A Contribution to the Understanding of the Social Unconscious

Dennis Brown

An initial attempt is made to discern more details in Foulkes's concept of the social unconscious, relating it to his deeper levels of group communication where it connects with, transcends and penetrates the individual unconscious revealed by psychoanalysis. The work of Earl Hopper is called upon as well as the findings of workshops conducted by the European Association for Transcultural Group Analysis: A tentative classification is proposed involving assumptions, disavowals, social defences and structural oppression representing blocks to communication and awareness within the field of relationships described by Giovanni Lo Verso as collective, transpersonal and transgenerational.

Key words: assumptions, disavowals, social defences, structural oppression, transpersonal communication

In *Therapeutic Group Analysis* (1964: 52) Foulkes wrote:

> . . . 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. Moreover, the individual is as much compelled and modelled by these colossal forces as by his own id and defends himself as strongly against their recognition without being aware of it, but in quite different ways and modes. One might speak of a social or interpersonal unconscious.

Foulkes's emphasis on interpersonal and transpersonal processes is a long way from the purely intrapersonal focus of classical psychoanalysis, in which each individual's unconscious impulses

and repressed memories conflict with her individual defences and the constraints of her individual superego. The classical psychoanalysts, e.g. Hartmann, acknowledged the need to adapt to the external environment, but reduced this to an 'average expectable environment' to which the individual has to adapt. In contrast, for Foulkes the idea of an individual is an abstraction. He or she is always a nodal point in dynamic networks, internal and external. The environment is inside as well as outside.

Foulkes's view of group dynamics and the relationship of the individual to the group is very much a communicational one. His idea of several levels of relationships and communication is often referred to:

1. The level of everyday current relationships – of social relationships and sociology.
2. Transference, displacing internal object relationships outwards.
3. Projected and shared feelings and phantasies, often bodily.
4. The primordial level of the collective unconscious, shared myths, archetypes, etc., i.e. elements of the foundation matrix.

If we look at what happens at these levels, especially levels 2, 3 and 4, we shall see that we need to allow for processes that involve not only the individual 'unconscious' of classical psychoanalysis, but also processes that occur *between* people and *through* people, i.e. *interpersonal* and *transpersonal* processes. For example, at level 2 we can have group as well as individual transference relationships to the conductor, transferences to the group as a whole, or even to the institution in which the group is held. Transferences can be shared, and interact with countertransference and mutual role responsiveness. At level 3, group projection and projective identification are very clear in groups where scapegoating occurs – all, or many, members project unwanted aspects of themselves into the victim of scapegoating, who may be driven out of the group. On a sociopolitical scale, as in Bosnia and Rwanda, the victims may be savagely killed. The primordial level 4 is expressed by Jung in terms of the archetypal images of the Collective Unconscious that can be traced in all cultures. It is part of the inheritance of all human societies.

However, I believe it is useful to think of this fourth level as

active in the unconscious influence of the *particular* societies each individual, family and social group is a part of, i.e. in *variants* of universal images and patterns of relationship, including the familiar and the strange. In the family and in social relationships, our manners and ethical standards operate automatically. These are taken in with mother's milk, and breathed in through processes of identification and education so that they seem natural – as one's mother tongue seems natural. It is only when they are challenged by confrontation with another culture or language, e.g. through migration, or even on holiday, that they are seen as only *one* form of what is natural. Such confrontation can be threatening or enriching according to the basic security of the individual or the group. Some manage to be enriched by exposure to diverse cultures. But if the changes are traumatic, or the challenges too incompatible with a continuing sense of security and worth, great damage can be done, especially to more vulnerable people.

The workshops of the European Association for Transcultural Group Analysis have used group analysis through experiential large and small groups to study the unconscious culturally-determined part of the personality. We have shown how powerful is the need to belong, and how strong is the support to identity of familiar culture, custom, language, religion, food and sense of humour. Even unspoken rules governing how we greet each other, so different between the North and South of Europe, can cause surprise, misunderstanding or – for somebody visiting Italy from more reserved England – great pleasure!

It is misleading, I believe, to talk about *the* unconscious in psychoanalysis as a place or a unitary thing. We need to distinguish between *preconscious* processes and contents (*descriptively* unconscious) and the *dynamic* unconscious which is defined as those processes and contents which are actively repressed and kept out of consciousness. Other unconscious elements include the so-called ego defence mechanisms which operate out of conscious awareness and, for Kleinians in particular, the primitive phantasies which are assumed to be the mental manifestation of instinctual drives. It is these deeper unconscious processes, operating at what Freud called the level of *primary process* mental functioning, that have the characteristics of displacement, condensation and symbolization, and which are timeless and without negation. They are outside the realm of logical rational thought and reality testing.

In the same way, the social unconscious needs to be explored and defined *in more detail*. It is not a unitary thing. Many processes

and contents in groups and society can operate outside of consciousness.

The word *conscious* comes from the Latin *conscio*, meaning knowing together. Among the things which we do *not* know together, particularly in closed, repressive and intolerant societies without adequate *insight* and *outsight* – i.e. understanding of themselves or of others – are the relativity of culture, the human similarities that balance the differences between cultures, and how our attitudes to foreignness and people different from ourselves are based on anxieties invoking primitive defences. Our sense of self is sustained by belonging to an in-group which projects what it does not want and value into out-groups.

Such processes, usually unconscious, are involved in many social tragedies – the wars and genocidal acts that show no sign of lessening. Freud was right to be pessimistic about the capacity of civilization to contain and transform the 'death instinct'. Instincts are by their nature unconscious. And so are defences.

Among the most powerful social defences are denial and projection – both operative at the time of the Holocaust in Europe. Few wanted to admit what was happening. Or if they did admit it, it was happening only to Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and communists. We do not want people who question our beliefs about ourselves.

Another powerful social defence is repression of memory. This is often invoked on a large scale by survivors of disasters and among those who choose to emigrate or are forced to. Such repression can result in numbing of affect, and a sense of absence and guilt that can be passed on to the next generation. Yet the repressed has a habit of returning in disguised form, even if only by such a sense of guilt or absence and inauthenticity, or by the development of psychosomatic disorders. Work with survivors of war, holocaust and emigration, and their descendants, shows how much locked-up feeling and sense of alienation can be relieved by uncovering repressed memories on a social and family level, feelings which can then be worked through and provide energy for reparation and creativity at a personal and communal level. Jaak Le Roy (1994) has written very clearly about these processes, which I have recently linked with their ethical implications (Brown, 1995). In looking at cultural differences in what is regarded as natural and fair, unconscious social attitudes are influenced by different types of family structure (e.g. authoritarian or libertarian), inheritance rules (e.g. primogeniture or equal shares), and the expectation of marriage within or

outside the 'core' family. These in turn may influence the natural 'fit' of political ideologies to contain cultures and localities (Todd, 1985).

You will see that social facts as well as individual or shared mental processes are involved in the social unconscious. Earl Hopper (e.g. 1975, 1985) has drawn our attention to this for a number of years. In his 'Social Unconscious in Clinical Work' (1996), Hopper defined the social unconscious as: 'all those social, cultural (values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, etc.) and communicational arrangements, the constraints and sometimes even the existence of which are unconscious'. He goes on (p. 7):

> An analyst who is unaware of the effect of social events and social forces cannot be sensitive to their unconscious recreation within the therapeutic situation. He will not be able to provide a space for patients to imagine how their identities have been formed at particular historical and political junctures, and how this continues to affect them throughout their lives.

Hopper used two diagrams to illustrate the choices an analyst or group conductor has in formulating interpretations or other interventions, such as acknowledging the coexistence of internal and external realities and their influence. Here I have adapted them. (Figures 1 and 2). They remind me of another diagram that might be familiar to you – the so-called Johari Window (Luft, 1966), describing the dual levels of awareness between self and others (Figure 3). This dual awareness enables us to learn from other people's perception of us, and is an important part of the therapeutic efficacy of groups. However, in the light of all I have been saying, you will see that Section D, the 'unconscious self', is composed of both the *personal* and *social* unconscious.

Among the social facts that are often ignored, disavowed or repressed, are the nature and location of *power* in society. Political and economic power is often used repressively to limit speech and fair access to products and privileges and to chances of education and social betterment. The effect on people who are disadvantaged can be profound at the psychological as well as the physical and social levels. In his work *The Civilizing Process* (1939, 1994), Norbert Elias showed how our European personalities, and what is taken for granted in personal relationships, have changed over the centuries as the location of power has changed in society. The recent struggles for the rights of women, blacks and gays have alerted us to the unconscious assumptions and oppressions that constrained our views of what is right and fair in the past. Dick

FIGURE 1

Space and Time in Conscious Preoccupations (adapted from Hopper, 1994)

	Here	There
Now	Therapy situation	Outside situation e.g. politics
Then	Personal, family and local history	Wider history

FIGURE 2

Preoccupation of Patient × Intervention of Therapist (adapted from Hopper, 1994)

	Internal reality	External reality
Asocial and apolitical	Classical psychodynamics	Socially and politically uninformed
Social and political	Areas of the foundation matrix	Classical sociology, anthropology, theology, biology, etc.

FIGURE 3

Dual Level of Awareness between Self and Others (adapted from Luft, 1966)

	Known to self	Unknown to self
Known to others	Public self	Blind self
Unknown to others	Secret self	Unconscious self

Blackwell (1994) has drawn attention to the power of unconscious racism even within a group-analytic context, a theme also explored by Farhad Dalal (1997).

In concluding I would like to summarize four ways in which 'the social unconscious' is manifested.

1. *Assumptions* – what is taken for granted and natural in society (e.g. that we should not eat food with our hands, or that the oldest son should have special privileges, and the many myths and illusions in groups and societies, including the belief that we are unquestionably superior – or inferior to others). What is taken for granted omits to recognize other potentialities in us and in others.

2. *Disavowals* – disowning knowledge or responsibility for things that are unwelcome (e.g. our own greed or our envy, or that the poor or homeless are sometimes innocent victims of a society that we benefit from, or that criminality can be a last resort, or that the myths and illusions of other groups and societies have value).

3. *Social defences* – what is defended against by projection, denial, repression or avoidance (e.g. in the interest of self-

esteem projecting what we do not like about ourselves; to prevent guilt, denying or repressing what we as a society have done to others or have had done to us; or forgetting how we organize our institutions and rituals to avoid anxiety – as classically described by Menzies (1961) in hospitals, and Goffman (1961) in prisons and mental hospitals). Such defences can operate across generations in relation to social traumas as in wars, the Holocaust, forced emigration, etc., among the themes studied in the workshops of the European Association for Transcultural Group Analysis (e.g. Le Roy, 1994).

4. *Structural oppression* – control of power and information by competing interests in society and the international community (e.g. what we can call political facts) can ensure that awareness is restricted. The idea of institutional racism is an example that is now widely recognized.

No doubt you will want to add other elements to this list, or question what I have included and said so far. We could include those elements in Foulkes's fourth primordial level of relationships – the collective unconscious, archetypes and myths. I regard what I have described as the beginning of an attempt to describe the complexity of 'the social unconscious' that influences us all and to which we all contribute. Further, as group analysts we know that these categories *overlap* with each other and with the unconscious dynamics of individuals, families and institutions.

Giovanni Lo Verso (1995), an Italian colleague in the European Association for Transcultural Group Analysis, emphasized that individuals exist in a field of relationships. He described five levels at which the collective or transpersonal operates: (1) biological-genetic, (2) ethnic-anthropological, (3) transgenerational, (4) institutional, and (5) socio-communicative.

It might be useful to see Lo Verso's classification as describing the *channels* through which transpersonal influences flow, largely unconsciously, if only in the sense of being taken for granted. In contrast, my classification is of processes that *block* communication and awareness; assumptions, disavowals, defences and structural oppression.

It is the area of overlap between individual and group or social unconscious that is of special interest to group analysts. Whereas Bion saw this in terms of primitive group mentality, the site of basic

assumption states (Bion, 1961; Brown, 1985), group analysts see it as the *matrix* where individuals find their assumptions challenged, where they can come to terms with what they have disavowed and avoided, can modify their more primitive defences, and move to a more democratic openness where both similarities and differences are valued. Individuals change with the group, and vice versa. In this way we approach individual and group maturity that allows what Elias called *mutual identification* and I have written about in terms of *intersubjectivity* (Brown, 1994).

The thinking in this article started when a sophisticated and experienced group analyst asked, with an air of genuine puzzlement, 'What is the social unconscious?' I hope it will provoke further thinking, and further questions.

Notes

1. Based on a paper read at a course organized by Professor Luisa Brunori at the Department of Psychology, University of Bologna, June 1994.

References

Bion, W.R. (1961) *Experiences in Groups*. London: Tavistock.

Blackwell, D. (1994) 'The Emergence of Racism in Group Analysis', *Group Analysis* 27(2): 197–210.

Brown, D.G. (1985) 'Bion and Foulkes: Basic Assumptions and Beyond', in M. Pines (ed.) *Bion and Group Psychotherapy*, Chapter 10. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Brown, D.G. (1994) 'Self-Development through Subjective Interaction: A Fresh Look at "Ego Training in Action"', in D. Brown and L. Zinkin (eds) *The Psyche and the Social World*, Chapter 6. London: Routledge.

Brown, D.G. (1995) 'Group Analysis, Transculturality and Ethics', *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 12:170–7.

Dalal, F. (1997) 'A Transcultural Perspective on Psychodynamic Psychotherapy Addressing Internal and External Realities', *Group Analysis* 30: 203–15.

Elias, N. (1939) *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, 2 vols. Basle: Haus zum Falken.

Elias, N. (1994) *The Civilizing Process* (single integrated edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

Foulkes, S.H. (1964) *Therapeutic Group Analysis*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Hopper, E. (1975) 'A Sociological View of Large Groups', in L. Kreeger (ed.) *The Large Group*. London: Constable. (2nd edn Karnac, 1994).

Hopper, E. (1981) *Social Mobility: A Study of Social Control and Insatiability*. Oxford: Blackwell.