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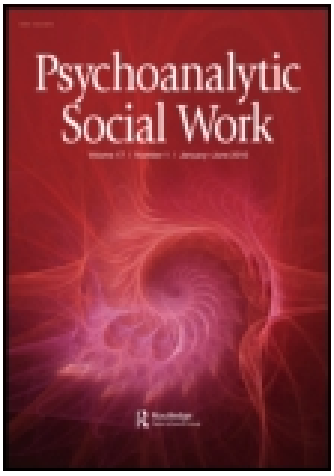

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Getting Connected: The Virtual Holding Environment

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Getting Connected: The Virtual Holding Environment

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This article introduces and describes the virtual holding environment*—a space where supportive relationships can be developed and maintained through the use of technology over time—and its role in helping us thrive during our doctoral program, dissertation process, and subsequent career transitions. Here, we present concepts related to computer-mediated communication, distance education, and psychodynamic theory (Winnicott's holding environment, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Fonagy's mentalization/intersubjective process) that have helped shape this virtual holding environment. Also, we present individual vignettes that illustrate the role this virtual holding environment has played in our shared successes. Our partnership offers collaborative principles that may be applied to other forms of education and training which require independent work, yet benefit from mutual ongoing support. We provide several recommendations for strengthening learning experiences and computer-mediated communication across distance.*

KEYWORDS attachment, distance education, holding environment, mentalization, online social presence

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INTRODUCTION

While the rewards of completing a doctorate are numerous, the process itself is notoriously challenging for doctoral candidates as they move through and beyond their doctoral studies. Crossing the finish line is no small feat. For example, completion rates 10 years after beginning a PhD in social sciences remain relatively low at 56.6% (Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008) and take, on average, seven and a half years to finish (Council of Graduate Schools, 2013). Although who finishes and why they finish is not well understood, Grasso, Berry, and Valentine (2007) propose there are "four conditions for optimal doctoral completion" and suggest that completion rates are influenced by (1) who applies, (2) who is admitted, (3) who forms strong working faculty relationships, and (4) who experiences social support by fellow students (p. 10).

The emergence and maintenance of peer support among doctoral students in particular may be influenced by student circumstances and varies from cohort to cohort. Similarly, the process by which PhD candidates "recognize themselves as members of a community of learners facing common challenges and opportunities" (Grasso et al.,2007, p. 10) may vary depending on the format of their program (e.g., online versus face-to-face) and the degree to which they have connected with their colleagues during the course of their studies (e.g., cohort versus non-cohort program models).

The purpose of this article is to introduce a conceptual framework where supportive relationships can be developed and maintained through the use of technology, yet transcend time and location: the "virtual holding environment." The virtual holding environment is a space where supportive relationships can be developed and maintained over time through the use of technology. The goal of our article is to describe the virtual holding environment that we created in order to complete our dissertations in the PhD program at Smith College School for Social Work, and then later transition into our postdoctoral professional lives. A review of the literature outlines some of the challenges that virtual collaboration presents and explores the related concept of social presence, while psychodynamic theory helps to explain how and why our virtual holding environment was successful. Throughout the article, we use vignettes to illustrate our key points.

The Beginning of Our Virtual Holding Environment

The seeds of our collaboration, our virtual holding environment, were really planted in the late spring of 2007 when the three of us arrived at Smith for our program orientation. It was the first time our cohort of seven met. Program codirectors emphasized their expectation for collegiality, personal

growth, and challenge during our PhD program. Our residential experience at Smith College during our summer courses was followed by an academic year spent in field placements in our respective hometowns. This format helped to create fast friendships and bonds that had to be nurtured over distance for nine months out of the year.

At Smith, a telephonic seminar was a key program element designed to increase cohesion within new student cohorts. A monthly group call, facilitated by two senior doctoral candidates, was designed to help us learn core elements of psychodynamic theory, while providing an opportunity for each of us to maintain contact with our cohort during our first winter away from Smith. These calls provided our first experience of a virtual holding environment, which had mixed results. While the seminars were effective virtual classrooms, the setting was not conducive for generating a collaborative and sustaining virtual space. In retrospect, perhaps the group was too large. Perhaps our relative lack of familiarity with one another made it difficult to hold one another in our mind's eye. For some, the environment seemed too competitive to garner trust.

When we returned to Smith for our second summer, a dizzying array of activities kept us occupied. Our class schedule—two rounds of five-week classes, each ending at the same time and each with a comprehensive paper—created a need for peer support. Planning and executing a graduation party for the cohort that preceded us created a need for organization and collaboration that pulled on individual strengths while strengthening our bonds.

After completing our final summer in residence, we made some attempts as a cohort to maintain contact. We created an online group that was designed to help us all keep in touch. However, we failed to maintain contact. Perhaps our cohort was too exhausted from the Smith experience to maintain cohesion. Maybe our larger mix of personalities could not easily come together to create a trusting virtual holding space. In retrospect, it seems clear that this format was limited by its very nature. One person administered it and members could provide updates at any time. Essentially, we were able to leave notes for one another, but no potential space for collaboration was generated. As we moved from the classes in residence and our personal clinical practica to our dissertation research and writing, it was unclear how or if we would be able to support one another. However, as the possibilities of our online group faded, a small group of us began to see the possibility for creating virtual liminal space for collaboration. The first vignette demonstrates how we began to create our virtual holding environment.

Vignette 1: The Beginning Of Our Virtual Holding Environment

Part one of our four-part vignette, as seen collectively through our eyes as Andy, Kari, and Sally, illustrates the role that our need for support played

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in the creation of the virtual holding environment. The vignette occurred as we were finishing our on-campus coursework and preparing to start the next phase of our doctoral studies. The vignette also foreshadows the emotional ups and downs associated with doctoral studies and the need to develop a framework that would help us sustain the relationships and support one another from a distance through the use of computer-mediated communication.

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> The summer storms had passed. As we completed our final doctoral classes on campus, together we walked the dappled paths of Smith for the final time. One of us was drying tears; one of us was fighting mad; and one of us was numb and withdrawn. The challenges of the Smith PhD program had been many, but we had successfully finished our two-and-a-half-year journey and completed our time together as an in-residence cohort. Despite this, we had many questions and some doubts about navigating the next phase of our program: Did we understand the theory? Was our clinical practice good enough? Were we worthy of being faculty colleagues? Yes. Maybe? We were done with the coursework, the clinical internships, and the comprehensive exams, but the next step was another kind of challenge: the dissertation.
>
> The first member of our group, Sally, was a 50-something married woman from the South. Sally was working in private practice as a psychotherapist, where she had years of clinical practice and a strong foundation in psychodynamic theories. She was drawn to complete her PhD after having raised two kids in the life she had established in North Carolina, which fueled Sally's drive to be successful. As she moved into the dissertation phases of her program, Sally had developed a research agenda that was firmly focused on exploring the impact of family environment, attachment relations, and affect regulation on childhood bipolar disorder.
>
> The second member of our group, Andy, was a 40-something student from the Northeast and the only male in the cohort. Andy was working in college counseling, where his work was framed in a family systems theoretical orientation. He decided to complete his PhD after seeing that an advanced degree could help further his work as a human rights activist and scholar. As he moved into the dissertation phase of his program, Andy had established a research agenda that focused on historical changes in the coming-out process for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people.
>
> The third member of our group, Kari, was a 30-something single woman from the Midwest. Kari was working with veterans and their families, where she practiced from an eclectic theoretical approach. She was drawn to complete her PhD at a time in her life when she wanted to develop further as a professional and to learn psychodynamic theory. As she moved into the dissertation phases of her program, Kari had established a research agenda that built upon her clinical experience working with veterans that focused upon supporting children of National Guard service members.

> "You guys. . . . I never dreamed it would be this difficult," Kari ventured as we walked down the path.
> "This is going to be really hard," intoned Andy.
> "Yup. But, I think we're gonna make this work," said Sally. "Let's go get a margarita!"

LITERATURE REVIEW

We shall now examine the literature relevant to the virtual holding environment. Virtual holding environments are present when collaborative groups use computer-mediated communication—or interaction through computer networks and in online environments—available through technology to help facilitate and maintain their connection with one another over time (Shulman, 2000). Virtual holding environments blend synchronous or "real-time" technology (e.g., videoconference technology) and asynchronous or "back-and-forth" support (e.g., e-mail) to facilitate communication and peer support. Much of what is known about collaboration across distance comes from distance education (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004), online curriculum development (Barnett-Queen, Blair, & Merrick, 2005; Sung & Mayer, 2012), peer supervision (Davis, Provost, & Clark, 2012), and e-mentoring (Pachler & Redondo, 2012).

Although little, if any, research exists that is specific to virtual holding environments, literature on social presence offers some insight into why peer relationships may help facilitate completion of otherwise difficult projects. *Social presence*, or a "sense of being with one another" (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003, p. 1), refers to a degree of self-awareness of others within communication interactions. It is characterized by safety, comfort, and risk taking present among participants that results in effective learning communities (e.g., Barnett-Queen et al., 2005).

Maintaining an effective learning community across distance becomes a challenge since participating members are not in one another's physical presence. As technology has changed the ways in which humans communicate, the concept of social presence theory has evolved over the past 30 years. Initially, social presence theory considered how communication and how face-to-face, audio, and television medias represented people and impacted perceptions of relationships with one another (Jusoff & Khodabandelon, 2009; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Subsequent research has primarily explored how social presence subjectively impacts communication across technology medias. In Rice's (1993) study, the appropriateness of communication vis-à-vis face-to-face and technology medias (p. 451) over time was examined. Rice (1993) found that appropriateness of new media, unlike face-to-face communication, changes over time.

As technology has become increasingly central to communication, a new concept, that of *online social presence*, has emerged (Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

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Online social presence can be thought of as "the degree of feeling emotionally connected to another intellectual entity through computer-mediated communication" (Sung & Mayer, 2012, p. 1739).

Tu and McIsaac (2002) suggest that within a computer-mediated communication, a shared sense of intimacy and/or of immediacy with one another are good predictors of a strong online social presence. According to Sung and Mayer's (2012) review of the literature, 30 primary affective indicators are inherent in online social presence and pertain to interpersonal skills (e.g., use of emotion or paralanguage), to online relationship skills (e.g., ability to express appreciation or to compliment), or to technology skills (e.g., use of "netiquette" such as timely correspondence).

While social presence literature addresses salient aspects and effects of technology upon communication (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 2), its focus is limited in its application to virtual holding environments. Within this space, an emphasis on collaborative peer support reaches beyond the technology and seeks to describe the interpersonal aspects of virtual collaboration. Virtual holding environments may be difficult to maintain over time, unless all parties are invested in maintaining their connections with one another, and are willing to continually navigate one another's needs. This type of ongoing negotiation requires constant communication and openness. This back-and-forth has been well described in therapeutic group processes (e.g., Yalom, 1995). The topic has also been explored in the use of supervision over distance (Manosevitz, 2006; Morissette, Bezyak, & Ososkie, 2012).

Various theories are helpful in conceptualizing and potentially enhancing virtual holding environments. Winnicottian object relations theory (1971) provides a theoretical base around which this idea can coalesce. Bowlby (1958) and attachment theory can provide guidance for participants in virtual holding environments to understand their styles of managing the challenges of virtual connection. Finally, intersubjective theory (Fonagy, 2001) can guide users of virtual holding environments toward a greater awareness of the process of mentalization, or holding the other's mind in their own mind.

THEORETICAL APPLICATION

Object Relations Theory in the Virtual Holding Environment

Vignette 2: Andy's Experience of Object Relations in the Virtual Holding Environment

Part two of our four-part vignette, as seen from Andy's perspective, illustrates the role that object relations theory played in the maintenance of our relationships and the creation of the virtual holding environment during the dissertation phase of our doctoral studies.

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> Sitting and drinking coffee in front of my computer as the drowsiness of the morning fades away. As eight-thirty a.m. rolls around, I log on to Skype. Soon, I'm connected and leaning forward into the call. I can hear and picture Sally in faraway North Carolina filling her kettle for tea. I imagine Kari sitting in her office in distant Minnesota, but more importantly, my mind is pitched forward into the problem that we're tackling together. This problem solving is not happening in my head, it's not happening in either faraway state, it's happening in the potential space that we co-created.
> "I don't get how this is supposed to make any sense," I was saying. "The independent variable is the one that influences the outcome of the experiment, right?"
> "Right," Kari answers.
> "That sounds right," Sally offered.
> "Well then, why can't I get the statistics to make any sense?"
> "I think we need to bring in Abu-Bader," Kari suggested, referring to his excellent text on statistical analysis and the use of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; 2006).
> "I think I need to start sleeping with Abu-Bader under my pillow. Maybe that way I can absorb all of this." A tone of frustration was evident from Sally.
> "Sleeping with Abu-Bader? I don't know, Sally. What will your husband say?" I joked.
> Laughter came across the Internet.
> "That's what our T-shirt should say," Kari ventured cheerfully.
> "Sleeping with Abu-Bader! I love it!" Sally agreed.
> Warmth, collegiality, understanding, mutual regard and belief in our individual and collective ability, flooded the potential space as we returned to the problem at hand.

Applying theory to the virtual holding environment. According to Winnicott (1971), the holding environment is that illusory no-man's land between the psyches of two people, in which human psychological development takes place. This potential space, as first experienced by the developing infant, is created by the "good enough" matching of parent to infant. Adequate physical handling and psychological holding creates a balance of safety and frustration to impel growth.

Psychotherapists deploy this concept when they intentionally create a physical environment that allows their clients to feel as if they are being nurtured. The necessary elements of this aspect of a holding environment include subtle and overt signals about who the therapist is and signals that this is a place of healing. This is, however, only the outward manifestation of the holding environment.

The intermediate area of illusion, generated in the original significant relationship, becomes, for the adult, a place of play and creativity apart from the inner world and the outer world. This intermediate area is a third space, rich with potential (Winnicott, 1971) and "throughout life is retained

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in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (p. 14).

Unadorned cyberspace is a cold place that requires careful cultivation of structural elements in order to create the outlines of the supportive space. For us, selecting a platform that met our needs was an important first step. Skype provided free, easy access to virtual space all three of us could access with few technical problems. In addition, text messages and phone calls between sessions offered lots of reassurance and encouragement as we moved through a difficult process, in effect bolstering the virtual holding environment. E-mails provided a form of more extensive encouragement and allowed a chance for feedback on drafts over distance and time. The final element was Dropbox, which provided us with a free and easy method of collaborating on documents in real time.

Beyond the structural basics of the virtual holding environment, we were all required to "get there" and "be there" with one another. Our computers were no longer just machines connecting us by hardware and software to the World Wide Web, but windows into Andy's cozy study and Sally's sunny dining room and Kari's wintery kitchen table. We very rarely used webcams to communicate, originally because Skype would not accommodate three webcams at once, but later because we didn't need to. This lack of visual cue fostered a kind of projection into the potential space of our virtual holding environment. Possibilities for creating something new were nurtured in this third space. Despite the challenges, creativity and play became the hallmarks of many of our journeys into this virtual holding environment. When the technology did not work, or one of us was distracted or unavailable, those minor impediments served to strengthen our individual capacities to achieve. We each learned to give the others a bit of grace and expand into the potential space of our virtual holding environment in ways that fostered individual growth.

Attachment Theory in the Virtual Holding Environment

Vignette 3: Sally's Experience of Attachment in the Virtual Holding Environment

Part three of our four-part vignette, seen from Sally's perspective, illustrates the role that attachment theory, and specifically the concept of a secure base, played in the maintenance of our relationships vis-à-vis the virtual holding environment during the dissertation phase of her doctoral studies.

> I am still doing clinical internships and employed as a psychotherapist, while I work to complete my doctoral program. I feel like a "lonely researcher" as I am completing my dissertation. In spite of the valuable support of my chair, supervisors, and Smith colleagues, I am "out there on my own," especially since my dissertation, though grounded in

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psychoanalytic concepts, is quantitative in nature and affiliated with a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) grant designed to complete brain research using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fRMI) techniques.

Theoretically, my research was based on attachment theory, and one day it struck me that some of what we were experiencing in our group might be analyzed from an attachment theory perspective. I thought, "Boy, it is amazing how these theories always apply to me or my friends and family." I looked forward to our virtual meeting times to be like touching "home base" and Kari, Andy, or I often experienced increased productivity after a meeting.

In the virtual holding environment, I find myself saying, "My friends' eyes are glazing over when I bring up my dissertation topic. No one understands!"

Kari says, "I am doing these charts and can tell I am avoiding moving on, but what is the next step?"

Andy says, "I'm so swamped. I'm beyond swamped. Teaching, trying to publish, and commuting are killing me."

"We are all feeling stuck right now but we can do this! We'll be there for one another at graduation, remember. We'll walk together."

"Let's get going and set some deadlines for our dissertations," I say.

Kari says, "I know how hard it feels but let's make a timeline."

Andy says, "Remember we are Smithies."

Our *earned secure attachment* frequently resulted in a sense of security, attunement, and affect regulation, quelling the anxiety and loneliness that accompanied our "stuckness." These discussions often led each of us to experience a burst of energy for writing, an increased focus of attention, or an enrichment of thought or ability to work on the next piece of one of our projects.

Applying attachment theory to the virtual holding environment. Attachment theory has been widely researched and applied to treatment with children (Cooper, Hoffman, Powell, & Marvin, 2005), adult psychotherapy (Wallin, 2007), and relationship counseling (Johnson & Kasarda, 2008). However, scant attention is given in the literature regarding distance education programs that founder in completion success (e.g., Fischman, 2011), and potential relevance to attachment theory. Given our experience in the Smith doctoral program, attachment theory can be applied to creating an effective virtual holding environment for distance education. In the virtual holding environment, we employed a deepening of the security of our attachment and a focus on the relationship, rather than an emphasis on the quickly changing technical aspects of the virtual holding environment.

Bowlby (1958), a British psychoanalyst, is credited with the development of attachment theory wherein attachment is defined as a biologically based urge toward proximity with caregivers in times of stress or perceived danger. It is present from birth and is necessary for survival. Working within the attachment framework to evaluate the security, or secure base,

established between the caregiver (usually the mother) and the child, Ainsworth developed the research tool known as the "strange situation" to assess attachment styles (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). According to the *strange situation* format a child's responses to separation and especially to the mother's return are considered reflective of the child's security or insecurity of attachment (including both avoidant or anxious styles) in relationship to the caregiver. Main (1990) further developed the understanding of attachment patterns, including disorganized attachment and earned secure attachment. *Earned secure attachment*, a frequent style among psychotherapists, refers to those who have a history of insecure attachment but whom, through important relationships, have earned a secure attachment as adults (Siegel, 1999).

As a further development of how security of attachment may affect the internal object world, both Bowlby and Ainsworth developed the construct of *internal working models* as the internal concepts of self and other in relationships. Fonagy (2001) further refined the concept of internal working models when he suggested that representations of early relationships coalesce as a mental model and implicit memories that shape the child's view of self as well as relationship expectations with others.

Additional developments of attachment theory included the concepts of affect regulation, attunement, and markedness. In Bowlby's (1969) attachment model the infant's ability to "cope with stress" was developed in the context of maternal behaviors. In agreement with Bowlby's theory, Schore (2003) stated that the "good enough caregiver" uses her ability to monitor and regulate her own affect to help the child regulate affect, especially negative affect when confronted with stress. Attunement, a term often used to describe connections between parent and child, refers to one person in the context of a relationship focusing his or her attention on another person so that that person feels understood (Siegel, 1999; Stern, 1985). Attunement in the relationship of our group and attunement to one another helped with affect regulation and maintaining a secure attachment. Finally, Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, and Target (2002) discussed the importance of markedness in the regularity process. *Markedness* is the caregiver's exaggerated or pretend emotional response which helps the infant recognize his own response as different from the caregiver's response (Fonagy et al., 2002).

The concept of attachment theory that is most pertinent to this discussion is *earned secure attachment.* The three of us were committed to working together on a regular basis and we worked to foster a specific kind of relationship. While working on our dissertations, we experienced stresses that included working independently, focusing on our own unique topics and capacities, taking risks in forming our new identities as doctoral candidates, and completing our tasks. Our earned secure attachment mitigated these stresses through the mechanisms of provision of safety and a secure base, attunement, and affect regulation. We enhanced our ability to cope with the stress of distance education by the safety afforded by our earned

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secure attachment. We trusted that we would be held by the group and not be dropped or rejected. The secure base of the weekly group meetings via Skype gave us a base from which to venture out and take new risks to accomplish our dissertation projects. We provided affect regulation for one another through the use of humor, cartoon sharing, and playfulness (e.g., designing group T-shirts). More importantly, true attunement to one another rather than self-absorption coupled with the diversity of our various topics led us to work hard to achieve our individual goals. In this context, we competed against our own timelines, rather than against one another.

Just as the child with secure attachment shows more exploratory behavior, because of our group attachment we were able to take more risks. We had already been tested in the fires of Smith (hours of classes, qualifying exams, and comprehensive exams). We could each have licked our wounds and gone our separate ways, but sticking with one another through the process increased the secure attachment that we found in our virtual holding environment, which allowed us to individually succeed.

The group members provided the function of markedness for one another as we brought slightly different perspectives to each task. Because each of us had different interests and skills, each person was able to provide a slightly different take on any given topic or perhaps a different skill (e.g., charts design, computer knowledge, limit setting, demands for work, writing skills, and ideas of new books) to help another group member.

Our earned secure attachment frequently resulted in a sense of security, attunement, and affect regulation, quelling the anxiety and loneliness that accompanied our "stuckness." These discussions often led each of us to experience a burst of energy for writing, an increased focus of attention, or an enrichment of thought or ability to work on the next piece of one of our projects. At times when stress escalated in our group, we focused more on containment of our fears. For example, when Sally's research project moved from North Carolina to Houston, Texas, midway through her dissertation, her anxiety around her ability to complete her research escalated. Her ability to think logically was decreased but our group contained her anxiety and offered alternative ways of thinking through the process. Reassuring and supportive statements such as "You can do this," follow-up e-mails, or phone messages also helped Sally. At this stage of the process, we were colleagues, but more importantly, friends.

Mentalization and Intersubjective Theory in the Virtual Holding Environment

Vignette 4: Kari's Experience of Mentalization in the Virtual Holding Environment

Part four of our four-part vignette, as seen through the eyes of Kari, illustrates the role that mentalization and intersubjective theory played in the

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maintenance of our relationships vis-à-vis the virtual holding environment as we transitioned into our professional lives. In this vignette, we are preparing for our first joint professional presentation together following the completion of our PhDs.

> Over the past several months Andy, Sally, and I have supported one another's transitions into life beyond the PhD. Moving on to new endeavors—individually and collectively—has helped me appreciate why our virtual holding environment remains a vibrant source of support for one another. Part of this gratitude stems from the fact we remain responsive to one another's needs even while addressing our own.
> "All right, should we talk about what we've each been able to look at for our paper since last week?" I ask as I move into our shared Dropbox account.
> "I'll just confess right now, I didn't get a chance to take a look at this draft yet since we talked about this last," says Andy.
> "I haven't either," echoes Sally.
> "That's okay," I say evenly. "We've still got another couple of weeks until we really need to be done with this draft."
> "How worried are you about getting this done?" asks Sally.
> "I know we each move at different paces, and I don't want you to feel like Sally or I are not pulling our weight," says Andy.
> "I know we'll get this done. We always do," I say. "I know how much you've both had going on with your schedules this past week. I've just had more time to dedicate to this right now and know that a few days down the road I'm going to be swamped."
> "Well, Sally and I have talked about it and we've agreed that you've definitely taken the lead on this. You should be first author on the paper," Andy offers graciously.
> "Right now I need to focus on preparing for an upcoming conference and the classes I'm teaching," says Sally.
> "Right now I have a lot going on, as well," Andy notes.
> "And given your current tenure process, it may be more meaningful for you to have first authorship right now," adds Sally.
> "Really? I really appreciate your thoughtfulness. I think we've worked so cooperatively on this, and think we've each done as much as we could when we could."
> I was really touched by Andy and Sally's ability to broach the idea of authorship. I had been thinking about asking this myself, but really appreciated the fact that they brought it up first. Not only were we all able consider the important needs of the others as we completed this project, but our group was able to easily balance individual and group success in larger ways as well.

Applying intersubjective theory to the virtual holding environment. We have identified the concepts of potential space, earned secure attachment, affect regulation during stress, and mentalization as most pertinent to creating

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a virtual holding environment. *Mentalization* is the process of making sense of mental states in oneself and others. It involves interpreting the behavior of oneself and others in terms of intentional states, such as desires, feelings, and beliefs (Allen, 2003). Mentalization develops in the context of a secure attachment such as the earned secure attachment described previously.

Fonagy and Target (2008) have also described mentalization as having someone hold your mind in mind. Developmentally, learning to mentalize requires consistently safe relationships. Mentalizing is difficult to maintain in the face of emotional distress or arousal. The mature mentalizer is able, in the context of a secure attachment, to take multiple perspectives, to be open to new information, and to have flexible attention. A less mature mentalizer may use the mode of *psychic equivalence*, in which the internal and external worlds are equivalent, or they may use the *pretend mode*, which is more playful, but dissociated from reality. In psychic equivalence, internal thoughts and feelings and external reality appear to the subject to be the same. In the pretend mode, external reality is ignored (Fonagy & Target, 2008).

Our group was perhaps particularly well suited to using mentalization since we all were psychotherapists as well as clinical social workers with good social and emotional intelligence. Rather than criticize or compete against one another, we were able to mentalize the needs of one another in the context of a secure attachment relationship. These capacities served to moderate the effects of competition and we were able to support one another in order to realize our best individual capabilities.

DISCUSSION

Overall, we have found that several elements were crucial to the creation and maintenance of our successful collaboration. We attended carefully to the virtual meeting spaces, much like the setting in a face-to-face meeting. For virtual holding environments, technology becomes part of the setting. When the virtual technology is working, it becomes invisible and allows the participants to psychologically enter the co-created space. When the technology is not working (e.g., perhaps there is poor call quality), it is much more difficult to hold the others' mind in mind; the lack of actual presence is painfully obvious.

Virtual holding environments that are successful will likely deploy a variety of synchronous (e.g., Skype video conferences) and asynchronous (e.g., e-mails, texts) strategies tailored to the needs of the individual members. Some groups may find the use of webcams to be helpful in the endeavor of connecting across the virtual divide. Group members should have opportunities to be in one another's presence occasionally, especially early in the creation of a group identity. The reality of the person must first be internalized before virtual representations of them can be effectively used.

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Group members should also be prepared for inevitable distortions that will occur across virtual distance. A commitment to "talking about talking" is not unique to virtual holding environments but an important tool. Members who are able to feel warmth, remain connected, and use group as a touchstone will know that their endeavors to cultivate virtual holding environments have been successful.

In general, both structural- and relationship-oriented recommendations may be useful in the creation and maintenance of virtual holding environments. One structural recommendation includes setting and adhering to ongoing meeting times. We chose to meet at the same time every week. Another recommendation was to renegotiate our schedules regularly. We did this on a semester-by-semester basis. Yet another recommendation was to have backup plans to address technical difficulties as they arose. We also established expectations and routines for each call by using agendas. Finally, we conducted check-ins and check-outs for each call, which helped us to be accountable to one another and make our plans explicit.

Relational recommendations include being willing to step outside of the virtual holding environment and to help in between sessions when needed and to honor individual and collective commitments (e.g., meeting deadlines, following through with agreed-upon tasks). It is also important to be willing to broach concerns as needed to keep difficult issues from building up. Working to maintain a sense of humor and creativity is also very important, and giving one another the benefit of the doubt when we're not at our best fosters trust in the virtual holding environment. Holding one another accountable, which our group fondly referred to as "knuckle cracking," when the pressure is on is also an important goal for members of a virtual holding environment. It is also important to connect through periodic face-to-face visits and to continue to collaborate with one another on projects. Finally, finding ways to support one another's individual tasks while sharing the professional and personal journeys is one of the greatest goals of the virtual holding environment.

For our group, the virtual holding environment helped to bridge a gap in our doctoral education by establishing a tie to other students that supported our dissertation completion. This is not a strategy for all students, as some may prefer to work alone. Our commitment to the virtual holding environment and our agreement to graduate together provided motivation and planted the seed of our group.

While our experience is related to our dissertation process, other programs, such as distance education programs and non-cohort programs of study, may also find the concept of the virtual holding environment useful. Postgraduate Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy programs, online education programs, and other postgraduate certificates in special areas of interest, such as supervision or working with military personnel, may particularly benefit from the use of virtual holding environments.

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CONCLUSION

Ultimately, we found the object relations concepts of the holding environment to be an important element in the success of collaboration over distance. Our ability to create an attachment informed secure base (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) allowed us to be able to use the process of mentalization for mutual support across distance. We relied on weekly Skype calls and Internet resources to build our virtual holding environment. Text messages and phone calls helped us to fuel our virtual holding environment while residing in distant states. We each had different styles, different personalities, and different needs. We each had different projects, different committee chairs, and different challenges. We all finished at different times. We all struggled to hold it together, to keep writing, to believe in ourselves, to keep writing, to maintain our non-Smith lives, and to keep writing. What we achieved in the end was three dissertations in two years. We developed and maintained lifelong friendships—the kind you go to hell and back with. And in the end, we all walked across that stage together.

Our virtual holding environment continues to enrich our professional lives as we each move into the postdoctoral phases of our careers. Kari continues to grow as an assistant professor in a graduate education program where she has developed military social work curricula and has taught courses infused with psychodynamic and attachment theory perspectives. Andy, also in his fourth year of teaching in higher education, has presented his dissertation findings widely. Sally collaborates internationally on her research findings, teaches as an adjunct professor in higher education and in a psychoanalytic institute-affiliated psychotherapy training program, and maintains a thriving clinical practice. We continue to collaborate on conference presentations and articles (such as this one) and continue to find ways to keep our virtual holding environment enriching to each of us individually and all of us collectively.

Developing and maintaining relationships vis-à-vis the virtual holding environment will be important in years to come. Continued efforts to develop supportive relationships that can be maintained through computer-mediated communication will not only improve completion rates among students and professionals who wish to finish degrees or complete projects, but also benefit their groups, programs, and organizations.

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