

A collaboration between:



Online Workshop 2: Can theoretical divisions in psychoanalysis and Jungian psychotherapy be divorced from institutional hierarchies?

Held on: Thursday 14th May 2026

Facilitator: Professor Jean Knox

How the workshop was 'pitched':

This session explores the ways in which competing theoretical frameworks, such as Freudian, Jungian, Kleinian, and other psychoanalytic schools, have profoundly influenced the institutional structure and culture of psychoanalysis. These historical divisions have not only influenced the development of training programmes and professional standards but have also contributed to the formation of distinct professional identities within the field. The session will consider how these theoretical divisions have shaped the culture of training institutions, often leading to rigid hierarchies, a 'bunker mentality', and divisive attitudes that can sometimes hinder collaboration and innovation. How might more partnership and openness be facilitated?

Summary of the Presentation

The presentation examined the epistemological foundations of psychoanalytic and Jungian psychotherapy, focusing on how knowledge is generated, validated, and institutionalised within the profession. The speaker argued that many psychoanalytic theories are fundamentally inductive constructions based on clinical observation rather than deductively testable scientific hypotheses. Because such theories cannot be conclusively falsified, multiple competing models of mind can coexist, leading to fragmentation, theoretical disputes, and institutional divisions.

The speaker identified several consequences arising from this situation:

- The proliferation of competing schools of thought, each supported by its own clinical observations.
- Confirmation bias, whereby clinicians may find evidence that supports pre-existing theoretical commitments.
- Enduring disagreements about fundamental concepts such as psychic reality and pathology.

- Institutional defensiveness, theoretical rigidity, and resistance to innovation.

The presentation also explored external pressures on psychoanalytic psychotherapy, particularly its marginal position within public healthcare systems, where shorter, outcome-focused and cost-effective interventions are often prioritised. While there is evidence that long-term psychoanalytic therapy can be clinically effective, concerns about cost-effectiveness continue to restrict wider implementation.

Particular attention was given to problems of:

- Siege mentality within institutions.
- Reification of theoretical constructs as if they were objective entities.
- Sectarian conflict between psychoanalytic traditions.
- Weak accountability structures and regulatory failures.
- Hierarchies that can facilitate abuses of power affecting patients and trainees.

The speaker concluded that psychoanalytic practice requires a broader evidence base grounded in developmental research, attachment research, process research, psychotherapy outcome studies, and interdisciplinary dialogue. Rather than treating theories as objective truths, they should be regarded as useful imaginative frameworks for understanding clinical phenomena.

Key Themes

1. The Nature and Limits of Psychoanalytic Knowledge

A central theme was the distinction between inductive and deductive reasoning and the implications of this distinction for psychoanalytic knowledge. Psychoanalytic theories were presented as explanatory frameworks that emerge from repeated observation rather than experimentally testable propositions. This creates epistemological uncertainty because multiple valid interpretations can coexist without definitive means of adjudication between them.

Underlying question: How do we know what we know in psychotherapy? This theme framed the entire discussion and set the foundation for later concerns about theory, evidence and professional identity.

2. Theory as Both Resource and Problem

Participants repeatedly returned to the paradoxical role of theory. Theory was described as:

- Essential for organising experience.
- Generative of meaning and clinical understanding.
- Potentially restrictive when treated as absolute truth.

A recurring concern was that theoretical allegiances can become defensive identities rather than flexible clinical tools. Several discussants argued that when practitioners become attached to theory, they risk losing sight of the person in front of them.

The discussion repeatedly distinguished between:

- Clinical phenomena.
- The theories used to explain those phenomena.

The assumption that phenomena necessarily belong to a particular theoretical model was strongly challenged.

3. Institutional Power and Orthodoxy

A major theme concerned the relationship between theory and institutional power. Participants explored how:

- Training organisations reinforce particular theoretical allegiances.
- Professional status becomes linked to doctrinal conformity.
- Certain approaches gain legitimacy while others are excluded.

Discussion of attachment theory and the BPC highlighted concerns that institutional structures may continue to privilege specific traditions while marginalising others.

This theme extended beyond intellectual disagreement into questions of:

- Access to training.
- Professional recognition.
- Gatekeeping.
- Authority.

4. The Profession under Threat

Anxiety about the future of psychoanalytic psychotherapy emerged throughout the presentation. Threats were described as both:

Internal:

- Theoretical fragmentation.
- Lack of consensus.
- Professional infighting.

External:

- NHS funding priorities.
- Cost-effectiveness requirements.
- Dominance of evidence-based commissioning models.

This produced a sense that the profession is simultaneously defending itself against outside pressures while struggling with internal divisions.

5. Research, Evidence and Legitimacy

Perhaps the most sustained discussion theme concerned research. Participants debated:

- Whether psychotherapy should seek legitimacy through conventional scientific methods.

- The limitations of randomised controlled trials.
- Alternative forms of evidence appropriate to complex relational processes.

Several contributors questioned whether psychotherapy's strengths lie precisely in those aspects of human subjectivity that are difficult to measure experimentally.

A developing consensus seemed to emerge that:

- Evidence is necessary.
- RCTs alone are insufficient.
- Multiple methodologies are needed.

The discussion reflects an ongoing tension between scientific legitimacy and preserving the complexity of therapeutic work.

6. Relationality as the Common Factor

One of the strongest integrative themes was the idea that what matters most in psychotherapy may be relational rather than theoretical.

Examples included:

- Turn-taking.
- Rupture and repair.
- Responsiveness.
- Emotional attunement.
- Recognition and agency.

Drawing on infant research, attachment research, and process research, the speaker suggested that successful therapy may depend less on competing meta-psychologies and more on universal features of human relationship.

This theme offered perhaps the clearest bridge across psychoanalytic schools.

7. Accountability, Ethics and Safeguarding

A powerful ethical theme concerned the dangers created when authority becomes insufficiently accountable. The presentation linked:

- Institutional hierarchy.
- Theoretical certainty.
- Regulatory weakness.
- Boundary violations.

Examples included:

- Failure to investigate complaints adequately.
- Abuse of institutional status.
- Coercive training practices.
- Sexual misconduct.

The discussion suggested that theoretical pluralism alone is not enough; robust ethical frameworks and transparent governance are equally necessary.

8. Inclusion, Integration and Professional Evolution

Several participants advocated moving beyond doctrinal boundaries and embracing a more integrative future. This theme manifested in discussions about:

- Attachment theory.
- Developmental research.
- Neuroscience.
- Relational and intersubjective perspectives.
- Cross-disciplinary learning.

There was a noticeable desire for a profession organised around communities of practice rather than competing schools defending territory.