Transference and Countertransference from an Attachment Perspective: A Guide for Professional Caregivers, Una McCluskey and Michael O'Toole, *Routledge, 2020, pp. 122, ISBN 978-0-367-34098-8, £32.99 (pbk)*

'Whether they be a therapist or a taxi driver, if the person seeking help is in distress', their interaction 'arouse[s] the dynamics of attachment in both the seeker and provider' (p.14). This simultaneous arousal is the focus of Una McCluskey and Michael O'Toole's book, *Transference and Countertransference from an Attachment Perspective: A Guide for Professional Caregivers.* While the authors identify a range of professionals (including social workers) as their intended audience, the majority of their content is addressed to the interactions between therapists and clients. This is not to say that the concepts and ways of thinking discussed in this book are not relevant beyond the therapist/client dyad. On the contrary, they offer a potentially fresh perspective on helping relationships, though effort will be required of readers from other disciplines to apply them to their own contexts.

McCluskey and O'Toole's premise, based on the work of Heard and Lake (1997) and emanating from Bowlby's original thesis, is that aspects of our *selves* can be usefully organised into seven interpersonal systems; that these systems have evolved to meet our needs and develop as much well-being as possible; and that, when things go wrong, we can develop an overreliance on one system in a manner that occludes the nature of our distress and misdirects attention away from its source. Practicing from this perspective – named an Exploratory Goal-directed Psychotherapy Perspective by the authors – provides therapists, other therapeutic workers, and their clients with a map to guide their work, and 'a sense that they can make the necessary changes in their lives and … seek out the help they require to do so' (p.14).

Seven systems constitute the overall 'attachment dynamic':

- The careseeking system or careseeking self,
- The system for self-defence or defensive self,
- The internal environment,
- The caregiving system or caregiving self,
- The system for developing and sharing interests with peers,
- The affectionate careseeking system or the sexual self,
- The personally created external environment or PCEE.

Six systems are 'goal-corrected', which means that when the needs related to that system are met (i.e. the goal is achieved), the system returns to a state of equilibrium and the person's affect becomes more regulated. The internal environment is not goal-corrected, but shapes and is shaped by experiences of successful and failed goal-correction of the other systems.

Understanding human development and interpersonal relations through a lens of behavioural systems will be familiar to those conversant with attachment theory. For example, the nurture approach in Scottish education settings (see, for instance, National Improvement Hub, 2017) is clearly informed by an understanding of the inverse relationship between the attachment and exploratory systems. Consistent, attuned responses from emotionally available attachment figures help children to regulate their attachment-related feelings and behaviours, quieting their attachment systems and enabling their exploratory systems to activate and support learning.

The primary focus of this book is on what happens when the activated behavioural system is unable to achieve its goal and a different system is regularly co-opted to regulate the subsequent distress, creating an overreliance on the co-opted system. A disconnect develops between the parts of the self that are associated with the two systems, and this disconnect is communicated through transference (and potentially received through countertransference). The authors also propose a more expanded understanding of transference to include the (intra-personal) transfer of feelings from one system to another.

Case studies and other material from the authors' practice are used to illustrate how clients' distress and dysregulation can emanate from the disconnected parts of their selves. The appropriation of the caregiving system to meet needs triggered by another system is a particularly recognisable example. The neglected parts of the self and related needs associated with that other system can make caregiving brittle. When rejection or other undesirable responses are encountered, caregivers who are over reliant on this system may experience disproportionate frustration or helplessness; they may unconsciously resort to control or withdrawal. Their caregiving may be characterised by a sense of compulsion, burnout, or resentment. Coming to understand one's own caregiving system and its relationship with one's other interpersonal systems, alongside an understanding of these behavioural systems more generally, can significantly enhance the capacity for 'goal-corrected empathic attunement' (GCEA).

GCEA, then, is to key to caregivers' ability to (co)regulate clients' distress. It enables recognition of a co-opted system, as well as the actual source of distress. Neglected parts of the self can then be nurtured and explored. The alternative, only recognising and responding to the co-opted system, is characterised as a form of misattunement that often provokes intense emotions in both care givers

and care receivers.   McCluskey and O'Toole's book offers an important resource for reducing misattunement, responding in a reparative manner when it does happen, and for more effective, attachment-informed, relationship-based practice in social work.

References:

Heard, D., & Lake, B. (1997). *The challenge of attachment for caregiving*. Karnac.

National Improvement Hub. (2017). *Applying nurture as a whole school approach: A framework to support the self-evaluation of nurturing approaches in schools and early learning and childcare (ELC) settings*. Education Scotland. https://education.gov.scot/improvement/self-evaluation/applying-nurture-as-a-whole-school-approach-a-framework-to-support-self-evaluation/

Laura Steckley, PhD

Senior Lecturer

School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde, UK