

Manchester Institute of Psychotherapy Conference

Key Note Speech

19th November 2011

**Written and presented by
Karen F Burke**

Thank you to everyone who has attended this third conference of the Manchester Institute of Psychotherapy – the title of this conference is

“An Understanding of the Self”

"The universal striving for meaning is central to an understanding of the human condition"

In my dialogue today I hope to embrace the spirit of the institute and the conference by adding my thoughts to the many who have given their time, their energies, and of course, their thinking to the conference by providing a wealth of workshops, all are which are based on the subject of an understanding of the self. In considering this subject my own thoughts were drawn to how, what and when this began – the ‘bones’ of the subject.

As a Gestaltist, I believe in the ‘wholsim’ of the therapeutic experience, to include behaviours, mannerisms, the back ground, the emotions and the instincts of my client as well as the drivers. I find, as I am sure many of you do also, that clients are initially only interested in the ‘why’ and how they can change.

In my years as working as a practitioner I have never managed to acquire a magic wand, or magic ball to aid my work, therefore I rely upon my curiosity, my skills and experience as a psychotherapist to support my work and the client.

So, as I considered this conference and the honour of presenting this Key Note speech I began to painstakingly wade through articles, books and training I have attended. What continually came up for me, was the striving for knowing, that clients bring, as well as asking, what is the meaning of us being born, living our lives and our impact upon others – remember I am a

Gestaltist, an Existentialist and a Humanist so relationship and how we relate is paramount for me!

Philosophers, scientists and various religions throughout the ages sought to answer this question and I kept returning to the fact that without consciousness we cannot pose this question to our selves, our teachers, colleagues, our spiritual or religious leaders, or indeed to our own therapists, to name but a few. So, today the 'bones' of this subject for me is not the 'why', it is the 'how' of consciousness.

If we did not have consciousness then we could never pose the question, when did humans gain consciousness? From an evolutionary point, what is consciousness and when as humans do we gain consciousness from a developmental point of view?

These were the questions that were important to me and I wish to share the answers that I have found (so far). I appreciate that you may know or know something different.

I am not looking at a spiritual faith when I consider consciousness, it is the part of each of us that is internal and guides us, I am hoping that by looking at what is behind the striving for meaning I will not cross over into the various workshops that we can all enjoy later. I realise that some human beings by accident, disease or genetic make up do not have the consciousness I am researching. In this piece of work I am referring to the consciousness that the majority of humans have.

In researching this topic I found that many academics and philosophers during the last twenty or so years have given the feeling of consciousness a name, a short hand to try and umbrella the experience. It is known as Qualia, Qualia as a word is the plural of quale, which is an experience, for example colours, feelings, emotions, the sound of C flat, the smell of a hot pot, etc. There is no little man or woman inside of each of us experiencing these quales (i.e., qualia), however it may feel as though there is an inner voice. The scientists say there are a lot of neurons, water, chemicals and electric signals, all hooked up in some complicated arrangement, that we call the brain. So how is the vividness of experience taking place inside this organ or indeed inside our bodies as a whole? The science of what and how brain processes relate to consciousness is known as ontogenetics. Surely of all the things we can

express about consciousness, it is a personal phenomenon for each of us – and thus entirely subjective.

It seems that the question is, is consciousness real, or is it just a side effect of the brain, that is it is an epi phenomenon. This divides current scientific and philosophical thinking. If it is not real and an illusion wouldn't we need to be conscious to either perceive or misperceive it?

Philosopher David Chalmers from the University of Arizona divides the problem of consciousness into a group of easy problems and one hard question. Chalmers says that science through its usual way of proving will eventually gain agreement in the future. Scientists would understand the different brain states, such as, being awake, sleepwalking, unconsciousness or intoxication. About deliberation of behaviours, how people focus and discrimination of hot, cold, hard, soft etc. Chalmers sees the 'hard problem' is how the physical processes in the brain allow us, subjective, phenomenal experience. If everything is because of behaviour, how does that account for the 'little person/voice' that most people hear in their head? This is referred to as, the Cartesian Theatre, when we imagine a voice that tells us of our experience in relation to ourselves. What is experience and why is it so vibrant? What is the vibrancy of the experience?

For today, to keep this brief and on track, I shall only consider three scientific schools, the dualists, physicalists and reductionists who chew over the massive subject of the epi phenomenon of consciousness.

Dualists believe that consciousness and qualia are real, they are not side effects. They view consciousness as a basic irreducible aspect of the universe. They agree with David Chalmers that there is a 'hard problem'.

The ancient Greek concept of the 'soul', is similar to what Chalmers is purporting. He discusses that differing properties of matter and energy is behind consciousness, and to date these have not been figured out with our present understanding of physics.

Dualists try to confirm their point by asking us to imagine, if there were people without consciousness, who could talk, be in relation, love and have further emotions, yet have no idea of being in the world, how, or why they relate to others, could be called 'zombies'? However as there is no such group, their theory lacks any clinical or quantitative research.

All of the scientists and philosophers agree that the concept of consciousness and mind are different. Mind is considered to be the brain dynamics, how it processes, for example, autonomous body regulation, consciousness is the processes that sustain reflection and individual experience.

The physicalists, (also known as materialists), as written about by David Papineau and another group called the reductionists believe that consciousness isn't what it seems, to the average person. Consciousness is not truly fundamental, it is more of a side effect. To them, there really is no "hard problem". There is no relative question regarding epiphenomenalism; consciousness to them must be causally inert, as it doesn't truly exist at all.

Consider watching a ship sailing away from the shore. The ship is not really becoming smaller as it moves away from us, although it appears to. Science tells us this is just an illusion. We have convincing evidence that we are on an almost round planet spinning around the sun, and that the ship does not fall off the edge of our planet as previously believed by our ancestors. The physical reductionists say that our illusion of consciousness and self-consciousness are questions of cultural programming and an inherent, evolutionarily selected tendency to search for root causes of things we experience.

What is considered normal features of consciousness? On going emotional engagement, ability to record new memories and fit them with old memories, rather than procedural memories that allow us to breathe, to walk with out thinking or consideration. To get from one side of the room to another I do not ensure that a certain muscle group is going to contract and expand. Surely consciousness includes our identity, our knowing and our personal idiosyncrasies?

The physicalists and reductionists have various researches from brain experiments over the last 25 years. Many of these results are from the work of Benjamin Libet, which includes the work, which proves our consciousness is a half a second or so behind reality. We know what has happened. His other works show we act before making a decision; this means that behaviour is often 'set' and the thinking is 'proving' our behaviours rather than guiding it.

The reductionists repeat that the experience of consciousness is 'epi phenomenal' and Libet, whom I cited earlier, discussed that it is not free will, it is 'free won't' that is engaged, as it is the 'I won't'. What we may call the impulse regulation. These are the thoughts of consequences, which when considered, that stops us shooting our nagging spouse, throttling the traffic warden or any other act that may cause our selves greater harm or distress than what we are feeling towards that person.

Dreaming is a non-waking activity, which can also embrace consciousness. Some, including the late Fritz Perls, believe that dreams are the royal road to awareness, as it is the unconscious moving into consciousness. An interesting question is around sleep walking, is a person conscious when this happens?

"Absence automatism", persistent vegetative states, and blind sight, (this is when people with working eyes, become blind due to cortex damage and still have sub-conscious mental responses to objects in front of them), are being studied by scientists. Dr. Antonio Damasio writes about these cases in *"The Feeling of What Happens"* (1999). These situations provide, determine and measure the characteristics and workings of consciousness.

We ask why and how - remember the sub title of this conference; 'The universal striving for meaning is central to an understanding of the human condition'. There may be some survival value behind this, expressing our joys, pains, loves and fears, especially in a social or relational context. This could keep us safe however is there more than this?

Wikipedia says: Consciousness is a term that refers to a variety of aspects of the relationship between the mind and the world with which it interacts. It has been defined as: subjectivity; awareness; the ability to experience or to feel; wakefulness; having a sense of selfhood; or the executive control system of the mind. Despite the difficulty of definition, many philosophers believe that there is a broadly shared underlying intuition about what consciousness is.

The online dictionary, Merriam Webster defines consciousness thus-

1

a : the quality or state of being aware especially of something within oneself

b : the state or fact of being conscious of an external object, state, or fact

c : AWARENESS; *especially* : concern for some social or political cause

2

: the state of being characterized by sensation, emotion, volition, and thought : MIND

3

: the totality of conscious states of an individual

4

: the normal state of conscious life <regained *consciousness*>

5

: the upper level of mental life of which the person is aware as contrasted with unconscious processes

Examples of CONSCIOUSNESS

1. The medication caused her to enter an altered state of *consciousness*.
2. The events have become part of the national *consciousness*.
3. He hopes that he can raise public *consciousness* of the disease.

First Known Use of CONSCIOUSNESS

1629

So when did human beings as a species begin to have consciousness? The Merriam Webster dictionary tells us that it was firstly recorded in 1629, however, I believe the date maybe significant to the printing presses, rather than the awareness of consciousness.

Again, there are varying thoughts to how and when consciousness evolved. Was it through natural selection, or an accident that 'qualia', the vivid experience of knowing, happened within humans? If so, did other mammals or

species evolve consciousness? When considering survival of the fittest, why did we not evolve into mechanical beings, as depicted in such scientific entertainment such as Star Trek, Star Wars and other works of fiction?

Big brains and significant thought processes allow us as a group to recognise the benefits of tribes and associations. However, we also do not choose to act as colonies of insects either, which have proven to be a highly effective group of species lasting for millions of years. With consciousness we produce, admire and long for creativity in the form known as 'art and culture'. Lasting, or not so lasting, pieces of music and pictures, fantasy writings all enhance our lives in changing degrees. Indeed the first cave paintings, when man first left his interpretation of his world were sketched 50,000 years ago. I am unaware of any other species that does this to date.

So are we the only species to have consciousness? Apparently not, although we are the only species that are known to have an 'extended auto biological consciousness'. This includes the ability to unite our experiences, with the environment and others, to put ourselves into other's situations and guess at their feelings, whilst holding a knowledge of the past and present and being able to guess regarding the future. Some higher level mammals, apes, dogs, whales and dolphins to name but a few, do have scientists believe, a core consciousness, due to their more sophisticated memory functions and a greater capacity to join the various features of their senses into a detailed, coherent mental picture of their surroundings. They may have some sense of their own existence; they may "know themselves", up to a point.

Reptiles have only a brain stem and a hypothalamus; therefore they only react to their basic needs, food, light and safety. Recognising that as humans we have the neo cortex too, all other mammals have a brain that consists of a mid brain. Scaruffi (2006) says allows mammals to act upon their environment, rather than react to their environment which reptiles do.

Due to our human ability to make noises, to convert these into a complex language and describe emotions, when we were flooded with various situations that had many, if not infinite sensory images to process and make sense of, the human brain needed to grow to utilise all of this information. Jerison (1973) states it is our nervous systems that create a concept of how the world is and it is that model that helps us understand our world. As children we begin to refine this and during adulthood we act due to our own personal internal model, which can be different to any one else's model.

Many scientists believe it is this rich language that actually was both the fore bearer and the reason for consciousness appearing in man. Others suggest it was a basic survival need, that the people who 'understood' and could guess correctly what others thoughts and feelings were, were more likely to live. If someone comes forward swinging an axe and a certain look on their face, connected with screams, with both consciousness and knowledge of what you are capable of, therefore knowledge of what another being may be capable of, may save your life.

So we now know that mirror neurones, can allow us to feel empathy for others, for us to register how it feels to be in someone else's situation. If this attachment based network was the predecessor or the reason for consciousness beginning, is a subject that divides professionals. It can be reasoned that having the ability, when mirror neurones are fired to become more knowing/guessing about our peers, would encourage a greater need for families, tribes and communities to survive, under the ethos of united we stand, divided we fall. Surely for us to know another we need to differentiate and know there is a 'me'. Our memories and experience allow us to consider past, present and future. We can communicate on a very complex basis with others that know our language.

Pinker, (1997, 43-4) writes,

"Contrary to popular belief, the gene-centered theory of evolution does *not* imply that the point of all human striving is to spread our genes ... People don't selfishly spread their genes; genes selfishly spread themselves. They do it by the way they build our brains. By making us enjoy life, health, sex, friends, and children, the genes buy a lottery ticket for representation in the next generation, with odds that were favorable in the environment in which we evolved."

How consciousness first came into being and how it evolved can never be proven. To date, however scientists, philosophers and historians are now considering this question. When during our evolution did consciousness arise? I have found various theories ranging from recent times possibly 3000 years ago, (Jaynes, 1997) to those who believe it began with the development of the neo cortex 200 million years ago – that is a considerable span. An interesting theory I found was that consciousness has always been there, however in Darwinian fashion, for some species to exist, the need for

compassion, empathy and awareness would not help them to live and spread their seed and so, their consciousness did not survive.

Interestingly enough if the early writers, those who scripted the Iliad, the Christian bible were without consciousness then they would have been unable to distinguish between facts and fiction. In the scriptures they act without conscious decision-making and rely often upon voices heard. An interesting fact is that they are written in the same form, as we know people with schizophrenia use when talking. To coin a phrase from Scaruffi, (2006) 'These stories are all action and no introspection'.

It has been noted that in the later writing of the Bible and indeed the writing of the Odyssey there is a note of consciousness arising.

Those that believe consciousness only arose in the more recent ages would have us believe that the societies that we saw as 'ancient and developed civilisations', were composed of individuals that had no awareness of right and wrong. They were without conscious memories, meaning they had no concept of good and evil, no memories, without thought of the past and definitely no thought for the future.

So unable to know when we as a species did develop consciousness, when does consciousness emerge in an individual? Is it with us from our embryonic state or is it developmental milestone that can be gauged? If we were to believe that we need a society and language then it would only be when we recognise we are part of a group, be that of a family or race with a common language that our consciousness evolves.

"Anything that we are aware of at a given moment forms part of our consciousness, making conscious experience at once the most familiar and most mysterious aspect of our lives". (Velhams and Schneider,2007)

Scientists have suggested the only way to really know this would be to take a newborn and keep it from any other being. Within our world, thank goodness this would not be humanely or ethically possible. Is the nearest we have to that experience, those children who by fortune, or the lack of it, were brought up by another species. When this has happened and these children are found, during their early adulthood or late teens, the ability to 'humanise' them has been impossible.

It is paramount for socialisation to begin at a very early age for the initial neural pathways to be laid down as a foundation for attachments and a conscience to grow. Without language the complexities required to inform others and be informed in a complex way, including recognising tenses, what heaviness is, for example, may mean that it would be near impossible for them to gain an extended auto biological consciousness. It is likely that these children who have no human contact throughout their early years may have a core consciousness and it may be improbable that they would advance this further.

What do I mean by a core consciousness? This concept would mean an awareness of self and others, however not an auto biological memory, which would be built in layers resulting in the advanced auto biological consciousness.

Gardenfors, the Swedish philosopher states that sensations are what are happening to the body and that perceptions are what are happening in the world that in turn impacts upon the body. This would account for the 'why' that many people are curious about. *"The universal striving for meaning is central to an understanding of the human condition"*.

We can, with perceptions understand why and what caused a change to us. Unlike other mammals due to our enhanced simulators in our brains we can work out the 'why'. Due to our recognition of differentiation, we know what is us and what is something else, this ability we share with other large mammals. Again what differs us from these other mammals is not the ability to plan, it is the ability to plan ahead, to anticipate. The knowledge and the impact of death and what that would mean to us as individuals can make us morose. Other animals only grieve in the present, when death has happened and the other is not responding.

Brain scans of foetuses at 26 weeks, show brain waves, indicating consciousness, however regarding developmental milestones Ferrari and Sternberg, (2004,p29) say that awareness (consciousness) is evident when

One witnesses potential evidence about oneself.

One has inner awareness of this witnessing.

One has occurrent awareness in thought of one or more features of one's character or personality.

One brings self-witnessed evidence to bear in judging of this feature or these features

Piaget, introduces that consciousness has four phases, each informing the other until each is integrated. He saw these as different periods of intellectual and moral reasoning – sensimotor, before the age of two, pre-operational from the age of 2 until 7, operational at 7 to 12 years of age and finally the formal between the ages of 12 and 18.

Lewin, (1935, p106) purports, that it is the concept of ownership and property in the second or third year, 'The "I" or self is only gradually formed, perhaps in the second or third year. Not until then does the concept of property appear, of the belonging of a thing to his own person.'

Allport, two years later (1937, p592) suggests that by the age of two a child may have consciousness whilst the concept of self-consciousness has not been developed.

'Until the child has a fairly definite conception of himself as an independent person, he cannot conceptualize his relationship to the surrounding world and hence lacks the subjective nucleus for the development of his own personality . . . Even at the age of four or five the self, is by no means firmly encapsulated . . . The advent of self consciousness is gradual, and its growth continuous, but a certain critical stage is reached around the age of two'

Both Horowitz (1935, p379-387) and Moreno (1934,p61) considered consciousness was developed by socialisation, in reference to how individuals manage groups.

So taking account of professionals of the past, I would like to cite Daniel N Stern and his theory of a child's development, which is more recent. (1985 and 1998)

Stern's theory is that a series of stages which are mutually supporting and overlapping, the sense of the 'emergent self' which forms between birth and two months. Later between two and six months a sense of core sense is experienced. The next period is when a core sense with another is recognised, followed between seven and fifteen months when a subjective self is formed and then later a verbal self, during the second year of life and followed by the final stage of narrative self or selves. It is here at the age of four or older that the child can relate 'stories' where psychological

explanations are implanted within the story and the child's identity is formed, of course the child may choose at this age to distort reality too, as any parent knows. So Stern suggests that these layers all contribute to the formation of consciousness.

I could not have included all opinions and theories into this Key Note speech. However I am pleased to have shared with you all, my research on what consciousness is, when in our evolution it was likely to have formed and when, as we see our children, or indeed our children's children the layers of consciousness is formed.

As a Gestaltist, when working with clients I am not interested in the 'why'. I can understand due to our society and culture, many will believe it is necessary to strive for meaning. I am curious how people are in the moment and how they relate to themselves, to others and me. For me my curiosity is drawn to how they strive, what they are striving for and to consider what they are not striving for, as this informs me, as a practitioner.

I am often reminded as clients confuse and confounded themselves, when looking for the 'why'; they lose their interest in 'what' and 'how' they are. In my practice my vested interest is to raise their awareness of what and how they do.

If clients are to make change in their lives, they can, with a new awareness make choiceful, meaningful changes - or chose not to of course. In knowing and accepting what is, their capacity for conscious choices can allow clients to facilitate change.

I believe that consciousness is a process of experience, which is unlike anything else. These are the viewpoints of the writer-philosopher Jean Paul Satre and the psychologist Daniel Robinson who agrees that consciousness is 'sui generis' (not like anything else). McGinn (1991) says that 'consciousness is consciousness and like nothing else'.

So, as we go forward to the workshops and consider man's striving for meaning, you may mull over on how consciousness allows the curiosity to form.

For all of us here I imagine that we are all accepting of having our consciousness raised and indeed welcome the prospect.

To choose with an open heart and mind, with consciousness, the workshops you will attend today, I wish you all heightened awareness.

I am grateful and honoured to have had this opportunity to share with you my findings. Thank you for attention and time.

Go well

References

Allport, G. W. (1937) *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*. New York: Holt

Beisser, A R. (1970) *The Paradoxical Theory of Change*. In Fagan, J. and Shepherd, I. (eds) *Gestalt Therapy Now*. Palo Alto CA: Science and Behavior Books Inc.

Cummings EE *'When God decided to invent' Poems 1923-1954* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc..

Damasio, A. (2000) *A feeling of what happens; Body, Emotions and the making of consciousness* London: Vintage Random

Damasio, A (2004) *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* London: Vintage Random

Edelman, G. M. (2004) *Wider than the sky The phenomenal gift of consciousness*. Connecticut: Yale University Press

Ferrari, M. & Sternberg, R. (1998). *Self-Awareness: Its Nature and Development*. New York: Guilford Press

Gradenfors P. (2003) *How homo became sapiens* London: Oxford University Press

Hofstadter, D. (2007) *I am a strange Loop*. New York; Basic Books

Horowitz, E. L. (1935) *Spatial localization of the self*. *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol 6, 379-387

Jaynes J (1977) *The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind*. New York:Houghton Mifflin

Jerison H. (1973) *The evolution of the brain and intelligence*. New York: Academic Press

<http://jimworld.com/Consciousness.html#c1> (18.10.11)

<http://www.daleklinks.co.uk/daleks/dalek-illustrations/leemations> (6.11.11)

Lewin, K. (1935) *Dynamic Theory of Personality*. New York: McGrawHill

<http://www.consciousentities.com/libet.htm> (18.10.11)

McGinn, C. (1991) *The Problem of Consciousness*. Oxford: Blackwell

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consciousness> (18.10.11)

Moreno, J. L. (1934) *Who Shall Survive?* Wash., D. C.: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co.

Piaget, J. (1932) *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. New York: Harcourt, Brace

Pinker, Steven 1997: *How the Mind Works*. London: Norton

http://www.religioustolerance.org/abo_fetu.htm (6.11.11)

http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/ramachandran/ramachandran_p1.html
(18.10.11)

Scaruffi, P (2006) *The Nature of Consciousness The Structure of Life and the Meaning of Matter*. Publisher Omniware

Stern, D N. (1985 and 1998) *The interpersonal world of the infant: A view from psychoanalysis and development*. New York: Basic Books

<http://theemergencesite.com/Theory/Human-Consciousness-Stages-Develop.htm> (6.11.11)

Velmans, M and Schneider, SL. (2007) *The Blackwell Companion to consciousness*. Oxford: Blackwell

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consciousness> (18.10.11)

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC529293/> (18.10.11)

