

61st Annual Meeting of the *Rapaport-Klein Study Group*, June 9-11, 2023
www.psychomedia.it/rapaport-klein/june2023.htm

June 11, 2023, 10.00 am

Introduction to Jessica Benjamin

Jim Fosshage

Hello Everyone,

I'm Jim Fosshage, and it's my pleasure to welcome you all to hearing Jessica Benjamin, the third major speaker of the *Rapaport-Klein Study Group* meeting, on June 11, 2023. I have the pleasure this morning of introducing Dr. Benjamin, anticipating hearing her delineate some of her most recent scientific and clinical contributions to the field of psychoanalysis, along with her current and ongoing interests in politics and social justice. Unfortunately, I could not be with you this weekend, but, nevertheless, chose to introduce Jessica through our newly found modality called zoom.

Dr. Benjamin is a supervising faculty Member of the *New York University Postdoctoral Psychology Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis*, and is a Founder and Board Member at the *Stephen Mitchell Center for Relational Studies*, and she is in private practice in New York City.

Dr. Benjamin is widely known and deservedly recognized nationally and internationally first for her contributions to create a relational approach to psychoanalysis that references and pays tribute to its classical and object relations origins.

I'll review these shortly, but these efforts to create a psychoanalytic theory of relational repair do not transcend her ongoing fight for social justice, for which she has also gained much appreciation. In 2015, she was awarded the *Hans Kilian Prize* at the University of the Ruhr in Bochum, Germany, the largest European award for work that joins psychoanalysis with the humanities. And from 2004-10 she initiated and directed *The Acknowledgment Project*, together with Dr. Eyad el Sarah of Gaza, that involved Israeli and Palestinian mental health practitioners and international dialogue leaders. Dr. Benjamin also participated in creating a video film describing the Israeli-Palestinian combatants for Peace, which is an organization committed to opposing the Occupation, working non-violently to establish conditions for peace.

Turning now to her psychoanalytic publications, *Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*, published in 1988, was Dr. Benjamin's first book, and while it would be difficult to argue that it is her most important, it nevertheless still retains its place as an outstanding contribution, still widely celebrated and discussed. In fact, 26 years after *The Bonds of Love* was published, in 2014, *The Bonds of Love Revisited* was published. This book contains fifteen different essays written by notable scholars all of which reflect on Benjamin's *Bonds of Love*, testifying irrefutably to that book's importance, influence, and continuing impact.

Bonds of Love considers a number of issues that remain of interest to Benjamin in all of her writings. It contains, first, an important revision of the sexual and developmental theories of Sigmund Freud, based partially on Benjamin's own thoroughgoing investigation of infant and gender research,

which influences her work to this day. Benjamin had observed and studied mothers and infants for three years, from 1979 to 1982, under the partial guidance of Beatrice Beebe. Benjamin also and always makes use of the feminist criticism she had studied for many years, beginning when she was in college. Finally, she applies to the book her own reinterpretation of psychoanalytic theory. All of this experience and background is employed to consider and reflect on her main topic, the problem of domination. Benjamin writes in the Introduction to *Bonds of Love* that the book is an analysis of the interplay between love and domination, viewing domination as a “two way” process involving the participation of those who submit to power and those who exercise it. She writes: “This work seeks to understand how domination is anchored in the hearts of the dominated.” She illustrates how relationships of domination involve estrangement, by which Benjamin means the turning away from recognition through gender splitting, or, using her own terms, gender polarity. Further, relationships of domination are not about an inherent aggressive drive, but, rather, can be explained better by the fact that recognizing the other is so difficult. Further, Benjamin contends that domination, with the attendant withdrawal of recognition, affects our family life, our social institutions, and our sexual relationships. We will ask Dr. Benjamin how her views on gender polarity and recognition are maintained in her current book, *Beyond Doer and Done to*, which I’ll refer to shortly.

Jessica Benjamin’s second book is *Like Subjects, Love Objects, Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*, published in 1995. Here she explores further her theory of inter subjectivity, and expands and revises Freud’s Oedipal theory to include both genders, discussing their shared attempts to generate within themselves both independence and connection. Returning to the themes of domination and submission, Benjamin once again reflects on the cultural polarity of male relationality and female vulnerability.

Benjamin has written two other books: *The Shadow of the Other; Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*, written in 1997, and, most recently, *Beyond Doer and Done to: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity, Kane the Third*, written in 2018, which expands her theory of mutual recognition and the breakdown into Complementarity, of Doer Done to dynamics. Here she traces the course of the third beginning in early development *its movement into the inevitable oscillations between recognition and complementarity*. In this book on the psychoanalytic situation Benjamin connects this emergence of the third to enactments in the psychoanalytic relationship. The book has been hailed by many as not only a great achievement, perhaps her greatest, but also one of the greatest books of this era in psychoanalysis. To quote from Lew Aron, “Benjamin elucidates the relations of complementarity, acknowledgement, rhythmicity, the third, mutual vulnerability, doer-done to relations, trauma, dissociation, and witnessing (...) This magnificent interdisciplinary synthesis breaks through intellectual barriers and will inspire generations of psychotherapists, psychologists, philosophers, feminists, social theorists, and activists.”

I’ll complete my Introduction to Benjamin by noting that in addition to the books she has published, Jessica Benjamin has published many articles, among them being “Beyond Doer and Done to: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness” (*Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 2004, 73, 1: 5-46), which is the fourth most cited journal article in the entire field of psychoanalysis.

Let us turn to Jessica Benjamin.