The Unconscious:
A Perspective from Sociohistorical Psychology

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This article extends concepts from Vygotsky's sociohistorical psychology to explain unconsciousness. Freud's conception of the unconscious is criticized for minimizing the importance of social and cognitive aspects of unconsciousness. In contrast, sociohistorical psychology explains unconsciousness as emanating from social values. These social values organize the manner in which we perceive people, and therefore account for oversights and distortions in our perception of self and others. Implications for overcoming unconsciousness are also discussed according to sociohistorical psychological principles.

Numerous scholars including social philosophers of the Frankfurt school and psychological anthropologists have argued that a cultural or sociohistorical approach to psychology cannot completely explain psychological phenomena. In this view, cultural psychology may comprehend the sociohistorical organization of conscious phenomena such as attitudes or customs, however it cannot explain subtle, arcane unconscious processes. Accordingly, sociohistorical psychology must be supplemented by Freudian concepts which do comprehend the unconscious. Recently, Dorothy Holland (1992), a psychological anthropologist, has complained that social cognitive theory does not account for unconscious phenomena such as "censorship" and "psychic strife," and she advocates importing other theories such as psychoanalysis to fill this void.

I dispute this contention. I shall attempt to demonstrate that a sociohistorical psychological analysis can illuminate phenomena that are called

unconscious. It is neither necessary, possible, nor desirable to supplement sociohistorical psychology with psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic principles cannot be imported into sociohistorical psychology because they are incompatible with its tenets. Moreover, psychoanalytic concepts fundamentally misconstrue human psychology and the unconscious in particular. As Vygotsky put it, the attempt at integrating psychoanalysis with a sociohistorical approach to psychology is "a monstrous combination" (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 169; cf. Lichtman 1982 for a similar conclusion regarding the integration of these two approaches). Sociohistorical psychology can stand on its own to explain "unconscious" phenomena and this explanation will be superior to the psychoanalytical one.

The Freudian Unconscious

Freud's theory of the unconscious assumes a private, personal mind. It is a mind populated with wishes that have a biological, intrapsychic origin, and which follow endemic mechanical laws. When these wishes are denied access to consciousness they remain buried in the mind as unconscious residues which distort perception of self and others.

Freud's conception of the unconscious rests upon two key assumptions concerning human psychology, biology, and society (Danziger, 1990). One assumption is a romantic view of humankind. This is the idea of a non-social individual who possesses endogenous ideas, feelings, and motives but who cannot express them in an intolerant society. However, the person valiantly manages to circumvent this social pressure. The repressed unconscious thoughts remain active and even guide conscious activity. They are the real meaning behind the conscious facade. The romantic standpoint enabled Freud to posit an entire underworld of thoughts, feelings, and motives independent of consciousness and society — "immaculate perceptions" so to speak. It also generated an approach to therapy which seeks to discover wishes buried in the unconscious, and which liberates them as far as possible from social and conscious repression.

A second assumption which bolstered the Freudian unconscious is that psychological processes are basically biological in nature. According to Freud, biology provides the content of the unconscious in the form of "primordial" id impulses.[1] These "primary processes" can exist inside the psyche,

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[1]Freud adopted Darwin's assumption that emotion is a form of physical energy (Rivto, 1990). Freud's conception of psychic energy was so modelled on physical energy that he was even led to find a physical source for it. This quest was one reason that he became so preoccupied with sex: sexual energy appears to be a physical drive and therefore constitutes a possible biological underpinning for psychic energy. As Freud said, "In the sexual processes we have the indispensable 'organic foundation' without which a medical man can only feel ill at ease in the life of the psyche" (quoted in Sulloway, 1983, p. 90).

disconnected from consciousness, because to begin with they are not conscious. Biological principles also endow the unconscious with a dynamic ability to convert unacceptable primordial impulses into different (disguised) forms. This dynamic exists because psychic energy obeys thermodynamic laws: that is, psychic energy can be neither created nor destroyed, it can only be converted from one form to another.[2] This physical principle, which Freud adopted from Fechner and Helmholtz, dictates that society cannot eliminate the impulses it condemns; society can only make individuals unconscious of the impulses which nevertheless continue to assert their influence in disguised forms.

The ability of primordial impulses to resist social control and to remain unconsciously active is strengthened by another mechanical principle. This is the "conservative tendency" of instincts to remain in an original state and to return there if disrupted. This tendency, which Freud (1920/1963) described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, enables instincts to preserve their primordial character insulated from social and cognitive disruptions.

To summarize, Freud's romantic and biological views of human nature led him to produce a particular conception of the unconscious as primordial impulses intransigent to social formation and segregated from consciousness. This conception is spelled out in Freud's article on "The Unconscious" (Freud, 1915/1957). The fact that Freud's conception of the unconscious springs from a particular ideology means that it is not the only one possible (Whyte, 1978). Indeed, it stands or falls with the truth of its romantic and biological foundation. Unfortunately for Freud, this foundation is flawed and cannot support the psychoanalytic edifice which houses the unconscious. As Sulloway (1991, p. 245) grimly concluded, "many of Freud's most essential psychoanalytic concepts were based upon erroneous and now outmoded assumptions from nineteenth-century biology . . . . Bad biology ultimately spawned bad psychology. Freud erected his psychoanalytic edifice on a kind of intellectual quicksand, a circumstance that consequently doomed many of his most important theoretical conclusions from the outset."

Freud's conception of the unconscious is flawed because it severs the unconscious from consciousness and social life. The notion of an arcane world of primordial, natural, quasi-physical ideas and mechanisms segregated from consciousness has been vigorously attacked by William James (1890/1950, pp. 164–176), neo-Freudians, and existentialists. Sartre (1943/ 1956, pp. 47–54) argued that psychological activity outside of consciousness is

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[2]The importance of thermodynamics to Freud's theory of the unconscious can be seen in his 1915 article on "Repression." There, Freud talked about the repressed libido finding alternative affective expression "according to its quantity." In other words, the quantity of libido is preserved in the substitute expressions.

an impossibility. A feeling which is not felt or an idea which is not cognized is an oxymoron. Sartre argues that ideas and feelings are aspects of consciousness. They are not forms of primordial energy outside consciousness.

Autonomous mechanisms such as perceptual defense are as illogical as unconscious feelings. Perceptual defense assumes a censor which surreptitiously blocks awareness of unpleasant stimuli. This kind of censor is presumed to engage in a host of activities, including knowing which things will threaten the self, wanting to protect the self from harm, deciding to block painful information from awareness, and effecting such a blockade — all unbeknownst to the subject. However, Sartre's critique renders this sort of autonomous information processing illogical. Information is only processed, decisions are only made, and knowledge is only possessed by consciousness.

Searle extends this argument to challenge physical models of information processing postulated by cognitive scientists. Searle (1990, 1992) argues that neurophysiological, non-conscious mechanisms do not *process information*. They may group or calculate certain properties of data but they do not comprehend these data as being or signifying anything. Only consciousness (or mechanisms of consciousness) can process information on the basis of comprehended significations.

The critique of unconscious processes may appear to be vitiated by subliminal perception, which has recently been reconceptualized as implicit perception (Bornstein and Pittman, 1992, pp. 17–45; Kihlstrom, 1990, pp. 450–453). However, subliminal perception is not analogous to the Freudian unconscious. The stimuli for subliminal perception are degraded in that they are presented for extremely brief time periods or masked by other confounding stimuli (cf. Masling et al., 1991; Bornstein and Pittman, 1992). However, the unconscious thoughts, feelings, needs, and motives which Freud discussed typically have none of these properties. Quite the contrary, they are enduring and persistent. According to Freud, mental states are difficult to apprehend not because they are fleeting, but because their content is threatening.

Subliminal perception and the Freudian unconscious also differ in their mode of operation. Subliminal perception is a very general recognition of a previously encountered stimulus. The subject presumably apprehends some portion of the stimulus which is sufficient to allow later recognition when the stimulus is presented along with other test stimuli. Moreover, the later recognition only occurs on a certain fraction of trials; it is not perfect recognition. The Freudian unconscious is quite different. The unconscious is full knowledge (minus consciousness) which directs complex behavior every time a relevant stimulus is encountered. Unconscious ideas are forcibly kept from awareness and transformed into other ideas because they are implicitly known to threaten the individual. Subliminal perception does not necessarily depend upon such dynamics. Subliminal perception can simply be the

hazy recognition of degraded stimuli regardless of their psychological signifi-
cance for the subject.

The great differences between experimentally induced subliminal perception
and the Freudian unconscious make it hazardous to apply the findings of the
former to the latter. As Kihlstrom (1990, p. 447) said,

> research on subliminal perception, motivated forgetting, and the like offers little support
> for the Freudian conception of nonconscious mental life because the propositions that
> have been tested are rarely unique to Freudian theory. Such support can only be provided
> by research that tests those hypotheses that are unique to Freudian theory — for exam-
> ple, that unconscious contents are sexual and aggressive in nature, and that unconscious
> processes are primitive and irrational. Such experiments are hard to come by, and posi-
> tive findings rarer still.

Even if experimental research did demonstrate nonconscious perception of
subliminal and masked laboratory stimuli, this would have little bearing on
everyday unconscious perception. However, research on subliminal perception
is not even conclusive; it is equivocal. Most experiments have failed to prove
that subjects are indeed unaware of the stimuli they discriminate. When rigor-
ous assessments of awareness are made, it appears that subjects were probably
aware of stimuli (Merikle and Reingold, 1992; Ratner, 1991, pp. 195–196;
Silverman, 1977). In other cases, the ability to discriminate without awareness
is minimally above chance and confined to a small number of subjects
(Merikle and Reingold, 1992, p. 67). Experiments have similarly failed to cor-
roborate the phenomenon of repression. After reviewing this research Holmes
concluded that "at the present time there is no controlled laboratory evidence
supporting the concept of repression" (1990, p. 96). In summary, "given the
available evidence, it is still possible to argue that unconscious perceptual pro-
cesses have not been shown to play any important role in directing human
behavior" (Merikle and Reingold, 1992, p. 76).

The foregoing critiques of unconscious processes indicate that psychological
activity is activity of consciousness. Psychological activity is also inseparable
from social life. Accordingly, the unconscious and its products (dreams, slips
of the tongue, and dysfunctional symptoms) must be reconceptualized as
integral to a social consciousness (cf. Lakoff, 1993 for a social cognitive analy-
sis of dreams). Reconceptualization would be objectified in terminology. The
term "the unconscious" would be abandoned because it connotes a physical
thing or place outside consciousness. "The unconscious" would be replaced by
"unawareness" which connotes a process or state rather than some sort of
thing. In the remainder of this paper, I shall attempt to articulate a social con-
ception of unawareness. The most fruitful perspective for guiding this
endeavor is sociohistorical psychology. This school was founded by Lev
Vygotsky, Alexander Luria, and Alexei Leontiev in the 1920's.

Unawareness According to Sociohistorical Psychology

An Overview of Sociohistorical Psychology

Space does not permit a full explication of sociohistorical psychology which can be found in Ratner (1991, 1993a), Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991), and Wertsch (1985a, 1985b). The cornerstone of this viewpoint is that psychological functions depend upon real social life and bear its imprint. Specifically, as individuals participate in economic, political, educational, religious, recreational, familial, and interpersonal activities they form *social concepts*. Social concepts are socially shared knowledge, expectations, and evaluations of objects, people, and events. Social concepts are the meanings that things have for a culture (cf., Lutz, 1985). Bourdieu (1977, chapter two) employed the term habitus to refer to these socially constituted systems of cognitive and motivating structures which generate behavior. Social concepts encompass what social psychologists term *social values* — that is, ideals which people positively assess and strive for (Berry, Poortinga, Segal, and Dasen, 1992, pp. 51–56; 330–333; Feather, 1994; Smith and Bond, 1993, pp. 38–53). Social concepts organize psychological functions. According to Vygotsky, understanding and evaluating things in a certain way structures the manner in which we perceive, remember, imagine, need, desire, emotionally respond to, and reason logically about them. These mental functions reciprocally modify concepts.

Expressing the link between psychological functions, concepts, and social life, Vygotsky (1931/1991, p. 88) said, life problems "lead to the development of the central and leading function of all mental development, to the formation of concepts, and on the basis of the formation of concepts a series of completely new mental functions arises; perception, memory, attention, [etc.] are reconstructed on this new basis [and] they are united in a new structure."[3] Social concepts also organize bodily functions. They determine the extent to which we privatize bodily functions, as well as our tolerance for pain, odors, and dirt. They also determine sexual arousal. Moreover, social

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[3]In an article that predates Vygotsky by several decades, John Dewey described the manner in which socioeconomic relations influence psychology.

> Occupations determine the fundamental modes of activity, and hence control the formation and use of habits . . . . Apperceptive masses and associational tracts of necessity conform to the dominant activities. The occupations determine the chief modes of satisfaction, the standards of success and failure. Hence they furnish the working classifications and definitions of value; they control the desire processes. Moreover, they decide the sets of objects and relations that are important, and thereby provide the content or material of attention, and the qualities that are interestingly significant. The directions given to mental life thereby extend to emotional and intellectual characteristics. So fundamental and pervasive is the group of occupational activities that it affords the scheme or pattern of the structural organization of mental traits. Occupations integrate special elements into a functioning whole. (Dewey, 1902, pp. 219–220)

concepts structure somatic symptoms of psychological dysfunction. Smith–Rosenberg (1972) concludes that hysterical conversion in nineteenth century middle-class women reflected the social value that women should be weak and spiritual rather than physically active. This social value led frustrated women to deaden their senses and immobilize their limbs, thereby exaggerating the normative gender ideal (Ratner, 1991, p. 274). Kleinman and Kleinman (1985, p. 434) similarly conclude that social values channel stress into somatic symptoms among pre-capitalist people and among lower class and rural groups in capitalist societies, while channeling stress into psychological symptoms among people living a more bourgeois life style.

Social concepts originate in particular praxis within particular sectors and classes (or fields) of a social system (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 94–115). But concepts may migrate to other sectors and classes and become quite general. Economic concepts such as competition, individualism, and materialism may permeate family life, education, and the arts (Adorno, 1974; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Henry, 1963; Leach, 1993). Religious ideas and scientific concepts may also achieve broad acceptance. Wherever social concepts are accepted, they organize perception, emotions, motives, imagination, needs, and bodily functions.

Research on the cultural–cognitive basis of psychological functions has been summarized by Shweder and Sullivan (1993) and Ratner (1991). This research demonstrates that psychological phenomena are integrated with each other, with social life, and with consciousness. Unfortunately, little is known about the specific operations by which social concepts organize psychological phenomena.

According to sociohistorical psychology, social concepts form psychological activity. They do not simply inhibit pre-social, pre-conscious functions. Social concepts reorganize and reconstitute natural, infantile functions into psychological activity. Natural functions do not retain their original character and continue to operate independently of social consciousness. In Vygotsky's words, "culture reworks all the child's natural behavior and carves anew his entire course of development" (1993, p. 166). Individual thoughts may be anti-social in content — they may oppose certain social norms — however they are not presocial in origin. Nor do social concepts influence the mind by operating on one function — e.g., sexuality — which, in turn, determines all other functions. Social concepts directly form all psychological activity; their impact is broad and systematic. In the same way, social concepts derive from the totality of social relations, not simply from a single domain of sexual mores. Social influences on consciousness include economic, political, and other norms. In contrast to Freud's psychology which narrowed the impact of society and consciousness on psychology, sociohistorical psychology expands their importance.

Sociohistorical Psychological Principles of Unawareness

Although Vygotsky did not propose a sociohistorical model of unaware-ness, the foregoing principles can be extended to develop one. Indeed, an alternative conception of the unconscious would strengthen the critique which Vygotsky levelled against psychoanalysis. While he was initially sym-pathetic to Freud's materialistic approach and remained attracted to certain of Freud's ideas, his mature work repudiated Freud's overall conceptual sys-tem (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, chapter five).

An exhaustive reconceptualization of the unconscious is beyond the scope of this paper. In what follows I shall only outline some fundamental concepts concerning the nature of unawareness.

To begin with, sociohistorical psychology accepts Freud's distinction between psychological phenomena which are temporarily beyond the focus of attention but are readily accessible (the preconscious), versus phenomena which are only accessible through extensive analysis (the unconscious). However, sociohistorical psychology constructs this distinction in terms that are significantly different from Freud's.

A more acceptable view of temporary unawareness is the phenomenologi-cal conception described by Sartre (1943/1956, pp. 150ff), Husserl (1913/1962, section 27; 1920/1973), and Schutz (1970). These authors refer to temporary unawareness as "pre-reflective" or "nonthematized" awareness that is "on the horizon" of thematic awareness. This nonthematized information is available to the individual; one simply does not attend to it at the moment, although it does influence one's focal awareness. Polanyi (1966) terms this unthema-tized awareness "subsidiary awareness," or "tacit knowledge."

Because this kind of unawareness is easily overcome by focusing attention onto unthematized elements, it does not require analysis. I shall therefore discuss more profound unawareness which is difficult to detect and over-come. This profound, intransigent unawareness can be conceptually divided into two categories: unawareness of processing information, and unawareness of features of things.

Regarding the first category, we generally do not know that we symbolize incoming stimulation and match it against stored representations as we per-ceive, feel, need, desire, dream, create, solve problems, or remember. Nor do we know the specific assumptions which lead us to become angry, to perceive an object as far away rather than as small, or to remember or forget a certain event. These implicit processes are what Helmholtz denoted by the term "unconscious inference." More recently, cognitive psychologists have called this mental activity "the cognitive unconscious" (Kihlstrom, 1990). Unconscious cognitive processes are functions of consciousness in the sense that they share the same origins, utilize the same symbols and knowledge,

and engage in meaning-giving interpretation. The cognitive unconscious is not an entirely different system from consciousness with different origins and dynamics, as Freud postulated. Nor is it repressed and disguised. The cognitive unconscious is subsumed within consciousness although it operates outside explicit awareness.

I shall not attempt to unravel the perplexing mystery of how the cognitive unconscious is acquired and controlled. Instead I shall analyze another aspect of unawareness, namely ignorance of *features* of things and people. Examples of this kind of unawareness are perceptual illusions which fool us into overlooking the features of physical objects. We may similarly overlook psychological characteristics of people such as motives, emotions, abilities, and attitudes. This ignorance of attributes is what Freud's concept of the unconscious denoted. In what follows I offer a sociohistorical psychological explanation of this kind of unawareness.

Sociohistorical psychology explains unawareness of people's psychological qualities in terms of the social concepts which structure perception. As discussed earlier, social concepts are cognitive schemas which structure our mental processes and sensitize us to certain things while desensitizing us to other things. In this way social concepts create unawareness as well as awareness. For example, the social value of romantic love leads to exaggerating the lover's attractiveness and obscuring faults. The social value of youthfulness leads to exaggerating the capabilities of young people and obscuring their limits. Conversely, the capabilities and wisdom of old people are obscured and denigrated.

From this point of view, unawareness and awareness are two sides of the same Janus figure. Unawareness is the obverse of awareness — its dialectical opposite — it is not a separate system as Freud claimed.

Unawareness is really misperception and it is explainable in the same terms as perceptual illusions: the perceiver invokes incorrect assumptions about a psychological quality and these erroneous assumptions misinform him about its properties, relationships, and origins. Asch (1952, p. 604) explained this as follows: "the forcible exclusion of data (and goals) from the center of awareness need not involve the operation of unconscious forces in Freud's sense. What is of most consequence at the social level is that one does not see facts in their proper context, or that one does not face them, or that one violently stresses certain events at the expense of others, operations which produce misstructuring or distortion in understanding and feeling." Explaining unawareness in the same terms as misperception has several virtues. It sharpens our understanding of unawareness by employing accepted, detailed concepts from the study of perception and cognition. It also maintains a parsimonious account of several phenomena using relatively few concepts, which is one of the goals of science.

Perception and recollection of psychological characteristics are distorted by inadequate concepts.[4] Distortion occurs in two ways. In certain cases, conceptual schemata lead to misperceiving an enduring quality. For instance, a person of low intelligence believes himself to be bright. His low intelligence persists despite his overestimation. In other cases, conceptual schemata actually transform a psychological quality. For example, an angry person who conceives of herself as mild-mannered may not perceive her own angry state as anger. Anger will be misconstrued as equanimity and the latter will be experienced. Anger may have been momentarily experienced but it was transformed in the act of reflection and no longer exists. Of course, the brief experience of anger may be encoded in memory and remembered as a previous experience. However, in all likelihood, the anger will not be recalled because it was so fleeting and discordant with the individual's self image.[5] Both kinds of misperception leave the subject unaware of the original quality. In neither case does the original quality remain in the subject's "unconscious." Even low intelligence is not "unconsciously" known to the subject, any more than the real properties of objects are "unconsciously" known in the case of perceptual illusions.

Social concepts function as filters which distort the character of a psychological quality just as they can distort the properties of physical objects. Distortion is not due to the subject's fear of facing his or her own unacceptable true ideas. It is caused by conceptual limitations of social values.

To say that social concepts structure awareness means that all perceptual activity is biased toward certain things and away from others. Perception can never be fully responsive to everything. It must be insensitive to, or unaware of, phenomena which fall beyond its parameters. Although all social concepts produce some unawareness, the content and extensiveness of unawareness vary. Certain concepts may desensitize us to things which are quite valuable, and we may wish to replace these concepts with others that sensitize us to the important things. We shall return to this subject in the section on overcoming unawareness.

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[4]Thinkers as diverse as Kant, Husserl, Brentano, Dilthey, Wundt, and William James recognized that reflection on experience interprets and inevitably distorts the lived experience. This problematic led these scholars to reject simple introspection as a sufficient basis for scientific psychology (Ermarth, 1978, pp. 210–213).

[5]For studies on the impact of expectations on memory see Bartlett (1932/1967), Cordua et al. (1979), Ross (1989), Anderson and Pichert (1978), Higgins and Lurie (1983), Schwartz (1991), and Robbins (1982). Ross (1989) summarizes several studies which show that a person's memory of events depends upon his or her theory of the characteristics of the events. Thus, we tend to exaggerate the consistency between present and past attitudes because we believe that attitudes are consistent. One study found that university students exaggerated the consistency of their impressions toward their lovers. This was true only for traits such as honesty — which subjects in a pre-test believed to be stable. The consistency effect was not obtained for happiness which on a pretest was believed to be an unstable feeling.

An Illustrative Case Study

In order to make the foregoing theoretical exposition serviceable, it is helpful to apply it to a specific case study. I shall therefore analyze a personal example of unawareness to illuminate the manner in which it is formed by social concepts. Such a sociohistorical analysis will correct the predominant tendency to portray unawareness in personal terms. For the purpose of illustration, I shall analyze a case whose sociohistorical features are readily identifiable. More complicated cases of unawareness can be understood by extrapolating and refining this analysis.

The subject is George. As a child, George lacked social skills and self-confidence, and had no friends. In adolescence he developed a critical attitude toward peers. He started believing they were shallow and pretentious and were unworthy of his friendship. George became a serious person preoccupied with social causes. He believed himself to be more intelligent and perceptive than others. He frequently talked down to other people, argued with them, and made sarcastic comments in order to expose what he saw as their superficiality, ignorance, and insensitivity. He wished people would perceive his intelligence and agree with his opinions, but instead they shunned his belligerence. George interpreted their rejection of him as confirming their shallowness and intolerance. George, additionally, resented other people's success. He interpreted their good fortune as the product of their unscrupulousness and insincere, ingratiating sociability. George spread malicious rumors about people in order to publicize their inferiority. He also stole things from stores, saying to himself, "they'll never catch me, I'm too clever for them," and "other people cannot afford to buy these things and they will admire me for having them."

Now what was George "unconscious" of and why? As I shall elaborate below, George was unaware of the reasons for his awkwardness and estrangement, the true level of his intelligence and moral character, the viewpoint and sensitivities of other people, the consistency of his thoughts and actions across situations, and the connection of his psychological activity to society.

Sociohistorical psychology explains George's unawareness of these in terms of two social concepts he adopted. One is competitiveness, the other is atomism.

Competitiveness is a value which drives us to outdo other people by emphasizing our own prowess and exploiting the weaknesses of others. This social value reflects economic praxis in our capitalist society. Competitiveness shaped George's understanding of people so as to blind him to certain realities. He was so intent on proving himself and denigrating others that he overestimated his own strength and their weaknesses, while underestimating his own weaknesses and their strengths (sensitivity and skills).

The logic of George's competitive outlook was so forceful that it led him to *invent* certain strengths in himself and weaknesses in others. He imagined that he was intellectually and morally superior to others, when, this was not the case. The logic of his outlook also compelled him to imagine that people rejected him because of their ignorance, intolerance and insecurity. He could not see that other people were sensitive and justifiably offended by his arrogance. Fictitious postulates were necessary to uphold the integrity of his ideological system.

George's competitive social concept additionally led him to misconstrue the interrelation of certain qualities in himself and others. His competitive schema did not allow him to perceive his awkwardness as a causal factor which pushed people away from him. This would have implied some weakness in George which was inconceivable to his viewpoint. His competitive schema made George reverse the causal relationship and postulate that other people had estranged him, thereby producing his awkwardness.

Another social concept, atomism, compounded George's unawareness. Atomism is the belief that phenomena are discrete, independent atoms. Atomism, like competition, is rooted in our capitalistic socioeconomic system. The struggle among independent entrepreneurs to maximize their private wealth, unbridled by social coordination, cooperation, or obligation fosters the belief that the world is composed of separate, independent elements (Macpherson, 1962). When people regard themselves in these atomistic terms they feel internally fragmented and detached from other people. Detachment desensitizes us to other people's needs, perceptions, emotions, reasoning, and motives. It also obscures social influences that mold behavior.

These effects of atomism can be seen in George's psychology. He certainly felt estranged from people, and he was terribly insensitive to their perceptions, emotions, and personality. George's atomistic thinking also obscured the interrelationships among his psychological activities. It focused his attention on individual acts and distracted him from detecting consistencies among them. For example, it never occurred to George that shoplifting, spreading rumors, resenting other people's success, and lecturing to them all embodied a common tendency to make himself superior. The dissimilar details of these acts overshadowed similar elements. When George succeeded in shoplifting he was absorbed in the success of obtaining a free object. When he lectured people he was absorbed in presenting a clever idea. The different acts each generated a gleeful superiority, but because the acts were not compared together, this feeling was not drawn out as a common essential quality.[6]

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[6]Experimental psychologists have reported similar awareness of particular events but unawareness of their relations. Kenneth Bowers (1984) described an experiment where he selectively reinforced subjects' preference for certain pictures. This reinforcement led to dramatic changes in preference for some subjects. These subjects were aware of the reinforcement, but they failed

A final effect that atomistic thinking had on George's unawareness was to blind him to the relationship that his behavior had to the broad society. He construed his behavior in individual terms and was oblivious to social factors, including social concepts, which had influenced his action.

It is important to understand that social concepts restructured George's consciousness to blot out the foregoing characteristics and relationships. George could not entertain these issues because they lay outside his conceptual framework, not because he was afraid to face them. He was unaware of them because they were inconceivable, not because they were unacceptable. Knowledge of these issues did not surreptitiously exist in George's "unconscious" insulated from social consciousness. Rather, competitive and atomistic schemata structured the psyche so thoroughly as to preclude knowledge from existing at any level. The true character and relationships of psychological acts were unknown to George without being unconscious in the Freudian sense. According to sociohistorical psychology, unawareness is not the product of negatively blocking an existing idea. It results from positively structuring perception in a certain way that misconstrues qualities and their relationships. Unawareness depends upon a certain kind of awareness. For Freud, understanding unawareness does not require understanding consciousness. The only aspect of consciousness that is relevant is that it rejects a certain idea as unacceptable. For sociohistorical psychology, understanding unawareness depends upon understanding the specific social concepts of consciousness which value and devalue certain qualities of people, relate and differentiate particular attributes, and which construe events in a certain manner.

George's conceptual framework not only desensitized him to certain characteristics (e.g., weaknesses) and relationships (e.g., patterns) of psychological activity. His conceptual framework also obscured the causes of his unawareness. Paradoxically, the social concepts of competitiveness and atomism which structured George's awareness and unawareness were not discernible to him. Because these concepts emphasize people's separateness from society, the concepts obscure the fact that personal psychology is affected by social concepts. Social concepts such as competitiveness and atomism therefore obscure their own existence.

Conforming to social influences of which we are unaware is what Sapir meant by "the unconscious patterning of behavior in society." Behavior (including thinking and feeling) is socially patterned according to definite rules and models. However, individuals may focus on particular actions and

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to comprehend the effect that the reinforcement had on their preferences: they insisted that their preferences were independent of the reinforcement. Nisbitt and Wilson (1977) summarize additional experimental demonstrations of people being aware of factual events but unaware of the causal relation between them. Subjects whose behavior has been systematically modified by manipulating certain variables misattribute their behavior to other factors.

not perceive the full pattern. "The unconscious nature of this patterning consists not in some mysterious function of a racial or social mind reflected in the minds of the individual members of society, but merely in the typical unawareness on the part of the individual of outlines and demarcations and significances of conduct which he is all the time implicitly following" (Sapir, 1974, p. 35). The fact that the individual is unaware of the manner in which her behavior is structured by social norms means that her acts contain an "objective intention" and function which outruns her conscious intentions (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79).[7]

Being unaware of the social concepts, practices, and conditions which shape personal activity means that individuals cannot control them. Unawareness thus enhances the deterministic power of social forces. As Bourdieu said, social "determinisms operate to their full . . . with the complicity of the unconscious" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 136).

Sociohistorical psychology is the only psychological approach which identifies particular social systems and ideologies as primary determinants of unawareness. In contrast to other approaches which emphasize intrapersonal determinants, or interpersonal (dyadic) determinants of psychological phenomena, Vygotsky said that social concepts constitute our psychological tools. Social concepts are the means by which we produce psychological phenomena — they are our "psychological means of production" and "psychological mode of production." Social concepts not only determine our perceptions, emotions, imagination, and needs, but our unawareness as well.

Several caveats must be mentioned concerning social ideology and psychology. Although ideology is constructed and sustained in social institutions, individuals creatively apply ideology to their particular personal situation. We have seen how hysterical women exaggerated social values to construct psychological symptoms. George was similarly creative in using competition to explain his estrangement. He postulated weaknesses in his peers which led them to reject him. However, he could have utilized the concept of competitiveness to explain his social estrangement in another way. He might have regarded himself as a loser with less ability than his successful peers. Blaming oneself for failure is as compatible with competitive ideology

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[7]The failure of naive individuals to identify the social pattern, significance, and origin of their psychological functions means that a sociohistorical analysis must be made by a culturally sensitive observer rather than by the subject him or herself. Phenomenological reports of subjective experience will not explicate the sociohistorical character of that naive experience. As Sartre (1960/1976, p. 225) said, "There is no a priori reason why the . . . result [of social events] should be understood by the agent: everything depends upon the instruments of thought provided for him by his period, class, and historical circumstances." While a sociohistorical character is implicit in all experience, it can only be explicated by an analyst who is knowledgeable about society and can draw out the manner in which experience reflects (and contradicts) social values and norms (cf. Ratner, 1993b).

as is blaming others. An ideology has numerous strands and the individual may select among them.

Another caveat is that predominant social values such as competitiveness and atomism do not affect all individuals equally. People have different social experiences and they exercise some selection in adopting social concepts. Why a particular individual adopts a particular form of a particular ideology is not addressed here. I am only concerned with the social parameters within which individual variations occur. The social parameters allow for prediction of general psychological trends among masses of people, but not for prediction of any one individual. An individual's psychology is composed of social concepts but which particular ones must be discovered *after* he or she makes the selection.

Overcoming Unawareness

We have seen that unawareness of psychological qualities and relationships is shaped by social influences of which we are also unaware. Consequently, overcoming unawareness requires identifying the social influences which produce it, repudiating these influences, and ultimately replacing them with others that enhance sensitivity.

The social concepts which generate unawareness can be gleaned from a social analysis of conscious activity. Consciousness and unawareness are two sides of the same social concept. The analyst must begin with the social concepts that inform conscious activity and proceed to identify the unawareness which those same concepts produce. For example, George's arrogance and stealing were forms of competitiveness, and the latter was responsible for his ignorance about self and others. Once conscious activity is construed in social terms, unawareness can be also.

Reconceptualizing cognitive concepts and behavior in social terms such as competition, materialism, individualism, reification, and alienation restructures understanding because language produces meaning. This meaning-giving function of language was one of Vygotsky's central concerns. He believed that, "Speech does not merely serve as the expression of developed thought. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word" (Vygotsky, 1987b, p. 251; cf. Ratner, 1991, pp. 36–37).

Recasting personal lived experience as reflecting social concepts[8] provides the greatest potential for identifying, repudiating, and eliminating the causes of personal unawareness. Identifying social concepts in the psyche would make George aware of the numerous ways in which he thinks and acts competitively, and how these combine to make him unaware of important issues. George would then be in a position to systematically repudiate these psycho-

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[8]Dilthey was an important advocate of this kind of recasting (cf. Ermarth, 1978, pp. 226–227).

logical manifestations of competition which impair his awareness. Identifying social concepts would additionally enable George to identify their origins and manifestations in diverse sectors of society. George could discern that his personal competitiveness was promulgated by competitiveness in the economy, in the media, in school, and elsewhere. He would then be in a position to systematically repudiate the social origins of his destructive behavior and his unawareness.

Explicating and repudiating the social concepts which generate unawareness is a necessary step in dismantling that state. However, such a negative act of deconstruction must be complemented by a positive act which constructs a new sensitizing conceptual system. Awareness will not immediately follow from dismantling the old social concepts and their social praxis. Although Freud assumed that unconscious knowledge would become conscious with the elimination of a repressive apparatus, his assumption was naively romantic. Awareness of self and others depends upon possessing a cognitive "apparatus" of social concepts for becoming aware.

For example, a cooperative value would orient George to working with people for a common good rather than enhancing his own self interest by outdoing people. A cooperative value would enable George to regard other individuals as dependable, helpful allies whose strengths can be appreciated rather than feared. In this protective climate George could recognize his faults rather than blaming them on his peers. A cooperative social concept would thus enable George to more accurately assess his own and other's abilities. Evidence for this contention can be found in cross-cultural research on identity formation. Marcus and Kitayama (1994, pp. 105–114) indicate that citizens of collective societies more realistically estimate their capabilities than do citizens of individualistic societies. Collective peoples regard themselves as harmonious with, similar to, and dependent upon other people. The belief in a social self leads to acknowledging one's own weakness and other peoples' strengths. In contrast, citizens of individualistic societies regard themselves as distinctive from and better than other people. Believing oneself to be better than others results in overestimating one's strengths and underestimating one's weaknesses. Culturally-derived conceptions of self affect one's ability to realistically perceive characteristics of the self.

Replacing the social concept atomism with holism would facilitate additional changes in George's self awareness. It would enhance George's awareness of the commonalities which run throughout his diverse behaviors. Holism would also facilitate awareness of the social reasons for his behavior. New social concepts would therefore restructure George's psychological field. Elements would become reorganized into new relationships, causal vectors would be reversed, and characteristics which appeared immutable might be perceived as changeable. Since social concepts emanate from social practice,

new beneficent concepts can only be successfully implemented if they are supported by a new social practice, just as debilitating social concepts can only be uprooted if their social basis is repudiated.

Sociohistorical psychology is unique in emphasizing the social changes necessary to enhance awareness. Nonsocial analyses ignore the full range of social and psychological influences which sustain unawareness. Nonsocial analyses also pay little attention to reconstructing new social practices and concepts that must replace the debilitating ones. This makes overcoming unawareness extremely difficult because the sustaining context continues to perpetuate it. Paradoxically, overlooking social systems reifies behavior as natural, while recognizing social origins and social forms of behavior enable them to be altered.

Social practices and concepts can be altered for a variety of reasons. One reason is that social practices and concepts may produce behavior that contradicts them. For example, competition is designed to motivate winning behavior, but it often produces losing behavior. People who consistently lose may see the contradiction between what the social value promises and what it actually produces. The social value cannot deliver its own definition of success. This internal contradiction may lead to questioning the viability of the social concept.

Another reason for altering social concepts is the "external" contradiction that occurs between different concepts. Every society has numerous social concepts which reflect activities from different social sectors. In the United States, competition is contradicted by religious, family, and educational values. Internal and external contradictions among social concepts can generate psychic strife and the desire to change behavior. There is no need to postulate a non-social segment of self which challenges and improves social concepts.

Conclusion

According to sociohistorical psychology, psychological qualities are not unknown because they are submerged below conscious awareness. They are unknown because they lie beyond the scope of our conceptual schemata. Psychological insight will not be achieved by a depth psychology which excavates impulses from inside the mind. Insight requires *breadth psychology* which develops new social concepts and social relations. This is what Vygotsky (1987a, p. 77) had in mind when he said, "it is not the depths but the heights of the personality that are decisive for understanding the reactions of the personality and for the fate of an individual's consciousness." True perception of self is not immediate or natural, lying in our unconscious, and waiting to be released by removing a social canopy — like a sleeping princess waiting to jump to life after a special kiss has removed her spell.

Self-perception is mediated and structured by social concepts in the same way that perception of all things is so mediated. Veridical self-perception requires positively constructing appropriate social concepts and practices.

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