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*"When people recount their dreams, they don't talk about the hippocampus."*

Author: Ariane Bazan / Sabrina Zehetner (TVP)

The golden age of Neuroscience has arrived while Psychoanalysis is still struggling with its bad reputation - Is Neuropsychanalysis a threat or an ally in the fight for credibility? We interviewed Prof. Dr. Ariane Bazan, a leading researcher in Neuropsychanalysis and professor of clinical psychology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles

How would you describe Neuropsychanalysis to someone who has never heard of it before?

Ariane Bazan: Neuropsychanalysis - in the simplest terms - is the study of the interface between neuroscience and psychoanalysis. Neuropsychanalysis might seek neuroscientific evidence for psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, repression or the drive. I understand it a little bit differently. I'm interested in what we call "Metapsychology": how psychoanalysis describes the mental apparatus and its architecture. I use this conceptual framework to interpret the brain mechanisms. Neuropsychanalysis mostly tries to extrapolate from the brain to mental mechanisms, I use it the other way around: I use mental frameworks to understand, or even to interpret, the brain.

Isn't that one of the major points of criticism? That there is no empirical evidence for psychoanalytical hypotheses? Do you think that neuroscientific empirical findings would increase the credibility of psychoanalysis?

Ariane Bazan: That's the idea. The idea is that psychoanalysis will gain credibility with biological evidence. That's the mainstream opinion within neuropsychanalysis promoted by neuroscientists and psychoanalysts like Mark Solms.

Who is Mark Solms?

Ariane Bazan: Mark Solms is the founder of the International Neuropsychanalysis Society. He works part-time in South Africa, and part-time in London at the Anna Freud Institute. He has gained a reputation with his research on dreams by showing that the neuroscientific underpinning of dreams fit Freud's general model of dream wishfulfilling very well. His main point is that the Id is actually conscious, unlike Freud who claimed that it's unconscious.

What is your approach?

Ariane Bazan: I don't support this epistemology. My goal is not to prove psychoanalysis with neuroscientific evidence. My approach is to have a very well-articulated psychological, mental theory which is supported by what is said within the intimacy of the clinical setting, and to use this theory to interpret the multiplicity of the brain. Indeed, the brain in and by itself does not disprove anything. The difficulty with neuroscience is that you will always get proof for small-scale theories but you can't do anything with that kind of multiplicity of theories. I want to propose a theory of the mental, which is based on by what you hear in the clinical situation, by what clients tell you when they're suffering from mental distress, and with that I want to examine the brain and highlight what is important.

(03/28/2018)

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**As a biologist, what made you interested in the topic?**

Ariane Bazan: When I was sixteen or seventeen I was interested in what it is to be human, what it means to be human, how to understand human behavior. Then, I did a lot of reading and most of my reading led me to biology.

**What did you read?**

Ariane Bazan: I read a bunch of psychological books and thought, "Well the author can be either right or wrong, but I don't have any means to know that." Then, I read about Biochemistry in magazines and thought, "Yes, that makes sense. It's Biology which I should study". Then, I did a PhD in Biology but was very disappointed because it didn't bring me any closer to understanding human behavior. In my last year in 1997, when I was defending my PhD thesis in November, a month earlier, in October, I had started an undergraduate program in Psychology. There, I encountered Psychoanalysis and it never left me. And, of course, I had the biological background, so I was immediately interested in neuropsychology as well.

**Some psychoanalysts are afraid that scientifically unraveling the unconscious, the source of dreams, would make psychoanalysis obsolete. What is your opinion on that?**

Ariane Bazan: I'm also a skeptic when it comes to this endeavor to neurologize or biologize the mental apparatus. I am on good terms with Mark Solms but we have different epistemologies and we are both aware of it. I'm skeptical about what neuroscience can bring to psychoanalysis but I do think psychoanalysis can make an important contribution to neuroscience. You can be a good clinician with or without a neuroscientific education. Being knowledgeable about neurology doesn't guarantee in any way that you will be a better clinician. When you have people talking about their dreams, they don't talk about the hippocampus. When they address their distress, they speak about their mothers, fathers, brothers, their youth. When it comes to the clinical situation, you cannot do anything with neuroscience. It's about the peoples' personal stories.

**You don't include neurology in your treatment?**

Ariane Bazan: No, I don't. It's also an ethical question. In consulting, you put yourself in the position of non-mastery. As soon as you think you are an expert because you have neuroscientific knowledge, you're a bit violent towards the patient.

**What about the individualistic, subversive nature of psychoanalysis in relation to Neurology?**

Ariane Bazan: The mental apparatus is a mental reality, it is objective: there is a mental reality which would appear independent of the psychoanalyst the client consults. I did my post-doc research in the United States with Howard Shevrin [Howard Shevrin died in Ann Arbor on January 18, 2018] at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Howie (Shevrin) examined participants with a team of analysts. Each one of them had a number of sessions with the psychoanalysts, and in a careful procedure, they selected words that were considered important because they touched upon an unconscious conflict [AB: I was not there yet at that stage of research], specific for each participant. When the analysts were not around, in the laboratory, we presented these words in a subliminal way in the span of one millisecond. The participants didn't have any conscious idea that they had been given these words. We could register a wave, which is called the alpha brain wave, and which synchronized when the word about the unconscious conflict was presented. The alpha wave was only registered when the patients were presented with the specific words. Independent of the analyst or of the transference relationship, a mental reality can be objectified, which therefore is not simply subjective [2]. That is what I do.

**How does the psychoanalytic community respond to this kind of research?**

Ariane Bazan: There is a lot of skepticism which is understandable because we live in a neuroscientific epoch. The neuroscientific approach often represents yet another way of "reducing" psychoanalysis, thus abandoning its specifics and ethical stance. The psychoanalytic ethical stance is quite radical. When you are in a consultation room the analyst's position is that the patient is the one who knows, and the psychoanalyst is just there to listen and find and point out regularities, patterns, or surprising turns of phrases. There is no ambition to make someone behave according to norms or societal expectations. There is not even an ambition to cure. Psychoanalysis doesn't want to adhere to any kind of normatization. Within the psychoanalytic community, some are afraid that neuroscience is yet another attempt to institutionalize the field.

**As a Lacanian, how do you combine the theory of Lacan with Neuroscience?**

Ariane Bazan: One of the major propositions of Lacan is his "Return to Freud". The lives of Freud and Lacan overlapped, and when Lacan began to work as a psychiatrist, he believed that too many Freudians had just taken what they wanted from Freud and created their own theory, but had not really read Freud very carefully. Freud started off as a biologist, a neurologist, and his meta-psychological framework was very much in accordance with the neuroscience and biology of his time. And it was very articulate, very precise. When the Freudians came, even the big

Freudians like Anna Freud or Melanie Klein or Winnicott or Bion, they took Freud's concepts for granted and did their own thing. In Lacan's opinion, they interpreted Freud all too metaphorically. What Lacan stood for was a return to the literal Freud. He meant that we have to read Freud's texts line-by-line, which he himself did. For example, one thing that was completely lost by the Freudians afterwards was Freud's emphasis on language and the way he paid attention to the literal words in all his writings. Take, for example, in *Psychopathology of everyday life* his beautiful analysis of the forgetting of the word Signorelli. His interpretation of dreams is completely linguistical. Lacan used de Saussure to formalize Freud's word presentation into the signifier. A big part of my research is based on the signifier. One of the hypotheses of Lacan is that the unconscious is structured as a language. I want to test this hypothesis empirically.

**What method do you use?**

Ariane Bazan: I use a methodology I have mastered with Howard Shevrin. He would for example prime people with an image of a pen and an image of a knee and together these images would form the word "penny". We prime people with images and see what happens [2].

See Fig. 3

The symptoms people show are very much about phonology, as the famous "Ratman" case by Freud shows. The Ratman's obsession with a rat torture had actually nothing to do with a previous encounter with rats or rodents, but had to do with his personal history, where his nanny, Frau Hofrat, and the question of "heiraten", to marry, played major roles. The only thing these diverse topics had in common was the syllable "rat". You cannot solve this case with only semantics.

**Have you ever undergone psychoanalysis yourself?**

Ariane Bazan: Yes of course, and I am still in analysis. I've started in 1998, so I've been in analysis for almost 20 years now....

**Fabric or leather couch?**

Ariane Bazan: I use a couch in bleu fabric. It's the couch of a senior analyst, from whom I got it in legacy. I changed the fabric to blue.

**I dream...**

Ariane Bazan: I was Bernini's lover, and of memories of times to come still to be made.

Also, that humanity has 20-30 more years before everything will go catastrophically downhill.

**If you had the opportunity to talk to Sigmund Freud, what would the topic be?**

Ariane Bazan: Sexuality. How come we have sexual fantasies that are not serving any evolutionary survival purposes? How come that for each sexual fantasy, however weird, someone else has the complementary fantasy of being the object of that fantasy? How come this is so 'attuned' while these fantasies are not at all biologically attuned?

**Bruno Bettelheim pointed out the importance of fairy tales in childhood. Will you tell us your favorite fairy tale? And do you see parallels to your own adult life?**

Ariane Bazan: Fairy tales are violent and scary. I was particularly afraid of Pinocchio when I was little, I hated every bit of that story. The best surprise of life when growing up was to discover that life was not a fairy tale.

**Do you have a favorite Freud - quote?**

Ariane Bazan: Counterintuitively (that's when Freud is at his best), from "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life": "*Close examination shows that misunderstandings are based on the fact that the person is too fine an observer and understands too much.*". What Freud explains here is that a lot of tension arises between people when they rightly understand each other's (bad) intentions. Here, he gives the example of a couple, which he was supposed to have dinner with that evening, but felt uneasy about joining as the man of the couple was using the empty chair for his coat. The man would apologize and say something akin to: "*It was not my intention to cut you out.*" Freud, however, did not side with the popular belief not to take offense in actions when 'there was no intention of wrong-doing'. Actually, when people take offense it is often because they better understand the other's intention. For example, it sure was the man's unconscious intention to cut Freud out, as this was the first evening with his wife after a long time. However, he might not have been conscious of that (very understandable) intention. Freud exhorts people to take responsibility for their actions, even when the intentions were unconscious, and to have the courage and the honesty to do so. It is the consequences of someone's actions, which tell the truth of his or her intentions, no matter

what the conscious intentions were. If the consequences are bad, then there is reason to believe that the unconscious intentions were bad as well. A more popular version of that quote could be: *"The road to hell is paved with good intentions"*.

Simpler and more intuitively: *"We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love."*

Contact information of [Ariane Bazan](#)

*Ariane Bazan is PhD in Biology (University of Ghent, Belgium) and in Psychology (University of Lyon, France). She is a professor of clinical psychology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB, Brussels, Belgium). She is a practicing psychoanalyst and author of the book *Des fantômes dans la voix. Une hypothèse neuropsychanalytique sur la structure de l'inconscient* (~ *Phantoms in the voice. A neuropsychanalytic hypothesis on the structure of the unconscious* », Ed. Liber, Montréal, 2007). She is recipient of the Clifford Yorke prize for neuropsychanalysis 2008 and specialty-field-editor-in-chief of "Frontiers in psychoanalysis and neuropsychanalysis" (a section of "Frontiers in psychology").*

Sources:

[1] Bazan, A. (2017). Alpha synchronization as a brain model for unconscious defense: An overview of the work of Howard Shevrin and his team. The International Journal of Psychoanalysis doi:10.1111/1745-8315.12629 .

[2] Steinig, J., Bazan, A. Happe, S., Antonetti, S., Shevrin, H. (2017). Processing of a subliminal rebus during sleep: Idiosyncratic primary versus secondary process associations upon awakening of REM- versus non-REM-sleep. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1955. DOI=10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01955

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Es freut uns wirklich ganz besonders unseren LeserInnen dieses tolle Interview anzubieten. Herzlichen Dank an Ariane Bazan!

Wir dürfen kurz daran erinnern, dass Sie, liebe LeserInnen, in der Rubrik Radio, unter Podcasts, auch unsere Sendung vom 12.4.2017 nachhören können. Thema: Wie verträgt sich das psychoanalytische Modell mit der gegenwärtigen Neurowissenschaft!

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DWP/TVP | 28-03-2018 14:16

Translation

We are really happy to offer our readers this great interview. Many thanks to Ariane Bazan!

We would also like to remind you, Dear Readers that you can listen to the podcasts of our radio show from April 12, 2017 with the topic: How compatible is the psychoanalytic model with the actual neuroscience? You can it in our column radio, under podcasts.

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