

# INTEGRATING FREUDIAN, RELATIONAL/INTERPERSONAL PSYCHOANALYTIC AND NEUROSCIENCE CONCEPTS OF UNCONSCIOUS PROCESSES: DISSOCIATION, NOT REPRESSION

Rebecca C. Curtis

W. A. White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Psychoanalysis & Adelphi University (United States)

## Abstract

Until the “cognitive revolution” in psychology, psychologists and psychoanalysts had different models of the mind. Not only were unconscious processes unimportant to behavioral psychologists, conscious processes were not important as well. Once the “cognitive revolution” took place in psychology, conscious processes, and eventually unconscious processes, were believed to be crucial again to understanding human behavior. The experiences that are unconscious in contemporary cognitive psychology are not, however, experiences that people appear motivated to keep out of awareness. They are experiences that are simply not activated by current situations. The psychoanalytic unconscious has continued to represent experiences that either do not reach awareness or get pushed out of awareness—in other words threatening experiences of which there is motivation to remain unaware to maintain the functioning of the meaning system—what Freud called “repression”. Knowledge that neural networks are activated by incoming experiences, especially those related to physical and psychological survival, and that the organization of experiences takes place on an ongoing basis, can unify psychology and psychoanalysis in their understanding of these processes. Psychoanalysts can now join mainstream neuroscience and scientific psychology by laying the term “repression” to rest and thinking instead in terms of “motivated forgetting” and of threatening experiences as sometimes “dissociated.” It is useful, however, to conceptualize unconscious processes not only as repressed, dissociated, or “adaptive” (or maladaptive), but as a cauldron of generative experiences. Turning to a patient Andreas, it is noteworthy that his insight into the origin of his “dead” feelings did not eliminate the compulsive sexuality that bothered him so deeply. He required learning other ways of handling feelings, not only an awareness of the origins of these feelings. Specific strategies about alternative ways of responding that some clinicians might consider “nonanalytic” were helpful to him until he became involved in a more meaningful relationship with another man. Unconscious processes are a sort of “boogie-woogie,” always rumbling in the background, with desires waiting to be satisfied and connections waiting to be forged. They rumble like a “boogie-woogie” out of awareness all the time until they are activated by external or internal experiences. We can think of the mind as having various aspects of self-representations that are not fully activated influencing our feelings and behaviors without our full knowledge—like Baudelaire’s (1857) “city full of swarming ants, city full of dreams where ghosts in plain daylight grab at passers-by.”

**Keywords:** *Unconscious processes, psychology, psychoanalysis, dissociation.*

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## 1. Unconscious processes in psychology and psychoanalysis

Until the cognitive revolution in psychology, psychologists and psychoanalysts had very different models of the mind. Not only were unconscious processes unimportant to behavioral psychologists, but conscious processes were also not important. Once the “cognitive revolution” took place in psychology, conscious processes, and eventually unconscious processes, were believed to be crucial again in understanding human behavior. The experiences that are unconscious in cognitive psychology are not, however, experiences that people appear motivated to keep out of awareness. They are experiences that are simply not activated by consciousness, i.e., by current situations. For psychoanalysts, in their understanding of conscious, unconscious processes, and their interplay, unconscious experiences are also those that are not connected or “dissociated” from the conscious processes activated at any given moment. Psychoanalysts can join mainstream neuroscience and scientific psychology by laying the term “repression” to rest and thinking instead in terms of “motivated forgetting” and of threatening experiences as sometimes “dissociated”. It is useful, however, to conceptualize unconscious processes not only as repressed,

dissociated, or “adaptive” (or maladaptive), but as a cauldron of generative experiences—perhaps burning, perhaps murky, but always rumbling in the shadows of the mind.

## **2. The psychoanalytic unconscious**

The psychoanalytic unconscious has continued to represent experiences that either do not reach awareness or get pushed out of awareness—in other words threatening experiences of which there is motivation to remain unaware --to maintain the functioning of the meaning-making system. Knowledge that neural networks are activated by incoming experiences, especially those related to physical and psychological survival can unify psychology and psychoanalysis in their understanding of conscious and unconscious processes and their interplay. Unconscious experiences are those that are not connected or “dissociated” from the conscious processes activated at any given moment. Psychoanalysts can join mainstream neuroscience and scientific psychology by laying the term “repression” to rest and thinking instead in terms of “motivated forgetting” and of threatening experiences as sometimes “dissociated.” It is useful, however, to conceptualize unconscious processes not only as repressed, dissociated, or “adaptive” (or maladaptive), but as a cauldron of generative experiences—perhaps burning, perhaps murky, but always rumbling in the shadows of the mind.

## **3. Three unconscious minds**

Three views of the unconscious minds have developed—a repressed unconscious from Freudian theory, a dissociated unconscious from Sullivanian and trauma theories, and a non-defensive, adaptive unconscious from cognitive theory. Recently, relational psychoanalysts have adopted a “dissociational” model of the mind, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that repression is a term related to the squashing down of instinctive urges which they no longer see as the major motivational urges. Rejecting drive theory, the models of Sullivan (1953) and Fairbairn (1929) considered dissociation to be the primary mode of defense. Cognitive and other psychologists in the empirical tradition have also adopted the word dissociation, initially perhaps out of an attempt to distance themselves from the idea of the psychoanalytic unconscious, but also quite likely because of the lack of clarity surrounding the term “repression.” Although both relational analysts and academic psychologists speak primarily of dissociations, there is greater overlap in the understanding of relational and other psychoanalysts about unconscious processes, however, than there is between psychoanalysts and empirical psychologists.

On June 5, 1968, Sirhan Sirhan shot Robert F. Kennedy. Apparently, Sirhan had attacked Kennedy in a very agitated state and remembered nothing about the event afterwards. Diamond (cf. Bower, 1981), the forensic psychiatrist who examined Sirhan hypnotized him and helped him reconstruct the memories of what had happened in the kitchen of the Los Angeles hotel. “Under hypnosis, as Sirhan became more worked up and excited, he recalled progressively more, the memories tumbling out while his excitement built to crescendo leading to the shooting. At that point Sirhan would scream out the death curses, ‘fire’ the shots, and then choke as he re-experienced the secret service guard nearly throttling him after he was caught. Despite the fact that Sirhan would have liked to have felt that he did the deed (in the cause of Arab nationalism) he was never able, through conscious effort in a non-hypnotized state, to remember doing so.” Do psychoanalysts call Sirhan's memory repressed or dissociated? It fits Freud's definition for “repression” as “rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness” (1915, p. 105). The memory involves what many may think of as a forbidden instinctual urge--murder. But the memory seems to be available in a dissociated state, so that many analysts would call it “dissociated.” Although many psychoanalysts might agree that some examples of forgetting seem to be more clearly “dissociation” and others that are more clearly “repression,” there is a great deal of overlap in these ideas. Let us look further at these two unconscious minds in psychoanalysis.

## **4. Dissociation in neuroscience**

Disconnections as a consequence of physical damage are referred to as dissociations throughout the neuroscience literature. Obviously, these dissociations from physical processes are not related to motivation in any way. Attempts to integrate the neuroscience perspective with the psychological perspective have merged in a field called “social cognitive neuroscience (Ochsner & Lieberman, 2001) and a new journal *Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Neuroscience*.

## 5. Case example

With regard to a patient Andreas, it is noteworthy that his insight into the origin of his “dead” feelings. As coming from his mother daily looking at a photo of a dead sister did not eliminate the compulsive sexuality that bothered him so deeply. His behaviors he had developed to cope with the dead feeling required learning other ways of handling his feelings, not only an awareness of the origins of his feelings. Specific strategies about alternative ways of responding that some clinicians might consider “nonanalytic” were helpful to him until he became involved in a more meaningful relationship with another man. It is unclear if he “repressed” or “dissociated” the memory, but it also required conscious processing of his reactions to get over his compulsive activity and a relationship with a stable partner.

## 6. Measuring unconscious processes

**Unconscious processes are now** being measured by a number of ways: 1) Implicit measures, including the Implicit Association Test, the Affect Misattribution Procedure, and lexical decision tasks; 2) Physiological measures that track bodily responses, such as electroencephalography (EEG) / Event-Related Potentials (ERP) that detect brain activity patterns related to unconscious processing, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI): identifying brain regions activated by unconscious stimuli, skin conductance responses: measuring changes in sweat gland activity, indicating unconscious emotional response, pupillometry tracking pupil dilation as a sign of cognitive effort or arousal; 3) Behavioral methods observing how people behave without explicit self-report, including priming tasks (a stimulus influences responses to subsequent stimuli, revealing implicit association), eye-tracking, and automatic motor responses such as hand movements in tasks like mouse tracking that reveal implicit tendencies, and 4) Hypnosis & subliminal messaging, presenting stimuli below the threshold of awareness to influence later responses.

Furthermore, a flurry of recent research on dreams by neuroscientists is providing evidence of the motivational factors involved in dreaming. Functional neuroimaging and neurophysiological techniques open fascinating new perspectives on the psychodynamic understanding of dreams (Castellet y Ballara, Spadazzi, & Spagnolli, 2023). And, at a recent meeting of neuroscientists, they voted in favor of a Mark Solms’ (2018) Freudian view of the motivation of dreams over that of Harvard’s Allan Hobson’s random theory. Quoting from a paper in Neuropsychanalysis (2023) by Campos Barbosa, “Functional neuroimaging and neurophysiological techniques open fascinating new perspectives on the psychodynamic understanding of dreams... This model proposes a correlation between the neurophysiological and the clinical role of dreaming... [T]he manifest content of the dream needs to be “unraveled” into its emotional roots. In conclusion, within a framework which includes psychoanalysis, theoretical and affective neurosciences, dreams represent the *via regia* not to the unconscious but to self-awareness and emotional self/regulation.”

And quoting Mares, a student in Australia, in a recent article on the common factors in CBT, psychoanalysis and schema therapy. . .” [U]nconscious processes are thought to be a major cause of symptoms, (b) a patient’s symptoms can be used to infer something about their unconscious causes, and (c) patients becoming consciously aware of unconscious processes is an important aim of treatment” (2022, p. 443).

## 7. Conclusions

Unconscious processes are a sort of “boogie-woogie,” to use the language of the poet Langston Hughes, always rumbling in the background, with desires waiting to be satisfied and connections waiting to be forged. They rumble like a “boogie-woogie” out of awareness all the time until they are activated by external or internal experiences. Now that the thinking in social/cognitive psychology has included the possibility of unconscious goals, or “dreams deferred” in Hughes’ language, more research by psychologists can potentially include arousal of the conflicting unconscious desires most important to people. A broader conceptualization of unconscious processes as creative can unify both psychoanalytic and cognitive understandings of unconscious processes and is discussed further elsewhere (Curtis, 2009). If we think of the mind as having various aspects of self-representations (that are not fully activated aspects of self) that might be influencing our feelings and behaviors without our full knowledge – like Charles Baudelaire’s (1857) “city full of swarming ants, city full of dreams where ghosts in plain daylight grab at passers-by” (author’s translation).

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