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Neurodiversity *A Paradigm Shift in Social Awareness*

Did you know that neurodivergence affects over a billion people around the globe, presenting each individual with wide-ranging challenges, as well as strengths? The prevalence of this syndrome varies significantly among different countries, with higher rates reported in high-income nations, due to more effective diagnosis.

Now a commonly used term, neurodiversity grew in prominence in the 1990s, and is attributed to Judy Singer, an Australian psychologist and sociologist. Her intent remains bringing different ways of thinking and experiencing the world into public view, in support of people whose personalities include neurodiverse attributes. Singer believes that all people have inherent worth, and that those who learn differently should be free from stigmatization and able to access all available opportunities.

Although autism spectrum is commonly used to describe neurodiversity, there are numerous categories that are illustrative of the syndrome, including:

- Autism spectrum disorder; Asperger's syndrome
- Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Down syndrome
- Dyscalculia—difficulty with understanding mathematics
- Dysgraphia—difficulty with understanding the process of writing
- Dyslexia—reading challenges
- Dyspraxia—a developmental coordination disorder
- Intellectual disabilities
- Mental health conditions, such as bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and others

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A MESSAGE FROM Executive Director Vicki G. Semel

Dear ACAP Community,

As we approach the 45th anniversary of ACAP, I find myself thinking about the classic children's book, *The Little Engine That Could*.

The book is a timeless motivational story that points to belief in oneself and a commitment to staying the course, regardless of obstacles. The famous line in the story, "I think I can," has inspired self-determination for generations of children.

Thanks to your generous support, during our history we have regarded obstacles not as impediments to progress, but rather as opportunities for growth and change—for ways to better serve our students, our patients, and each other. From the handful of people who launched ACAP, we have become a group of dedicated teachers intent upon educating and nurturing the students who come to us from all walks of life. I am grateful to each of you for sustaining us along the way, and for your commitment to our future. Because of you, our alumni, with their training, skills and dedication, are flourishing in careers, from the nonprofit sector, to teaching, to private practice.

Contrasting these times with our inception in 1980, our current students are navigating a world that is changing with undeniable speed. The cost of post-graduate education has never been as high. Some ACAP students are parents, some are single parents; some work full-time, taking our courses during the evening. Managing it all is a struggle—but they persevere, because *they know they can*.

With your support, we will continue this journey, training the next generation of mental health providers for a world in need of our care. With your help, no obstacle we face cannot be overcome. Thank you.



Vicki Semel, PsyD, Executive Director



Celebrating 45 Years of Service to Our Mission!



“I’m proud to be part of the ACAP community, a place that has not only transformed my professional career, but also offered me a safe and welcoming space to grow and find my footing within American culture. ACAP has been more than a school—it’s been a home.”

—CASSIO MENEZES

**On Behalf of
Troubled Teens,
ACAP Appeals to You.**

We ask for your gift in support of our biannual fundraising appeal, a copy of which is included with this newsletter.

With your help, we can provide skilled, professional therapy for young people who turn to us in their time of crisis, but who lack the financial means to cover the entire cost of the care they need.

We can continue to do this vital work thanks to you—a member of the committed, compassionate ACAP community.

Thank You.

ACAP'S MISSION AND VISION

ACAP promotes and prioritizes optimal mental health in communities through teaching, training, and treating, as we apply the transformative power of talking and listening.

Through their training in the application of effective interventions and acquired clinical skills, ACAP students and graduates work toward a future in which issues of mental health will be addressed with the deepest empathy, respect, and compassion, and resolved in ways that meet unique individual needs.

ACAP partners with the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis to offer BGSP-New Jersey's graduate degree programs. BGSP-NJ shares ACAP's mission to optimize mental health in communities through teaching and training.

GRADUATE SPOTLIGHT

“At ACAP, You’re Allowed to Be You!”

In 2019, when Nicola Foster-Wilsher moved to the United States, she kept in the back of her mind the words of a mother she’d befriended in a parent-child group in her new town; that friend is a psychotherapist.

It was a job offer her husband couldn’t pass up that brought their family of four, including two children, then ages 6 and 3, across the ocean to a new country and a bit of culture shock, with a new life in suburban New Jersey. Before her children were born, Wilsher had been an educator at Thurrock and Basildon College in Essex, England, and then moved on to training other teachers. Before she embarked upon her teaching career, she says she was always interested in the possibility of working in mental health.

Within a few weeks of arrival in her new home in New Jersey, Wilsher says she was overwhelmed by homesickness

and became depressed. She had grown closer to her mothers’ group friend in her new town; the friend, who was familiar with ACAP, suggested that Wilsher take a course, but the pandemic intervened, prompting her to consider waiting. After a conversation with Eva Silver, ACAP’s director of admissions and advisement, Wilshire acquired the impetus to matriculate.

“She encouraged me to think enrolling at ACAP was possible, even though I felt I knew nothing about psychoanalysis,” said Wilshire. Within two weeks, she signed up for the fall 2021 semester and began her studies; in 2024 she completed a masters in clinical mental health counseling. Her husband was exceptionally supportive, she noted, which helped her feel empowered. “I was completely invested in, excited, and invigorated by my studies,” she said, adding, “I’ve got the bug!” She is



Nicola Foster-Wilsher

currently working as a mental health counselor at a specialty practice and graduated from ACAP’s program in April.

“ACAP has been there during my personal journey,” she said, adding, “Classes are so unlike those at “Uni” back home; here, there is sharing and discussion that relates to oneself. You’re allowed to be you—and that’s so American!”

Where ARE THEY NOW?

ACAP and BGSP-NJ graduates are always evolving! Here is one update:

“I started my career as an art therapist which morphed into training as a modern psychoanalyst at ACAP. Both schools of thought align well, emphasizing the unconscious and emotional communication. My early experience in analysis and classes gave me a feeling of finally being “heard” and “seen” for the first time. It has also given me the stamina and perseverance to pursue life goals.

Along the way I have worked as an art therapist for Essex County Hospital Center for 25 years, the majority of that time supervising modern psychoanalytic students, as well as art therapy students. It has been a pleasure working with them, and to witness their curiosity and dedication to their patients. Over time I have built a private practice in Livingston. My work as a psychoanalyst has helped me develop healthy relationships and an overall sense of being fulfilled.”



—LISA THOMAS, SCPsYA, LPC, LPAT

The Pioneer Who Founded Modern Psychoanalysis

Ask any ACAP student or alum to name an icon in the field of psychoanalysis: You'll hear about Dr. Hyman Spotnitz (1908-2008). An exceptional researcher in the field of psychiatry, his approach to working with schizophrenic patients in the 1950s gave rise to what is known as modern psychoanalysis. Born in Boston to immigrant parents, Spotnitz graduated from Harvard College in 1929, received his M.D. from Friedrich Wilhelms University in Berlin, and earned a Doctor of Medical Science degree in Neurology, from Columbia University in New York. As we celebrate ACAP's 45th anniversary, it's an occasion to also honor the memory of Spotnitz, an iconoclast, researcher, and humanitarian.

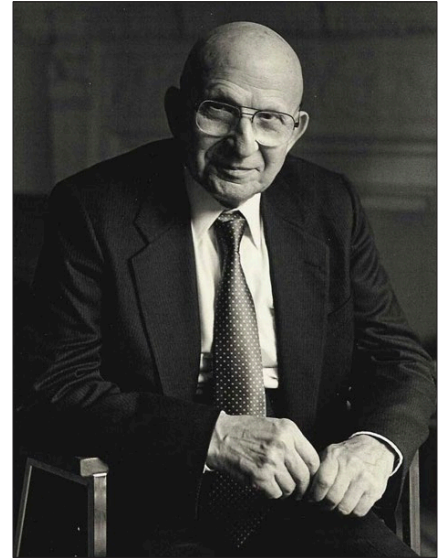
Central to his treatment was the theory of narcissistic transference, in which the patient relates to the therapist not as a separate person, but as a part of the patient's own identity. His view of the analyst's interventions emphasizes the development of an emotional-maturation communication rather than intellectual insight.

Spotnitz held then-revolutionary ideas about the treatment of schizophrenia, believing that the condition was re-

versible, and that the failure to achieve that outcome was due to methods inadequate to the diagnosis. Using his techniques, he was able, remarkably, to cure many patients previously deemed incurable. He was also one of the first psychoanalysts to promote the use of group therapy. In his landmark book, *Modern Psychoanalysis of the Schizophrenic Patient* (1969), he laid out a theory and technique for the treatment of schizophrenia, formulated from his innovative clinical research and practice.

Spotnitz's career included research in neurophysiology at the New York State Neurological Institute. He was an Adjunct Psychiatrist at Mount Sinai and the Hospital for Joint Diseases. He served as the honorary president of more than 10 psychoanalytic institutes throughout the country, including the Boston Graduate School for Psychoanalysis (BGSP).

His other books include *Psychotherapy of Preoedipal Conditions*, *Treatment of the Narcissistic Neuroses*, and *The Couch and the Circle*, among other co-authored books written for a lay audience. He published more than 100 articles and received numerous honors, including the Sigmund Freud Award



Dr. Hyman Spotnitz

from the American Society of Psychoanalytic Physicians. He was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The American Psychiatric Association honored Dr. Spotnitz in 1991 for his 50 years of service to the Association and to psychiatry. His videotaped interview, "Conversations with Dr. Hyman Spotnitz on Modern Group Psychoanalysis," was released in 1999. Spotnitz is widely recognized for his brilliant insights into the human psyche.

“One of the things we should talk about is why, in psychoanalysis, we say everything. I've had patients ask, 'How does this help? Why do I need to come and say everything?'

Dr. Spotnitz explained that so much resides in our unconscious and affects our behavior. The more you talk, the more these (thoughts) percolate into your conscious realm, where you can control how they affect your behavior.”

—RAFAEL SHARÓN, NCPsyA, SCPsyA, Psychoanalyst

“WHY I GIVE”

Nearly twenty-five years ago, when Dr. Judy Ashworth enrolled in ACAP, she was a licensed social worker specializing in eating disorders, couples and family therapy, and group psychotherapy. She says that going through the certificate program was transformative:

“I became more mature, more interested in myself and in others,” she said, but even more than that, “I found my place of belonging. The people at ACAP are

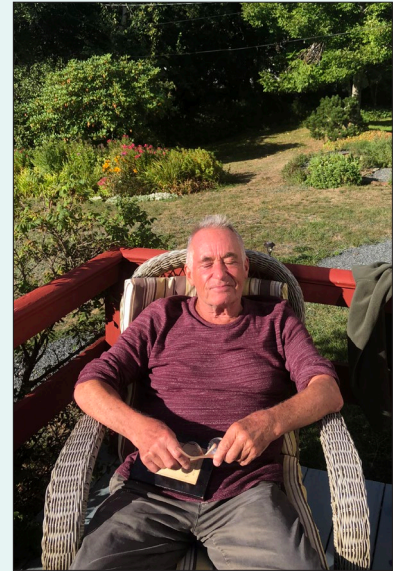
“It would make him happy to know that in his memory new analysts are being trained.”

some of my closest friends; they are like my family. We learn together, work together, share trials and tribulations. Our connection to each other is less intellectual, more emotional.

We know one another in a deeper way than we would otherwise,” she said.

Ashworth recalls that prior to enrolling at ACAP she never felt she had much to offer; joining the ACAP community changed all that. “Toward the end of my training, someone asked me what I wanted to do after graduating. She told me, ‘There’s always a place for you here.’ “That made me want to stay,” said Ashworth. Over the course of her studies she completed

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Gordon Ashworth, pictured in Maine, 2019.

NEURODIVERSITY *continued from pg. 1*

- Prader-Willi syndrome—a rare genetic condition that affects a child’s metabolism
- Sensory processing disorders
- Social anxiety
- Tourette syndrome
- Williams syndrome—a genetic disorder

Autism spectrum disorder affects approximately 1 in 100 children globally. Approximately 60% of neurodivergent individuals experience challenges with executive functioning: basic cognitive processes such as attentional control, cognitive inhibition, inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. These attributes affect planning and organization through the ability to focus attention, manage tasks, and regulate emotions—skills that are essential for goal-directed behavior.

The outlook for neurodiverse individuals, based on developing research, suggests that it can be viewed not as a disorder, but as an aspect of variation in humans. Those who advocate for neurodiversity de-emphasize differences, with the goal of creating an environment of inclusivity and acceptance. In online platforms, the awareness of neurodiversity increased more than 150% from 2019–2022; this indicates growing social awareness and acceptance. Neurodiversity training in workplaces has increased by 200% over the past three years, reflecting growing corporate recognition of employees who process information differently. For all in the neurodiverse community, these statistics are proof positive that great strides are being made, with more to come in the future.

Good News

Neurodivergent professionals report higher levels of creativity and problem-solving skills, with 60% of respondents indicating that the condition enhances their work performance.



Inclusive education frameworks can improve outcomes for neurodivergent students, with up to 70% demonstrating improved academic performance.



Multisensory interventions can significantly improve learning and behavior in neurodivergent children, with effectiveness exceeding 75%.



Access to early intervention services for neurodivergent children can reduce symptoms severity by up to 40%.

Source: Worldmetrics.org

ACAP at 45: An Evolution in Progress

In 1980, ACAP first began operating under the name Psychoanalytic Institute of New Jersey (PINJ). The then-fledgling school was housed in a church; 90-minute classes were held bi-weekly on Saturdays. PINJ subsequently moved to another location in Morristown, then to one in West Orange, and finally, to its current location in Livingston, NJ. During these moves, PINJ's name changed to the Academy of Clinical and Applied Psychoanalysis. Vicki G. Semel, PhD, PsyD, joined in 1980 and became its Executive Director in 1985, a position she has held for over forty-five years. Other major figures included Sheila Zaretsky, as well as, Patricia Bratt, PhD, and Maurice Lovell, PhD, who became directors in 1988.

Predicated on Freud's support for the idea that anyone who wanted to pursue psychoanalysis as a profession should not be deterred, ACAP adopted that model, welcoming and nurturing students from

other disciplines. In the early days, students were mental health professionals seeking advanced clinical training, with a smaller number from a range of academic fields. Some students became interested after experiencing personal psychoanalysis. As a modern psychoanalytic institute, ACAP continues to enroll new students, offering them opportunities to take one course at a time, to learn about themselves as well as available careers in mental health. Over the years, ACAP adopted the structure of a more traditional format for classes, scheduled for 3 hours over 16 weeks, including an exam week.

ACAP's students, with their respective educational and career backgrounds,

add dimension to the class experience through sharing of their diverse experiences throughout their training. Through ACAP's partnership with the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis (BGSP-NJ), students can acquire a master's degree, allowing them to pursue licensure and enter advanced education in psychoanalysis.

Students at ACAP who come from non-mental health disciplines quickly become acclimated to the psychodynamic mindset and academic competence required for excellence in clinical practice. Extensive fieldwork, training, personal psychoanalysis and clinical supervision are integral aspects of the ACAP course of study. Faculty, committed to mentoring and

an in-depth experiential academic environment, encourage a collaborative, rather than a top-down, experience.

Today, students come from all walks of life and professions in the corporate world, education, and other sectors. They take classes to enhance their professional acumen, improve parenting/relationship skills, or to make a career change. The hallmark of ACAP, personal and professional transformation, will continue to encourage and support future generations of mental health professionals.



Top right: Dr. Patricia Bratt with Executive Director Dr. Vicki Semel
Bottom row (l-r): ACAP faculty; Moe Freedman; Lillesol Kane



1986

The Psychoanalytic Center of Northern New Jersey (PCNJ) accorded nonprofit status as a 501 (c) (3)

1987

PCNJ receives Certificate of Incorporation

1995

American Board of Accreditation in Psychoanalysis (ABAP) accredits ACAP

Insights from ACAP’s Annual Conference

A CAP’s annual theater conference, held on November 1, featured a reading of *Constellations*, a two-hand play written by Nick Payne that premiered in London during 2012 and has been featured on Broadway.

The story follows the arc of the relationship between Marianne, a physicist, and Roland, a beekeeper, who meet at a social event, get swept up in a whirlwind

romance, and move in together. When an act of infidelity occurs, the couple breaks up; over time, they meet again, resume their relationship, and eventually marry. The story takes a tragic turn when

Marianne learns she has a brain tumor; with Roland’s support, she decides to pursue assisted suicide.

ACAP chose to showcase this play to explore and discuss the emotional and philosophical complexities that drive the characters, as well as each of us, across time. Through a post-screening Q&A session, attendees engaged with the artistic and psychoanalytic dimensions of the play, prompting them to consider motivation, memory and the unconscious, the life choices we have all made and continue to make, and the impact of human connection in our lives.



ACAP’s resident poet and author, Nancy Gerber, shared her experience at the event: “The play opens with playful banter, interspersed with conversations that often contradict what was said in a previous scene. As the drama progresses, both characters become more thoughtful and introspective. Roland wonders, ‘Why are we here and what are we meant to do with our lives?’, a question that has been pondered for millennia. The play’s structure is unusual—a split Zoom screen, perhaps symbolizing the emotional distance (instantiated by separation and individuation from the mother) between humans —that cuts out after short scenes of maybe a minute or so. This ongoing shifting and contradiction is a powerful device that reinforces the play’s ideas about knowability and unknowability and the effects of the unconscious on our lives. While at first I was resistant to the constant shifting,



Bottom photo (l-r): Max Roll (Roland), Danny Vaccaro, Elizabeth Handley (Marianne), and Michael Satow

as I gradually accepted its thematic importance, I came to appreciate the playwright’s creativity.” “The concept of timelessness resonates with Freud’s observation that the unconscious does not recognize time, leading us to consider how little we know about the universe, about others, and, sometimes, about ourselves,” she added.

Eleanor Handley returned to ACAP’s theater conference in the role of Marianne; Max Roll made his debut at the conference. The play was produced by Danny Vaccaro and directed by Michael Satow. The annual conference chair is Dr. Annette Vaccaro.

2003

The Psychoanalytic Center of Northern New Jersey (PCNJ) becomes the Academy of Clinical and Applied Psychoanalysis (ACAP).

2015

ACAP affiliates with the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis (BGSP)

2018

iSTRIVE program launched for young adults on the autism spectrum

2025

Enrollment grows to 100 students hosted on campus.

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Happy 90th Birthday, Moe Freedman!

One of the highlights of ACAP's 45th anniversary event was celebrating Morris "Moe" Freedman's 90th birthday. Moe has been a treasured member—and a pillar of the ACAP community, for the past 25 years.

A veteran who served in the Korean War, Moe did his utmost in outreach to other veterans, sharing the message of psychoanalysis and how therapy can be transformative. He has served as a trustee, then as board chair, and has been an active member of ACAP's fundraising committee.

His exceptional contributions and his commitment are recognized and deeply appreciated.



Moe and Nancy Freedman at ACAP's 45th anniversary event.

Recommended Reading

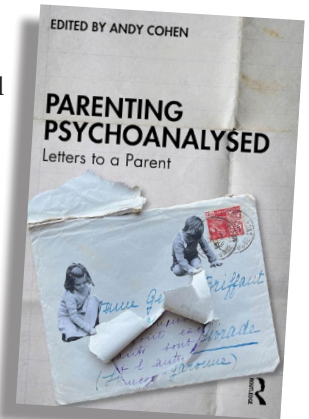
Parenting Psychoanalysed *Letters to a Parent*

Edited by Andy Cohen (Routledge, 2025)

This unique book is a collection of letters, each written by a different psychoanalyst, offering personal observations about a specific aspect of parenting, while sharing insights and what they wish they'd known before parenthood. ACAP's Dr. Patricia Bratt is a contributor.

Leveraging their professional training as analysts, this international group delves deeply into the joys and pains of parenting and the unexpected challenges, as well as individual worries and wishes.

Through personal stories and anecdotes, readers will gain insights into the most important role they will ever assume in life. The book opens the door for readers to deeply consider how their own inner worlds can guide them in becoming better parents, and how that self-awareness and knowledge can help them raise their children with greater awareness, compassion, and understanding.



"WHY I GIVE" *continued from pg. 5*

roles as a fellow, then as a teaching assistant, small group supervisor, and field work coordinator. "I didn't feel that my parents wanted to know me in the same way as did my ACAP colleagues. I got everything I needed from ACAP—my needs met, what had been missing in my life," she noted, "and the amount of fun we have together—whether in class, or a faculty or committee meeting, cannot be overestimated."

Ashworth's husband, Gordon, who passed away in 2022, was well-known

in the ACAP community; he had a deep interest in psychoanalysis and was a regular at events. After his passing, Dr. Ashworth established the Gordon Ashworth Memorial Scholarship in his memory, and continues to fund it.

"It would make him happy to know that in his memory new analysts are being trained. For my past two birthdays, I've asked family and friends to make a gift to the scholarship; that's the best birthday present I can imagine," she said.

We regret any errors.