

# Transference phenomena issues in coaching & teaching

Bruce C. Ogilvie

San Jose State University, USA

Abstract. – The author considers that the teacher, coach, trainer and sport consultant will invariably confront transference issues. The concern is not that transference feelings will germinate as a consequence of idiosyncratic human needs. What is at issue is the counsellor's ability to recognize the nature and source of emotional needs being expressed. In the role of director of training for graduated clinical trainees this has proven to be a most challenging training responsibility. The potential for violation of professional standards and the abuse of client trust is a primary concern. Ethical standards as defined by APA have become a required course in most training institutions. Presently those providing services as sport consultants come from such a variety of backgrounds it is not possible to assume that all coaches and sport counsellor be encouraged to deepen their understanding of transference phenomenon. Receiving such training under supervision would protect clients. Also, they could be trained to use transference as a means for promoting growth and independence.

Recent public attention by the media has focused upon incidents of relationship violations by coaches that have resulted in the emotional exploitation of individual athletes. Within the past two months this consultant has been asked to review relationship violations reported by individual team consultants. Each of these young professionals expressed a deep concern with regard to their responsibility to athletes who they perceived to be victims of improper coaching conduct. Recent reported cases of exploitation have become public knowledge when coaching conduct has resulted in criminal charges by either athletes or their parents. These cases represented accusations of sexual exploitation of

both minor and adult athletes. Motivation for this presentation is the observation that the sport psychology literature does not reflect significant concern with regard to this topic. Particularly the potentially damaging effects of what may be best understood as forms of violation of transference relationships. It is apparent that by the very nature of such violations documenting the actual incidences of these forms of abuse and unethical conduct are difficult. Consultation with colleagues confirms that such forms of violation have caused them grave concerns. In the absence of data defining incidence of such behavior our concern is limited to the question whether cases now appearing in the press represent another example of a 'tip of iceberg' phenomenon.

A recent presentation at the 8th International Society of Sport Psychology World Congress in Lisbon resulted in numerous examples of such unethical conduct by members of this international audience. It was the consensus of these professionals that relationship violations on the part of coaches and teachers has been a topic let untreated by most professional organizations. There was considerable agreement that addressing such issues would invite consultation conflicts and in many cases place their role in jeopardy. Numerous question arose with regard to a team consultant's responsibility for addressing suspected or confirmed forms of relationship violations. This consultant can attest to the volatile nature of such consultation crises. In practice over the years it has been a third party who seeks consultation. The accusations or claims most often have from observer to the inappropriate relationship. They may be fellow teammates, parents, and less often members of the sport organizations. Even when the information is shared within the privileged athlete-consultant relationship the consultant is required to act in a manner that honors and protects the needs of the athlete-client. This being stated it would still would be recommended that the sport consultant contribute most by performing the duties of the mental hygienist. Specifically this would be taking responsibility for sensitivity training of those who have not had the opportunity to develop the skills and insights that would protect athletes from such forms of involvement. This could be presenting workshops and training sessions that would sensitize coaches, consultants and teachers with regard to the dynamic features of transference. Particularly those in roles of authority who might have a propensity to utilize such roles for manipulation or exploitation of those under their

charge. The corrupting influence of unequal power in relationships needs no further elaboration here. It is evident by the concerted effort of the APA Ethics Committee that graduate training for clinicians and counselors has not provided a perfect inoculation against these very same forms of human violations. The evidence for the incidences for violation of sexual boundaries by clinicians has proven to be a professional disgrace. Even though client-counselor conduct has been defined in most precise ethical terms graduate clinical trainees are continually were forced to confront professional boundaries with every client. Training supervisors constantly focus upon the ongoing clinical relationship ever alert to indications of subconscious elements that place the client's welfare in jeopardy.

The foregoing reference to training is offered to reinforce once again that where power difference exist in any relationship subconscious or unconscious motive may place the dependent one at risk. By the nature of such relationships be they client-therapist, coach-athlete, teacher-student interactions of complex human need may surface. Often these are driven by subtle idiosyncratic emotional and social needs. A significant number of clinician, who should have four years of concentrated training with regard to transference phenomenon, still violate their position of trust. Can we expect those untrained with regard to the dynamic forces which underlay transference to be more responsible? In order to avoid any suggestion that coaches are being made scapegoats the last decade has seen even a concerted effort to formalize the ethical boundaries that should exist between university professors their students has become an issue. As shall be elucidated in the following presentation it is not necessarily the professional title of the individual that presents the opportunity for mischief but the abuse of particular powers that are inherent in these various roles. In preparation for increased comprehension transference phenomenon a brief history of the derivation of this psychological construct is in order.

1. *Transference as a construct derived form early psychoanalytic theory.*

The birth of insight with regard to the human propensity to express transference phenomena may be found in the early writings of Freud and

Breuer (Freud, 1924). Early psychoanalytic writers applied the simile, 'white washing' to describe their patient's compelling need to the structure the world and relationships into forms that would compliment their most fundamental psychological needs. Freud was first to formulate hypotheses as to the dynamic motivational processes which gave rise to the need to white wash significant interpersonal relationships. From early interpretations of transference feeling as representing unresolved Oedipal conflicts subsequent interpretations attribute this human propensity to more general psychosocial factors (Wolstein, 1960). Most significant in terms of the issue of our responsibility as educators were attempts by these early writers to illuminate the double edged sword that transference represents. Both positive and negative transference feelings were found to support thoughts and beliefs that therapist eventually utilized as foundations for emotional and social growth. One of the most important contributions of these early theorist was that such feelings do not emanate from a vacuum. They are created by the interaction of subtle subconscious or unconscious needs of the individuals involved. As sport consultants we may serve most effectively by promoting increased vigilance on the part of those who serve as mentors to our athletes. This form of vigilance would represent both a willingness to engage in self-reflection as well as devoted attention to what each individual athlete may be seeking in the relationship with his/her mentor. The early admonition of Theodor Reik, that of 'listening with the third ear' is equally as applicable when our concern is that of identifying the unique psychological needs athlete bring to their sport.

## 2. *Statement of the problem.*

It will not require many years practicing as a sport consultant before the practitioner will confront the complex nature of transference. Violations may occur through ignorance and lack of training, but are most destructive when they represent conscious exploitation of such feelings. We may begin our discourse by examining the nature of the changes in human relationship when one acts in the role of mentor, teacher or any relationship were their is an unequal distribution of power. Individuals conducting themselves from positions of power must be made sensitive to

the roles they may be called upon to play in the lives of those they are seeking to serve. Those in authority roles who express certain forms of psychological blindness are prone to accidental harm. Those with subconscious or conscious ulterior motives are in danger of inflicting the most harm. The following represent primary the most frequent concerns that have been confronted by this consultant. A brief examination of each may serve to provide insights that have educational value.

3. *Create on of conflictual relationships danger of emotional/social exploitation threatening abuse of power dangerous manipulation of dependency needs potential threat of emotional betrayal.*

Both transference and counter-transference have their roots within idiosyncratic conscious and unconscious needs that both athlete and coach bring to the relationship. Of particular concern will be emotional or social vulnerabilities that profoundly influence the nature and quality that eventually determines the form the transference may take. Those in greatest danger of forming self-limiting or destructive social/emotional bonds will be those who have experienced serious deprivations within their primary relationships. These may take the form of a range of personal betrayals. We must be particularly vigilant for those individuals who experienced a socialization characterized by benign neglect. In greatest danger are those who have suffered loss of primary relationships during their most formative years. Those whose deprivations lead to a quest for the idealized parent surrogate place themselves in emotional jeopardy. It is rarely, if ever possible to anticipate the nature and quality of the relationship any given athlete will seek with coach, mentor or counselor. To presume that it will be only your technical or practical knowledge and experience would be unusual naive. Let us now review a selection of the human propensities that structure the foundation for the process under discussion.

4. *Foundations underlying transference process.*

The more dynamic general underlying features will be those that represent idiosyncratic conscious and unconscious emotional/social needs

both mentor and athlete bring to the relationship. Transference feelings will derive from the nature and qualities of the needs the athlete projects upon the coach or others upon whom he comes to depend. It is natural to project fantasies, expectations and roles upon those in whom we invest power or knowledge. The common reference to 'role-models' is a case in point. To project upon the authority figure qualities of integrity, honesty, reliability or superior knowledge based upon rational appraisal would be desirable for any teaching relationship. The danger for both coach and athlete will be when the projections are fantasies and imagined expectations driven by unfulfilled emotional/social needs. To place the coach in the role of the idealized parent that one never had, the lover, the sibling, the person faithful unto death may give rise to extremely conflictual personal interactions. To become the substitute love object may contribute to counter-transference behaviors that can have devastatingly negative implications for the one so projecting. In the extreme such projections may take on a delusional quality. The individual may be expressing a level of neediness that no amount of rational exploration can force them to test the reality of what their feelings truly represent. It would be as difficult as challenging someone trapped in emotional bondage based upon irrational dependency needs to step back and see that this is not a sound foundation for love. Working within individual and team sports will expose the consultant to gradients of bonding extremes. These may take the form of an obsession to the example of a preadolescent testing in fantasy form basic human needs. These may be affection, erotic arousal, or confirmation of identity feelings in what is now experienced within the protection of a caring relationship. As we will discuss subsequently the mentor expresses caring most constructively by understanding both nature and quality of the needs which are projected upon them. Most importantly, by employing their insights to form foundations for the growth and maturation.

The issue of moral and ethical violations of one's role as mentor that have received the most public attention have been those where coach, teacher or consultant have utilized projection, role idealization and various transference phenomenon to fulfill needs of their own. (We will discuss willful exploitation subsequently). What we confront in practice most often are questions of culpability because the violation within the relationship appear to be motivated by mentors acting out of personal

emotional deprivations. Such individuals appear unable to maintain the necessary boundaries that should exist between themselves and their charges. The male or female mentor who permits themselves to be captivated by seductive behaviors their students most often fails to reflect upon their own subconscious unfulfilled desires. Whether these are motives driven by sexual inadequacies, deprivations, or as means for expressing power or dominance we can anticipate some form of denial is operating. When such motivations are tested such individuals most often offer a rational basis for whatever relationship violations have occurred.

As we continue to look more deeply into transference issues it becomes increasingly apparent that emotional/social vulnerabilities become the foundation for inviting conflictual feelings which result in distortions within the relationship. At one level we have simple misinterpretation of the behavior and actions of another. At the other extreme we have manipulation of relationships for narcissistic or exploitative intentions. In practice will be found grave differences in consultation responsibility. The married coach who becomes sexually involved with an adolescent team member. The gay female coach who forms a deep emotional bond with a single adult team member. One can anticipate that such bonding will not remain undetected. Such issues may have a very deleterious effect upon team morale and often team performance. Should the consultant be brought into such crises involving a minor will require a significance alteration in role as compared with crises involving two consenting adults.

Let us review examples taken from actual practice. You receive communication from the parents of a sixteen year old team member who strongly suspect their daughter is sleeping with her coach when on road trips with the team. The report that their concerns are based upon hearsay evidence. Their information is based upon other team member having reported seeing the coach entering and leaving her hotel room in the early hours. In this example the consultant not only confronts possible ethical violations but the legal implications of statutory rape. Another example would be where the consultant must confront issues which are those between consenting adults. You are approached by an individual from a women's team and she relates her inability to accept her coach's behavior. In this case the gay coach has formed a sexual liaison with one particular team member. This athlete assures you that it is not the liaison

which cause her distress but the issue of favoritism, team selection, and playing time. She offers her evidence for her concerns. When confirmation was sought from team leadership the young woman seeking counsel had represented well also the teams concerns. Based upon testimony of these athletes team morale had been dramatically effected. There was no evidence that this romantic involvement was by it's nature unacceptable to them, the only troublesome issues were related to the coach's capacity to remain just and fair to the entire team. Would ability and demonstrated athletic behavior remain the performance criteria? The formation of the foregoing deep emotional bonds between athletes and mentors represent what actually occurs in the real world of international sport. It is impossible to determine how many graduate programs in sport psychology have formal course offering were counselors can be trained in the management of such complex issues. Training in preventive measures should receive high priority.

The foregoing coach-athlete crises presented in detailed form could be a model for open student discussion. Here the importance of possible counter-transference phenomenon as a contributor to possible team crises could be explored. Such consultation experiences serve to reinforce how important prevention and formal training become by enabling mentors to become extremely sensitive to the nature of their involvement and the implications of such for others under their charge. The presentation of case histories with similar scenarios could provide an excellent background for workshops and post-doctoral training. Should one have participated in resolution of such conflicts or crises where transference or counter-transference implications are relevant then creative and intuitive clinical skills may be reinforced. There will be no well defined resolution formula, nor theoretical template that can be applied. Remediation or problem resolution will reflect creative counseling skills.

##### 5. *Athletes with need to fabricate a performance world.*

There will be a selection of athletes who are motivated by a subconscious need system that can make of the sport environment a minefield for experiencing transference traumas. These will be the athletes who are living out a fantasy in which they create nature of relationships that



compliment their most fundamental needs. There is a strong element of fabrications by which they fill in all those factors that they feel are necessary for their emotional survival. In the extreme they may create a reincarnation of the one individual upon whom they can always depend. Their dependency needs are profound and lead to the unrealistic nature of their projections. The compelling need to imbue the mentor with superhuman virtues, strengths and understanding sets the stage for what eventually may set the stage for betrayal. Warning mentors about the consequences of being placed upon such a pedestal could both reduce stress for the mentor and reduce the possibility of irrational expectations.

Because the topic of transference is so broad and can be developed at an ever increasing number of levels only one further foundation for vulnerability will be addressed. The concern here is for the vulnerabilities created by the experiences of those athletes who have experienced serious forms of emotional and social betrayal. The resultant sensitivities may reflect benign or deliberate neglect, physical or emotional abuse or extended periods of isolation. For many such individuals athletics may be the first experience of functioning in an environment where they receive attention, verbal reward and even a sense of being an acceptable person. Depending on the extent of the emotional damage such individuals will of necessity place everyone, and even the sport environment on trial. It will be at one level they are living out a dream of what their life could be, at another, there is a dreadful feeling that it cannot last, or maybe isn't even really happening. Such profound individual differences in the needs which learners bring to relationships must be recognized and then responded to in ways that will enhance the development and self acceptance of all who have been subjected to such abuse. Within sport there are opportunities for promoting emotional growth that not be available within any other aspect of their lives. The children and young adults described above require the most dedicated, mature and understanding mentors. Should the sport environment provide increased security, stable relationships, and total reliability a path to the rebirth of trust and faith in others is a real possibility. The key to whether growth and development follows will be the mentors awareness with regard to the maintenance of faith and his/her responsibility for nurturing the beginning process. Most important avoiding those behaviors which could undermine this process.

Freud, S. (1924), *Collected Papers*, The Hogarth Press, Ltd., London.

Reik, T. (1960), *Listening with the third ear*.

Wolstein, H. (1960), *Transference: A Historical Perspective*, *Psychiatry*, 23, pp. 159-72.

Resumo. – O autor considera que o professor, o treinador ou o psicólogo serão invariavelmente confrontados com o fenómeno de transferência. A preocupação não é que os sentimentos de transferência germinem com consequência de necessidades inerentes à idiossincrasia humana. O ponto está na capacidade do psicólogo reconhecer a natureza e a fonte das necessidades emocionais que são expressas. Enquanto director de um programa de pós-graduação, estes aspectos constituíram a maior responsabilidade no trabalho desenvolvido. A violação potencial dos códigos profissionais e da confiança do cliente é uma preocupação prioritária. Os princípios éticos definidos pela APA constituíram matéria de curso na maior parte das instituições de ensino. Actualmente o serviço de apoio ao treino vem de tantas origens que não é possível garantir que todos os treinadores e psicólogos sejam estimulados a aprofundar a sua compreensão do fenómeno de transferência. A supervisão com incidência nestes aspectos protegeria o cliente e possibilitaria o seu aproveitamento como meio de promover o desenvolvimento e independência.