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### Journal Item

How to cite:

Redman, Peter (2009). Affect revisited: transference-countertransference and the unconscious dimensions of affective, felt and emotional experience. *Subjectivity*, 26(1) pp. 51–68.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1057/sub.2008.34>

<http://www.palgrave-journals.com/sub/archive/index.html>

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## **‘Affect revisited: Transference-countertransference and the unconscious dimensions of affective, felt and emotional experience’**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the concept of transference-countertransference which, it argues, holds out the promise of an inherently *relational* understanding of the unconscious dimensions of affective, felt and emotional experience. This argument is contrasted to Ian Burkitt’s multi-dimensional model of affect, feeling and emotion which rejects the notion that these have unconscious dimensions understood in psychoanalytic terms. The article suggests that there may be more grounds for dialogue between these approaches than meets the eye and that, as such, transference-countertransference may be a useful resource in the current putative ‘affective turn’.

### **Keywords**

Affect; feeling; emotion; transference-countertransference; object relations; relational unconscious.

### **Introduction**

During the 1990s the journal *Sociology* witnessed what, in a small way, was to become a celebrated academic spat. The dispute’s initiator was the sociologist and Group-analytic psychotherapist, Ian Craib. In an initial response-piece and a subsequent article, Craib (1995, 1997) launched an acerbic attack on approaches to subjectivity that emphasise processes of cultural inscription. In the first of these pieces he was particularly concerned with the sociology of emotion which he took to task for, as he saw it, its

failure to address embodiment; its tendency to ignore work on affect, feelings and emotion in other disciplines; and its inability to recognise the existence of a contradictory 'internal' world of feeling-laden, unconscious experience. Among a number of responses that appeared in the wake of this assault, the most detailed was by Ian Burkitt (1997). In an argument he developed further in subsequent work (Burkitt 2002, 2005), Burkitt sought to navigate a path that, like Craib's, went decisively beyond accounts of cultural inscription but which, in contrast to the latter's psychoanalytic approach, firmly rejected the notion of the unconscious. In its place, Burkitt turned to concepts of relationality and embodiment.

Although this dispute took place over a decade ago it parallels a number of more recent developments in critical work on subjectivity. As Blackman et al. (2008) have documented, in recent years, work on subjectivity has entered a period of fundamental transition brought about by increasing recognition of the limits of the post-structuralist, Lacanian and Foucauldian approaches that had previously dominated debate in this area. As Blackman et al. suggest, from the point of view of these approaches subjectivity frequently seems little more than the 'outcome of operations of power-knowledge; [a] subsidiary element relative to structure; [or] the result of various instances and variations of the signifier' (ibid., p. 8). In short, it lacks 'its own distinctive, "*non-derivative*" ontology' (ibid., p. 7, emphasis in original).

If these points echo Craib's discontent with approaches that emphasise processes of cultural inscription, the various ways taken out of this impasse have tended to be much closer to that advocated by Burkitt. As Blackman et al. detail, in response to the

perceived limitations in approaches that emphasise processes of cultural inscription, debates have become increasingly preoccupied with questions of affect, relationality and embodiment (ibid., pp. 12, 16-21). For instance, they note that cultural theory, is witnessing a putative ‘affective turn’ characterised by engagements with, among others, the work of Deleuze (Clough and Halley, 2008; Massumi, 2002); the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins (Sedgwick, 2003); neuroscience (Massumi, 2002); and psychoneuroendocrinology (Brennan, 2004). While some work in this area continues to entertain psychoanalytic ideas (see, for instance, Ahmed 2004), in common with Burkitt, a number of commentators seem to view the turn to affect and relationality as, necessarily, a turn *away* from psychoanalysis. For instance, Clough (2007, pp. 5-6) notes that her own interest in Deleuze was prompted, in part, by limitations in accounts of informed by Lacanian theory. Even Brennan (2004, p. 24ff), despite a close engagement with relational psychoanalytic accounts, concludes that psychoanalysis is unable fully to acknowledge the inherent relationality of affect and turns instead psychoneuroendocrinology.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of this article I propose to return to the terrain of the *Sociology* dispute with the aim of exploring whether, despite such criticisms, psychoanalysis might contain useful resources for addressing affect, feeling and emotion in ways that do not reduce either to cultural inscription or to a notion of self-contained, bounded subject. In common with Craib’s own orientations, the versions of psychoanalysis I will be exploring are ones that inform the mainstream of current clinical practice – in this case, post-Kleinian object relations theory and the US relational tradition (see, for example, Benjamin 2004; Chodorow, 1999; Ogden, 1983). However, rather than revisit the detail

of Craib's argument, my strategy will be, first, to sketch some of the main aspects of Burkitt's multi-dimensional approach to affect, feeling and emotion (specifically, as this is outlined in Burkitt 1997, 2002) and then to interrogate this via a relational understanding of the concept of transference-countertransference.

Transference-countertransference is potentially interesting because it clearly suggests that feeling, affect and emotion may have unconscious dimensions. As Chodorow (1999, pp. 18-19) tells us, transference can be taken to refer to the process, largely unconscious in character, by which our experience of 'external' reality (prototypically, the patient's experience of the analyst) is imbued with feeling and takes on subjective texture, colour and shape. In contrast, countertransference refers to what is happening in the analyst, primarily to what the transference is itself said to stir up in his or her unconscious.

Moreover, in the last issue of *Subjectivity's* predecessor, transference-countertransference was heralded as 'fundamentally challeng[ing] the notion that feelings, emotions (and perhaps also ideas) can originate or be contained "within" one individual' (Campbell 2007, p. 51; see, also, Baraitser and Frosh 2007). As this suggests, as well as directing us to the unconscious dimensions of affect, feeling and emotion, understood from an intersubjective position, the concept also seems to open the possibility of viewing these in terms that are inherently relational. It is this possibility that form the article's principle object of enquiry. In other words, the article aims to evaluate the extent to which the concept of transference-countertransference provides the basis for a relational understanding of affect and feeling and whether this can be integrated with Burkitt's multi-dimensional account. Before moving on to this discussion, however, it is first necessary to say something briefly about the definitions of affect, feeling and emotion

used in this article, and about the relationship of transference-countertransference to unconscious phenomena present in everyday life.

Defining affect, feeling and emotion is notoriously difficult since they are used very differently in different bodies of work. One set of definitions, currently gaining ground in the critical human sciences (Blackman and Cromby 2007, pp. 5-6), defines affect in Deleuzian terms. As Clough (2007, p.2) puts this, affect, in this view, refers to ‘the bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body’s capacity to act, to engage, and to connect’. In contrast, feeling is understood as the phenomenological or subjective registration of embodied experience, and emotion as the cultural or discursive articulation of bodily responses, understood as a process of enactment rather than one simply reflecting a prior state. Instructive those these definitions are they do not always map easily onto psychoanalytic debates. This is particularly so in relation to affect, the definition of which has been a matter of considerable contestation within psychoanalysis (see, Spezzano 1993). At the risk of falling between two or more stalls, in what follows I propose to use affect to refer to bodily propensities, such as those associated with the so-called ‘basic emotions’ (Elkman, 1992). Importantly, these will be viewed as existing only within a relational context. I will use feelings to refer to the subjective experience of affect, understood as a register of pre-cognitive, embodied experience but one that has significant unconscious dimensions. Finally, I will reserve emotion for the discursive repertoires through which a particular culture attempts to speak about and name affects and their associated feeling states. However, following Burkitt, I will be arguing that, although in some sense distinct, these registers exist only in relations of mutual constitution.

What of the relationship of transference-countertransference to phenomena in everyday life? This is an issue because it is sometimes argued that transference-countertransference is peculiar to the consulting room. If this were so, the concept's utility in helping us understand affect, feeling and emotion in everyday life would obviously be limited. In fact, strictly defined, transference-countertransference is necessarily bound up with the structure of the analytic session which is purposely designed to elicit and allow reflection on the patient's transference – something that rarely, if ever, exists outside the clinical encounter. However, this should not blind us to the reality that unconscious communication is a routine part of everyday experience. As Craib has written:

Throughout our lives we are giving and receiving ... emotional messages; [these are] the basis of the transference and countertransference on which the process of psychodynamic therapy centres ... and most psychoanalysts would regard [them] as a process of unconscious communication. [This] is something that we come into contact with in our everyday lives – we must all have emotional reactions to each other. Sometimes we are more aware of them than others – perhaps when we meet somebody ... to whom we take an immediate dislike – and at other times we are aware of them as a sort of background noise to our encounters, perhaps even a barely noticed feeling of comfort or discomfort. (Craib 1998, p. 173)

Thus, although what follows explores an extreme moment of transference-countertransference in a clinical setting, it seems reasonable to argue that, though often in a less intense form, parallel experiences punctuate our everyday lives.

### **Burkitt's multi-dimensional model**

In common with many commentators (for example, Ahmed, 2004; Brennan, 2004; Clough and Halley, 2007; Masummi, 2002), the starting point for Burkitt's argument is the claim that affects and feelings are inherently relational. He writes:

I want to try to get away from the idea that [affects and feelings] are expressions of something 'inner', so that the expression is an outer register of an inner process. ... [I]f [they] are expressive of anything it is the relations and interdependencies of which they are an integral part ... they are expressions occurring *between people* and not expressions of something contained inside a single person. (Burkitt 1997, p. 40)

As this suggests, for Burkitt affects and feelings occur only within relationships between people and, as he subsequently noted, between people and things (Burkitt 2002, pp. 151-2). As such, they are viewed as an active response to a given moment and as part of the longer history of the relationship in question (Burkitt 1997, pp. 40-42). For example, Burkitt (*ibid.*, p. 44) argues that, faced with a rival's misfortune, we may feel some sympathy for his immediate predicament but, because of a longer history of hostility, also take pleasure in his plight. This can, he suggests, explain our propensity to experience



ambivalent or conflicting feelings since these arise from the *relationship* in question (ibid., p. 49). Burkitt (2002, pp. 160-161) also argues that affect is an attempt to elicit a particular response from the other people or things in a relationship. Thus, to return to his previous example, a feeling of hostility towards a rival registers the impact of our rival's actions on us but might also be an attempt to minimise this impact by forcing him into retreat.

This emphasis on relationality does not, however, preclude an awareness of the ways in which affects and feelings are shaped by social meanings. For instance, Burkitt argues that these will necessarily be orientated to the emotional repertoires made available by the discourses current within the spheres of human activity in which our relationships are located – for example, those regulating the emotional expression 'appropriate' to weddings and funerals (ibid. p. 41). As such, discourses (at least to some extent) enable and constrain what it is possible to express in a given context. As Burkitt (2002, p. 160) notes, if the available emotional repertoire speaks adequately to our felt experience it can allow us to articulate and reflect on this in ways that might not otherwise be possible. If it is inadequate to the task, our feelings may remain baffling, ill-defined or troubling.

However, in a move that parallels wider discontent with the limits of arguments that emphasise cultural inscription, Burkitt (2002, p. 156) argues that affect and feeling are 'not found in discourse alone'. As he goes on to say 'The emotion vocabulary and the discursive consciousness it creates complete the emotional experience but do not entirely construct it' (ibid.). As suggested previously, in seeking to identify what comes 'before' or lies 'outside' emotion vocabulary, Burkitt, in common with many other commentators,

turns to the body. Following Elias (1987), Burkitt, argues that the body and social practices are mutually constitutive, existing only in and through each other. As Burkitt suggests, this implies that affects (understood as bodily propensities) are *simultaneously* embodied and social (Burkitt, 2002, p. 153). If some of their dimensions demand to be understood as propensities inherent to human being (most obviously, the so-called ‘basic emotions’ such as fear and anger), these cannot be said to have an existence separate from the social practices and relations they enter into it and which, in consequence, shape and limit them. Thus, if anger is a body-brain response found in all human cultures, it is certainly not the case that how or when it is expressed are also constants. From this point of view, social practices and relations enable and constrain human bodily propensities even as the latter enable and constrain social practices and relations (see, Burkitt 1997, pp. 43, 45-46).

In his 2002 chapter, Burkitt extends this argument to embrace a phenomenological notion of a ‘practically engaged, non-reflexive bodily belonging in the world’ (p. 156) in which embodied feelings operate as a primary, extra-linguistic register of meaning. As John Cromby (2007 p. 99, 111) has noted in a similar argument, this suggests an embodied realm of experience – that of ‘feelings’ – which registers affect and other body-brain responses to the world and constitutes our ‘default’ mode of engagement with it. Central to Burkitt’s version of this argument is the notion of ‘image-schemata’ (Johnson 1987). As Burkitt explains, image-schemata register our ‘felt, embodied, understanding’ as this arises within ‘*recurring patterns of relations* between us humans and our world’ (Burkitt 2002, pp. 162-163, emphases in original). In other words, recurring interactions give rise to patterned bodily sensations and the feelings which register these, and these are

sedimented as image-schemata and provide the basis of an ongoing and extra-linguistic experience of the world as coherent, meaningful and enduring (ibid., p. 163). As Burkitt goes on to argue, the concept of image-schemata can be allied to that of habitus (Mauss, 1935, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977), referencing the way in which the social and biographical patterning of felt bodily experience inculcates within us particular ‘emotional dispositions’ or propensities: what we are liable to feel – as it were, ‘spontaneously’ – in response to a given situation (Burkitt 2002, pp.163-4).

As the preceding paragraphs indicate, for Burkitt, those experiences that in everyday life we designate in terms of our ‘feelings’ or ‘emotions’ can be seen as containing a number of registers. Available discourses articulate, shape and sometimes block an extra-linguistic embodied register of felt experience – our ‘bodily sense of being in the world’ (ibid., p. 164) – which itself is the registration of the body-brain sensations arising within ongoing, socially- and biographically-patterned interactions. Significantly, however, although Burkitt sees these registers as, in some sense, distinct, his argument allows us to view them as fundamentally inter-related, indeed always present in each other. For Burkitt, affects, feelings and emotions occur within a ‘complex’ or ensemble of processes and ‘cannot be reduced to biology, [social] relations or discourses alone, but belong to all these dimensions as they are constituted in ongoing relational practices’ (Burkitt 1997, p. 42). Burkitt’s argument is thus rather different from naive determinist models (whether social or biological) in which one dimension of this ensemble is considered to be foundational to its other dimensions. For Burkitt, the bio-chemical and neurological, the discursive, and the felt experience of being in the world exist in relations which are contingent, variable and mutually constitutive (Burkitt 1997, p. 45; 2002, p. 153).

To my mind, Burkitt's multi-dimensional model makes available a sophisticated means through which to understand affect, feeling and emotion. However, as the introduction to this article noted, Burkitt does not regard this 'complex' as having an unconscious dimension, at least not understood in psychoanalytic terms. There appear to be two main reasons for this. The first echoes Brennan's (2004) argument that psychoanalysis has difficulty recognising the inherent relationality of affect, feeling and emotion. Indeed, somewhat problematically (see Craib 1995, p. 156), Burkitt reads Craib as defining affect, feeling and emotion as purely internal phenomena. The second reason for Burkitt's scepticism about psychoanalysis is to be found in a more general, though provisional, argument: that the phenomena psychoanalysis describes can be explained without recourse to psychoanalytic concepts. In what follows, I will be addressing the first of these objections in some detail. However, I propose to return briefly to the second point in the article's penultimate section.

### **'Something catastrophic': an instance of transference-countertransference**

In a celebrated article, Thomas Ogden (1994) relates the case of a patient, Mrs B, with whom he was somewhat at a loss. There was, he explains, 'a superficiality' to their work together and her sessions were increasingly filled with silences. Moreover, Ogden had begun to feel a 'diffuse anxiety' manifested in, among other things, a tendency on his part to procrastinate before their sessions and, in consequence, to arrive slightly late for them. He had even begun to feel ill during their meetings (ibid. pp. 13-14). Ogden explains what happened next:

[During one of our sessions] I felt thirsty and leaned over in my chair to take a sip from a glass of water that I keep on the floor next to my chair (I had on many occasions done the same during Mrs B's hours, as well as with other patients). Just as I was reaching for the glass, Mrs B startled me by abruptly (and for the first time in the analysis) turning around on the couch to look at me. She had a look of panic on her face and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't know what was happening to you".

It was only in the intensity of this moment, in which there was a feeling of terror that something catastrophic was happening to me, that I was able to name for myself the terror that I had been carrying for some time. I became aware that the anxiety I had been feeling and the ... dread of the meetings with Mrs B (as reflected in my procrastinating behaviour) had been directly connected with an unconscious sensation/fantasy that my somatic symptoms of malaise, nausea and vertigo were caused by Mrs B, and that she was killing me. (Ogden 1994, pp. 14-15)

The few seconds in which these events must have occurred were evidently both intense and frightening for patient and analyst alike. For reasons that are not immediately obvious, Mrs B seems to have been gripped by the fear that her analyst was experiencing a devastating medical trauma (as she subsequently explained, she thought he was having a heart attack). In his turn, Ogden clearly felt that something 'catastrophic' had befallen him – in fact, that Mrs B was killing him. How are we to understand this bizarre set of experiences?

Following the more socially-orientated aspects of Burkitt's argument, we might direct our attention to the concrete interaction between Ogden and Mrs B; to the history of their relationship; and to the discursive conventions appropriate to the immediate context. However, little of what we are told about the history of the relationship or the overt dimensions of the interaction itself would seem to justify the level of mutual fear involved. Why should reaching for a glass of water provoke such panic? Moreover, even if we accept that the expression of intense emotion is warranted by the conventions of the analytic encounter, the fact that Mrs B apologised for her behaviour suggests that something out of the ordinary had occurred, some unspoken rule had been broken. In short, something more seems to have been going on than can be easily explained by reference to the overt social and discursive dimensions of the interaction alone. Ogden's (1994, p. 15) own answer to this question is that the incident reflected a 'highly-conflicted set of Mrs B's unconscious internal object relationships'.

### **Internal objects, feelings and affect**

Christopher Bollas (1993 pp. 56, 59) describes internal objects as '*highly condensed psychic textures*' (emphases in the original) constituted from the 'feelings, unthought ideas, deeply condensed memories, somatic registrations, body positionings, and so forth' that gather in response to an external object's 'movement through us'. (We should note that an external object can be a person, thing, event or aspect of these). For Ogden (1983) this 'movement' causes a 'dual subdivision of the ego' resulting in '*the formation of two new suborganizations ..., one identified with the self in the external object relationship and the other thoroughly identified with the object*' (p. 234, emphases in

original). In other words, our encounters with external objects are said to give rise to two distinct entities. The first of these – the ‘self-component’ – refers to the ego’s experience of self in relation to an external object or part object (for example, what it feels like to be me in relation to you). The second – the ‘object-component’ – refers to an aspect of the ego that has become ‘profoundly identified with an object representation’ (ibid.). In short, it is a part of the self that is experienced as if it is the object (or what it is imagined the object is like) as this exists in relation to the self.

For our current purposes, what is crucial about such object relations is the point that, although only ever partially available to consciousness, they are said to be ‘capable of thought, feeling and perception’ (Ogden 1983, p. 227). That is, they not only register an initial experience of the external world but, in turn, generate further experience. This means that any experience generated by an internal object relation will necessarily be ‘in a mode modelled after’ either the self-component or its companion object-component (ibid.). In other words, for Ogden, our internal objects are liable to *mediate* how we think, feel and perceive by animating the external world after the pattern of the self- and object-components from which they are constituted.

Armed with this understanding we are now in a position to return to Ogden’s claim that his shared moment of fear with Mrs B had revealed a ‘highly-conflicted set of ... [her] unconscious internal object relationships’. As Ogden (1994 p. 16) explains, in their subsequent exploration of this moment, it emerged that, as the only child of an older couple, Mrs B had believed herself to be unwanted. Her parents were, she said, ‘devoted’ but, nevertheless, the home ‘did not feel to her to be a place for children’. She offered as

an example the fact that she had been required to confine her play to her own room in order to protect her father – a ‘serious academic’ – from disturbance. As Ogden explains, Mrs B had never before talked in this way about her parents, in fact, had been unwilling to talk about them at all (ibid., p. 14). In this light, Ogden reads her comments as evidence of an increased capacity to acknowledge and reflect on parts of herself that were intensely painful and of which she sought to have as little conscious awareness as possible. These parts, Ogden suggests, were ones in which Mrs B experienced ‘her very existence’ as ‘a kind of growth that greedily ... and destructively took up space that it had no business occupying’ (p. 16). Although Ogden does not himself specify this, in the light of his earlier paper we can understand this painful experience of self as compromising a self-component – one in which Mrs B experienced herself and her needs as destructive and overwhelming – and an object-component, one profoundly identified with an object that was imagined to be overwhelmed by the destructive needs of the self-component.

Seen in this light, Mrs B’s otherwise bizarre fear that Ogden was dying can be understood as a transference involving the mediation of the external world by an unconscious object relation. Indeed, it appears to have been a text-book example of ‘projective identification’, the means by which, in unconscious fantasy, the self- or object-component of an object relation (perhaps, although not exclusively, one that is felt to be troubling or unbearable) is said to be ‘evacuated’ into a person or thing in the external world, thereby investing it with unconscious meaning (Ogden 1983, p. 234-235).<sup>2</sup> As this suggests, Ogden’s and Mrs B’s shared moment of terror can be understood as one in which she projected onto him the object component of the object relation described



above, one that was seemingly too painful for her to acknowledge in herself. Mrs B's intense fear that Ogden was suffering a heart attack can thus be viewed as resulting from this projective identification. In effect, she now experienced Ogden as possessing qualities that, in reality, belonged to that part of herself identified with this object component: specifically, the sense of being overwhelmed by a greedy and destructive other. In turn, Ogden's sense that something 'catastrophic' had befallen him can be understood as a countertransference, a response – partly unconscious – to the experience of Mrs B's projective identification.

What I want to take from this account of transference-countertransference is its emphasis on *unconscious communication*. If Ogden's and Mrs B's shared moment of fear arose from such a process, it becomes possible to argue that, rather than residing 'inside' either one of them as individuals their fear circulated between them. In other words, it seems possible that it was a property of the relationship itself. However, in order to sustain this argument, a number of fairly obvious objections to it need to be addressed. First, it is not entirely clear that a set of affects and feelings supposedly driven by an internal object relation can be truly described as located within a relational field. Wasn't Ogden essentially a passive participant in an encounter driven by something – an internal object relation – located *inside* Mrs B? Second, is it not the case that, from this perspective, affects and feelings have less to do with relations between people in the present than with some hidden cause located in an individual's past? For instance, wasn't Mrs B's fear that Ogden was suffering a heart attack *caused* by her childhood experience of herself as 'unwanted' and a 'mistake'? To answer these criticisms we need to turn to a more

detailed exploration of unconscious processes as these are understood in relational psychoanalytic thought.

### **Affect, feeling and the relational unconscious**

In an early formulation of what they termed a ‘relational model’, Mitchell and Greenberg wrote:

For the relational model analyst the psychoanalytic situation is inherently dyadic; events within the analysis are not understood as preset and unfolding from within the dynamic structures of the patient’s neurosis. Rather, they are created in the interaction between the patient and the analyst. (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983, p. 389)

This position, widely accepted in current clinical practice, clearly suggests that the phenomena expressed in the analytic encounter (or, for that matter, in our encounters outside the consulting room) are not pre-determined: mechanistic reproductions of a fixed and pre-existing unconscious formation located ‘inside’ the patient. Instead, they are responses to – and therefore *emergent within* – the encounter itself. We can further clarify this argument by considering the ‘inherently dyadic’ character of the psychoanalytic situation. As Greenberg and Mitchell (1983 p. 389) go on to write, something about the analyst as a ‘particular person’ – that is, something that she thinks, does or feels in a particular moment, whether consciously or otherwise – will ‘exert[...] a pull on the patient’. In other words, something about the analyst is said to ‘speak’ to the

patient's unconscious and, spoken to in this fashion, the patient's unconscious is said to 'reply'.

Needless to say, this relational argument clarifies our understanding of transference-countertransference, allowing us to grasp it as a process of unconscious communication firmly located in the present and within a relational field. If we apply it to Ogden's vignette, we can say that Mrs B's transference will have been, in part, precipitated by something about Ogden himself. Although not commenting directly on this issue, Ogden implies one explanation of what this might have been when he tells us that, in the wake of their shared moment of fear, he came to realise that, in unconscious fantasy, he had long believed that achieving his full potential as an analyst would result in the death of a part of himself strongly identified with his own analyst/father (Ogden 1993, p. 16). In this light, it may be possible to understand Mrs B's transference – her apparently unconscious belief that her needs would destroy Ogden – as itself a response to the 'pull' exerted by an unconscious part of Ogden that believed it was threatened with death. We might imagine that, in its turn, this transference will have further exacerbated Ogden's unconscious belief, something which in turn will have exacerbated Mrs B's transference. Indeed, this spiralling exchange – one that seems to have gone on over a number of weeks – appears to have come to an end only because something about their shared moment of fear finally allowed Ogden to acknowledge and think about what was happening between them.

As this implies, even within what Ogden (1994 p. 17) calls the controlled 'asymmetry' of the analytic encounter, it can be very difficult to identify to whom the feelings within a

transference-countertransference actually belong and their point of origin remains fundamentally ambiguous (see, Hollway 2006, p. 70).<sup>3</sup> Thus, Ogden's feelings (his conscious if vague sense of anxiety; the uneasiness associated with his physical symptoms; and his more obviously unconscious belief that he was dying) were certainly his own but they were also Mrs B's (her unconscious projection into Ogden of part of herself identified with an internal object experienced as overwhelmed by her own destructive needs). In other words, *Ogden was feeling Mrs B's feelings*. Similarly, it is possible that Mrs B's panic, although profoundly her own, was also a response to Ogden's largely unconscious sense that she was killing him and his equally unconscious belief that a part of himself would die if he were ever to realise his potential as an analyst. In other words, *she was feeling his feelings*. In short, the origin and location of conscious, preconscious and unconscious feelings generated within transference-countertransference exchanges are seen, within a relational perspective, as being remarkably indeterminate. They are simultaneously internal and shared, felt as belonging inside a particular individual while having no clear home in any single person.

If this addresses the first objection identified at the end of the previous section, what of the second: the possibility that Mrs B's panic had relatively little to do with the interaction in which it arose and much more to do with a cause hidden in her past, preserved in the form of an unconscious object relation? Greenberg and Mitchell clearly distance themselves from a conception of object relations couched in these terms ('events within the analysis are not understood as preset and unfolding from within the dynamic structures of the patient's neurosis'). However, if this is so, how if at all does the content of the transference-countertransference relate to the past? Why, for instance, when

exploring her reasons for believing that Ogden was dying, would Mrs B choose to connect these in some way to her childhood sense that she was unwanted?

Synthesising contemporary thinking on the past's role in unconscious transference, Chodorow (1999 Ch. 2) argues that the past, although a 'living force within the patient', is nevertheless continuously remade within and in response to the present (Loewald 1980, p. 60, quoted in Chodorow 1999, p. 45). This does not, of necessity, mean that, compared with the objectively existing past, the 'past' expressed in unconscious transference is false (it may or may not be). However, it does mean that the past of unconscious transference is a retelling, a creative use of the past that is primarily orientated to the contours of the present. In this light, we can say that Mrs B's belief that her analyst was suffering a heart attack was not *caused* by experiences from her childhood. Rather, experiences of self and other that had their roots in her childhood were actively called upon and (as Ogden himself puts this) 'made anew' in the moment that Ogden reached for his glass of water (Ogden 1994, p.15).

This view of the past and its relationship to transference has a number of important implications. First, it implies that we are all engaged in a constant process of making unconscious meaning in the present, one in which our internal object relations are *actively* drawn upon and used to give feeling-laden tone and colour to our encounters (Chodorow 1999, p. 40). However, this in turn obliges us to revisit our understanding of the object relations that are drawn into and shape the unconscious meanings we generate. From this point of view object relations are not static entities that lie 'behind' or 'beneath' our encounters. Instead, they are 'made anew' within these encounters. As,

Christopher Bollas (1993, p. 59) tells us, just as projective identification mediates the people, things and events we encounter, so we are 'played by' these people, things and events and, in the process, are transformed by them.

If, as this implies, internal object relations are remade by our ongoing encounters with the external object world they cannot be considered facsimiles of early childhood experience. A closer metaphor might be that of the palimpsest, suggesting that, even when 'stuck', they are endlessly written over and modified as they are played by and play with people, events and things in the external world. As such, object relations should be thought of as in process. As Mrs B's experience indicates, this does not deny the possibility that our object relations can get 'stuck' or prevent us from living and feeling as creatively as we might. Rather, the point is that, even when they give rise to repetitive modes of experience, internal object relations should not be understood as pristine fragments of the past reappearing in and determining the present but rather as an already modified element of the past actively 'drawn into' the present and remade by it. As Chodorow (1999, p. 63) writes, 'psychological agency is always in the present'.<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, all of this raises the question of where exactly the unconscious 'resides'. Given their emphasis on the relational character of unconscious processes, it might be assumed that relational arguments in psychoanalysis deny the existence of 'inner' subjective states. However, as Mrs B's evident distress indicates, this is far from the case. Unconscious processes clearly have 'inner' dimensions and point to the existence of a dense and endlessly elaborated register of unconscious experience that is profoundly subjective and personal. To speak of an 'inner' dimension to unconscious experience in

not, however, to view this as the property of self-contained, bounded individual. From a relational perspective, this register is in process – a flow rather than a location – and, more particularly, is elaborated and *changed* as it comes into contact with other people and things, even as these (particularly in the case of other people) are changed by it. Thus the ‘inner’ always has the ‘outer’ present within it (and vice versa) such that the boundaries between inside and outside are fundamentally blurred and unstable. Moreover, from the relational perspective, to acknowledge an ‘inner’ dimension to unconscious experience does not imply that the latter exists only within individuals. As Ogden’s and Mrs B’s shared moment of fear indicates, unconscious processes can be simultaneously individual and shared. Indeed, they can be the property of both small and large groups as well as pairs (Gerson 2004, p. 74). In such cases, unconscious processes seem to lie *between* the individuals who constitute them or, as Ogden (1994, p. 4) puts this, to constitute a ‘third’: something that is in excess of these individuals and, whether to a greater or lesser extent, transforms them.

### **Towards the possibility of dialogue?**

If we accept the argument that affect and feeling have an unconscious dimension that is inherently relational does this mean that we can insert an account of this dimension into Burkitt’s multi-dimensional model? It is certainly tempting to do so. For instance, from this perspective we might characterise episodes like that occurring between Ogden and Mrs B as simultaneously neurological, discursive, felt and unconscious events located within concrete relationships and interactions which are themselves part of wider social

relations. From this point of view, we would have to say that the unconscious processes present in Mrs B's sessions with Ogden did not take place in a wholly separate realm but were, instead, part of the discursive, felt and embodied aspects of the interaction just as these were part of the unconscious processes. For example, the sensations of illness that Ogden reported experiencing in his meetings with Mrs B and the raised heart-beats and sharply increased adrenalin production that must have accompanied their mutual panic would have been profoundly embodied but also *part of* the unconscious communication taking place between patient and analyst. Equally, although this unconscious communication was clearly a structuring feature of their immediate social interaction, it will have been made possible only by the interaction itself. The social features of the interaction – not least the transference-provoking effects of Ogden's analytic 'neutrality' – can thus be considered to have been *part of* the unconscious communication just as the unconscious communication can be considered to have been *part of* the social interaction.

To my mind, this mode of analysis is an appealing prospect. However, before making such a move, a moment's reflection may be in order. As indicated earlier, Burkitt's scepticism about psychoanalysis was not only rooted in doubts about the relationality of unconscious processes but also in a belief that the phenomena psychoanalysis describes can be explained in other terms. Admittedly, Burkitt does not develop this argument to any great degree. However, his discussion of image-schemata is interesting since these seem to bear at least some similarities to internal object relations. Is it possible, we might ask, for Mrs B's internal object relations to be re-described in terms of image-schemata that had coalesced into an emotional disposition – perhaps as a family-specific variant of a wider gender assumption that girls should be emotionally passive? And, if we were to



do so, would this obviate the need for a psychoanalytic reading of Ogden's and Mrs B's shared moment of fear? In fact, Burkitt's argument is not sufficiently elaborated for us to answer these questions. In order to do so, we would need to know, for instance, whether, as with other 'dispositions' inculcated by the habitus, Mrs B's was unconscious merely in the sense that riding a bike, once learned, does not require conscious reflection (Bourdieu 1984, p. 466). For a psychoanalytic audience, the latter formulation would not take us very far since Mrs B's moment of fear, rather than 'second nature', appears to have been generated by a part of herself that she found literally *unthinkable*. Equally, we would need to know whether the concept can be used to explain a process of apparently unconscious communication like that occurring between Mrs B and her analyst. As was noted earlier, Ogden's and Mrs B's shared moment of fear appears to have had less to do with the overt dimensions of their encounter than with a spiralling exchange of unconscious material, an exchange whose starting point was inherently ambiguous. Understanding this process of unconscious communication seems to require something equivalent to the concepts of projective identification, transference and countertransference.

However, if from a psychoanalytic viewpoint there are grounds for doubting whether a phenomenological reading can simply replace a psychoanalytic one, dialogue between the two does not seem impossible. Indeed, the whole notion of embodied feeling as a primary, extra-linguistic register of meaning has interesting parallels with accounts in the psychoanalytic literature. For instance, psychoanalytic descriptions derived from infant-observation studies suggest the existence of a preverbal and pre-linguistic register of sensual experience imbued with feeling and unconscious fantasy, one that, as Chodorow

argues, persists throughout life (Chodorow 1999, p. 57-59). Equally, Bion's (1962, 1984 p. 17) concept of 'alpha function' – the means by which 'sense-impressions related to an emotional experience' ('beta elements') are said to be made available for unconscious work and, thereby, for preconscious and conscious thinking – seems to point us towards an ongoing register of nonverbal, feeling imbued embodied experience (see Bollas 1993). This suggests that, if inserting an account of unconscious process into Burkitt's multi-dimensional model can only be done against the grain of his argument, there are at least grounds for believing that discussion between his own and psychoanalytic approaches may be productive.

## **Conclusion**

In the course of this article I have sought to argue that the phenomenon of transference-countertransference has much to tell us about the unconscious dimensions of affective, felt and emotional experience. In particular, I have suggested that the view of unconscious processes made available in post-Kleinian object relations theory and the US relational tradition allows us to address these in terms that are fully relational. If this suggests that a notion of unconscious communication might be integrated into multi-dimensional models, such as Burkitt's, it also has clear implications for wider debates seeking to move beyond accounts of cultural inscription. Seen through the lens of transference-countertransference, subjectivity cannot be conceived as bounded and self-contained. Indeed, as was noted earlier, Ogden (1994, p. 16) tells us that, in the wake of their shared moment of fear, Mrs B became seemed more able to relate to a previously unconscious part of herself. She not only felt able to talk, for the first time, about her childhood relationship with her parents but, as Ogden said, seemed more fully present as

a human being. Paradoxically, then, Mrs B's experience (and Ogden's as well) seems to have been one in which she become *more* herself precisely through a loss of boundaries – through coming into contact with, and being changed by, another's unconscious (see, also, Bollas 1993). Clearly, then, the notion of unconscious communication does not return us to a 'naïve individualizing humanism' (Blackman et al 2008, p. 10). Moreover, the discussion in the preceding paragraph of parallels between phenomenological accounts and psychoanalytic descriptions of a non-linguistic register of sensual experience, arguably suggest a basis for a 'non-derivative ontology' of the subject (see, also, Chodorow 1999). In this light, I would argue that the phenomenon of transference-countertransference is one that the 'affective turn' might usefully pursue.

### **Acknowledgements:**

This article is indebted to discussions with Wendy Hollway and other OU colleagues in the Psycho-Social Reading Group. Thanks also to Simon Forrest, Ann Phoenix and Deborah Steinberg and, for advice on an individual point, to Lynne Layton. Finally, my thanks to Lisa Blackman and two anonymous reviewers for exemplary critical responses to earlier drafts.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Brennan suggests that, although clinical accounts of transference-countertransference contain a relational model of affect and feeling, this is contradicted by the psychoanalytic concept of the subject. The latter is, for Brennan, a self-contained 'bounded' individual. This argument is, I would argue, difficult to sustain in the light of the relational and object relations literature. See, for instance, Bollas (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Transference is not seen as a purely defensive or negative phenomenon. As Nancy Chodorow (1999, pp. 22-23) has argued, it is via transference and projective identification that the external world is brought subjectively to life.

<sup>3</sup> Ogden stresses that, in analysis, it is the patient's transference that is the object of reflection. The analyst may privately reflect on his contribution to the transference but with the aim of understanding what this tells him about the patient.

<sup>4</sup> It has been pointed out to me that at least elements of this argument – particularly the emphasis on repetition's location in the present – exist in Freud's own discussion of these issues (see, for instance, Freud 1914, 1958, p. 151).

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