

## Empathy-----moral behavior or immoral behavior

Zheng Liu<sup>1,\*</sup>, Ziqi Liu<sup>2</sup>, Yihang Rong<sup>3</sup>, Zixuan Wang<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Case Western Reserve university, Cleveland, USA

<sup>2</sup> Shanghai Southwest Weiyu Middle School, Shanghai, China

<sup>3</sup> College of the Canyons, Santa Clarita, CA, USA

<sup>4</sup>21CIS, Beijing, China

\*Corresponding author: zxl1315@case.edu,

**Abstract.** The concept of transference, rooted in psychoanalysis, involves projecting buried emotions and desires onto a therapist. Developed by Sigmund Freud, this enduring concept remains relevant today, particularly in psychological counseling. This paper explores the intricate interplay of empathy and moral considerations within counseling. Examining these dynamics enhances our understanding of emotional and ethical components, thus improving the effectiveness of psychological interventions. Freud's notion of transference as unconscious emotions surfacing during therapy has transcended time. It prompts us to question its influence on contemporary counseling. Concurrently, modern research delves into empathy's interaction with moral dilemmas in counseling. Balancing emotional resonance with ethics is crucial as counseling becomes more complex. Exploring empathy and moral crisis holds significance. It aids practitioners in using empathy while maintaining ethical boundaries. This research empowers mental health professionals to navigate transference and moral issues with wisdom. In summary, studying transference, empathy, and moral crises deepens our grasp of the human psyche. Combining historical foundations with modern inquiries elevates counseling's quality — refined techniques, heightened ethics, and commitment to well-being.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Moral behavior, Immoral behavior.

### 1. Introduction

In psychoanalysis, the intricate phenomenon known as transference involves the projection or displacement of a patient's submerged emotions and desires onto the analyst. Originating from the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud, this concept, though conceived many years ago, continues to hold relevance in the intricate tapestry of human interactions. As we navigate the complexities of modern society, the persistent presence of transference remains evident. However, contemporary exploration delves into the intertwined dynamics of empathy and moral quandaries within the domain of psychological counseling. Such investigations enrich our comprehension of the intricate emotional and ethical components inherent in the psychological counseling process, thereby cultivating avenues to enhance the efficacy and caliber of psychological interventions.

Sigmund Freud's conceptualization of transference as a channel through which unconscious emotions and desires manifest onto the analyst represents a cornerstone in the evolution of psychoanalytic thought. While rooted in the past, this phenomenon's tenacious manifestation endures, transcending temporal boundaries to permeate our present-day interactions. Having stood the test of time, the concept prompts us to confront the persistent question: How does transference continue to influence the dynamics of psychological counseling in the contemporary context?

In parallel, contemporary scholarly pursuits have embarked on an exploration of empathy and its intricate interplay with moral dilemmas within the realm of psychological counseling. This investigation highlights the delicate equilibrium between emotional resonance and ethical considerations, resonating deeply with practitioners and scholars alike. As the counseling arena becomes increasingly multifaceted, these studies beckon us to scrutinize the fine line between forging emotional connections with clients and upholding the ethical principles that underpin professional practice.

Moreover, the study of empathy and moral crisis in psychological counseling promises far-reaching implications. It offers insights into how practitioners can harness the potency of empathy while mitigating the risks of crossing ethical boundaries. Researchers endeavor to equip mental health professionals with a nuanced understanding by delving into the intricate interweaving of emotions and morality, empowering them to navigate the complex terrain of transference and moral conundrums with sagacity and sensitivity.

In summation, the exploration of transference, empathy, and moral crisis in psychological counseling extends a compelling invitation to deepen our comprehension of the human psyche's intricate nuances. As the echoes of transference reverberate through the corridors of time, the fusion of historical foundations with contemporary inquiries paves the way for a heightened caliber of psychological counseling—an evolution characterized by refined techniques, enhanced ethical consciousness, and an unwavering commitment to the holistic well-being of those seeking solace within therapeutic sanctuaries.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Moral and Immoral Behavior**

Moral behavior, a cornerstone of human interaction, embodies the actions and conduct that harmonize with the universally acknowledged principles of right and wrong. It is a reflection of our ethical compass and serves as a guide for our interactions with the world around us. One illustrative instance of moral behavior revolves around the simple yet profound act of extending a helping hand to those in need without harboring any ulterior motives or expectations of reciprocation.

This exemplar of moral conduct encapsulates the essence of altruism and empathy. It underscores our innate capacity to transcend self-interest and embrace the well-being of others as a priority. By aiding someone without anticipating any form of compensation, we demonstrate the purity of our intentions and our commitment to fostering a more compassionate society.

Conversely, immoral behavior constitutes actions and behavior that deviate from the established standards of right and wrong. It stands as a stark contrast to the noble principles that underpin moral conduct. An apt portrayal of immoral behavior is found in deceit employed for personal gain. When an individual resorts to falsehoods and manipulation to achieve their own objectives, they breach the trust that forms the bedrock of interpersonal relationships.

Such conduct erodes the fabric of integrity and undermines the foundations of a harmonious society. It demonstrates a prioritization of immediate self-interest over the welfare of others and disregards the potential consequences of such actions. This kind of behavior can sow seeds of discord, breed mistrust, and disintegrate social cohesion.

In conclusion, the dichotomy between moral and immoral behavior embodies the essence of human values and their impact on society. Acts of moral behavior, like selfless assistance, exemplify our capacity for kindness and empathy, fostering connections that strengthen the bonds of community. On the contrary, engaging in immoral behavior, such as manipulation through lies, weakens these bonds and erodes the ethical fabric that sustains us. By consciously choosing moral behavior, we contribute to a more compassionate and harmonious world, where integrity and benevolence prevail.

### **2.2. Transference**

Transference is one of the critical concepts of psychoanalysis, first proposed by Freud. Transference refers to the phenomenon in which the patient projects the experiences and feelings of his childhood or early life onto the analyst [1]. Specifically, the patient sees the psychoanalyst not as the "real" psychoanalyst, but as the person in their mind, influenced by his or her childhood or early experiences. The formation of transference takes place on a subconscious level, with patients often unconsciously projecting past emotions and experiences onto the therapist. Transference's emotions can be powerful, even exceeding the patient's feelings towards the therapist in real life. This is because

patients see the therapist as a figure in past relationships that may be related to their emotional needs, conflicts, and desires.

In psychotherapy, transference can be a way of exploring and understanding the patient's feelings and conflicts, as it can reveal the patient's emotional connections with other people or past experiences and provide the therapist with opportunities to understand and intervene [1]. Therapists play an essential role in dealing with transference. They need to recognize and understand the patient's transferable emotions and use those emotions to delve deeper into the patient's inner world. The therapist should maintain an objective, unbiased, and sympathetic stance to help the patient untangle past emotions. By utilizing the phenomenon and effects of transference to achieve specific psychoanalytic effects becomes the psychoanalytic approach to transference.

Transference can be categorized into two main types: positive and negative. This can occur because the patient finds characteristics in the therapist that are similar to the original person's traits. Positive transference, which facilitates therapy, occurs when the patient transfers their original positive feelings about someone, such as liking, respecting, or trusting, to the therapist. In addition, negative transference occurs when a patient transfers a negative emotion, such as anger, disgust, or resentment, that they originally felt toward someone to the therapist.

Countertransference also occurs during psychoanalytic therapy. This refers to the therapist's unconscious transference for the patient that produces some unconscious reaction. These reactions may stem from the therapist's personal experiences, emotions, and unconscious conflicts. The therapist needs to address and manage the counter-transfer through self-reflection and individual therapy to ensure that it does not negatively affect the healing process. According to Freud "countertransference was seen as a hindrance to the process of analysis" (p. 144). [2] The remedy is to let analysts do further analysis.

In short, transference is an example of the complexity of human emotions and behaviors, and it has an important role in interpersonal relationships and mental health [3-6].

### 2.3. Relationship Mechanism

While solving some social problems, it inevitably brings some problems. Empathy is sometimes a force that can promote prosocial behavior, but when empathy is used as a guide for judging behavior, indifference and cruelty can sometimes be aroused [7].

In a study on the relationship between children's moral judgment, empathy, and prosocial behavior, we conclude that children with strong empathy are significantly affected by moral behavior than children with low empathy, and high moral judgment is a key factor in determining the amount or willingness of prosocial behavior [8].

But when we follow our heart, that is, let empathy guide us to make moral decisions, This kind of decision-making is narrow and specific to specific groups, which will further deepen the contradiction. Just as blacks are discriminated against, empathy makes people angry about racial discrimination, and from another perspective, people who empathize with the police are saying, "Do you know how much pressure the police are under? " At this time, our vision also becomes theirs; no longer looking at things as a third party, will be replaced by the same emotions, and even become impulsive. Our decisions are no longer objective, and what we think of as "help" may also become a weapon. It seems that empathy without rational thinking is also one of the causes of ethnic disputes and antagonism between men and women, which seems to run counter to our vision of a better and harmonious world [7].

Although digital tools offer young people a range of opportunities to learn, socialize and be informed this kind of freedom and openness of communication will bring about practical problems such as "cyber violence". Information on the Internet comes too fast; sometimes the truth is still wearing shoes, lies run all over the city, and many events happen, occupying the public's view very quickly. Everyone swarmed in, and then broke up, and no one was emotionally responsible, as if empathy had become the umbrella of violence. At the beginning of the incident, the person who took the lead in occupying the public's view was supported, and we condemned the "immoral person" in

the incident described by the first party, and then the "immoral person" came out to speak, and the incident reversed, and we turned the spearhead to the first party of rumor monger. it's the same verbal attack. The problem we face is how to deal with the information we see in front of us, and then how to deal with our emotions (empathy) in the face of the information.

It is true that empathy has two sides. The right amount of empathy is a virtue, but unthinking empathy can hurt people.

## **2.4. Future Implication and Enlightenment**

The exploration of this study reveals multiple perspectives on whether transference is considered moral or immoral behavior. Early psychologists, such as Freud, viewed transference as a natural outpouring of a patient's emotions that provided an opportunity for deeper therapy. From this perspective, transference can be perceived as a normal therapeutic process that helps to parse inner conflicts and emotional histories.

Nevertheless, some scholars have also argued that transference may lead to unethical behavior in some cases. They emphasize the professional responsibility of therapists and the need to maintain appropriate boundaries and ethics when dealing with transference. Judith Lewis Herman emphasizes the therapist's significance in working with trauma patients and stresses the therapist's need to carefully manage both the patient's and their own emotions. [3] They should try to avoid triggering traumatic memories in patients, ensuring that the therapy does not further exacerbate the patients' psychological trauma [3] The indistinct boundary between patient and therapist can be harmful to the patient.

The findings also suggest that there are cultural and ethical contextual influences on whether transference is a moral behavior. Perceptions of emotional expression and the role of the therapist may vary across cultures. Therefore, the evaluation of transference should consider individual differences, treatment environment, and cultural factors to ensure the therapeutic process's appropriateness and respect.

### **2.4.1 The Influence of Empathy on Psychological Counseling**

Listening and understanding go beyond essential communication in psychological counseling; it is a strong catalyst for healing and development. Empathy, a vital and irreplaceable cornerstone of good counseling, is central to this process. Empathy is the foundation of psychological therapy, fostering emotional expression, removing self-imposed stigmas and judgments, and cultivating resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms. Its impact extends beyond the counseling room, significantly altering the therapeutic process and promoting long-term psychological healing and progress.

#### **Building Rapport and Trust**

Building trust and rapport heavily relies on empathy within counseling settings. Feeling recognized and valued enhances customer connections; thus, understanding them effectively strengthens trust. Trust forms the foundation of therapy because it instills confidence in revealing the innermost feelings and emotions. Recognizing their counselor's genuine care and respect fosters trust, enabling them to open up about their vulnerabilities with a greater sense of comfort and safety. Trust is vital for the therapeutic process and the whole healing journey.

### **2.4.2 Enhancing Emotional Expression**

Empathy fosters a nonjudgmental environment where clients can freely express and explore their feelings. Clients often come to counseling with feelings of fear, anger, grief, and anxiety, which may be challenging to express or admit. A supportive counselor actively acknowledges, responds with sensitivity towards, and validates the depth of emotions exhibited. This encouragement supports clients to express themselves more freely and dig even further into their thoughts and feelings. Clients acquire significant insights into their experiences and emotions as a result. The self-discovery process supports the resolution of emotional issues, resulting in enhanced psychological well-being.

### 2.4.3 Reducing Stigma and Self-Judgment

During therapy, many individuals grapple with emotions of guilt and self-judgment that impede psychological treatment. Empathy is critical to breaking these barriers since it demonstrates the counselor's unbiased and inviting demeanor. Clients are more likely to share sensitive or stigmatized concerns with their counselor if they perceive them to be empathic and understanding. The decreased self-stigma and judgment opens the door to a more open and fruitful therapy encounter. It enables clients to address their concerns and practice self-compassion, an essential component of the healing process.

### 2.4.4 Building Resilience and Coping Skills

Building resilience and coping skills is an integral outcome of empathetic counseling, transcending the confines of the therapy room to foster lasting strength and emotional intelligence. Empathetic counselors, through their deep connection with clients, play a pivotal role in guiding them through the intricate terrain of processing and managing complex emotions. In this empathetic environment, clients not only understand their feelings more deeply but also acquire the skills to respond to them in a thoughtful and adaptive manner. This cultivation of emotional intelligence is a profound consequence of empathetic counseling, allowing clients to navigate life's myriad challenges with heightened resilience and adaptability. The benefits of these acquired skills extend well beyond the therapeutic process, enhancing clients' ability to confront and overcome adversities, ultimately resulting in a lasting sense of well-being and personal growth [9].

Empathy significantly benefits psychological counseling, given its powerful influence. By cultivating empathic links with her clients, the counselor creates an atmosphere favorable to emotional disclosure and helps establish trust. It is an excellent tool for removing self-judgment and stigma, enabling clients to discuss uncomfortable subjects freely. Furthermore, empathy promotes emotional growth and the development of adaptive coping skills in clients, which helps their long-term well-being. Finally, empathy is a transforming force that enables clients to begin a journey of self-discovery, resilience, and psychological healing within a counseling setting [10-13].

## 3. Conclusion

Examining transference, empathy, and moral dilemmas within psychological counseling provides valuable insights into the intricate workings of the human mind. The concept of transference, as conceived by Freud, remains a pivotal aspect of therapeutic dynamics, with its relevance extending to contemporary counseling practices. The ongoing manifestation of transference invites contemplation on its influence in today's complex counseling landscape.

Moreover, the intersection of empathy and moral considerations presents both challenges and opportunities for mental health practitioners. Striking a balance between emotional resonance and ethical boundaries becomes increasingly vital as counseling interactions grow multifaceted. As we navigate the digital age, where empathy can promote positive connections and fuel conflicts, understanding the nuances of empathetic responses becomes paramount.

The implications of this exploration are far-reaching. They underscore the importance of integrating historical foundations with modern insights to enhance the efficacy of psychological interventions. By equipping mental health professionals with a deeper understanding of transference, empathy, and ethical considerations, we empower them to foster a compassionate and ethical therapeutic environment.

In conclusion, the exploration of transference, empathy, and moral crises within psychological counseling is an invitation to comprehend the intricate dimensions of human psychology. This comprehension, when integrated into therapeutic practice, leads to a refined approach characterized by heightened ethical consciousness and a steadfast commitment to the well-being of those seeking solace within the realm of psychological support.

## Author Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

## References

- [1] American Psychological Association. APA Dictionary of Psychology Press, 2015
- [2] Freud, S. Introduction to Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses, XVI Press, 1916
- [3] Freud, S. The future prospects of psychoanalytical therapy. In Standard edition, 1910, 11: 144-151.
- [4] Herman, J. L. (1992). Trauma and recovery. Retrieved from: [http://www.georgiadisaster.info/PublicSafety/PS13%20Building%20Resiliency/PS13\\_3.pdf](http://www.georgiadisaster.info/PublicSafety/PS13%20Building%20Resiliency/PS13_3.pdf)
- [5] Ding Fang, The Relationship between children's moral judgment, empathy and prosocial behavior, Journal of Shandong Normal University: Humanities and Social Sciences Edition Press, 2000
- [6] Bloom, P. Just Babies, Chapters Press, 2013
- [7] Bloom, P. Against Empathy, excerpt Press, 2017
- [8] Pacheco, E., Melhuish, N. New Zealand Teens' Digital Profile: A Factsheet. Wellington, New Zealand Press, 2003.
- [9] Digital self-harm: Prevalence, Motivations and outcomes For Teens WHO Cyberbully Themselves, New Zealand Press, 2019.
- [10] Dang, B. N., Westbrook, R. A., Njue, S. M., Giordano, T. P. Building trust and rapport early in the new doctor-patient relationship: a longitudinal qualitative study. BMC Medical Education, 2017, 17(1): 1–10.
- [11] Hou, J. M. Skovholt, T. M. Characteristics of highly resilient therapists. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 2020, 67(3): 386.
- [12] Seidman, A. J., Wade, N. G., Geller, J. The effects of group counseling and self-affirmation on stigma and group relationship development: A replication and extension. Journal of Counseling Psychology Press, 2022.
- [13] Sharma, A., Lin, I. W., Miner, A. S., Atkins, D. C., Althoff, T. Towards facilitating empathic conversations in online mental health support: A reinforcement learning approach. In Proceedings of the Web Conference Press, 2021 .