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Projection, Values, Transference, and Countertransference in the Context of Early Childhood Rejection Experiences

Introduction

In psychodynamic theory, concepts such as projection, transference, countertransference, and early childhood attachment experiences play a central role in understanding relationship dynamics in adulthood. Early childhood emotional rejection and its long-term effects can significantly influence how individuals navigate relationships. This often results in difficulties with boundaries and rejection, particularly in intimate relationships.

Early Childhood Experience: Rejection and Object Permanence

In early childhood, a child goes through various developmental stages in which fundamental psychological structures are formed. Of particular importance is the development of object permanence. Before the development of object permanence, a child cannot internally represent the continued existence of a caregiver when they are physically absent. At this stage, the child is entirely dependent on the immediate attention of caregivers to feel secure and emotionally supported. If the child is emotionally or physically rejected during this phase, they are unable to process the experience, which can be described as attachment trauma (Bowlby, 1988).

A child who experiences rejection during this sensitive developmental phase often internalizes a negative self-image: "I am unlovable," "I am rejected because I am not good enough." These early experiences shape the internal working models (Bowlby, 1969), which strongly influence later relationship behavior.

Transference and Countertransference

These early experiences are often unconsciously reactivated in later relationships and projected onto the present. This process is referred to as transference, in which feelings and expectations originally directed toward a previous caregiver (e.g., the parents) are transferred onto a current relationship (e.g., the partner). The partner becomes the carrier of these old emotional conflicts. The "no" or rejection by the partner triggers the old feeling of rejection that is deeply embedded in emotional memory (Freud, 1912/13).

The projection of these old emotions complicates an objective perception of the current situation. Instead of seeing the "no" as a healthy boundary or decision by the partner, it is perceived as a fundamental rejection of the entire person. At the same time, there is a strong internal blockage in setting boundaries or saying "no" because it unconsciously feels like emotionally wounding the partner, just as the person was hurt as a child. These reactions can be closely tied to shame, as the desire to maintain the relationship conflicts with the inner struggle to express authentic needs (Schoore, 2003).

In countertransference, the partner often reacts unconsciously to the transference of the other person. If the person reacts to the partner's "no" with intense emotional hurt, this can evoke feelings of guilt or the tendency for the partner to soften their boundaries to avoid jeopardizing the relationship. This dynamic can lead to a self-reinforcing cycle in which both partners stop clearly expressing their needs and boundaries.

Projection and Defense Mechanisms

The phenomenon of projection is a central defense mechanism in this dynamic. It involves an unconscious psychological process in which one's own, often unacceptable emotions or inner conflicts are projected onto others. In this case, the affected person projects their fears and defensive attitudes, associated with saying "no," onto their partner. This creates the impression that the partner or the other person is rejecting them, when in reality, the rejection is linked to unresolved conflicts around boundary-setting and self-assertion.

These projections lead to a deep internal dilemma: when the person says "no" or sets a boundary, they feel as though they are destroying the relationship or emotionally hurting the other. This fear stems from their painful childhood experience of perceiving rejection as an existential threat. This emotional dynamic can lead to a shame reaction, where the person feels "wrong" or "not good enough" when expressing their needs or setting boundaries (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Impact on Partnerships

In partnerships, these early childhood conflicts often manifest in a tension between closeness and boundary-setting. The fear of entering a relationship often stems from a deeply rooted fear that the partner may eventually reject them, as was experienced in childhood. At the same time, the thought of hurting the partner by saying "no" can strongly inhibit setting authentic boundaries. This blockage often manifests in avoidance behavior or excessive compliance to avoid conflict, which in the long term leads to dissatisfaction for both partners (Siegel, 1999).

Therapeutic Implications

In psychotherapy, it is essential to recognize these dynamics and work through the underlying emotional cores. The goal is to help the client understand the connection between early childhood rejection experiences and current relationship dynamics. This allows for the emotional integration of wounded parts and a reevaluation of saying "no" and boundary-setting. A key step is helping the client strengthen autonomy and self-assertion without intensifying the fear of rejection. A central concept is developing self-compassion to better cope with vulnerability (Neff, 2011).

References

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