PBSP in the time of Coronavirus: Reflections on my experience with an online PBSP group

Many of us have led one-to-one PBSP structures with individual clients in our practices over the years. It's the same as doing PBSP in a group – except the group isn't there… so the therapist has to be inventive, creative, and find ways of making the experience equivalent.

Many of us have led one-to-one PBSP structures online over the years too, using Skype or other platforms[1]. It's the same as doing PBSP one-to-one in person – except the client isn't there, in the room… so the therapist has to be inventive, creative, and find ways of making the experience equivalent.

In other words, many of us have already been doing PBSP work that prepares us for group work online – it's just another step. The most straightforward way for a PBSP therapist to lead a structure online in a group is simply to lead an online one-to-one structure, during which other group members are present.

There follow some further reflections from my own practice, expressed using PBSP concepts and frames. First I share a few thoughts from practical experience of the online medium.

Some points on managing the technology

The points here are basic, for the person who is not used to working online. Most people reading this will have much greater technological expertise than I do. I have PC, not Apple technology, so can't comment on the latter. The most important point is that you can do perfectly good PBSP work online just using your computer or other device.

To look at ways of using another camera, eg when running Holes in Roles movies, see my separate notes "What you need to run an online group."

Get familiar with the audio and video settings bottom left on Zoom screen; you may need to help group members to activate their audio or video settings.

Click the little arrow by 'Stop Video' and click on Video Settings. Make sure you have checked 'Mirror my video' – so when you're in the group session and you use your left hand to make a gesture, you will see your image facing you using the hand on the same side (i.e your mirror image's right hand).

Practise before running a PBSP group – open a Zoom meeting and invite a couple of friends. At least 3 of you: this simulates 'a group' – having only 2 people doesn't. Some settings, like Spotlight, only work with 3 or more people.

Learn by practising how to manage volume. Your practice-colleagues can let you know what you sound like. It was only by sitting in another room at home, on my husband's laptop, while listening to him speaking from my own PC, that I heard how distorted the sound was from my PC's internal mic. I now plug an external mic into a USB port. Others use Bluetooth headphones / mic. But your PS's internal mic might sound fine.

When everybody is present in the Zoom group meeting, I prefer Gallery view so I can see everyone.

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[1] Skype and Facetime are 'unstable' and offer uneven online experiences. Microsoft Teams is good, but I now prefer Zoom, both for group meetings and to meet with individual clients.

If someone is in a role and speaking directly to the client, you can make their screen the largest one for everyone by using Zoom's Spotlight facility. Click on the three dots in the top right-hand corner of the role figure's window and check Spotlight. All participants including the client will see that face foregrounded, and it has bigger impact. Uncheck Spotlight on that window when they've finished speaking.

Possibility Sphere in an online group

It's harder to create the right Possibility Sphere virtually, and some aspects of the online setting can greatly reduce the Possibility Sphere unless attended to. During PBSP work in an online group, I ask the group not to import typical "online" meeting behaviour to this therapeutic setting. Phone-checking, the sound of notifications coming in, leaving the screen to get something and thus leaving their Zoom window empty, turning off the video…. such behaviours are ubiquitous in everyday online meetings. For a PBSP meeting I explicitly make group members aware how these behaviours limit the Possibility Sphere when so many of the anticipated human interactive cues we rely on for good therapy are already missing.

For example, group members who are not the client must mute their mics, but this also removes all the barely audible small sounds and breaths we humans make to demonstrate that we are attentive.

Clients on Zoom consistently report the challenge of not being able to read non-verbal cues of safety from the screen as they can when with others in a physical room. I make group members aware of the need to consciously manage their body language and facial expression so as to communicate attentive focus and welcome. The human need for these qualities is innate https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0 I think these small adjustments to the Possibility Sphere oil the wheels of online PBSP work.

The Body Keeps the Score: the individual's internal and external personal comfort level

What type of comfortable setting would you want for a client, so that they would be able to feel physical ease in a normal PBSP one-to-one structure or in a group? It's the same online.

Make sure pre-meeting instructions encourage each group member to be sitting comfortably. There must be sufficient privacy and warmth.

Group participants need access to pillows/cushions/blankets – substantial enough to give the feeling of a physical human presence, and to communicate comfort/support if leaned against. Something to put behind the head so that if they need to lean back fully, they can. Something to set their laptop or device on, so they don't have the strain of holding it. Something to wrap around themselves if they need protection or comfort.

To manage internal comfort levels each individual has to become aware of what feels intimate or what feels intrusive for them in this virtual mode. It's like tuning in to the client's metaphor, as Al encouraged, except this is what fits visually and kinaesthetically, rather than linguistically. This is Controlled Approach - a device we are already familiar with – but now we have to try doing it using the webcam.

How does this translate into practice? One client likes it when a Reassuring figure puts a gentle hand close to the camera – it feels good to have that hand on the screen so close to him. Another finds

that overwhelming, too close. Without being able to see the whole body we have to ask what we should always ask, but may forget when we have the luxury of data from the person's physical presence. Online more than ever our questions have to invite the client's Pilot forth, so we can collaborate with the client to give their body comfort and ease: *Does that fit? What's happening in your body? What are you seeing in your mind / feeling in your body? How would it be to settle your head back as you imagine that?*

Therapist and client work together to find out, in this virtual mode, "*Where shall I gesture to indicate where to place the Voice in relation to you? Because we need to externalise it.*" The client will have to *feel* their way to an answer, by tuning in to their own body and internal sense. They must guide me, as therapist, in the closest way of making my gestures communicate fitting 'spatial placement,' from my computer screen to theirs. We need a focused and committed therapeutic alliance to navigate through this medium onto the screens of the client's mind's eye and mind's body. And from there onto the stage of their body.

Contract and Motivation: managing individual expectations within the group

Maybe one gift of having to work with a group online is that of removing the therapist's potential omnipotence – that dangerous sense of "I know what's happening here!" – and remembering that the healing is in the client.

Being together in a group online has reminded me how resourceful people are. It's made me remember, too, all the other ways of helping clients in addition to leading full structures, all within the context of familiar Pesso Boyden frameworks. Some examples:

1. A full structure ending with a satisfying embodied Antidote is a wonderful thing. But so is feeding the client's Pilot. Understanding more about the PBSP process helps expand clients' consciousness. Taking parts of this wonderful method and using them effectively in a group setting is in my view a legitimate application of PBSP in an online group.

2. Focused teaching of small elements of PBSP. E.g. I attach a document adapted from UK training materials about Voices. I sent this to one of my groups a few days before our last online meeting. I asked them to notice and 'catch' the voices they became aware of internally in the days before the group met.

   To start the group, I asked them to check in with a focus on their own 'Voices.' For some this yielded light-bulb moments, in ways that externalising Voices in their structures often hasn't. I have previously started an online group with a 10-minute input about Basic Needs and then asked group participants to check in with a focus on their own relationship NOW with any or one of the Basic Needs. Developing consciousness – one of the Genetic Nature Requirements that help us become more fully who we truly are.

3. You can do good reversal / antidote work by enroling a group member as a helping figure for another group member's unmet basic need. Fragment figures can supply enormous comfort and relief, even online – see the examples below.

4. Holes in Roles work – asking group members *"Who did you take care of?"* will almost always yield a response. With a second camera (see my additional notes) you can run movies that give

people surprising relief. A group of 8 people in my practice each had some time during an evening online group to experience a movie. Much insight.

5. Back to the exercises: some of these can be adapted for online use, as mentioned above for Controlled Approach. They are always rich and offer people new insights, as Lowijs taught in his long-ago chapter to this effect.

Shape Countershape

How can we do proper Accommodation online? There have been lots of attempts during the lockdown to communicate connection/holding/touch using a virtual medium. One that Al and Diane might like is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqzkn-jX-JU

In a recent 3-hour online PBSP group, a distressed client was weeping under a barrage of Voices. I asked her who, on her screen, was in the window next to her in Gallery View. "Paul." I asked Paul to take the role of a Comforting Figure. I suggested he leaned towards her – with some trial and error he was able to lean in the correct direction, so that on her screen he was leaning into her view of herself.

I asked her who was on the other side. "Vicky." I asked Vicky to take the role of a Comforting Figure. When the client suggested words she would like to hear, I pressed Pin Spotlight so that Vicky's kindly, comforting face filled the screen as she spoke, and the client liked it.

In this online PBSP experiment I, the therapist, chose the role figures Paul and Vicky because of their proximity to the client on her screen. It's not classic PBSP to be so directive. Is this justified in the online medium, to attempt to countershape the client's immediate need? I judged so.

Another client was feeling dread /anxiety in her chest and shoulders. She clutched her shoulders in classic Self-Self mode. I suggested enrolling a blanket next to the client as a strong tender presence, and she wrapped it around herself. I offered: that presence could say to you "*I'm with you when you feel like this. I've got you.*" In the pause that followed, I was thinking out loud: "How can we give her the feeling of being held?" Another group member offered "How about us all holding ourselves the same way? "As everyone in their separate screens did just that, the client's distress was interrupted by startled pleasure on seeing all the group members mirroring her Self-Self action.

The client then reported feeling warmth and comfort spreading from the blanket into her body as the images of others made the feeling of being held more vivid.

Another PBSP online experiment… It's not classic PBSP for group members to offer input, and I wouldn't normally invite that. In this case the group resources were intensely focused on "How do we make this work for the suffering client?" and her response was that the intervention fitted.

Do I advocate such an intervention as a way forward for online PBSP work? No… classic PBSP protects the client from well-meant offerings from group members, unmediated by the therapist. We're doing PBSP, not Constellations! The most important thing these examples highlight is the need for a solid foundation of PBSP theory and practice – a continuing infrastructure of good training, intervision, supervision, so the PBSP therapist is completely clear when using a technique that's not classic, knows when and how to do so – that's our creativity and inventiveness – but unequivocally can return to home-base at will.

Concluding thoughts

PBSP in the time of Coronavirus could be an invitation for therapists to go off-piste with the method and keep on going. But it doesn't have to be so – let's not forget that "the effectiveness of PBSP therapy lies in the ability of the therapist to run a structure in a flexible, compassionate manner and adhere to the essential principles of the method." (Winnette and Baylin 2017, *Working with Traumatic Memories to Heal Adults with Unresolved Childhood Trauma*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

Right now, our world and our therapy clients are in a situation of great complexity, and Al Pesso has already shared his hopes for how we PBSP therapists would handle that: "I like to think of this work that it is not fixed, that it will keep on growing. It will have its essential roots, but it will get further and further into the complexity. So I would like [future PBSP therapists] not to hold back. But first, *before they are going to get creative, get the essential foundation and then just keep on learning*. I hope that people who are the trainers beyond my lifetime are going to keep the foundation and then still let it grow." Al Pesso quoted in *Working with Traumatic Memories*… (ibid – my italics).

Connected reading

Perquin L. 1991 *Structured Exercises as Therapeutic Tools in PBSP in Moving Psychotherapy* ed. A Pesso and J Crandell Brookline Books

Pesso A 1991 *Ego Development in the Possibility Sphere* in Moving Psychotherapy ed. A Pesso and J Crandell Brookline Books

Pesso A. 1996, *On Contract and Motivation in Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor* (Albert Pesso, transcribed and edited by Lowijs Perquin from audiotape in 1996 with assistance from Louisa Howe)

Van der Kolk B. 2014, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Allen Lane

Winnette and Baylin 2017, *Working with Traumatic Memories to Heal Adults with Unresolved Childhood Trauma*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers