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## Embodied intersubjectivity as online psychotherapy becomes mainstream

Dear Readers,

Coronavirus measures have stimulated a re-organisation of the field of psychotherapy demanding a new level of technological skill, creativity and revision of established practice. This issue celebrates the resilience and adaptability of therapists and clients who have found new ways to stay connected, with contributions from Israel, Italy and Finland and the UK. It explores the new dimensions of online psychotherapy, offering vivid case studies of individuals and groups. The authors share their journeys of learning, re-thinking and reconnecting with sometimes unanticipated benefits for the work.

It is important, however, to acknowledge what has been lost or profoundly changed before considering the gains in terms of resourcefulness and resilience in the face of challenge. One of the difficulties with online therapy is that for some of our clients there is no safe space to talk, no place where they can feel comfortable to speak openly about what is on their mind without fear of being overheard. This is linked to privacy: both in terms of who is at home, and whether they will respect the boundaries of the session, and also the risk of being hacked or stalked online.

When conducting sessions online there is the loss of physical proximity which supports the felt sense of intimacy. The body of the therapist with all s/he offers is no longer 'there' in the same room as the client. Nor is the holding environment created by offerings of props, blankets, art materials, a comfortable chair, mattress or a studio space which are part of a greater sense of provision. These absences are keenly felt by many clients, whose space feels empty, or cramped, or threatening. In the online meeting, time and space are different, it is not just an intersubjective meeting, but an inter-local (i.e. two venues) meeting.

In a disturbing almost/as if experience we are impacted by the impossibility of fully synchronised eye contact. We can look at the video image of the other looking at us, knowing they too can apparently see us looking at them but there is not the same energy, full dopamine charge, light in the eye of actual eye contact (Schoore, 2003). We know that synchrony is a fundamental attribute of close connection and that our brain perceives nano-second delay as a disruption in attunement. Latency, the problem of a slight delay between

a live moment and its reception, is an underlying stressor in video communication (Goldhahn, this issue).

Several authors here reflect on this and other problems posed to a body-centred approach by the shrinking visual frame and sagittal perspective created in online work: 'the body-movement text and communication, which lies in the heart of DMT, has been seriously impaired with the use of online media' (Yariv et al., this issue). Online work tends to invite a focus on head and face, and the body as a whole is not seen unless client and therapist move further away from the device. In work with children or adults, where sensory play has been central, the screen can seem bare, and the reduced sensory variation and stimulation creates a setting that feels too exposing. However, playing with what can be seen and what is hidden can also become a source of rich communication (Engelhard & Furlager, this issue).

Embodied intersubjectivity can be defined as everything that shapes the therapist and client's interaction moment to moment expressed via feelings, movement, breathing pattern, sensation, image and words. It also incorporates history, gender, class, power, race, what is happening in the world, and the physicality of the meeting place, including qualities of light, space, perspective and sound. With a webcam lens we can become habituated to a fixed and shortened horizon, interrupting the freedom and potential for shifting between wide and narrow focus and peripheral vision which happens when we are in a room together person-to-person.

Another loss is the transitional time that is part of the therapy when we meet in person i.e. the processing that happens in the journey to and from the session, involving movement, free association, and/or digestion. Furthermore 'In webcam therapy, we are unable to witness the transitions (entrance) from the "outside world" to the room and vice-versa' (Yariv et al. this issue).

Monica Re (in her article) names the broader social and therapeutic issue of the connections between lockdown and prison from a physiological point of view. 'Time and space are different from everyday life: the body lies or sits in a limited space following the flow of an unlimited time. Space limits mean short horizons for the eyesight with a reduction and restriction of the perspective. The body starts to adapt to standstill position and boredom, falling into a state of hypokineses'. Warnecke in his article summarises the characteristics of hypo-states such as low energy, hopelessness, or 'I'm not good enough' perspectives or identifications and bystander countertransference and offers a range of interventions to help clients mobilise and re-calibrate their autonomic state.

Within this is the now well-recognised state of zoom fatigue. Being locked onto, or into, a screen for many hours a day can lead to chronic contractions in the eye itself, as well as restricted movement in the rest of the body and a reduced kinesphere. Lack of movement combines with the demand on our

brains to carry the extra stress of adapting to the image and its lack of dimensionality. We are always translating, and much is 'lost in translation' (Goldhahn, this issue). The load carried by therapists is magnified for many now by the intense work of holding clients as the scale of loss, the prolonged isolation, uncertainty, restriction and economic challenge is impacting mental (sic) health. Overuse of focus is a form of exertion and needs to be balanced by release, recuperation, and rebounding so we can return refreshed (Carroll, 2020a; Hackney, 1998). BPs and DMPs have potential advantages here in having an embodied understanding of the importance of movement for all aspects of well-being.

All this said, what positives emerge from the switch to online work? Most importantly, therapeutic relationships can be sustained. As all these articles attest, therapists and clients everywhere are making creative adjustments to online work. This says something about our capacity as human beings to suspend disbelief and to transcend the limitations of physical absence. It is also to do with shared intent which enhances intersubjectivity (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). In addition, polyvagal affective exchange (Porges & Dana, 2018) and kinaesthetic empathy (Fischman, 2009) through mirror neurons is still potent via the screen. The clinical vignettes in this issue describing creative, unexpected, touching encounters confirm this over, and over again.

Our remarkable adaptability as a species is also confirmed. We can meet 'in the air' and creativity leads to new modes of interacting. For example, Lotan Mesika et al. in their article describe how: 'The group practices placing the phones so everybody can move and at the same time see each other sharing the imagined colouring gestures on their body'. Autonomy and self-agency are encouraged, we are learning new skills, discovering online resources and creating new communities.

The practical and political implications of this move to online psychotherapy, is, perhaps, an era-defining power shift. The client does not have to travel to their therapist, they can meet them from their own space. The therapist does not need a room in a private house, or to pay room hire fees or work in an organisation. This has economic implications (Goldhahn, this issue). The negotiation of the options for meeting are changing, and will change, the dynamics of therapy, giving both therapist and client more (and sometimes less) choice; a form of democratisation. So that before we agree to start therapy with (a) client(s) we might begin with a very basic negotiation such as will we meet in a physical room? Will we meet online and, if so, on what platform? Will we talk on the phone? Perhaps we work outside. Are text, email, or video clips part of our way of working? Will the client choose to keep the video on all the time? Are sessions recorded? These questions are very significant for the intersubjective field especially as they may address issues of privilege and inequality which are increasingly urgent.

What has actually brought satisfaction to many is the convenience afforded by having psychotherapy without the cost and time of travel. It is easier to organise meetings in busy lives and to teach, study or do clinical work with a group that is located throughout the world. Time is precious. This expedience is double edged, however, and something we are going to have to wrestle with once we move beyond the pandemic fears. Online work has been normalised but what will that mean for our long-term embodiment as a species, and the value we place on live embodied encounter in BP and DMP (Carroll, 2020b)?

Complex questions are also raised by the paradox of both loss and benefit of the face-to-face screen meeting. As Medrano in this issue writes, 'In online sessions, the therapist may lose body expressions, but they can gain by identifying very subtle details in the gaze, the muscles of the face, the posture of the shoulders, the tones in the voice'. Eigen (1986) called the human face 'the most prominent organising principle in the field of meaning', and sitting in front of a screen replicates some of the facial closeness of a mother holding her baby. Through the attuned mirroring of the therapist the client may find deep holding and understanding in this modality. Others find more attunement through the auditory and felt-sense focus afforded over the phone that allows 'going inside' without visual distraction.

We have been evolving our screen sophistication over decades, first film, tv, internet, then smart phones. We are familiar with the sense of the figure on the screen as a living breathing other. Images arise from, and impact on, the body in this screen to screen meeting. Mirror neurons converse. Light too is part of the embodied intersubjective field and affects the mood of the encounter. Is the light poor or bright, slanting or dazzling? Is our client in shadow? Both therapist and client can 'curate' their space, or conversely reveal gaps, or mess, or dramatic background vistas. Several articles in this issue consider the therapeutic implications of the capacity for editing, directing, and setting up make believe in the selfie of screen presentation. The potency of screen work builds directly on our capacity to imagine, to enter another world, through the portal of our machines. Screen life is part of our culture now and includes fantasy, video games, distraction, new realities and particularly new versions of bodies (Orbach, 2009).

The energetic communication that is possible between human beings who are not physically proximate is surprising. Online meetings can be a conduit for vivid and intimate connection. However, whilst 'those with more embodied experience adapt more easily' (Medrano, this issue), what will our increasingly digital remote lives will do to the vulnerable, those who struggle to have, and to be in, a body, those whose lives are empty of human contact?

Working outside can be an antidote to the constriction of online work. Here open wide attention is invited, less direction may be needed, it is easier just to be, with less dependence on verbalising (Marshall, 2020). The natural

world offers many invitations to feel alive in our bodies and connected with the other-than-human world, a larger intersubjectivity. There is both therapeutic and political urgency to enhancing our embodied awareness of living within a complex ecosystem.

The articles in this issue create a window on the world – snapshots of different times in the spread of the virus and the impact of lockdowns and social distancing on therapeutic services. Italy was the first focus of the spread outside China and it is here that Monica Re's reflections are set in her article entitled 'Isolated systems towards a dancing constellation: Coping with Covid-19 lockdown through a pilot dance movement therapy teleintervention'. She begins with a powerful description of the early stages of the pandemic:

The social system needed time to organize a totally new way of life ... on-line [but] lots of people were still isolated, not connected, alone. In many cases the only contact with the outside was TV: a flow of terrifying numbers, contrasting data, images of death and military checkpoints.

Uncomfortable feelings arose everywhere. The situation was shocking: a global trauma was on the doorstep.

In an inspiring narrative, Re goes on to describe how she liaised with a Families' Center of Consorzio Intercomunale Socio-Assistenziale in the province of Turin to set up a DMT intervention online, focused on children aged 3–10 and the residents of two care homes. Camille Saint-Saens' music 'The Carnival of Animals' was chosen as a focus to help participants explore body-effort-shape-space to the music with its 14 movements representing fish, mammals and birds. The animal-music motifs created an immediate connection between all participants and the therapist as they worked together, and yet separately, online. The article highlights how it is possible 'to weave a canvas from screen to screen' (Re, this issue). The culmination of this story brought me (one of the editors) to tears of delight, joy and hope.

During this pandemic, Tom Warnecke's article on 'Acute crisis states as a presenting issue and some psychophysiological interventions' is a welcome voice of calm, clarity and decades of clinical experience. Warnecke clarifies the distinction between crisis and trauma. He summarises key principles of working with hyper- and hypo- manifestations of a crisis state which are applicable to face-to-face, telephone and online work. His overview straddles well-established body psychotherapy principles and newer insights and practices. The laying out of strategies, with options and examples, offers a grounding guide to working with clients in acute states.

The article 'Waking up the bear: A dance/movement therapy group model with depressed adult patients during Covid-19 2020' articulates and demonstrates the efficacy of a DMT model in the context of the creative adaptations used to sustain work during the pandemic. Sheerie Lotan Mesika, Hilda

Wengrower and Hagai Maoz portray the range of these in a reflective descriptive diary of a week with outpatients and inpatients, working on the phone, WhatsApp video, distanced four person groups meeting in hospital rooms, and then outside on a basketball court and finally under a tree. They find that DMT can measurably enhance global vitality and that with resourcefulness and thinking out of the box, groups could continue to meet in one format or another.

Katherine Rothman, a DMP who describes herself as a 'digital native', focuses on meeting with her patient for remote sessions during lockdown. In 'Expanding: A case study of exploring online work and relationship in one-to-one sessions in an adult learning disability service' the challenge of working under newly democratised conditions is explored. Navigating mutual disorientations and difficulties with the shift to online work, the learning curve is steep. What emerges is captured in brief diary entries showing the client's and therapist's negotiation in relation to screen to screen choreography. New vectors of relating open up as different ways of meeting without props are found especially through movement mirroring.

In 'Reflections on individual webcam-dance/movement therapy for adults', DMTs

Anat Yariv, Yifat Shalem-Zafari, Hilda Wengrower, Nira Shahaf, and Dalia Zylbertal, share their thoughts about online work. They highlight the importance of the 'kinetic text' (La Barre, 2005) and how the webcam lens 'redefines the borders of the body-movement text'. They articulate the gaps, losses and absence that characterise the shift to screen-based work and ask searching questions regarding therapeutic DMT goals in the presence of the mirror, namely, the webcam lens. Now, they suggest, the patient has to be witness to parts that the therapist cannot see by describing out-of-screen body movement.

In 'Screen-bridges: Dance movement therapy in online contexts' Susana Marcia Medrano, feminist DMT and Gestalt psychotherapist, reflects on her work with an internationally-located group, and with one-to-one clients. Data included a Survey Monkey questionnaire for collecting research participants responses to online work, as well as her own observations. Medrano draws some hopeful conclusions. Whilst recognising that the effects of DMT in virtual contexts need to be explored and documented further, she writes of her conclusion that her clients and the group found online sessions really did 'help to reduce feelings of isolation'. She savours the fact that participants can 'experience synchrony and an ability to "tune in" [] even through a screen' demonstrating that it is possible to transcend geographical barriers and bring together people in different countries and time zones.

DMPs Einat Shuper Engelhard and Avital Yael Furlager continue with this theme in 'Remaining held: Dance/movement therapy with children during lockdown'. In this article they discuss how the therapist may help to transform

the digital space into a safe playing ground. The therapist closely tracks the child through all the elements of the way they relate to the screen and to disruptive elements such as interruptions. This is illustrated by case studies of two child clients, a boy and a girl, with touching detail of movement process and verbatim exchanges. In both, there are transformative moments of connection as new ways of making contact are discovered.

In 'Being seen digitally: Exploring macro and micro perspectives', Eila Goldhahn, examines the way in which digital media are used for therapy and teaching. In particular she draws a parallel between camera-witnessing and the witnessing process in Adler's (2002) discipline of authentic movement. In this article conceived two years prior to the coronavirus crisis, she considers why it is important to understand the way digital media work, and what they do, and do not, achieve. Locating the use of camera-based online work in a larger political, economic, cultural and ecological context, Goldhahn poses some searching questions about the trajectory of this development. In conclusion, some thoughtful, practical and ethical guidelines for the use of camera-based online work are offered.

The link with authentic movement continues in the final piece, which is a poem rooted in authentic movement practice, during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, in Finland by Päivi Pylvänäinen. This beautiful poem captures the delicate nuance of embodied process, its exquisite attention to each moment, and the continuum of grief-pain and hope-restoration.

## Notes on contributor

*Roz Carroll* is a relational body psychotherapist.. She is co-editor, with Jane Ryan, of *What is Normal? Psychotherapist's address the question* (Confer 2020) and author of numerous articles and chapters, including: 'The Blood-dimmed Tide: Witnessing war and working with the collective body in Authentic Movement' in the *Journal of Psychotherapy and Politics International*. She taught on the M.A. in Integrative Psychotherapy at The Minster Centre for 14 years and has been a regular speaker for Confer for twenty years. She is UKCP registered and an associate member of ADMP.

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