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THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE: REFLECTIONS ON SECRECY, DEHISCENCE AND THE GAZE OF THE OTHER IN THE THERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTER

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Psychotherapy is broadly concerned with secrets. Often our clients bring us things which they have never told anyone, subjects they have felt unable to broach. What happens in the relationship when a secret is uncovered? In this article, I discuss how one's secrets finally being uncovered can invoke shame. However, the shame of being seen in a new way can also create an opening that allows for a deeper intersubjective experience to unfold. Using Sartre's concept of the gaze of the other alongside Merleau-Ponty's ideas of dehiscence, visibility/invisibility and intertwining, I explore the meaning of secrecy, guilt and shame for both therapist and client within the therapeutic relationship.

KEYWORDS: MERLEAU-PONTY, SARTRE, EXISTENTIAL THERAPY, INTERSUBJECTIVITY, TRAUMA THERAPY

We are made up of half-hidden things stored in ourselves.Bari, 2022, p.268.

When I was a child, I had a pet slow worm. He was grey and long, with tiny black eyes and a flickering forked tongue. I kept him in a plastic box with air holes poked in the lid. My slow worm's name was Secret, because he was one. My mother did not approve of slow worms: they were too 'snakey'. I very much approved of slow worms and also of secrets. I had him for a summer, and then when I was going back to school, I set him free in the hedgerow where I had found him.

The choice of name came not only from the fact of our relationship but also from my relationship with secrets more generally. I knew how to keep them, enjoyed knowing them and held them close. I have always congratulated myself on my capacity to keep secrets. And it is true: my default setting is to keep things confidential. Sometimes when people say 'Don't tell anyone this, but …', I feel confused. It would not occur to me to share what someone had said with another person unless they explicitly asked me to. To me, secrecy is the unspoken tapestry on which my life is woven.

As a therapist, clients bring me their secrets too. Part of my role is to hold these previously unspoken truths. Sometimes my role is to ascertain when they need to no longer be secrets; there is an element of safeguarding involved, and my confidentiality policy only goes so far. If someone is about to be put at direct risk of extreme harm, for example, then I feel an obligation to step in. It is important then to understand my own relationship with secrecy so that I can ensure I make ethically sound decisions.

In this article, I will consider the experience of holding a secret in relation to guilt and shame. I will discuss both from the perspective of Sartre's (1943) concept of the gaze of the other and will enquire into how Merleau-Ponty's (1968) idea of dehiscence might shed light on what is happening when secrets are revealed.

GUILT, SHAME AND SECRECY

The difference between guilt and shame, for me, is one of identification. I feel guilty about something I have done; I feel shame about who I am. Sometimes one can lead to the other: by performing a certain action, I can decide I am 'the kind of person who…', and this can lead to shame. Guilt feels more active, shame more passive. Guilt is something I could potentially change: I could choose not to act in the same way next time, or if I had a time machine, I could go back and make a different decision. There is a helplessness to shame, though, a sense of inevitability. It goes all the way through me. It is not just about what I have done, but about who I am, and so although I might change my actions and remove some of the guilt, the shame may still remain.

Secrecy is often, although not always, linked to one or the other of these feelings. It is possible to keep a positive secret—someone's upcoming surprise party, a piece of good news that we are waiting to share—but more often than not, if we are concealing something, it is because we are uncomfortable with it being revealed.

Recent research around secrecy has demonstrated that it is not the concealment itself that is taxing to the secret-keeper so much as the frequency with which the person thinks about the secret becoming known (Slepian et al., 2020). This corresponds to my own experiences. Whenever I have kept secrets in the past—my own or other people's—it has been easy to get on with life without thinking about them most of the time. It has only been when it looked like they might be uncovered that the secrets have become stressors.

GUILT, SHAME AND THE GAZE OF THE OTHER

Sartre (1943) talks about the moment of recognition in which we realise we are being seen. For Sartre, there is a solidification that comes with the gaze of an other. Before the gaze, there is a flow to what is happening—it is not so much that 'I' am looking at a 'scene' as that a process of seeing is occurring. When I realise that someone else is seeing me, my previously verb-like state is solidified, and I become a noun: I become someone who is seeing. I am separated from my actions:

wrenched from the world so that, to borrow a Heideggerian term, I am not so much Being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962) as *a* being in *a* world.

Beyond becoming someone who is seeing, though, I am also someone who is being seen seeing. The wrenching from the world occurs with the understanding that another is watching. When we become aware of it upon us, the gaze of the other invokes shame (Sartre, 1943). Within the recognition that I am the object of someone's gaze, there is the recognition that I am being in some way judged. When their gaze falls upon me, the other concretises me, makes me a noun. This prompts a sense of self-consciousness to arise. I am on guard in a different way from before: aware of myself, aware of what my body is doing, of what I am showing and trying not to show to the other. Many of us experience moments of this from time to time; for example, if you have ever held a conversation with someone you find attractive and suddenly become very aware of not really knowing how to arrange your limbs; or if you have suddenly lost the ability to type because somebody is watching you do it. For Sartre, these are not small one-off moments; they are the stuff of which human interaction is made. As soon as we become aware that the other is there, we become aware of their perception of us, which brings to mind our perception of ourselves, which invokes self-consciousness. For Sartre, this self-consciousness leads directly to a sense of shame, which some have criticised as being an overly negative view. Merleau-Ponty (2012, p.378), for example, accuses Sartre of assuming an '*in*human gaze' when he speaks of shame arising from the gaze of the other (emphasis added).

It feels like there is something intrinsic to Sartre's writing which assumes we are all trying to keep as much of ourselves as possible hidden at all times. This is illustrated by the very example Sartre uses to describe what happens in the moment of coming under the gaze of the other. He speaks of someone looking through a keyhole and then realising there is someone else behind him and feeling ashamed (Sartre, 1943). But bending to look through a keyhole is not the same as browsing a menu or watching a sunset: it is itself a furtive act. Sartre extrapolates this experience to everyday life, which underlines the centrality of shame to his view of interpersonal relations.

The feeling I get from reading this passage is a feeling of a secret being uncovered. The other suddenly appears and knows that you are looking through the keyhole. They know something about you which was not supposed to be for public view, something you were unprepared for them to know.

But we do not only keep our own secrets: we also keep them for other people. What happens in those cases? Is the gaze of the other magnified? Refracted? Diverted?

During a conversation about keeping others' secrets, one of my colleagues shared the following thoughts:

> Does a secret collude with the person who puts the secret on us? … Does a secret have a sense of danger about it? As in, if you decide to keep something

> secret, what happens when everyone not only finds out about the thing you are keeping secret, but also the fact that you kept it secret? (Michael, 2023)

If someone is spying through a keyhole and you are standing guard, but then you are both interrupted, what is the different quality of shame for each individual? The keyhole-gazer is the one performing the furtive act, but the guard is not only party to the act itself but also to their own experience of keeping the other's secret. The guard and the keyhole-gazer in this scenario are thrown together as one in the eyes of the viewer: they are aligned in their goals.

And perhaps it is this very element that makes keeping another person's secret feel like it is linked with shame. My colleague's question about collusion feels apposite here: in agreeing to keep a secret, we agree to collude with its subject matter, even if we might disagree with what is happening. Many of the secrets I have kept throughout my life have related to the abuse I went through as a child, and one of the most common yet unhelpful reactions I have had from people I have told about the abuse in later life has been 'Why didn't you tell anyone?' It feels like in that moment I am being accused of colluding with the abuser—of supporting their behaviour—rather than being understood as a terrified child who did not feel able to trust anyone with the weight of the secrets she held.

This has been true in a lighter way of more day-to-day secrets I have kept as an adult, too; when they have come to light, I have felt thrown into shame not only about keeping the secrets but also about being potentially associated with the relevant characteristics and behaviours of the individuals whose secrets I had been keeping.

UNCONCEALMENT AS DEHISCENCE: SECRECY FROM A MERLEAU-PONTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Secrecy is a kind of making-invisible. It is a concealment of something from specific parties, and it is active: one does not accidentally keep a secret, it requires effort.

For Merleau-Ponty, 'it is the invisibility of the world that makes the world visible' (Maldiney, 2000, p.62). Within each phenomenon lies the experience of its opposite: the darkness of milk is only accessible through its whiteness; there is a blue so blue that only blood could be more red (Merleau-Ponty, 1979). We could apply this to human experience: the warmth of life is only accessible through the cold darkness of death. But we are used to acknowledging only the visible: only the whiteness of the milk, not its darkness; only the aliveness of life, not its movement towards death.

If the function of the invisible is to make the world visible via the intrinsic experience of each phenomenon's opposite (Maldiney, 2000), then secrecy contains within it an experience of openness. This feels counterintuitive: the very definition of keeping a secret involves not being open. But when I consider this more carefully with regard to my own experiences, I can see the truth in the statement.

Although keeping a secret does not involve revealing the secret itself, nonetheless there is a disclosure that happens within the way of being of a person who is keeping something from others. In the past when it has seemed like a secret I was keeping might come out, I have begun to act in ways that did not necessarily disclose the secrets themselves but did disclose that something was awry.

These behaviours have taken multiple forms, but they all involved acting in ways that harked back to unhelpful patterns that have been familiar since childhood. These included drawing away from my friends; not being able to sleep; anxiously obsessing over what the right thing would be to do; and spending days in bed feeling numb. At times, the stress of keeping certain secrets and considering their potential unconcealments has made me physically unwell.

As a child, secrecy felt incredibly important. I was sexually abused throughout my childhood by multiple perpetrators who threatened to kill me if I told anyone, and they were violent men whose words I took entirely seriously. Nonetheless, I at one point accidentally told my mother, and her reaction underlined that I should not have let that secret out.

My historic relationship with secrecy thus springs from a space of desperation within me. It feels hugely important to keep secrets: like it is a matter of life and death. As I grew older, I learned that secrets have power. I worked out that people could only hurt me emotionally if they knew things about me. Anyone can kick you in the spine, but only the people you let into your world can rip at the fabric of your being.

I feel a creeping sense of shame as I begin to write this next paragraph. I do not want to admit to my own desire for power, how my desperation for safety leads me to sniff out secrets and hoard them. But it is true. Having learned that secrecy is powerful, I realised that not only was it a good idea to not let anyone see anything of me, but it was also a good idea to know as much about them as possible. This puts me in an advantageous position: I know all about you, you know nothing about me.

This process has been going on outside of my awareness for practically my whole life. Even my choices of profession are telling: before training as a psychotherapist, I was an investigator. Both of these roles involve learning things about people that render them vulnerable and keeping those things confidential from others.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) talks about how we do not only look at the world and move around in it, but our very being is of the world, even *is* the world. He talks about how the objects in the world are 'encrusted into [our] flesh' (ibid., p.163), using 'flesh' in the sense of an element (Merleau-Ponty, 1979). So what does it mean when secrets are encrusted into the flesh of the world? Do the visible and invisible swirl around together, creating a necessary but indefinable mixture?

Like the famous iceberg metaphor used in psychoanalysis (Green, 2019), whether we are talking about secrets actively kept or things held outside of awareness, what we see and understand of human experience is just a tiny fraction of what is actually going on. Beneath the surface, there is much more at play, all of which affects what we can see without being directly observable or measurable.

Secrets sit somewhere between awareness and unawareness. The secret-keeper is aware of the secret, but others are not. The impact of the secret is probably visible, to varying degrees of subtlety, and probably at some point, the secret will come out. What happens to the flesh of the world when it does?

When the invisible suddenly becomes visible, we are rudely thrust into an engagement with a facet of the intertwining nature of Being that we might not want to consider. If looking requires an opening onto the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), then something suddenly appearing in our field of vision, of openness, might feel confronting, even intrusive.

For Merleau-Ponty (1968), we are all the flesh of the world. Flesh is elemental, it is the stuff we are, the stuff the world is. Thus interacting with others involves not just a relationship but an intertwining: we are their flesh, they are ours, all is one is all. Through perception, we come to an embodied understanding of the intertwining nature of being (Merleau-Ponty, 1995). For Sartre (1943), on the other hand, when we notice the other's gaze upon us we are drawn swiftly *away* from them: their gaze is Other to us, we are Other to them. The distinctions between us in that moment invoke shame. These distinctions are felt in, and boundaried by, our physical bodies. Yet for many people, our bodies extend beyond purely the limits of the skin. Certainly, when I am in conversation with another person, it does not feel like two sacks of skin making sounds; a good conversation feels like an intertwining of being.

I wonder though whether engaging with Sartre's gaze can help us move towards, rather than away from, an understanding of the flesh of the world. It reminds me of adding droplets to a swirling mixture of ink and water. The glittery ink moves within its world of water, intermingling and nonseparate. When a new droplet is introduced, there is a momentary dehiscence, a hole appears in the tapestry. Rather than rushing to fill it, the world swirls around it; it has impacted the whole and yet is a part of it. And it is impossible to separate the droplet back out, to say which discrete particles it was that created the dehiscence, even though the element is changed by its addition.

Perhaps then the jolting Sartrean gaze of the other can be seen as a Merleau-Pontian moment of dehiscence. For Merleau-Ponty (1968, p.123), dehiscence is a splitting-open which involves 'overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things.' For Sartre, the gaze is a moment of recognition that something has shifted regarding the identity of self-in-world; suddenly, I am aware that I am I and you are you. A secret coming to light would be an example of such a moment. But if we follow through with a more Merleau-Pontian approach, what is changed is not an individual themselves but the whole world. The ripples we create are not just ripples, they are the water.

SECRETS IN THERAPY

Therapy is concerned with secrets. People bring things that they have never told anyone before. Clients allow us deep access into their worlds.

I work primarily with people who have experienced sexual abuse in childhood. For most of my clients, the abuse began when they were very young and continued for many years, with multiple perpetrators involved. This was also true of my own childhood.

I thus have some lived experience of what my clients are bringing, although of course everyone's experiences are unique. But there is something that happens in my body when a client brings their deepest childhood traumas, which I find helpful for the therapeutic endeavour. A sense of calm settles over me; I feel my muscles relaxing, my spine lengthens, my tailbone dips down into my seat. I feel an opening of a space inside me where I know I can hold what the client is bringing. It is, I think, the space where the secrets live.

I have a sense of this space opening and inviting the client to bring what they need to say into the room with us. I feel a gentle confidence in our capacity to be with whatever needs to be borne, and I think this comes across in an unworded way, spoken through our bodies as we sit together.

Often my clients are acting in ways that are not serving them well in their lives. Some of them want to have intimate sex but feel unable to do so; some constantly fall out with friends; some overeat, drink too much, lose themselves in work to distract them from pain. Like my own actions outlined in the beginning of this article, these feel like Merleau-Pontian (1979) examples of the invisible making itself visible. My clients' behaviours show that something is wrong.

When they courageously bring their secrets into the therapy room, often saying them out loud for the first time, they frequently report a sense of shame. They hide from my gaze as they speak: turning away, looking down, hiding behind their hair. As the Other in the room (Sartre, 1943), my gaze makes them aware of their lived sense of shame. It reminds them of how they have been objectified throughout their lives.

But the fissure created by the moment of shame offers a choice point. We can either identify with the shame, use the other's gaze as limiting, as confirmation of what we have always known to be an objectifying, frightening world or we can use the therapy room as an opportunity for something in our world to change. Taking Merleau-Ponty's (1995) stance of intertwining, the gaze of the other becomes something different. Although there is a momentary dehiscence when the terrible words are spoken—'he raped me'—usually there is then a moment when the client looks up, meets my gaze and something begins to shift.

For Sartre (1943), in this moment, there is a 'nouning' as the gaze of the Other falls upon us. It is interesting that the French word for 'noun' is 'nom,' which is the same as the word for 'name': there is something about the gaze of the other which *names* us, gives us our place in the world. It also pulls us away from a sense of being a 'project which possesses a subjective life' (Kearney & Rainwater, 1995, p.68) and towards a sense of being an object with a specified place in the world. This is reminiscent of the feeling my clients report when they talk about why it is hard to share their experiences of abuse: they are worried that they will be viewed differently, 'put in the victim box.' But if rather than 'nouning' them as an Other,

the process-like nature of being-together is allowed to play out, something different can occur.

Earlier, I wrote that for me, the difference between guilt and shame is that I feel guilty for something I have done but shame about who I am. And perhaps this speaks directly to the distinction I am making here. In order to be ashamed of who I am, I first of all have to decide that I am something. I am distinct, I am a noun, I am not flesh in the Merleau-Pontian sense but rather gazed-at in the Sartrean sense. I am 'nouned'; named; *nommée*. So what if I were to *dénommer*—de-noun, or de-name—the situation? What if, instead of being ashamed of the self that I am, there simply is shame in the room? What if I allow the shame I feel to become an intersubjective experience, allow the other not to be an onlooker outside of the shame, but a participant in what is being felt?

As a person who has experienced childhood sexual abuse working primarily with others who have had similar experiences, I have a lived understanding of how difficult it can be to put feelings into words. Often childhood abuse begins in the pre-verbal stages of development, or at least before the child has words for the complexity of feelings that arise when dealing with something as challenging as, for example, incestual rape.

Clients are thus often tentative about naming their feelings. Often they are unsure about their memories too and have been warned never to tell anyone what has happened to them. Frequently, I encounter people who have tried to discuss things that happened with their perpetrator or other people who were around at the time, only to be met with 'I don't remember that' or even 'That didn't happen.' This can have the effect of making people reluctant to stand behind what they are saying and fully identify with it, before even taking into account how hard it is to face up to this level of pain in the first place.

When working with people who have experienced abuse and have had to keep many secrets throughout their lives, I therefore start out very gently. Rather than asking them to identify a feeling within themselves, I sometimes ask if they can sense a change of atmosphere in the room. Sometimes I will verbalise a feeling I am picking up: 'I feel like there's a little imaginary version of you standing over there stomping her feet on the ground and screaming.' Externalising the feelings in this way can make them seem less threatening to admit to. Gradually the clients come to identify the feelings themselves: 'What would the little imaginary version of you be doing right now?' I ask, and they tell me: throwing a tantrum, crying uncontrollably, smashing up the painting from the wall. The concept of the imaginary version of themselves gives them the opportunity to express what they would be doing if they felt free to express anything at all, regardless of how 'true' it might be. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who pointed out that this shares some similarities with children who use transitional objects to speak "for" them, for example by confessing to something they feel guilty or ashamed about by saying, for example, "Teddy is ashamed" before developing the capacity to internalise and process their own feelings. There is insufficient space to explore this theme here but it could be an interesting area for further consideration.

As time moves on and we become more comfortable in the relationship, I begin to bring myself in more. What does it mean that I am here with you? What would it mean if I, too, could grasp what feelings were in the room with us? This plays out in any number of different ways depending on how the client prefers to work. Sometimes it involves metaphor (Kopp, 2015) or some kind of improvised movement. I often use the metaphor of a 'pit' in which the most difficult feelings live, and sometimes I will spend time visualising the pit with clients, talking about where in the room it might be, its dimensions, its colour and shape. Sometimes we will decide the pit lives in a particular part of the room and gradually, over several sessions, physically move ourselves closer towards it. Sometimes the feelings arise in the form of a blanket that comes over us, or a vortex that spins around us, or a field in which we are metaphorically sitting.

This period of encouraging the client to use their imagination to allow me into the feelings-space with them helps us to move the relationship forward in a way that can feel less threatening to clients who are afraid of sharing things they have never shared. If someone has been punished for expressing feelings, for example, or has never been allowed to show anger or sadness, then suddenly showing those feelings in front of another person can be overwhelming. The metaphors and improvised creations can help to ease the client away from a Sartrean assumption that my gaze upon them will necessarily invoke shame and towards a more Merleau-Pontian understanding that we are together in this, that I am not going to 'other' them for expressing feelings or telling me their secrets. Over time, I find the metaphors become less and less necessary, and we begin to discuss how the clients feel more directly.

When we go through this process together, and when they are finally able to speak the words they are afraid to say and then dare to look up and meet my gaze, upon seeing that I am impacted but that I remain in the intersubjective experience of being-together, the client understands that opening themselves to another need not lead to objectification but can in fact lead to a deeper understanding of a shared world: a shared flesh.

This is difficult to write about because so much of it is ineffable; it is what we are, it is *how* we are, it is not something I can easily define.

ETHICS IN THERAPY

Asking clients to sit with their traumatic experiences requires vigilance, care and a constant checking-in with my own ethical stance. Whilst it can be helpful that I share some of my clients' experiences, this also requires me to ensure that I am not allowing my own experiences to get in the way. It is important to remember that although they share certain similarities, my clients' experiences are not mine, and their responses, understanding and meaning-making may all look very different from my own. But within the context of secrecy there is another ethical requirement which calls to me when working with clients who have kept their own terrible secrets all their lives.

Often, we keep secrets from people because we do not trust that they will respond in the way we would want them to. This was certainly true for me as a child. I remember being pulled into the school nurse's room aged about 8 years old. After PE class, I had been carefully positioning a towel around myself while changing so no one would see the bruises all over my torso and back. A couple of my friends were play-fighting nearby, giggling, using their towels to hit each other. One of them grabbed my towel from around my body just as a teacher came into the room. She began telling them off, then noticed me and a look of horror crossed her face. In that moment, I assumed I had done something bad by showing my bruises, rather than understanding that the bruises themselves were the problem. With the school nurse a few minutes later, trying not to react as she pulled my top up and gently examined my body, I felt absolute terror that I would be 'found out.' Luckily—or so I felt at the time—it was a busy school in an impoverished area where practically every child was in some kind of terrible home situation, and so although the nurse called home, when my mother assured her she would 'sort it out', it was never followed up.

When I started training as a therapist, I noticed my natural stance of distrust and secrecy coming into play. I approached everyone from a stance of assumed untrustworthiness. I remember worrying about whether supervisors would understand enough about my clients to be safe overseers of my work.

I felt like this was coming from a place of protectiveness, but there is an arrogance in this position, too. I felt like I was, if not the only person who could understand such deep-rooted trauma, at least one of a select few. I was worried that if I took some of my clients' experiences to supervision, the supervisors might wade in with well-meaning but misplaced pseudo-helpfulness.

I am not sure exactly how a shift occurred. Probably, it was an accumulation of events that made me begin to realise that I needed to step down from my position of greedily hoarding my own secrets and other people's and into a more humble position of recognition that others might have helpful perspectives. A lot of this came from tutors sharing their experiences in lectures; it also came from my personal therapy.

By the time I actually began seeing clients, I had discarded the view that I had to 'protect' them from supervisors and instead had begun to understand that supervision was there to make sure I was working ethically. I approached my first supervision relationship with an openness I had never felt before and responded to my supervisor's questions with a truthfulness that surprised me in its immediacy and depth. I kept nothing back from him, and when I met other supervisors, I approached those relationships from a similar space. I continue to abide by the self-imposed rule that if there is something I do not want to take to supervision, that is the primary thing I will take.

In writing this article, however, I have realised just how much of the automatic secret-keeping tendency remains within me. I have recognised that I am probably still too willing to keep secrets, which prompts me to consider my own ethics more carefully once again. The secrets I have kept throughout my life have sat in a space

of not trusting that if I took them to someone, they would be dealt with well. A space of automatically assuming that I should be the one to hold the thing, that I should not burden anyone else with a disclosure. I wonder whether this plays out in my client work in ways that are too subtle for me to notice. I hope it does not, but that feels naïve and unlikely.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

A version of this article was originally submitted as my final essay for the last term of my psychotherapy training. When I completed the article, I was left with a feeling of unfinishedness. This felt dissatisfying: I would have liked to have wrapped everything up, congratulated myself on five long years of training and provided a pleasant springboard into my future work as a therapist.

But perhaps it is fitting to end on a note of not-there-yet. I have always viewed therapy training as a beginning rather than an ending. I want to continue being humbled by my experiences, I do not want to ever stop reflecting or learning, and so perhaps the experience of writing this article has been exactly the wake-up call I needed to ensure that I continue to examine my own ethics, actions and ways of being as I move forward in my journey of being and becoming a therapist.

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