Accepted Manuscript

An If-Then Theory of Personality: Significant Others and the Relational Self

Susan M. Andersen, Jennifer S. Thorpe

PII: S0092-6566(09)00029-4
Reference: YJRPE 2851

To appear in: Journal of Research in Personality

Received Date: 30 December 2008
Accepted Date: 31 December 2008


This is a PDF file of an unedited manuscript that has been accepted for publication. As a service to our customers we are providing this early version of the manuscript. The manuscript will undergo copyediting, typesetting, and review of the resulting proof before it is published in its final form. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.
An If-Then Theory of Personality:

Significant Others and the Relational Self

Susan M. Andersen         Jennifer S. Thorpe

New York University
Abstract

In our work on the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002), which is grounded in research and theory on the social-cognitive process of transference (Andersen & Cole, 1990), we build on advances in IF-THEN models of personality (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) and their lineage in early work (Mischel, 1968) to demonstrate that the self is inherently interpersonal. Because we have shown that mental representations of significant others are activated by immediate triggering cues in a situation and that this activation influences the nature of self and personality as experienced and expressed, the work expands the IF-THEN approach to the dyadic level of interpersonal relations. Moving beyond Mischel’s early work (Mischel, 1968), our model also integrates social cognition and learning theory with psychodynamic thought, bringing the latter into the realm of this contemporary conceptualization of personality that highlights the importance of the situation.
“I love you not because of who you are, but because of who I am when I am with you.”

-Roy Croft

The nature of personality, so much a matter of debate over the years, was reconceptualized in by 1960s and 1970s by the work of Walter Mischel, which ended up transforming the field in a number of ways. The idea that an individual’s behavior varies with the situation the individual is in and does so because of internal states, mental representations, and interpretations so that these internal factors underlie behavioral variability across situations (Mischel, 1973, 1977) was rather revolutionary at the outset. While a person may be easily seen as having global traits that do not vary substantially depending on the situation, Mischel concluded that such an assumption glosses over the complexity of personality. Sophisticated in situ research done in subsequent years confirmed this while revealing as well that there is considerable consistency over time in the pattern of cross-situational inconsistency that each person shows, suggesting a kind of personality signature – the person’s unique behavior-situation profile. There is both variance in a person’s behavior across situations and continuity over time. This dual assumption forms the basis for the research we highlight in this article.

In situ research – that is, research done in varying situations in the individual’s life – forms the evidential basis for the approach and the subsequent theory of cognitive-affective units that underlies a person’s interpretations and hence behavior in specific situations (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; see also Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). Prior experiences change both the meaning and importance ascribed to current situations and the strength and probability of behaviors that result in those situations. What is essential to take into account in predicting and modifying human behavior is the stimuli in situations that evoke particular behavior – that is, evoke the
particular “covariation of situation and behavior” that exists for that person (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999, p. 296). The cognitive affective systems model of personality is an IF-THEN theory in which the IF is a situation or set of triggering cues, including the actual physical setting as well as the psychological situation (as the person assigns it to the physical situation) and the THEN is the response (both psychological experiences and observable behaviors).

We highlight aspects of this IF-THEN framework through presenting the social-cognitive model of transference and the relational self as well as the research supporting it (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen & Andersen, 1999). The research has focused on mental representations of significant others – any important person, such as an old friend, a prior love, a sibling, or a parent whom the individual has known for a long time and who has had an impact on him or her – and has examined how these mental representations influence moment by moment responses as a function of whether or not they are activated. People are emotionally invested in their significant others, and they are motivationally linked to them as well (Andersen, Glassman, & Gold, 1998; Higgins, 1989; Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). When triggering cues in a situation – for example, what a new person is doing or saying – activate a significant other representation, the person exhibiting those cues will be interpreted and responded to much as the significant other typically is.

These representations are activated as a function of situations. A new person may laugh just like one’s mother, activating the mental representation denoting her – that is, calling it to mind so that it is then used in response to this new person. Such representations have frequently been called to mind previously and used. Indeed, evidence shows that significant-other representations have a rather high baseline level of accessibility; that is, they are rather
accessible on a chronic basis, even while they are far more likely to be evoked if triggered by cues in the situation as well (Andersen et al., 1995; Chen et al., 1999; Higgins, 1990).

Beyond this, and beyond being affectively laden and relevant to motivation, mental representations of significant others are also linked to the self. Cues in situations account for variability in the version of the self experienced, combined with the overall chronic accessibility and use of significant-other representations. An IF-THEN model is built into the theory. The fact that our model of the relational self and transference is grounded in the examination of the century-old psychoanalytic concept of transference (Freud, 1912/1963; Sullivan, 1953) as conceptualized in social-cognitive terms (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Andersen & Glassman, 1996; Chen & Andersen, 1999) makes it relevant to classic personality theory while also offering one way of integrating the cognitive-affective system model and psychodynamic thought.

Transference and the Relational Self

Imagine that a new person has arrived at your workplace. He likes hockey, just like your wise, beloved father does, has a similar preference for Thai food, and even has a slight similarity in interpersonal style – the way he interacts with others. You find you warm up to him easily and yet cannot put your finger on why. You might also find yourself having special regard for his opinions, potentially second-guessing yourself when you disagree with him, and so on, which you do not do with others at work.

In transference, when a new person resembles a significant other in some minimal way this will activate the representation of that person at the moment. The resemblance can be in terms of the new person’s personal features, like interests, habits, beliefs, ways of interacting, quirky expressions, or perhaps even physical appearance. When the significant-other representation is activated it also tends to be applied to the new person being perceived and this
sets in motion shifts in interpersonal perception and responses (Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen & Cole, 1990). Cues related to the significant other that are encountered in a situation thus combine with what is stored in memory (and chronically accessible) about the significant other and influence interpretations of and responses to a new person at the moment.

In short, beyond what is actually learned about a new person who happens to be similar to a significant other, numerous other aspects of what is known about the significant-other representation are then assumed to be true of the new person as well – as if the individual “learned” them originally in the information encountered about the new person. There is also an evaluative component to transference. A new person is also evaluated positively and liked when he or she resembles a significant other who is in fact regarded positively – that is, liked or loved (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen & Cole, 1990; Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995; Chen, Andersen, & Hinkley, 1999). The process of transference is also evoked implicitly and without awareness (see Andersen, Reznik, & Glassman, 2005). This is important in part because of the predominance of the unconscious in discussions related to psychodynamic theory, including those regarding transference, and in part because this implies that transference may not readily be subject to intentional efforts to control its occurrence.

The relationship the individual has (or has had) with each significant other ends up as a link in memory between the individual’s representation of that significant other and his/her representation of the self (Andersen & Chen, 2002). Our model of the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; see also Andersen, Reznik, & Chen, 1997; Chen & Andersen, 1999) concerns how mental representations of significant others are linked to the versions of the self typically experienced with that person and thus how the latter are indirectly activated based on the activation of the significant-other representation – based on triggering cues in the situation.
Evoking a self-with-other representation indirectly in this way does not require the physical presence of the significant other. Any cue relevant to the significant other can activate that representation and then indirectly activate the version of the self linked with that significant other in memory, and the interpersonal relationship between the two. In the process, one actually “becomes” the self one is with that significant other. Moreover, motivations and goals that are part of each significant-other relationship are also activated in response to this new person – for example, one might find oneself especially motivated to self-disclose to him or her. Knowledge about a significant other’s prior acceptance or rejection should also end up being activated when the representation of that significant other is activated and hence should similarly be expected from the new person in transference.

Scholarly Backdrop

**Historical Roots: The Psychoanalytic Concept of Transference**

Transference has been a central process in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory since the origins of the theory (Freud, 1912/1958). In its original form, transference was defined as the process by which a patient in psychoanalysis re-experienced with the analyst unconscious psychosexual wishes and conflicts from early childhood (Freud, 1912/1963; see also Andersen & Glassman, 1996). Freud also assumed the existence of “imagoes,” structures that designate one’s parents, even though these structures were never precisely integrated into his theory of the tripartite structure of mind – that is, the id, ego, and superego, all fueled by psychosexual, libidinal drive. Imagoes were accorded little or no causal weight in the drive-structure model (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983) and unconscious psychosexual drive was assumed not only to be universal and to fuel these structures but also to fuel transference and all of one’s experience, assumptions we do not make. On the other hand, Freud did acknowledge that transference can
occur outside of the therapy context (even if this was far from emphasized, Freud, 1912/1958; Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1990; Schimek, 1983), and this offers some consistency with our approach.

Our work has been influenced more directly by Sullivan’s notion of parataxic distortion, Sullivan’s term for transference, in which “personifications” of the self (akin to mental representations) and “personifications” of significant others are linked via “dynamisms” (akin to the relationship between the self and the significant other) (Sullivan, 1953). Personifications and dynamisms are formed based on actual experience in interactions with significant others rather than based purely on drive, and they come into play in relation to new people. Hence, Sullivan’s model is more parallel to ours in terms of our focus on significant-other representations that are linked to the self in memory and that can influence perception and behavior when evoked.

It is worth noting that Sullivan also abandoned Freud’s assumptions about psychosexual drive and instead assumed that people have other fundamental human needs, including that for satisfaction, achieved by expressing competencies and feelings while remaining connected or “integrated” with others, and that for security or feeling safe from literal and symbolic harm. Either way, he argued that parataxic distortion is heavily influenced by these motivations as experienced with the significant other because personifications and dynamisms develop in a way that reflects how these needs have or have not been satisfied. On balance, Sullivan’s notions about motivation are also quite compatible with ours, even though the list of basic human needs that we have offered is somewhat longer (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Andersen, Reznik, & Chen, 1997). And while our focus is on transference in everyday life, outside of clinical settings, and Sullivan focuses instead on the therapeutic setting, like Freud, Sullivan did acknowledge that it occurs in everyday life as well.
Sullivan’s interpersonal model has many parallels in object relations theory, with the exception that the former focuses more on interpersonal behavior and the reality of how one is treated while the latter focuses more on libidinal drive and fantasy, as elaborated on by Melanie Klein and others in the British object relations school (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1985; Grotstein, 1985; Klein, 1946, 1952). Still, as with Sullivan, object relations theorists posit something akin to mental representations of significant others – objects in the external world and relations with them that become internalized – and projective identification in which such objects are projected onto others in the present. As with Sullivan’s approach, the object relations approach is mostly concerned with transference in the therapeutic context but it does not deny its existence in everyday life.

Another related model is that of the attachment theorists, who long posited that thoughts, memories, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and behaviors about the self and others are impacted by experiences with significant others, forming an internal working model that is used to cope with later relationships with friends, spouses, and children (Bowlby, 1973). In this way, early relationships come to bear on later ones. This working model is akin to a mental representation that is applied to understand and navigate new situations when applicable.

Since the concept of transference was first proposed, most scholarship on the topic has been theoretical rather than empirical, and it has thus been subjected infrequently to the scrutiny of psychological science (with some exceptions, e.g., Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1990; Horowitz, 1989, 1991). The precise definition of transference has varied with the theorist as well (e.g., Ehrenreich, 1989; Greenson, 1965), with the one most utilized being “the experiencing of feelings, drives, attitudes, fantasies, and defenses toward a person in the present which are inappropriate to the person and are a repetition, a displacement of reaction originating in regard
to significant persons of early childhood” (Greenson, 1965, p. 156). Our data and conception of transference fit reasonably well with this general definition.

**Cognitive and Cognitive-Behavioral Theories of Personality**

One way of considering the transference concept is to do so in light of George Kelly’s personal construct theory as a framework for understanding personality (Kelly, 1955). In this model people categorize the world around them, other people, and themselves in terms of adjective concepts that they define in idiosyncratic ways, and these constructs are mediators of interpretation, decision, and action for each person. Significant others are central to the constructs each person forms, according to Kelly, because the individual formulates these adjective-based constructs for the function of defining how particular significant others are similar to and different from each other (and from the self). Mischel’s cognitive social learning reconceptualization (1973) assumes that personal constructs of this kind are integral to cognition and Mischel’s model thus advances Kelly’s (1955) theory by explicitly defining such constructs as acquired by means of basic social learning mechanisms. In Mischel’s model, situational stimuli evoke personal constructs, expectancies, encoding strategies, and self-regulation.

Our model of transference and the relational self is also grounded in personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) as well as in Mischel’s later conception of the cognitive affective processing system (CAPS, Mischel & Shoda, 1995). In this case new people who are minimally similar to significant others activate significant-other representations and this has a variety of perceptual, affective, and behavioral consequences. At the same time, our model is integrative across psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and cognitive-behavioral approaches, as noted (Andersen & Saribay, 2006). It is in essence a cognitive model, but is heavily reliant conceptually on basic learning processes and interpersonal psychodynamic thought (Sullivan, 1953) linking the self to
significant others and bringing motivation and emotion into special relief.

**Personality Prototypes as Mental Representations**

It is worth noting that other work by Mischel and colleagues on personality prototypes (Cantor & Mischel, 1977, 1979) also indirectly influenced the development of the transference paradigm. This early research utilized a recognition-memory paradigm to show that personality prototypes can be used to go beyond the information given about a new person. Importantly, traits were conceived by the researchers as cognitive concepts in the eye of the beholder (see also Kenrick & Stringfield, 1980) that influence implicit personality assumptions people make to interpret others. That research prompted later work comparing traits as prototypes with more elaborate “caricatures” of people or stereotypes, revealing that representations labeled by an adjective (trait prototypes) are treated as particular “features” of a person or type of person, while representations labeled by a noun tend to be seen as encompassing the whole personality, and the former are thus less rich and distinctive than the latter (Andersen & Klatzky, 1987), and are used less efficiently in processing (Andersen, Klatzky, & Murray, 1990).

This evidence led to the hypothesis that representations of significant others should be those that are the richest and most distinctive of the representations in memory, thus offering a particularly powerful tool for encoding stimuli, as supported by the first experimental demonstration of the phenomenon in the paradigm adapted from Cantor & Mishel (1977; Andersen & Cole, 1990, Study 3). This effect has been replicated repeatedly by now and using various control conditions, and the work has also examined numerous precise hypotheses about affect, motivation, and behavior in transference (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995; Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996; Baum & Andersen, 1999; Berenson & Andersen, 2006; Berk & Andersen, 2000, 2008; Chen, Andersen, & Hinkley, 1999;
Glassman & Andersen, 1999a, b; Reznik & Andersen, 2007).

Dispositions and the Uniqueness of a Person

What makes an individual unique, such as his or her personality signature in the CAPS model, has periodically been the focal point in conceptualizing personality (Allport, 1937; Kelly, 1955; see also Higgins, 1990). That is, what is idiographic is of importance in understanding the person beyond what is nomothetic, general, or global. In our research, significant-other representations are unique to each person as are the features or qualities that describe that significant other, even though the process by which these representations are activated and applied to a new person is a commonly shared process (Andersen & Chen, 2002). Hence, we would argue that a combined idiographic-nomothetic approach is needed.

Evidence Supporting Transference and Relational-Self Processes

Procedural Preliminaries

Research on transference is conducted in a two-session paradigm with participants in the first session naming and describing a significant other in self-generated sentences consisting of an equal number of positive and negative items (of two to six words each) and then rank ordering these items according to their descriptiveness of this other. Some of these features – which are typically statements about the significant other’s likes and dislikes, interests, beliefs, attitudes, habits, typical behaviors or styles (e.g., likes to think about economics, plays the piano, has a quick temper) – are then intermixed with irrelevant filler items by the researchers and used in a later (allegedly unrelated) experiment. In the experiment, participants are randomly assigned to a condition in which they learn about a new person who is either described by some of these same features the participant listed earlier to describe the significant other or is not. There is thus a minimal similarity created between the new person and the significant other in one condition.
In a yoked control condition, these features are instead derived from those that another 
participant listed about his or her significant other. This one-to-one yoking of one participant in 
the control condition with one in the transference condition means that, when averaged across all 
participants, those in the resemblance and control conditions are in fact exposed to exactly the 
same features. After learning about the new person, participants complete dependent measures. 

*Inference and Memory*

The initial research on transference examined how an activated significant-other 
representation is reflected in memory for a new person. Participants have been shown to “fill in 
the blanks” about the new people using their prior knowledge, for example in a recognition-
memory paradigm (adapted from Cantor & Mischel, 1977). Our work has shown this with 
significant-other representations. That is, upon learning about a new person who minimally 
resembles a significant other, people are more likely to infer that this new person has other 
features of their significant other as well. In fact, people report being more confident that they 
learned particular features about the new person when they did not – *if* the new person minimally 
resembled the significant other (rather than reflecting a control condition) and if the feature itself 
also described the significant other (e.g., Andersen & Cole, 1990; Andersen et al., 1995). If an 
individual learns that a new person likes to sew and it turns out that the individual’s own mother 
likes sewing too and is, in addition, assertive, the individual will be more likely to misremember 
learning that the new person is also assertive.

This effect occurs even when the interpersonal stimuli are presented subliminally 
(Glassman & Andersen, 1999a), and thus the process does not require that one is consciously 
aware of the stimuli presented for them to evoke transference. The effect also does not require 
effort, and cannot readily be controlled, i.e., it is automatic (see Andersen, Moskowitz, Blair, &
Nosek, 2007) and can persist over time, at least for a week (Glassman & Andersen, 1999b). This is important because it suggests that the effect is pervasive, is not simply an artifact, and can affect impressions of other people and the self without the individual’s awareness.

Many potential experimental artifacts have been ruled out as explanations of these findings. For example, one might argue that the fact that these features were self-generated by participants could account for the effect (Greenwald & Banaji, 1989). When stimulus words have been self-generated, enhanced memory for those words may result. Since participants in the significant-other resemblance condition generated the features about their significant others themselves, a control condition consisting of features that were also self-generated, such as those based on representations of those who are not significant, can be used. When the representation is of a significant other, the inference and memory effect is stronger relative to other representations tested (such as those for stereotypes) and relative to no representation at all (but still self-generated features) (e.g., Andersen et al., 1995; Glassman & Andersen, 1999a). Thus, the effect is plainly not due simply to self-generation or to stereotyping.

The effect occurs as well regardless of the valence of the significant other, that is, whether the significant other is positive or negative in the individual’s eyes (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996; Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). The effect also occurs regardless of what kind of self-discrepancy the individual may have based on individual differences in perceived self-standards and discrepancies. That is, regardless of whether or not one falls short of an ideal from a parent’s perspective or falls short of what one should be (or has an obligation to be) from that parent’s perspective, this effect holds (Reznik & Andersen, 2007). Likewise, it holds whether or not one was psychologically and physically abused by a parent (Berenson & Andersen, 2006), and whether or not one is depressed for two or more weeks as in
major depression (Andersen & Miranda, in press). The transference process occurs regardless of these individual differences, using this measure, even though individual differences do moderate transference in more nuanced ways, i.e., in the specific emotional and motivational reactions the individual has in transference (noted below).

*Evaluation and Facial Affect*

People form evaluations of other people and things very quickly and quite automatically (e.g., Bargh, Chaiken, Raymond, & Hymes, 1996). This is so as well when it is the significant-other representation that is activated and the overall evaluation of this significant other is thus also activated. When a new person resembles the significant other, this new person will be evaluated as the significant other is evaluated – whether positively or negatively. This is akin to schema-triggered affect (Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986). Those who encounter a new person who minimally resembles a positive significant other come to evaluate the new person more positively relative to the control condition (Baum & Andersen, 1999) and more positively than if the person minimally resembles a negative significant other (Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000). This effect occurs across a variety of significant others, e.g., even when the significant other is a parent and the individual has an actual-ideai or an actual-ought self-discrepancy from the parent’s standpoint (Reznik & Andersen, 2007; see Higgins, 1987).

Indeed, when the significant other is positively-regarded, there should also be an immediate positive emotional response, and the evidence supports this. When the new person resembles a positive versus a negative significant other this evokes more positive affect revealed in facial expressions, recorded covertly, which occurs relatively immediately, i.e., in the few seconds it takes to read relevant descriptors about the new person (Andersen et al., 1996). When
this new person is similar to a positive or a negative significant other, immediate facial
expressions reflect the overall affect the individual has toward the significant other, re-
experienced toward the new person. The relative immediacy of the response may reflect
automatic evaluation (Bargh, Chaiken, Raymond, & Hymes, 1996) in transference. This effect
occurs, moreover, even when the significant other is a parent who was abusive while the
individual was growing up (Berenson & Andersen, 2000). Often people indicate that they love
their parents regardless of unpleasant (or even dangerous) past experiences with these parents,
and this positive evaluation too is reflected in immediate facial affect that is positive (Berenson
& Andersen, 2006).

Expectancies

Wrapped up with knowledge about significant others is knowledge about how each
significant other relates to and interacts with the individual. People have beliefs about how
accepting or rejecting their significant others have been, and these beliefs ought to carry over to
similar others in transference. Indeed, research suggests expectancies for acceptance or rejection
from significant others are also activated in transference and applied to the new person in
transference. When the significant other is positive, the similar new person is expected to be
more accepting and less rejecting than when the significant other is negative, a difference not
arising in the control condition (Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000).

Thus, the individual expects to be liked or disliked by the person according to his or her
expectations regarding the significant other, and this holds across the individual differences thus
far assessed, including the type of self-discrepancy one has from a parent’s point of view (Reznik
& Andersen, 2007), whether or not the significant other has typically satisfied or failed to satisfy
the individual’s goals for affection (Berk & Andersen, 2007), and whether or not the parent was
previously abusive (Berenson & Andersen, 2006). Generalized expectations of rejection are known to be linked to relationships in memory (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996; Downey & Feldman, 1996) and such relational expectancies can also influence how one expects to be regarded when a significant-other representation is primed (e.g., Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990).

**Interpersonal Behavior**

Ways of behaving with the significant other should be activated in transference as well and expressed in behavior with the new person and in fact should evoke a self-fulfilling prophecy – behavioral confirmation. The new person should come to fulfill what was expected of him or her. Indeed, individuals having an unstructured phone conversation with another person who is a stranger and also resembles a positive (vs. negative) significant other – or does not – actually evoke behavioral confirmation from the new person (Berk & Andersen, 2000). An audiotape can show that the new person’s portion of the conversation expresses the same positive or negative affect that the individual expected, based on how positively or negatively regarded the significant other is, and this did not occur in the control condition, when the new person did not resemble a significant other. Such effects are obtained based on the ratings of independent judges who are blind to condition. Other evidence suggests that it is not that people consciously try to elicit expected confirming behavior from the target of behavioral confirmation (e.g., Chen & Bargh, 1997), but that the effect is readily elicited without intention, as we assume is the case in transference. Without realizing that he or she is doing it, a person may behave toward a new person as though she is a former love, and the new person may end up at least starting to respond in kind as the former love would.

**Motivation and Goals**

People’s motives and goals with significant others should also be stored with those
representations in memory, and they are. Hence, they are activated and applied when the significant-other representation is activated. For example, the motivation to be close to positive significant others is activated in transference. People are more motivated to approach a new person and be emotionally open and disclosing when the new person is at least minimally similar to a positive significant other or avoid such closeness when the new person resembles a negative significant other (Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000). Beyond this, when a loved significant other has tended to reject one’s bids for love and acceptance, the goal for affection would not be satisfied, a fact no doubt stored in knowledge about the relationship (Berk & Andersen, 2008). Hence, when such a significant other is activated in transference, it should disrupt positive affect while also leading to less closeness motivation relative to what is experienced in a control condition, and this is exactly what occurs. Indeed, increased hostility toward the new person is experienced when this person resembles the significant other who did not satisfy one’s affection goals.

As an interesting correlate, when the significant other in transference is kin (implying that the relationship is unlikely to be terminated by either person), the more hostility elicited in this kind of transference, the more the individual also engaged in overt behavior designed to gain acceptance and liking from the new person (Berk & Andersen, 2008). The effect may have been restricted to kin and not have occurred among friends and others because the former relationships are unlikely to be dispensed with. Unachieved goals with the significant other are evidently pursued in transference as affect becomes hostile in response. The mixed message likely to be sent in transference by communicating hostility and also being effortfully solicitous of affection could prove confusing and frustrating to others.

Interestingly, evidence shows that various kinds of goals (rather than only affection
goals) are activated when a significant-other representation is activated. Research on priming shows that priming a significant-other representation influences goal-directed behavior – to compete, achieve, or help – if these goals tend to be experienced with the significant other (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003a, 2003b).

*The Self in Relation to the Other*

In fact, one’s entire sense of self should change as well in transference to be in line with the self that is experienced with the significant other. With each significant other, a different version of the self should be recruited and experienced, as shaped in the context of that relationship. For example, one may be soft-spoken with one’s mother and try to be particularly helpful, and yet one may be assertive and seek leadership positions with peers. All of these ways of thinking about the self and acting make up the self, e.g., both soft-spoken and assertive, but they vary in terms of the interpersonal context in which they are activated, consistent with Mischel’s IF-THEN theory (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Each is activated when the significant-other representation is activated (Andersen & Chen, 2002).

This is what the evidence shows. Controlling for baseline self-definition (that is elicited at pretest, Hinkley & Andersen, 1996) the “relational self” with the particular significant other is re-experienced with the new person, regardless of whether the significant other was positively or negatively regarded. The content of the self with the significant other, and also the valence of the content, flows into the working self-concept at the moment – when the significant-other representation is activated.

Thus, the relational self active at any moment depends on the context and whether or not a new person in the context is similar to a significant other. IF relevant triggering cues are encountered in a new person, THEN the significant-other representation will be activated, and
the self-with-that-significant-other will become the operative self-concept at the moment.

*Self-Regulation*

In transference, it is not only that the working self-concept is changed via the implicit activation of a significant-other representation; it is also that self-regulation is evoked in this context. One way this should occur is that, when there is influx of negative self-with-significant-other features to the working self-concept, a predicament that should be threatening, there should be a self-defensive, compensatory response – as seen in response to other threats (see Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Steele, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988) – and this should happen when a significant other linked to a disliked version of the self is activated in transference (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996; Reznik & Andersen, 2005). In transference, then, the negative self-with-other influx should lead to an even greater influx of positive features into the working self-concept, positive features not part of the self-with-other (i.e., the relational self), protecting the self-image in the face of threat, and it does (Hinkley & Andersen, 1996; Reznik & Andersen, 2005).

Moreover, one protects not only the self in transference in the face of threat, but rather, one may protect the significant other as well under some circumstances. This other-protective regulation may occur because it is beneficial for people to believe that their significant others are basically good and loving, despite what flaws they have. Hence, people mentally transform flaws of significant others into quirks, charming idiosyncrasies, or even virtues (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1993). If this process occurs regularly and is well-practiced as one maintains the relationship, then it may end up occurring relatively automatically in transference.

This is what the data suggest. As noted earlier, automatic facial affect that arises in transference tends to reflect the overall affect associated with the significant other. Beyond this, when participants are presented with negative features about a new person derived from their
positive significant other, their immediate facial expressions become more positive than when they are presented with positive features, a pattern not observed in the control condition (Andersen et al., 1996). Hence, the emotion exhibited in facial expression seems to transform the negative valence of the feature so that it is positive, and in sync with the overall positive affect associated with the significant other. This evidence suggests that self-regulation occurs in response to negative information encountered about the new person because the negative feature is one that the liked or loved significant other has, which could in principle threaten positive regard for the significant other. Such self-regulation could presumably extend as well to negative behaviors or emotions of the significant other when these are encountered in a new person

Prior maltreatment by a significant other and affect. As implied, a related form of self-regulation should be evoked in transference when a negative emotion often expressed by the significant other is encountered as an emotional expression of a new person in transference. Specifically, a cue especially relevant to the build-up of tension prior to abusive behavior by a significant other who has a history of psychologically and physically maltreating the individual should be particularly negative and yet evoke self-regulation. That is, cues like irritability and anger on the part of the significant other are likely to serve as signals to the onslaught of abuse and may evoke self-regulation to ward off its consequences. Research has thus examined how individuals abused by a parent in childhood (or not) respond in transference when the new person is showing this same pattern, i.e., becoming increasingly irritable while waiting for the interaction to begin, with the aim of examining self-regulation (Berenson & Andersen, 2006).

Indeed, in spite of exhibiting immediate positive facial affect in transference relative to a control condition, abused individuals exhibited negative feelings. When the new person
resembled the participant’s parent (versus not), those who had been abused by that parent felt mistrust toward the new person, expected to be rejected by him or her, were particularly indifferent to being disliked by the new person, and reported significantly more negative mood. However, when the additional cue was presented – that the new person was becoming irritable and angry – those in transference showed more positive facial affect relative to those in the yoked control condition, regardless of abuse status, presumably to protect one’s overall regard for the significant other. Abused participants showed no less positive facial affect than did non-abused participants in response to this cue. Such an other-protective regulatory response could be unwise if the new person who resembles an abusive significant other happens in fact to be abusive as well; that is, it could perhaps open the door to abuse in a new relationship. Interestingly, when the new person resembled the participant’s own parent and was also becoming increasingly irritable and angry, abused participants showed dramatically less negative affect than participants in all other conditions in response to this cue, an indifference that may reflect what is termed in the abuse literature as “emotional numbing.”

Self-standards and self-discrepancies in affect. Another way of thinking about self-regulation and transference arises from a consideration of how one may fall short of the standards held by a significant other and experience a self-discrepancy from this other’s standpoint – along with the emotional vulnerability associated with the relevant self-discrepancy. In this research (Reznik & Andersen, 2007), the primary aim was to determine whether or not implicit activation of a significant-other representation indirectly activates the standards the significant other holds for the individual and the individual’s actual sense of self, which are often different – i.e., the self-discrepancy (e.g., Higgins, 1987) and self-regulatory focus (e.g., Higgins, 1997) when with the significant other. A discrepancy between one’s actual self and one’s ideal
self (hopes about the self) or one’s ought self (obligations of the self) should precipitate
dejection-related affect (based on the activated actual-ideal discrepancy) or agitation-related
affect (based on the activated actual-ought discrepancy). This is what the evidence showed.
These affective states emerge in transference as predicted when the new person minimally
resembles a parent from whose standpoint the individual has a self-discrepancy.

On the other hand, when cues are encountered about the new person in transference that
directly evoke the parent’s standard (i.e., when the new person’s emphasizes his/her greatest
hopes for new friends or what he/she sees as friends’ greatest obligations), this should trigger the
regulatory functions of the standards activated as a function of transference. That is, ideal
standards (i.e., hopes) are associated with a promotion focus, or a focus on eagerly working
toward potential gains, whereas ought standards (i.e., obligations) are associated with a
prevention focus and a vigilance to threat to avoid losses. Regulatory vigilance should feed and
exacerbate agitation-related affect while regulatory eagerness should overturn or reduce
dejection-related affect, the opposite regulatory effect, which is what the data showed.
Individuals in the transference condition with an actual–ideal discrepancy from their parent’s
perspective who also encountered a cue evoking the parent’s ideals showed a regulatory
eagerness that neutralized dejection whereas the parallel cue encountered by individuals with an
actual-ought discrepancy in transference produced no parallel reduction in agitation.

Future Directions

The complex, situation-contingent responses we have shown in transference offer
evidence in support of a relational if-then conceptualization of personality and open the door to
future research that can further explicate the exigencies of human behavior and personality as a
function of immediate situational cues. For starters, significant others are not simply “positive”
or “negative” but rather comprise levels of satisfaction and ambivalence that have precise implications for what will be experienced when these significant-other representations are activated that are worthy of continued examination, extending research on the activation of standards held from the standpoint of a significant other and prior abusive behavior of that significant other as ways of operationalizing that ambivalence. Significant others may be loved and yet associated with considerable painful affect. Far more research on these matters is needed, including that focusing on emotion and regulation of emotion in transference. It is also of considerable conceptual significance to know whether or not or exactly how individuals are able to prevent or overturn the processes of transference altogether once the conditions for it (i.e., the triggering cues) are present in a situation. The capacity of the individual to regulate what is otherwise a rather automatic response evoked implicitly and unintentionally so as not to be buffeted about by it is worth better understanding, assuming such a capacity exists.

On another level, determining the conditions under which positive interpersonal results of transference may arise, rather than only difficult or negative ones, would be valuable in revealing the contours of positive interpersonal responses related to prior knowledge of significant others. To take one example, under some conditions it should be that the individual not only makes particular errors in forming interpretations and expectancies about the new person, but may acquire the gift of careful attention to him or her and the motivation to understand him or her e.g., through empathy. Such positive outcomes of transference have gone under-examined.

Conclusion

The Relational Self:

In sum, our integrative model of the self and personality known as the relational self was inspired in part by Mischel’s (1968) observation of cross-situational variability in behavior, and
in particular by his work integrating such findings with those showing stability within people based on the cognitive-affective processing system and their personality signature (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). In our research, the finding that the significant other can be activated at any moment based on triggering cues in a situation reflects the tight link between the situation and a person’s responses at the moment including affect, expectation, and the experience of the self. We assume that the process by which the mental representations of significant-others are activated, thus indirectly activating the self when with the significant other, reflects a constant affecting behavior in predictable ways. At the same time, we assume that the particular pattern of responses in response to that activation is unique to the person and to the relationship, even if rather consistent over time (when similar cues are encountered). The self and personality experienced at any moment is, in this way, contingent on cues in the environment combined with the chronic accessibility of significant-other representations. Such representations, when activated in transference, activate the version of the self one is with this other. Therefore, the significant-other representations available in memory to be activated are quite constant over time, as is one’s sense of self in relation to each significant other. Effects thus occur in IF-THEN terms – IF you are in the company of someone who resembles a significant other, THEN you become the person you are when with that significant other. This process occurs even in individualistic cultures such as the U.S. (where the research was done) as well as across gender and without pre-selection for any special attentiveness to relationships.

Ultimately, the conceptual and empirical contributions of Mischel and his colleagues set the stage for a seismic if somewhat subtle shift in the field of personality. There is an increasing embrace of the fact that behavioral variability is central to human personality and ways to examine the texture and richness of that behavioral variability rather than leaving it aside as error
variance, and this can enrich our understanding of individual persons. Our model fits within the IF-THEN tradition in personality, as a relational IF-THEN model, which can be considered as one of a number of IF-THEN models of personality to arise in the last two decades (see also, e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; English & Chen, 2007).

Overall, our research reveals the centrality of significant others for understanding personality, particularly in terms of the affect, expectations, behavior, and versions of the self expressed from moment to moment. It combines insights from psychodynamic theory with those from social cognition and learning theory to provide an integrative model of personality. Inspired by Mischel’s insights, the work binds together diverse areas of psychology in an effort to map the complex topography of human personality, incorporating both a person’s own history and the current situation, and does so in a way that reflects what is essential about an individual.
References


Psychology, 59, 192-201.


and the Pope are watching me from the back of my mind. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 26, 435-454.


