

## Going to sea in a sieve: 'remote analysis', the internal setting, and disavowal.<sup>1</sup>

John Churcher  
British Psychoanalytical Society

**Abstract:** In 'remote analysis', how might the analyst apprehend the risk that the inherent lack of privacy due to telecommunication will result in an actual breach of confidentiality? What are the consequences of this lack of privacy for the containing function of the setting? Unlike the sharing of clinical material between colleagues, telecommunication exposes the analytic couple to potential view by third parties who cannot be assumed to share the analyst's ethical commitment to the best interests of the patient. How is this situation represented in the minds of the analyst and of the patient, how far is it deposited unconsciously in the setting, including the internal setting, and to what extent is it typically disavowed?

### **The insecurity of telecommunications**

Modern electronic telecommunications are vulnerable to interception and surveillance. This creates a problem for the confidentiality of any psychoanalytic consultation that is conducted remotely: there is a risk that the conversation will not remain private. For reasons of time I shall not today rehearse in detail the reasons for taking this risk seriously. They were set out recently in the *Report of the IPA Confidentiality Committee* which will be the subject of a Panel tomorrow afternoon.

Briefly, there is a qualitative difference in security between the classical psychoanalytic setting and one which involves telecommunication: the analyst normally knows enough about the classical setting to be able to tell if the conversation is private; whereas in the telecommunicative setting, the analyst's ignorance and lack of control over the technology means that he or she cannot ever know if the conversation is private. This asymmetry is not dispelled by anecdotes about successful eavesdropping in the classical setting, or by an absence of reports of actual breaches in the telecommunicative setting.

### **The telecommunicative setting**

Where telecommunications are used, e.g. in 'remote analysis', they form part of the setting. We cannot avoid asking, therefore, what happens to the setting as a result of this insecurity.

In the classical setting, if a breach becomes known to the analytic couple, it can become the focus of an analytic process which, with luck, may result in a repair which will keep the analytic vessel afloat. But what about the chronic uncertainty of the situation in which the risk is constantly present but no breach has been known to occur? What psychological consequences does this have for the analyst, the patient, and the setting?

### **The containing function of the setting**

The psychoanalytic setting functions as a container of the analytic process. As John Steiner has put it: *"The setting, frame, space or container provides the arena within which the patient's emotional disturbance and conflicts can be expressed and understood"*. (Steiner,

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2006, p.315). Steiner cites José Bleger who 40 years earlier had described the setting as: *“the constants within the framework of which the process takes place.”* Bleger borrowed the terms ‘constant’ and ‘variable’ from mathematics, writing that the setting corresponded: *“...to the constants of a phenomenon, a method or a technique, and the process to a set of variables.”* (Bleger, 2013 [1967], p. 228)

### **Confidentiality essential to the containing function of the setting**

The containing function of the setting is essential to psychoanalysis and confidentiality is an essential element in making this possible. The ‘constants’ of which Bleger wrote cannot be just *any* constants; the framework has to create a degree of trust that whatever is said will remain private to the analytic couple. Analysis cannot be conducted in a public arena, such as a shopping mall or on stage in front of an audience.

### **Need for a secondary container when container fails**

If the setting fails as a container for any reason, for the analysis to continue there has to be some way of reestablishing the psychoanalytic situation, repairing the setting and restoring the analytic process. Philip Stokoe (2015) calls the means of doing this a “secondary container”. He describes this in terms of an institutional structure which can act to provide a benign inquiry into what has led to the breakdown by occupying a ‘third position’ in relation to the container, and typically this involves an actual third party external to the analytic couple.

### **The internal setting as secondary container of first resort**

The secondary container of first resort, however, is usually the analyst’s own mind, or more specifically the internal setting in the analyst’s mind: a mental space that is reserved for the analysis and for the patient.

The concept of an internal setting has been developed by various authors,<sup>2</sup> who don’t all think of it in precisely the same way, but they do all agree that it is when the external setting is disrupted in some way that the internal setting is essential for maintaining or restoring the analytic process. Faced with such a rupture the analyst invariably seeks, as Bleger pointed out, to restore it, an endeavour which is only possible because the analyst keeps the idea of an *unruptured* setting in mind.

When a disruption is occasioned by a breach in confidentiality, the crisis is one of trust, and it shakes the foundations of the analysis. Claudia Frank (in this Panel) has given us a vivid account of such an event with her patient ‘A’, which shook the internal setting in both analyst and patient. In this case, the publication of material from the analysis had been decided by the analyst, and the patient was subsequently obliged to explore competing phantasies of what the analyst was up to, some of which were benign, and some not.

If this had been a ‘remote analysis’, and if publication of essentially the same material had been made anonymously by a third party having no connection to the analysis, we may imagine that both patient and analyst would have found themselves in deeper water and

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<sup>2</sup> Temperley (1984), Bridge (2013 [1997], 2013), Alizade (2002), Churcher (2005), Parsons (2007), Civitarese (2013 [2011]), Labarthe (2012), Schachter et al. (2019)

sinking fast. Under such circumstances it is hard to imagine how either of them would have been able to experience the event as the action of a benign third party, or how it would have been possible to restore trust in the setting.

### **Disavowal**

I have argued elsewhere (Churcher, 2017) that because we now depend on the Internet in so many aspects of our lives, any knowledge which puts the viability of this dependence into doubt provides an occasion for psychic defence. I proposed that our reactions to the revelations by Edward Snowden in 2013 can be understood in terms of Freud's concept of disavowal (*Verleugnung*) just as Hanna Segal did 30 years previously in relation to the threat of nuclear war (Segal, 1987), as Sally Weintrobe and others have done more recently in relation to climate change (Weintrobe, 2013; Hoggett, 2013), and David Tuckett in relation to instability of financial markets (Tuckett, 2011; Tuckett and Taffler, 2008)).

Freud's concept has entered everyday language as one of the meanings of the English word 'denial', and various authors (e.g. Weintrobe; Hoggett; Cohen) have discussed the relations between denial as a psychic defence in the individual and 'denialism' as a cultural and political phenomenon.

Obviously, the dangers we live with every day are not all of the same order of magnitude; the survival of psychoanalysis is ultimately of less importance than the survival of human life on earth. But I am using the comparison to bring out common aspects of the way we relate to them psychologically.

Freud described disavowal as a defence that is activated by a *psychical* trauma: the discovery of something which implies an incommensurability between the relative peace and calm of the *status quo*, and the terror of an anticipated future. Steiner described it as the basis of an attitude of 'turning of a blind eye' in the direction of reality (Steiner, 1985), and Weintrobe (2013) and Hoggett (2013) have described the formation of a perverse culture of denial in connection with climate change. As the pressure grows on us to expand our work into new geographical regions by making greater use of 'remote analysis', I fear that a culture of denial may be developing within our profession in relation to telecommunication.

### **A more primitive defence**

In addition to disavowal/denial, a more primitive kind of defence may also be in operation. For Bleger, the setting is the repository of an infantile symbiotic relation. He writes that in the necessary task of analysing the psychoanalytic setting itself the analyst meets with:

*"...the most tenacious resistance, because it is not something repressed but something split off which has never been discriminated. Its analysis is an upheaval for the ego and for the more mature identity reached by the patient. We are not interpreting gaps in memory but something that was never part of memory. Nor is it a projective identification, but the manifestation of the patient's syncretism of 'participation'."* (p. 238).

This is the area of 'unrepresented states' which has been the subject of much recent clinical and theoretical work (Botella; Kahn; Sapisochin; Aulagnier;...). But Bleger's concept of syncretic participation, which he takes from Levy-Bruhl, shifts the focus from absence of

representation or figurability to absence of discrimination: between the self, the other, and the setting.

### **Invariants, natural & artefactual**

It is easy to imagine how basic invariants of nature, such as gravity or the stability of the earth, might remain 'undiscriminated' from earliest infancy, if no circumstance arises which disrupts them. When, exceptionally, a disruption does occur it can occasion profound anxiety of the kind that Bleger calls 'catastrophic', and that Chris Mawson (2019), following Heidegger, has recently characterised as 'ontological'. Charles Darwin, experiencing an earthquake in Chile in 1835, wrote: "...one second of time conveys to the mind a strange idea of insecurity, which hours of reflection would never create" (Darwin, 1913 [1839], p.323)

As we come to rely ever more on the internet and its associated technologies, we increasingly take for granted *its* invariant properties as if they were natural ones; they become no less 'basic' in our daily lives. The illusion of privacy is an example of this, and if we were one day to find our conversation with a patient over hundreds of sessions exposed to public view, like WikiLeaks, the shock would be profound.

The widespread persistence of this illusion of privacy depends on a collectively cultivated ignorance of the actual workings of the technology. Not enquiring, not being curious, and not educating oneself about the technological resources one relies on, is one way of not having ever to represent to oneself the risk.

### **Both defences compromise the internal setting**

To conclude, I am suggesting that two levels of psychic defence may be operating simultaneously to limit our awareness of the risks to confidentiality inherent in the use of telecommunications in psychoanalytic practice. One is disavowal, which allows us not to see what we have seen. The other is what Bleger calls 'syncretic participation', which allows us to depend on something without ever having seen it as distinct from ourselves. Both may be having chronic effects on the internal setting, but how this happens, and how they interact or combine, is a matter for further investigation.

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