

To be Masked or to be Image; the Presence Dilemma in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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When we talk about presence, we imagine an in-person, full attention, and whole-hearted communication. Presence illustrates shared space-time, attuned minds, and synchronized bodies. Nevertheless, what can we imagine about the experience of presence in a virtual communication? Do different places and times impede the presence experience? Is it possible to have attunement and synchronization with others in a virtual space?

To be honest, before the Covid-19 pandemic, I felt that a virtual contact could not be real and authentic. I thought that presence is something that happens between bodies. In spite of plenty of virtual meetings with my clients, my orthodox beliefs around presence and the healing atmosphere had not allowed me to affirm the positive outcomes of such therapy sessions. I usually used to narrate them as inhibited and imperfect relationships. I should confess that I had read many original and review articles that showed no significant difference in the efficacy of online psychotherapy in comparison with face-to-face treatment, but I personally was suspicious of the generalizability of the results to the clinical setting.

During the pandemic state, I – like many other psychotherapists – encountered a dilemma of either having an in-person and masked meeting or a virtual, unmasked one. I should think about 2 barrier systems in our communication trajectory. On the one hand, I faced semi-covered mimics, damped breathing, and fearful bodies and, on the other hand, I met two-dimensional closeups with occasional technical interruptions. Which way could be the better way to rapport and healing?

We were gradually pushed to the virtual meetings despite my resistance and that of my clients. After a while, my clients and I preferred to suspend our beliefs about the magic of face-to-face meetings, especially when you can have to the utmost a masked face-to-masked face visit!

Evidently, these adjustments and changes in our manner of thinking and communicating like other evolutions in life were the result of necessity. After the deconstruction of my traditional web of beliefs around communicative action, now, I can see more clearly that the presence experience even in in-person relationships is something nonlocal. Intercorporeality and mirroring arise from attunement of emotions and intentionalities do not arise from the spaces amongst bodies.

The online therapy sessions and webinars, like in-person communications, can prepare the cathartic and insightful experiences rely on intersubjective and intercorporeal resonances.

It seems that coronavirus is working as a digitalization accelerator of the personal and professional relationship and communication. However, a mindful and experimental approach to this virtual level of organization, namely Cybersphere, can improve health. We cope with the Cybersphere in the same way that we deal with the biosphere, community, and family.

This spring we will publish a special issue on “online psychosocial support of caregivers in the COVID-19 pandemic”. Therefore, we can also think about such a virtual healing atmosphere for caregivers to help them heal their distress and fatigue, especially in these extremely challenging times in the pandemic. We hope that this program can evoke a higher sensitivity in the field of caregivers’ health and lead us to a more positive attitude towards a virtual presence and its healing potentials.

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.