

Lost in translation?

Communicating therapeutically
beyond geographical, physical and
psychological boundaries

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Introduction

The theme:

- My background and interest in **online therapeutic relationships**
- Exploring how people experience **'connection'** online
- Conveying **meaning** online and the use of language
- The place of **metaphor** and **imagery** in communication of self and feelings

My background in online work:

- 10 years with the University of Portsmouth (UK) Counselling Service
- Established an in-house online student counselling service using text-based approaches
- Now working independently as a consultant and practitioner both face-to-face and online, using video, IM and email approaches
- 8+ years experience of online counselling, training and supervision
- Collaboration with 'online specialist' colleagues and professional organisations
- Research project: The therapeutic relationship online
- Publications: Professional Journals and "Psychotherapy 2.0" (Weitz, P)



Training, experience and competence

- Core training in psychotherapy – what is your modality? How will this ‘translate’ to online work?
- Specialist training – what do I need to explore? (“I don’t know what I don’t know!”)
- Personal style and preferences
- Gaining experience and sharing with others also working online (through supervision, membership of professional groups, forums etc.)

Online counselling: the setting

- Online communication:- clients may be trying out a new way of relating (or seeking an opportunity to experience a new 'attachment style'?)
- **Asynchronous** engagement vs **synchronous**? (What may be unique and special about the former?)
- The rapidly changing world of communication: **digital immigrants** vs **digital natives**

Which are you?

- A digital native

(born around 1980 or later)

- A digital immigrant

(the rest of us!)



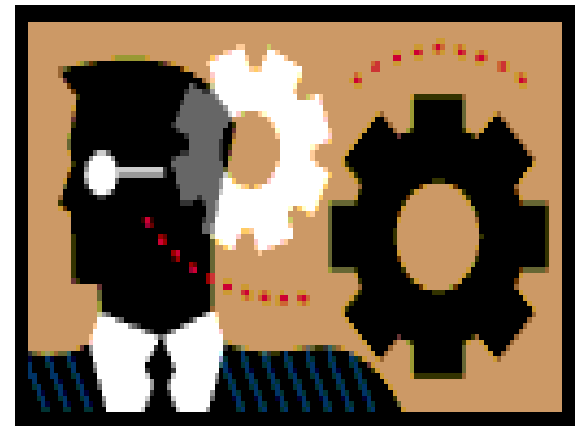
The client context in 2015

“...while traditional psychotherapy remains blissfully unplugged, its therapists and clients generally are not; outside the therapy room they are always “on”, plugged in and connected. Whether or not the ubiquity of connected-up culture features as an explicit theme in therapy, it is no doubt an intrinsic part of the field in which psychotherapy occurs.” (Balick, 2014)

Managing Identity

“It has been suggested that the internet represents a kind of ‘middle landscape’ that allows individuals to exercise their impulses for both separation and connectedness”.

Healy, D (1996) *Cyberspace and place: The internet as middle landscape on the electronic frontier*. In D Porter's (Ed) *Internet Culture*. New York, Routledge, 55 – 68



The Online Disinhibition Effect

Suler, J (2004)



“In removing the physical aspect of the counselling, the pure expression of mind and soul may be communicated effectively, bypassing the defences of Counsellor and client.” (Anthony, 2000)

It's About **Time**



Cosmic time (scientific time)

VS

Phenomenological time (time as
subjectively experienced)

(See “Psychotherapy 2.0” Chapter 6 by Divine
Charura)

And Transitional Space?

Winnicott (1953):

“The intermediate area to which I am referring is the area that is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality testing.”

Lingiardi (2011):

“computer mediated communication allows the user to play with realities and identities. It can thus contain transitional objects as defined by Winnicott; the transitional object...lies half way between near and far, between what we create and what we discover...”



Who am I online?

Who are you?

What do we bring to the
meeting?

When does our meeting
happen?

Where do we meet?

How does it proceed?

How does it feel?



Online identity

- Reality vs fantasy?
- Authenticity vs illusion?
- Impoverished or enriched?
- Restrictive or freeing?
- True self/false self/many selves?
- Considered or spontaneous?

A client may write very differently from how they converse, but may feel this represents them BETTER as they are not hampered by embarrassment etc

True self/false self

The self as represented online ... as “an expression of the outward facing part of the ego” (Balick 2014)



Think of:

- Jung's 'personae' or 'masks'
- Winnicott's notion of the false self.



Online communities create new networks
and provide links and unique opportunities
for connection



The therapist working online

- Which theoretical approach/es am I using?
- What assumptions am I making as I communicate with my client?
- What **language(s)** am I speaking and **does my client speak the same language?**
- What are the boundaries here and how do I establish them?
- How do I assess client progress?



Language, text and emotions

The capacity to convey both conscious and unconscious feelings and emotions through text is vast; it is just a little different from being in the room with your client.

Of course, some things are missing (eg: visual cues, with text-based therapy)

But some others may emerge....

Conveying feelings online

Feelings are expressed in many ways.
Some approaches are consciously
chosen eg:

Use of emoticons:

,,, ^ ^ ,,,



Use of acronyms:
LOL ROFL OMG

Text enhancement:

- He told me last week he will soon be leaving the area << feeling sad>>
- Emotional bracketing:
((((((((John))))))))
- After all that I'd said she went ahead and just applied anyway [sigh]



Using text emphasis:

....I simply ***hate*** the way I look....

Why can't you just LISTEN TO ME
NOW....

When he said that I just wanted to disappear....

As I'm writing this I'm suddenly feeling a
whole lot better



Using punctuation marks:

- Perhaps you could just leave me to think about it!
- Perhaps you could just leave me to think about it?
- Perhaps you could just leave me.... to think about it.....
- Perhaps you could just leave me to 'think' about it



Using coloured text and different fonts:

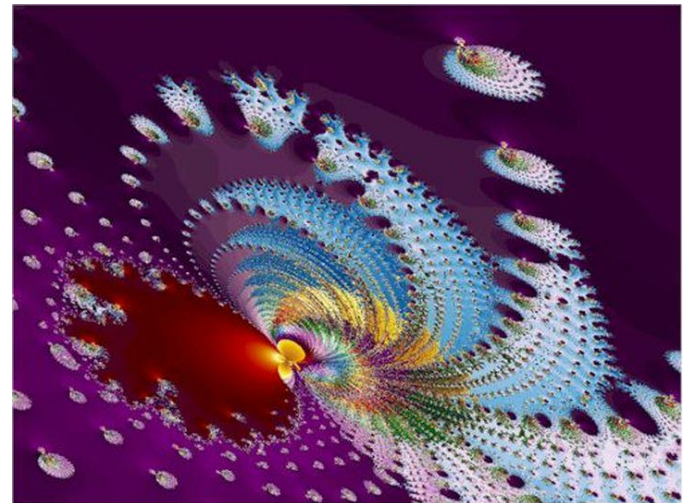
I really felt **mad as hell** when I heard about that

He is always telling everyone about his great house, fast car, wonderful holiday - I'm **wishing it was me....**

Mentalizing and the use of metaphor

Evidence from neuroscience showing the potential for the creation of new neural connections which are facilitated by 'story-telling' imagery, use of pictorial imagery. Giving words to feelings. Repairing rupture in attachment pathways.

Allen, Fonagy & Bateman (2008)
“*Mentalizing in Clinical Practice.*”
Arlington, USA: American
Psychiatric Publishing



Imagery and Metaphor – Magnification



“I think that it may have had an impact on not wanting to speak face to face with someone but only because I know how freely I can speak over text. I think saying to someone what I needed to say meant that i had to actually form the words in my mouth and force them out. Whilst when I type I just have to think them and there they are just on a screen not in someone's mind yet.”

Imagery and Metaphor – Time to think



“i also liked the way that i was not expected to reply the next day or the same day as the email was sent to me, it helped that i had a week to think about what was being said and how to reply to the issues raised.”

Time to think cont....



“I have a tendency in life to snap and say the first thing that comes into my head I could read the question and the response and take time to really think about my reaction, if necessary i could type out a response and then come back to it a few hours/day later and rewrite it if my feelings had changed.”

Imagery and Metaphor – Being in control



“I guess you have more control over distance...edit it, read it back, correct it. You can never really take back what you say. It's there forever in that person's memory.”



The work of James Pennebaker

- Professor in psychology department at University of Texas
- Has explored links between traumatic experiences, expressive writing, natural language use and physical and mental health
- Author of 10 books and 300+ articles
- Original studies demonstrated how writing about traumatic experiences can powerfully improve both mental and physical wellbeing



In Pennebaker's own words:

"While the effects are often modest, the mere act of translating emotional upheavals into words is consistently associated with improvements in physical and mental health...."

Dr. Pennebaker's Basic Writing Assignment

Over the next four days, write about your deepest emotions and thoughts about the emotional upheaval that has been influencing your life the most. In your writing, really let go and explore the event and how it has affected you. You might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. Write continuously for 20 minutes.

How do words affect us?

- ❑ The story behind the project(s)
- ❑ Development of the software
- ❑ 'Stealth' words!
- ❑ Issues of gender, age and power
- ❑ Personality
- ❑ Emotion detection
- ❑ Lying
- ❑ The language of love

The image shows the front cover of the book 'The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us' by James W. Pennebaker. The cover has a light beige background. A large orange speech bubble shape is centered on the cover. Inside the speech bubble, the title 'THE SECRET LIFE OF PRONOUNS' is written in white, with 'THE' in bold. Below the title, separated by a thin horizontal line, is the subtitle 'WHAT OUR WORDS SAY ABOUT US' in white, with 'OUR' and 'US' in bold. At the bottom of the cover, below the speech bubble, the author's name 'JAMES W. PENNEBAKER' is printed in orange.

THE SECRET
LIFE OF
PRONOUNS

WHAT OUR
WORDS
SAY ABOUT US

JAMES W. PENNEBAKER



Are you

Lost in translation

OR

Discovering new potential?



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