

Interview with Mark Solms, Phd FIPA

The following interview was conducted in December 2015 by EBOR Committee Chair Rikki Ricard, MA FIPA in advance of the eleventh International EBOR Conference in Seattle, Washington (USA) on October 28-30, 2016.

Rikki: Hi Mark. First off, let me thank you taking the time for me to conduct this interview. I would like to open up a bit of a dialogue here in order to introduce you to those who will be attending the upcoming EBOR 2016 Conference.

When first asked to chair this conference, I was a participant in a reading group that was focused on your paper, "The Conscious Id" (*Neuropsychanalysis*, 2013, 15 (1)), and found myself newly inspired and excited about what you were introducing in the paper. The thought of you being one of our plenary presenters seemed significant and meaningful. To our great delight and benefit, you accepted and we are thrilled to have you join us.

Before we dive into some theoretical questions, I'm wondering if you could tell us a bit about your life in Cape Town, South Africa and the community you are a part of there?

Mark: I am Professor of Neuropsychology at the University of Cape Town. I teach and do research there and I work clinically at Groote Schuur Hospital. In addition, I am president of the South African Psychoanalytical Association and I have a small analytic practice (candidates only, sadly). I live with my family on a small farm outside Cape Town. It is an experimental farm in which we have tried to redress our terrible political history. It is run along socialist lines but the application of psychoanalytic ideas has also played a big part.

Rikki: I know that a lot of your background is covered in your bio, but I'm wondering if you could share with us, in a nutshell, what you consider the most influential elements that have affected your current thinking?

Mark: My biggest early influences were Freud (of course) and Luria. In more recent years my major influences have been Panksepp and Friston.

Rikki: How do you envision these perspectives impacting the future of both psychoanalysis and neuroscience?

Mark: I think, to say the obvious, that psychoanalysis and neuroscience have a lot to teach each other. More specifically, I think the recent realization that consciousness is fundamentally affective is bound to have major implications for both fields.

Rikki: Can you talk about how your current thinking impacts your clinical experience? Has it changed how you practice or do you imagine it changing it in the future?

Mark: The three most direct influences on my clinical work have been the following: (1) An increased focus on affect, especially in relation to so-called countertransference. I think much countertransference is simply feeling the affects of the patient, which are not unconscious, and most of the analytic work is finding the unconscious thoughts that explain these conscious affects. (2) A different conception of instinct, which is closely related to affect and much closer to consciousness than we previously thought. Especially helpful is having a better taxonomy of

the instincts than we had in the old days; this makes a big difference clinically. For example, did you know there is a hard-wired instinct for PLAY in the brain? (3) A deeper understanding of the relationship between feelings and objects, including the representation of the feeling self as object/s. Understanding the neurological basis (and amazing relativism) of object representation has made me understand primitive defences and defensive organisations very much better.

Rikki: Can you share with us what your focus was during your psychoanalytic training, as well as where that was and who your major influences were?

Mark: My analyst was classical Freudian (he was Anna Freud's immediate successor at the Hampstead Clinic). So my personal experience of analysis was very classical. But I trained in the British Society, so my formal analytic education was probably more Kleinian than anything else – much more Kleinian than is the norm in America.

Rikki: As the upcoming conference is titled Evolving British Object Relations, I find myself wondering how you think the current trends in neuropsychanalysis might impact our thinking regarding internal objects as well as unconscious phantasy?

Mark: Hugely. I will show a video of a neurological patient in the master class which will enable me to illustrate this. It is too complex to convey in this Q&A format.

Rikki: What and who are your current influences? Where do you find your interests headed?

Mark: The major influence on me at the moment, as I said above, is Karl Friston (i.e., his notion of the Bayesian brain and his reinvention of Hemholtzian physiology and physics). I am also very exercised by the implications for psychoanalysis of research in reconsolidation – an important but previously neglected aspect of memory. I am hoping to work closely with Cristina Alberini on this topic. She is both an analyst and a bench neuroscientist doing cutting-edge work on this topic.

Rikki: On a more specific note, it seems that many clinicians doing psychoanalytic or psychotherapeutic work shy away from the neuroscience aspect of the work out of a belief that there is an irreducible gap between the workings of the brain and the meaning the mind makes of the brain's work. How would you address this bias to help clinicians come out of their consulting rooms to embrace the neuroscience branch of the psychoanalytic tree?

Mark: I plan to address this in the master class, too. It is always best to discuss such things with direct reference to clinical material; otherwise it becomes too abstract – and even ideological.

Rikki: And lastly, are there other aspects of your life that impact and influence your current trajectory? What might be interesting for us to know about you?

Mark: When I was little, I was overwhelmed by the apparent meaningless of life. I was driven to a sort of nihilism. The idea that gradually helped me out of that hole, and towards psychoanalysis, was the idea that the only worthwhile thing to do in the circumstances was to devote one's life to trying to understand what mortal being actually *is*.

Rikki: Mark, thank you so much for your generosity in being available for this interview. We look forward to our time with you in October.