been joined by one of his friends, a sophomore girl who is also in the COMPASS program, and I was acutely aware of many things at once in this situation: the power dynamics between myself and Sam, the gender dynamics and age differences, and most especially the fact that we were being observed by Sam's – female – peer. Not wanting to reject or embarrass Sam in front of her, I gave him a brief one-armed hug back, and left to debrief with my task supervisor, taking note of my own feelings of discomfort and nervousness, which would not abate in future sessions with Sam.

In our second session, he was even more insistent on getting to know personal information about me, asking me where I live and whether or not we could hang out, what I do in my spare time, if I have a boyfriend or not, and whether I use social media

(specifically, Instagram) and if so, if we could follow each other. As I write this, these questions seem like normal adolescent curiosity (and in fact, in supervision, L.B. cautioned me against pathologizing what could just be normative adolescent developmental boundary pushing) so it seems overdramatic to spend more than a few cursory moments in supervision mentioning them and seeking polite and professional ways to redirect the conversation toward Sam. However, the emotional tenor that our sessions take when Sam asks me questions like this give me pause with regard to the responses they evoke *in me*. I'm willing to admit that it is likely that (as aforementioned) it is mostly my personal history at play here that is making me feel like I need to be on such high alert for boundary violations.

I think it's appropriate to mention, as well, that my second meeting with Sam occurred during the week that the Harvey Weinstein scandal broke, and I'd been dealing with the emotional repercussions of having been sexually harassed at a former job of mine. Though I had talked about this with my own therapist, I hadn't until recently, begun to fully process this experience in a conscious way (using, instead, the ego defenses of denial and minimization, a longstanding classic of mine⁵). I was also overwhelmed by the outpouring of accounts of sexual assault from friends and acquaintances during the #MeToo social media campaign, which I was hard-pressed to unplug from. Overall, in my second meeting with Sam, I felt extremely raw and inundated with thoughts and memories of sexual assault and harassment both in my lived experience, and as a cultural epidemic more generally, and his innocent and developmentally appropriate flirtation were unfortunately experienced by me within this context.

To be clear, I am not at all suggesting that Sam, in his curiosity about me was in any way harassing me. However, I find myself in an unsettlingly familiar position of having to gently hold space for his flirting in order to explore what function that serves for him as a client, rather than rejecting this flirtation outright and unapologetically and getting on with my life. (Which, to put it bluntly, is how I generally respond when people flirt with me insistently when I don't want them to, and which I no longer have any

⁵ As a little girl, I was known for self-soothing after vaccinations at the doctor's office by rocking back and forth and telling myself, "Not so bad, not so bad."

compunctions about, since catering to the needs and desires of men at the expense of my own comfort and well-being has taken me a lifetime to unlearn.) This dynamic, frankly, occasionally *feels* unsafe to me, though rationally I know I have nothing to fear from Sam himself and in fact I am in the dominant position in our power dynamic. In supervision with L.B., I've even gone so far as to label this as feeling "triggered," a word that I don't use often to describe my emotional state, and certainly don't use lightly; and the use of which has caused me to reevaluate, in my therapy sessions, my own relationship to trauma. In terms of resistance, since I don't think I have enough information about Sam to assess what forms his resistance will take, but I am curious about countertransferential resistance, if such a thing exists.

In order to alleviate some of my anxiety about erotic transference, I did some reading to understand it better. Alvarez makes the distinction between Oedipal and post-Oedipal desire, and writes that the post-Oedipal child "...struggling to experience the self as the object of another's sexual interest when the other is not the oedipally idealised parent figure" (Davies, as cited by Alvarez, 2010, p. 215). She later connects it to "early developments the baby's feeling of being potent enough to awaken responses, interest, delight in the caregiver," and while I don't yet know the specifics of Sam's early attachment relationships, I thought of how, while he is talkative and eager to share with me, Sam is quiet and distracted in group, frequently overlooked by his peers, teased by the girls (p. 220). He rarely has a comeback or a witty rejoinder so necessary to keep up with the sparring-like pacing of the conversations that occur in the group sessions. As a facilitator in our group sessions, I notice that I have to make a specific effort with certain students – Sam included – in order to entice the rest of the group to quiet down and listen to what they have to contribute. If I fail to do this, I notice that Sam instead spends his time on his phone, watching rap videos or maintaining his own social media presence, which may be an effort to create a stimulus barrier in order to self-soothe in a situation that makes him anxious or uncomfortable (Goldstein, 1995, p. 66).

EROTIC TRANSFERENCE AND SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY

The framing of the function of erotic transference within the therapeutic relationship – as a means for the client to understand himself as a sexual subject – makes a

lot of sense to me, and goes a long way to take the edge off the anxiety it stirs up. While I think it will take some time before I am not flustered by needing to field personal questions therapeutically, understanding the way erotic transference might function for Sam helps temper my own countertransference resistance and makes it easier for me to conduct our interactions from a state of unconditional positive regard and non-judgment. Very few of us, after all, are given the opportunity to form an understanding of ourselves as people worthy of desire and love *in the context* of a relationship defined by unconditional positive regard and the safety that is the nature of an ideal therapeutic relationship. The circumstances by which we come to understand our own sexuality and sexual subjectivity, as well as a *healthy* understanding of ourselves as sexual objects (something I've never considered before, having had only harmful associations with objectification), are so often — if not always — oppressive and distorted under white supremacist, capitalist, cisheteropatriarchy. In beginning to understand the function of erotic transference, and the responsibility of the therapist to help the client to understand that erotic transference, I am able to see how a relationship like this can be immensely beneficial to an adolescent, especially from a social-emotional perspective. If I had had one in my life, for example, I can't help but wonder if the events that my current discomfort and unease are stemming from might have been avoided.

After reading “Re-examining Empathy: A Relational Feminist Point of View” I found myself very drawn to relational feminist theory, and wanted to understand how erotic transference is handled through this specific lens. Lotterman (2013) puts forth that:

Within relational theory, transference operates more actively throughout the lifespan, so that a person is not necessarily taking feelings “stuck” at age 2 and applying them to the therapist at age 42 with nothing in between; rather, transference refers to patterns of relating to others that may have *begun* with an experience or a relationship at an early age but have continued to create the conditions for multiple relationships throughout the individual's life that reaffirmed and solidified those patterns. (p. 136).

As I do not yet know the specifics of Sam's early childhood experiences (was he raised by his grandmother, or did he only more recently move in with her? Has he ever met his mother? Is he still in contact with her? How close are/were his relationships with

his brother when he was younger? Where is his father?) I am hesitant to speculate too much as to what this erotic transference means in the context of our client-counselor dynamic. However, I can describe the nature of the dynamic in terms of what I do know – that there is, of course, an element of the unattainable which is inherent in all ethical client-therapist relationships. I am older – nearly twice Sam’s age, though I suspect to Sam I am perceived as *just* out of range of a peer relationship – and my role is murky, as I am not a teacher, and not an official employee of his school. (I wonder how something like an I.D. tag, or if our social emotional learning group sessions were held in a more formal classroom setting, would affect Sam’s transference?) Additionally, Sam knows that we are to meet regularly each week, and that the tone I’ve set is one of warmth, unconditional positive regard, gentle curiosity, and investment in his life, goals, and well-being; elements that undoubtedly most people look for in most supportive and mutually beneficial relationships.

Yet while I will be certain to monitor the progression (or not) of this erotic transference, I am (through supervision and through my own work in therapy) also endeavoring to keep in mind and separate how much of my interpretation of it is in response to my own “stuff”. In our second meeting, Sam briefly described to me some of his difficulties with his peers: “Everyone,” he said, “is in their bag all the time,” meaning we all have baggage with which we are preoccupied. It has become clear to me that part of my work as a social work intern is to keep out of my bag while in session with Sam. After all, sometimes a crush is just a crush.

REFERENCES

- Alvarez, A. (December 2010). Types of sexual transference and countertransference in psychotherapeutic work with children and adolescents. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 36(3), 211-224. doi:10.1080/0075417X.2010.523815
- Benjamin, J. (2004). Beyond doer and done to: An intersubjective view of thirdness. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 73, 5-46. Retrieved October 20, 2017.
- Benjamin, J. (2015). Maculinity, complex: a historical take. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 16, 271-277. doi:10.1080/15240657.2015.1107451
- Benjamin, J., & Atlas, G. (2015). The 'too muchness' of excitement: Sexuality in light of excess, attachment, and affect regulation. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 96. doi:doi: 10.1111/1745-8315.12285
- Celenza, Andrea. (2009, January 15). *The absence of the third and murderous dyaD.S. in male to female erotic transference*. Presentation presented at Scientific Meetings of the AIP.
- Freedberg, S. (2007). Re-examining Empathy: A Relational--Feminist Point of View. *Social Work*, 52(3), 251-259. doi:10.1093/sw/52.3.251
- Goldstein, E. G. (1995). *Ego psychology and social work practice* (2nd ed.). Free Press.
- Krausz, R. (2016). Can we transcend the next taboo? When the analyst avoidD.S. the erotic transference and erotic counter transference. *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 24(1), 24-50. Retrieved October 19, 2017.
- Lotterman, J. H. (2013). Erotic Feelings Toward the Therapist: A Relational Perspective. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 70(2), 135-146. doi:10.1002/jclp.22065
- Ngozi Adichie, C. (July 2009). *The danger of a single story*. Speech presented at TEDGlobal in Oxford, UK.
- Rogers, N. M. (December 2011). Intimate boundaries: Therapists' perception and experience of erotic transference within a therapeutic relationship. *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research*, 11(4), 266-274. Retrieved October 23, 2017.