

REPRESSION AND THE UNCONSCIOUS: A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL REFORMULATION¹

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This paper attempts to reconceptualize a number of human activities and behaviors that, collectively, have led Freud and many theorists since then to postulate unconscious processes and mechanisms of repression. But the same observations which have been used as evidence for the unconscious and repression can be dealt with, meaningfully and parsimoniously, without recourse to these concepts and solely on the basis of conscious and intentional functions. These functions arise and are maintained primarily through man's conscious social existence and may be traced to his learned use of language, modes of thought, and communication. The theoretical position adopted here is related to those of Adler (1) and Szasz (34).

The original accounts of repression and the unconscious by Freud (especially 17, 18, 19, 20) have been well presented by Munroe (29) and Cameron (5), among others. Critical re-examinations are to be found in MacIntyre (27), Peters (30), Sartre (32, pp. 47-54), Levy (26, pp. 1-29), and Phillips (31, pp. 90-126). Papers by Ichheiser (23) and by Collier (7) are specifically concerned with this problem. Notable attempts at reformulation that do *not* seriously depart from the psychoanalytic viewpoint have been made by Dollard and Miller (9) and by Ellis (10), although more recently, Ellis appears to have completely severed whatever earlier ties he had with psychoanalysis.

Before offering a reinterpretation, we shall present a brief summary of the reasons for abandoning the concepts of repression and the unconscious. Perhaps no single reason will be deemed forceful enough; however, together they would seem to constitute a powerful argument for change.

1. There is lack of agreement as to the precise meanings of unconscious and repression. Even a single theorist may be guilty of inconsistent usage. As a result, neither positive nor negative experimental findings are agreed to be relevant to these constructs. Attempts to inject some positivist respectability in to these terms have

¹This paper was prepared while the author was the recipient of a research fellowship from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, University of Texas.

been unsuccessful: for instance, repression and suppression may lack separate status (10), or it may be conceptually difficult to determine the temporal boundaries between the two (9).

2. A related argument concerns the paucity of experimental evidence supporting these constructs (33, 36). Despite the open advocacy they have received for over sixty years, and despite the impressive quantity and quality of relevant research, there has failed to emerge any consistent, non-trivial circle of confirmation (28, pp. 102-107) for these constructs.

3. These constructs are often taken as explanations when, in fact, they are descriptions, appropriate to a limited range of human actions (24, 30). Explanation requires truth, whereas description requires only appropriateness that may even be limited to only one observed instance (24, 26). The notion of "the unconscious" as an entity is justifiably rejected by contemporary commentators (29); the "unconscious processes" that are left can only be viewed as one set among other plausible and appropriate descriptions of events.

4. There is the unfortunate tendency to extend the use of the constructs of repression and the unconscious to areas where they are inappropriate or that lie beyond their "range of convenience" (25, pp. 8-12). Peters states:

My conclusion, then, is that there is a kind of gradation in the relevance of explanations in terms of unconscious wishes. Some actions have such obvious and acceptable reasons that reference to unconscious wishes seems . . . out of place. There are then actions . . . where good explanations in terms of conscious reasons can be supplemented either by other motives or by postulating unconscious wishes as well . . . Then there are actions where the stated reason is *unconvincing* . . . We look first, in such cases, for a man's *real* reason, of which he may well be conscious, but . . . keeps to himself . . . But often there is no such concealed reason; and in such cases we have recourse to unconscious wishes . . . It looks, therefore, as if recourse to unconscious wishes is appropriate in cases where there is something palpably inefficient about an act in relation to the point ascribed to it as well as when an act seems to have no point (30, p. 61).

In actual practice, Peters' call for limiting recourse to unconscious wishes is seldom heeded. The present tendency is to interpret any act, not only as "overdetermined," but as if unconscious wishes were its primary or profound cause. Allport in an often quoted paper similarly attacked the tendency stemming from irrationalism to resort to projective techniques with normal persons to uncover their unconscious motives. In this event, a normal person may "either give material identical with that of conscious report—in which case

the projective method is not needed; or give no evidence whatever of his dominant motives" (2).

The overemphasis of the so-called unconscious is not limited to psychological theory and practice, but extends to interpretations of art, music, literature, and religion, on the popular assumption that repression and the unconscious are established facts. It is little wonder that Flew (15) seems to see these concepts as powerful agents of personal and social change.

5. Psychotherapy that relies on repression and the unconscious has been challenged ever since its inception by systems that make no use of these concepts and have available alternative constructions (1, 3, 11, 13, 30, 31, 32, 35). The success of these alternatives, equal to and often greater than that of psychoanalysis (13), suggests that perhaps notions of unconscious processes are only scientific "excess baggage." Therefore a fifth reason for abandoning repression and the unconscious is their apparent failure to contribute substantially to psychotherapy. It may be added that some psychoanalysts and many of their patients seem to invest these concepts with a status of truth or fact, and it has been suggested by Frank (16, pp. 114-141) that successful analyses may owe a lot to precisely this tendency. Such a procedure may then be pragmatically justified, but its scientific value is dubious.

The remainder of this paper borrows from the available alternative constructions to replace repression and the unconscious. It is an attempt to reintegrate a variety of observed human behaviors in a manner consistent with parsimony, testability, and adequacy of explanation. A social-psychological emphasis will be maintained throughout. Communication, whether between individuals or within the same person (self-awareness), is a distinguishing acquired human characteristic and serves its largest function in a social context. In some human activities communication is not essential and may be undesirable; in others, it may be incomplete or distorted. The notion of repression, however, is not necessary in order to account for such phenomena.

BEHAVIOR "WITHOUT AWARENESS"

The more familiar label is used for this category of behavior, although a more appropriate label would be something like "habitual acts lacking active intention." The qualification "without awareness"

suggests a conceptualization in terms of lack of consciousness, whereas it is probably more correct to think in terms of lack of active intention and focusing of attention. Examples of this category are the following.

Although most daily human activities are undertaken with a specific and intentional final outcome in mind, there is little or no planning as to the various steps that would bring about this outcome. Dressing, setting out to go to work, and going to a business luncheon engagement are good examples.

Many other activities involve the use of acquired, over-learned habitual acts. Performance may not only be "automatic," but a person may at times have no recollection that he initiated the activity or that he engaged in it. Thus, a habitual smoker, in the course of conversation, lights and smokes a cigarette for some time before he realizes that he is smoking.

In some actions performance may actually be impaired if attention becomes focused on any specific part of the sequence. This is especially true in the case of learned but highly complex and fine motor coordinations like walking down a flight of stairs or playing tennis. It should be noted that relatively few verbal cues are used in the learning of such activities.

Such activities that lack either active intention or focusing of attention are quite common. Ordinarily they are not claimed to be evidence for repression or the unconscious. On the other hand, they suggest alternative mechanisms that would be perhaps applicable, with some modifications, to other human activities as well.

LEARNING "WITHOUT AWARENESS"

Recent research has purported to show conditions where discrimination or learning takes place without the subjects' "awareness," and, thus, offers evidence favoring unconscious processes. In a learning experiment (21), the human subject increases the frequency of his use of a particular word category that was reinforced by the experimenter, and, yet, is unable to state the latter's rule of administering reinforcement. Although at first glance learning without awareness is suggested, closer review, as Eriksen (12) points out, compels no such interpretation. The effect may be the result of the subject being aware, not of the experimenter's definition of the "correct" response, but of a series of hypotheses that have a positive, though imperfect, correlation with the actual criterion. Similarly,

methodological considerations, including the subject's "set," suggest more pedantic explanations in experiments that purport to demonstrate "subliminal perception," "subception," or "perceptual defense" (12).

It should also be noted that Eriksen's (12) alternatives to learning without awareness and to subliminal perception fit many everyday human experiences. As psychologists of the Gestalt school have shown, people respond to partially perceived stimuli with an inference about the whole. We also strive, with varying degrees of success, to guess what others expect from us, and we are often rewarded for responses we base on the "wrong" rules. To postulate unconscious processes on the basis of these phenomena is equivalent to denying the operation of many conscious ones.

MEMORY LOSSES

Under certain circumstances forgetting is believed to be evidence for repression, and the distinction between so-called "repression" and ordinary forgetting represents a major problem. The distinction is not easy, as examination of two main criteria will disclose.

1. Repression is claimed to be "motivated forgetting." This means that certain ideas, experiences, and feelings become partially or completely unavailable to recall for reasons usually hedonic in nature.

"Motivated forgetting" and "repression" are, however, not identical. The former may be based on the conscious mechanism of suppression, i.e., an aware subject intentionally avoids the unpleasant thought, so that severely weakened associations and, hence, partial or complete forgetting may result. Suppression by itself is an inadequate explanation because in most instances a person goes further and deliberately magnifies the import of extenuating details (rationalization) or enhances the role of entirely different motives (at times, reaction formation), and, in general, alters the thought itself through voluntary and intentional self-deception. The result is that in the future the event in question, if recalled at all, may be distorted beyond recognition. This alternative analysis does not deny the observed phenomena of human behavior that suggested the notion of repression. Instead, it emphasizes that adequate descriptions of these phenomena are possible within exclusively conscious boundaries.

A concrete example will clarify this contention: During a heated argument involving valid complaints from both sides, a husband orders his wife, whom he

loves, out of the house. She storms out, drives away in the car, and meets with a fatal accident. The husband is now faced with a major readjustment in his life and with the more immediate task of his own grief and the confrontation with officials, relatives, and friends. He may feel and even openly express at least partial responsibility for his wife's death. In time, the man's own deliberations and his friends' assurances will very likely restructure his perceptions and memories. Arguments emphasizing his non-causal role in his wife's death will begin to gain ascendancy over arguments stressing his blameworthy role. Both kinds of argument are psychologically valid and will persist, though the former variety will become more prevalent and the issue of the death will lose its central importance. Despite these changes, the accident will continue to exert some effect on our hero's behavior, and the effect, to the extent that it depends on re-evaluation (distortion) of the earlier facts and implications, may appear peculiar to an observer. It would however, be detrimental to understanding to introduce in this connection notions of the unconscious and repression.

2. Repression is claimed to be distinguishable by the "completeness" of the memory loss. The major problem with this criterion is that it depends upon the ability of an outside observer to establish that a given event, now claimed to be repressed, had indeed been perceived, conceptualized, and known to the subject at an earlier time. Unfortunately, very few instances completely satisfy this requirement, and even here it is possible that the subject who claims to have forgotten may not be telling the truth or is practicing self-deception.

The usual method of ascertaining if this criterion is met, consists of either noting the appearance of a "memory" previously unavailable (perhaps during the course of psychoanalysis), or noting the acceptance or spontaneous acknowledgement by the subject of a previously denied experience that carries the status of a "universal" within a particular theory (primal scene, castration anxiety). In neither of these instances does the observer know for a fact that the remembered item ever happened. Freud himself became wary of the trustworthiness of what some of his patients claimed were repressed memories. Also to be noted is that the majority of these instances deal with experiences presumed to have taken place during the early life of the person. It has been argued (9) that lack of verbal labels in early life seriously limits discrimination, perception, and memory. It is also known that persuasion is facilitated when the "facts" of the case are unknown or hard to ascertain. When individuals finally admit to experiences previously "unknown" to them, it is more appropriate to view them as applying new constructions to their self-concept than as demonstrating a new awareness of a fact forgotten long ago (26).

This is not meant to deny the importance of early memories. It should not matter if they are incorrect or suffer from various degrees of "distortion." These are results of misperception or of qualitative memory changes that characterize material that is repeatedly reproduced (4). Nor does it matter how important the recalled events were at the time they supposedly took place. Their present role is what matters as Adler (1) has stressed.

At this point the example of the man whose wife died in the car accident will be brought back. A few years later, he repeatedly denied that he had ordered his wife to leave the house. Has he necessarily repressed a painful memory? Dismissing the possibility of an outright lie, he has most probably succeeded in a rather common form of self-deception. First, he knew (probably the moment his anger began to subside) that he never really wanted his wife to leave the house. It is quite possible, in order to relieve his guilt, that he now believes he made the statement in a manner that made obvious the fact that he did not mean it. On further thought, he did not mean the statement even at the moment he was making it! Second, he may have made such statements previously and his wife had never taken them seriously. The reader may wish to continue this game on his own. At any rate, it is possible that our hero will conclude that he never *really* made a statement that he in fact did make. Since he is also unlikely to phrase the matter in these terms, the inconsistency, after a few repetitions will be reduced and probably disappear. If this man later undergoes psychoanalysis he may be expected to (a) resist attempts to bring out the fact that he had made the statement, and, perhaps (b) admit he made the statement after considerable probing, and become quite emotional about it.

This account of memory losses concentrated on two types of forgetting most often associated with repression. Other such types suggestive of retroactive inhibition or events "experienced" while the subject was intoxicated, have been left out. A later section deals more fully with self-deception.

UNAVAILABILITY AND LACK OF PRECISION OF VERBAL LABELS

Most individuals in a culture learn to name things, showing both internal consistency in applying names to objects, and agreement with the labeling used by others. These tendencies are most marked with familiar, everyday objects; less with unfamiliar objects, or those giving rise to strong affect; still less, with abstract concepts like "freedom" and "justice;" and least with feelings and emotional states. "Sadness," for example, as used by a person to describe his subjective state, does not carry the exact same meaning each time he uses it. Even less interperson agreement and communication would take place when labels of this last type are used. And not only do these

labels lack a shared precision of meaning; it is also very probable that individuals vary in the frequency with which they use them and in how appropriate they consider them to be as descriptions of their own feelings as well as the feelings of others.

This brief and rather obvious analysis was meant to point out that none of the following frequent situations is evidence for unconscious or repressed impulses and feelings: (*a*) difficulty in communicating one's feelings to others; (*b*) difficulty in consistently interpreting (to himself) his own feelings; (*c*) difficulty in interpreting the feelings of another person; (*d*) disagreement between two individuals regarding the appropriateness of the labels one of them uses to describe himself; (*e*) convergence of the labeling operations of two interacting individuals. The interested reader should note that these situations include a considerable segment of the psychotherapeutic interaction that is thought to yield evidence for unconscious processes (26).

INCOMPLETE ASSIMILATION OF EXPERIENCE

Under this heading are included a number of very common phenomena of human experience. Their distinguishing characteristic is that, irrespective of the reasons or causes behind the effects, the individual, after he experiences certain events, behaves in a manner that suggests that these events have not had an effective impact upon his cognitions and/or his behavior. Events may occur that the individual is apparently unable to "take in" or assimilate at all; or, more frequently, the events do "register" but are not assimilated within at least some contexts where they would be meaningful. For example, an employee may fail to see the role his reluctance to assert himself plays in his interactions with his supervisor; and he may fail to see the connection between his present behavior and his typical reaction to past authority figures. It is granted that partially assimilated experiences significantly affect a person's psychological make-up and behavior; but it is misleading to contend that either an originally fully assimilated perception is lost to subsequent awareness (repression), or that an incompletely assimilated experience subsequently acts without the person's awareness as if it were completely assimilated (unconscious).

Characteristically, psychoanalysts trace most instances of incomplete assimilation to early childhood. Indeed, most normal instances of this type appear at that time. It is argued here that any experience that will later affect behavior has to be perceived and

maintained within at least a minimum context of meaning. In addition, to the extent that an early or late experience was not included within certain contexts of meaning, its influence on subsequent behavior will appear different or less comprehensible than if it had been.

If early childhood is a period when partial or total failure of assimilation is very likely to take place, the infant and young child also perceive less, know less, understand less, and label less than the average adult. A similar but qualitatively different deficit would be expected in intellectually retarded or deteriorated persons of any age. Relevant here is the work of Piaget (14, 22) as well as Jaspers' (24) concept of "differentiation." In addition, a large number of other factors may cause or contribute to incomplete assimilation: temporary blocks to attention, habitual patterns of attention, and educational, physical, or cultural handicaps.

PREVAILING COGNITIVE HABITS

In this section, the focus of interest shifts from the assimilation of single experiences to prevailing "habits" or "styles" of thought. Differences are again expected between individuals, as well as within the same individual in successive stages of his development, in the manner in which relations between events are perceived. Early stages of cognitive development (infancy, early childhood), low intelligence, lack of education, limits of available information, and culturally prevalent forms of reasoning are some of the factors that tend to restrict a person's repertory of useful operations in the relating of events to one another.

Examples are easy to find. A person may understand incorrectly naturally occurring events because he may lack the necessary constructs, e.g., he may not know that coal and diamonds can both burn. An infant may at first fail to realize the correlation between his crying and his mother's comforting arrival. Within the confines of a family or culture a person may learn to avoid associations between actions by authority figures and his own anger. Thinking about an explanation for one's own acts may be limited to only socially acceptable reasons.

This last example calls for a few further comments on rationalization. Thinking about and verbally responding with reasons for one's actions is an acquired habit imposed on children by society. Adults begin to demand that children explain, especially their "bad" behavior, at an early age. It does not take very long before children

recognize that apparently the "appropriate" reasons are limited to the "good" reasons, both because the latter are acceptable to adults and because very often punishment may be avoided in this fashion. Conformity to adult expectations, imitation, and identification then establish a habitual tendency to explain actions in terms of only socially acceptable reasons.

Neither failure of a person to use a particular cognitive approach nor his subsequent use of it is evidence for repression and the unconscious. It is much simpler to view the acquisition of such styles as characteristic of the conscious "mind." It may be added that because of the particular design of man's brain and the general similarities of his social existence some cognitive styles may be more probable than others, especially within the same culture.

SELF-DECEPTION

Self-deception has already been alluded to. The notion of repression has been in part supported by the observation that people are often unable to explain their actions or give false reasons for them (30). In these cases recourse to unconscious motivation provides the outside observer (and, sometimes, the subject himself) with a reasonable account of the discrepancies. Two examples will suffice. A mother verbally protests her love for her children while she treats them in a manner highly suggestive of hate. A married woman accepts an invitation to visit alone with another man so that she can view his art collection.

Such instances were once regarded as outright lies but have been reinterpreted in the past sixty or so years in terms of unconscious processes (34). Unfortunately, and despite admonitions like those of Peters (30), the latter kind of interpretation is increasingly applied where it is inappropriate, and when applied in addition to other explanations is often assumed to be superior. The request that "the patient should be assumed 'insightful' until he is proved otherwise" (2, p. 114) is all too often ignored. Thus, criminals are driven by unconscious wishes for punishment, and, if other reasons for their behavior are mentioned, they are thought to be secondary. Probably the most glaring abuse of this type is found in the belief that so-called "secondary gains" in neuroses are indeed secondary. However, there is an alternative to lying and unconscious wishes, namely, self-deception or lying to one's self. Recognized as far back as Plato (8),

this serves as a more appropriate and realistic explanation of the phenomena in question.

Since self-deception and repression describe the same observations, they are in some ways similar. Both are attempts to prevent a thought from exercising its full cognitive impact, and both fall short of this goal. The differences between the two are more crucial. Unlike repression, self-deception is, at least for a time, a conscious and intentional operation, so that the individual is at least partially aware of what he is up to. For the same reason, in self-deception the unwanted idea exerts its influence on cognition and behavior *precisely because* the individual is aware of it and is attempting to reduce its impact.

Self-deception has already been illustrated in previous sections. Another example was recently observed by the author. A 12 year-old girl was allowing a 13 year-old boy to apply sun-tan lotion on her body while both were near a swimming pool and in full view of several people. The parents were not present. The application of the lotion took ten minutes and can only be described as a slow "labor of love" that both participants seemed to enjoy thoroughly. Analysis in terms of repression would place the sexual component of this situation in a prominent position but below the participants' awareness. An adult would have little trouble recognizing it. In terms of self-deception, it would be assumed that both participants were privately aware of the sexual implications, yet were able to behave as they did because they, and other observers, could interpret the situation without the sexual component. They would probably have stopped from embarrassment had they been in private or if either had openly alluded to the sexual pleasure involved. Even had they been observed and scolded by their parents, their effort at self-deception would have been reinforced: the girl's mother would probably not have made a direct reference to sex, but would have cautioned of the dangers inherent even in "innocent" play. In brief, everybody, including the two participants, is aware of what is going on. Self-deception is possible because the behavior is subject to more than one interpretation, and the less controversial interpretation is more comforting and is encouraged by most observers.

Sartre (32) would call the above examples instances of *mauvaise foi*, the literal translation of which would be "bad faith."² However, it has been found that the most adequate translation of *mauvaise foi* is "self-deception," the very term with which we are concerned here. According to Kaufmann, "'Self-deception' seems much more accurate . . . and this is also how Philip Mairet has translated the same phrase" (24a, p. 222). In a chapter variously entitled "Bad Faith" (32, p. 47) or "Self-Deception" (24a, p. 241) Sartre indeed criticizes Freud's

²The author is indebted to Mr. Robert V. Stone for bringing Sartre's views to his attention.

notion of repression similarly to the way taken in this paper. "If we reject the language and the materialistic mythology of psychoanalysis, we perceive that the censor in order to apply its activity with discernment must know what it is repressing" (32, p. 52). Sartre also gives an example which is very similar to ours. It is that of a young woman who lets a man hold her hand, but does not notice that she lets him do so (32, pp. 55 ff.; 24a, pp. 250 ff.).

Self-deception has also received attention from philosophers (6, 8). It creates philosophical problems only if the individual is seen as holding two logically contradictory beliefs at the same time. This would hardly seem to be the case: the beliefs (and there may be more than two) are not conceptualized in logically contradictory ways, although they may in fact be quite inconsistent in their complex ramifications. It is well-known that everyday human cognition seldom follows lines of internal consistency. Self-deception is not an activity that maintains cognitive balance. It is fluid, unstable and usually accompanied by emotional involvement.

"PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE" AND DREAMS

Temporary memory blocks, faulty recollection of ordinary events, slips of the tongue and pen, as well as dreams have, since Freud, usually been thought to reflect unconscious processes and to provide evidence for them. Space does not permit a full analysis of these phenomena, but the unconscious does not provide the only plausible description of them. Undeniably these behaviors very often provide meaningful insights into a person's psychological make-up; and, certainly, antecedent conditions for them can be found. Thus the phenomena themselves are meaningful both as additional sources of data and in that their origins can be traced. In neither context of their meaning, however, do they necessitate the postulation of an unconscious.

Errors of memory may involve either failure to recollect or the substitution of an incorrect response. These errors are sufficiently accounted for by the fact that memory shows quantitative losses and qualitative changes over time and by mechanisms like retroactive inhibition and negative transfer. Similarly, momentary errors or "slips" require no further assumptions than the momentary intrusion of a competing thought process. That the result of a "slip" is meaningful is not surprising since the majority of probable responses happen to be so.

Finally, the content of dreams can be easily derived from a variety of previously experienced events or thoughts. The peculiar organization of dreams reflects the greater freedom of association characteristic of the sleeping brain. Symbols, in dreams as well as in art and waking life in general, present no special problems. Most symbols are culturally shared and easily recognized by persons familiar with the rules of the game. They need not reside in any kind of unconscious.

CONCLUSION

An attempt was made to show that the traditional psychoanalytic notions of repression and the unconscious are not only unnecessary but also less appropriate to the understanding of human behavior than explanations in terms of exclusively conscious behavior. The latter has its primary origin within the social conditions of inter- and intra-person communication. Several categories of human activity were then re-examined from this point of view.

The implications of this analysis in terms of theory as well as application are: Psychoanalysis no longer provides an appropriate model for human behavior, while further support is granted to such personality theories and treatment methods as Adler's Individual Psychology (1), Wolpe's behavior therapy (36), or Ellis' rational-emotive therapy (11). Implications for a new theory of neurotic behavior and for empirical research will be forthcoming in future publications.

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