



The New Frontier: Therapists and Patients in Cyberspace

Estelle Krumholz, MSW, LCSW

In a 2000 New York Times interview, Sam Shepard observed, “The struggle with the land is finished...now the frontier is the computer, so it has become an internal thing. Computers cause protracted dreaming about what might be, and the frontier everyone is seeking is now in the imagination...That means everything-relationships, families-has taken on a new dimension...We don’t even need a family anymore; you can have an imaginary family.” (Weber, 2000 as in Gabbard, 2001). Psychotherapy is hardly immune from the new technology. Psychotherapists of various schools and modalities are grappling with what aspects of cyber-communication may be helpful to patients and also fall within ethical and legal treatment parameters.

Freud wrote to his established patients, but only adjunctively to the traditional person-to-person session, and most often when distance or forced interruptions, such as vacation, caused a disruption in the usual treatment. Today, the boundary of the therapist’s office has been stretched by new forms of communication such as e-mail, texting, Internet phone and videoconferencing.

Traditionally, little of the psychoanalytic therapist’s personal life was revealed to his/her patients. This was the practice of letting the transference develop without external intrusions, thereby allowing the patient to experience the therapist as a replication of childhood experiences. Although judicious self-disclosure is used today by many relational therapists, revelations on the Internet are a different matter. With the advent of social networks such as FaceBook, Twitter and LinkedIn, therapists now must be vigilant not only of what they post for friends and family, but also of the potential effect the postings could have on their patients. As one patient recently said to me, “I don’t want to know anything about you. I just want you to be here for me.”

It is interesting to see how creative therapists have incorporated new technology into their face-to-face work with patients, for example using technology as transitional space, and how patients have transformed their computer devices into transitional objects (Winnicott 1951). The inter-relationship between humans and machines portrayed in the recent movie, *Her*, pushes the boundary of reality

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between humans and computers. In the future practitioners will need to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable usage of technology in their practices. I will attempt to address some of these issues.

Jonathan Shedler (2006, pg.13) wrote, "The goal of psychoanalytic psychotherapy is to help people become more mindful of their experience in the here and now." In psychoanalytic psychotherapy, the patient and therapist work together in a metaphorical "potential" or "transitional" space, best described as a mixture of the literal and the symbolic, the real and yet unreal; a space where therapist and patient can "play" with feelings and ideas and, together, explore new ways of thinking. Similar to the potential analytic space, computer technology is a mixture of the illusory and the factual, the actual and the inferred. People use the computer, as they do psychotherapy, to gain knowledge about themselves and others, to acquire new perspectives, try on new feelings, educate themselves, fantasize, dream and to experiment with other, albeit temporary, personas.

Use of e-mail presents the potential for confidentiality to be breached. Most therapists don't use encrypted email, and once e-mail leaves the computer it travels through the Internet service provider, where it is retained. As Gabbard observed, "the confidentiality of e-mails is roughly equivalent to the confidentiality of a postcard; after an e-mail is sent it does not disappear, but is traceable and identifiable." (2001, pg. 732)

A relevant issue to consider in cyber dyadic communications is the feelings that may be evoked in the therapist upon receiving sexually charged e-mails. Gabbard wondered, "Was I transgressing a boundary by incorporating e-mail communication into analysis, or was I breaking new ground on the analytic frontier in a constructive and creative way?" (2001, pg. 733)

Computer devices can take on individual meanings. For several years, my patient, Sally, communicated with her boyfriend through text messaging. As one would expect, this kept the relationship stagnant at a safe yet increasingly frustrating distance, and Sally was able to maintain illusions about the relationship that were not in keeping with the reality. In unpacking the text messages during our sessions, these illusions gave way to a more realistic understanding of the relationship. Our sessions illuminated her disappointing childhood relationship with her mother and her unspoken longing for closeness, which had been unattainable.

Several years ago Judd came to psychotherapy. Nothing in his life was good and everyone was a disappointment. Unable to establish himself as an independent young person, Judd hid his feelings of inadequacy and fears of closeness beneath a tough layer of hostility and disdain. He also was a heavy solitary Internet game user, which promoted his powerful, controlling feelings. During the sessions I was determined to maintain a safe, holding environment (Winnicott, 1960) regardless of the fact that in his eyes I was alternately valuable or worthless, smart or moronic. After some time in therapy, Judd insisted on keeping his cell phone with him and on during our sessions, almost as if it were an appendage, explaining that he needed to be available to his mother. I sometimes felt ambushed against my will into a chaotic battle of "I won't give up my cell phone and you can't make me." Judd, in a power struggle, was pitting me against his mother, and I lost.

Winnicott implies that the use of a transitional object is the person's attempt to repair and rework an empathic connection with the primary object." (Dryer & Lijtmaer, pg. 51). Upon reflection, the cell phone served as a transitional object, enabling Judd to hold onto the illusion of being with Mom while simultaneously moving towards greater autonomy.

Dryer and Lijtmaer (2007, pg.55) state that various "domains" or "rooms" on the Internet become a form of transitional space to try on and explore aspects of one's identity. At such sites one can be anonymous and disinhibited. While online, reduced social cues and anonymity, or the illusion thereof, gives one permission to compartmentalize his/her online self and rationalize online behaviors as "this isn't really me." (Joinson, pg. 85, in Gackenbach, Ed. 2007). Several studies have concluded that a large segment of the population experiences disinhibition online in the absence of the visible presence of the other person. (Suler 2004, in Gackenbach, Ed. Pg. 58). This is not unlike the invisible therapist sitting behind the patient on the couch, except that patient and analyst still meet in reality.

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How real are Internet relationships? “*Her*,” a nominee for best picture and best screenplay in 2014, explores this question. This mildly futuristic story, where the virtual can seem real and reality unreal, concerns Theodore Twombly, played by Jaoquin Phoenix, a thirty-something, seemingly average, depressed man. Theo lives alone in a trendy, albeit sterile-looking apartment in the impersonal modern glass and steel city of Los Angeles. Commuters with eyes glued to their computer devices are everywhere. Theo is in the process of divorce from his wife, has few friends and appears to be isolated and lonely. He attempts to enliven his humdrum life by playing a 3-D video game with a mean-spirited avatar-like character. He also tries to connect romantically through cybersex, only to find the woman at the other end of the line consumed in her own bizarre fantasy.

Theo lives an “as if” life (Deutsch 1942), going about his daily routine seemingly unaffected by his alienation. His professional work is a continuation of his “as if” life, where he writes “personal” love letters for poetically-challenged people on an on-line service, not surprisingly called BeautifulHandwrittenLetters.com. Although praised for his writing by a co-worker, Theo’s personal life lacks vitality and authenticity. For Theodore, the certainty of technology proves safer and more reliable than human relations, so he acquires an artificially intelligent operating system which includes a phone app. This program has a beguiling voice and charm and goes by the name of Samantha, voiced by Scarlet Johansson. Samantha is connected to Theodore in his small, mobile computer device and an attachment between the disembodied Samantha and Theodore takes hold. He carries “her” around with him in his breast pocket, not unlike Judd’s cell phone.

Samantha is a composite of Winnicott’s (1960) “good enough mother” and Kohut’s (1978) self-object. She cheerily wakes Theodore in the morning, reminds him of appointments, encourages him in his endeavors, delights in his accomplishments and is empathic in his disappointments...and demands nothing in return. As a self-object, Samantha is reflective and buoys Theodore’s sense of self. Is it any wonder he falls madly in love with her? In this virtual space between real and not real, Theodore learns to feel his emotions and, in paradoxical effect, become more human.

The movie is provocative, romantic, and also unsettling. To what extent can our basic need for attachment be supplied by nonpersons or simulations? The movie demonstrates how real a relationship can feel, even if it remains illusory. Yet the impact of the illusion was huge in helping Theodore move toward real attachment to people.

I recently received an e-mail announcement from a major insurance company advising that it is now including EAP telephone counseling in its services for subscribers. The new world has finally landed on my doorstep. Most therapists would agree that conducting counseling or therapy via the phone or teleconferencing without at least first getting to know the person face-to face is risky.

The complicated issue of which patients might benefit from contact with a therapist via computer technology (e.g. an adolescent who refuses to leave home) and which might be harmed (e.g.. an emotionally and/or thought-impaired high risk person), needs careful consideration of the patient’s emotional and physical state of being and the profession’s established guidelines of practice.

Electronic modes of computer communication are flush with potential misunderstandings, lost connections, distorted imagery, lapses in real time and lack of eye contact, all of which impair the delicate moment-to-moment happenings in the therapy. Interfacing psychotherapy and digital technology also presents a myriad of concerns related to state and federal laws, confidentiality and insurance coverage, to name but a few issues. Until clear guidelines and rules are established, those who are adventurous nevertheless should proceed cautiously.

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