
A Tumbling Ground for Whimsies?

Empirical Perspectives on the Psychoanalytic Unconscious

by Robert F. Bornstein and Joseph M. Masling (Eds.)

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Review by John F. Kihlstrom

From a scientific point of view, classical Freudian psychoanalysis is dead as both a theory of the mind and a mode of therapy (Crews, 1998; Macmillan, 1996). No empirical evidence supports any specific proposition of psychoanalytic theory, such as the idea that development proceeds through oral, anal, phallic, and genital stages, or that little boys lust after their mothers and hate and fear their fathers. No empirical evidence indicates that psychoanalysis is more effective or more efficient than other forms of psychotherapy, such as systematic desensitization or assertiveness training. No empirical evidence indicates the mechanisms by which psychoanalysis achieves its success are those specifically predicated on the theory, such as transference and catharsis.

A partial exception to this conclusion is at the broad theoretical level which David Rapaport (1960) called *metapsychology*. Rapaport summarized psychoanalytic metapsychology in terms of 10 points of view, including the genetic (that behavior, by which Rapaport meant to include thoughts, feelings, and motives as well as actions, is part of a developmental sequence), the dynamic (that behavior is motivated), and the psychosocial (that behavior is social in nature). At this most general level of explanation, the propositions of psychoanalytic theory are not all that different from those of other psychological theories of mind and behavior.

One of Rapaport's metapsychological propositions was topographic: "The Crucial Determinants of Behaviors Are Unconscious" (p. 46). There was a time when

psychology was embarrassed by talk of consciousness, not to mention unconscious mental life, but that time is long past. Now, studies of automaticity and of implicit memory fill our journals, both cognitive and social. Furthermore, the explicit-implicit distinction is being extended from the domain of memory to other aspects of mind and behavior, including perception, thought, feelings and motives, and attitudes and stereotypes. The notion of a psychological unconscious—the idea that conscious experiences, thoughts, and actions can be influenced by mental states that are outside of conscious awareness and by mental processes that are outside of conscious control—is now firmly enshrined in our textbooks. Some philosophers even argue that consciousness is essentially epiphenomenal, of no functional significance, and some psychologists have concluded that much, if not all, of everyday life is automatically driven by environmental stimuli, rather than mediated by conscious thought.

So, was Freud right after all? Bornstein and Masling, the editors of this book, note that the unconscious is the cornerstone of psychoanalytic thinking, and they have edited this book in an attempt to bridge the gap between empirical science and clinical practice. Clearly there is much that psychoanalysis can learn from laboratory research on unconscious processes, and there are psychoanalytic hypotheses about the unconscious that can be tested by laboratory techniques. But this does not mean that Freud had it right all along and that contemporary laboratory research provides support for psychoanalytic theory and practice.

This is because, as Ellenberger (1970) clearly documented, the notion of the psychological unconscious predated Freud. Freud's unique contributions were a description of unconscious mental life in terms of repressed sexual and aggressive drives and the defenses arrayed against them and the development of clinical methods, such as free association and dream interpretation for decoding

the unconscious origins of conscious behavior. Contemporary laboratory work might support Leibniz's notion of petite (subliminal) perceptions or Helmholtz's notion of unconscious (automatic) inferences, without perforce supporting Freud's notion of monsters from the id.

Put another way, psychoanalytic metapsychology might be generally correct in assuming the existence of a dynamically active unconscious mind, but might be entirely wrong in its more specific descriptions of what unconscious mental life is like. Thus, as Rapaport indicated, the topographic point of view at the metapsychological level has to be unpacked into the general, specific, and empirical propositions nestled under it. Is it really true that unconscious determinants are crucial for behavior, or do they play only a minor role? Are these unconscious determinants accurately characterized in terms of sexual and aggressive motives, and are defenses like repression arrayed against them? Is repression the mechanism by which thoughts, feelings, and motives are rendered unconscious? Can we confidently infer unconscious motives and

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conflicts from conscious thought and behavior? Here, it has to be said that the evidence is lacking.

In this book's opening chapter, Drew Westen reviews laboratory evidence, mostly from cognitive and social psychology, in favor of unconscious cognition, emotion, and motivation. From this, he concludes that "[t]he notion of unconscious processes is not psychoanalytic voodoo, and it is not the fantasy of muddle-headed clinicians. It is only clinically indispensable, but it is good science" (p. 35). True enough, so far as it goes, but Westen ignores the fact that none of the literature he has reviewed bears on the particular view of unconscious mental life offered by Freud. The fact that amnesic patients show priming effects on word-stem completion tasks and can acquire positive and negative emotional responses to other people, without having any conscious recollection of the experiences responsible for these effects, cannot be offered in support of a theory that attributes conscious behavior to repressed sexual and aggressive urges. None of the experiments reviewed involve sexual or aggressive contents, none of their results imply defensive acts of repression, and none of their results support hermeneutic methods of interpreting manifest contents in terms of latent contents. To say that this body of research supports psychoanalytic theory is to make what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle called a category mistake.

Howard Shevrin's chapter, immediately following Westen's, leads to a similar conclusion. After reviewing Rapaport's exegesis of Freud's notion of the unconscious, Shevrin describes a series of experiments on "subliminal" perception testing the hypothesis, ostensibly derived from Freud and Rapaport, that conscious recollection of an event requires conscious perception of that event at the time it occurred. But we do not need Freudian metapsychology for this prediction, much less a theory of repressed eros and thanatos. All we need is a theory of cognition that states that memory is a by-product of perceptual activity, that what is initially perceived constrains what will be remembered later. The degraded conditions of subliminal stimulation do not seem to permit the deep, elaborate encodings that are necessary for subsequent conscious retrieval. Thus, subliminal percepts, which are by definition only weakly processed, may be retained only as implicit memories; that theory comes to us from Toronto, by way of people like Fergus Craik, Endel Tulving, and Paul Kolers—not from

Vienna by way of Sigmund Freud. The results of Shevrin's experiments, though consistent with Freud and Rapaport in some respects, are not decisive because they are also consistent with other non-psychoanalytic theories.

The closest any contribution comes to supporting specific, unique propositions of psychoanalytic theory concerning consciousness is found in a chapter by Siegel and Weinberger on the "oneness" motive, or the drive to achieve symbiosis with the comforting, protecting, and nurturing mother we experience (or imagine we did, or wish we did) during early childhood. They begin with what is certainly the most provocative line of research ever produced on subliminal perception: Lloyd Silverman's claim that the subliminal presentation of the message *Mommy and I are one* (the MIO stimulus) disrupted task performance by certain types of mental patients (e.g., schizophrenics and homosexuals), while enhancing task performance in students and other nonpatients. Siegel and Weinberger confirm Silverman's findings experimentally and go on to argue that MIO stimulation triggers a fantasy of oneness, which in turn induces positive mood in normals. Finally, they present evidence that oneness motivation can be reliably assessed by the Thematic Apperception Test, correlates with psychological health, and predicts treatment outcome. It is an impressive research program.

The MIO research has the characteristically Freudian flavor that is lacking in the work reviewed by Westen and Shevrin—although it should also be said that Silverman's theory of symbiosis has been criticized by some psychoanalysts, including Howard Shevrin, as being somewhat idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, a central problem remains unresolved. Everything we know about subliminal stimulation indicates that it is analytically limited: People may be able to process the meaning of simple subliminal stimuli, such as single words, but they simply do not seem to have the cognitive capacity to extract the meaning of complex stimuli like whole sentences (e.g., Greenwald, 1992). The reader is left with a conundrum: Either the MIO research contradicts known facts about human information processing, or material relevant to psychoanalytic themes is processed in a qualitatively different manner than is more neutral material. Further research is required.

The remaining contributions to the book depart somewhat from its main theme of linking laboratory research on unconscious processes with psychoana-

lytic notions of the unconscious. Seymour Epstein reviews his cognitive-experiential self-theory of personality, which substitutes an adaptive unconscious for the maladaptive unconscious of Freud and adds emotional processes to the cognitive processes emphasized in current laboratory work. Epstein's unconscious retains some of the qualities of Freud's primary process, but Freud gets only passing mention in the chapter. Jerome L. Singer reviews his research on daydreaming—a program which, along with studies of mental imagery and hypnosis, spearheaded the consciousness revolution in psychology. Singer agrees that the unconscious processes revealed by modern experimental work have little to do with psychoanalytic conceptions of the unconscious and asserts that "consciousness may be more extensive than is proposed in the psychodynamic literature" (p. 143). Daniel Kriegman argues that an evolved capacity for self-deception, which renders us unaware of our true beliefs, feelings, and motives, can be adaptive rather than maladaptive, but his chapter, which consumes almost a third of the book, is more concerned with the problems of clinical inference than with experimental evidence.

The notion of a psychological unconscious, which long predated Freud (Ellenberger, 1970), was conserved by scientific and clinical psychoanalysts throughout the dark days of behaviorism and into the early days of the cognitive revolution, when cognitive psychologists were preoccupied by manifestations of conscious mental life, such as attention, short-term memory, and mental imagery. However, the revival of research on the psychological unconscious, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was essentially independent of psychoanalysis. With the possible exception of Silverman's MIO paradigm, modern laboratory research provides no support for the psychoanalytic view of unconscious mental life.

One response to this state of affairs is to argue that psychoanalytic theory itself has evolved since Freud, and that it is therefore unfair to bind psychoanalysis so tightly to the Freudian vision of repressed infantile sexual and aggressive urges, symbolically represented in dreams, errors, and symptoms, and revealed on the couch through free association. Westen (1998) himself recently attempted this gambit, arguing that critics such as myself attack an archaic, obsolete version of psychodynamic theory and ignore more recent developments, such as ego psychology and object relations theory. But, to

borrow the language of the Vietnam War, this destroys the village in order to save it. Culturally, as the exhibit called "Freud: Conflict and Culture" at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, makes clear (Roth, 1998), the 20th century has been the century of Sigmund Freud, not the century of Heinz Kohut or Melanie Klein. Freud's legacy is not to be assessed in terms of ideas, which emerged since Freud died, but rather in terms of the ideas propounded by Freud himself through the 24 volumes of his collected works. Chief among these, as Bornstein and Masling note at the very beginning of this book, is a particular view of unconscious mental life—a view which, to date, has found little or no support in empirical science. □

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