

Feeling comfortable?

When it comes to consulting rooms, psychoanalysts are supposed to provide a ‘blank canvas’ – a chair, a couch and possibly a neutral print on the wall. Yet as the photographer *Shellburne Thurber* discovered, the reality is rooms full of useful insights which patients are quick to pick up on – both directly and, yes, unconsciously...

Words by *Antonia Macaro* and *Julian Baggini*



Buenos Aires: analyst's office with television and picture of Sigmund Freud



Newtonville, Massachusetts: blue couch with multiple portrait of Freud



Buenos Aires: analyst's desk with flowers and a hand paperweight



Brookline, MA: basement office with blue couch and African mask



Buenos Aires: beige couch with two leather pillows



Lexington, MA: office with polar bear sculptures and daffodil plant

Despite the fact that psychoanalysis is but one form of psychotherapy, the chair and the couch have come to define the popular conception of the profession. The space in which analysts probe their patients' unconscious has thus become part of the collective consciousness.

American photographer Shellburne Thurber's images of consulting rooms reveal the tensions of psychoanalysis. The "patient" lies on the couch, as though receiving medical treatment. At the same time, the walls are lined with books, paintings and objets d'art, telling us this is not a hospital but a site of intellectual endeavour. So is psychoanalysis a "talking cure" for the sick or a creative, humanistic exploration of the psyche? The ambiguous set-up of the therapeutic space suggests it is a little of both.

There is a similar tension in the delicate balance between formality and informality. Several of the rooms have something of the feel of drawing or sitting rooms, yet they are unlike any which one would arrange for one's own comfort. It is as though we are being invited to put ourselves at ease – but not too much. The space is friendly, but we must not make the mistake of thinking the analyst is our friend.

The rooms show us that, despite Freud's claims about the ubiquity of patricidal urges, analysts remain in thrall to the father of their discipline. Oriental rugs adorn several of the rooms, just as they did Freud's own.

These rooms also speak of the authority of the analyst, normally by more subtle means than the certificates that line the walls of just one of them. It is the analyst who sits upright in what is usually a conspicuously comfortable-looking chair, just as the best armchair is often the preserve of the patriarch in many traditional family homes. The chair is placed behind the patient, out of their sight lines. The patient thus encounters the therapist not eye to eye, as an equal, but as a disembodied, god-like voice.

In theory, this distance is required because the analyst's role

is to be a blank canvas on to which the patients can project their fantasies, so that they can be explored. Likewise, the analytic space itself should be as neutral as possible, so that nothing intrudes on the patient's free association. So, for instance, there are no family pictures or anything too personal on display.

Yet no space can be entirely neutral. The office or budget-hotel Ikea-chic of some rooms frames the patient's expectations as surely as the cosy homeliness of others. One tells the patient to expect a clinical, business-like encounter; the other emphasises that this is an emotional dialogue between two human beings. The visible presence of a box of tissues in several rooms also sends the message that crying is not only allowed but perhaps expected. Patients are being primed to emote.

What these pictures do not reveal is how the rooms are lit during sessions, which can change the atmosphere significantly. If the analysts were to follow Freud's example, the rooms would be dimly lit. While this may be thought to avoid distraction, some patients may find the darkness more intrusive than light.

Thurber therefore seems right when she says that each room has its own "undeniable energy" and functions as "a third participant in the analytic process". Given that the room's character must reflect something of the analyst, would it be possible, sensible even, to choose your analyst on the basis of their room?

The idea is not as peculiar as it might sound. After all, psychoanalysis is premised on the idea that we reveal ourselves at least as much by indirect and unconscious – as by direct and conscious – communication. The evidence suggests that the success of therapy is often as much to do with the particular relationship between therapist and client as the precise kind of therapy on offer. And you can probably tell by looking which couch you are most likely to feel comfortable lying on. ►

Antonia Macaro and Julian Baggini write "The Shrink & The Sage" column for FT Weekend Magazine



Brookline, MA: hospital office with blue fabric couch



Brookline, MA: office with native American wall hanging



Cambridge, MA: office with black leather couch and bentwood chair



Buenos Aires: office with floor-to-ceiling window and sheer curtains



Andover, MA: office with chartreuse analyst's chair and floral wall print



Lexington, MA: office with two plush orange patients' chairs



Cambridge, MA: office with green fabric couch and brown leather analyst's chair



Brookline, MA: office with oriental rug on wall



Arlington, MA: office with red window curtain and small statuettes



Boston, MA: analyst's chair with a painting of a crooked house



Buenos Aires: green plush analyst's chair with embroidered antimacassar



Auburndale, MA: office with blue antique couch and brown leather analyst's chair