

Parasocial Relationships Beyond Media

A theoretical reflection on the phenomenon in offline teaching contexts

Where does this phenomenon come from

In 1956, two American sociologists, Horton and Wohl, were puzzling over something that had become evident with television: audiences were developing toward program hosts something that resembled a personal bond. They called them by name, talked about them as acquaintances, felt in a relationship with someone who had never known of their existence.

The concept of parasocial relationship was born there. But the phenomenon it described was far older than the television set.

Today the context in which it is most discussed is social media: followers who develop a visceral attachment toward a YouTuber, an influencer, a content creator who has no idea they exist. It is the territory where the phenomenon is most visible, most studied, and in some ways most obvious: the physical distance and the numerical scale make the asymmetry hard to ignore.

This reflection moves elsewhere. Whenever there is a figure who speaks to many — a preacher, a philosopher, a teacher — and an audience that listens with attention and frequency, the conditions arise for this strange form of bond even without a screen in between. A bond real insofar as it is lived, imaginary insofar as it is unilateral. Neither true nor false: simply asymmetric.

We will focus on one of the contexts in which the phenomenon is most recurring and least discussed: that of teaching, when the number of students grows beyond the threshold at which a reciprocal relationship would still be possible. In particular, we are interested in the kind of transmission in which teaching also passes through the body — touch, physical correction, sequential progression authorized by the teacher — because there the phenomenon finds particularly favorable conditions to manifest itself.

How it works

When a teacher goes from a handful of students to several hundred, if not thousands, the relationship changes in nature even if on the surface it seems only the size that changes.

The structural asymmetry

The student observes, listens, builds internally a representation of the teacher. The teacher, physically in the same room, does not have the resources to do the same with each individual. It is not indifference: it is a matter of arithmetic. The asymmetry is embedded in the form of the relationship, not in the character of the people.

The projection

In the absence of direct feedback, the student fills in the gaps. They attribute to the teacher intentions, affinities, relational qualities that have never been verified in concrete experience. The result is a figure that is partly real and partly constructed: a hybrid between the person in front of you and what you need them to be.

The phenomenon has points of contact with clinical transference, without coinciding with it. In transference, the present figure reactivates relational dynamics sedimented in personal history: ways of idealizing, fearing, depending that come from afar. Here too, past experiences come into play, coloring the figure being constructed, determining which traits are noticed, which needs are attributed. The boundary is blurred, not a sharp line. The difference is that in parasocial relationships this construction occurs around a public figure shared by many, which mixes personal material with a collective image, and when hundreds of people project onto the same figure, their individual constructions tend to overlap and reinforce one another, creating something more solid and resistant than a solitary projection.

The mere exposure effect

Zajonc demonstrated that the simple repetition of a stimulus's presence, even in the absence of any interaction, produces an increase in perceived familiarity and a more positive evaluation. In teaching contexts this effect is amplified: the exposure is rhythmic, structured, imbued with meaning. Hearing the same voice every week, in a context in which one is open to learning, creates a form of intimacy that requires no reciprocity to be experienced as real.

The body as vector

In offline contexts there is a dimension that media do not fully replicate: physical presence. The live voice, gestures, bodily proximity activate response systems far more ancient than conscious reasoning: those deep circuits that regulate the sense of safety, trust, recognition by the other. This explains why offline parasocial relationships, though less studied than mediated ones, can be emotionally more

intense. The body believes in the relationship even when the mind knows it is asymmetric.

In traditions where teaching passes through physical touch this becomes even more pronounced. A postural adjustment is not a neutral gesture: it involves an evaluation, a correction, sometimes an implicit authorization to go further. That very brief bodily interaction creates a form of trust and dependence that settles at a level deeper than intellectual understanding.

Idealization and the role of authority

The teacher's public role fuels a cycle: visibility generates authority, authority reduces spontaneous critical feedback, the reduction of critical feedback reinforces idealization. The more the figure is followed, the more each individual's position in the group becomes anonymous, and the more the perceived relationship is built on image rather than encounter.

There is a paradox worth naming here: the better the teacher, the more the phenomenon intensifies. Teaching quality, clarity, charisma, depth, feeds exactly the conditions that make it difficult to receive authentic feedback. The mediocre teacher gets criticized; the excellent one gets protected by the group. Success produces a space in which authentic critical feedback finds it increasingly difficult to arrive.

An often overlooked element: epistemic dependency

In teaching contexts an additional dimension emerges that the literature on parasociality does not always bring into focus.

The student does not delegate to the teacher only the content. They also delegate the criteria by which to evaluate it, the way they decide what is true, reliable, worthy of trust. This dependency, which we might call epistemic because it concerns knowledge and judgment itself, makes it difficult to correct idealization when immersed in it: the very tool that would be needed to correct it, namely critical thinking, is already influenced by the figure itself.

The phenomenon is not pathological in itself. It is the normal way in which one learns from someone who knows more than we do. It becomes problematic when the figure becomes aware of it and begins to manage it, modulating perceived closeness to maintain the following, or not creating the conditions for the student to progressively develop critical autonomy. A good teacher, in a sense, should work toward making themselves superfluous.

When the teacher becomes part of who you are

In certain contexts, such as therapeutic training, artistic academies, spiritual schools, some craft traditions, identification with the teacher concerns not just learning. It concerns the construction of professional identity.

Being a therapist of X's school, a practitioner of Y's tradition, an artist trained with Z is not merely a description of one's path. It becomes part of who one is. The teacher is no longer simply someone from whom one has learned: they are a component of one's own story and way of being in the world.

This makes detachment even more difficult, and criticism of the figure even more threatening, because it does not call into question merely an opinion or a method, but a part of oneself. Whoever leaves or challenges the teacher does not simply change their mind: they must to some degree redefine their own identity. It is a considerable psychological undertaking, and many avoid it not out of laziness but out of a genuine need for inner continuity.

It is worth noting that this pattern is not exclusive to contexts with problematic dynamics. It can coexist with excellent training and a teacher of great integrity. The complexity lies in the fact that the intensity of identification is not necessarily proportional to the quality of the bond, neither in a positive nor a negative sense.

The collective distortion: when the group amplifies the phenomenon

There is a dimension that deserves particular attention, because it often escapes the analysis of individual relationships: what happens when many people share the same parasocial relationship with a figure.

Belonging to the group of a teacher's followers itself becomes a source of identity. It is no longer simply a matter of learning from X, but of being among those who follow X. And this implies, often without anyone making it explicit, recognizing the importance of the figure, because the value of one's belonging depends on the value of what one belongs to.

A silent but powerful pressure is thus created. Questioning the teacher does not mean simply updating an opinion: it means questioning the group, and therefore oneself as a member. Dissent becomes costly, not because anyone explicitly sanctions it, but because the very structure of the group tends to isolate critical voices.

The typical consequences of this collective dynamic are three:

- Closure to dissent. The group tends to perceive criticism as an identity threat before considering it as an argument to evaluate. Those who express doubts are seen as someone who “hasn’t understood yet”, not as someone with a legitimate point of view.
- Inflation of the figure’s value. The group has a collective interest, often unconscious, in overestimating the teacher. The more important he is, the more significant it is to belong to his following.
- Pressure toward conformity. Agreement becomes the implicit norm. Those who deviate are not simply in disagreement: they are perceived as someone who is breaking something.

This pattern is found in very different forms and intensities, from spiritual communities to professional academies, from self-help movements to large university courses. The difference in degree is enormous. The underlying structure is the same.

No villain in the story

Perhaps the most important point, and the most difficult to accept, is this: all of this can happen without anyone wanting it to.

It is not necessary for the teacher to have manipulative intentions. The group does not have to be naive or incapable of constructive criticism. The dynamic can emerge as a side effect of a relational structure that no one designed.

In a concrete way: the teacher receives signals that seem positive, no one brings real objections, consensus appears unanimous. Not because anyone is orchestrating it, but because the group, without realizing it, tends to filter critical voices. That silence can easily be mistaken for genuine agreement, becoming in the perception of the one who teaches proof of consensus.

A particularly insidious aspect is precisely this: there is no identifiable responsible party, and yet neither the student nor the teacher is necessarily seeing all aspects of the relationship for what it truly is.

An ethical question: asymmetric responsibility

If the structure produces this distortion regardless of intention, who bears the responsibility for interrupting it?

The uncomfortable answer is that this responsibility falls primarily on the teacher, not because they are guilty, but because they are the only one who has the visibility and structural power to act on the form of the relationship. The student, immersed in the phenomenon, often does not have the tools to exit it autonomously. The group, as we have seen, tends to perpetuate the dynamic for reasons of identity cohesion.

Only the figure at the center has the necessary perspective to see the situation from the outside, and the capacity to introduce constructive disruptive elements: actively seeking dissent, valuing critical voices, avoiding gestures that feed idealization, building the conditions for those who learn to develop autonomy even at the cost of drifting away.

This is not a simple task. It requires a form of renunciation of the power that the phenomenon offers, and that power, even when not actively sought, is difficult to give back.

A phenomenological note: the direction of the gaze

There is a detail worth naming, because it says something precise about the mechanism.

In a large lecture hall, in a seminar, in a frontal lesson, the teacher looks toward the group. Every student interprets that gaze, partially and ambiguously, as directed at themselves too. It is not a random illusion: it is the very geometry of the situation that produces it.

In traditions of individually guided practice the dynamic presents itself in a different form but produces similar effects. The teacher moves among the practitioners, approaches, corrects: each interaction seems personal. And in a sense it is — but it repeats, almost identically, with each of the others. What is experienced as individual attention is in reality a form of distributed care, which however the body and mind register as if it were exclusive.

The offline parasocial relationship feeds on this ambiguity. It is neither a true relationship nor a pure absence of relationship. It is something intermediate that psychology struggles to name precisely, because its tools were built for the poles: the

real encounter on one side, pure fantasy on the other. Not for the wide grey zone that separates them.

Is it negative?

The honest answer is: it depends on what is made of it.

Idealization has a function. It opens a space of trust that makes deep learning possible. The student who idealizes their teacher often learns with more attention, more dedication, more openness to change. Expecting the teaching relationship to always be perfectly symmetrical and free of projections would be unrealistic, and would likely impoverish the very experience of knowledge.

It becomes problematic when it rigidifies, when it stops being a tool and becomes an end. For the student, when identification with the figure replaces autonomous thought. For the teacher, when the following becomes a resource to manage rather than a responsibility to honor.

How to inhabit it consciously

Recognizing the structure of the phenomenon is already a step. It does not cancel the dynamics, but it creates a distance that allows navigating them with greater clarity.

On the student's side, the invitation is to develop over time a capacity for discrimination: distinguishing between enthusiasm grounded in a real encounter and what is internal construction, and between the teacher and the teaching, remembering that the former is ultimately a means for the latter. This capacity rarely appears immediately: it is refined over time, if the context favors it.

On the teacher's side, awareness requires something more difficult: renouncing part of the power the phenomenon offers. Not modulating perceived closeness to keep the group cohesive. Actively seeking critical feedback instead of waiting for it. And above all creating the conditions for those who learn to progressively develop autonomy, even at the cost of losing some followers along the way. A good teacher, in this sense, should work toward making themselves superfluous.

On the collective plane, perhaps the most overlooked: a group that cannot question its central figure has already stopped, to some extent, learning from it. Creating the conditions for dissent to be possible is not a formal exercise, but a practice that requires constant intention, on everyone's part.

Where it manifests

The phenomenon is structural whenever three conditions occur simultaneously: an asymmetric numerical ratio, a repeated and structured exposure, a recognized difference in status. Among the most recurring contexts:

- spiritual teachers and teachers of lineage traditions (particularly where transmission occurs through the body and progression is authorized by the teacher)
- university professors with large lecture courses or widely cited
- therapists who lead training courses or group supervision
- charismatic teachers in academies or professional schools

In all these cases the phenomenon does not depend on the technological medium or the individual psychology of those involved. It is a consequence of the form that the transmission of knowledge takes when it scales beyond a certain threshold.

To conclude

This reflection does not claim to exhaust a topic that would deserve far more space. It aims rather to signal something that tends to remain implicit: that the parasocial relationship is not a side effect of mediated modernity, but a recurring anthropological form that predates the web by centuries and manifests wherever the distance between the one who transmits and the one who receives exceeds a certain threshold.

It is not necessarily a problem. It can be an extraordinary tool for learning. It becomes a problem when it is not recognized, by any of the parties involved.

Further reading

Horton, D. & Wohl, R.R. — Mass communication and para-social interaction. The founding essay of the concept of parasocial relationship.

Zajonc, R.B. — Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. On the mechanism by which repetition of presence generates familiarity and positive evaluation.

Freud, S. — The Dynamics of Transference. On transference and the role of past experiences in constructing the relationship with a significant figure.

Winnicott, D.W. — Playing and Reality. On the intermediate space between external reality and inner world.

Cialdini, R.B. — Influence. On the functioning of authority and social pressure in groups.

Kohut, H. — The Analysis of the Self. On the process of idealization and differentiation in identity construction.

This text was developed by Alan Calaon with the assistance of AI tools.
