

Truth-seeking and its Discontents

Programme

The sessions of this virtual conference will consist of concise presentations and discussions between the Speakers, Discussants, Chairs, and Delegates. The aim is a working model within which to frame the enquiries necessary to further understand interactions of overwhelming complexity.

Friday 9 July 2021

16.45 Online Registration

17.00 Welcome and Introduction

David Taylor (British Psychoanalytical Society, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, University College London, UK) and Liz Allison (British Psychoanalytical Society, University College London, UK)

17.15 Session 1 – Truth-Seeking or Truth-Avoiding in Clinical Settings

Chaired by David Taylor

This session provides descriptions of relevant clinical phenomena further considered by hugely experienced clinicians who work in different settings with individuals at different points in life cycles with differing trajectories. The presentations will be followed by a discussion between the Speakers with a contribution from Michael Feldman (British Psychoanalytical Society, UK) as a Discussant and from Delegates.

What we learn from child psychotherapy about a drive to seek understanding of ourselves and our world. What impedes it or facilitates it?

Margaret Rustin (British Psychoanalytical Society, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, UK) and Alex Datnow (Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, UK)

Thoughts on an adolescent's lockdown state of mind

Catalina Bronstein (British Psychoanalytical Society and University College London, UK)

Deception or Dissociation in Forensic Cases?

Carine Minne (British Psychoanalytical Society and Royal College of Psychiatrists, UK)

19.15 Virtual drinks reception



Saturday 10 July 2021

10.45 Online Registration

11.00 Film Screening – *Chasing the Revolution: Marie Langer, Psychoanalysis and Society*

Marie Langer was a refugee from Anschluss Austria who went on to become a foundational figure in the Latin American psychoanalytic establishment, and a critic of what she saw as self-deception in the relationship of psychoanalysis with societal and political conditions and injustices. This film by Lily Ford focuses on Langer in the early 1970s. It raises the question of how such social conditions impact on the practice of psychoanalysis with its necessary basis in the values of freedom of thought, of speech, and of open debate.

The film will be followed by a panel discussion between Virginia Ungar (Buenos Aires Psychoanalytic Association, Argentina), Jeanne Wolff-Bernstein (Wiener Arbeitskreis für Psychoanalyse, Austria) and Lily Ford (The Derek Jarman Lab, Birkbeck University of London, UK).

13.00 Lunch break

13.30 Session 2 – Have We Evolved to Seek the Truth? Perspectives from Developmental Science

Chaired by Chloe Campbell (Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and University College London, UK)

In this session, Peter Fonagy and George Gergely will present empirical research findings and research inspired thinking on the role of social relationships and the experience of being understood in opening our minds to new knowledge, the evolutionary importance of shared beliefs about truth, and the implications of these ideas for our understanding of how authority and communities of knowledge are established and undermined.

They will discuss the factors that impede the development of epistemic trust (the ability to absorb new knowledge with an understanding of its relevance for the group or individual), and the consequences of epistemic abuse, when apparently prosocial behaviour masks a self-serving agenda. They will reflect on how these developmental considerations might inform our understanding of contemporary phenomena such as fake news and the spread of conspiracy theories.

Their presentations will be complemented by Ronald Britton's clinical description of how experiences and expectations of being understood or misunderstood that have been internalised in the course of infancy and childhood manifest themselves in adult subjectivity.

Are humans seekers of truth or seekers of shared beliefs? An evolutionary and developmental perspective

György Gergely (Central European University in Vienna, Austria and Budapest, Hungary, and Hungarian Psychoanalytical Society)

The constitution of knowledge: The internet and the epistemic crisis of the 21st Century

Peter Fonagy (University College London and Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, UK)

Chaos: Destruction or creation?

Ronald Britton (British Psychoanalytical Society, UK)

15.00 Break

15.45 Session 3 – Reflections on Truth in Politics

Chaired by Liz Allison

Hannah Arendt wrote 'Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings'. She also suggested that the ability to deny factual truth is linked to the human capacity for imagination. Arendt noted the persistence of political lying across the ages: particular forms of state could facilitate their transmission, or overwhelm the capacity to discern the difference between fact and fiction. She pointed both to universal and contingent factors at work in the realm of 'alternative facts'. This session revisits these and other perspectives on truth-telling, lies and political dissent. We will look at analyses of mass psychology, fake news, conspiracy theory, and paranoid political thought. We will reflect on the relevance of these ideas for our present times.

Truth, Lies and Captive Minds: Lessons from the Cold War

Daniel Pick (British Psychoanalytical Society and Birkbeck College, UK)

Mass Psychology Today: A Response

Eli Zaretsky (New School for Social Research, New York, USA)

17.15 Final Plenary and Closing Reflections

Michael Rustin (Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, UK) will comment on the ideas the Conference has offered and will suggest what further work might lead to helpful remedy. Liz Allison will conclude with an overview.

18.00 Virtual drinks reception