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Images and Words in the Clinic of Autism

Dr Leon S Brenner

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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.

Dr Leon S. Brenner spoke to us on the subject of his book in November 2021. In that previous seminar he described autism as a singular mode of being that is fundamentally linked to one's identity and basic practices of existence. He offered 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.

We wanted to know more and Leon offered this follow up seminar.

For psychoanalysis the human subject is a speaking subject. Babies are born too organically inadequate to survive. 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.

For Freud the castration complex is a refusal to enter language at this early stage. In the Lacanian view language is a system of signifiers and autism a refusal to enter language. This refusal is experienced as a moment of extreme helplessness.

Unlike most accounts of autism this Lacanian view is not strictly developmental but usually precedes the formation of the ego.

Babies have basic vocal articulations from babbling onwards. This kind of sign is a sensory unit and is part of a signifying unit. We met days after a change of the British Monarch. This gave Leon an example of sign and signifier. The sign, this sensory form, in this case is the head of a Monarch on currency. The signifying unit is all the references connected with this sign of a head of a Monarch. A signifier is not in isolation, they form chains of signifiers. Imagine all the references you can think of starting from the Monarch's head; currency, systems of government, republicanism, previous deaths of Monarchs and so on and so on.

With autism signifying units are rigid. For example it will be hard to grasp that a pig and a sow are in the same category. The non-autistic person will see all chickens as birds. For some signs there is no concrete reference in the world. An example is the word *peace*. Even

an autistic genius mathematician cannot grasp *infinity*. Grasping symbolic objects like *honesty* can only be done with more concrete signs, for example the act of returning a lost wallet. One autistic person gathers pictures of dogs in date order to approximate the abstract term *dog*. This kind of categorisation could be termed *pseudo abstract*.

The presence or absence of access to language is also the presence or absence of access to a social bond. There is a Lacanian term *dialectisation* about signifiers that have a disproportionate effect and stop the chain of signifiers. These are closer to iconic signs than signifiers.

An autistic artist created a montage of clay figures which encoded the theme of birthday. This links to the artist's anxiety at being at a birthday party. The figures are non-elements which do not touch each other. Creating this work of art helped her connect with the other people in her life.

Picture Exchange Communications (PEC) is a communication system developed in the USA in 1985 by Andy Bondy and Lori Frost. It is based on behavioural principles. While different in theoretical underpinnings to a Lacanian approach, you can see how the practice would fit with Leon's conception of autism.

With PEC a person gives a single picture of a desired item or action to a communicative partner who immediately honours the exchange as a request. The system goes on to teach discrimination of pictures and how to put them together in sentences. In the more advanced phases individuals are taught to use modifiers, answer questions and comment. The primary goal of PEC is to teach functional communication.

Thank you to Dr. Leon S Brenner for an intriguing seminar. He offered us a creatively different view of autistic subjectivity. This Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective is helpful in understanding autism and useful in therapeutic work.