



Dr. Danielle Knafo to Speak About Creativity and Eros in the Age of Advanced Technology at VAPS Scientific Meeting in November

With Pamela Nauda Clark

Dr. Danielle Knafo will be our speaker at the Scientific Meeting on Saturday, November 4, 2023. Dr. Knafo is a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst, a prolific author, and a popular speaker. She was a professor at LIU-Post in its clinical psychology doctoral program for 22 years, where she chaired a concentration on Serious Mental Illness (SMI). Additionally, she is faculty and supervisor at NYU's Postdoctoral Program for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and Adelphi's Postgraduate Programs for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy. She writes and lectures on many subjects, including psychoanalysis, art, creativity, trauma, psychosis, sexuality and gender, and technology. She is a writing consultant and leads private writing groups. Dr. Knafo maintains a private practice in Manhattan and Great Neck, NY.

I met with Dr. Knafo over Zoom from her Long Island office surrounded by books, with a stack of sketch pads close at hand and an image of Freud behind her. We talked about how her formative years gave her a foundation of creativity and adaptability that is infused in her approach to her work in the world. She shared the evolution of her interests and research, which includes sex, creativity, gender, and technology, and how they intersect. I was struck by her passion, fearless candor, and robust willingness to embrace change. A portion of our conversation is presented below.

Pamela: In Dancing with the Unconscious, you make a connection between art, creativity and home. Where or what is home for you?

Dr. Knafo: I'm an immigrant and nowhere feels completely like home to me, but I can make a home anywhere. I come from a Moroccan, Jewish culture and arrived in Pennsylvania as a child. It was so dramatically different that it required me to creatively bridge those two worlds. My family is a creative family, composed of writers, musicians, artists, chefs, jewelry designers. Everything my mother touched, from cooking to making haute couture Barbie clothes for me and my sister, to decorating our home- was very artistic. But home moves for me. I can feel at home and very alienated and on the margins at the same time. I feel at home when I speak Hebrew even though it's my fourth language. I was very shy as a child and came to adulthood in Israel, an aggressive society; something about the language forced me out of my shyness. It felt very much mine, and I felt at home when speaking it.

Our early challenges often correlate or point the arrow towards our gifts and meaningful work. I'm curious with what you've just shared, how that might have informed your work.

Very much so. I embrace creativity in everything I do. I adapt easily to places, to people, to things, but I also feel like I'm a little bit on the outside. It allows me to have a different vantage point from the mainstream and I've learned to embrace that. It's why I've worked with people who are also on the fringe. My most recent book is about working with psychosis, something a lot of therapists avoid. I see it as a challenge, and challenges are opportunities to be more creative in my work. Working with people outside the box makes me work and think outside the box. It's one of the

advantages to psychoanalytic work. I never know what my day is going to be like. I want to be surprised. That's what keeps me interested and curious. I've always loved traveling around the world. I see working with people as encountering a new culture, a new country, a new story. Everybody comes with their histories, their idioms, their cultures. That's the excitement. Some people travel and look for McDonalds, for the familiar. When I travel, I want to go places I don't know, where I don't know the language or the culture. I want to learn something new. When I sit with a patient, it's like I'm traveling- show me what it's like to be you and where you come from.

Tell me about the evolution in your focus from creativity to sex and technology.

I have so many interests! Students often sought me out because they knew I would let them research what they were interested in, and then I'd learn along with them. I did my master's thesis on sexual fantasies in males and females. I was young and I started feeling like I was thinking too much about sex, so I put it aside. I've always been interested in creativity also- I almost went into the arts instead of psychology, but I figured I could bridge the two worlds. I started writing about creativity and art from a psychoanalytic perspective. I came back to sex when I started noticing changes in the younger generation in terms of their gender identity and politics. I remember many years ago having a transexual patient (that's what they were called then) and it was seen as very rare. Now we see transgender persons everywhere. On Facebook there are 60 genders to choose from. Sadoomasochism was a perversion and now BDSM is an accepted form of sexuality. There were changes in pronouns and behaviors. What I noticed, too, was that these changes were very intimately connected to the internet and technology. I became fascinated with these issues, and I had to deal with them with my

students and with my patients. I became curious and started researching, so here I am. And now I'm writing a lot about AI. That's my latest obsession.

Where is the intersection of psychoanalysis and technology?

Technology is everywhere. With AI, I like to say the algorithm has become our new unconscious. We've externalized it. AI gets to know us by how we respond. If you dwell on an image on social media, you get more of that. If you buy a book on Amazon, suddenly you get suggestions. Our computers externalize the unconscious and know us better than we know ourselves.

It sounds like you wholeheartedly embrace change when you see it. That's not easy for everyone. Where do you think we, as clinicians, might need to pivot or expand our awareness or thinking in this new landscape?

Young people are growing up with a reality that is new to the older generations. Many therapists belong to a different generation from their patients. They don't always know how to discern what's pathological, what's adaptive. I embrace the three "C's" -- courage, creativity, and curiosity. Those are the abilities that we need to cultivate to deal with this rapid change. Courage to face difference, to say difficult things, to admit when we don't know. Creativity to think outside of the box. And curiosity always. The world is changing and if we don't change with it, we'll be left behind. We have to move with the changes.

Do you have a bit of preview of what we can expect at the conference?

On Friday I'm going to be talking about creativity and solitude. I've written a lot about creativity. A lot of creative people spend a lot of

time alone. In our field we've become very relationally focused, and I feel that we've neglected the positive aspects of solitude, the capacity to be alone as Winnicott wrote. He's one of the only people who wrote about that. There's a difference between solitude and loneliness. We have a loneliness epidemic right now. Part of it is because of technology. People are addicted to their technology.

Saturday there will be a few cases presented that I'm going to supervise. You know now that I like spontaneity, so I'm going to do what I'm doing with you- free associate. I'm going to talk about eros and sexuality and technology. One of my presentations is going to be a full case describing a patient who experienced a strong erotic transference to me--a challenging and interesting case-- and how that was navigated. The other talk I'm going to give is about the ways sexuality and technology intersect and where we are today with it.

I'm very much looking forward to it. Thank you for your time and for all that you've shared.

I appreciate the space to free associate on these topics that are all very important to me. Thank you.

We hope that you will join us for the 2023 Annual Scientific Meeting and Pre-Conference Seminar with Dr. Knafo! Please visit the website to register.

Pamela Nauda Clark is a psychotherapist in private practice in Burlington, VT.