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The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Feb 9, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/the-contemporaneity-of-the-unconscious-interviews-with-vittorio-lingiardi/>

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The Contemporaneity of the Unconscious: Interview with Vittorio Lingiardi

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Can you describe the idea of unconscious which is closest to your theoretical conception?

Unconscious is what is not accessible to consciousness and therefore to theoretical conceptualization, since by definition, as Freud had already said, we can only know it indirectly, through the effects it exerts on our conscious experience. All models that try to grasp the elusive substance of the unconscious fascinate me. I find them theoretically heroic. In recent months I have returned to study the dream phenomenon: looking at it in the light of Freudian, Kleinian, Jungian and Bionian models of the unconscious is compelling. Just as it is compelling to compare psychoanalytic ideas of the unconscious (from the unconscious that conceals and reveals to the unconscious that tells and constructs) with other perspectives, e.g., neurocognitive. Well knowing that the unconscious of psychoanalysis is not that of neuroscience. To talk about the unconscious today, Füssli's restlessness, Salpêtrière's hysterics and Jung's archetypes are not enough. We also need the amygdala and computer science, automatic reflexes and preconscious information processing. A few years ago, Peter Fonagy proposed that psychoanalysis should refer to an idea that is no longer motivational but

only functional of the unconscious, which is precisely the one, now widely accepted, that is proposed by neuroscience and cognitive science. But if we want to talk about the unconscious, we cannot do without the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, the a posteriori resignification whereby experiences, impressions and mnemonic traces, especially traumatic memories, are reworked in function of new experiences. After all, it is a biologist, Gerald Edelman, who has revolutionized the theory of memory, asserting that it does not consist of a permanent record in the brain, isomorphic to past experience, but rather a context-dependent dynamic reactivation, a re-categorization of the past according to the present. And if memory is not a mere archive, neither can the unconscious be.

I believe that today we can say there is not “one” unconscious, but there are multiple unconsciouses, each corresponding to a register of processing experiences that eventually lead to their landing in consciousness. Similarly, there are multiple consciousnesses (it should be added that the mind, in order to function, does not always and constantly need consciousness). Scientists today are questioning what consciousness is, its function within mental processes, what makes it necessary to move from the processes and contents of unconscious processing to conscious experience. What in this debate remains the prerogative and cause of interest of psychodynamic research (and human psychology) is the role that emotional vicissitudes, meanings and personal and individual history play in facilitating or hindering such conscious processing. I believe, however, that only marginally can we still think of the unconscious as the Freudian basement of repressed or denied desires (as the cognitivist animated film *Inside Out* seemed schematically to suggest). Rather, I am convinced by an idea of mind as a “global working space,” a laboratory of mental states, implicit memories, and sensory transformations that also follow paths of transformation on the basis of emotional and identity events that differ from time to time. If the stereotype of the psychoanalyst-investigator-Haruspex who deciphers mysterious symbols already appeared obsolete in years gone by, today the reality of the analyst-clinician who, together with the analyzed, constructs a narrative endowed with meaning to make us more capable of living (and living with the traps of the unconscious, whether cognitive or dynamic), also starting from the actuality of the experiences that are made in the relationship, has been fully established. The idea of the unconscious closest to me today is not that of an onion to be peeled to get to the patient’s psychic core, nor an archaeological site to be unearthed. I think of it more as a kaleidoscopic laboratory, a complex system in which a series of elements, of different shapes and densities, reorganize themselves into structures with multiple perspectives shaping our psychic life. The unconscious is not a place, much less a structure; it is a set of functions that can potentially be integrated between past and future memory. Joking about models we might say that the unconscious is a concept of the past to which we must give a future, but to appreciate that future, we must traverse its past to understand what to retain and what to add. So, the idea closest to me is one that can selectively dialogue with all models while critically accepting their historicized multiplicity. That said, if skeptics contemporary with Freud thought it was impossible that much of mental life was based on an intangible organ, today we find it hard to believe otherwise. We can also put it this way: the workings of the brain will always be more complex than our ability to understand it.

On the other hand, what is the theoretical conception of the unconscious which is farthest from it? And why?

I think I’ve already answered in part above. They are all distant and all close. But if I have to go into it, I reiterate that I feel the original Freudian concept of the unconscious as a repository of the repressed is far away. On closer inspection it was Freud himself who felt a certain dissatisfaction with this first formulation and approached the idea of different functions of the unconscious, although in the vulgate and partly in the way psychoanalytic clinicians proceeded by referring to this idea. Nor, of course, am I convinced by certain simplified neurocognitive approaches that equate the unconscious with the implicit. Some authors have recently brought our attention to the idea of the “unremoved unconscious,” to be understood as an affective, preverbal, pre-reflective state consisting of early memories recorded in the mind-body system before they can be verbally qualified and experienced as properly subjective experiences belonging to the self. Part of this approach comes from Gianni Liotti (who integrated insights from Bowlby and later Stern). The concept

of the unremoved unconscious combined with recent conceptions on relational trauma (a major reference author is Bromberg) can be useful in the clinic to understand syndromes whose cause, not attributable to unconscious conflict (typical of neurotic conditions), is to be found in the failure of processing dissociated traumatic emotional content: bodily impressions that, unable to be consciously processed, burst into consciousness as “things in themselves,” undigested facts. Bion would say “proto-emotions.”

What do you think is the relation between the unconscious process or the unconscious *tout court* and the conscious? Can you describe it?

As I was saying, unconscious processes, think for instance of the functioning of defence mechanisms, operate in multiple and parallel ways. They consist of rapid, automatic and therefore unconscious functioning in which the use of attentional resources is not required. These processes are involved in specific situations in which the subject's implicit patterns of behaviour, motivation and representation mechanically activate responses previously associated with particular external or internal stimuli. Once triggered, these processes are characterised by inflexibility and rigidity by virtue of their involuntary nature. The quantity and content of the elements that can be processed unconsciously is considerably greater than all other conscious processes, which are therefore characterised by narrowness and selectivity. Conscious processes in fact operate through serial and controlled processes. The use of such processes occurs predominantly in situations in which the subject is led to the use of specific attentional resources in an attempt to elaborate conscious responses in situations that tend to be new and for which there are no previous learned patterns. Authors such as Stanislaw Dehaene have concentrated on how the passage from unconscious elaboration processes to conscious representations takes place, demonstrating that it is not an automatic passage but a selective process that invests the entire cortex, sifting out incoherent, contradictory information that does not present an acceptable degree of uniformity with memory input and above all of correspondence with stimuli coming from external reality. At this primary level, therefore, conscious processing would serve to guarantee, in an adaptive key, a level of stabilisation and best possible approximation of the maps that each of us is called upon to construct in order to interact with the world. According to contemporary research, moreover, these maps, constructed in a cooperation between bottom-up and top-down mechanisms, would give rise to what scholars and philosophers have described as the stream of consciousness that, to quote Winicott, accounts for our sense of going on being. Now, however, neuroscientists are also telling us that there are even bigger and more relevant maps that orient the way we feel and relate to the world. These are the more or less unitary and coherent representations that we try to give of ourselves as subjects of our lives. In addition to this, evolution in our species has created the possibility of creating equally rich but stable references of the mental life of others. I would say that for every human being, the main part of mental life takes place in this constant dialogue, meeting or clash of minds. It is a fact that when we move to the level of these broader representations of the self and the other, those processes seem to come into play that, as analytical experience has taught us in various ways, construct identities and models of relationships on the basis of specific affective and meaning values. A final consideration concerns the theme of embodied knowledge; the tendency to construct meanings on the basis of the bodily operations that take place in the relationship with the environment, has once again placed at the centre of our attention an aspect to which we analysts are still attached. Going beyond our clinical experiences, we are authorised to think that there are ways, intimate and embodied, of encoding reality, external to the more conventional ways of verbal language that belong par excellence to the sphere of consciousness. The peculiarity of this tendency towards monitoring and voluntary attention limits to a high degree the amount of information that can be analysed by reducing it to a series of separate individual elements. The separateness of these conscious and unconscious mechanisms and the substantial differences in the type of information that can be processed would make the content of these particularly discrepant, thus making any attempt to translate from one language to another complex.

Thinking from a clinical perspective, what does it mean having to deal with the unconscious of the patient in the psychotherapeutic process?

Dealing with the patient's unconscious in the therapeutic setting means understanding one of the ways of his or her mental functioning in a broad sense: nuclear themes, affects, behaviors, defenses, relational styles, somatic expressions. Trying to understand how they "work" in us and with us. In therapy there are (at least) two unconsciouses: that of the patient and that of the clinician. In the words of Lewis Aron: a meeting of minds.

And finally, do you think that there are some conceptions of the unconscious that, even if you agree with, are however useful from a clinical perspective? And why?

Despite the differences between the models proposed by different theoretical perspectives, I believe that each serious approach contains useful elements to highlight different aspects of psychic functioning and related treatment choices. As I have said, there are multiple unconsciouses and also multiple ways of becoming conscious of the contents of the unconscious. If the brain is one, the unconscious can be many, with arrangements and functioning that change in relation to our psychopathological state. Neurotic unconscious, borderline unconscious, psychotic unconscious; unconscious to be "narrated" with psychoanalysis, "unmasked" with cognitivism, "photographed" with neuroscience, and even "localized" with Solms' neuropsychology. There is even an "artificial unconscious," an alarming metaphor with which the Web has been described. Alarming because if the cognitive unconscious has developed throughout the evolutionary arc of the human species by putting itself at the service of adaptation (very fast thoughts, intuitive decisions, immediate actions, automatic, though sometimes deceptive, emotions), the artificial unconscious has arisen within a few decades, following the laws of the market and communicative facilitation rather than those of natural selection.

Bios:

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Publication Date:

December 9, 2022