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Angela Kreeger: Subject of the miracle of modern medicine and psychoanalysis.

Blog post, September 2022 URL <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/educational-studies-blog/angela-kreeger-subject-of-the-miracle-of-modern-medicine-and-psychoanalysis/>

Introduction

It is a cold January Sunday afternoon in 2022, but Angela Kreeger's living room feels gorgeous. I am surrounded by walls covered beautifully with art, and I'm eating far too many slices of a delicious almond cake Angela has made.

Angela smiles at me, her eyes and being exuding the warmth and openness that anyone who has met her will be familiar with. Although her physical health could be better, you wouldn't know it by the vibrancy in her talk, and the intensity with which she listens to you.

Ever since I met her, several months ago now, I've wanted to interview her; to capture, as best I can, some of her wisdom and her experiences. I came to know her through a mutual friend, Andie Newman, who like Angela is a psychoanalyst and a member of the Site for Contemporary Psychoanalysis, which is a training organisation and a member of the [Council for Psychoanalysis and Jungian Analysis College \(CPJA\)](#) of the [United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy \(UKCP\)](#).

Although I have links with 'the Site' -- the name that people who are involved with the Site for Contemporary Psychoanalysis give it -- having spoken at one of its conferences, I met Angela informally at a dinner with Andie. It was at this relaxed occasion, I found myself sharing emotional details about my life with Angela because I felt so at ease, so listened to, so cared for. Angela has this effect upon many people because of her passion for them: her fascination for life shines out of her. Her effect upon me captivated me, and led me to want to know more. Although she talked a bit about her life and work in this first meeting, and subsequent ones, I felt I didn't know enough. I was intrigued to find out how Angela came to be who she is. How is it that she, above so many others, has this quality of listening, of holding people's vulnerabilities, of putting people at their ease?

The answers to these questions I found, to a certain extent, were in Angela's training and practice as a psychoanalyst. 'I have two things to thank for my life: the miracle of modern medicine and psychoanalysis,' she told me during the interview.

Training and Practice

Angela became a psychoanalyst relatively late in life. After gaining a First-Class degree as a mature student in sociology at Middlesex University, she joined the [Philadelphia Association \(PA\)](#) in 1991. She told me: 'I joined the PA immediately after I finished my degree, to do the introductory year, later joining the training proper and Passing (qualifying) in 1997. The Pass was a nerve-wracking experience because it involved getting the go ahead from my peers on the training and the Training Committee, then presenting a paper on a designated evening to

whoever is a member or trainee at the PA, and then getting voted on live during the evening to say whether or not I had Passed. Gulp! A trial and a test, and it indicated how I was absorbed into the company of the PA – sort of setting a tone for how one was perceived.’

The PA was founded by R.D. Laing and his colleagues in 1965, and promoted (and still does) Laing’s distinctive approach to psychoanalysis. In books like [The Divided Self \(1960\)](#) and [The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise](#) as well as in his own practice as a psychoanalyst, Laing argued that we need to understand the madness of modern family structures before pathologizing patients as insane. His approach, which was controversial when he was alive, has become increasingly mainstream and has spawned many off-shoots. In the following video, Angela explains how she came to train with the PA, and how and why she left it to become a member of ‘the Site’, which was established in part by [Haya Oakley](#) and her then husband [Chris Oakley](#), and others.

[embed]https://youtu.be/DQiv-S2Ba84[/embed]

Influences

A few major thinkers have influenced Angela’s practice. They are [Sigmund Freud](#), [R.D. Laing](#), [Jean Laplanche](#) and the US based academic and psychoanalyst [Agvi Saketopoulou](#), who has written and presented about Laplanche. Angela told me: ‘I started my first therapy in 1979. It helped me realise that I had agency in my life, and I know it was a successful piece of work. When I was at Middlesex I was introduced to Laing, which opened another door to me. It showed me that there was another way of doing psychoanalysis which wasn’t as conventional as I’d previously thought. My training at the PA helped me think about psychoanalysis as a philosophy rather than a ‘how to’ guide. I was encouraged to think critically about all the different theories I encountered, and come to my own conclusions.’

She explains [in the next video here](#) how Freud’s works were useful for her, not because he provided a clear guide about how to practice as a therapist, but because the reader of his work can see his thought processes, how he figures things out as he goes along. Angela sees his thought processes as Talmudic, in that Jewish scholars of the Talmud – the Jewish commentary on the Torah (Bible) – are constantly questioning and reflecting on interpretation of the Torah.

This, it seems to me, is the key to how Angela works: she is a questioning, intuitive, ‘allowing’ person who deeply listens, giving you the space for you to be what you want to be, to discover what you want, even in casual conversations. This approach Angela perceives as fundamentally Freudian. She explains: ‘Freud feels like a living, everyday experience. I can see what Freud was saying.’

Similarly important for Angela are the ideas of Laplanche and a modern interpreter of his theories, Saketopoulou. Laplanche/Saketopoulou emphasize the ‘enigmatic’ elements of human interactions, the ways in which much of what people communicate and feel is unknown to them and to other people. Their experiences are mysterious or enigmatic. Trauma, for many people, is simply ‘noise’ – sounds, feelings, bodily sensations which are untranslated into language. The process of psychoanalysis is to translate and retranslate this noise into words, stories, discoveries, investigations and questions, which can all become different ways of understanding one’s own unconscious.

Angela discusses these ideas here:

[embed]<https://youtu.be/wFHN4nSNJ3U>[/embed]

After Angela finished her training, she spent ‘a couple of years’ in the wilderness. She struggled without the safety net of the training. Although she had practised as a psychoanalyst during her training, she was not confident in the role: she lost more patients than joined. She said, ‘I was too focused upon myself. Was I doing it right? Was I saying the right thing? I should say, reflecting back, I feel I got it right more often than I got it wrong. Now I find it easier to forget myself whilst remembering myself. I’ve got better at it!’ She explains what happened here:

[embed]<https://youtu.be/NV0so5FwOVk>[/embed]

Breaking the Cycle

Much of Angela’s work is about helping people understand or break out of repeated patterns of behaviour which can be destructive. This involves being with them as they come to understand the nature of their desires and difficulties. Something that Angela has done for herself.

Born in 1950, Angela grew up in London. She has faced many challenges in her life, but believes it’s important for her to keep her privacy; she is particularly mindful of her patients in this regard. She believes that the focus should be on them, not her, and therefore is reluctant to divulge much personal information publicly, although it should be noted she is very open about life to her friends.

Angela offers this eloquent explanation for her reticence about her personal life in the public realm. She says: ‘The analyst aims to be a ‘blank screen’ onto whom all manner of thoughts, ideas and fantasies can be projected – we call this transference. This mythical state is both useful and impossible. It’s useful because not only is transference a tool to understand how the patient inhabits their world with others, but also because being (aiming for) a blank screen doesn’t contaminate the ‘field’ qua the setting and parameters within which the work takes place; Laplanche calls this being ‘hollowed out’. It’s an impossible aim, particularly in the world in which we live, because no matter how much we are withheld, we leak all the time, if we know what we (analysts) are listening for. Red jumper today, blue next time. Is the room warm or cool? Have we tweeted? At the same time this quietude is both useful and busted. The analyst has a personality, has a life, and just as we know from our work with patients things may not be what they seem and there are moments when we know something (often called intuition but which is a form of gathered knowledge) though it’s unspoken – they give themselves away, similarly we give ourselves away too. Again. following Laplanche, if we remain (attempt to remain) enigmatic, this encourages the patient to think for themselves, and so the work of translation begins. Thankfully, no matter how much we leak, and I think I am probably very leaky, we always remain other.’

For many years she has had a supervisor – someone she would prefer to remain anonymous – whose ability to listen to her, to draw her out, to enable her to translate her own noise has been consistently miraculous. She told me: ‘My supervisor is now less supervisor, more analyst and through whom both my work and my life have been enhanced. He helps me currently bear the load I carry, reminding me of my zest for life. The two aspects of me

seeing him are that the balance varies between work and personal reflections, depending on how my life is going, but mostly now it's about me. But that enhances my work because if my head is in a good place, I'm freer to work. Having said that however, work is so interesting and absorbing and thought-provoking that just doing it has the power to return me to myself and that leads to good work. Me seeing him has been the most transformative experience of my life – the power of psychoanalysis and it's sequelae. It's been well over 20 years of conversation – back and forth, in and out.'

At the heart of Angela's story both in doing therapy and being a therapist is the concept that psychoanalysis can help people creatively transform their difficulties.

[embed]<https://youtu.be/KgZKVUmmBQ0>[/embed]

For Angela, psychoanalysis involves people searching for better ways of living. She says: 'Psychoanalysis can help a person live better according to what they consider, through analysis, a good life is. I have no idea, nor do I want to have, any idea of what a good life is for them – it's their life, not mine.'