Schrödinger's Cat Goes Online: Exploring the Paradoxes of Psychotherapy in the Digital Age.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced therapists to embrace online sessions, creating a sudden shift in the therapeutic environment. However, the integration of technology into therapy was already underway, prompting the need to explore how the online environment impacts clients and the therapeutic process. This article asks what online therapy can teach about therapy. It highlights the author's experience with online therapy and the unsettling incident that occurred during a session. The article reflects on the philosophical and psychological implications of technology and online communication, suggesting that the glitches and breakdowns in online communication may reveal underlying states of the psyche. Drawing upon Heidegger's philosophy of technology and Whitehead's process philosophy, it argues that our environment and technologies shape our consciousness and subjectivity, and that both the therapist and the client are partly a product of the media in the digital age. The article also references Freud's theory on the psychopathology of everyday life to suggest that unintentional glitches in online communication may be manifestations of unconscious thoughts and impulses.

Overall, the article raises some questions about the use of technology in therapy and the implications for understanding the human psyche. It highlights the need to approach online therapy with caution and awareness of the potential limitations and disturbances that may arise.

Keywords

Embodiment, online therapy, technology, process, object relations

I. Reconsidering the Therapeutic Environment through Whitehead's Philosophy of Prehension

My research interest lies in the exploration of embodied subjectivities that arise from professional involvement with computers, spanning AI, digital visual art, and psychotherapy. Initially, I was drawn to psychotherapy due to the apparent lack of technology required - simply two armchairs and perhaps a cigar. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and all client work, supervision, and training had to move online, I found myself uncertain of my footing once again. In researching online therapy, I hope to establish a connection with the tradition of psychotherapy.

It is important to note that the integration of the internet into therapy was not a sudden change brought about by the pandemic; it was a gradual process. For years prior, I had been paying my own therapist via online bank transfer, which eliminated any physical exchange of money and the associated nonverbal gestures that could be analysed in therapy. We had already begun to live and work remotely even while still conducting face-to-face sessions.

Before the pandemic, like most other therapists, I worked in a variety of clinical locations that shared similar features - small, uninspiring rooms within large, institutional buildings. These rooms were often windowless, poorly lit by fluorescent strip lights, and covered in grey carpeting. They were stark and transactional, reminding me of the atmosphere in interview rooms at job centres or airports. These rooms lent an air of anonymity, formality, and efficiency to our meetings. If I needed to offer the client a tissue, I had to bring it with me and remove it at the end of the session to leave the room exactly as I found it. I found these rooms both depressing and comforting, as they provided a sense of professional authority and removed any chance of playfulness or creativity.

Now, after working online for more than two years, I realize that these rooms were far from neutral. Their very attempt at neutrality was loaded with significance, and it never occurred to me to discuss the room with my clients or ponder how they felt about the space. However, once therapy became only possible online, myself and other therapists began to consider the impact of remote therapy on clients and the therapeutic process. The sudden shift to online therapy forced me to evaluate the space I was working in for the first time. What did clients make of the room? Do we always just accept things? If I had considered these questions with my clients, I could have helped them (and myself) arrive at a better understanding.

I am concerned that I am not asking the right questions about the environment and setting of therapy, even now. When I first started working online, I had my own anxieties, such as familiarizing myself with the technology and finding a suitable workspace. However, once the initial strangeness of working online subsided, it was replaced with familiarity and routine, which precluded inquiry and fostered acceptance. The pandemic was a missed opportunity to start thinking about the setting, and once its strangeness became normalized, a new dogma settled in. My research aims to challenge this dogma and stop going along with things.

The dichotomy between therapy and its setting and the prioritization of the latter over the former can be viewed as a manifestation of a deeply ingrained paradigm that perceives the mind as distinct and separate from the body. This paradigm may be rooted in Cartesian dualism that dissociates the mind from the world. By neglecting the environment, I failed to acknowledge the world that emerged for both the client and myself. Instead, I accepted the room as a mere physical space that enclosed us. This neglect privileges what Alfred North Whitehead calls “presentational immediacy”, ignoring the ways that this perception is always already grounded in our bodies (Shaviro, 2009, p. 19). Whitehead’s (1985, p. 153) concept of "prehension" describes the way that each entity in the world is influenced by and influences others. He argues that we do not exist independently from our environment, the world (and us) is a vast network of relationships, where everything is connected to everything else. Similarly, therapy is not merely an interaction that occurs in a room; instead, being in the room is integral to the experience that forms the backbone of personality. Any alteration to the environment alters the essence of our being. To understand this dynamic, we must recognize human beings as “process of becoming” (ibid p.156) that are inherently embedded in the world. My disregard for the environment was a disservice to the client, as it conveyed a message of disconnection and detachment at best and objectification at worst. Even before the pandemic, my practice was instrumentalised, leading to an alienation and reification of the therapeutic relationship. The pandemic and the shift towards online therapy have challenged the notion of physical presence as a necessary condition for intimacy, privacy, and proximity. Online therapy has taught me that physical co-presence is not a guarantee of a meaningful encounter, and that remoteness does not necessarily impede intimacy.

II. Monsters in the Cloud: Exploring the Psyche in Online Therapy

Since the pandemic started, I've been doing therapy sessions through video conferencing or on the phone. They call it remote or online therapy. My setup is simple: two computer monitors connected to a Mac mini, a webcam on top of the bezel, and a ring light that illuminates my face. Behind me, there's a grey curtain that hides the features of my study. I wonder what my clients think of it. Do they wonder what I am hiding? During sessions, I sit at my desk, wearing a headset with a boom microphone, like a call centre agent. It's strange how my setup seems to mimic the anonymous blandness of the institutional rooms I used to work in. I suppose I didn't think my spare bedroom could pass for a legitimate therapist's study, so I stripped away any personal touches. I missed the legitimacy of an institutional setting.

One time, while working with a client, something strange happened. He'd been talking about his narcissistic mother, and suddenly, his face froze mid-sentence. The top of his head drifted upwards and separated from the rest of his face. His forehead stretched, and his mouth, nose, and eyes contorted into a grotesque parody of Francis Bacon's gargoyles. The ominous message "Bad Connection" flashed at the bottom of the screen, summarizing his object relations. Suddenly, there was a flash of light, and his face returned to normal. But his voice had sped up, disconnected from his image, like a cassette tape on fast-forward. I found the whole incident deeply disturbing. It revealed the unsettling truth about online therapy: beneath the smooth appearance of the screen, there is a disturbance lurking, a monstrous presence that we must contend with.

Martin Heidegger (1977), a philosopher and a Nazi, believed that technology is more than just tools or means to an end; it is the very essence from which human consciousness and subjectivity are shaped. The advent of new technologies isn't just a means to shorten distances or speed up communication, it is fundamentally changing our perception of reality. Our eagerness to embrace online therapy highlights the extent to which we are willing to entrust our intimate and social existence to the cloud, to rely on it for memory, social and political orientation, and human connections. But when the interface breaks down, as in the incident I described, we witness something akin to a dream, where the very fabric of the psyche and the unconscious is stripped of its shiny and humanizing appearance, laid bare by algorithms and our tendency to rationalize everything.

John Gray (2003), a political philosopher, argued that consciousness, which emerged in evolutionary prehistory as a by-product of language, today is a by-product of the media. In the digital age, the conscious self is partly the product of the web, video and audio networks,

and data servers that know us better than we know ourselves. It is possible that the random errors in the functioning of these technologies indicate an underlying and hidden state of the psyche. Freud's "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life" (2001) suggests that unintentional glitches in everyday conduct, like omitting seemingly random words or making accidental mix-ups, are manifestations of unconscious thoughts and impulses. Perhaps, as we follow Freud's line of thinking into the 21st century, the glitches, breakdowns, and stuttering of online communications are not mere accidents but essential to understanding the interaction between therapist and client.

III. The Screen as a Transitional Space: Exploring a Client's Relationship with Technology

In exploring the client's relationship with their computer, I turned to the insights of Donald Winnicott in his essay on the use of objects and relating through identifications. Winnicott (1969) posits that the process of maturation involves the destruction of the object, with the object surviving the destruction becoming a metaphor for the survival of the subject. This concept was particularly relevant when working with my client, M., who conveyed their emotions primarily through their use of the computer screen.

During our first session, all I could see was the ceiling of a room and occasionally a hair bun at the bottom of the screen. M. spoke about not wanting to come out as trans at college, already having come out as gay several years earlier. They also shared that men were only attracted to their body, causing me to wonder if I was one of those men and if that was the reason for M.'s reluctance to be seen. M. spoke about their dating life and how they trained themselves not to feel anything to avoid getting hurt.

Reflecting on these experiences, I began to ponder the connection between being visible and being seen and whether there was a link between not feeling and not being seen. M.'s background revealed a child who used the fantasy worlds of online games to escape from their mother's tantrums, becoming an omnipotent ruler or a flying unicorn to rise above their troubles. These insights into M.'s use of the computer as a substitute for human interaction provide valuable insight into their inner world and the ways in which they cope with their struggles.

As I began to explore M.'s inner world, it became apparent to me that screens played a crucial role in how they related to themself. They shared with me one of their earliest

memories, of playing Tetris on mother's phone under the table during their parents' arguments. The screen acted as a protective barrier, shielding them from the turmoil of their surroundings. But I also noticed that screens served as a projection surface for M. to cast images of themselves, such as the idealized version presented in their Grindr profile picture.

During our second session, I saw only half of M.'s face on the screen as they furiously scribbled on a digital tablet that I could not see, periodically replying to messages that pinged on their phone. I realized that for M., screens were not just a means of communication, but a way of existing. This brought to mind Winnicott's idea that we become real through our mother's gaze, and that we need to be seen and understood by someone in order to exist. He explains, "I get back (as a face in a mirror) the evidence I need that I have been recognised as a being" (Winnicott, 1990, p. 61). In favourable circumstances, our skin becomes the boundary between ourselves and the outside world, but for M., the screen seemed to be the boundary between themselves and others.

In the spirit of Winnicott, I am moved to explore the use of the screen as a long-term substitute for a sense of having an inner life. Fairbairn's Object Relations Theory of Personality (1994, p. 141) describes the psyche as formed by a series of self-and-object links. Like a moth seeking a flame, M. is drawn to screens not because of the pleasure they offer, but because they help define who they are and provide evidence of their existence. Our attachment to screens suggests that we are all caught up in images, particularly since the pandemic lockdowns, as the screen became not only the main window onto the world but also the main source of libidinal excitation. However, our looking and being caught up in a screen is a way of not seeing other things.

As therapy progressed, I noticed a transformation taking place with M. At first, I only heard M.'s voice, but later, M. was keen to show themselves to me in different ways. The screen became an instrument of performative play as M. used it to perform a seductive dance and to try on different scarfs and apply make-up. The screen acted as a transitional space that bridged different identities and levels of reality. Through our work together, we discovered that the screen persona can offer permission to develop a playful expansion of the self (Gabbard, 2001).

It is essential to note that the screen does not create psychic realities, but it intensifies them. Magnifying the power of otherwise weak and tiny impulses, the screen supports invention, invites acting out, flatters grandiosity, and supports the spinning out of self-serving

and potentially world-shaking scenarios (Seiden quoted in Hanlon, 2001, p. 567). M.'s seductive displays felt illicit in some way, and there was a possibility of a connection between our therapy sessions and the dating and cybersex M. engaged in outside the sessions on the same screen.

As therapy progressed, the screen became a playful arena for generative fantasies and analytic work. I hope that the experience of online therapy showed M. that they do not need to invent fake versions of themselves and that there is a way of socializing online in which they can be more true to themselves. In the end, the screen became a tool for transformation, not just a hiding place or a source of seduction.

IV. The Face-to-Face Encounter in Online Therapy: The Otherness and Intimacy of the Client's Face

In the realm of online work, one cannot help but be struck by the unexpected intimacy and immediacy of the encounter with the client's face. No longer separated by distance or physical space, the client's face is now magnified and brought into vivid relief on the high-definition screen, filling the monitor with its Byzantine splendour. Initially, this experience can be overwhelming in its difference from traditional face-to-face meetings, which are often misnomers, as the face is not merely a representation of an entity, but rather a ground zero of meaning that precedes representation and cognition.

According to Levinas (1979, p. 215), the face of the other is not a luminous essence that inspires fear and trembling, but rather a presence that calls for human fraternity and creates the possibility of communication. By acknowledging the client's face, the therapist assumes responsibility for the client and for the therapeutic encounter itself. In Levinas's schema, the face is not the representation of an entity (i.e., the client), but rather places something that precedes representation and the operations of cognition. This is the great paradox of online existence: the techno-political system of the screen is part of the military-entertainment complex and yet we must employ it in order to go beyond it and bear ethical responsibility for the client (Levinas in: Kearney and Ricœur, 1984, p. 65).

Regarding the client's face, Loewenthal (2011, p. 23) notes, "For the psychological therapist to acknowledge the client's face is for the psychological therapist to have responsibility to the client and for the client." Thus, online therapy has the potential to focus a lot of attention on the face because it stages an encounter between two persons as an

encounter of two faces. However, this enlarged and detailed online face is completely inaccessible to me, just as my face is inaccessible to the client. In a profound way, I cannot "know" the client online, both in the epistemological and sensual senses. Rendered in pixels and emitting light, the face of the client is reaching me from a beyond that I cannot fathom. This absolute strangeness defamiliarizes the client and serves as a reminder that she is the absolute other. The meeting between me and a client online is not only a meeting of two "I" with different properties, but also an encounter with an otherness that is always a part of who I am. In this way, the screen functions as a kind of "superego" intrinsic to the clinical environment itself as a form of disclosure of being-in-the-world as being-with-others (Russell, 2022, p. 50).

This encounter between the therapist and the client online, as an encounter of two faces, is a fascinating manifestation of the Other in its most intense form. The client's face is a sublime revelation of the Other's presence, a presence that is at once intimate and foreign, known and unknown, accessible and inaccessible. This encounter unveils a certain depth to the therapeutic process that is often obscured by the seemingly banalities of daily life. The therapeutic encounter is not simply a matter of one person trying to help another, it is a confrontation with the Otherness that is at the very heart of being human.

This Otherness is both exhilarating and unsettling. The face of the client, so magnificently rendered in pixels, is an enigma that resists easy comprehension. It is as if the client's face is a window into a world that is at once familiar and utterly strange. This Otherness is the source of the therapeutic potential of online therapy. By bringing the therapist and the client face to face in this way, online therapy opens up new possibilities for therapeutic dialogue that are not available in traditional face-to-face therapy.

At the same time, the Otherness of the client's face also underscores the limitations of online therapy. The therapist cannot fully know the client in this medium. The client's face is a digital mosaic, a pixelated and patterned approximation of the client's embodied reality. The therapist cannot smell the client's perfume or feel the warmth of their body. The therapist is confronted with an Otherness that is always partially hidden, that always eludes full comprehension.

Moreover, this alterity is not pre-made, but rather it is produced by the abstract process of video-conferencing. The client's visage appears on the screen, which also serves as my surface for writing and reading materials, viewing videos, responding to emails, and

engaging in other activities known solely to me and my internet service provider. In their chapter on faciality, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the face is not an organic element of the body: "The head is included in the body, but the face is not" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. 167). This suggests that the face is a surface for writing, akin to a chalkboard or a screen. The face is written in wrinkles, facial features, lines, mouth movements, squinting, and tics. We say "sad face" or "long face," but we don't say "sad body." Deleuze and Guattari propose that the face is a coded surface, and it is not the "flesh of the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) but rather, it is information. As such, it is perfectly suited for accurate transmission over the internet. One might suggest that online therapy separates the face from the body, but this is not entirely accurate; instead, the face becomes the coded expression of the whole body: "Hand, breast, stomach, penis and vagina, thigh, leg and foot, all come to be facialized … Everything remains sexual; there is no sublimation, but there are new coordinates" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. 171).

The shift from in-person therapy to online therapy represents a shift from a body-head system to a face system, which is described by Deleuze and Guattari as a shift from biology to signification. It can be further understood through Freud's "two formulations on mental functioning" as a radical move from instincts to drives (in: Legorreta and Brown, 2016). In-person therapy has always been a meeting of bodies. As Winnicott (1990) posits, the underlying model is that of a mother and child, founded on the one hand on the desire for physical intimacy and on the other on the prohibition of incest. Bazzano (2021) asks what might happen if we no longer conceive of desire as lack and are open to transcending the limits of biology? "What happens if the direction changes, if drive takes over instinct, if we reach the limits of what the body can do?".

During my work with a client, I had an experience that crystallized for me the strangeness of online therapy and the centrality of the face in this mode of communication. The client was describing her experiences sited an empty room, while we were connected through a video conferencing app. I was in front of my computer, and the client was hunched over her phone, with the ceiling visible above her head. The session was intense, as the client recounted her father's behaviour, and with each new revelation, she inched closer to the recognition that she had been emotionally, physically, and possibly sexually abused by him, though she had not realized it at the time.

Suddenly, I heard a door being flung open, and someone entered the room. The client turned to look at the intruder and immediately placed her hand over her phone, covering my

face and the lens through which I was observing her. This moment was poignant and strange, as I experienced a sensation of being trapped inside the handful of her hand, as though I were a moth caught in a jar. Simultaneously, I was still in my room, staring at my computer monitor, and Schrödinger's cat-like, I felt that I was in two places at once. The client spoke to the intruder while keeping her hand over the phone, perhaps to protect me or to conceal the session from the intruder, or to safeguard the secrets of her therapy. Eventually, I heard the door close, and the client removed her hand from the phone, and we were alone once more. She resumed speaking about her experiences.

Regrettably, I did not explore with the client what motivated her instinctive response to cover the phone. It is possible that she intended to protect the privacy of our session from prying eyes, or perhaps the intrusion into the session made her acutely aware of the peculiar weirdness of the situation. She may have suddenly realized that she was alone in a room, divulging her deepest and most painful secrets into a rectangular screen of glass, metal, and plastic. Perhaps this paradoxical nature of online existence dawned on her at that moment. The individual participating in online therapy is alone, yet not entirely so. According to Gabbard (2001), apparent privacy facilitates freer expression, but the awareness of the other's presence or absence allows for passionate attachment and heightened emotional expressiveness. Both privacy and intimacy are transformed in this new paradigm.

V. Conclusion: Building Bridges: Integrating Digital and Psychoanalytic Frameworks in Online Therapy

Returning to the question that opened this text, "What online therapy says about therapy," this research points in two dovetailed directions: first, working online compelled me to reconsider the meaning of an encounter and to question what is behind the dogma that when two bodies are placed in physical proximity, an encounter is taking place. When working online, there is no illusion of proximity, and separateness becomes more real and tangible. Writing sixty years ago, RD Laing, a psychiatrist and a wife beater, said that "persons as embodied beings relate to each other through the medium of space" (1990, p. 29). Online therapy prompts one to ask how we relate to each other through the medium of the screen.

Another lesson learned about therapy from online therapy: Writing about online worlds can feel like trying to figure out the shape of an elephant by holding onto its tail. In

supervision, I often reflected on the importance of understanding the world we live in to be able to help clients find their way through it. However, do I even have a rudimentary understanding of how online worlds work, the considerations that go into their design, and the impact they have on me and my clients? Heidegger's warning that "Technology is not mere means, technology is a way of revealing" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 12) suggests that the screen, the computer, and the network are not mere tools but are formative of our very being. By drawing on the meaning of the Greek word technē, which means both the art of making and poetic reverie, Heidegger shows that technology is not an instrument or object of use made by humans for humans; rather, it is the way in which the human subject is constituted through making and caring. According to Heidegger, the human being acquires a sense of subjectivity and identity through the process of acting in the world. The self is formed in and through technology because human acting and doing are the process of technē. For Heidegger, a person is Da-sein (being-there). A person is not a thing or a substance; human existence comes into being through the performance of intentional acts. To be human, therefore, is to perform intentional acts, and it is only in the performance of such acts that humanity is actualized (Heidegger, 1962, p. 73). Therefore, Heidegger says that it is wrong to assume that one is using technology to achieve certain goals; rather, one becomes through technology, and it is this becoming that constitutes what we later name 'identity,' 'ego,' or 'subjectivity.' It follows that technology is not something that can be explored from outside, like an insect under the magnifying glass. Rather, one is always taken over by technology. The eye through which I look through the magnifying glass is the same eye with which the insect is looking back at me, and my eye and the magnifying glass are one. Or, as Meister Eckhart put it, "The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one love" (Eckhart, 2007). If we admit that subjectivity is formed in and through technology, this can have profound implications for the way psychotherapy understands the notions of self, ego, and identity.

While working on this text, I kept returning to the screen as the setting and comportment of online therapy. As I discussed above, in some instances, the screen transmogrified into a stage upon which the client and I could playfully explore the way identities and subjectivities are formed online in real-time. It seems to me that this is a huge, unexplored potential of online therapy: to be a space not only for "remembering, repeating, and working through," but also for the performance of online subjectivity. Therefore, the screen is something other than a mirror (in both the Winnicottian and the Lacanian sense); it

is something like “the great ephemeral skin” (Lyotard, 2004); an infinite membrane that stretches across all our digital devices and has the potential to be a catalyst for psychic transformation (Sheon in Scharff, 2013, pp. 137–146).

As discussed earlier in this article, there is a transformation occurring in screen-based work where the focus is shifting from biology to signification, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2003). This shift may have positive implications for online therapy, as the lack of physical closeness between therapist and client eliminates the threat of incest that can loom over the mother-child relationship, as noted by Winnicott (1990). Additionally, the perceived safety and control offered by the screen may allow clients to take risks that they would not take in person, leading to breakthroughs in therapy.

It is possible that online therapy is a symptom of broader societal changes, as Freud's ground-breaking work was influenced by the cultural context of his time. While Freud focused on resolving repression related to incest and sexual desire, the concerns of clients today may involve resolving the splitting of the self into different parts, some organic and some machinic, some physical and some digital. The use of online therapy may therefore require therapists to build bridges between different paradigms, such as computational and psychoanalytic frameworks, and to integrate insights from media studies and network theory into their practice.

As such, therapists should study the impact of big data, data science, and data visualization on their understanding of the psyche. Working online may provide a valuable opportunity to help clients get closer to a sense of who they are and to resolve the challenges they face in their lives. By embracing the potential of online therapy and exploring new approaches to treatment, therapists can expand their ability to help clients achieve meaningful change and growth.

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