Psychoanal Cult Soc (2024) 29:36–50
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-023-00421-5

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘Transference is love’: Love and the logical impossibility of collective life in Lacan and Simmel

Daniel R. Smith[1]

Published online: 1 February 2024

Abstract This article argues that Freud’s concept of ‘transference-love’ – the phenomenon where patients fall in love with their psychoanalysts – could become the basis for a theory of collective life. Freud’s radical claim that transference-love, despite its immoral appearance, is real love is situated in relation to the problems facing the sociology of romantic love: modern couples are problematised for being unable to provide a normative foundation for not only sexual desire, but social solidarity outright. This article restates the problem: transference is not a lesson in how love resists norms, but how love is resistant to logic. Transference-love arises out of a social condition Georg Simmel called life’s fragmentary character, marked by asymmetries appearing symmetrical: instead of transference being a case where we fall in love with the wrong person, transference is a case where our mistaken apprehensions of others is the precondition for our bonds to them. Viewed through the phenomenon of transference, love illuminates this asymmetrical form of life. It is argued that transference could be understood, sociologically, as demonstrating a logical impossibility to collective life: that a shared life together is possible, but nevertheless relies upon something that evades each of us.

Keywords love · transference · Simmel · Lacan · flirtation

✉ Daniel R. Smith
SmithD34@cardiff.ac.uk

[1] School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Ave, Cardiff CF10 3NN, UK

Introduction

Sigmund Freud did not intend his 'Observations on transference-love' (1915/1958) to become a contribution to the sociology of love. Originally written as a technical paper, Freud sought to advise psychoanalysts on how to handle the fact that (female) patients fall in love with their (male) analysts. But in that advice, Freud made two crucial observations on the nature of love that this article wants to pursue. First is that whilst 'transference-love' was considered to be 'abnormal', it was nevertheless genuine and revealed something about the nature of love (Freud, 1915/1958, p. 168). Second was that transference revealed love to be resistant and a threat, to the normative foundations of social life. 'We should not forget', Freud (1915/1958, p. 169) reminds us, 'that these departures from the norm constitute precisely what is essential about being in love'. These two facets of 'transference-love' underline its definition: how we fall in love is inseparable from why we fall in love. Why we fall in love is, simply, because we have been loved in the past. How we fall in love is through our earlier history of being loved being repeated in the present; the latter being the essence to the phenomenon of transference (Forrester, 1992). Read sociologically, however, 'Observations on transference-love' could be understood as demonstrating something about love as a social form: we can fall in love with seemingly anyone under the right conditions of repetition, but falling in love with others unravels social relations and their moral foundations.

Transference-love, whatever else it is (clinically, psychoanalytically), will be treated in this article as a phenomenon that tells us about the problem, and possibility, of 'society'. Love highlights a logical impossibility to the foundations of collective life: on the one hand, being able to fall in love with anyone is a way in which social bonds are made (and multiplied); but, on the other, those bonds of love unravel the normative foundations of social bonds (and dissolve social life). Viewing love through the lens of transference offers insight into this problem as it is at the centre of the sociology of romantic love at present.

Eva Illouz's *The End of Love* (2019) has claimed that contemporary romantic love is predicated upon 'unloving', itself producing a 'sociology of negative relations': what defines love today is our freedom to end it; to leave love relationships as freely as we entered into them. Illouz situates 'unloving' as a consequence of two transformations to romantic life: first being that collective, normative frameworks guiding the choice of a romantic partner have fallen away and the second being the individual's emotional introspection over who they choose produces uncertainty and anxiety ('Are they the One? What if someone else is out there?') (Illouz, 2012). As such romantic love produces 'cold intimacies' that are no basis for collective solidarity as the form of the couple is unstable, uncertain; unmoored to wider normative frameworks (Carter & Arocha, 2020).

To Illouz 'unloving' should be understood as a state which the classical sociologist Emile Durkheim called anomie, 'the breakdown of social relationships and social solidarity' (Illouz, 2019, p. 4). Illouz is not alone in her concern. Sociologists have, for almost three decades, been keen to announce the breakdown of social solidarity and the moral foundations of collective life given the state of

romance (Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003). Situating this literature within the context of 'transference-love', this article argues that we need to separate out two conceptual facets to love which, in experience, we consider to be one and the same. The first is love as sexual desire, and the second is love as a social bond of fidelity of one to another (predicated upon sexual desire). Illouz, Giddens, and others consider love as sexual desire to be no normative basis upon which to make social bonds, if normativity means fidelity to lover and beloved. But what Freud's (1915/1958) observations on transference-love was able to situate was how a social bond based upon sexual desire was prone to multiply because sexual desire is unconscious desire seeking to realise repressed, infantile wishes that could be repeated ad infinitum. Love resists normativity not because sexual desire has no truck with norms, but because unconscious (sexual) desire shows *how* bonds of love are made: it finds expression in One, but is unlimited in its scope. As such the social bond of love resists logical limits.

To make this argument, the article is structured in three stages. First, I place the sociology of love in relation to Georg Simmel's writing on love (1921–1922/1986a; 1921–1922/1971) and Jacques Lacan's *Transference* (2001/2015), book VIII of his seminar. Simmel and Lacan's observations on love are used as a way to, conceptually, separate out love as sexual desire and love as a social bond predicated upon sexual desire. Here, it is argued that the problem of transference-love – that we could love anyone, but undo our bonds at the same time – is that the social bond of love is founded on an asymmetry that appears symmetrical. Second, the article argues that this asymmetrical social form of love, illustrated by the phenomenon of transference, expresses the fragmentary character of life in modernity (Simmel, 1916/2012). Transference is love not because love is, solely, or exclusively, resistant to the normative frameworks we inhabit, but rather because transference-love illuminates this asymmetrical form of life.

Third, and finally, the article seeks to overturn Freud's (1915/1958, p. 166) claim transference-love 'is one for which there is no model in real life'. Or more precisely, the way one must act in cases of 'transference-love' is 'one for which there is no model in real life'. If transference-love captures the social form of a fragmentary modern life, there must be a model for transference in our lives: that model is flirtation (Simmel, 1909/1986b). By treating the social game of flirtation as mirroring the phenomenon of transference, I conclude that flirtation tells us not only what love is, but how the form of collective life is founded on the logical impossibility of love's asymmetry. Transference, viewed through the practice of flirtation, both tells us how a shared life together is possible, but nevertheless relies upon something that evades each of us.

The Problem of the Romantic Couple: Simmel and Lacan on Love

Sociologists who examine romantic love focus on the couple, two people defined by their (sexual) desire for one another, and wish to live for each other (socially) (Carter & Arocha, 2020; Bowring, 2019; Carter & Duncan, 2018; Seebach, 2017; van Hooff, 2013; Illouz, 2012; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992).

When the classical sociologist Émile Durkheim explored anomie in *Suicide* (1897/2006, pp. 232–239), he took the rise of divorce rates and the prevalence of 'the single man' as an index for the dissolution of social bonds: only marriage could regulate and limit sexual desire (as men knew where sex could be had) and morally sanction the union of sexual relations (see Bowring, 2019). We may be a long way from Durkheim's phallocentric views on marriage as a sacrament regulating sexual desire, but a 2012 British Social Attitudes survey found that whilst 98 per cent of people believed sex outside of marriage, and divorce, to be morally permissible, 89 per cent still believe that extramarital sex or affairs to be wrong: 'Infidelity is usually seen as a serious transgression and often means the end of the relationship' (Carter & Duncan, 2018, p. 55; see van Hooff, 2013). The couple, therefore, is taken to be a precarious form in the social organisation of sexual desire, a belief that animates Illouz's recourse to Durkheim's anomie in *The End of Love* (2019).

As with Durkheim, Illouz sees modern romance as unable to regulate sexual desire:

> It is a desire that properly lacks an object, and that, in lacking an object, is insatiable. This creates a particular form of action, one that is at once in perpetual motion (moves from one object to another) and lacks an overarching purpose. (Illouz, 2019, p. 29)

Illouz is saying that the couple form of today, where sexual desire is what brings two people together and is also what makes people move on to other partners, is unable to provide an end, or purpose, to desire (see also Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 180f). The passage is contradictory as sexual desire is *not* lacking an object (the object being the person one enters a sexual, romantic relationship with). To Illouz, rather, sexual desire contradicts the purported normative purpose of the couple: to limit sexual desire between two people. By contrast, Sven Seebach's *Love and Society* (2017) views the couple form as offering the opposite to the Illouzian perspective: instead of the couple being unable to limit sexual desire, Seebach considers the couple form as a way of decentring individual desire and alternative sexual partners in favour of commitment to lover-beloved: the couple creates durability 'by turning the shared past and the shared subjective futures into the central focus for the creation of durability' (p. 137). Either the couple form is unable to limit sexual desire or the couple form decentres sexual desire as it prioritises the shared subjective universes of self-other and lover-beloved. Either an individual is able to find in the couple a means for their sexual desire to be realised or find that desire decentred as they realise themselves as One-of-Two.

Contemporary romance seems to be asking the couple form to do two things at once: one as a relation based on sexual desire; two a social bond of I for Thou (shaped by sexual desire). In this regard Georg Simmel's 'Eros, Platonic and Modern' (1921–1922/1971) is helpful in untangling this issue, for he saw the couple as staging a problem of modernity: modern society obliges individuals to experience the world primary 'through inner reactions, indeed *as* an inner world' (Simmel, 1911/2020, p. 317: on Simmel's theory of modernity see Harrington, 2020; Kemple, 2018; Pyyhtinen, 2017; Symons, 2017). What Simmel (1916/2012) noted about this inner worldly way of experiencing the world was that it transforms the social forms

through which self-other relations are formed; social forms take on the same status as our inner reactions: they are mercurial, changeable, and fluid. Thus, modern persons are obliged to seek in social forms an answer for their individual desires, both of which are mutually unstable. Simmel (1921–1922/1971, p. 238) calls this 'the great task' for modern people, one made all the more difficult in the romantic relationship as the individual has to realise their desire in another, whilst the couple form itself has to transcend these individual desires whilst never leaving those individuals:

> In the incomparable relationship of incomparable individuals there lies a meaning which is wholly limited to that relationship and yet extends beyond its surface manifestation, not dominated or justified by a universal idea of Beauty, of Value, or of Amiability, but just by the idea of these individual existences and their perfection. (Simmel, 1921–1922/1971, p. 244)

The problem of the modern couple is not the couple form but what is being asked of this form: for two individuals to be the answer for each other's desire, whilst each other's desire being the foundation to transcend themselves whilst never going beyond their individuality.

In his 1960–1961 seminar, *Transference* (2001/2015), Jacques Lacan began with a similar problem: we think those we love have something we ourselves lack, and it is this mistaken certainty that they have something that we do not which causes us to desire them (Pluth, 2020). If we pursue this line of thought, we see that Simmel and Lacan offer a productive way out of the problem of the couple highlighted by contemporary sociology. Sociologists are unable to theorise a way out of this problem, but not because it is an antinomy or a matter of point of view (to some, couples cannot hold sexual desire; to others, couples decentre sexual desire). Rather, the problem is that sexual desire is being treated as an acquisitional good; something we 'get' from others (as we do material gifts or tokens of affection; sex being very different to sexual desire, as psychoanalysis insists upon). Instead, it would be productive to think of sexual desire, in Simmel's account, as less about acquisitional goods but what psychoanalysts call unconscious desire. Simmel certainly did not have a theory of the unconscious, but he did have a theory of individual desire which can be considered one of German idealism's antecedents to Freud's 'discovery' (ffytche, 2011).

In his *The View of Life* Simmel (1918/2010) sought to theorise the 'great task' of modern people with his concept the 'individual law'. Here, Simmel reworked Kant's categorical imperative as: 'Can I let this act define my entire life?' The act is one's entire life, from the point of view of life as a continual process of becoming. My obligation is to bring my life in line with my desires. But if my obligation is to demand that my entire life be defined in accordance with my desire to live such a life, a life that is never experienced as a whole, I never coincide with my desire to be myself. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan (1986/2008) produces a version of the same claim but through conceptual terminology inspired by Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious. Lacan's (1986/2008) reworking of Kant's categorical imperative is: 'Have you given ground relative to your desire?' or 'Do not give grounds relative to your desire' (on Simmel and Lacan's ethics see Smith, 2021; Nobus,

2017; Lee & Silver, 2012; Neill, 2011; Zupančič, 2011; Morris-Reich, 2005). To Lacan, as with Simmel, the subject can only keep on the path of (unconscious) desire insofar as they do not coincide with themselves. Desire, in Lacan, is not a good in the acquisitional sense, but 'the metonymy of being': it is how our unique personal history finds its way into the realm of signification. Unconscious desire is revealed in how we tell our story of ourselves and how that story is unified by a series of words, meanings, and associations which, whilst comprehensible by others, only have the significance they do to us as they answer our unique law of being.

When it comes to love, we find that metonymy of signification in other people. We could say that to Simmel or Lacan, 'having a type' is about (mis)perceiving the other as the answer to your individual law. Only we (and those we love) do not know this, consciously. Thus, in the self-other relationality of love Lacan outlines in *Transference*, the beloved, who 'appears to have something, to possess something special and worthwhile' (Fink, 2016, p. 35), animates this unconscious desire. Couples are orientated by unconscious desire in two opposite directions: both persons in a couple think of each other as 'having' something which only comes into being insofar the lover feels themselves lacking something. The question of what lovers and beloved do or do not 'have' turns love into a dialectic of knowledge and ignorance. Neither person knows what it is about themselves that makes them loveable to the other person: where they meet is 'that *neither one knows something* that seems to be of very great importance!' (Fink, 2016, p. 40).

The fundamental asymmetry upon which love is founded is the individuality of both lover and beloved. Thus, individuality becomes, for Simmel (1921–1922/1971, p. 244), the 'deepest mystery of *our* worldview':

> Modern love is the first to recognise that there is something unattainable in the other: that the absoluteness of the individual self erects a wall between two human beings which even the most passionate willing of both cannot remove and that renders illusory any actual 'possession' that would be anything more than the fact and consciousness of being loved back. (1921–1922/1971, p.246)

Therefore, one needs, says Simmel, 'something like an Individual Law of erotic life': a way for 'the incomparable relationship of incomparable individuals' (1921–1922/1971, p. 243) to be the answer for itself. When it comes to finding this individual law of erotic life, however, the fundamental asymmetry to love is unable to find any mutual point of expression for two reasons: one is that the beloved is not the source of any knowledge, but believed to be so; second, it is only by loving our beloved that we become the individuals we are (to ourselves, as well as each other). As to the first, Simmel writes:

> When we love, however, especially when the object of our love, unlike everything with a human soul, does not bear within itself a latent intention that disposes it to become an object of love, we feel a definite freedom of choice … And yet here too it is the *object* that we form with this activity. The movement has the form of an eclipse. … Thus, consider the maximally extreme point at which the intrinsic significance of the object approximates the limiting value of zero – indeed, it has actually reached this value. (1921–1922/1986a, p. 159)

In loving, the lover is One and the beloved becomes reduced to the 'limiting value of zero'. We know we love what we love, but what we know of what we love amounts to 'zero'. As this happens in two directions, what one is to the other, the other is not the one. One is all to the other, but the other is not-all to one. However, this logical impossibility is not a problem but 'the miracle of love' (Simmel, 1921–1922/1986a, p. 154). It is how we come to be who we are to one another. 'As one who loves', Simmel goes on to say:

> I *am* a different person than I was before, for it is not one or the other of my 'aspects' or energies that loves but rather the entire person … In the same way, the beloved as such is also a different being, arising from a different a priori than the person as an object of knowledge … There is an absolute connection and not a mere association, between love and its object only in this way: the object of love in its complete categorical significance does not exist prior to the love itself but only by means of it. (1921–1922/1986a, p. 161)

Not only does love change my entire being, but the other is changed entirely by my love: 'an absolute connection' is made between lover and beloved. But it is an absolute connection where, to reiterate the point, neither are what they are to the other. Lover and beloved, as I and Thou, are not diminished in this absolute connection but come into being as such. But the fact that this absolute connection between self and other reduces the other to zero is certainly puzzling. Love is 'a completely irrational phenomenon that resists the categories of logic' (Simmel, 1921–1922/1986a, p. 154).

Instead of thinking of this as a fault within the couple form, in what follows I want to offer this seeming logical impossibility as providing a way to conceive not only of love relations but collective life, outright. To do this, we can think of the asymmetry of love relations as the root of what Freud called transference.

Transference: Love and the Fragmentary Character of Life

Lacan said that Freud made a daring claim when he said that 'transference – is love' (Lacan, 1975/1988, p. 90). It is a daring claim because it brings out the two sides to love that trouble us: we could fall in love with anyone, and love could unravel the moral foundations of society. As histories of psychoanalysis have demonstrated, transference is both the basis of psychoanalysis's clinical efficacy and bound up with multiple moral indiscretions crossing many different areas of life and their moral lines, from men-women, doctors-patients, parents-children, marriage-infidelity, not to mention serious medicine and salacious gossip (Forrester, 1997, 1990; Appignanesi & Forrester, 1992). This blurring of norms and social worlds forms the axis of the problem Freud wants to detail in 'Observations on transference-love': the analyst, assumed to be a man, has to deal with the inevitable fall out of female patients falling in love with them.

However, if one considers Freud's two famous case histories, the Rat Man and Dora, the way transference is interpreted and handled in both cases are suspect. With the Rat Man Freud assumes he is being treated like a father whereas he is, in

fact, being treated more like the Rat Man's mother and uncle. But, as Lacan (1966/2006, p. 499) observes, even though Freud is mistaken about who he is being treated like in the analysis, he nevertheless gets to the root of the problem. Whereas in the case of Dora, Freud does realise (eventually) he is being treated more like how Dora treated her nanny than her father, he fails to adequately treat Dora (see Freud, 1905/1953, p. 105). Thus, whilst the transference rests upon cases of 'mistaken identity' (Fink, 2016, p. 2), it is more like 'some mistaken identities are less mistaken than others': transference requires us to mistake others in the right way. That is, transference is love insofar as transference rests upon a fundamental asymmetry that closes in on symmetry, as Simmel claims love does.

So, whilst transference is the essence of psychoanalysis, Freud's concern in his 'Observations on transference-love' (1915/1958) is an attempt to work out what mistaken identity is best when dealing with the thorny issues of doctors (men) and patients (women) falling in love with one another. Freud wants to tell us that 'transference is love'. But such a claim is by no means palatable. So Freud imagines his argument being received by what he calls 'a well-educated layman (for that is what the ideal civilised person is in regard to psychoanalysis)' (Freud, 1915/1958, p. 160). They are ideal because they believe what everyone believes: that 'things to do with love are incommensurable with everything else' (Freud, 1915/1958, p. 160). Such a rhetorical device is essential to not only Freud convincing us that 'transference is love', it is also a way to mediate the thorny moral and normative problems transference-love puts in place.

'Observations on transference-love' (1915/1958) tries to play different normative spheres of modern life off one another. Ostensibly, it concerns the division between the doctor's oath to heal their patients and the normative sensitivities of 'male-female' love relations that are colouring the otherwise pure landscape of the clinical setting. But through the device of the well-educated layman and their belief that love transcends all, and his own claim that 'transference is love', Freud is offering three scenarios for the outcome of the transference which reflect a differentiation of worlds: one is that doctor-patient become husband-wife, the second being that doctor stops treating the patient, and the third – and worst option of all – is that doctor-patient become lovers in secret to their spouses. The belief that love transcends all highlights the problems not of man-woman love but overlapping normative spheres of life: that there are ethics of man-woman love called marriage (scenario one); that there are professional codes of conduct and civic morals (scenario two); and, that people are willing to risk these ethics and morals for 'love' (that transcends all).

Freud's entire strategy is to preserve the belief that love does transcend all and convince us that transference-love is real love. If transference-love were not real love, Freud's argument falls apart. As he makes very clear, there are three options in dealing with the transference. One is to refuse to treat the female patient who falls in love with him and therein begin a vicious cycle of referrals from analyst to analyst. Two is to grant the patient's wish and love her back and therein give in to the resistances of the patient and fail to unburden her of the repressed desires (that which leads her to look for love in the wrong persons). The third is to neither consent, nor refuse, to love the patient. The third option is the only way. For the

dialectic of the transference that Freud discovered is that it hangs on a contradiction between a universal demand for love and a particular, repressed unconscious desire on the part of the patient. Freud needs to play the lover to allow the neurotic to 'work through' their repressed desires and refuse to be the neurotic patient's beloved in order to allow them to realise what love is: an answer to the question of one's individual law (Simmel, 1918/2010).

Psychoanalysis stages the dialectic of a universal demand for love and the unique source of one's history of love, unconscious desire, in the transference: and the only way to do this is for the analyst to entertain transference-love on a tightrope between neither accepting the love nor rejecting it; neither becoming lover nor spurning advances. Neither consenting nor refusing the love of the analysand is necessary because one needs a way to let them act out, without 'repeating in real life, what she ought only to have remembered, to have reproduced as psychical material, and to have kept within the sphere of psychical events' (Freud, 1915/1958, p. 166). Transference is how the unconscious speaks, and it speaks through the Other, cast here as the shrink who interprets words directed to them but not for them (Forrester, 1990, p. 108; 1997, pp. 77–78).

On the one hand, Freud is describing transference as the theoretical accomplishment of this intellectual project. On the other hand, Freud is talking about what the love between a man and a woman amounts to: falling in love is about the imaginary projection of one's own ego onto the beloved; being a lover is about being cast as a witness to the history of their being loved. Insofar as these two conditions are in place, we could fall in love with many, many people. As noted in the introduction, transference-love is at once a startling discovery to how we fall in love, as much as it a seeming threat to the normative foundations of social life.

However, we could rethink transference-love as less a purely technical discovery of psychoanalytic treatment, more as evidence of the social form of modernity: a world of fragmentary experiences which each and every individual is obliged to comprehend from within themselves. What Simmel called 'The Fragmentary Character of Life' (1916/2012) referred not to the fact that in modern life, as we've seen with Freud's paper, different normative spheres of life are separated from one another. Rather he saw life's fragmentary character from within individual experience: individuals are obliged to make relatively stable realities from unstable foundations and treat incompleteness as if it were complete (Smith, 2023). But 'the decisive matter' to the fragmentary character of life, 'is not simply that something relative becomes something absolute' (Simmel, 1916/2012, p. 240). Instead the decisive matter is that, in this process, there is one 'fragment' of reality that takes on the status of being both a product of life's fragmentary character and becomes privileged above all other piecemeal fragments of life's processes. Simmel (1918/2010) calls this privileged fragment the ego, and it is marked by two forms of contingency: the 'ego' is that which is both formed by life's contents and the one thing that is distinct from these content's continual transformations (Simmel, 1918/2010, pp. 73–75; Symons, 2017, pp. 44–45).

Once Simmel has made this point, he is able to observe something about modernity which helps situate why Freud, and Lacan, are right to say that transference-love is love, and why it requires handling mistaken identities and fault

lines of responsibility. Just as with the 'ego', all ways of conceptualising, and explaining, the world around us tend towards turning fragments of life into privileged contents that come to stand outside of life's processes. Thus religious, artistic, scientific, familial 'worlds' become incompatible not because they have different normative standards, but because 'each world absorbs all matter of experience exclusively according to its own principle' (Simmel, 1916/2012, p. 241). As Simmel (1916/2012, p. 247) concludes: 'Where life and worlds intersect, they create fragments – fragments of life, fragments of worlds.' Here, we can introduce the transference. For what the transference and patients demonstrate is how no fragment of the world – of science, medicine, marriage, cure and illness, love or madness – is privileged above another.

Simmel says life is profoundly fragmented because one facet of life is granted the status of both participating in life whilst being distinct from life: the ego is one such '*fragment of its own absoluteness*' (Simmel, 1916/2012, p. 240). What we witness in Freud's discussion of transference-love are two ways that *two egos* become a fragment of *each other's* absoluteness. First, that the psychoanalyst is cast as the witness to the history of unconscious desire. Transference is how the unconscious speaks, and the outcome of this is that falling in love can happen with anyone: hence the rejection of option one (love the patient back) and option two (refuse to treat the patient). Transference confirms the fact that who we fall in love with is contingent: who we cast as witness to our symptoms is neither here nor there, as our history of being loved is the metonymy of signification. The second is that our ability to be loved depends on that other we cast as a witness to our history of being loved: our symptoms can only speak insofar as there is the Other. In the first, the beloved is contingent and the symptoms of the lover are necessary. In the second, the symptoms of the lover are contingent and the beloved is necessary. Between the two, there is a fragment of absoluteness in *two* directions: two people who need one another to be each other and themselves, but nevertheless remain fragments of each other and themselves. We have asymmetrical symmetry.

Transference is love because love gives form to the fragmentary character of modern life. Freud's discovery of the unconscious in the transference is a staging of life's fragmentary character: it is how fragmentary worlds find their articulation between individuals. Transference is, in this regard, a social relation which does not conform very well to doctor-patient, nor husband-wife, nor any other, seemingly. Thus, we could say transference is a social relation that stages, at a higher level of abstraction, the profoundly fragmentary character of modernity: of how the individual is both born of, and yet distinct from, life's continual transformations; of how identities are something relative required to be absolute. Notice, too, that transference poses a way to view love as an 'absolute connection' where both are born together, but less than each other. This is why Freud (1915/1958, p. 166) will say transference is a feat for which there is 'no model for in real life'. But if transference-love captures the social form of a fragmentary modern life, there must be a model for transference in our lives: that model is flirtation.

Flirtation: Love and the Logical Impossibility of Collective Life

Transference is successful in psychoanalytic treatment insofar as the analyst neither consents nor refuses to love their patient. When it comes to the crises around sex today, the issue is framed as one of consent. On the issue of consent, Angel (2022) and Illouz (2019) have – whilst, of course, not denying the importance of consent – argued it is far from a perfect normative foundation for sexual relations. Angel's *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* (2022) points out that the model of consent is organised exclusively around yes *or* no. But in terms of how this 'yes/no' plays out, the onus is on women to grant permission to sex: men are understood to have already 'said yes', so it falls to the women to oblige the yes by way of her 'yes' or 'no'. Now whilst this scenario mirrors the asymmetry of love that Simmel, and Lacan, have theorised, it is not the asymmetry of the transference scenario. As Angel (2022, p. 12) points out, the consent scenario is completely phallocentric: 'Once a woman is thought to say yes to something, she can say no to nothing.' The 'yes' is all or nothing because the yes is on the side of the man's 'always yes'. The problem is mistaking saying yes to sex with knowing what you want, as Angel (2022, p. 9) points out: 'Woe betide she who does not know herself and speak that knowledge.' Thinking a way beyond this impasse, I want to offer Simmel's (1909/1986b) essay on flirtation as a way of thinking about how sex and love go together without coming down on one side or the other.

When it comes to that female sexual knowledge, however, Lacan's seminars on sexual relations, … *or Worse* (2011/2018) and *Encore* (1975/1998), may hinder more than help issues on sex and love. Lacan argues that humans have sex because they love, but the pleasures of the flesh is not itself a sign of love (1975/1998, pp. 4–5, 38ff). Sex is phallic, but love is not-all phallic: there is phallic *jouissance* (which is sex enjoyed between bodies), but then there is *jouissance* of the Other (feminine sexuality, upon which we cannot say or understand anything). Darian Leader's *Jouissance* (2021, p. 118) argues that whilst Lacan's thinking privileges the impossibility of the sexual relation, the purported enigma of feminine sexuality, that Angel (2022) alludes to, conceals its own phallic logic. Leader's criticisms focus on the mathematical and logical models that Lacan deploys to illustrate his claim that 'there is no sexual relation': logical models that reduce love and sex to the man's inability to make two sexes one (Chiesa, 2016). To Leader, these models become useless once the issue of human intentionality is introduced: in maths, a limit is something calculated on the basis of rates of change; with humans, they tend to treat limits as targets to reach. As Leader (2021, p. 121) points out, a limit is not a target as any parent of teenagers with credit cards has to reiterate. The point being that Lacan's logical problems in books XIX and XX of his seminar only formalise the impasses of love and sex, they do not map on to human reality.

By contrast, Simmel's discussion of flirtation can combine logic and love in a way sex and consent is unable to. To Simmel flirtation ought to be considered a social game, but one that unlike consent is not zero sum. Flirtation is defined as a state of abeyance: 'every conclusive decision brings flirtation to an end' (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 136). As such, flirtation produces a fantasy on the part of the flirted

with, which Simmel assumes is always a man: 'the whole is fantasised all the more vividly and the desire for the totality of reality is excited all the more consciously…' (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 136). However, unlike sex, which is a decisive act with a definitive climax (if understood as phallic), flirtation rests upon this eternal inconclusiveness. In this way, flirtation mirrors transference-love as it is predicated on a social relation of symmetry revealed as asymmetrical.

> The essence of flirtation … is this: Where love is present, having and not having are also present, whether in its fundament or in its external aspect. And thus where having and not having are present – even if not in reality but only in play – love, or something that fills its place, is also present. (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 134)

Flirtation gives social form to love as it demonstrates how love functions as an absolute connection between zero and one, which are brought into being together, neither diminished nor exhausted but constituted as such.

Yet this asymmetric relation is actually, Simmel claims, one of unity, and it gives way to his central thesis: flirtation becomes not only illustrative of 'the relationship between the sexes' but 'provides the prototype for countless relationships between the individual and the inter-individual life' (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 149). Simmel elaborates this prototype for the relation between individual and collective life from flirtation with a myth, one he attributes to a 'French social psychologist' (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 150). The myth concerns the role assigned to women: 'the woman as a type confronts the erotic question as an issue of All or Nothing' because 'it seems to be the universal experience of the male sensibility that the woman … holds back some ultimate, indecipherable and unattainable quality' (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 147). It appears that Simmel is pointing to that mysterious female *jouissance*, but he is explicitly stating this to be a belief that men have of women. A belief that his recourse to the 'French social psychologist' seeks to reaffirm. Due to the repression of desires modern society brings up, goes the French social psychologist's story:

> It is not simply possible to possess all the attractive women – whereas, in primitive times, such an abundance of attractive phenomena just did not exist. Flirtation is a remedy for this condition. By this means, the woman could give herself – potentially, symbolically, or by approximation – to a large number of men, and in this same sense, the individual man could possess a large number of women. (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 150)

In this story, there is a man who believes that by being flirted with he could possess every woman; and there is a woman who, no matter how loved she is, is still believed by men to be holding something back and provokes the question 'is she all or nothing?'

The way Simmel presents this myth of sex through flirtation gives social form to Lacan's logical models and with it a lesson on the social uses of mathematical limits. Lacan's 'there is no sexual relation' rests upon the claim that sexual difference is founded upon a logical asymmetry: what man is to woman, woman is not to man and vice versa (see Chiesa, 2016, p. 161; Neill, 2019, p. 9). The problem is that sexuation 'exceeds logic' (Chiesa, 2016, p. 161) in the sense that woman is to man what zero is to one: 'for One to exist at all, two are needed', which is a feat

made possible by the number zero. Yet 'zero is not identical with itself, whereas One, like all objects, is. Zero indicates a lack, it is a situation of a non-relationship in which identity is meaningless, but because it makes the lack visible, it sets in motion the movement forward' to identity (Mitchell, 1974, p. 386). Logically, whoever assumes the identity of One has no choice but to identify with the law of counting; whilst zero, the one who is not-all, is granted the freedom to choose to be included or excluded. In flirtation, we have this logical asymmetry in a social form: 'the flirt' produces the (phallic) illusion that man could possess all whilst revealing that she is not-all in her refusal to choose. Flirtation operates on this model of not-all phallic inexistence of making a lack visible, and stages a limit: to consent is to pass the limit and to refuse is to delineate the limit.

It is the flirt's not-all phallic inexistence that makes the logical impossibility to the operation of collective life visible. Flirtation 'moulds the interest of the woman in the relationship between the sexes' (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 149) to the foundation of collective life outright. Neither consenting nor refusing in flirtation

> … form aspects of a relational unity, the most extreme and passionate form of which ultimately lies in having something that one at the same time does not have. In the relationship between the sexes, the profound metaphysical loneliness of the individual – for the surmounting of which all the fondness of one person for another is only a path that leads to infinity – has achieved … a tangible configuration. (Simmel, 1909/1986b, p. 149)

Flirtation demonstrates the logical impossibility to collective existence: even in the absolute connection of self to another one glimpses their irreducible singularity as a form of loneliness. This ought to be understood as a positive, or miracle: Simmel is not saying that flirtation demonstrates that love-sex is impossible, but rather that by loving another we glimpse our singular, unique existence as something tangible. That something always eludes us, and that something is our inclusion in a life with others. This is why Simmel will insist that 'flirtation debases neither its subject nor its object' (1909/1986b, p. 149). Flirtation does not debase subject or object because it brings subject and object into being as flirt-flirted with, and always remains inconclusive. Flirtation is the antithesis of yes/no made into a synthesis: a yes that is also a no. Raised to the level of collective life, flirtation is not to consent to or refuse a life with others, but a way to give tangible expression to how you are included and excluded at one and the same time.

This was our initial problem: to some the couple was unable to limit sexual desire, whilst to others it could offer a way to delimit that desire in other forms. Either way the couple, as 'incomparable individuals', had to answer for itself. Out of this asymmetry masquerading as symmetry, transference offered us a way to see how love is resistant to the logic of difference and limit. Transference rests upon the balance of symmetry and asymmetries in the positions of those loved and beloved in the same way a fragmentary modern world has to find unity out of unalike worlds. When it comes to flirtation, we can say that its function is to be the forever, moving target in the irreconcilable difference of sexual relations in play form. Flirtation stages the lessons of transference in a fragmented modern society within a game where there is no winning or losing, only the act of engagement.

To conclude, 'transference is love' is a radical claim not because transference is a moral threat to social relations, as Freud feared it could be, but because transference shows us how bonds are made: if we could fall in love with anyone under the right conditions of repetition, then what? It would mean that a life shared with unlimited others is possible. There may well be 'no such thing as a sexual relation', but love is the impossible premise of collective life. If there is collective life, there exists at least love.

References

Angel, K. (2022). *Tomorrow sex will be good again: Women and desire in the age of consent*. Verso.
Appignanesi, L., & Forrester, J. (1992). *Freud's women*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995). *The normal chaos of love*. Polity.
Bauman, Z. (2003). *Liquid love: on the frailty of human bonds.* Polity.
Bowring, F. (2019). *Erotic love in sociology, philosophy and literature: From romanticism to rationality.* Bloomsbury.
Carter, J., & Arocha, L. (2020). Introduction. In J. Carter & L. Arocha (Eds.), *Romantic relationships in a time of 'cold intimacies'* (pp. 1–13). Palgrave Macmillan.
Carter, J. & Duncan, S. (2018). *Reinventing couples: Tradition, agency and bricolage*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Chiesa, L. (2016). *The not-two: Logic and god in Lacan.* MIT Press.
Durkheim, E. (2006). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. (J. A. Spaulding & G. Simpson. Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1897)
Fink, B. (2016). *Lacan on love: An exploration of Lacan's seminar VIII, Transference*. Polity.
Forrester, J. (1990). *The seductions of psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida.* Cambridge University Press.
Forrester, J. (1992). 'In the beginning was repetition': On inversions and reversals in psychoanalytic time. *Time & Society*, *1*(2), 287–300.
Forrester, J. (1997). *Truth games: Lies, money and psychoanalysis*. Harvard University Press.
Freud, S. (1953). Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *Standard Edition: Vol. 7* (pp. 3–122). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1905)
Freud, S. (1958). Observations on transference-love. In J. Strachey (Ed.) *Standard Edition: Vol. 12* (pp. 159–171). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1915)
ffytche, M. (2011). *The foundations of the unconscious: Schelling, Freud and the birth of the modern psyche*. Cambridge University Press.
Giddens, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: Love, sexuality and eroticism in modern societies.* Polity.
Harrington, A. (2020). Introduction. In A. Harrington (Ed.), *Georg Simmel: Essays in art and aesthetics* (pp. 1–92). University of Chicago Press.
Illouz, E. (2012). *Why love hurts: A sociological explanation*. Polity.
Illouz, E. (2019). *The end of love: A sociology of negative relations*. Oxford University Press.
Kemple, T. (2018). *Simmel.* Polity.
Leader, D. (2021). *Jouissance: Sexuality, suffering and satisfaction*. Polity.

Lacan, J. (1988). *Freud's papers on technique: The seminar of Jacques Lacan, book I.* (J. Forrester, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1975)
Lacan, J. (1998). *Encore, on feminine sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge: The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*. (B. Fink, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1975)
Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits: The first complete edition in English* (B. Fink, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1966)
Lacan J. (2008). *The ethics of psychoanalysis: The seminar of Jacques Lacan, book VII* (D. Porter, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1986)
Lacan, J. (2015). *Transference: The seminar of Jacques Lacan, book VIII.* (B. Fink, Trans.). Polity. (Original work published 2001)
Lacan, J. (2018). *…or Worse: The seminar of Jacques Lacan, book XIX.* (A. R. Price, Trans.). Polity. (Original work published 2011)
Lee, M. & Silver, D. (2012). Simmel's law of the individual and the ethics of the relational self. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *29*(7–8), 124–145.
Mitchell, J. (1974). *Psychoanalysis and feminism: A radical reassessment of Freudian psychoanalysis*. Allen Lane.
Morris-Reich, A. (2005). From autonomous subject to free individual in Simmel and Lacan. *History of European Ideas*, *31*(1), 103–127.
Neill, C. (2011). *Without ground: Lacanian ethics and the assumption of subjectivity*. Palgrave Macmilln.
Neill, C. (2019). Masculinity in crisis: Myth, fantasy and the promise of the raw. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, *25*(1), 4-17.
Nobus, D. (2017). *The law of desire: On Lacan's 'Kant with Sade'*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Pluth, E. (2020). Agalma: Commentary on Session X. In G. B. Thakur & J. Dickstein (Eds.), *Reading Lacan's seminar VIII" Transferance* (pp. 121–126). Palgrave Macmillan.
Pyyhtinen, O. (2017). *The Simmelian legacy*. Palgrave.
Seebach, S. (2017). *Love and society: Special social forms and the master emotion*. Routledge.
Simmel, G. (1971). Eros, platonic and modern. In D. Levine (Ed.), *On individuality & social forms: Selected writings* (pp. 235–248). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1921–1922)
Simmel, G. (1986a). On love: a fragment. In G. Oakes (Ed.), *Georg Simmel: On women, sexuality and love* (pp. 153–192). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1921–1922)
Simmel, G. (1986b). Flirtation. In G. Oakes (Ed.), *Georg Simmel, On women, sexuality and love* (pp. 133–152). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1909)
Simmel, G. (2010). *The view of life: Four metaphysical essays with journal aphorisms* (J. Andrews & D Levine, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1918)
Simmel, G. (2012). The fragmentary character of life (A. Harrington, Trans.). *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(7–8), 237–248. (Original work published 1916)
Simmel, G. (2020). Austin Rodin, Part II. In A. Harrington (Ed.), *Georg Simmel: Essays in art and aesthetics* (pp. 309–318). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1911)
Smith, D. R. (2021). The joke-secret and an ethics of modern individuality: From Freud to Simmel. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *38*(5), 53–71.
Smith, D. R. (2023). The sad clown paradox: A theory of comic transcendence. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *26*(1), 87–103.
Symons, S. (2017). *More than life: Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin on art.* Northwestern University Press.
van Hooff, J. (2013). *Modern couples? Continuity and change in heterosexual relationships*. Ashgate Publishing.
Zupančič, A. (2011). *Ethics of the real: Kant and Lacan.* Verso.

Daniel R. Smith is Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. He is author of, most recently, *The Fall and Rise of the English Upper Class* (Manchester University Press, 2023). His social theory has appeared in the journals *Theory, Culture & Society* and the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*.