The Presence of the Analyst: An Intersubjective Perspective

Lewis Kirshner, M.D.

lewis\_kirshner@hms.harvard.edu

Abstract

The concept of the analyst's presence gained attention almost 60 years ago through the writings of the French analyst Sacha Nacht and the Hungarian-British Michael Balint. Anna Freud earlier spoke of the related, but rather ambiguous term "real person of the analyst," which has been widely discussed by many authors since (Kirshner 2012b). Both terms- presence and real person- appear frequently in the psychoanalytic literature, usually without much definition or conceptual clarity. Authors have used them in different ways, but in general their intention has been to contrast the analyst's reality as a person with his function as a transference and fantasy object, perhaps as a corrective to the perceived austerity of the classical model. The author argues that "real presence" can be better understood as part of the phenomenologic experience of intersubjectivity, in contrast to metapsychological theories that attempt to conceptualize intrapsychic processes. Lacan's work represents an exception in attempting to escape this dialectic between intra and inter-psychic, but at the cost of eliminating the transactional influence of the analyst as subject. In this paper I explore some implications of the intersubjective encounter of two subjects in the clinical process. I argue that the phenomenology of presence cannot be reduced to psychoanalytic theories of the mind and thereby holds ethical implications for practice.

The concept of the analyst's presence gained attention almost 60 years ago through the writings of the French analyst Sacha Nacht and the Hungarian-British Michael Balint. Anna Freud had spoken a few years earlier of the related, but rather ambiguous term "real person of the analyst," (1954), which has been widely discussed by many authors (see Kirshner 2012a). Both terms- presence and real person- appear frequently in the psychoanalytic literature, usually without much definition or conceptual clarity. Nacht's controversial use of the phrase "the analyst's presence" clearly tapped into widespread dissatisfaction with what many analysts perceived as the excessively formal and ritualized aspect of classical technique, but he failed to provide a substantial explanation of the term. Likewise, the expression "real person" may have appealed to analytic authors because it lent itself to justifications for modifying the standard frame, ignoring underlying assumptions about its meaning. In this paper, I critically review the use of the terms "the analyst's presence" and "real person" from an intersubjective perspective. I argue that both refer to an irreducible aspect of the intersubjective encounter, its unknown otherness, that impacts both participants.

Nacht's controversial use of the phrase "the analyst's presence" raised a major issue for psychoanalytic practice but lacked explicit reference to intersubjectivity. His paper of 1958 on variations in technique challenged the classic notion of analytic neutrality without rejecting basic Freudian concepts. Nacht asserted that "by adopting rigidly, obstinately, and without question an attitude of absolute neutrality, and maintaining it strictly in despite of everything" (p, 235) the analyst could produce an interminable situation of therapeutic stalemate. With the important proviso that the countertransference must remain under control, he argued that the analyst must at a certain moment abandon neutrality. "He then ceases to be the unchangeable mirror in order to adopt a new attitude of what I have called 'presence'." Nacht cited Racamier, who defined the term as ”an attitude by means of which we present to the patient a clear, tangible, durable, unambiguous form of ourselves and of our interest for him" (p. 236). This apparently radical affirmation of the actuality of the analyst's presence suggests a return to a phenomenologic, intersubjective stance. In place of the early notion of Freudian "*Indifferenz,*" which was designed to foster receptivity to an analysand's unconscious, the analyst would display a new attitude of presence operating at an experiential level. In a subsequent paper, Nacht and Viderman (1960) concluded that the analytic situation goes beyond transference, perhaps to include "the original, primitive experience of Being and to express its essence" (p. 386).

In later writings, Nacht focused his understanding of presence on two different clinical situations: regression and termination. Perhaps his most consistent position involved his belief that patients wish unconsciously for a primitive merger and loss of differentiation, analogous in his view to the earliest mother child relationship. "For the patient to be able to let himself go in that special kind of deep union which he unconsciously desires," he wrote, " it is more than ever necessary for the analyst to bring a certain *quality of presence* rooted in inner availability and openness" (1963, p. 336). The therapeutic necessity, as well as the risk of profound regression constituted a major theme, since the restorative quality of analytic experience could promote a clinging to a primitive transference, a "fusional regression" (Nacht and Viderman, 1960). In her review of Nacht's 1963 book, Veszy-Wagner (1964) noted a similarity to Winnicott's advocacy of regression to the point of developmental arrest, but always with the need to move beyond this state. Nacht and Viderman (1960) saw the analyst's presence as a protection against a collapse into stasis. As an extension of this principle, Nacht advised an active role, especially towards the termination phase of treatment, in which the analyst should endeavor "to become for the patient that which he is in reality, a man like the rest, like the patient himself, in a world of fully evolved human relationships", (p. 87). He portrayed "a *gratifying presence*, in which the patient perceives a deep-down attitude of availability and hearty attentiveness" and "authentic benevolence" (1963, p. 336). Although he first argued that transmission of these attitudes must occur in silence, Nacht later found room for offering "a word of encouragement "and minor gratifications (p. 337). Here the tension between a metapsychological concept like regression and the phenomenology of intersubjective presence becomes striking. We will see this discordance repeated throughout subsequent works.

Balint was also forthright in advocating an active presence in the context of regression, which he saw as necessary for many patients. Yet, as Eshol (2013) observed, he joined Nacht in advising caution in handling regressive movements, which in the worst case can become "malignant." She hypothesized that by making this distinction Balint sought to avoid the pitfalls of his own analyst Sandor Ferenczi's tolerance for regression in his patients. Balint believed that active presence need not imply excessive gratification or participation in a fantasy scenario. In *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression* (1979), he addressed the dialectical play of analytic presence and absence. The analyst "must be felt to be present but must be all the time at the right distance — neither so far that the patient might feel lost or abandoned, nor so close that the patient might feel encumbered and unfree — in fact, at a distance that corresponds to the patient’s actual need" (1979, p. 141). The Winnicottian connection becomes apparent in the evocation of need, which suggests that the analyst provides something real.

Throughout these writings, one senses a confusion between establishing a holding presence within which regression can safely occur and presenting the reality of the analyst as a person. In her discussion of reality in treatment, Alsteens (1989) advocated both aspects: the analyst must be "sufficiently present" to induce a transference, yet absent enough to permit the projection of a past history. She spoke poetically of the patient's discovery of the analyst's reality, analogous to Heraclitus' image of a lightening bolt that suddenly makes things appear in the night. The analyst, she wrote, should be animated by the same capacity for wonder (*émerveillementI)* "like a philosopher devoted to the mystery of being" (p.36)[[1]](#footnote-1). Again taking a Winnicottian direction, Alsteens referred to the patient's discovery of the analyst as a real object (presumably related to the stage of object use): "to learn to recognize the other for himself" (p. 50). As we know, Winnicott employed this mixture of theoretical terms and experience-near language in speaking of the analytic relationship, no doubt as did Freud himself.

Greenson's influential textbook of psychoanalysis (1967) built on the earlier work of Balint, Nacht, and others to emphasize the effects of the analyst's actual presence on the patient and their cooperatively shared work. Greenson and Wexler (1969) further developed the separation between real presence and analytic theory and technique. To Anna Freud's comment separating the real relationship from countertransference, they added detailed descriptions of non-transferential aspects of treatment, like the analysand's ability to recognize real features of his analyst. Yet, lacking an intersubjective model (not widely employed at the time), their work perpetuated the division between standard technique and real relationship, endorsing the analyst's participation without providing clarification about what this might mean (despite many vivid vignettes). The notion of a "real person" itself suggests an amalgam of wishful fantasies, cultural beliefs and ideologies, internalized forms of object relationship, and the analyst's actual behavior, all filtered through the patient's subjective perceptions. So Lacan's partially correct criticism of Nacht In his Seminar XI that the presence of the analyst is “in itself a manifestation of the [patient’s] unconscious” and not separate from the transference (Nobus, 2013) could also apply to Greenson and many others. Of course, the analysand's transference in the traditional sense influences the way the analyst is experienced, but Lacan left no place for his own contribution to the process.

Although he began by assimilating the phenomenologic concept of intersubjectivity into psychoanalysis, Lacan soon found reasons to reject any implication of an interactive process. In his inaugural seminar of 1953-1954, he recognized Balint as a transmitter of Ferenczian ideas, centered around "an emphasis on the relation between the analysand and the analyst, conceived as an interhuman situation and ... implying a certain reciprocity" (Lacan 1953-54, p. 209). Lacan consistently regarded contemporary work in this vein as a serious misunderstanding of psychoanalysis. Although the term intersubjectivity did not appear directly in Ferenczi's contributions, his ideas were clearly predecessors by implicitly raising the issue of presence. In his *Clinical Diary* (1988), he privileged the lived experience of transference-countertransference interaction over unconscious dynamic conflicts and desires, regarding the analytic relationship as an authentic and reciprocal encounter between subjects. In this respect, Ferenczi represents an important reference for current relational theorists. His work evoked criticism from Lacan, whose conception of the analyst's role turned increasingly impersonal, first standing in for the Other in the transference as a receptacle of symbolic fantasies, later representing the *objet a* and its link with an unrepresentable real (Kirshner, 2012b).

Lacan opposed the Ferenczi-Balint position with what he termed “a radical intersubjectivity” (p. 217), a refraction of the complex field of interaction between two persons that he elsewhere theorized. Although in some ways escaping the self-object division of classic theory, Lacan's innovations found no place for the analyst's own subjectivity in his new model. He first taught that the analyst both serves as a screen for his patient's imaginary fantasies (and is constituted by them) and as a symbolic object, the Other (representing the field of signifiers and speech). In his former role, the transference supports misrecognition and resistance to the unconscious; in the latter, it opens the possibility of full speech- what the analysand has been unable to say- in place of a flow of empty or defensive speech. For Lacan, elegantly summarized by Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet (2017), "the analyst’s presence is not the shadow of a former love, but a discursive phenomenon. The analyst tries to steer the patient away from imaginary associations about him by pointing to the signifiers used at moments when he is addressed as just another person. Lacan's focus was on the patient's text (the Symbolic) not his perception of the analyst (the Imaginary)" (p. 622). Psychoanalysis cannot be intersubjective, he argued, because the analysand experiences the situation unconsciously in terms of his fantasies and past experiences, with no room for reciprocity nor the reality of the analyst's presence.

Although Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet acknowledge that Lacanian analysts "experience anxiety, joy, excitement, interest, disgust, and other emotions vis-à-vis their analysands" (p. 627) just like others, they follow Lacan in minimizing the part played by the countertransference, which he believed could be resolved in personal analysis or supervision.

Beginning with his Seminar XI, however, Lacan modified his formulation of the transference to emphasize the register of "the real," the effect of the analyst's real presence (Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet, 2017; Nobus, 2013). His newer conception questioned his previous Freudian therapeutic goal of converting the analysand's actions and fantasies into the symbolic register of speech by emphasizing the limitations of symbolization of the real. Something of the real (by definition) resists translation, although it can be mobilized in the transference if the analyst remains unpredictable and spontaneous (avoiding interpretations of the imaginary or symbolic registers). According to Lacan, unexpected behavior brings the real of the analyst's existence into the session, without involving any unconscious motivation, since the real is essentially impersonal. This rationale for excluding the analyst's unconscious from his spontaneous acts enabled Lacan to endorse the therapeutic possibilities of chance encounters without admitting an intersubjective component (perhaps this was the meaning of his term “radical intersubjectivity). Such spontaneous encounters might resemble the kinds of unwitting repetition of trauma Ferenczi discussed, but the contrast with the latter's concern for the possible traumatic effects of his own unconscious desires is striking.

Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet offer two clinical examples in which an analyst's spontaneous actions acted as revelations of the real, disrupting the patients' prior transference fantasies. In one, the analyst impulsively crushed a spider on the threshhold of his office. In the other, the analyst uncharacteristically telephoned her regressed patient to invite him to return to sessions. In both cases, the surprising (very unaccustomed) behaviors of the analysts awoke the patients to their separate real existences. The former imaginary and symbolic encounter between subjects was then disrupted by the presence of an unknown other. These traumatic experiences of the real, they report, could then be worked over productively in the changed transference (with symbolizing the real as the altered aim of treatment).

The kinds of spontaneous events described in the above examples have been addressed by writers from other schools. The authors mention Poland's case in which he unthinkingly passed a telephone call from Italy to a native-speaking patient, and many relational analysts have recounted similar episodes. Sometimes they report using self-disclosure or speaking about their own feelings in situations of great tension, a step considered inappropriate by Lacanians (and others), but one wonders whether such responses don't also amount to a form of revelation of the real of the analyst. The analyst drops his guard, as it were, and reveals himself by an affectively charged and expressive comment. A widely discussed article by Greenberg (2001) took up several published accounts of such moments published by relational psychoanalysts who ventured into "startling and unexpected" behavior (p. 364). Usually the element of choice seemed involved, but, of course, choice is another difficult concept and one that might be applied even to actions like stepping on a spider or handing over a telephone impulsively. "In each of these clinical examples," he wrote, "the analyst takes a risk and puts him- or herself on the line in a highly personal way. In more or less classical terms, the analytic frame is broken." One would certainly expect such incidents to shake up an "unbearable," tense, or stagnant treatment situation (p. 364), which can then be explored. As Greenberg observes, "A great deal of the work in every analysis is to understand, after the fact, what has transpired in an unexamined way" (p. 362). Whether such moments represent enactments, implying some unconscious participation by the analyst, or amount to "pre-subjective" expressions of the real depends in part on one's theoretical preferences.

We might better understand these spontaneous expressions of the analyst's personal reality from a phenomenologic perspective, in contrast to the metapsychologies of Freudian and Lacanian theories. Unlike psychoanalysis (or the neurosciences), phenomenology has not generally been interested in speculating about or researching the mechanisms or causes of intentions, emotions, and thinking, but takes these as basic givens of conscious awareness. "How things appear to us is not an epiphenomenal property, or a feature of experience explainable in reductionist or behavioral terms; rather, it is a fundamental, and so “ineliminable”, aspect of experience" (Doyon, 2017). The studies of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and others supplemented the phenomenological reduction of intentional conscious experience by including the constant mental presence of other subjects. They reminded us that the subject does not exist independently from the world of other subjects in which he or she is embedded. The concept of intersubjectivity derives from this insight, but was only belatedly brought into psychoanalysis, and its status remains unsettled. Many basic clinical questions continue to be debated. For example, should analysts focus on patients' unconscious fantasies and fears that are considered to determine the form and content of the transference, albeit assuming the influence of the particular setting, or does the transference emerge as a unique co-construction of the bi-personal field? If the latter alternative best describes the analytic situation, close attention to the analyst's participation beeomes crucial. Indeed, contemporary theory has turned increasingly towards working out the relationship between the subjective contributions of analyst and patient and the unique presence of a "third" they mutually create over the course of an analysis. Baranger and Baranger (2008), for example, spoke of the integration of "the transference and countertransference phantasies concerning analytic work" within a shared structure (p. 825), in which a novel experience may emerge. Yet, these theoretical questions about the encounter of one unconscious with another bypass the phenomenologic presence of the other as a primary datum[[2]](#footnote-2).

The question of presence must be acknowledged as intrinsic to any relationship between two persons. The phenomenology of the encounter with the other forms the substrate of social life, and has a rich philosophical history, notoriously given iconic form with Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. In the clinical situation, the mutual presences of analyst and patient are facts of the subjective experience of each, and, within the social frame of the clinical setting and the anticipations of both parties, evoke immediate reactions and counter-reactions, largely non-verbal. This process can be described semiotically as an intersubjective exchange of signs operating continuously, at different levels of processing. Both analyst and patient are together entangled and influenced as Baranger and Baranger described, building a shared experience into the encounter. Each makes on-going attempts to find meaning by bringing the experience more into images and thought, both at the "micro" semiotic level and the macro of symbolic concepts. An aspect of immediate meaning (a signified) may intrinsic to every conscious perception and sensation as proposed by Cassirer. All experience involves mediation and symbolization of some kind from basic gestalts or forms to cognitive operations that provide familiar personal and cultural explanations. Lacan added that symbolic and imaginary representations always leave an untranslated remainder of the real of the experience. For him, the presence of the unassimilable real in the analytic encounter can stir up the ambiguities of subject origins (becoming a subject) provoke creative revisions, as described by Cauwe, Vanheule, and Desmet. The French analyst Michel de M’Uzan wrote about a similar unsettling effect of the analytic dialogue. Perhaps the theme of losing mastery of the unfamiliar through the stimulation of the encounter itself, as well as the effect of questioning or interpretation of prior identifications, crosses man theoretical

Attempts at theoretic understanding by the analyst probably emerge later and in retrospect, although they may then influence subsequent sessions. The intersubjective field generates the material for the analysis (the effects of dual presence on what emerges as a shared construction), so that the patient's and analyst’s histories inevitably become symbolically represented within the actual context. Extreme abstinence may obscure the analyst’s contribution, but cannot completely efface it. After all, presence can be communicated in many ways.

Nacht and Balint suggested that regression, in the sense of dedifferentiation and fragmentation of identity, necessarily accompanies the interaction. This privileging of “letting go” of a position of knowledge or explicit understanding may be a feature of French psychoanalysis. In *L'inquiétude permanante* (2015*)*, de M’Uzan portrayed and advocated as a goal a permanent disturbance of the psyche and disruption of the usual quest for a stable identity (for both parties). From this perspective, the analyst's responsibility is to remain receptive and open to the unfolding of this process and to resist attempts at mastery (by interpretation, for example). Ultimately, new ways of thinking and imagining can arise from the interaction, enlarging the analysand's capacity to think about himself and his relationship with the analyst, of the boundaries of self and other.

In practice, however, both analyst and patient tend to close-off the free flow of interaction, moving instead to categorize each other by rigid typologies, judgments, and interpretations that remove uncertainty.. Patients often seek a confirmatory mirror to avoid the unsettling anxiety of experiencing the presence of an unknown other, and analysts can equally impose their own self-fulfilling constructions about the nature of the transference and countertransference. Lacan placed the problem of the analyst's resistance in the foreground, and his caution has become central to the intersubjective approach. Ablon (1994) expressed this resistance succinctly: "What most often stands in the way of the attainment of a growth promoting, creative dialogue between analyst and analysand are the analyst's anxieties about following the analysand's associations, especially when frightening affects are evoked," (p. 315). Consciousness may be constant, but its receptivity capacity constricts or expands.

Of course, a patient's experience of the analyst carries effects of other important relationships, real and imaginary. Everyone knows that. Yet from an intersubjective point of view, attempting to formulate or explain the transference in intrapsychic terms may distract from the actuality of the encounter. Every school can explain the dynamics of presence very well in terms of its own theoretical models. These can provide useful metaphors for understanding the process, as long as they don't close down the unknown of the other. For this reason, analysts benefit from remaining open to their patients’ perceptions and feelings about their presence and participation over time. The fluctuating nature of personal subjectivities should find a parallel in an analytic process that resists closure of meaning or explanation.

By highlighting the dangers of objectification and countertransferential impingement that accompany the analyst's inclination to formulate and interpret, intersubjective theory directs attention to the encounter itself. The first steps of the dual experience of presence should not be passed over too quickly on the way to meaning-making. Seeking elaboration rather than interpretation recognizes the transience and uncertainty of understanding. The intersubjective construction of meaning may take multiple directions without an end point, without building a well-organized narrative. The phenomenology of co-presence speaks to the immediacy of the encounter and the importance of cultivating an attitude of bracketing or suspending theoretical understanding.

Analysts have always debated when and how much to respond intentionally, and the papers about the "real person" of the analyst discussed above touch on this issue. Some of the differences between schools reflect disagreements about what kinds of interventions are appropriate, yet the analyst cannot help responding, and putting his responses into words represents a further step into self-disclosure (the choice of words says something about the speaker). Analysts tend to be reserved, but reveal their unconscious or preconscious feelings and intentions non-verbally by tone, attitude, and posture, facial expressions and gestures, or by detachment from the interactive field. All these responses communicate the nature of his inescapable (real) presence to the analysand. Whether and to what extent the analyst can eventually interpret (in the sense of offering words for what is happening), his basic task remains to suspend meaning, sustaining the unfolding effects of mutual presence.

Conclusions

In this paper I have taken the phenomenologic perspective that presence forms an intrinsic part of the encounter between two subjects. The analyst's presence should be differentiated from the vague concept "the real person," which always carries ideological implications and attempts to separate a personal relationship from the other factors that structure human interaction. Presence cannot be reduced to a theoretical content like types of transference, which attempt to define the experience of the analytic encounter. Theories and formulations like this form an inevitable part of the analyst's reflections, but can interfere by reifying, ignoring, or distracting from attention to the patient's and his own actual speech and behavior. The intersubjective perspective brings two contrasting principles to psychoanalytic practice: an intentional stance to maintain and an attention to the effects of presence on the patient. These suggest that the analyst sustain a dialectical tension in the clinical encounter between his inevitable attempts to define the meaning of his patient's experience and a commitment to maintaining an incomplete and open field. Both tend resist the otherness of the encounter, but the analyst holds an ethical responsibility to monitor himself and support the experience of the unknown and unknowable in the interaction.

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1. author's translation [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are similarities and differences between the phenomenologic view and Lacan's concept of the real that go beyond the scope of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)