

Interview with Steven Kuchuck: From Lisbon to New York

Paula Campos and Hélder Chambel



Steven Kuchuck is a psychoanalyst, psychotherapist and clinical consultant in private practice in New York City.

He is Editor-in-Chief of “Psychoanalytic Perspectives: An International Journal of Integration and Innovation”, Associate Editor of the Relational Perspectives Book Series, on the Board of Directors, supervisor and faculty at the National Institute for the Psychotherapies, contributor and Editor of “Clinical Implications of the Psychoanalyst’s Life Experience: When the Personal Becomes Professional” (2014) and co-editor of “The Legacy of Sandor Ferenczi: From Ghost to Ancestor” (2015). President of International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy (IARPP), 2018-2021.

Paula e Hélder - Psychoanalysis has evolved from 19th century to 21st century, from Freud to the present, passing through many different authors and schools, some providing tensions and conflicts about what is psychoanalysis and how to go forward. The “relation turn” gave us all a new ground to explore. Steven, what is psychoanalysis for you?

Steven - Ah, a very minor, “small” question to start us off LOL. Hmm...First, I appreciate how your question places the Relational turn in the context of Freud

to the present, numerous authors and schools, and that you note the conflicts that exist, as well. I suppose that for me, psychoanalysis is all of these theorists and orientations. The dialectical tensions that exist in our field between the various theories and their binaries - one person vs. two-person psychology, transference-countertransference, analyst containment vs. expressiveness and deliberate disclosure and so on deepen and enrich our work. The human psyche is far too complex to be able to assess and treat according to one or two theories only.

I believe that we do our best work by studying as many analytic - and probably even non analytic ways of working, and finding which of these orientations resonate most for each of us, with particular patients, etc. I don't want to be in the position of saying which theorists are "correct" and which are not any more than I think it useful to define psychoanalysis based on the number of weekly sessions or use of the couch. As long as we are thinking about the unconscious, transference-countertransference (and related, analyst-patient interaction and mutual impact), patient and analyst internal object worlds, the ways in which these objects become stirred and emerge via here and now interactions in the treatment room in order to work with dynamic patterns and resolve interpersonal conflicts and psychic pain, broadly speaking, for me, that is psychoanalysis.

Paula e Hélder - Freud is, for almost every one of us, the first reference; for some he's still the major reference, for some other, just the original one from which all has developed. What is the nature of your "relationship" with Freud?

Steven - Freud is all of those things and more, to me. He is the man who (albeit indirectly) helped to heal the men and women who did the same for me and via those personal and training analyses, led me to this life-enhancing career. He is my good father—more grandfather or great grandfather, I suppose, whose work made room for Grandfather Sandor Ferenczi, who gave us the Relational school and other forms of contemporary psychoanalysis via his patients Clara Thompson, Michael Balint and others. Freud is the internalized professional object who inspires and motivates me, whose strong hold I both celebrate and, in some ways, still try to pull away from to this day. For both better and worse, I believe—there's that dialectic I mentioned - Freud casts a long shadow.

Among my most prized possessions, by the way, are several original letters written and signed by Freud that I keep on my office bookshelf. His brilliant theories inform my work to this day. Still, like his patient and protégé Ferenczi, I wish the times and his character might have allowed for him to pass along a greater degree of loving kindness to a profession that until relatively recent times, has been saddled with more theoretical rigidity and intellectualization than has been good for it. As we know, he sometimes shared that warmth with his patients, but not as freely in his theory. And like all of us, he was a product of his era and had there been an option, might have benefited from additional treatment, as it were.

Paula e Hélder - In 2015, you co-edited with Adrienne Harris, a new edition of “The Legacy of Sandor Ferenczi”. Ferenczi was one of the “second generation” analysts with important new ideas, some of it in great tension with Freud’s theories. On account of this, his work was left away from the psychoanalytic “establishment” for many years (though his influence in different schools). This book is another important contribution for rediscovering Ferenczi’s ideas, namely his impact on the relational context. Why did you feel the need to gather knowledge about Ferenczi?

Steven - As I mentioned above, Ferenczi was really the first relational analyst although tragically for psychoanalysis—as you note—his ideas were banished from our field for over half a century. Because of that, analysts and therapists of all theoretical persuasions (and therefore, generations of patients) were deprived of theories and practice techniques that could have alleviated a great deal of suffering. Fortunately, ever since Adrienne, the late Lewis Aron, and other scholars rediscovered Ferenczi, psychoanalysis has been greatly enriched.

Adrienne and I both have an interest in psychoanalytic history and believe that we can gain a deeper understanding of theory when we better understand our profession’s rich foundations. We published our book in order to help trace the roots of relational psychoanalysis back to Ferenczi himself as well as his patients/students, but also in order to highlight and add to current relational scholarship as informed by Ferenczi and his proteges.

Paula e Hélder - “When the personal becomes professional” is the subtitle of another of your works (“Clinical Implications of the Psychoanalyst’s Life Experience”, 2013), which is already a “classic” of the relational contemporary thought. Freud’s neutrality (or freudism’s neutrality) seems far away from this perspective, where personal becomes professional. Doesn’t personal always become professional? What are the new boundaries here?

Steven - Freud and his colleagues, and later, especially his American Ego Psychology followers, believed that there was such a thing as correct psychoanalytic theory and technique. Remember, in those days, there was only one psychoanalytic theoretical orientation and its clinical treatment correlate. This “one size fits all” perspective stressed the belief that any properly trained psychoanalyst treating a patient could be replaced with any other correctly trained analyst and therefore produce the same intended results with that same patient. One of the golden rules was that the analyst must maintain neutrality—sometimes referred to as the blank screen upon which the patient would be free and able to project his or her full range of affects and fantasies, unencumbered by any of the analyst’s biases, protected from any attempts to depart from neutrality and instead gratify the patient’s—or analyst’s—desire for drive discharge and other psychic pressures.

From at least the mid-1980’s (with the birth of Relational psychoanalysis) on and earlier for some, many psychoanalysts began to actively challenge the notion that

neutrality was possible or if some attempt at it was achievable, suggested that it was not beneficial in any absolute form and, more likely, dangerous. This is where my 2013 book picks up—with this latter premise. But as I and many of the contributors to this volume explore, a number of analysts still believe that “allowing” the therapist’s subjectivity to enter the room (which of course I maintain is outside of a human being’s ability to control) seriously interferes with the clinician’s neutrality and is an indication that the therapist is not well analyzed enough or is practicing something other than “proper” psychoanalysis.

So this is a long approach to answering your specific questions. Yes—I and I suspect all Relational analysts believe that the personal—put another way, the personhood of the analyst or the analyst’s subjectivity is both inevitable in and if worked with successfully, enriching of every analytic treatment. As for the “new boundaries” as you ask, I’m not sure how to answer that in any kind of succinct-enough way here, though I do delve into that in the 2013 book and most if not all of my writing. My writing and teaching explore the consequences of historical—and for some, current-- prohibitions on being our more authentic selves and examines the numerous and inadvertent ways in which our subjectivities impact and are impacted by our patients.

Paula e Hélder - You gave some lectures on love and eroticism and the therapeutic action. How does love and eroticism are “played” in relational therapy? Which limitations are there? Which transformations are possible?

Steven - Yes, I’ve lectured on this and published several related articles available on PEP Web, as well as my chapter in the aforementioned Ferenczi book. In certain clinical situations, desire and arousal are significant components of the intersubjective field. My work in this area proceeds from that assumption and explores the impact of absent, violent, or otherwise unavailable fathers on their heterosexual sons and the resulting longing for male attention, admiration, and love. This longing—sometimes referred to in the literature as father hunger, often includes a need to be admired physically and romantically in ways their fathers could not provide. When this desire emerges in the treatment, the male analyst who experiences an erotic countertransference response and can manage potential anxiety and shame is in a unique position to provide the patient with these necessary supplies. In this respect, the romantic and/or erotic countertransference becomes an integral component of the therapeutic action.

Paula e Hélder - You have a new book “The Relational Revolution in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy”, to be published in the beginning of 2021. Could you kindly present it to us?

Steven - Gladly. My new book will be available on Kindle and other E-readers beginning on February 26th 2021 and as a paperback edition from Karnac Books and Amazon UK on that date as well. The paperback version will be available in

the USA and most everywhere else in the world by the end of April, 2021. As far as I am aware, it is the first solo-authored primer of Relational psychoanalysis. It's my attempt to offer an overview of key concepts in Relational psychoanalysis written for those newer to the orientation as well as more experienced Relational analysts who are looking for a single volume that they can refer to as a reference book or teaching tool. In addition to providing an historical overview of the birth of Relational psychoanalysis in the first chapter, I follow a single, in-depth case throughout the book as a way of applying each chapter's teachings—analyst subjectivity, self-disclosure, enactment, etc. to my clinical work with this patient.

Paula e Hélder - What could be the relational analyst's role in social and political spheres: on contemporary forms of racism, xenophobia, gender discrimination, homophobia and other forms of human discrimination, which have been focused by the relational thought?

Steven - As most of your readers probably know, Stephen Mitchell and his colleagues were interested in incorporating sociocultural and political issues into the Relational turn, as it was originally called. Early writers such as Jessica Benjamin, Adrienne Harris, Neil Altman, Mitchell and many others all addressed the spheres and issues you name. Others of us are writing about these topics currently. My book was completed during the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, UK and elsewhere in response to police brutality against blacks and other people of color and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. We soon came to realize that the pandemic disproportionately affected people from marginalized and otherwise discriminated against communities. In "The Relational Revolution", I address these areas within the context of Relational psychoanalysis.

I believe that if Relationalists are interested in addressing the "whole" person, we must also address white fragility and the various forms of discrimination—as well as internalized societal/familial hatred that all therapists and patients are burdened by.

Paula e Hélder - In 2016, one memorable IARPP online colloquium became a ground for expressing, sharing and debating the fearful Trump's election. For many of us, both in the US and around the world, Trump's election would represented a deep step back to a polarized and discriminated world, where social relations are established lacking the empathy with the other, not allowing the "mutual recognition" that relational psychoanalysis preconizes. Since he won that election - and lost this year's, how do you see Trump's impact on the contemporary Culture, and what shall we expect from the near future?

Steven - This is a big and important question. So many of us in the US and internationally were deeply upset and in some cases even traumatized by Trump's election and by the impact of other populist and totalitarian leaders. There has been some excellent writing by Relational authors on this and I have an article that will be published in Psychoanalytic Perspectives this spring, I believe, in an issue of the journal that is partially devoted to your question.

I was glad that in conjunction with my colleagues on the Board of IARPP, I was able to make Colloquium space available to discuss these issues and the overwhelm of what many (though not all) of us believe to be Trump's assault on humanity and attacks on our most vulnerable US and other citizens.

It was his ignorance and deliberate attempts to chip away at science, free speech, freedom of the press and truth in general that compounded the terrible impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. My patients and colleagues were—are—all terrified, deeply saddened and as I mentioned before, in some cases traumatized by living under his regime. When you combine his four-year reign with the widespread illness, death, fear and economic destruction caused by both the pandemic as well as Trump's mishandling of it, I believe we are looking at long-term mental health consequences that will be with us for years if not decades to come.

Paula e Hélder - We are in the middle of a pandemic crisis, with large effects on our societies and in the therapeutic settings. What message could you send to all of our relational colleagues?

Steven - I believe that one of the greatest challenges currently facing us as psychotherapists and psychoanalysts is the fact that during the pandemic, we are simultaneously experiencing the same severe upset, disruption or as mentioned above, trauma as our patients are. We don't have the luxury to say to a patient "I'm sorry, but 'd rather not discuss the pandemic" if or when we need a break during a clinical day in which patient after patient comes in wanting to discuss the pandemic. How do we care for ourselves in the midst of this?

My message, then is this and I hope it doesn't seem too trite: Please do as you are likely urging your patients to do--engage in as much self-care as possible. Take breaks throughout the day and/or vacations if time and economics allow. Take breaks, too, from reading or watching the news if you have the sense that this is triggering. Reach out to colleagues and engage in online learning, peer or professional supervision, etc. Anything that has the potential to combat burnout and personal and professional isolation is more crucial now than ever before. And of course, when the vaccine becomes available and it's your turn to receive it, I would urge you to do what you can to get it for the peace of mind and sense of (as well as actual) safety it offers.

Paula e Hélder - You are the President of the Board of IARPP. How do you see the movement's "weight" in the broad psychoanalytic context? What are the tendencies?

Steven - Actually, in the interim between when you were kind enough to invite me to this interview and now, when this finally appears in print, my term as President of IARPP has come to a close. I will remain on the Board and Executive Committee in the role of Past President and hope to continue contributing to IARPP and Relational psychoanalysis well into the future. I am excited by the number of new IARPP

members who have joined us recently and the IARPP chapters that have formed in countries where Relational psychoanalysis had been previously underrepresented. I see the challenge for us as needing to bring Relational teaching to colleagues who are less familiar with our work. And it's urgent that IARPP continues its efforts to translate more of our colloquia, presentations and written materials into multiple languages.

I am also encouraged by what Steve Cooper and others refer to as bridge theory. Many ideas from Relational and other psychoanalytic theories have been crossing over into—"bridging" multiple theoretical perspectives. It is no longer just the Relationalists, for example, who discuss deliberate disclosure, impasse and enactment, multiple self-states, etc. While these ideas first emerged or expanded within Relational teaching, many contemporary analysts now utilize them. Still, respect for theoretical differences and not just agreed upon bridge theories is important, of course, and deepens our work. Related, respectful critique from within and outside of our orientation as Aron, Grand and Slochower discuss in their recent edited books and as Aron wrote about extensively before his untimely death, is necessary for us to grow and evolve in our development of psychoanalytic theory and technique.

Paula e Hélder - As you know, the Portuguese relational movement has been made very close to our Spanish neighbors and friends. We began later and had their precious help and encouragement. IARPP (from the USA) and yourself also expressed your encouragement to our relational project when we were born in early 2016. Since 2016, PsiRelacional is the center of the relational movement in Portugal, gathering near 100 psychotherapists nowadays. We gratefully appreciate your attention and your support, and, of course, this interview. Thank you. Please, some final words...?

Steven - I have followed your project closely from its inception and have been impressed by and appreciative of your efforts to revive and spread Relational psychoanalysis in Portugal. Bravo to you. I know how hard it can be to volunteer large amounts of time and precious energy to the administrative and other tasks necessary for starting and growing a movement. I hope that there has been much gratification and pride in your accomplishments. Your students, colleagues and patients are of course the direct beneficiaries of your hard work and accomplishments. And now you are launching this publication. I'm happy for this latest achievement, and so glad to be a part of your first issue. I wish you continued success, health and satisfaction in the years ahead.