

## Hate in the Transference

By Joan Schain-West, M.S.W., Ph.D.

Winnicott's landmark paper, *Hate in the Countertransference* (1958), is a forthright, direct and honest description of the depth of emotion that can be generated in the treatment relationship. This has inspired me to re-examine a patient's expressions of hate toward me in an effort to further explore and utilize the dynamics of this emotion in the therapeutic endeavor. Understanding the role of guilt and other factors that contribute to the patient's hate enabled me to resolve an impasse, minimize hate in the countertransference and prevent premature termination. As a clinical example, I will refer to a single young man, forty-four years of age, who has been seen twice weekly for 5½ years.

Early in treatment, this patient's expression of rage was intense and primarily directed at himself, various members of his family and "the world" for dealing him a bad hand. He would fling himself on the floor of the office, pounding and crying at times. At one point, he threw a batch of magazines across the room (not aimed at me). My interpretations focused primarily on his anger at each of his four family members (mother, father, sister and brother) with different reasons for each person. At this time, his anger at me was not acted out in missed or late appointments, argumentative behavior or direct rage but primarily in his inability to hear what I had to say. He would tell me, "I can't hear you." He remarked that I reminded him of his mother who was my age and in my profession. The transference nature of his anger at mother/me was clear but was not the whole story. My patient also noted our differences, such as how I listened to him, remembered what he said and didn't criticize or put him down. He said that he knew I was "rooting for him."

After approximately two years, my patient became openly angry with me, arguing about what I considered my most perceptive interpretations, such as his commitment phobia and its roots in his childhood experiences.

His affect was dismissive and contemptuous. I interpreted his oppositional attitude and anger to be transferentially related to one or the other parent (usually his mother) and expressed toward me. At this point I frequently felt, for whatever reason, that he hated me. He agreed.

At the 5½ year point in therapy the patient had gone from a depressed state of mind, without a job, a car, or a place of his own to having a very fine job, a home of his own, and a car he was proud of. However, he had no wife or family; his stated top priority in life. He continually pursued women who were unstable or inconsistent with his stated objectives. For example, dating a woman 59 years of age. His frustration at not "finding" an appropriate partner increased his rage because I was supposed to fix it. In spite of his negative affect in the session, he never cancelled an appointment or arrived late. By holding onto the belief in my omnipotent power, he could avoid positive feelings towards me, and the vulnerable dependency that would result.

Suddenly, at the 5½ year point, my patient, for the first time, missed an appointment without a phone call to cancel. His explanation was, "I forgot our session." Since it was so sharp a shift from his earlier state of mind, we both recognized the significance of this. He spoke of termination for the first time and expressed great delight at the idea.

At our next meeting my patient brought in this dream:

"There are four people telling me that I am to be punished for 44 years.  
They string me upside down by my heels."

In response to a request for associations to the dream, something he had done previously with enthusiasm, he said, "You tell me what it's about – that's what I pay you for." His need to provoke me into rejecting him required vigilance on my part against feeling like "so be it."

What was this patient punishing himself for? In my clinical judgment, termination at this time and in this mood, would be a self-destructive act. Why did he need to be demeaning to me and my work? Why did he become sarcastic, uncooperative and hateful towards me, spoiling what had been our good work together? After all, he had made progress in many areas of his life.

At the next session I suggested that he was punishing himself because his guilt prevented him from “taking in” the care and concern of his therapist. I also noted that our relationship had become more emotionally intense. Since his frustration at being unable to form relationships, friends, or lovers was a major hurdle, I suggested that his relationship with me could be an opportunity to understand his difficulty in this area. How could he allow himself kind and caring friends or a loving partner when he needed to “push me away?” I asked if he felt that he didn’t deserve a good relationship. I suggested that his dream was one of punishment to himself, a 44-year-old man, by four people; mother, father, sister and brother. In the dream, being strung up by his heels may be a reference to his Achilles’ heel, be it guilt, shame or castration anxiety. After presenting the dream, he spontaneously blurted out, “I know that I didn’t kill my mother but I feel as if I did.” My interpretation focused on his guilt about his mother’s death and his need for punishment in the form of not allowing himself what he wanted the most – good relationships.

At that point we went through the events associated with his mother’s death – a suicide precipitated by the abandonment of her husband superimposed upon a painful, troubled childhood. We also further explored his ambivalent relationships with his father who abandoned the children emotionally at the time of the divorce. My patient describes his sister as being demeaning of him (like his mother) and his brother, who will not maintain any relationship with him.

Opening up the issue of his guilt and need for punishment led to other interpretations that had been touched on previously but were revisited in a new and more meaningful way. These were:

- Love can be destructive. If you are not in control of your hateful feelings, when you love someone (i.e., your mother), your hate can destroy. If you avoid loving, you never have to face the guilt that can be associated with destruction. I pointed out the omnipotent nature of his thinking. Why omnipotent? In order to avoid the agony associated with his helplessness to prevent his parents’ divorce and the subsequent depression of his mother, he had to maintain that he could have fixed it. Hence he blamed himself for not fixing it.
- There is the fear that sooner or later your rage will be found out. Therefore, you choose to drive people away before your hatefulness can be revealed.
- Holding on to negative (hateful) feelings avoids the risks associated with loving and losing (as happened with my patient’s loss of his mother). If you let yourself love, you’ll run the risk of being rejected or put down; again, consistent with my patient’s experience.
- Who could love you when your self-image was formed by critical, ambivalent parents; resulting in projection of your self-hate to everyone else.
- Hate keeps you “safe” from psychic injury and loving makes you vulnerable.
- You’re so bad you don’t deserve love.
- If you love, you may become too dependent, too demanding, too narcissistic, or strive for oneness with another and thereby drive the person away.
- You need your negative feelings to avoid a loss of self. Related to this is the conviction that to be “involved” requires you to please the other person frequently, at the cost of your own needs. You may suffer from a compulsion to not displease, which leads to a loss of a sense of self.
- You may fear a “mindless state” in which you profoundly ignore your own state of mind and automatically think and feel as others expect you to.
- The ability to maintain love depends on losing focus on the negative in self and others. Focusing on the negative avoids loving.

As my patient worked through his hateful feelings and was able to feel closer to me, I suggested that his guilt and the other feelings we have explored might return. However, now he had more understanding and better tools to deal with these issues. He summed up our work on his guilt when leaving a particularly poignant session with, “I had to hate you because I felt too guilty to let you love me.” He subsequently joined an appropriate dating service and paid his bill upon receiving it, instead of on the last

day of the month.

In closing, I'd like to emphasize that my patient's missed appointment followed by his dream about punishment led to a better understanding of the hate I had experienced in the transference. The interpretation of his unconscious guilt and other factors contributing to his rage helped us get through an impasse in the treatment and may have prevented a premature termination.

**REFERENCE:**

Winnicott, D.W. (1958). Hate in the Countertransference. *Collected Papers: Through pediatrics to psycho-analysis*. (Chapter XV, pp. 194-203). New York : Basic Books.

*Joan Schain-West, MSW, PhD, is in private practice in West Los Angeles, specializing in work with individuals and couples from a psycho-analytic, psycho-dynamic perspective. She is on the clinical consulting faculty of The Sanville Institute and has been published in multiple journals.*