I argue for the notion that we reserve the term boundary for the psychic realm because the psychic boundaries of psychoanalysis are so fundamentally complex, dense, and intrinsically confusing that bringing in the realm of behavioral ethical violations is actually unnecessarily vague and mystifying. The notion of a psychological boundary as a term in psychoanalytic work is a fragile, metaphoric construction that allows us to explore fantasy, affect, symbols, and elements of shared and unique realities. Psychoanalysis hinges on a social compact by patients and analysts to open up otherwise forbidden territory offered through this metaphoric construction. Rather than conflate forensic vocabulary ("violation") with a central psychic concept for conducting psychoanalytic work ("boundary"), I suggest that we refer to ethical misconduct in more straightforward conventional terms such as misconduct (behavioral referents) or with specific psychological understandings of the many determinants of this behavior that we have available to us as psychoanalysts.

The notion of a psychological boundary as a term in psychoanalytic work is a fragile, metaphoric construction that allows us to explore fantasy, affect, symbols, and elements of shared and unique realities. Psychoanalysis hinges on a social compact by patients and analysts to open up otherwise forbidden territory offered through this metaphoric construction. I would like to raise some questions about what I regard as the problematic extension of the psychic boundary concept to describe breaches in ethical behavior and sexual misconduct. On a pragmatic level, I believe that psychoanalysts are likely the most capable group to describe the myriad of reasons that lead to sexual misconduct. Instead, through the use of the term boundary violation we have compromised perhaps the most pivotal and rich metaphoric construct for working in psychoanalysis (i.e., the boundary concept) and conflated it with forensic discourse, which in turn undermines our capacity to explore psychic phenomena.

I make a case for the notion that we reserve the term boundary for the psychic realm because the psychic boundaries of psychoanalysis are so fundamentally complex, dense, and intrinsically confusing that bringing in the realm of behavioral ethical violations is actually unnecessarily vague and mystifying. We know that there is an invisible or barely visible boundary that divides everyday life from the particular frame of psychoanalytic work and that this boundary is crossed when analysts break from sexual abstinence. Yet I believe that we already have and need to
develop more precise ways to describe sexual misconduct than with the always shifting metaphor of psychic boundaries and borders.

A NOTE ON THE PSYCHIC BOUNDARY CONCEPT

The art that Freud invented is what I think of as a kind of boundary art (Cooper, in press). The word boundary is itself a most complex word, given Freud's fundamental understanding of the unconscious as the driver of our own dissemblance and not knowing.

I value the term boundary for its beauty, folly, and ambitously playful invitation to distort through illusions what we think we know that we don’t really know. The term itself reflects the need we have as humans to earnestly, humorously, and sometimes pathetically locate where we are when we really don’t know where we are. We put down stakes on a lonely and tiny frontier in a universe that is utterly indifferent to us, one that subjects each of us to an uncertain fate at an uncertain time. Boundaries help us to manage this overwhelming existential reality by creating illusions to facilitate speaking to each other about what we think we are saying that we cannot fully know we are saying.

Boundaries are shared illusions about what belongs to us and what belongs to the other. In psychoanalysis, we locate intrinsically blurry denotations with terms such as fantasy, reality, self states, and transference. Boundaries are a part of how we play with our knowing and not knowing, our illusions, and our sadness about our limitations in knowing. Boundaries are pretend play words (omnipotent fantasies) about thinking that we own or are owned by a powerful other. The word itself allows us to think that we know the difference between self and other or the demarcation and coordinates between inside and outside. We are, in a sense, akin to small children saying that this is mine and that is yours through our use of the term boundary.

Boundary, in these senses of the word, involves as much verb as noun and is not unlike the word play, which while sometimes used as a noun is best understood as an activity. In fact, the concepts of boundary and play are nearly impossible to use without reference to each other psychoanalytic work.

In beginning psychoanalysis, we are asking our patients to live outside the law in an unconventional terrain, one that loosens the rules of social and discursive engagement, in which we take liberties about translating what someone is saying that he doesn’t know that he is saying. This kind of translation was captured by Dylan’s (1983) words “license to kill” as he described the destruction and creativity of what poetry achieves and how poetry works then. It is an artistic act to do the translating of psychoanalysis, as well as the type of communicating that occurs in psychoanalysis. This living outside the law is captured by the notion of analyst as a boundary artist and analysis as a kind of therapeutic art.

In an essay entitled “The Wilderness of Childhood,” Michael Chabon (2009) discussed a very disturbing shift in our very idea of childhood in which adventure is itself no longer valued by our society in the way that it once was. The wilderness of the outdoor life in suburbs is now occupied by neighbors, and for many children, scheduled activities have replaced unstructured time. In some ways, the adventures of saying what comes to mind are also minimized by our culture now. As Chabon wisely pointed out, one of the best ways to get to know a geographical place is to get lost in it a few times, really lost. I like this as an analogy to the notion of getting
lost with our minds. As we get lost, our moorings or sense of psychic boundary is often changed and confused as patients and sometimes as analysts.

David Foster Wallace (2009) said that the purpose of fiction is to give the reader, "marooned in his own skull," access to the lives and minds of other selves: the analytic patient associates, opens things up, and temporarily gets lost in order to gain access to other elements of his own selfhood. The abstract expressionist painter Richard Diebenkorn (1993) suggested that he sought to "find an image that is more mine than the thought I had in my head" (p. 1). The contemporary painter Amy Sillman (2014) described painting as devotion to a process of transformation.

As a boundary artist, the psychoanalyst maintains positions in various aspects of psychic boundaries but is always trying to be aware of our tendency to become overly concrete in our ways of talking about boundaries. Since the particular border of everyday life and rules of engagement in the framework of analysis is always a threat to be crossed in the imagination of the patient and analyst, and because it has been repeatedly crossed in the history and mythology of our everyday lives, it is easy for our imaginative capacities to become truncated. Repeated actual ethical transgressions and the threat of such can easily make us lose sight of the artistry of the psychoanalyst as a boundary artist.

The concretization and distortion of the term boundary as it has been used in the pseudo-psychological and forensically tinged term "boundary violation" is the subject of what follows.

WHY DO WE REFER TO SEXUAL MISCONDUCT WITH PATIENTS AS "BOUNDARY VIOLATION"?

For a number of years, I have been trying to figure out why the term boundary violation bothers me. With all due respect to my esteemed colleagues who are experts in the study of sexual misconduct, I want to think through why the recent habit (circa 1989 but with references as early as Stone, 1976) of referring to sexual misconduct in psychoanalysis as a "boundary violation" might be problematic. I argue that since "boundaries" are fragile metaphor constructions essential in our psychoanalytic work, the tendency to concretize them in pragmatic forensic discourse undermines our capacity to explore psychic phenomena. One might even say that by reducing the metaphor of boundaries so insistently to a single behavioral referent—"sexual boundary violations"—we "violate" another boundary that is constitutive of psychoanalysis itself: the implicit psychic boundaries related to the concept of transference.

The problem is that in our moral pragmatic discourse we have created what might be termed, to borrow a phrase from Bion (1959), a false "constant conjunction" between the term boundary and the term violation. This is not just a semantic issue. When the "boundary" metaphors that are implicit in our work are transformed into a major piece of jargon in our lexicon, one that supposedly designates precise behavioral entities and coordinates, something fundamental about the psychoanalytic way of thinking is compromised and potentially lost in confusion.

In the art of psychoanalytic work, psychical boundaries involve processes, not things. Analytic work tries to gain purchase on the ways that patients and analysts play in the virtual realm of psychic boundaries, including how these boundaries are understood and misunderstood. The insistent and very concrete references to behavioral boundaries in our discourse tend to obfuscate this virtual dimension by fostering the impression that boundaries are literal and stable entities. I chaff against this "category confusion" because, while there is no such thing as a
psychic boundary, there is a line that should not be crossed with reference to having actual sex with patients.

My wish is to wrest the term *psychic boundary* from its frequent companion, *violation*, because it adds to already precarious and always shifting metaphors of psychic boundaries and psychic borders in clinical work. In a sense it is the most general and vague way to describe these problems and often inaccurate as well except at the most general level of description, one in which all illegal actions of one person against another involve a “boundary” crossing (e.g., murder or theft).

There is a problematic way that our language about psychic boundaries, juxtaposed to sexual boundary violations, involves a taming of the radical enterprise of psychoanalysis. The discursive shift of the essential, *implicit* boundary concept to the explicit and concrete behavioral dimension reflects not only the danger of sexual stimulation and intimacy in the analytic situation but also anxiety for all of us about loss of control in general in the analytic enterprise. The problematic aspects of referring to actual behavioral ethical violations as boundary violation is in my view indicative of problems of technique and analytic sensibility that I try spell out.

It is important to keep in mind that even behavioral boundaries are fluid constructs, no less so than—and always confluent with—psychic boundaries. For example, the use of explicit sexual language in the psychoanalytic dialogue is not necessarily “sexual harassment” of the patient, though of course it may become a form of enactment within the work. Yet with regard to the analyst’s behavior, it is indeed possible and in my view necessary to draw a stark and simple line beyond which ethical misconduct is empirically defined for practical purposes. The discourse of “sexual boundary violations” piggybacks on this pragmatic, expedient definition of sexual misconduct, giving rise to the impression that psychic boundaries are also “clear and distinct,” when in fact all human boundaries, psychic and/or behavioral, are always negotiated and always shifting in the analytic relationship.

Sexual relationships with psychoanalytic patients are unethical. There are many reasons that analysts engage in sexual relationships with patients, and these have been well explored by psychoanalytic authors (e.g., Celenza, 2007; Celenza & Gabbard, 2003; Gabbard, 1994, 2008). However, in referring to sexual activity with patients also in terms of boundaries, thus importing preestablished borders and false precision into the analytic situation, we minimize the unique aspects of the treatment that we provide and we externalize elements of our psychic responsibility as analysts.

When analysts have sex with patients, they are not operating within the basic contract and set of ideals that mark psychoanalytic work—that psychic boundaries will be discovered and understood through the analytic process. The concept of sexual boundary violation jumps from this psychical exploration and discovery of psychic boundary into inevitably moralistic and behavioral judgments. These judgments are intrinsic to and essential to maintaining ethical standards in the conduct of analytic work, but they do not involve the basic work approach to explore psychic boundaries at the heart of the analytic enterprise. Without this work, there can be no meaningful talk of psychic “boundaries,” and so it is vital that this work not be conflated with preestablished rules of ethical behavior.

One could argue that we need a general term to refer to ethical misconduct in analytic work. I would suggest that if we are not going to use our significant tools to describe the specific nature of ethical misconduct—and there is a time and place for that, but not in more general or public discourse—in more general discourse, the term *ethical misconduct* works
fine. The term *ethical misconduct* brooks no nonsense with potential ambiguity and is not a piece of jargon that confuses outsiders to our profession. The term *ethical misconduct* also preserves our valued concept of boundary for the psychical realm and offers the requisite lack of specificity that many seek in general discourse for reasons of protecting colleagues, preserving privacy and the like.

I am concerned that the use of *boundary* as standardized jargon in the context of sexual misconduct is part of a particular kind of distortion of what we do and do not have control of in relation to psychic mechanisms and psychic functioning. Aesthetics come into play because, in my view, the concept of psychic boundary involves the workable artistic function of the analyst as a boundary artist. The literal use of the term *boundary* to "theorize" sexual misconduct unwittingly drains its implicit source in the radical, aesthetic, and artistic challenge of working in Freud's "playground" of psychic boundaries. The literal concept of a violation of a boundary that is sexual compels retreat from the underlying complexity inherent in any notion of boundaries in psychic life, as I have been describing. If Freud and Klein taught us anything, and they taught us a great deal, it is that in thinking about the concept of boundary, we have to begin with the notion that a boundary is always rooted in a fantasy.

That in psychoanalytic work we are talking about virtual realities, fantasies, and liminal phenomena is easily lost in the pragmatic language of ethics discourse. I want to say in advance that I am going to take on what at first glance appears to be a very small matter about the way we use language, and I'm going to amplify it for discursive purposes. I focus on some particular words from my colleague Glen Gabbard, who has been at the forefront of exploring what he refers to as the analyst's ethical boundary violations. I do so in order to provide a critique of this usage. I do not mean to minimize his significant contributions to understanding unethical behavior among our colleagues. I suspect that he might agree with the point I want to make, but our words matter, particularly since the notion of psychic boundaries is so central to the art of psychoanalysis.

For example, in a discussion of Goldberg (2008), who questions the concept of "boundary violation" in a somewhat different angle than I do, Gabbard (2008) made the following intriguing statement: "Paradoxically, the boundaries that we set up in the analytic setting are established so that both participants have the possibility of crossing them psychologically" (p. 878). He provided as examples of boundary crossing "familiar modes of crossing the semipermeable membrane constructed by the analytic dyad, introjection, projective identification and empathy" (p. 870).

I believe that Gabbard was trying here to distinguish between the use of *boundary* as related to behavior versus uses of the term *psychic boundary* that relate to unconscious mechanisms and fantasy. Psychic boundaries relate to the intrinsic confusion of human communication about what is inside and outside and what is self and other. He was referring to the basic concept of sexual abstinence as what allows us to do our work, an unassailably logical argument and, in my view, an absolute prerequisite to analytic work.

Yet there is something that is subtly quite blurry and thus provocative about Gabbard's understanding of the analyst's power in his description here. I think that I know what he might intend to mean when he says that sexual abstinence is what "allows" the patient and analyst to "cross boundaries psychologically." I believe that what he means to say is that we have the possibility of understanding these psychic processes with the patient in analytic work. But what
does the phrase mean—that we "allow" to cross psychic boundaries expressed through uncon-
scious mechanisms of projective identification, identification, and empathy?

It is likely that Gabbard’s intention is to suggest that the creation of the frame itself (that kind
of boundary) allows us to notice, explore, and make use of processes of projective identification
and empathy. But I focus on the way that he puts it because it expresses a problem that we as
psychoanalysts continually enact related to the borders of what we do and do not control in the
analytic arrangement. His phrasing implies that psychic phenomena such as empathy, projective
identification, or enactment are forms of boundary crossing. I think that within an intersubjective
view of psychology, it is very misleading to think of them in this way.

In contrast to Gabbard’s formulation, I would say, alternatively, that projective identification
exists as a need that humans have “as deep as hunger and thirst” (Ogden, 2004, p. 173). Unless
we begin with a notion that self and other are clearly differentiated from the outset—a very
dubious assumption—we should assume that empathy and projective identification occur natu-
really. Moreover, the psychic boundaries that we co-create with patients, or encounter, will in all
likelihood be artifacts of these very same processes of introjection, empathy, and projective
identification that the putative “analytic boundaries” allegedly make possible.

Psychoanalysts set up rules about sexual abstinence in the analytic situation to provide real
and illusory experiences of safety, ideals held by professional organizations that the analyst
belongs to about the invasive procedure of psychoanalysis. These rules allow us to look at
psychological processes that are not really acknowledged in conventional discourse.
Psychoanalysts simply construct a situation that allows us to understand the embedded complex-
ity of psychic boundaries.

Conventional discourse enacts the processes of projective identification, empathy, and identi-
fication. Humor is funny because we are putting ideas into the other person that are fundamen-
tally culturally forbidden or uncontrollable related to aggression, hypocrisy, longings, repulsion,
shame, rage, and so on. Projective identification and empathy, transference and countertransfer-
ence, are not reflections of our invitation for boundary crossing in psychoanalysis. Instead, they
reflect the ways in which minds communicate in intersubjective patterns that in psychoanalysis
we try to fleetingly understand. These processes of human communication are generally not
really acknowledged in conventional discourse, yet they are the foundational principles upon
which psychoanalysis works. For we can’t understand what people are telling us that they don’t
know they are telling us without our empathic capacities and attunement to projective
identification.

What we do invite is an opportunity for patients to talk about whatever comes to mind, to
psychically shed their clothes, and to discuss things that we are taught from childhood not to
discuss with others. These processes are not something that the analyst is involved in offering,
controlling, or approving. Instead, these processes are embedded in human communication. We
do not approve them or make them possible. We use them.

These messages to our patients about heightened expressiveness in the context of behavioral
restraint are, as Modell (1991) described, paradoxical in nature, and sexual abstinence helps
therapists to cope with implicit paradox in the structural arrangements of psychoanalysis.
Paradox exists between the rule of sexual abstinence in the framework of treatment and another
boundary between everyday life in which abstinence is not required, even if sometimes advised
depending on the social context. Describing our needs to cope with paradoxical and impossibly
complex elements of the analytic situation that we don’t create allows for a clearer statement
about the relationship between sexual abstinence and psychic communication that we have no control over. As I said earlier, I imagine that Gabbard would agree with this formulation, but I draw attention to these words because these ways of thinking permeate all of our analytic thinking and may enact ways that we try to control matters that we have no control over in the context of our impossible profession.

By characterizing psychic phenomena such as projective identification as crossings of boundaries set up by the analyst, or which only the analyst understands, we are potentially involved in a particular kind of professional enactment—the conscription of naturally occurring human communication patterns into the service of the analyst’s sense of control and dominance. In other words, we enact a kind of disavowed claim for control over things that we do not control. So, for example, aspects of relationships, analytic and otherwise, in which we are all submerged become analytic techniques, as if the analyst is now “using” these rather than submerged in them and trying to understand what is happening. That both people are submerged in the process is not to say that there is absolute mutuality or symmetry; I think that there is a great deal of asymmetry in our roles, and presumably the analyst is in a better position than the patient to make sense of what is happening. Bass (2001) argued that asymmetry in roles is relatively distinct from asymmetry of psychic experience.

Why did we ever go in the direction of referring to engaging in sex with patients as a boundary violation? To be sure, we need a general way to refer to our colleagues’ difficulties and unethical conduct in ways that are general and nonspecific when discussing these matters in public discourse. If we know that someone has engaged in what we commonly refer to as a “boundary violation,” what would be lost by simply using everyday language such as ethical misconduct? Are we worried that it sounds judgmental? In this instance to me it sounds factual and not obfuscating. As colleagues we all want to be on the side of helping our colleagues, not isolating them from the rest of us, making them feel worse than they often do about what has occurred. But we also have a responsibility to not use language that we rely on to describe psychical complexity and extend it to the realm of behavior and forensic levels of discourse.

I actually see it as a form of abstraction and defense on the part of the analytic community—a shying away from the very specific ways that we are uniquely qualified to describe unethical sexual misconduct. We use our strong capacities for formulations to describe the pathology and regressive elements of our patients, but in describing our colleagues, who deserve our compassion, we offer to the community a level of confusing abstraction. By referring to unethical sexual conduct as a boundary violation, I believe that despite our collective and justified alarm with regard to sexual misconduct and the need to protect patients from such actions, our vocabulary helps us to unwittingly protect ourselves from our responsibility to offer more incisive understandings or in instances when we simply want to refer to ethical breaks in more general ways simply as unethical behavior.

I suspect that some of the problems that I have detailed about how we describe naturally occurring psychic phenomena as part of our technique are even more pronounced when sexual misconduct is involved in the discussion of boundary crossing. I think that it is safe to say that analysts, like all human beings, are frightened and anxious about their own sexuality and that of others. It is not by accident that this unjustified conscription of technique about psychical boundaries to the power and authority of the analyst is made by many of us, because I believe that it unconsciously works to titrate the analyst’s anxiety about an area that, along with death, is
the most anxiety-producing area of work in psychoanalysis. It seems to me that to be open to our patient's sexuality and all elements of projective identification, including anger and wishes for merger, and the analyst’s projective identification too, involves a recognition that we often, if not always, ask our patients to submit to our own comfort levels and thresholds for listening to affect and fantasy. We are bound to accept this more directly than to create a construction of technique in which we make inaccurate claims about what we allow and don't allow.

Each of us as analysts is required to know what we allow and don’t allow as it relates to behavior. We also know that we are engaged in a similar conscious and unconscious communication to our patients about what we can tolerate regarding expressiveness of sexual desire and hostility. I have been aware of how I’ve conveyed my own limits to patients with strong erotic interests or strong angry feelings, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes to good effect and sometimes in ways that were constraining for the patient.

We are all guilty of the conscription or sliding of elements of communication, such as projective identification, into a technical framework (e.g., referring to it as a matter of technique) that we call psychoanalysis. In other words, we are all subject to developing descriptions of technique that involve subtle shifts to safety in the service of control and reduction of anxiety. The use of the term *boundary violation* to refer to sexual misconduct reflects an understandable dialectical collapse in the face of anxiety over transgression. I fear that it also makes the incredibly demanding artistry of our use of psychic boundaries for our work as analysts a potential cover for our ethical failures.

We all fear the wilderness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Charles Levin for several thorough readings of this paper in earlier forms and some very helpful editorial suggestions.

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