

Reflections from online practice

Interpretation and therapeutic intervention
in online therapy

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The photos in this presentation are posed by models for illustrative purposes only.

Management of risk

- ▶ A major concern for Tavistock Relationships has been the management of risk, particularly true when working internationally.
- ▶ What happens if a couple discloses abusive behaviour (e.g. towards a child) and they do not live in the UK?
- ▶ Safeguarding of confidentiality is crucially important.
- ▶ No system is hack-proof especially from state operators and spy software is very easy to come by. Consider implications.

Issues around Jurisdiction

- ▶ What laws apply when seeing a patient in Tokyo or Rome?
- ▶ Guidance in this area is patchy. In the US psychologists need to be licenced in the particular State the patient is located in at the time of treatment.
- ▶ In some countries psychotherapy is regulated very tightly (e.g. Germany). In other countries the profession is not recognised.

Issues around Jurisdiction

One way of reducing the uncertainty is to explicitly state in the contract that the work is being undertaken in accordance with the laws of the practitioner's own country and any disputes will be subject to that country's law. This reduces the degree of uncertainty but does not eliminate it all together. Any contractual disputes would usually be considered in the legal system that applies to the practitioner, provided that this has been included in the contract between practitioner and client.

BACP – Good Practice in Action Series (Working Online, 2015)

Counter Indications

- ▶ Couples with history of violence
- ▶ Presence of psychotic features with poor reality testing
- ▶ Dissociative state of mind (e.g. in PTSD)
- ▶ Self-harm, risk of suicidality
- ▶ Consider the use of an extended assessment as a valuable offering its own right even if leading to outward referral.

A Different Frame

- ▶ Development of a ‘consensual hallucination’
(Sand, 2007)
- ▶ The computer as *metaphor for state of mind*
(Sherer-Mohatt & Scharff, 2013)
- ▶ The therapist ‘interacts in the language of technology, works in the displacement, and gradually interprets the conscious parallel between aspects of the computer and parts of his mind’.
(Sherer-Mohatt & Scharff, 2013).

A Different Frame

- ▶ The interpretative elements in the frame are novel because they are mediated via the 2-dimensional plane of the screen and other characteristics of the medium itself. Additionally, patients are not located in the familiarity of our consulting room.
- ▶ In traditional face-2-face work we see more of the patient but never get to see their pet dog, cat or child. We are never introduced to the couple's messy kitchen, office, bedroom or a patient's naked torso in vivo.

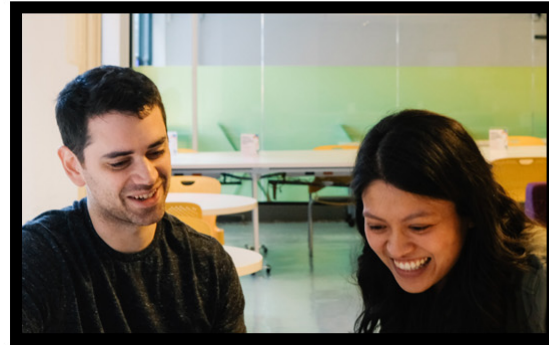
Composition as Communication



Composition as Communication

- ▶ The scene is composed in a way as to convey something of the patients' inner realities.
- ▶ Does the scene speak of rigidity, mess, balance, chaos, instability, focus, visibility or a lack of visibility? Is it warm, hot or cold?
- ▶ Think about foreground vs background
- ▶ What happens at the edges and centre of the frame/screen?
- ▶ Any focal point?
- ▶ Consider structures and patterns, light and shadow
- ▶ Equality of partners' presence vs dominance

What does the image speak of?



What might this say?



Operating in Cyberspace

Contrasting imperatives often leading to:

- ▶ An expectation that the therapist is available and flexible at all times
- ▶ Some etherapy providers list pictures, bios and star ratings of their therapists and 24-hour access mimicking Amazon and eBay
- ▶ Patients do not have reference points as to how to conduct themselves in online therapy. It is the therapist that sets the tone.

Amplification

- ▶ In contrast with our fear that vital cues may be lost when working online, the medium will often amplify aspects of the couple's experience or dynamic.
- ▶ Consider how the wide angle of the camera has a number of distinct effects
- ▶ Movement may be amplified (e.g. the mentalising hand can become rather scary)
- ▶ Mess looks even more messy
- ▶ A bit of movement becomes a storm



85mm @ 200cm

35mm @ 85cm

16mm @ 40cm

12mm @ 30cm

Amplification

- ▶ Automatic volume adjustment feature should balance volumes, but we have found that with couples where one is much louder than the other the utterances of the less bombastic might actually be missed/partly missed. Difference is amplified but may possibly be missed by a naïve online therapist.
- ▶ How is this to be interpreted?

Reaching New Populations

- ▶ Defended and anxious couples – collusion vs inclusion?
- ▶ A positive experience with online therapeutic intervention allows more vulnerable clients to more easily engage with face-to-face intervention (Jones, Kass, Trockel, Glass, Wilfley & Taylor, 2014).
- ▶ Cleavelly (1993) points out that the fact a relationship serves defensive needs is not in itself counter-developmental. I think this is equally true of online therapies.

Reaching New Populations

- ▶ Patients with mobility problems
- ▶ Those in remote locations



Reaching New Populations

Living Apart Together Couples (LAT) including those

- 1). troubled by togetherness,
- 2). in the process of establishing a LAT lifestyle and
- 3). those transitioning to a shared home.

Reaching New Populations

Online therapy is mediated via increasingly stable, secure and bandwidth efficient technologies we now have access to but it is the therapist's modelling of a way of thinking and relating towards the couple, their environment and the technology itself that remains at the core of the therapeutic process. The experience allows couples Living Apart Together to internalise a method of thoughtful reflection and communication that is designed to outlive their encounter with online couple therapy.

Cachia (in press)

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