

## 1NWRPA Newsletter November 2021

### Special Event – Meet the Author

#### The Autistic Subject: On the Threshold of Language

Dr Leon S Brenner

Friday 12 November 2021

#### Summary by Frank Kelley

Leon is a founder of Lacanian Affinities Berlin (laLAB) and Unconscious Berlin, and a lecturer at the International Psychoanalytic University in Berlin. His website is, <https://leonbrenner.com/>

*The Autistic Subject: On the Threshold of Language* was published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2020.

In his Zoom talk Dr Leon S. Brenner described autism as a singular mode of being that is fundamentally linked to one's identity and basic practices of existence, offering a rigorous alternative to the prevailing treatment of autism as a mental or physical disorder. He outlined the unique features of the autistic subjective structure and provided a comprehensive synthesis of contemporary work on the psychoanalysis of autism.

Leon has read a lot of biographies of autistic subjects. They talk of a sense of selfhood where autism is an essential trait of their humanity. *Neurotypical* is a term that's used by these authors to describe individuals with typical neurological development or functioning. The terms *neurotypical*, *neurodivergent*, and *neurodiverse* are a more comprehensive way to describe autism.

Leon believes both this activist and the conventional medical view of autism constitute a dual misrecognition. He hopes to fill this gap with his training which is Freudian and Lacanian.

The word autism first took its modern sense in 1938 when Hans Asperger of the Vienna University Hospital adopted Bleuler's terminology *autistic psychopaths*. It was often confused with infantile schizophrenia and was not widely recognized as a separate diagnosis until 1981. Leo Kanner of the Johns Hopkins Hospital first used autism in its modern sense in English when he introduced the label *early infantile autism* in 1943. All the characteristics described in Kanner's first paper such as *autistic aloneness* and *insistence on sameness* are still regarded as typical of the autistic spectrum of disorders.

The American Psychiatric Association publishes the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This lists symptoms and talks of of lower and higher functioning and adaptive traits. This medical picture does not have a clear effect on treatment.

*Life, Animated* is a 2016 American documentary by director Roger Ross Williams and based on journalist Ron Suskind's 2014 book *Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism*. He tells the story of his son, Owen Suskind, who was diagnosed with autism at the

age of three and learned how to communicate with the outside world through his love of Disney films.

In one example Ron puts a blanket over his head and imitates the voice of the Disney actor Gilbert Gottfried. At bedtime he asks eight year old Owen how he feels and he says sad. By age twenty Owen had found a way to communicate through animated films.

The conventional idea is that development happens at a particular age. In this view Autism is a permanently missed developmental opportunity,

There have been psychoanalytic ideas about autism beginning with Freud and Bruno Bettelheim and developed by the Kleinians Esther Bick and Frances Tustin. Bettelheim talked of an *empty fortress* and a *moment of extreme helplessness there is no escape from*. Tustin developed the view of autism as a defensive encapsulation or shell. Activists have campaigned against these ideas, particularly against the view that autism is a result of a *freezer mother*.

There is a Lacanian distinction between object and subject. The subject evades objectification. For Lacan the autistic subject refuses to take an *annunciative role*. This role is at the level of language but has no content. It establishes communication between speaker and listener. An example is the military radio term *Rodger*.

Babies have instinctual demands which are not completely met. The infants are very resourceful and have to adopt a language which their caretakers recognise. These communications exist before the baby. The baby has an experience of lack. This is communicated by a cry that does not encompass the experience of lack.

The autistic child refuses to take on the language of the caretaker and does not take on a position in relation to the caretaker. They can avoid eye contact, only cry sporadically and use babbling which conveys little.

Autistic subjects, in the main, want to be part of the social world but are not willing to use the language of the caretaker to convey bodily states. The autistic baby is initiated into language but goes a different way.

Many autistic people have an idiosyncratic language. They have a unique mode of access to language and have their own treatments for their own suffering. Amanda Banks is fairly non verbal and communicates through writing and is a great blogger.

Leon described the *Dynamic Clinic* where the protective treatment moves to a level of more openness. It is not teaching; the staff are following children. The children purposefully chose objects, often in the way other children do. The more children and the more staff the better. With trial and error the child will make more versatile protections which change as they develop. They use language associated with objects both defensively and also for pleasure.

**Thank you to Dr. Leon S Brenner** for an engaging seminar which opened our eyes to a creative and helpful way of thinking about autism which is also useful in all our kinds of therapeutic work.

Our member Saujal Acharya enjoyed Leon's seminar and shared these links to a couple of different podcasts featuring Leon which he mentioned during our session last month.

[InForm 040 Autism & Psychoanalysis w/ Dr. Leon Brenner | InForm:Podcast \(transistor.fm\)](#)

[Rendering Unconscious – Podcast hosted by psychoanalyst Dr. Vanessa Sinclair](#)

He also shares the story of Owen Suskind Leon mentioned in his talk. He found this documentary a fascinating watch. The approach developed by Owen's father, Ron became synonymous with Affinity Therapy. Saujal hopes you find it useful.

[Life\\_Animated\\_2016.mkv - Google Drive](#)