Group Analysis

So What is this Social Unconscious Anyway?
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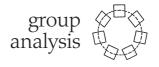
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What is This?

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So What is this Social Unconscious Anyway?

Haim Weinberg

Although the concept of the Social Unconscious has increased in importance in the group analytic literature recently, there are still many misconceptions and misunderstandings about it and its practical applications. While some papers define the term, there are no papers explaining the basics of the social unconscious and what it includes. The purpose of this article is to address the misconceptions, describe the basic building blocks of the social unconscious, and develop a working definition for this complex term.

Key words: Social Unconscious, large groups, chosen trauma, group analysis, Foulkes

Introduction

As social scientists we are looking for order and construction to explain social structures. It is easier to explore order in small groups, and to analyze their developmental stages, styles of leadership, members' roles, and dynamic processes. When we turn to higher hierarchy living systems, simple models are not enough. The need to have meaning for complex social formations leads to different perspectives explaining cultures, society, and nation states. From the psychological point of view, we are looking for a method to uncover the 'deep structure' of a society or of cultural belief systems. Following the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic tradition, we look for some unconscious motives driving an individual, a group, or communities. The first question

that comes to mind is whether it is justified to relate an 'Unconscious' to a larger social system. So the first task of this article is to justify the use of the social unconscious concept and explain its meaning and misinterpretations. I introduce several definitions of the concept of the Social Unconscious, including my own, and outline the necessary dimensions to be described when analyzing a specific society and its unconscious.

The Concept of the Social Unconscious

What connects a group of people together? Which are these invisible ties that make members of a group feel that they belong to the same group? Why do human beings construct and become attached to nations and similar imagined communities? Psychology today moved from a one-person to a two-person psychology (Aron, 1996). Whenever two or more individuals are together there is a shared unconscious field to which they belong and of which by definition they are not aware. We can talk about a 'relational unconscious' process co-created by both participants.

Group analysis moved long ago to multi-person psychology, not only because there are several people participating in the group interaction, but also because they create something beyond their individual contributions. The psychic activity occurring in a group is much more than the simple addition of the psyche of its members. The notion of the matrix implies an unconscious connection between people in a group. Bion's basic assumptions (1961) are also examples of the group unconscious. When regressed, the group behaves 'as if' its members have some common shared hidden purpose. The basic assumptions can also be regarded as collective defense mechanisms resorted to in order to cope with deep anxieties.

If we agree that groups have some common unconscious fantasies and can use collective defense mechanisms, we should also consider this possibility in higher social structures, such as communities and even societies. This does not mean that large groups and societies behave like small groups, but that we can infer from the existence of a group unconscious the existence of a higher level of unconscious which has its own features: the social unconscious. Similar to the individual unconscious, the social unconscious is also out of space and timeless. Due to

its timelessness, members of a group are able to re-live and re-enact in the here-and-now relationships and pertinent emotions from the remote past. Correspondingly, members of social groups could be said to unconsciously re-live and re-enact in the present emotions related to past events of their society. When regressive conditions occur (such as in times of war or other social dangers) these unconscious fantasies and anxieties might impact the behaviour of society-at-large. It is because phylogenetically and ontogenetically the Social Unconscious precedes the individual consciousness, that a shared unconscious can and does develop among total strangers. This phenomenon clearly happens in a small group: members of an analytic group have a lot in common even before they meet. This holds true no matter how heterogeneous their disturbances are. They have in common what Foulkes termed the 'foundation matrix', (Foulkes, 1986: 131) based on the biological properties of the species and also the culturally firmly embedded values and reactions. A similar foundation matrix exists in larger and social groups: every group produces it own foundation matrix.

Some writers (Dalal, 2001; Hopper, 2001, 2003) vehemently argue against the use of the term 'group mind' because it assumes an existence of a physical group body. Knauss (2006; 163) claims that –

> There is no such thing as 'the group unconscious', the 'social unconscious' or a 'collective, cultural unconscious'. Instead, each individual's unconscious is groupal.

When I use the term 'social unconscious' I do not mean to say that social systems have brains, or that they behave as an organism. What I mean is that they behave *as if* their members have similar elements in their individual unconscious. They share anxieties, fantasies, defenses, myths, and national memories. They co-construct a shared unconscious. Clinicians who use the terms 'group transference', basic assumptions, foundation matrix, automatically imply that there is some co-constructed phenomenon belonging to a small or large group. Thus it is also justified to use the term 'Social Unconscious'.

The idea of the social unconscious assumes that some specific hidden myths and motives guide the behavior of a certain society or culture. It also assumes that a large group or society might use

some shared defenses. 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. As will be demonstrated later, large groups serve well to bring the social unconscious into the open.

Foulkes (1964) describes four levels of relationships and communication existing in the group at the same time:

1. The current level – everyday relationships in which the group represents the reality, community, social relationships and public opinion. The conductor is perceived as a leader or authority.
2. The transference level – corresponding to mature object relations, where the group represents the family, the conductor is perceived as a parent and the group members as siblings.
3. The projective level – corresponding to primitive object relations of part-objects with projected and shared feelings and fantasies. Members can represent elements of the individual self. The group represents the mother image or even her womb, and body images are reflected and represented by the group and its members.
4. The primordial level – the group represents shared myths, archetypical images and the collective unconscious.

Brown (2001) points out that in levels 2, 3, 4 we allow for processes that involve not only the individual unconscious of classical psychoanalysis, but also processes occurring between and through people. These levels of communication exist in small groups, as well as larger groups including social ones. We might wonder, where is the level of the Social Unconscious? Two answers are possible. One is to add this level to the four already existing levels of Foulkes, assuming that he neglected adding it. Another solution is to assume that the Social Unconscious exists in each of these levels, with the first one serving as a background (we will see later that the fourth primordial one might be excluded). If we choose this solution, then when analysing the social unconscious we should relate to all these levels and look for unconscious hidden aspects shared by members of a social system at each level. For example, we should analyze the myths of the family (transference level) shared by members of a certain culture.

According to Brown (2001) there are four ways in which the social unconscious is manifested:

1. Assumptions – what is taken for granted and natural in society.
2. Disavowals – disowning knowledge or responsibility for things that are unwelcome.
3. Social defenses – what is defended against by projection, denial, repression or avoidance.
4. Structural oppression – control of power and information by competing interests in society and the international community.

We need to add each of these above items when describing the ways in which a certain Social Unconscious is manifested. But first we need to define our object of study.

Definitions of the Social Unconscious

The term 'social unconscious' was first mentioned by Foulkes in his book *Therapeutic Group Analysis* (1964: 52):

> . . . the group-analytic situation, while dealing with the unconscious in the Freudian sense, brings into operation and perspective a totally different area of which the individual is equally unaware. . . . One might speak of a social or interpersonal unconscious.

Thus Foulkes went beyond the classical Freudian concept of the individual unconscious to include the social and communicational forces affecting interpersonal and transpersonal processes, but he did not elaborate further on this concept. Hopper (1996, 2001, 2003) contributed many papers to this concept, being one of the most consistent exponents of the social unconscious. Hopper (2001: 10) defines the social unconscious, thus:

> The concept of the Social Unconscious refers to the existence and constraints of social, cultural and communicational arrangements of which people are unaware. Unaware, in so far as these arrangements are not perceived (not 'known'), and if perceived not acknowledged ('denied'), and if acknowledged, not taken as problematic ('given'), and if taken as problematic, not considered with an optimal degree of detachment and objectivity.

Dalal (1998) persistently argues that the dichotomy between the social and the individual, culture and personality, is false. He identifies two theories hidden in Foulkes's approach: the first he has called Orthodox, as it retains its allegiances with individualism and instinctivism; the second theory he has called Radical, as it challenges the orthodoxy that prioritized the individual over the social group. In the same manner, he argues that Foulkes's definition of the Social Unconscious does not go far enough, because it suggests the presence of an unconscious that is *not* social, or prior to the social, or outside the social. Dalal's (2001) radical idea following Radical Foulkes is that one cannot talk about a Freudian unconscious that is different from a social unconscious. Thus, he claims that the social unconscious is not 'the social *in* the unconscious' [my emphasis], meaning that it is not just the way someone is affected by their particular cultural system.

> 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, 2001: 212).

Specifically he explores some of the consequences of bringing the notion of power into the discussion, and examining its consequences for the contents of the social unconscious.

My definition of the social unconscious is somewhat different from Hopper's (2001) or Dalal's (2001): the social unconscious is the co-constructed shared unconscious of members of a certain social system such as community, society, nation or culture. It includes shared anxieties, fantasies, defenses, myths, and memories. Its building bricks are made of chosen traumas and chosen glories (Volkan, 2001) which I shall explain later.

Misperceptions about the Social Unconscious
It is not the Superego
In his structural model, Freud divided the mental apparatus into three structures: the Id, the Ego, and the Superego. The last of these is the internalization of social norms and values,

through the prohibitions and reinforcements activated by parental figures as representatives of society. The Superego represented our conscience and stands in opposition to the desires of the Id. The Superego, Freud stated, is the moral agent that links both our conscious and unconscious minds. It is part of the unconscious mind, and based upon the internalisation of the world view, norms and mores a child absorbs from parents and the surrounding environment at a young age. Dalal (1998: 211) calls these unconscious parts of the superego, the *unconscious social*. As the conscience, it is a primitive or child-based knowledge of right and wrong, maintaining taboos specific to a child's internalisation of parental culture.

One might argue that because the social unconscious represents the social restraints, constraints and barriers, it resembles the Superego. But although the Superego is the child's internalization of parental culture, it differs from the Social Unconscious in several important aspects. First of all, it has individualistic features, as my superego is not the same as yours. This is because the social agents (the parental figures) through which these social norms were internalized differ from one individual to another. Second, the interpretation of these social taboos and restrictions change from one individual to another, and they are applied according to each person's level of maturity. Of course, there are some common moral elements in each individual's Superego, such as the Divine commandment 'Thou shalt not kill', but the degree of guilt a person feels while disobeying this commandment varies from one person to another. The social unconscious, as I shall show, is common to people belonging to the same society.

As Ormay (2001: 172) writes –

> The superego contains the value system of the family and of society. What is missing in psychoanalysis is a direct representation of the bigger human context. The superego goes towards it to some extent, but it falls short because it is only a part of the ego, a special group of internal representations of a few people with their idiosyncrasies, largely negative, locked up in solipsism. A genuine, shared social function is missing.

It is not just the Social in the Unconscious

One way of understanding the social unconscious is to see it as the social aspects in the individual unconscious. Surely people

are affected by their particular cultural system, and their uncon-
scious is shaped according to the social forces. We can analyze
these hidden influences and title the parts in the individual uncon-
scious attributed to the impact of culture and society as the social
unconscious, but this is not what we mean when talking about
this concept.

Hopper (2005: 29) clearly states:

> . . . although it can be said that an unconsciously co-created microcosm within
> the group is an expression of the ''unconscious of the group'', I do not think
> about the dynamics of groups and other social systems in terms of their
> 'unconscious', because I do not believe that social systems have minds, con-
> scious or otherwise. Certainly they do not have brains. . . . However, the meta-
> phor that social systems are like people and have minds in the same way that
> people have minds, is an extremely useful heuristic device that directs our
> attention and curiosity towards those parts and aspects of social systems of
> which people are unconscious. This is especially apposite under conditions
> of trauma when wounded people regress, as do the systems of which they
> are members.

Actually we can question this concept from its other end. Accord-
ing to Dalal (1998), if we take the group seriously, we can say that
there is no such a thing as an individual, because we can never
talk about the individual outside the social context. If we
extend this idea we can also conclude that there is no such
thing as an individual unconscious which is different from the
social unconscious. Indeed Dalal (2001: 554) asserts that 'the
unconscious is constituted by the social at every level' and
Knauss (2006) claims that each individual's unique unconscious
life forms a dynamic group matrix. This process expresses itself
through an ongoing wordless or verbal conversation within
imagined or real groups (Stacey, 2001).

Social aspects, constraints and influences might portray them-
selves in the individual unconscious, and the individual uncon-
scious might be social through and through, but in order to
relate to something as coming from the Social Unconscious we
need to find evidence to it in most individuals belonging to the
same culture/society. This is because the social unconscious,
according to my definition is the shared unconscious fantasies.
Actually this is an interesting case where the inner and outer
are compounded to create a combined shared phenomenon. We
can find this un-separated combination in Dalal's (1998) defini-
tion cited above. We do not have to talk about the group mind

or need to relate to society and culture as an organism in order to agree that members of a social system co-create some unique unconscious and share fantasies, repressed memories, anxieties and defenses.

It is not the Collective Unconscious

Jung (1936) termed the concept of 'the collective unconscious' to describe that part of a person's unconscious which is common to all human beings. He distinguished the collective unconscious from the personal unconscious, which is particular to each human being. The collective unconscious contains archetypes, which are universal mental predispositions not grounded in experience and are manifested by all people in all cultures. The archetypes are not memories of past experiences but 'forms without content' representing the possibility of a certain type of perception and action. They are part of the inheritances of all human societies. They offer a certain kind of readiness to produce the same or similar mythical ideas over and over again.

The Social Unconscious differs from the collective unconscious that emphasizes the inheritance of acquired characteristics. It is common to people belonging to the same culture or society, while the collective unconscious goes beyond a certain culture. The Social Unconscious is based on shared memories of a certain society, especially traumatic memories transmitted through the generations. This is clearly different from the archetypes that are the basis for the collective unconscious and are not based on memories. The Social Unconscious is similar to more contemporary Jungian views of the 'shared unconscious', which emphasize the interpersonal, the intersubjective and socialization (Zinkin, 1979). It is also similar to the 'cultural unconscious' introduced by the American psychoanalyst Spector-Person (1992).

However, Brown (2001) argues that it is useful to think of the primordial level of group communication (mentioned above in the four levels of relationships and communication) which represents the collective unconscious, as active in the unconscious influence of the particular societies to which each individual, family or social group belongs. We might trace aspects of the collective unconscious in the Social Unconscious if we notice that certain archetypes are more powerful in a specific culture.

It is not just Hidden Cultural Norms
Some cultural aspects are more elusive and less obvious than other aspects. Culture itself can be seen as an invisible web standing behind our behaviours and interactions. But although the Social Unconscious has to do with the subtle, tacit, taken-for-granted ways of doing things in one's society or culture, it is not just the norms that we are unaware of. For example if we consider the spatial distance common in different cultures in day-to-day relationships, we will find that Mediterranean people keep less physical distance and touch one another more than the British. This might be related to the Social Unconscious, as it seems to fit the definition of: '. . . the existence and constraints of social, cultural and communicational arrangements of which the people are unaware' (Hopper, 1996), but it is not enough to make it unconscious. When we look for unconscious elements we usually assume that there are some motives for keeping these elements unconscious, and that there is some defense involved in this process.

So we are looking for *a meaning* behind this hidden cultural norm or covert behaviour. If we find out that the behaviour of keeping physical distance in a certain culture is related to some difficulty in intimate relations or that there are myths that relate touch to dangerous outcomes (such as the one about King Midas, whose touch turned anything and anyone into gold) we can include this behaviour in the Social Unconscious. What differentiates between merely being a hidden social norm and being part of the Social Unconscious is an unconscious motive, a defense, or a deep conflict.

That is why traumatized societies become a rich source for exploring the Social Unconscious. Traumas involve painful events – pains against which we build strong defenses and develop various behaviours to avoid recollecting them. Uncovering these traumatic memories or the way they unconsciously impact on a society is the essence of the Social Unconscious.

So the social defenses participating in this unconscious could be analyzed as part of it. Based on his observations from the workshops of the European Association for Transcultural Group Analysis (EATGA), Brown (2001) stated the most powerful ones as denial and projection. In addition, he found the repression of memory to be very powerful, especially in traumatic social experiences. My own experience in large groups has led me

to add the mechanisms of splitting, idealization and projective identification acting strongly in the group and society as well.

Large Groups, Chosen Trauma, and the Fourth Basic Assumption

Unstructured psychodynamic large groups that are organized in conferences (usually group psychotherapy conferences, but not necessarily) can be an important instrument for studying and exploring the Social Unconscious. The large group is a valuable group structure from which we can learn about the Social Unconscious, mass psychology and society-at-large. Although we usually focus on the here-and-now in groups, when we want to explore the Social Unconscious and transcultural phenomena, we deduce from the here-and-now to the there-and-then. Large and median groups, more than small groups, usually start with chaos. Participants try to find order and make sense of the chaos so as not to feel lost, alone, isolated and possibly have 'a fear of breakdown' (Winnicott, 1974: 87) and disappear. Due to the weaker container function of the Large Group, fluidity of boundaries, and the seemingly chaotic structure, which creates regression, the large group awakens feelings of anxiety.

> In a large group the single member feels threatened and isolated and a sense of helplessness in the face of chaos is dominant. (von Platen, 1996: 486)

The large group arouses a powerful pull of regression, threatening individual identity (Turquet, 1975; Weinberg, 2006) and inviting crude aggression between its members and sometimes towards the leaders. Anzieu (1984) stresses the denial of differences between the sexes due to the pressure for narcissistic and pre-Oedipal regression in the large group, and Kernberg (1989) focuses on the tendency of the large group to promote conformity, thus contributing to the illusion that the large group is homogeneous. In these conditions of regression, shared fantasies and anxieties reveal themselves easily; de Maré et al (1991: 10) write:

> . . . large groups provide a setting in which we can explore our social myths (the social unconscious) and where we can begin to bridge the gap between ourselves and our socio-cultural environment . . .

The observant conductor can connect some of the overt themes discussed in the large group with hidden themes relating to Social Unconscious issues. The way members of the large group protect themselves from feeling anxious and isolated (or too enmeshed) also gives a clue to Social Unconscious themes. As stated previously, social defenses are part of it.

At the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA) annual conference, two conveners, a man and a woman, conducted the large group continuously for years. When the woman announced her resignation from leading the group next year, the participants talked about it anxiously but without expressing their sad feelings. The male conductor suggested that the group feels abandoned by its mother, and maybe is worried by the loss of the good breast. In addition to connecting it to the transference towards a mother figure, he hypothesized about the difficulty for North Americans to mourn the loss of their motherland when immigrating to America.

This theme is definitely a deep Social Unconscious issue transmitted over generations in a society of immigrants, affecting the way different ethnic groups integrate in this multicultural society. This vignette shows how a large group interpretation can relate both to the transference level (mother figure) the projected level (the good breast) and the Social Unconscious level (mourning motherland loss).

The Social Unconscious reveals itself also in traumatized societies and in community and national crisis events. In times like these, natural large groups (large groups as societal, educational, ethnic and political structures) regress too. Hopper (1997) claims that a regressed traumatized society manifests behaviors stemming from the fourth basic assumption, which is an extension of Bion's (1961) original three basic assumptions. This assumption is expressed in bi-polar forms of incohesion. When activated, groups and group-like social systems oscillate between aggregation and massification. In the massification polarity the group seems unified, members tend to merge in fantasy and present enmeshed characteristics, deny differences and an illusion of togetherness and sameness prevails. In the aggregative polarity, people feel alienated from one another and indifference, hostility and withdrawal from relationships are prevalent. In its extreme form a massive splitting mechanism is active and each subgroup is against each other subgroup. The deep anxieties invoked in traumatic states and the defenses

against them, manifested in the fourth basic assumption should be analyzed as part of the Social Unconscious of a certain culture.

A special consideration when exploring the Social Unconscious, especially in traumatic situations and their aftermath, should be given to the idea of the 'chosen trauma'. Volkan (2001) refers to 'chosen trauma' as the collective memory of a disaster, which becomes a paradigm that keeps the existential threat in the national memory in order to ward off potential complacency. The chosen trauma is the shared mental representation of a massive trauma that the group's ancestors suffered. When a large group regresses, its chosen trauma is reactivated in order to support the group's threatened identity. 'Chosen Trauma' is an echoing trauma, becoming a paradigm that reassures existential threat, and exists in the national memory. Memories, perceptions, expectations, wishes, fears, and other emotions related to shared images of the historical catastrophe and the defenses against them, may become an important identity marker of the affected large group and actually construct its Social Unconscious years, even centuries, later, when the large group faces new conflicts with new enemies, it reactivates its chosen trauma in order to consolidate and enhance the threatened large group identity. In this way the Social Unconscious re-enacts the past. The mental representation of the past disaster becomes condensed with the issues surrounding current conflicts, magnifying enemy images and distorting realistic considerations in peace negotiation processes. It is clear from this description that chosen traumas reside in the Social Unconscious, maybe even constructing it just as archetypes construct the collective unconscious. Chosen traumas bring with them powerful experiences of loss and feelings of humiliation, vengeance, and hatred that trigger a variety of unconscious defense mechanisms that attempt to reverse these experiences and feelings.

We can conclude that the Social Unconscious includes chosen traumas, chosen glories and phenomena stemming from the fourth basic assumption.

Summary and Conclusions

I have argued that the Social Unconscious is a heuristically useful concept to explore unconscious social phenomena without

assuming an existence of a 'social mind'. It is co-constructed by members of the same community, society or culture and contains the shared fantasies, myths, anxieties, defenses and memories. It is not the superego, neither just the social in the unconscious. It is also not the Jungian collective unconscious and includes more than hidden cultural or social norms to which people are unaware. Volkan's (2001) chosen traumas are embedded in the Social Unconscious, assembling its shared myths and national memories.

Any analysis of the Social Unconscious of a certain society should include the four levels of communication and relationship described by Foulkes (1964) and the ways it is manifested in that society according to Brown's (2001) suggestion. We can use these dimensions to analyze the Israeli, North American, Italian or any other Social Unconscious. Indeed, Pisani (1993) made an attempt to describe some aspects of the cultural unconscious in southern Italy using Foulkes's (1964) four layers of communication, but it is only a beginning.

There are still many more areas for exploration arising from this article. First of all it might be of interest to analyze specific societies along the lines I have set out regarding the Social Unconscious. Of special interest might be a comparison between the North American Social Unconscious and that of European countries. The USA builds on a tradition of individualism, while the United Kingdom has a long-standing interest in socialism (maybe this is why group analysis has never been incorporated in the States). Historical events such as the civil war, eliminating Native Americans, slavery, the gold rush, and conquering the West should be evident in the North American Social Unconscious.

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