



Constructivism in the Age of Trump: Truth, Lies, and Knowing the Difference

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Donald Trump lies so often that some have wondered whether he has poisoned the well. Can we continue to defend the constructivism of relational psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on interpretive understanding? Might it not be claimed that this is actually the very approach Trump himself takes? Does an openness to interpretive understanding allow anybody to just say anything, as Trump does? Would our views perhaps be more justified and defensible, and give less shelter to the world's liars, if we shifted to a reliance on objectivism and its advocacy of "facts?" I say no. I take the point of view, drawing illustrations from the news of the months just before this presentation was delivered (June 2018), that the crucial democratic influence of constructivism not only persists when despotic leaders lie in order to enforce their agendas, it is actually magnified under circumstances like those we face now.

According to the *Washington Post's* Fact Checker, Donald Trump, by May 1 of this year, had made 3,001 false or misleading public claims in his presidency (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2018). That's an average of 6.5 per day. And the rate is increasing. In his first 100 days he made 4.9 such claims per day; but in April and May of 2018,¹ that number rose to about 9 per day.

We expect politicians to stretch the truth. But Trump is a whole different animal. He lies as a policy. He lies to get whatever he wants, and he clearly feels entirely justified in doing it. We are angry and frightened because what he wants is so often nationalistic in the very worst sense, enriching for the already wealthy; misogynistic; racist; fascist; and anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ). He will say anything to please what gets called "his base" and to inflate his own sense of importance.

Before I get to psychoanalysis per se, let me use a little math to represent the scale of Trump's lying. I haven't found a comparison of the number of Trump lies reported by Fact Checker with the records of lies by other politicians. But the *New York Times* has done something like that (Leonhardt, Philbrick, & Thompson, 2017). They used much more stringent criteria than Fact Checker, listing only outright, blatant lies—that is, the *New York Times* didn't include the multitude of slurs and hyperbole that may not rise to the level of outright lies but are destructive and purposely misleading. By that conservative standard, Trump told 103 lies in his

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¹ This is the most recent period for which Fact Checker had tallied their findings at the time this piece was written.

first 10 months in office, or an average of 10.3 lies per month. Trump told six times as many lies in the first 10 months of his presidency as President Obama told in his entire eight years.

At these rates, Trump will tell 494 blatant lies in the four years we hope will be the limit of his presidency. Barack Obama, according to the *Times*, told a total of 18 lies in his eight years in office. Divide that number in half to make it comparable to the projection I have made of Trump's lies during a single presidential term, and we have these totals: 494 Trump lies to 9 Obama lies. It would take poor, pokey Obama 55 presidential terms, or 220 years, to catch up with the number of lies that Trump will tell, at his current rate, in a single four-year term. Obama would have had to start lying in 1796!

A senior relational analyst who, like all of us (I believe), considers the current political-moral situation in this country to be a disaster, recently told me that she wondered, given the lies that are Trump's stock in trade, whether it remains justifiable to continue to take a constructivist position about truth, the kind of position that has been an anchor for relational psychoanalysis since its earliest days. And my colleague is not alone. On May 29 of this year, the lead story in the *New York Times* (Davis & Haberman, 2018) carried the headline "Trump Embraces Shadowy Plots; Theories from Fringes; Agencies Undermined by Claims of 'Spygate' and 'Deep State.'" Near the fold of the front page, the story has this to say:

Now that he is president, Mr. Trump's baseless stories of secret plots by powerful interests appear to be having a distinct effect. Among critics, they have fanned fears that he is eroding public trust in institutions, undermining the idea of objective truth and sowing widespread suspicions about the government and news media that mirror his own.

"The effect on the life of the nation of a president inventing conspiracy theories in order to distract attention from legitimate investigations of other things he dislikes is corrosive," said Jon Meacham, a presidential historian and biographer. "The diabolical brilliance of the Trump strategy of disinformation is that many people are simply going to hear the charges and countercharges, and decide that there must be something to them, because the president of the United States is saying them." (p. 1)

The perspective represented in this newspaper article is widespread; and it should be. But let me repeat one of its sentences, which conveys a point I eventually dispute: "Among critics," the writers say, "[Trump's lies] have fanned fears that he is eroding public trust in institutions, undermining the idea of objective truth" (Davis & Haberman, 2018, p. 1).

Note that the desirability of objective truth is taken for granted. That is common. I don't believe that most people actually *decide* that objective truth is desirable, though; rather, this way of thinking about truth has been "normalized" in our culture so that there is no real alternative; it simply seems as if that's the way the world is. Objectivity is good.

The alternative to objectivism that I will put before you is constructivism. And so, before I offer a further response to the issues raised by Trump's lying, let me tell you a bit about constructivism, so that you can understand the views and worries of those many people like my colleague and the *Times* writers.

Constructivism is a broad orientation derived from the hermeneutic epistemology of a collection of influential psychologists and philosophers,² and it was introduced into relational thinking in the 1980s and 1990s by (among others) Irwin Hoffman (1998), Stephen Mitchell

² A partial list of these writers, an otherwise disparate crew, includes Barthes, Richard Bernstein, Jerome Bruner, Derrida, Foucault, Gadamer, Paul Goodman, Habermas, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Thomas Nagel, Ulric Neisser, Ricoeur, Rorty, Charles Taylor, and Paul Watzlawick.

(1993), and me (Stern, 1983, 1997, 2018). Those years were an exciting time to think about what mattered about truth in psychoanalysis, because at that time the traditional philosophical interpretation of truth—correspondence theory, or objectivism—was still taken for granted in our field. In that frame of reference, even if human beings take many different perspectives on reality, the objects and events of the world have a single, objective existence, an existence independent from our activity of knowing. Truth, that is, preexists our acquaintance with it. And so truth, in this view, is simply a matter of establishing the correct correspondence between our statements—that is, the view from *inside* our minds—and the things and events in the world that already exists *outside* our minds.³ Truth is either/or, in other words. What we know or believe is right or wrong, accurate or inaccurate.

By the 1980s and 1990s, when the first relational writers began publishing, most of the rest of the intellectual world—but not psychoanalysis, at least not the mainstream psychoanalysis of North America—had moved from objectivism to poststructuralism and philosophical hermeneutics. The rest of the world, that is, was in the process of coming to terms with the interpretive or linguistic turn, in which it was accepted that truth is an interpretive matter inextricably bound up with the human mind, no longer “either/or” but more often “both/and.” These pairs of terms have become so familiar today that we can hardly remember a time when they were new. But it was not so long ago.

And so, by the 1980s, the process of symbolization had begun to be understood, even in some psychoanalytic quarters, as something more, or other, than a set of labels for experience that already existed. Instead, the process by which symbolic meaning comes about was understood to have constitutive properties. Verbal language, in particular, no longer was understood to be merely a set of labels, or clothing, for experience that already existed in some other form. Instead, language transformed what it represented, not only shaping a new *kind* of meaning but also participating in the creation of experience itself.⁴

The interpretive turn represented a widespread rejection of dualism, the understanding of mind that had been dominant in the Western world since the Enlightenment. Descartes thought about the mind as a kind of theater in which we sit as spectators, watching world events as if they were events on a stage. This is the source of what I described a moment ago as correspondence theory—truth defined as the correct link between symbol and symbolized. The scene on Descartes’s stage was already there; symbolization was just a matter of correctly describing it. There is no genuine ambiguity in the world in this view. Anything that *seems* like ambiguity actually represents some interruption of our natural and direct access to the truth.

In the interpretive or hermeneutic critique of dualism, on the other hand, mind and world become parts of a unity, and the spectator metaphor ceases to work. World and self are all mixed up together so that it is no longer possible to imagine observing the world without changing the self (e.g., Slavin & Kriegman, 1998), or changing the self without addressing its embeddedness in its world. Truth is understood to be the outcome of what hermeneutic

³ In objectivist views, the mind’s knowledge of itself, or of the self, is a special case; but this special case doesn’t contradict the rule: In objectivist views, that is, what we can know about our minds, like what we can know about the outside world, preexists our acquaintance with it.

⁴ Here let me just add that I accept the existence of interpretations that are so widespread that they may as well be facts. That the object in front of me is a table is an interpretation; but it is such an obvious one that the interpretive aspect is trivial.

philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) called *genuine conversation*. Truth, that is, is always dialogic. More about this point later.

The critique of dualism lies at the heart of the ways that relational psychoanalysis differs from the North American mainstream psychoanalysis that preceded it. We relational analysts adopted the view of most contemporary epistemologists, especially those with a hermeneutic orientation, that *reality itself is ambiguous*, and that the shape it takes when we articulate it is not fully predetermined. Truth is not defined objectively, as if it already exists and is just waiting for us to stumble over it. It comes into explicit being only as we become aware of it. We worked hard to establish psychoanalytic constructivism in those days. We faced stiff resistance from members of the conservative wing of the American Freudian mainstream, who characterized our views, wrongly, as relativistic, as if we were claiming that anyone could say anything, with an equal claim to be speaking the truth.

Now, let me return here to my colleague's questions about constructivism. It is this point that worried her, I think. She wondered if it was right to continue to represent and defend constructivist views to her students. Could she—*should* she?—still take the position that truth is not defined objectively? Is it possible that, by doing that, we were undermining our justification to reject the lies of Trump and his minions? If we come to our understandings, our truths, via acts of interpretation, selecting from among the possibilities available in that particular moment, does Trump not have the right to do the same thing? How do we answer the assertion that he is simply doing what we do, interpreting the world the way he sees fit? Should we still so clearly support the idea that psychoanalysis is an interpretive discipline?

I really, *really* hate to say this—but the argument that relational psychoanalysis is relativistic is fake news. Dealing with this annoying argument is like playing Whack-a-Mole: No matter how many times we defeat the claim that we are relativists, it pops up again elsewhere. It is in this context that the argument made by the critics of constructivism, the worries of my colleague, and the kinds of attitudes represented by what is taken for granted in that *Times* article I quoted come together: They all rest on the assumption that if you reject objectivism, you inevitably embrace relativism, as if there were only those two alternatives. This just is not true. (It was to make this point, for instance, that philosopher Richard Bernstein titled his 1983 book on Gadamer's hermeneutics *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*.⁵) And so I present one more time the case that constructivism is not relativism.

In constructivist views, what appears in consciousness as experience is an explicit articulation or realization of whatever it is that came before. Steve Mitchell (1993) referred to the global, undifferentiated, vague state that preexists consciousness as “essential ambiguity”; Irwin Hoffman (1998) described it as the continuously shifting dialectical relation of the foreground and background of experience; in my vocabulary, it is “unformulated experience” (Stern, 1983, 1997, 2018). Our conservative critics claimed that we were advocating the position that unconscious phenomena, the “what-came-before”—essential ambiguity or unformulated experience—could be articulated, formulated, or realized in any damned way we pleased. This is an “either/or” position, anchored in that unquestioned assumption, which I have already stated and disputed, that the adoption of objectivism is the only way to avoid relativism.

⁵ See also Schmidt (1995).

Let me be as simple and straightforward about this as I can: I have yet to meet a relational analyst who accepts designation as a relativist. So if we reject objectivism, how is it that we're not relativists? News flash: We do it by—believe it or not—accepting that reality exists! We believe that we are *not* free, if we want to respect the limits of truthfulness and sanity, to formulate explicit meaning from unformulated experience in any way we please. Reality supplies *constraints* on the interpretations we can make and still be creating valid meanings in life. If I tell you that I went to the grocery store yesterday when I actually went bowling, I am lying in any epistemology: My statement exceeds the constraints. Constraints are much looser, although still present, when (for example) I assign an affective significance to the expression of my patient's face. These looser constraints allow a greater latitude in the range of formulated experiences that remain valid, or truthful. There is wiggle room, often lots of it.

Constraints on meaning are the only direct indications of reality we have. In hermeneutic or constructivist views, reality cannot be known or understood directly. Meaningfulness requires that we interpret whatever faces us, and the tools we use in that interpretive task are the tools of culture. Culture, actually, can be defined as the sum total of the interpretive tools at our disposal. Despite the essential ambiguity of experience in constructivist views, then, reality is "*there*."

In constructivist views, the question is never whether the patient is distorting objective reality; the question is how to understand how the patient's perception is plausible. What is the patient observing about the analyst, for instance, however selective that perception may be? And why is it *that particular perception* that comes about, among all the others that might have been created from that preexisting ambiguity?

Even with all this wiggle room, though, there is a point beyond which a perception or a thought is crazy or untruthful—even if it conveys something we need to pay attention to. Ed Levenson (1981) said, years ago, that, while Freudians interpret as a distortion the patient's insistence that the analyst has poisoned their soup—that is, as a projection of the inner world—interpersonal (and now relational) analysts ask what they *really did*—or at least what they can plausibly be interpreted to have done—that the patient is representing in this indirect way. Both the Freudian and the interpersonalist think this patient is crazy—but they differ over what being crazy means.

As a means of taking the next step in the argument I want to make, let me quote some remarks made by our former secretary of state Rex Tillerson, who, in May 2018,⁶ said this to an audience of graduates of the Virginia Military Institute. Tillerson was obviously referring to Trump, and was taken that way: "If our leaders seek to conceal the truth, or we as people become accepting of alternative realities that are no longer grounded in facts, then we as American citizens are on a pathway to relinquishing our freedom" (McCarthy, 2018). Tillerson went on say that

a responsibility of every American citizen to each other is to preserve and protect our freedom by recognizing what truth is and is not, what a fact is and is not and begin by holding ourselves accountable to truthfulness and demand our pursuit of America's future be fact-based—not based on wishful thinking, not hoped-for outcomes made in shallow promises, but with a clear-eyed view of the facts as they are, and guided by the truth that will set us free to seek solutions to our most daunting challenges.

⁶ Just a month before these remarks were delivered.

I appreciate Tillerson's attempt to bring Trump down. But Tillerson's way of dealing with truth doesn't work for me. It doesn't work for psychoanalysis in general, and for relational psychoanalysis in particular. Tillerson makes the same assumption made by the authors of the *New York Times* article I cited earlier: He assumes that objectivism is the way of the world, a natural phenomenon. We have seen that it is not.

What I have said so far is, I think, a good defense against the accusation that relational psychoanalysis is relativistic. But we need not limit ourselves to defense. We can also mount an offense.

Here we reach the real heart of the matter. If we depend on reality to be unitary, and to preexist our interaction with it—as an objectivistic view would have us think—and if we understand that unitary reality to be objectively true—which is the only way you *can* understand a unitary reality, after all—we create a world in which there exists a constant battle for supremacy. Whose truth will prevail? This is a world in which Benjamin's (2017) reversible complementarity is the order of the day, and the Third is nowhere to be found. *In extremis*, the Third is dead, as in Sam Gerson's (2009) classic paper on the impact of the Holocaust on those of its victims who survived. Such a world is ruled by violence, force, and oppression.

Facts are made to be enforced; and they are amenable to enforcement. If we depend on reality to be unitary, we make it certain that whomever has the most power will establish what counts as "the facts." To live in a world of facts is to give nationalism and patriotism free reign, to support the right of one culture, gender, race, sexual preference, or class to dominate others. When you believe one thing is objectively true, to the exclusion of alternative ways of understanding, you act on that basis. Life becomes a struggle for the right to determine the truth, and the one who wins is the one who is strongest. It is our unthinking belief in facts, strangely enough, that makes Donald Trump so alarming, because he cynically claims he believes in the facts and that he has them. He would be less dangerous if the citizens of this country were more used to the idea that truth is jointly constructed in a collaborative conversation.

These points are as true in the consulting room as they are in the broader society. In relational psychoanalysis, as I have already said, the creation of truth is a dialogic process created through genuine conversation. We often fail, of course; power relations of all kinds are inevitably part of what we try to examine in our clinical work. Dialogue is our ideal. Force is not. But neither do we idealize the avoidance of conflict: Argument and confrontation are part of genuine conversation. There is nothing inconsistent in simultaneously holding constructivist views and the strongest kind of commitments to clinical and political positions.

And so, for political and clinical purposes alike, constructivism is not simply unobjectionable. We need not be limited to defending it. We *need* constructivism—in our clinical work as much as in our political and moral lives. In an objectively defined world, racism, classism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and hatred of LGBTQ people are liable to be enacted endlessly and without much opposition because, without a commitment to a collaborative, dialogic approach to truth, we cannot identify and question, and eventually perceive in our own experience, our participation in systems of oppression. In an objectivist world, oppression is the norm: The strong impose their will and their facts—often, we know, with what seem to them to be the best intentions. But good intentions are not enough, and anyway, they are often enough in short supply. Trump doesn't give a damn about good intentions, and the idea that he has even a smidgen of interest in genuine conversation is laughable.

This is why opposition like Tillerson’s can’t work for us, and doesn’t appeal to us as a way to proceed—in psychoanalysis, I think, but in life, too. We cannot accept the certainty that there is a right way based on “the facts.” While of course we do thoroughly agree with Tillerson’s passionate position about Trump’s lies, we must reject his worldview on the grounds that it would lead us into just the kind of ethical morass we deplore.

We must continue to take the position that human experience is an interpretive, dialogic construction. Trump’s lies, inspired by objectivism, do not constitute a challenge to our kind of truth; and our view of truth does not reduce the effectiveness of our challenge to Trump’s lies. In fact, if we want to defeat Trumpspeak, constructivism is the best ground I know to stand on. A lie continues to be a lie in constructivism, both because it exceeds the constraints supplied by reality and because it does not emerge in dialogue. To my colleague who worried that our constructivism is leading us into a moral quagmire, I say that matters are just exactly the other way around: Constructivism not only is an effective answer to Trump’s lies but also preserves what is most precious about truth, and supports the way relational psychoanalysts have always argued that we reach it.

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