

## Social Unconscious

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**Sigmund Freud** did not “invent” the notion of unconscious mind but he was the first to propose its dynamic nature (Ellenberger 1970). According to Freud, some mental contents and affects are not only merely unconscious, but they are actively repressed by opposing mental forces. To Freud, the unconscious includes both elements which have never been conscious, and elements which were once conscious and subsequently repressed. Among elements which have never been conscious, Freud includes what he calls *ur-phantasien* (primordial fantasies) (Freud 1990), remote collective memories, shaped in narrative form and inaccessible to consciousness, which are transmitted (either genetically or culturally) through generations. **Carl Gustav Jung**, who was much more interested than Freud in collective mental structures, proposed the theory of the *collective unconscious*, which is close to Freud’s *ur-phantasien* (C. Jung 1959). To Jung, the *collective unconscious* is made of *archetypes*, “*typical modes of apprehension*” – in Jung’s words – belonging to a remote past, at the very origin of the human species. Human beings look at themselves, their life and their world, through the lens of these archetypes, which frame the human mind at personal and collective levels. Many other psychoanalysts addressed the issue of unconscious collective mental formations. Those inspired by Jung’s theories chiefly focused on archetypes, which are no longer understood in almost metaphysical terms, as Jung did. “*Jung saw the collective unconscious as a container for the whole spiritual heritage of humankind’s evolution born anew in the brain structure of every individual*” (Fariss 2011), contemporary Jungians see archetypes chiefly as cultural patterns, transmitted through cultural means (e.g., verbal and non-verbal languages, implicit and tacit education, arts, music, etc.).

### The Unconscious Mind

The notion of unconscious is not at all new, dating at least to Plato. Many other philosophers spoke of unconscious mind, notably Spinoza, Leibnitz, Hegel and Marx. Both Hegel and Marx were mostly interested in the social dimension of such a mind. **Hegel** suggested that individuals come to share ideas and worldviews by “absorbing” the “spirit of the times”, although he did not provide a clear explanation on how such an “absorption” could occur. More pragmatically, **Marx** investigated ideological production (including beliefs, worldviews, collective memories and myths) concluding that ideologies are a peculiar kind of collective “*false conscience*”. To Marx, people’s cultural understanding of the world is shaped by ideas prompted by the ruling class, which does not rule only material powers but also intellectual forces. So, everybody deceives himself; elites claim to know the truth, while they are simply happy with beliefs supporting their domination; lower classes claim to believe in mainstream ideas, denying their state of subjugation (Marx 2004). **Gramsci**’s notion of “cultural hegemony” comes from Marx’s theory, being, however, much richer and less mechanical (Gramsci 1971).

#### 1.1.1.1 Transgenerational transmission of experiences

*“Offspring of those exposed to early life trauma are at elevated risk for psychiatric disorders. This phenomenon has also been demonstrated in rodents. For example, transmission of the effects of stress across generations has been observed after exposing male mice to a wide variety of psychological stresses, including social defeat, chronic physical restraint, multiple variable perturbations in adults, social instability beginning in adolescence, and early maternal separation”* (Dickson, et al. 2018) . Since the 1980s (Rosenheck and Nathan 1985) (Solkoff 1992) (Westerink and Giarratano 1999) (Daud and PA, Children in families of torture victims: transgenerational transmission of parents' traumatic experiences to their children 2005), a vast clinical and empirical literature has showed the possibility of transgenerational transmission of psychological, collective and individual, experiences, notably traumatic experiences and capacity for resilience. Controlled studies (Dekel and Goldblatt 2008) (Braga, Mello and Fiks 2012) offered mixed evidence, without rejecting, however, the hypothesis of such an occurrence. Actually, inheritance of acquired characters is incongruous with the central dogma of molecular biology, and scholars were quite sceptical to the idea of finding a genetic component in intergenerational transmission of personal

and collective experiences. Researchers (Daud, af Klinteberg and Rydelius 2008) considered alterations in parent's interactions with their children, and the child's elaboration parent's history, to be the likely causal explanations of reported cases and observational studies.

Since the 2010s, evidence is, however, accumulating that there could be also a molecular component in transgenerational transmission of mental contents (Franklin 2010). Changes in sperm DNA methylation induced to traumatic experiences, correlated to the transmission to the offspring of peculiar attitudes, have been demonstrated in mice (Arai, et al. 2009) (Bohacek, Gapp, et al. 2013) (Saavedra-Rodríguez and Feig 2013). In addition, the accumulating evidence of small RNA species in sperm seems to indicate another possible mechanisms of transmission both in mice and humans (Gapp 2014), (Bohacek and Mansuy 2015), (Andolina, Di Segni and Ventura 2017), (Dickson, et al. 2018).

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Among psychoanalysts inspired by the Freudian theory, it is worth mentioning **Erich Fromm**, who first used the term "social unconscious, and **S. H. Foulkes**, who pioneered group-analysis. Foulkes speaks of "social matrix", *"the hypothetical web of communication and relationship in a given group (that) determines the meaning and significance of all events (...) communication and interpretations, verbal and non-verbal (...) inside the network the individual is conceived as a nodal point (...) as an open system"* (Foulkes 1964, 118). More recently, also E.Hopper and H.Weinberg have addressed the social unconscious. **Hopper** defines it as *"social, cultural and communicational arrangements of which people are unaware"* (E. Hopper 2003, 129). **Weinberg** explains *"The idea of the Social Unconscious assumes that some specific hidden myths and motives guide the behaviour of a certain society or culture (...) In the same manner that unconscious forces drive an individual without knowing it, a group, an organization or the entire society can act upon unconscious forces too"* (Weinberg 2007, 308), the social unconscious is made of *"anxieties, defences, fantasies, myths and collective memories of special importance"* (Hopper and Weinberg 2011, xxxviii). **F.Dalal** proposes to call "social unconscious" internalised cultural aspects plus internalised power relations, *"The social unconscious includes, but is bigger than, what might be called the cultural unconscious. The cultural unconscious can be described as consisting of the norms, habits, and ways of thinking of a particular culture. The social unconscious includes the power relationships between discourses. The social unconscious is a discourse which hierarchically orders other discourses"* (Dalal 1998, 212). Similarly, **Brown** (D. Brown 2001) argues that the "social unconscious" includes, (1) *Implicit assumptions* - what is taken for granted by individuals because it is taken for granted by their social group(s); (2) *Disavowals* -disowning knowledge or responsibility for things that are unwelcome by the social group(s) to which the individual belongs; (3) *Social defences* – mental contents that are rejected from the individual consciousness of all individuals belonging to a social group by using psychological mechanisms of defence (e.g., scapegoating); (4) *Structural oppression* – Marx's *"false conscience"*, power conflicts and relationships in society, which act under-the-radar.

**Sociology and social psychology** have also addressed the "social unconscious". It is worth mentioning XIX century French polymath, **Gustave Le Bon**, who suggested the crowd is almost exclusively driven by unconscious drivers, which would explain, to him, phenomena such as panic, impulsiveness, inability to "reason", mental contagion (Le Bon 1895). Le Bon's theory provided the theoretical foundation for Nazi and Fascist propaganda. Other social scientists who studied the social unconscious include **Gabriel Tarde**, a French scholar contemporary to Le Bon, who proposed unconscious imitation and repetition as vital mental and societal functions, structuring groups and individuals (Tarde 1890). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari re-discovered Tarde's approach and used it in their elaboration of the rhizomatic theory (Candea 2010). More recent social scientists who studied the social unconscious were **Nobert Elias** (N. Elias 1991)

and **Pierre Bourdieu** (Bourdieu 1991), who both described it in terms of unaware habits of mind, carried out by symbols.

Finally, in the last two decades, also **cognitive sciences and neuroscience** have addressed the notion of social unconscious (Banaji, Lermm, and Carpenter 2001, 150). Cognitive sciences have focused on the relational, interpersonal, nature of the human mind. In their 1998 seminal paper, **Clark and Chalmers** (Clark and Chalmers 1998) advanced the idea of the extended mind “*Cognitive processes ain't (all) in the head! (...) In effect, explanatory methods that might once have been thought appropriate only for the analysis of 'inner' processes are now being adapted for the study of the outer, and there is promise that our understanding of cognition will become richer for it. Some find this sort of externalism unpalatable. One reason may be that many identify the cognitive with the conscious, and it seems far from plausible that consciousness extends outside the head in these cases. But not every cognitive process, at least on standard usage, is a conscious process. It is widely accepted that all sorts of processes beyond the borders of consciousness play a crucial role in cognitive processing: in the retrieval of memories, linguistic processes, and skill acquisition, for example. So, the mere fact that external processes are external where consciousness internal is no reason to deny that those processes are cognitive*” (1998, 9). Also, distinguished American psychiatrist and neurobiologist, **Dan Siegel** (Siegel 2012), argued that the human mind extends well beyond the physical brain. To Siegel, the mind is a complex system, open to interactions, randomly distributed, non-linear, which includes both internal (neural) and external (social) processes. Minds would emerge jointly from brain and body activity as well as from social networks and communication webs. In neuroscience, the discovery of mirror neurons by **Giacomo Rizzolatti** (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008) played a pivotal role, providing biological basis to some psychoanalytic approaches (i.e., explaining how external, collective, events can be internalized by the human mind) and to theories such as Tarde’s hypothesis on imitation (de Wall 2008).

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