

Challenges in conceptualising ‘cultural countertransference’: An interpretive phenomenological analysis of therapists’ experiences

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, a burgeoning body of psychoanalytic literature has examined sociocultural context as it relates to intrapsychic and interpersonal processes. The present article aims to extend these psychoanalytic contributions through exploration of the phenomenon ‘cultural countertransference’. Cultural countertransference (CCT) may be an important resource to understand cultural nuances occurring within the therapeutic dyad and it may be a stimulus for psychotherapists to examine personal cultural biases, blind spots and frameworks for relating. However, a paucity of research exists on the use of culturally informed aspects of countertransference. This patterning is reflected in South Africa whereby a relative silence has encapsulated literature on cultural dynamics operating from within the client-therapist relationship, despite the country’s fraught socio-political history. As such, this study sought to explore six South African psychotherapists’ understandings of culture and countertransference within the therapeutic encounter. Explorative findings from an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed that participants found conceptualising CCT challenging, and this appeared to impede application in clinical work. The following themes emerged from the interviews: an externalisation of cultured identity; cultural sameness and denial; difficulty defining countertransference; difficulty marrying culture and countertransference into a unified construct; a limited engagement with CCT as a construct; and CCT as a pathologising construct.