Psychoanalytic Selves in Digital Space

Kimberlyn Leary

Way Beyond Freud

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Table of Contents

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I

Psychoanalysis has always built its conceptual home in the neighborhood of the scientific models and cultural sensibilities of the day.[1] From Freud's hydraulic account of the drives and defenses to the American pragmatism of ego psychology, psychoanalysis has remained a culture-bound enterprise. One result is that the psychoanalytic encounter with human subjectivity is sensitive to social change even when the profession has not recognized this itself. In key ways, psychoanalytic understanding shifts from generation to generation, resonating with the problems and preoccupations of each. The explanatory strength of psychoanalysis issues precisely from its being embedded in culture. As a theory and a practice that is itself in transition, psychoanalysis permits us a view of who we are and what we are becoming.

My intention here is to consider the ways in which cyberspace has come to intersect with psychoanalytic space. I will do so by considering how clinical exploration of our patients' experiences with e-mail and other digital media resonates with evolving psychoanalytic accounts of self, subjectivity and

relation. Concepts such as “enactment,” “multiplicity,” and “paradox” represent some of the diversity of psychoanalytic opinion on how the psychoanalytic exchange is best conceptualized. These accounts—recently dubbed as “new view” psychoanalytic theories (Eagle et al., 2001)—have been influenced by postmodern critiques of power and authority that have successively changed the climate of the psychoanalytic consulting room. The digital revolution likewise challenges fundamental assumptions. The everyday immersion in cyberspace that is increasingly common for many of us deconstructs traditional beliefs about what is private and what is public. Foundational notions of “interiority and “depth”—so central to everyday clinical work—are transformed in digital environments in which multiple realities and identities appear to co-exist seamlessly as a function of the interlinked architecture of the Internet.

The backdrop for this paper is the ascendancy of postmodern perspectives in the humanities. The term “postmodernism” is of course notoriously elastic, referring in practice to a diverse collection of positions and predilections. It is perhaps most usefully appreciated as a take on theory, identifying the contradictions and inconsistencies within an idea that had otherwise been assumed to be authoritative and true. Postmodernism has been effectively used as a strategy to disrupt centralized authority and has offered as a counterpoint a view of reality and truth as multiple and determined by context.

Since the early 1980s, psychoanalytic theory and practice have come to reflect this postmodern metier. The impact of postmodern perspectives in the psychoanalytic consulting room has been considerable. The view of the analyst as an authoritative source of truth about the working of the patient's mind has gradually given way to the view that the proper sites for psychoanalytic understanding are intersubjective. Virtually all forms of psychoanalytic treatment now recognize that the transformative potential of an analysis takes shape in the context of interpersonal events experienced by both patient and analyst (Mitchell, 1993; Mitchell & Black, 1995). The analytic work therefore consists of giving their differing subjectivities an articulated voice.

One consequence of these efforts is that practitioners across differing schools of analysis are shifting from models of abstemious practice to those that increasingly emphasize "analytic provision" (cf. Lindon, 1994). Most innovations in psychoanalytic technique involve extensions of the analyst's expressive participation in the session. For some analysts, these measures remain occasional adjuncts to standard technique. They are deployed to bootstrap the analytic couple through a period of some extremity (e.g., a rupture in the therapeutic alliance or an extra-analytic crisis in the life of either patient or analyst). For other analysts, an eschewing of neutrality and a focus on action in the clinical situation represent credible alternatives to established practice, and signal fundamental change in psychoanalytic

technique (Renik, 1996).

A related set of issues has been played out within the professional organizations of psychoanalysis (e.g. the American Psychoanalytic Association, the Division of Psychoanalysis of the American Psychological Association and the International Psychoanalytic Association). The introduction of e-mail communications in these venues has successfully disrupted hierarchies of power, permitting individual members outside the political structure of these organizations an expressive voice to shape debate about the representation of their public identities as psychoanalysts.[2] Thus, the turn is undeniably to a postmodern psychoanalysis.

Cultural theorists have suggested that postmodern sensibilities inflect everyday experience through the widespread use of computers and accessibility to the Internet. Sherry Turkle (1995) has called the computer the pre-eminent actor on the postmodern stage for its capacity to make manifest semi-independent "multiple selves" that challenge traditional understandings of what it means to be a self and lay claim to an identity existing in space and time.

I would like to extend Turkle's ideas to the consulting room by considering the ways in which technology and the postmodern worldview it affords highlight problems of self and subjectivity for which people turn to

psychoanalysis for help. I will use clinical case examples to illustrate some of the tensions that arise when it is possible to experience multiplicity "for real" in digital environments and the challenges that arise when technology makes permeable the boundaries between space, time and persons. Likewise, I will discuss the ways that some patients make use of e-mail communications and other technologies to locate themselves more concretely in the analytic conversation. I will suggest that clinical moments like these highlight questions of importance about how we understand cultural and personal experience.

II

By now, an entire generation has "grown up wired" (Tapscott, 1997). For these elites, technology seems to change basic dimensions of human experience even as it creates a new class of others, disenfranchised and/or estranged from the information revolution.[3] As numerous authors have noted, the advent of mass telecommunications and the widespread public use of the Internet has restructured the boundaries existing between persons and countries, and between time and space (Harvey, 1989; Gergen, 1991, 1995). This was made heartbreakingly evident during the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and United Flight 93. Access to cell phones and e-mail allowed hundreds of victims a last contact with their loved ones that would not otherwise have been possible. For those of us at some remove

from the immediate horror, the televised image— replayed again and again and again—of jet planes detonating the towers transformed time, fixing the mind on an instant that could not end.

Sherry Turkle (1995), in her usefully provocative book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* comments on the ways in which digital environments illuminate the concerns of contemporary theory. Even a superficial consideration of virtual media shows the way in which they are instances of multiple realities in which more than one thing may be true at any given time. She notes, for example, that the computer evokes conflicting images of isolation and of interconnection. The end user may be simultaneously viewed as singular person holed up alone in front of the screen even as she may also be engaged in a dense collaboration with others across the globe.

Which image is "true"? The answer of course is both. The user as isolate and the user-in-community represent multiple realities. In this way, as Turkle puts it, "life on the screen carries theory" (Turkle, 1995, p. 49). Which is the *better* answer, however, is entirely pragmatic and depends on your interests and the question you need to have answered (cf. Renik, 1998; Turkle, 2002[4]).

Perhaps the most significant challenge to traditional views of the self as

bounded and stable is mounted in the chat rooms and in the proliferation of virtual worlds online that the Internet makes possible. In these venues, often devoted to special interests or imaginary worlds in which the user may enter as a player, identity is treated as a matter of self-presentation. A user may participate by adopting an alias or persona whose age, race or even species are recognizably different from the self the user would otherwise be understood to be. These online masquerades of course have their predecessor forms in racial passing or the refuge in closeting that gay men and women have sometimes sought. As I have written elsewhere (Leary, 1999), such passing always occurs in the context of a relationship; it requires, on the one side, a subject who doesn't tell and, on the other, an audience who fails to ask. [5]

Consider the following clinical vignette. Matthew, a patient in psychotherapy, spends his evening hours pursuing relationships online. He has been unhappy with his marriage for some time, and had considered having an affair. In an apparent compromise, he reports his involvement with several women he met in a chat room. Their conversations were animated with a lot of breathless, sexually titillating talk but none progressed to the cybersex that appeared to be his goal. Over time, Matthew becomes frustrated with these relationships feeling that these women are withholding something of themselves from him. Matthew has the very same complaint about his wife, but this fact rarely interests him. Nor is he often interested in how his own

aloofness and disingenuousness might contribute to the problems he has had with women. Matthew is now considering entering a chat room as a woman, hoping to meet a lesbian who might seduce him. As Matthew discusses his intentions, he begins to recognize that he has always believed that women reserve their emotional intimacies for each other. It is exciting to him to imagine being loved by a woman who believed he was a woman. He tells me: "That would be quite a trick."

Matthew is self-consciously constructing alternate selves to mitigate his unhappiness, believing that they might be more successful than he in getting their needs met. At the same time, Matthew fully expects that it is he who will reap the benefits of their adventures. Matthew hopes to derive from an imaginary contact something real. That is his "trick."

Matthew is drawing in part on a fantasy of transformation familiar to us all. From this standpoint, the Internet is simply the current medium for the elaboration of his fantasy. However, his use of the Internet is different in several key respects. As Bader (2002) suggests, online affairs exist "halfway between a fantasy and a real relationship." While the technology allows Matthew to instantiate multiple selves and precisely configure himself in the (feminine) shape he hopes will yield the intimacy he craves, the technology also establishes the parameters for the masquerade. Matthew can "pass" as a woman in the chat room because his online self is created through language

rather than say an exchange of digital photos or through video streaming. At the same time, Matthew's relational ambitions cannot be realized without a real and separate person present in the interaction on the other end of the phone line (Bader, 2002).

Matthew comes to therapy to tell me about his online pursuits. In doing so, he is conveying to me, a woman, his efforts to locate himself among women. It makes sense to assume that at least part of his message is intended for me. How do I, as a real live woman, figure in this psychic/cyber drama? I learn later that Matthew's intention to become a woman online occurred after he had seen me dining with a woman friend in a local restaurant. For Matthew, online or offline, it is the presence of a real person with autonomous interests outside of his control that he finds both threatening and also the object of his longing.

Melissa, a young undergraduate student, brings a related set of issues to her treatment. For some time, she has been sharing with me the details of an online fantasy game with which she is engrossed. Now she tells me she has met someone, a "knight" who has begun to court her. He attends to her tenderly and she is smitten. Their conversations involve erotic exchanges, occurring in real time. Some weeks later, Melissa presses the knight to reveal himself. Their Internet relationship is no longer enough. She wants to meet him and asks him to drive the distance from his hometown to meet her for

coffee at a local bar. The knight comes clean, telling Melissa that he is all of 15 years old, a highschool sophomore sitting at his father's computer in the basement of his home. Melissa is chagrined but in conflict. She has enjoyed what has taken place between them and she doesn't want it to stop. Since he is 15, is she doing anything wrong if they continue? The knight mounts his own challenge. He also wants their erotic talk to proceed. In one e-mail, he reminds Melissa that he is still the person he was on the screen. Melissa hesitates for a moment and then types back: "You may be the same in the game but you are now different in my head."

For Melissa, the recognition that the knight was "now different in my head" acted as a constraint on virtuality. Once she knew him to be 15, he could not ever be anyone else.[6] Few of us would consider Melissa's choice as indicating a lack of imagination. Indeed, most clinicians would consider it to be adaptive. Melissa's experience indicates that the postmodern gravitation to the multiple selves the computer makes possible is only approximate and not fully realized. Multiple subjectivity is perhaps "really" only an emergent sensibility.

Thus, the postmodern attention to surfaces de-emphasizes depth but does not do away with it all together. The surface manipulations on the screen after all exist as a consequence of the machine language underneath and the unseen hand of the software developer who coded the application in

the first place. Perhaps it is when problems develop that interiority and depth return as matters of importance. It when things go wrong that we look beyond the surface.

III

The clinical vignettes of Matthew and Melissa are quite familiar to most clinicians. Our patients have always expressed their desires and defenses through the cultural materials of their day. However, even if the move to multiple subjectivities is itself virtual (i.e., only approximate or partially realized), it is a way of thinking about human experience that yields very different potentials for clinical engagement.

Paradigm change in psychoanalysis has also been relative rather than absolute. In one sense, psychoanalysis remains as lowtech a venture as one could imagine. The "hardware," if you will, is typically a private room. The "software" consists of the emotional histories, hopes and dreads (cf. Mitchell, 1993) each brings to the treatment relationship.

To be sure, psychoanalysis has developed a new vocabulary. Many analysts are now fluent in the languages of social constructivism and dialectical reasoning. Even though discussions about the objectivity and the subjectivity of the analyst and the analytic situation continue to dominate psychoanalytic discourse (Greenberg, 2001; Eagle, et al,, 2001), the whole of

contemporary clinical theory recognizes the intersubjective medium of psychoanalytic work.

The idiom of psychoanalysis increasingly resembles the lexicon that is used with respect to digital environments. The analytic relationship is described in terms of its interactivity. Patient and analyst engage in a liminal space outside of normal time. The language of medicine and natural science has given way to a clinical medium characterized by virtuality and connectivity.

This change in analytic ethos requires the analyst to provide more by way of involvement than was the case in times past (cf. Lindon, 1994). Analysts no longer see themselves as technical surgeons, if ever they did in actual practice. Many now openly invoke models of developmental care-giving or mentorship (Hoffman, 1998) to describe the role they believe themselves to play in their patients' lives. The focus of analytic work is also different. Authenticity and relational connection are increasingly recognized as the *outcomes* of successful treatment rather than preconditions for analyzability (Mitchell. 1993). While technology is frequently implicated in the etiology of the existential ills for which patients need help (i.e. the lone hacker isolated in his room), psychoanalysts are now attentive to the ways in which technology can also mediate analytic experience and even assist patient and analyst to participate in a meaningful intersubjective exchange

(e.g.. Gabbard. 2001).

IV

Specific turns to a postmodern sensibility have been prominent in the work of Irwin Hoffman and Owen Renik. The challenges they raise about the nature of everyday clinical practice offer new metaphors for the analytic enterprise that in turn resonate with the potentials of the Internet and the subjectivity it makes possible.

Hoffman's (1998) work, for example, on “dialectical constructivism” puts relational struggle at the center of effective clinical work. Hoffman argues that analyst and analysand function in constant tension with one another and in the context of internal tensions within each one. For Hoffman, effective clinical work rests on the analyst's ability to fall into a kind of spontaneous authenticity with his or her patient. Although the analyst tries to subordinate his personal needs in favor of the patient’s interests, the analyst also expects that he will fail the patient in some unique fashion. The analyst's capacity to deviate from his preferred stance (“throwing away the book") instigates therapeutic potential.

By way of illustration, Hoffman describes a clinical hour in which he and his patient become able to explore the meaning of a transaction only after Hoffman meets the patient's demand for immediate help by spontaneously

offering to call the patient's internist to secure Valium for her (Hoffman is a clinical psychologist and therefore cannot prescribe medication himself). For this patient, interpretation is possible only after her analyst is willing to do something for her that in this instance lies outside of his preferred assumptions about how analysts are normally helpful (i.e., by analyzing rather than enacting). The content of the shift is not important, rather it is the analyst's willingness to be shifted and moved by his patient.

Thus, Hoffman suggests that the analyst is called upon to become personally responsive in a way that will be unique for each of his or her patients. Such a therapeutic moment cannot be explicitly invoked or instigated by the analyst. It is an emergent phenomenon, issuing from the interactive-intersubjective context that cannot be predicted in advance.

Owen Renik's formulations (1993, 1994, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1999) have achieved iconic status in contemporary psychoanalysis. Renik (1995) has offered a cogent critique of the notion of the anonymous analyst. He forcefully suggests that the principle of anonymity promotes an impossible ideal and thus renders the analytic enterprise disingenuous. Rather than clearing the field, anonymity promotes active idealization by assuming that if the analyst's ideas were known, the patient would no longer be in a position to think for him or herself.

Renik has used the metaphors of "getting real" in analysis (1998b) and of "playing one's cards face up" (1999) to denote the process of establishing ground rules that create a collaborative clinical environment. This is a way of working that requires the analyst to depart from her preferred ways of working and bear a measure of discomfort, just as the patient is asked to do. Furthermore, the analyst's understanding of what it is useful to disclose is always open to counter-critique by the patient.

Renik (2002) has also suggested that from the very start analyst and analysand ought to formulate goals for the analytic work. He suggests that the outcome in clinical analysis is best assessed with respect to the patient's experience of therapeutic benefit. For Renik, clinical analysis is only effective to the extent that it promotes therapeutic change.

Analytic models such as those of Hoffman and Renik accord primary importance to a kind of clinical problem-solving that resonates with a postmodern sensibility. Both of these analysts configure the analytic situation as one that permits the patient an opportunity to work out nonlinear solutions to complex emotional and interpersonal problems. Neither approaches the patient's difficulties in a top-down or bottom-up fashion. Each advocates a therapeutic process that is emergent, provisional and which constructs itself as it goes along. In these contexts, clinical learning occurs through reciprocal and recursive exchanges of information, especially of

emotional and relational information. Clinical engagement occurs as a kind of dynamic construction of content and action; a "just in time" build of what is needed at a given moment.

These ideas remain controversial within psychoanalysis. Jay Greenberg (2001) has gone on record as suggesting that "new view" theorists like Hoffman and Renik focus narrowly on only a partial truth. He argues that that the current focus on mutual influences between patient and analyst unwittingly functions as a prescriptive story for psychoanalysis, every bit as limiting as the traditional authority that earlier generations of analysts uncritically assumed.

I agree with Greenberg to the extent that what he is observing is that the clinical stories that analysts tell have shifted in decisive ways.[7] He is right to suggest that analytic perspectives such as those offered by Hoffman and Renik have little in common with the archaeological metaphor that Freud used to significant advantage during the first century of psychoanalytic thought. Instead, contemporary psychoanalysis perhaps conceptually resembles the architecture of the Web and other media technologies. Psychoanalytic knowledge takes shape in local contexts and in custom-tailored connections between two people and their subjectivities. Analytic subjectivity increasingly emphasizes *strategic* subjectivity. Analyst and analysand configure a relational surface that phenomenologically yields

emotional and psychic depth.

In this respect, contemporary psychoanalysis may find new metaphors by looking to interactive storytelling on the Web. Interactive media forms offer narratives that are shared among users. They have no fixed beginning, middle or end. The story is traded back and forth with each user contributing to the actions and characterizations that develop. The narrative has no one author; it is the product of multiple interacting subjectivities.

As with any jointly constructed narrative, there are times when it makes sense to limit one's focus on one or the other of the analytic couple in order to understand how the story took the turn that it did. But as before, this is entirely pragmatic and constituted by the question you wish to have answered (cf. Turkle, 1995)—a question whose utility is also to be determined by the analytic couple themselves (cf. Renik, 1999).

Psychoanalysis—a discipline popularly assumed to be preoccupied only with the past—also shows itself to be remarkably sensitive to presentday contexts. In naming the alienation, dislocation and dissonance of contemporary culture, psychoanalyst practitioners are increasingly willing to acknowledge their role in providing relational comfort and deep connection, alongside the provision of insight. Clinical actions (beyond the verbal) are now routinely included in clinical reports. Other analysts (e.g. Renik) promote

a renewed emphasis on clinical accountability in arguing for demonstrated links between analytic work and patient experienced therapeutic benefit. With this, the profession is attempting to come to grips with the fact that in good treatments, patients almost always want and frequently extract something considerably beyond the pure self-understanding that theory dictates (Friedman, 2000).

Psychoanalysts are also beginning to grapple with ways in which technology may transform dimensions of experience relevant to psychoanalytic attention. Gabbard (2001) has suggested that psychoanalysis and communications in cyberspace share common potentials as well as common dangers. Each may also be deployed as substitutes for actual engagements, even as each may be used at any time to expand the boundaries of self and relation. As we have seen, interactive media create new classes of imagination and subjective activity, neither public nor private. The question of what is "real" and what is a "fantasy" (as well as the question of when such a distinction should matter)—an ongoing preoccupation for psychoanalysis—becomes newly relevant to critics, scholars and clinical practitioners. The living legacy of psychoanalysis lies in exactly this capacity to find in the new a glimpse of the old and to locate in the strange something familiar.

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Notes

[1] The author wishes to thank Jonathan Metzl, Daniel Shapiro and Richard Hale Shaw for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

[2] During the summer of 2001, several members of the American Psychoanalytic Association's "Open Line" raised questions about the language of the International Psychoanalytic Association's policy of nondiscrimination, noting that it did not explicitly prohibit discrimination against gays and lesbians. The online discussion prompted the American analyst David Sachs (who had previously held office in the International Psychoanalytic Association) to write a letter to the IPA's current president, Daniel Widlocher, who subsequently circulated an e-mail affirming his organization's opposition to all forms of discrimination, including that related to sexual orientation.

The discussion on the open line prompted action driven by the membership. Even more importantly, the open line postings allowed North American analysts a chance to redress their own organizational history of pathologizing gay experience. The e-mail forum functioned as a mechanism for members to acknowledge affirmative gay identities.

At this writing, correspondents on the open line are now actively debating the process by which the American Psychoanalytic Association certifies and credentializes its members.

[3] Preliminary findings from the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society indicate that

the most important features facilitating or inhibiting Internet usage appear to be education, age and access to computers outside of work environments (Nie & Erbring, 2000).

[4] Turkle (2002) suggests that computation and psychoanalysis offer different faces: "There is a modernist way to experience computation, and this, in fact, is what most people usually think of when they think about deciphering the computer or a program. The surprise is more that it shows this other face. But I think that the tension between the two elements is what gives it much of its cultural richness. Computational emergence and complexity does not 'trump' computational reductionism in any simple sense. Which side has the upper hand is a matter not just of technical but of cultural negotiation."

[5] For a recent account of passing and the disdain it provokes in African-American communities, see Henry Louis Gates (1997) who describes the life and times of Anatole Broayard, the *New York Times* Book Review Editor who passed as a white for much of his professional life. Philip Roth's (2001) novel *The Human Stain* explores similar issues.

[6] The crucial question of course is this: how could Melissa know for sure that her knight was only 15? The answer is that she could not. Information in digital contexts remains highly ambiguous (Johnson, 2001). The knight's "true" identity was endlessly manipulable in cyberspace. In this instance, in *presenting* himself as 15—whether he was or was not 15—Melissa's knight was now perceived as unavailable for the offscreen relationship she desired. In this, she recognized him as someone other than who she had in mind. This functioned as a relational fact, interfering with Melissa's ability to return him to the figure he had occupied in her imagination. I am indebted to Robert Hatcher for raising this question.

[7] Greenberg's critique brought to mind a genre of children's literature that I found quite appealing when I was a young girl. In it, the child protagonist—a certain "Trixie Belden"—was regularly called upon to solve a mystery. Her detective work always began in the same way. Aware of some strange goings on, Trixie and her curious friends would take it upon themselves to visit the abandoned cave or warehouse or forest cabin that they had been expressly forbidden to explore. Once inside some clue would alert them to the fact that they were in the midst of a ghostly presence. The hairs on the back of their necks would stand on end. The young detectives would be forced to flee temporarily, vowing in the interim that they would uncover the identity of the troublesome intruder. The story ended equally predictably. Trixie and her friends would flush out the nefarious

interloper who invariably was the disaffected teenager, local recluse or new arrival that until that moment had existed only on the periphery of the town's attention. With Trixie's help, the alien stranger became familiar and was made subject to reparation, rehabilitation or punishment. The mystery was over. Order was restored.

Our clinical stories have of late gravitated towards something of this same narrative trajectory. This makes sense of a certain sort. All of our psychoanalytic accounts concern the alienated other within, the stranger in our midst, the disavowed recluse that in the course of an analysis we discover ourselves to be. Confrontation with the patient's externality and the countertransference that results is perhaps the "ghostly presence" of the contemporary consulting room.

Analysts of different traditions have responded variably to the challenge this presents. For classically trained analysts, the analytic work consisted of the interpretative effort to drive forcefully into the open the alien stranger causing the ruckus. Analysts trained in relational, self-psychological and intersubjective perspectives have always understood their task differently. For them, the analytic relationship could provide the milieu in which that stranger might emerge voluntarily. The analyst's activity has been in the service of helping the patient to develop the conviction, based on experience with the analyst, that the alien and alienated self could be accepted and welcomed, perhaps for the very first time. Here, it is the analyst's empathy and emotional attunement that becomes the medium through which mysteries are solved and order restored.

About the Author

Kimberlyn Leary completed her PhD at the University of Michigan and was recently graduated from the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute. She is also the associate director of the University of Michigan Psychological Clinic and a senior researcher at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School. The chair of the online forum PsyBC On Psychoanalysis, she also sits on the editorial boards of *Psychoanalytic Psychology, Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* and *Studies in Gender and Sexuality.* Her research and theoretical interests include postmodern perspectives in psychoanalysis, race and culture in the consulting room, and interactive relationship building.