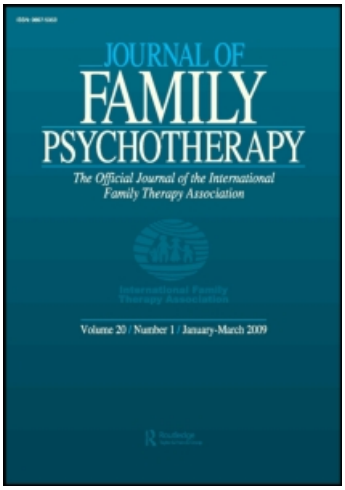

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ESSAY ON FAMILY PSYCHOTHERAPY

Cyberspace Betrayal: Attachment in an Era of Virtual Connection

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Electronic technology has yielded new forms of relationship bonding as well as unique aspects of betrayal and ruptures in attachment. Four key characteristics of betrayal that differentiate online from offline experience will be identified. The inherent ambiguities in defining online sexual infidelity will point to a need to professionally define the parameters of internet betrayal in light of the ever expanding electronic revolution.

KEYWORDS cyberspace, online, betrayal, attachment, infidelity, couples

The word betrayal is mesmerizing, and the roster of its perpetrators, including Brutus, Judas Iscariot, and Iago, are iconic figures in our cultural landscape. But what of betrayal in cyberspace? Is there a particular wound penetrated in virtual, versus offline experience? Is the hurt of betrayal as real, or on the contrary hypperreal, when it is technologically executed? This article examines four properties of cyberspace betrayal: (a) the suddenness of exposure; (b) the physical site of exposure, for example, the home or bedroom; (c) the permanence of record; and (d) its addictive quality. A specific discussion of the ambiguities in defining online sexual infidelity points to a need to professionally define the parameters of infidelity and betrayal in light of the ever expanding electronic revolution.

Essentially I think that betrayal evokes a primal rupture in attachment, which underlies our most basic sense of psychological equilibrium. We have learned from attachment research that attachment is coded in storytelling,

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that for example, secure attachment is signified by the coherence of how a life story is told, how the narrative hangs together, not its content; the content can reveal neglect and trauma. Michael White (2007) refers to these coherent stories as "landscapes of identity." We know that dyanamics that are selectively inattended help shape these stories, but once our stories of identity are formed, they provide a way to negotiate multilayered interaction with others.

BETRAYAL AND THE COUPLE NARRATIVE

A somewhat unchartered area in the attachment, psychodynamic, and family systems literature is that there is a couple narrative, a shared story that provides an identity of bonding. I believe that the shared couple narrative underlies the couples' attachment security. What genre of storytelling does it entail? It can be romantic, comedic, or tragic. It almost always follows a linear temporal sequence: a beginning, middle, and wished for perpetuity, a lasting through time. Adam Phillips (1996) believes it is the foundation narrative and writes in his book, *Monogamy,* "To describe a couple is to write an autobiography. Because we begin our lives in a couple, and are born of a couple, when we talk about couples we are telling the stories of our lives. We may try and make the couple as abstract as possible because they are so close to home, or rather because they are home; because once there was nowhere else to live " (p. 24).

Thinking about a couple narrative leads to several intriguing questions. Does its genre relate to security of attachment? Does the couple have to tell the same narrative? I recently had a couple arrive in my office and the session began with the wife announcing, "Our problem is that we do not share a story." Indeed the discrepancies in explanation for what went right and what went wrong between them had absolutely no overlap, and their relationship was fraught with tension and pain. One thing is clear. The couple narrative invariably includes rules of fidelity, however elastic they may be, that is what constitutes loyalty and security. Fidelity is a central narrative element in the storyline of mating. When there is a betrayal of fidelity, in however it is defined, the narrative fractures.

I think that all storymaking, and the security it provides, is jeopardized in cyberspace. If postmodern theory has recently heralded the decentered self, it is—particularly for less-integrated individuals—fragmenting in cyberspace. Though we have been intrigued by multiple, context versions of self, we have always done so from the secure tilt of singularity, enjoying the ricochet without feeling the danger of fragmentation.

On Second Life, an internet site with millions of subscribers, self-states take on avatar status. Sherry Turkle (1995), a psychologist with a special interest in the psychology of internet usage, notes, "Without any principle of

coherence, the self spins off in all directions . . . Multiplicity is not acceptable if it means being confused to a point of immobility" (p. 258).

What happens to the shared couple narrative, the narrative of fidelity and dependency, in a world in which self-states become independently engaged? Cyberspace offers intense activation of suppressed or inactive aspects of self. Engagement can seem totally disconnected from ordinary interpersonal relationships, magical in quality. In the company of alternative selves, how do we design moral categories of intimate engagement? To answer this question, I identify what I think are four particular ruptures in bonding that occur via cyberspace connection and then expand on the phenomenon of sexual betrayal that is implicit in most, though not all, of these ruptures.

SUDDENNESS OF EXPOSURE

First, internet betrayal is sudden in its exposure. Over 10 years ago a couple I had worked with successfully returned because Ellen had discovered an absorbing relationship that Richard had in a literary chat room. Richard was ardent in his critical attentiveness to this woman's literary attempts and had suggested a lunch meeting to discuss her work more thoroughly. He insisted on the innocence of his feelings and his intentions, only admitting to a sense of profound closeness to the new attachment figure. I was convinced that Richard's feelings were not romantic, at least consciously. Ellen felt betrayed. Richard and Ellen did not share intellectual or aesthetic interests, and in spite of Ellen's entreaties that Richard emotionally open up to her, he had remained clammed shut. However, there had been a string of what Ellen saw as flirtations, which had always worried her, such as neighbors or the au pere who had worked for them, but this was the worst. Why? It was utterly unexpected.

Because of one inadvertent, not investigative search in his e-mail program, Ellen was flooded with a trail of playful, solicitous, and mutually admiring communications between Richard and an unknown "other" woman. Partners who are unhappily bonded are often wary of extramural, repetitive social encounters. But anxious partners chart encounters, calculate frequency. Discovery of a hidden liaison in cyberspace is often startling because of its private execution. When it is exposed, the aggrieved partner feels disoriented by his or her inability to locate the betrayal within the storyline of the couple narrative. We know that spouses have often been shocked by the revelation of a sexual liaison, but this revelation generally comes in stages of sinful disclosure, more unexplained time away from home, two ticket stubs left in a pants pocket, an unexplained expense on a credit card bill. Traces of betrayal often require decoding and are somewhat ambiguous until they are certain. Evidence of an affair online is often full disclosure and

the narrative of the couple is suddenly spliced. There is an abruptness and intensity to the rupture.

Electronic communication often executes sudden and traumatic ruptures in off-line relationships as well, because the medium allows for instantaneous and overwhelming revelations. I worked with another couple who came to me barely hanging together in a marriage with three children after the wife found an open message on her husband's Blackberry, left in haste right in front of her on the couch as he ran to answer an old-fashioned telephone call. She read a torrid recollection of a sensual night he spent with a young associate at his law firm.

There is also the betrayal of abrupt dismissal. A patient of mine in a relationship of mutual ambivalence, suddenly and devastatingly found herself removed from the Facebook contact list of her lover. Another female patient ended a long attenuated love affair by way of an e-mail message. When I inquired about this (to be truthful for me somewhat hurtful) method, she witheringly told me that people of her 20-something generation find it unseemly to negotiate these transitions through voice contact. Like a version of Harlow's monkeys, I think that being dropped by an attachment figure without any flesh and blood, breathing, stuttering, anguished embodiment, is a more annihilating betrayal of attachment.

For some people, the immediate, electronic dismissal of the other is an exciting aspect of internet life. It is so clean and so surgical, the bloodless wound. But for others, the cruelty of sudden online betrayal is dissociated. And here whether it is sudden dismissal or the revelation of involvement with another, we should note that electronic technology though entrancing in its limitless possibilities is also prosaic and concrete in its daily execution. From a historical perspective, we are not talking about letters sent by night carriage or huddled phone booth connections on darkened streets. We are talking about the same instrumentation that accesses the morning's weather report. The couple I worked with intensively around the tryst with a law associate grew closer, and the wife was convinced that her husband was no longer implicated in the affair. However, one night he sat lovingly near her on the couch and answered two e-mails from his former lover, clearly within view of her anxious purview. What was shocking to me was his confusion about her upset. "Hadn't we all agreed that the affair was over? These were business communications and required attention," he said. I don't think that a phone call from this woman to his home landline, even if it were about a trial postponement, would have been as easily dismissed by him.

PRIVACY AND PERMANENCE

A second unique aspect of internet betrayal is that is has been conducted in the private domain of the home and thus it can feel more violating to the partner who discovers it. The space of cohabitation is the proscenium on

which the shared narrative of coupling is performed. In online trysts, partners often slip out of bed in supposed or real insomniac states or withdraw from family engagement to go online and get into it.

A third aspect of internet betrayal is the permanence of its record. Helping a couple restore their narrative of connection after the revelation of an affair requires sensitivity and clinical imagination. A principal narrative goal is one of temporal punctuation. That was then (i.e., resentment, depression) and now is here (reconciliation), leading to a promising future (transparency, collaboration). Often a ritual of reengagement helps, such as the resumption of a shared pleasure, which previously delighted the couple before the affair. There is a subtle way in which internet betrayal cannot be punctuated in narrative, never becomes past tense. The record of evidence is eternally archived and can always be reexamined when the partner becomes anxious. Electronic coding interferes with the reconstruction of shared meaning.

ONLINE ADDICTION

A fourth characteristic of internet betrayal is that it tends not to be impulsive and episodic but rather often addictive and obsessive. We are no longer talking about stolen moments or evenings, but rather 24/7 access at fingertips reach. There is active controversy about what constitutes addictive behavior on the internet (Toronto, 2009; Whitty & Carr, 2006). Moreover, we certainly haven't clearly defined the sociopsychological parameters of addiction. Don't we generally work too hard in contemporary society? Consume and shop too much (Grohol, 1999)? However, people engaged in online affairs often describe their behavior as beyond their control, reporting that they cannot stop texting and searching for responses. There is a kind of Frankensteinian quality to it for me. The sequence is electrified. A longing, often manageably controlled, is gratified and then the technological machine feeds the impulse. The discovery of internet connection on a partner's computer usually involves reams of items, multiplicity of contacts. A colleague described a man who could not stop contacting the woman he had become attached to online. It was all virtual (until well into the relationship he decided to schedule an offline meeting), but long before that meeting, contact with her had become the most emotionally compelling experience of his waking life. Anytime he felt anxious or off-kilter, he distracted himself with a quick response, the clever patter they created, the high of the delight she took in him and he in her. As Peter Fraenkel (2001) describes our cyberspace voyage: "Once there, we feel as if we are a node in a gigantic web, a neuron in a universal mind, high on our capacity to spread some part of ourselves instantly across the globe. Our ungainly corporeal bodies start to seem like nothing more than biological vessels for our own electrical currents . . . No wonder our boring old, predictable,

real-time relationships with partners, parents, children and flesh-and blood friends start to look pretty darned dull" (p. 27).

What is the hypnotic pull of virtual connection? For one thing the self that is activated in cyberspace is an ideal self, utterly in control, and incommensurately gratified. There is nothing we value in Western culture more than potency and the electronic medium deludes us with its actualization. I can summon your presence and rivet your attention, across time zones and geographic constraints with a flick of my finger. As Dryer and Lijtmaer (2007) state, "The Internet creates a feeling of freedom and omnipotence. Primary-process and magical thinking can reign supreme. Losing self-boundaries and transcending the laws of physics and space can give a symbolic power to the communication (Suler, 1999)" (p. 56).

And beyond potency, there is the elixir of believing that one is always held in mind of the other. The shared narrative of coupledom rests on a premise of remaining central to the partner, even when there are agreed upon dalliances. Cyberspace liaison delivers the illusion of preeminence. I think that a crucial aspect of online relationship addiction is the seduction of experiencing a kind of hyper real security in attachment. Although cyberspace relationships can be suddenly erased, while they are ongoing, they often provide an illusion of seamless and boundless continuity. Offline, though we weave couples narratives that soothe our need for security, these are always fraught with some tension, or as Mitchell (2001) noted, some deadness if security lapses into utter predictability. Virtual connection promises excitement as well as persuasive and obsessive centrality in the mind of the lover. "When will she steal the next moment to reconnect?" is the reassuring anticipation of the virtual partner. Of course addictive and repetitive internet contact further and further removes a real and embodied partner from emotional centrality, both internally and interpersonally. What's more, there is often little experienced conflict, but rather the embodied partner serves as backdrop, as wallpaper to the virtual thrall.

Which is not to say, of course, that security is a cyberspace guarantee. I worked with a man who best characterized this disillusion. Very frightened of deep involvement, he had requested a relationship of sexual, explicitly nonemotional involvement online, for which he was willing to provide a handsome reimbursement. A willing partner entered his life. Unfortunately, he found himself emotionally swept off his feet by her. She recoiled from his interest because she reported that it was more than she could handle. He felt deeply betrayed by her rejection.

SEXUAL BETRAYAL

Beyond the specifics of internet betrayal is the fundamental representation of intimate betrayal at least in American culture: sexual infidelity. Scheinkman

(2005) highlights the difference between American and other cultures, and states, ". . . .in American culture, affairs are viewed as a sign of moral corruption. In other cultures, even though there is the recognition that affairs can be damaging and involve lies and betrayal, affairs are about something else. They may be about loving more than one person, or about complementing marriage with romance, passion, sexuality, or autonomy" (p. 238). However, she notes that our family therapy literature "presumes the cultural norm of long-term monogamous partnerships as an ideal, and what is considered healthy" and addresses sexual infidelity as trauma (p. 228).

There is a traditionally stated gender difference in categories of betrayal, supported in research (though too often involving college students), that men are more upset by sexual infidelity and women by emotional infidelity. One perspective on this difference is what is referred to as the "double-shot" or "two-for-one" hypothesis, that is men are more likely to believe that if a woman has sex with another man, she is probably in love with him and women believe that men can have sex without being in love (Whitty & Quigley, 2008). I note that Whitty and Quigley did find that these associations were less powerful with regard to the relationship of cybersex and online love.

There is a plethora of sexual possibilities online: pornography sites, chat room flirtations, phone sex, and interactive camera-ready sex. Indeed there is a site for married couples interested in engaging in sexual play, the 70s swinging couples redux. For many individuals, online sexual contact provides a parallel reality. It involves little sneaking away or public indiscretion but offers a kind of electronic polygamy. Individuals often think of themselves as engaging in a sexual excitement while remaining utterly bonded, and monogamously so. Not so to the partners when it is discovered. Toronto (2009) states "When the world of fantasy in any form becomes a seductive alternative that breaks with ongoing experience, it disrupts the biographical narrative that is critical to the development of agency and the functioning of the relational self" (p. 121). Of course the sense of remaining nonbetraying revolves around the noncorporeality of the contact, the fact that bodies are merely represented, that language rather than touch is exchanged.

THERAPEUTIC PARTICIPATION

While we are on the subject of our own subjectivity, let me say a few words about my therapeutic participation. I know that I deal with several issues in working with internet betrayal. To begin with, I, like many therapists, tend to be somewhat conservative about sexual infidelity, focusing on its distraction from intimacy, commitment, and depth, all bedrock psychotherapeutic values. After all, we spend our professional lives dedicated to staying the course in difficult and challenging clinical relationships. However, as Hirsch

(2007) notes, "imposing a moral judgment suggests that we may view people as perfectible, and in so doing, we create aims for patients that are not reachable for them and that we have not reached in our own lives" (p. 362).

But my other conundrum relates to my own confusion about the reality of a virtual connection. I often feel suspended between the literalness of the digital document and the imaginary, noncorporeal form it assumes. This is an issue that the therapeutic community must address. As Hertlein and Piercy (2008) note: "As found in the present investigation, some couple and family therapists consider sex a primary criterion in the definition, while others believe that emotional intimacy defines Internet infidelity. Secrecy may also be seen as a critical component. Likewise, many also consider a breach of trust part of the definition of Internet infidelity . . . Internet infidelity treatment might better be served by a framework that integrates traditional infidelity treatment frameworks and strategies which are specific to the Internet." (p. 494).

CONCLUSION

I end my own reflections on internet betrayal with a full measure of ambiguity and with ambivalence. I think I partially reflect my chronological age in my reservations, but my openness to cyberspace possibilities also reflects a psychotherapeutic career of exposure to an extraordinarily varied, resourceful range of solutions to life's dilemmas. Nothing captures my ambivalence better than the conversation I had with one of my colleagues, who reported that what is most marked in her practice is the reconnection of patients with old lovers, often reaching back deep into development to high school or college. In one case in her practice, a marriage ended and the earlier relationship replaced it. I find this clinical instance dense with the unique aspects of cyberspace possibility. We could say conventionally and perhaps wisely that these resumed affiliations are efforts to deny aging and its attendant restrictions and limitations. We could describe these as fantasy bubbles that ultimately envelope reality into pastime. But there is a part of me that muses on these early liaisons as reflecting true and essential passions, uncompromised by the logistic, geographic, career-building trajectories that choices later in adulthood might reflect. Perhaps it is cyberspace's gift to offer a second go-round of romantic opportunity. Or is it its curse to offer a fantasized retreat from the vicissitudes of maturity? We will struggle with this conundrum, as one of many we family therapists will be pondering in the decade to come.

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