The Presence of the Analyst: An Intersubjective Perspective

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Abstract

The concept of the analyst's presence gained attention almost 60 years ago through the writings of the French analyst Sacha Nacht and the Hungarian-British Michael Balint. Anna Freud earlier spoke of the related, but rather ambiguous term "real person of the analyst," which has been widely discussed by many authors since. Both terms- presence and real person- appear frequently in the psychoanalytic literature, usually without much definition or conceptual clarity. Authors have used them in different ways, but in general their intention has been to contrast the analyst's reality as a person with his function as a transference and fantasy object, perhaps as a corrective to the perceived austerity of the classical « one-person » model. Lacan's work represents an exception in attempting to escape the dialectic between intra and inter-psychic, but at the cost of eliminating the influence of the analyst as another subject. In contrast to metapsychologic theories of the mind, the author argues that "real presence" can be better understood as part of the phenomenologic experience of intersubjectivity, The co-presence of the analyst is fundamental to the encounter, rather than an accidental or intentional disruption.

The concept of the analyst's presence gained attention almost 60 years ago through the writings of the French analyst Sacha Nacht and the Hungarian-British Michael Balint. Anna Freud had spoken a few years earlier of the related, but rather ambiguous term "real person of the analyst," (1954), which has been widely discussed by many authors (see Kirshner 2012a). Both terms- presence and real person- are used frequently in the psychoanalytic literature, usually without much definition or conceptual clarity. Nacht's controversial use of the phrase "the analyst's presence" clearly tapped into widespread dissatisfaction with what many analysts perceived as the excessively formal and ritualized framework of classical technique, but he failed to provide a substantial explanation of the term. Likewise, the expression "real person" may have appealed to analytic authors because it lent itself to similar justifications for modifying the standard frame. In this paper, I critically review the use of the terms "the analyst's presence" and "real person" from an intersubjective perspective. I argue that both refer to an irreducible aspect of the intersubjective encounter, its unknown otherness, which impacts both participants.

Nacht's controversial use of the phrase "the analyst's presence" raised a major issue for psychoanalytic practice but lacked explicit reference to intersubjectivity. His paper of 1958 on variations in technique challenged the classic notion of analytic neutrality without rejecting basic Freudian concepts. Nacht asserted that "by adopting rigidly, obstinately, and without question an attitude of absolute neutrality, and maintaining it strictly in despite of everything" (p, 235) the analyst could produce an interminable situation of therapeutic stalemate. With the important proviso that the countertransference must remain under control, he argued that the analyst must at a certain moment abandon neutrality. "He then ceases to be the unchangeable mirror in order to adopt a new attitude of what I have called 'presence'." Nacht cited Racamier, who defined the term as ”an attitude by means of which we present to the patient a clear, tangible, durable, unambiguous form of ourselves and of our interest for him" (p. 236). This apparently radical affirmation of the actuality of the analyst's presence suggests a return to a phenomenologic, intersubjective stance. In place of the early notion of Freudian "*Indifferenz,*" which was designed to foster receptivity to the analysand's unconscious, the analyst would display a new attitude of presence operating at an experiential level. In a subsequent paper, Nacht and Viderman (1960) concluded that the analytic situation goes beyond transference, perhaps to include "the original, primitive experience of Being and to express its essence" (p. 386).

In later writings, Nacht focused his understanding of presence on two different clinical situations: regression and termination. Perhaps his most consistent position involved his belief that patients wish unconsciously for a primitive merger and loss of differentiation, analogous to the earliest mother child relationship. "For the patient to be able to let himself go in that special kind of deep union which he unconsciously desires," he wrote, " it is more than ever necessary for the analyst to bring a certain *quality of presence* rooted in inner availability and openness" (1963, p. 336). The therapeutic necessity, as well as the risk of profound regression constituted a major theme, since the restorative quality of analytic experience could promote a clinging to a primitive transference, a "fusional regression" (Nacht and Viderman, 1960). In her review of Nacht's 1963 book, Veszy-Wagner (1964) noted a similarity to Winnicott's advocacy of regression to the point of developmental arrest, but always with the need to move beyond this state. Nacht and Viderman (1960) saw the analyst's presence as a protection against a collapse into stasis. Nacht advised an active role, especially towards the termination phase of treatment, in which the analyst should endeavor "to become for the patient that which he is in reality, a man like the rest, like the patient himself, in a world of fully evolved human relationships” (p. 87). He descibed "a *gratifying presence*, in which the patient perceives a deep-down attitude of availability and hearty attentiveness" and "authentic benevolence" (1963, p. 336). Although he first argued that transmission of these attitudes must occur in silence, Nacht later found room for offering "a word of encouragement "and minor gratifications (p. 337). Here the tension between a metapsychological concept like regression and the phenomenology of intersubjective presence becomes striking. We will see this discordance repeated throughout subsequent works.

Balint was also forthright in advocating an active presence in the context of regression, which he saw as inevitable for many patients. Yet, as Eshol (2013) observed, he joined Nacht in advising caution in handling regressive movements, which can become "malignant." She hypothesized that by making this distinction Balint sought to avoid the pitfalls of his own analyst Sandor Ferenczi's tolerance for regression in his patients. Balint believed that active presence need not imply excessive gratification or participation in a fantasy scenario with the patient. In *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression* (1979), he specifically ddressed the dialectical play of analytic presence and absence. The analyst "must be felt to be present but must be all the time at the right distance — neither so far that the patient might feel lost or abandoned, nor so close that the patient might feel encumbered and unfree — in fact, at a distance that corresponds to the patient’s actual need" (1979, p. 141). The Winnicottian connection becomes apparent in the evocation of need, which suggests that the analyst provides something real.

Throughout these writings, one senses a conflict between the technical stance of establishing a holding presence within which regression can safely occur and presenting the reality of the analyst as a person. In her discussion of this problem, Alsteens (1989) advocated both aspects: the analyst must be "sufficiently present" to induce a transference, yet absent enough to permit the projection of a past history. She spoke poetically of the patient's eventual discovery of the analyst's separateness, analogous to Heraclitus' image of a lightening bolt that suddenly makes things appear in the night. The analyst, she wrote, should be animated by the same capacity for wonder (*émerveillementI)* "like a philosopher devoted to the mystery of being" (p.36)[[1]](#footnote-1). Again taking a Winnicottian direction, Alsteens referred to the patient's discovery of the analyst as a real object (presumably related to the stage of object use): "to learn to recognize the other for himself" (p. 50). Like Balint and Nacht, Winnicott employed a mixture of theoretical terms and experience-near language in speaking of the analytic relationship (as did Freud himself).

Greenson's influential textbook of psychoanalysis (1967) built on the earlier work of Balint, Nacht, and others to emphasize the analyst's actual presence in the clinical situation and its effect on their cooperative work of treatment. To Anna Freud's comment separating the real relationship from countertransference, Greenson and Wexler (1969) added detailed descriptions of non-transferential aspects of treatment, like the analysand's ability to recognize real features of his analyst. Yet, lacking an intersubjective model (not widely employed at the time), their work perpetuated the division between standard technique and real relationship, endorsing the analyst's participation without providing clarification about what this might mean (despite many vivid vignettes). The notion of a "real person" itself suggests an amalgam of wishful fantasies, cultural beliefs and ideologies, internalized forms of object relationship, and the analyst's actual behavior, all filtered through the patient's subjective perceptions. So Lacan's partially correct criticism of Nacht In his Seminar XI (Lacan, 1994; Nobus, 2013) that the presence of the analyst represents a manifestation of the analysand’s unconscious, not separate from the transference could be applied equally to Greenson. Of course, the transference in the broadest sense influences the way the analyst is experienced, but Lacan left no place for his own contribution to the process.

Although he began by assimilating the phenomenologic concept of intersubjectivity into psychoanalysis, Lacan soon found reasons to reject any implication of an interactive process. In his inaugural seminar of 1953-1954, he recognized Balint as a transmitter of Ferenczian ideas, centered around "an emphasis on the relation between the analysand and the analyst, conceived as an interhuman situation and ... implying a certain reciprocity" (Lacan 1953-54, p. 209). Lacan consistently regarded contemporary work in this vein as a serious misunderstanding of psychoanalysis. Although the term intersubjectivity did not appear directly in Ferenczi's contributions, his ideas were clearly predecessors by implicitly raising the issue of presence. In his *Clinical Diary* (1988), he privileged the lived experience of transference-countertransference interaction over unconscious dynamic conflicts and desires, regarding the analytic relationship as an authentic and reciprocal encounter between subjects. In this respect, Ferenczi represents an important reference for current theorists of intersubjectivity.

Lacan opposed the Ferenczi-Balint position with what he termed “a radical intersubjectivity” (1953-54, p. 217), a refraction of the complex field of interaction between two persons that he elsewhere theorized. Although in some ways escaping the self-object division of classic theory, Lacan's innovations found no place for the analyst's own subjectivity or presence in his new model. As elegantly summarized by Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet (2017), "the analyst’s presence is not the shadow of a former love, but a discursive phenomenon. The analyst tries to steer the patient away from imaginary associations about him by pointing to the signifiers used at moments when he is addressed as just another person. Lacan's focus was on the patient's text (the Symbolic) not his perception of the analyst (the Imaginary)" (p. 622). Psychoanalysis cannot be intersubjective, he claimed, because the analysand experiences the situation unconsciously in terms of his fantasies and past experiences. Although Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet acknowledge that Lacanian analysts, like everyone, "experience anxiety, joy, excitement, interest, disgust, and other emotions vis-à-vis their analysands" (p. 627) they remain primarily objects of imaginary and symbolic transferences.

Beginning with his Seminar XI, however, Lacan modified his formulation of the transference to emphasize the register of "the real" and the lost *objet* a, which reintroduced the question of a “real” presence (Lacan, 1988). As summarized by Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet (2017), this revised conception changed his previous aim of converting the analysand's actions and fantasies into the symbolic register of speech by emphasizing the limits of symbolization of the real. By definition, the real cannot be translated or interpreted, but lacks any representation, like an unperceivable black hole that has effects on everything near it. Lacan suggested that effects of the “real” of the analyst could further the goals of the analysis if he remains non-present as a subject, avoiding making standard interpretations that might support the analysand’s imaginary and symbolic fantasies. Spontaneous gestures or unexpected actions, however, can bring the real of the analyst's existence into the session, presumably without any psychic mediation or unconscious motivation, since the real is essentially impersonal and accidental. This conception of the real enabled Lacan to endorse the therapeutic possibilities of chance events without admitting an intersubjective component (perhaps this was the meaning of his term “radical intersubjectivity). While such spontaneous behaviors might appear to resemble the kinds of unwitting repetition of trauma Ferenczi discussed, the contrast with the latter's concern for the effects of his own unconscious desires is striking.

Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet offer two clinical examples in which an analyst's spontaneous actions acted as revelations of the real, disrupting the patients' prior transference fantasies. In one, the analyst impulsively crushed a spider on the threshhold of his office. In the other, the analyst uncharacteristically telephoned her regressed patient to invite him to return to sessions. In both cases, the surprising (very uncustomary) behaviors of the analysts awoke the patients to their separate real existences. Something completely unfamiliar and unexpected disrupted their prior experiences of an imaginary and symbolic relationship with the analyst. These traumatic encounters with an unknown real, they report, could then be worked over productively (with creative re-symbolization of the real as the altered aim of treatment).

Similar kinds of spontaneous events have been addressed by writers from other schools. The authors mention Poland's case in which he unthinkingly passed a telephone call from Italy to a native-speaking patient, and many relational analysts have recounted analogous episodes. Sometimes they report unexpectedly using self-disclosure or speaking about their own feelings in situations of great tension, a step considered inappropriate by Lacanians (and many others), yet one wonders whether such responses don't also amount to a form of revelation of the real of the analyst. The analyst drops his guard, as it were, and reveals himself by an affectively charged and expressive comment. Something shows itself from outside the conscious volition of the analyst. A widely discussed article by Greenberg (2001) took up several accounts of such moments published by relational psychoanalysts who ventured into "startling and unexpected" behavior (p. 364). Usually the element of choice seemed involved, but, of course, choice is another difficult concept and one that might be applied even to actions like stepping on a spider or handing over a telephone impulsively. "In each of these clinical examples," Greenberg wrote, "the analyst takes a risk and puts him- or herself on the line in a highly personal way. In more or less classical terms, the analytic frame is broken." One would certainly expect such incidents to shake up an "unbearable, tense, or stagnant treatment situation"  (p. 364), which can then be explored. As Greenberg observes, "A great deal of the work in every analysis is to understand, after the fact, what has transpired in an unexamined way" (p. 362).

The relational examples occurred against an implicit background of “conventional” analytic technique with all of its familiar moves and rituals that, as Viderman (1991) argued, can too often become a stagnant routine. Although the classical position with its lack of the usual social supports for self-images and identity was in part designed to promote regression, it can settle into a “comfortable but distant” (p. 453) pattern. To counter this, Viderman advocated an affective presence for the analyst, presence as a responsive, expressive partner, “a real person,” but, of course, such behavior by definition cannot be consciously planned. From similar considerations, Hoffman (1998) argued that the security and safety provided by the frame can disguise hidden countertransference gratifications that may obstruct change. Whether such moments represent enactments, implying some unconscious participation by the analyst, or amount to "pre-subjective" expressions of the real depends in part on one's theoretical preferences. Hoffman’s point was the undecidability of the sources of almost any event, even unorthodox departures from routine within analysis. There is no way for the analyst to know what balance to strike between spontaneous response and adherence to ritual at any given moment.

The non-Lacanian French analyst Michel de M’Uzan wrote in much different terms about the unsettling effect of an intense analytic engagement, which he saw as disrupting the earliest boundaries of self for both participants. The uncoupling of investments of drive energies in particular structures opens the opportunity for a fundamental reorganization of the subject. In *L'inquiétude permanante* (2015) he advocated promoting a permanent disturbance of the psyche and abandonment of the quest for a stable identity as a desirable goal in analysis.

It seems that all the writers thus far discussed pursue some

variant of going beyond the customary set-up of analytic work (breaking the frame) to engage in a different type of encounter. The aim becomes not to teach solutions or repair deficits or resolve conflicts by interpretations but to enable a rearrangement of the subject’s mode of being. The non-Lacanian French analyst Michel de M’Uzan wrote about a similar unsettling effect of the analytic dialogue which he saw as disrupting the earliest boundaries of self for both analyst and analysand. In *L'inquiétude permanante* (2015) he portrayed and advocated a permanent disturbance of the psyche and disruption of the quest for a stable identity. One wonders whether this search for a more fundamental reality for subjectivity than the unresolvable struggles for meaning and value that characterize human consciousness represents only another ***form of a familiar wishful thinking.***

Following Freud, De M’Uzan emphasized a quantitative redistribution of psychic energies, while Lacan focused on the ever-branching chain of signifiers. Others sought to find a powerful source of change in the real relationship or authentic engagement of the analyst. The common element in these theories points to a basic intersubjective phenomenology of dual presence that underpins each encounter.

We might better understand these spontaneous expressions of the analyst's personal reality from a phenomenologic perspective, in contrast to the metapsychologies of Freudian and Lacanian theories. Unlike psychoanalysis (or the neurosciences), phenomenology has not generally been interested in speculating about or researching the mechanisms or causes of intentions, emotions, and thinking, but takes these as basic givens of conscious awareness. "How things appear to us is not an epiphenomenal property, or a feature of experience explainable in reductionist or behavioral terms; rather, it is a fundamental, and so “ineliminable”, aspect of experience" (Doyon, 2017). The studies of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and others supplemented the phenomenological understanding of conscious experience by including the constant mental presence of other subjects. They reminded us that the subject does not exist independently from the world of other subjects in which he or she is embedded. The concept of intersubjectivity derives from this insight, but was only belatedly brought into psychoanalysis, and its status remains unsettled. Many basic clinical questions continue to be debated. For example, should analysts focus on patients' unconscious fantasies and fears that are considered to determine the form and content of the transference, albeit assuming the influence of the particular setting, or does the transference emerge as a unique co-construction of the bi-personal field? If the latter alternative best describes the analytic situation, closer attention to the analyst's participation beeomes crucial. Indeed, contemporary theory has turned increasingly towards working out the relationship between the subjective contributions of analyst and patient and the unique presence of a "third" they mutually create over the course of an analysis. Baranger and Baranger (2008), for example, spoke of the integration of "the transference and countertransference phantasies concerning analytic work" within a shared structure (p. 825), in which a novel experience may emerge. Yet, these theoretical questions about the encounter of one unconscious with another bypass the phenomenologic presence of the other as a primary datum[[2]](#footnote-2).

The question of presence must be acknowledged as intrinsic to any relationship between two persons. The phenomenology of the encounter with the other forms the substrate of social life, and brings a rich philosophical history that took iconic form with Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. Within the social frame of the clinical setting, the mutual presences of analyst and patient dominate the subjective experiences of each, as a mixture of immediate assimilations to familiar sets of meanings and a disquieting sense of the unfamiliar, similar to Freud’s parable of the Nebenmensch. This process can be conceptualized as a continuous intersubjective exchange of signs in a volley of interpretants (in Peirce’s terms), some with mutual signifieds (like the roles of analyst and analysand), others unshared (like transference and countertransference figurations). Analyst and patient are together entangled and mutually influenced through an accumulated history of important moments, references to significant events, and repeated words. Each makes on-going attempts to find meaning by bringing his experience more into images and thought, both as unconsciously linked signifieds and, gradually, as a conscious activity.

The philosopher of symbolization, Ernst Cassirer, proposed that an immediate meaning is intrinsic to every perception and sensation. All experience of the world involves a form of mediation (presumably by both learned and intrinsic symbolic processes) from the level of basic perceptual gestalts to symbolic representations that provide familiar meanings and explanations. Language **provides** the overarching structure. Unlike Cassirer, Lacan emphasized the disconnection of the signifier from its meaning, which leaves interpretation by symbolic and imaginary representations as a patch on an essentially meaningless subjective experience. Such after the fact representations besides being incomplete or imposed also leave an untranslated remainder of the real of experience.

For Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet, the presence of the unassimilable real in the analytic encounter unsettles the uncertain boundaries of self and identity, thereby provoking creative revisions by the subject. Confronting the unknown disrupts previous significations tied to references (words and images) that have defined and perhaps shackled the subject to a frozen identity. The non-Lacanian French analyst Michel de M’Uzan wrote about a similar unsettling effect of the analytic dialogue which he saw as disrupting the earliest boundaries of self for both analyst and analysand. In *L'inquiétude permanante* (2015) he portrayed and advocated a permanent disturbance of the psyche and disruption of the usual quest for a stable identity. Perhaps the important step of losing a prior sense of mastery over experience through the novelty of the encounter itself, crosses many theoretical systems.

The phenomenology of dual presence generates the affective and ideational content of the interaction through a mixture of shared and idiographic constructions. There are explicit and implicit agreements about the situation, some negotiated, like meeting arrangements and payment, others derived from the culture, like the roles of treater and patient. But each subject inevitably brings symbolic representations of his own personal history to making meaning of the experience. What being with the other subject feels like will depend on how various expressions are interpreted from moment to moment, as signification unfolds, but relies on using familiar, expected, and learned dispositions that mediate every aspect of the encounter. Extreme abstinence may obscure the analyst’s contribution, but cannot completely efface it, as she moves, makes sounds, chooses how and when to speak and so forth.

From this perspective, the analyst bears responsibility to remain open and receptive to the unfolding of the interactive process and to resist attempts at mastery (by interpretation, for example). Remaining in uncertainty rather than in a position of knowledge maintains the creative tension that can expand meanings, which eventually reach words. Ultimately, new ways of thinking and imagining can arise, enlarging the capacity of each participant to think about himself and his relationship with the other. Because the relationship is formally and by intention asymmetrical, the goal remains to foster growth in the analysand, although both must tolerate the threat to boundaries of self and other..

In opposition to this creative outcome, both analyst and analysand tend to close-off the free flow of interaction, moving instead to categorize each other by rigid typologies, judgments, and interpretations that remove uncertainty and anxiety, Patients often seek a confirmatory mirror to avoid the unsettling experience of the presence of an unknown other, and analysts can equally impose their own self-fulfilling constructions about the transference and countertransference. Lacan placed the problem of the analyst's resistance in the foreground, and his caution has become central to the intersubjective approach. Ablon (1994) expressed this resistance succinctly: "What most often stands in the way of the attainment of a growth promoting, creative dialogue between analyst and analysand are the analyst's anxieties about following the analysand's associations, especially when frightening affects are evoked," (p. 315). Consciousness may be constant, but its receptive capacity constricts or expands.

Of course, a patient's experience of his analyst carries effects of other important relationships, real and imaginary. Everyone knows that. Yet from an intersubjective point of view, attempting to formulate or explain the transference in exclusively intrapsychic terms distracts from the actuality of the encounter. Every school can explain the dynamics of encounter very well in terms of its own theoretical models. While these can provide useful metaphors for understanding the process, they often close down the unknown of the other. For this reason, analysts benefit from learning patients’ perceptions and feelings about their impact over time. The fluctuating nature of personal subjectivity should find a parallel in an analytic process that resists closure of meaning.

By highlighting the dangers of objectification and countertransferential impingement that accompany the analyst's inclination to formulate and interpret, intersubjective theory directs attention to the effects of his presence. Seeking elaboration rather than interpretation or formulation recognizes the transience and uncertainty of understanding. The intersubjective construction of meaning may take multiple directions without an end point and without building a well-organized narrative. Of corse, narrativity The phenomenology of co-presence speaks to the immediacy of the encounter and the importance of cultivating an attitude of bracketing or suspending theoretical understanding.

Analysts have always debated when and how much to respond intentionally, and the papers about the "real person" of the analyst discussed above touch on this issue. Some of the differences between schools reflect disagreements about what kinds of interventions are appropriate, yet the analyst cannot help responding, and putting his responses into words represents a further step into self-disclosure (the choice of words says something about the speaker). Analysts tend to be reserved, but reveal their unconscious or preconscious feelings and intentions non-verbally by tone, attitude, and posture, facial expressions and gestures, or by detachment from the interactive field. All these responses communicate the nature of his inescapable (real) presence to the analysand. Whether and to what extent the analyst can eventually interpret (in the sense of offering words for what is happening), his basic task remains to suspend meaning, sustaining the unfolding effects of mutual presence.

Conclusions

In this paper I have taken the phenomenologic perspective that presence forms an intrinsic part of the encounter between two subjects. The analyst's presence should be differentiated from the vague concept "the real person," which always carries ideological implications and attempts to separate a personal relationship from the other factors that structure human interaction. Presence cannot be reduced to a theoretical content like types of transference, which reduces the global experience of the analytic encounter. Theories and formulations like this form an inevitable part of the analyst's reflections, but can interfere by reifying, ignoring, or distracting from attention to the patient's and his own actual speech and behavior. The intersubjective perspective brings two contrasting principles to psychoanalytic practice: an intentional stance to maintain and an attention to the effects of presence on the patient. These suggest that the analyst sustain a dialectical tension in the clinical encounter between his inevitable attempts to define the meaning of his patient's experience and a commitment to maintaining an incomplete and open field. Both tend resist the otherness of the encounter, but the analyst holds an ethical responsibility to monitor himself and support the experience of the unknown and unknowable in the interaction.

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1. author's translation [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are similarities and differences between the phenomenologic view and Lacan's concept of the real that go beyond the scope of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)