Locating Countertransference in the Psychotherapy Process: A Review

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This article attempts to review the major theoretical positions on countertransference and situates it within contemporary psychotherapy literature. The major viewpoints on countertransference have been delineated under four broad headings—the classical, complementary, totalistic and relational positions. Finally, an integrative trans-theoretical approach to countertransference proposed by Gelso and Hayes (2007) has been presented. The standing of these theoretical positions has been discussed with regard to components of countertransference, its role in the therapeutic process and the provision for its appearance in trained psychotherapists. The article has also critically examined the contemporary research methods employed in the area of countertransference.

Keywords: countertransference, therapist conflicts, countertransference interaction hypothesis, countertransference analogue methodology

Countertransference has been a matter of debate in psychotherapy, ever since Freud first coined the term. During his lifetime, several of Freud's core concepts have undergone changes. For example, in his initial works, he identified transference as a hindrance to psychoanalysis. But later, he went on to ascribe a pivotal role to transference, identifying it as a vehicle for navigating the analytic work (Sandler, Holder, & Dare, 1970). This has not been the case for countertransference. Freud emphatically advocated in favour of the analyst's putting aside all her/his feelings, while engaging in the task of analysis (Freud, 1912). Probably, this stance of Freud has sown the seeds for the stigma associated with countertransference, keeping it at the margins of traditional psychoanalysis. However, proponents of various other traditions within psychoanalysis, like the object relation theorists, have departed from Freud's notion of countertransference in various ways (Hinshelwood, 1999). In recent times, several philosophical positions like two persons psychology, inter-subjectivity and relational approaches to therapy have further inspired theoreticians to develop trans-theoretical understanding of countertransference, locating it as a universal phenomenon across psychotherapies (Gelso & Hayes, 2007). Given the role countertransference plays in the therapeutic encounter, it is surprising that, until recently, this area has received so little empirical attention. This review intends to delineate the major positions on countertransference and critically discuss the methods currently employed in researching this area.

The theoretical positions with regard to countertransference may be broadly delineated under five headings, that is, the classical, the complementary, the totalistic, the relational and integrative positions (Gelso & Hayes, 2007). The first three positions closely correspond to the Freudian, Kleinian and Ferenczi (independent object relations) traditions, respectively, as described by Hinshelwood (1999). The relational and integrative positions represent the contemporary approach to understanding countertransference. These theoretical approaches to countertransference can be broadly understood with regard to their position on three domains, that is, the components of countertransference, its role in the therapeutic process and the provision for its appearance in trained therapists.

Classical Position

Following Epstein and Feiner (1988), Gelso and Hayes (2007) have referred to Freud's position...