

Unconscious Fantasy, Mental Representation, and Priming: A Possible Solution to the Problem of Theoretical Pluralism

Anne Erreich, Ph.D.

Introduction

I will offer a redefinition of unconscious fantasy that situates it within a model of the mind and also provides a possible solution to the problem of theoretical pluralism which has plagued psychoanalysis since its founding. It seems rather foolish to propose a new metapsychology in an era when many psychoanalysts in North America have been determined to shake off Freud's metapsychology as a failed project, and have further declared that theory-making itself is suspect. But some of us, like Freud himself, aspire to create a discipline that fits into an overall science of mind rather than one narrowly focused on psychopathology. We hold that a more accurate understanding of how the mind works and develops will improve our work with patients. I believe that we do not have the luxury to dispense with theory, and that the future of the psychoanalytic project, at least in North America, depends on progress toward a scientific discipline.

To this end, I wish to reexamine the notion of "unconscious fantasy" in three respects: Part 1) the nature and development of unconscious fantasy; Part 2) its place in a contemporary model of the mind, which, parenthetically, suggests a solution to the problem of theoretical pluralism; Part 3) its mode of operation in the mind of an individual. The aim of these investigations is to update the notion of unconscious fantasy, an indispensable construct in psychoanalytic theories which assume out-of-awareness mentation, and to situate that construct within contemporary views of mental functioning in disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy of mind, and cognitive and developmental psychology, while bringing to bear the unique data of psychoanalysis to these academic disciplines.

Part 1: The nature and development of unconscious fantasy

In Freud's 1915 essay, "The Unconscious," he describes a dilemma regarding the opposite nature of certain instinctual impulses which are both highly organized but at the same time, unconscious: he has discovered that these derivatives "*qualitatively* ... belong to the system Pcs., but *factually* to the Ucs....[Freud, 1915, pp. 190-191].

These musings ultimately involved important changes in Freud's thinking about mental organization and the nature of trauma, which resulted in his move from the topographic to the structural theory. Having abandoned the reality-based seduction theory, Freud opted for a model of psychic reality dependent on the dominance of unconscious fantasies, a view reinforced by the Kleinian proposal that unconscious fantasy is synonymous with the content of the unconscious mind. Ultimately, the nature of the patient's fantasy life became the central interest of psychoanalytic work.

Both Freud and Klein believed that unconscious fantasy represented primarily the output of endogenous drives/wishes. In contrast, I have proposed that unconscious fantasy should be re-defined to represent the three-dimensional intersection of endogenous wishes, the veridical perception of exogenous events, and naïve misinterpretation, given the child's limited knowledge of the world (Erreich, 2003, 2007).

Unconscious fantasy: the role of fantasy (wishful thinking) and reality (veridical perception)

The relationship between fantasy and reality has always preoccupied psychoanalytic theory. Freud began by locating neurogenesis in reality events, but ultimately turned away from the seduction theory to a theory of psychic reality based on fantasy and conflict. The fantasy dimension represents Freud's discoveries of the unique, idiosyncratic, fantasy/wish-driven elements in an individual's mental life.

Psychoanalytic theorizing regarding the reality dimension has attempted to account for the individual's perception of, and adaptation to, reality, including interpersonal reality, apart from fantasy-driven dynamic conflict. This emphasis on reality is found in Freud's (1895) "Project for a Scientific Psychology", in his notion of ego or self-preservative instincts, and in the emphasis on ego functions that resulted when the structural theory replaced the topographic model. The reality dimension was, of course, most fully codified in the ego psychology of Hartmann, Lowenstein, Kris, Rapaport, and others. The ego psychological claim that the infant was pre-adapted to the average expectable environment represented a significant departure from Freud's notion that the infant reluctantly turns to reality as a result of the failure of hallucinatory wishes to provide gratification.

Unconscious Fantasy: the role of naïve misinterpretation of reality

Research regarding childhood epistemology has greatly expanded since Freud's day, something I will emphasize continuously through this presentation. Current infant research demonstrates the infant's remarkable capacity for accurate perceptual discrimination under a variety of circumstances (Stern, 1985; Cary, 2009). Nevertheless, though the perception of an event may be veridical, the attribution of personal meaning to that event may derive entirely from wishful (or dread-ful) thinking and naïve misattribution because of a child's limited knowledge of the world, as noted in Hartmann's proposal that "a great part of psychoanalysis can be described as a theory of self-deceptions and of misjudgments of the external world" (1958, p. 64). For example, a child may accurately perceive that mother leaves her to go to work every day, but may subjectively experience that event as a traumatic abandonment over mother's insufficient love for the child, that is, the unconscious fantasy "if mother loved me more, she wouldn't abandon me." No young child can be expected to understand that mother might need to work to ensure the well-being of the child and its family.

Psychoanalytic theories have differed in their emphasis on the fantasy versus the reality dimension

Freudians and Kleinians have emphasized the wishful/fantasy dimension, while ego psychologists (with their emphasis on adaptation), Kohutians (with their emphasis on the availability of mirroring, idealizable, empathic self-objects), relational theorists, and attachment theorists, have all emphasized the veridical perception of reality events. Little explicit or systematic notice was given by any theory to the child's naïve misinterpretation of events. Any attempt at a comprehensive motivational psychology must be capable of encompassing all three dimensions of this re-definition of unconscious fantasy.

The development of unconscious fantasies

Freud proposed no model for the development of unconscious fantasies, apart from his belief that the capacity to fantasize was an ego function that did not exist before the emergence of an ego capable of differentiating reality from fantasy (Sandler and Nagera, 1963). Klein tried to solve the problem of fantasy development by simply asserting that fantasy was present in some rudimentary form at birth (Spillius, 2001).

I have argued that unconscious fantasies represent the intersection of the infant's wishes, its veridical perception of events, and its naïve knowledge of the world. At what age are children capable of such mental constructions? In Parts 2 and 3 of this presentation I will provide evidence that young infants have the capacity for rudimentary unconscious fantasy.

Unconscious fantasy and trauma: Discrete trauma vs. cumulative trauma

Freud discovered the importance of discrete trauma, events such as sexual seductions, the birth of a sibling, or a primal scene experience. However, from Freud's case histories, we learn very little about these patients' day-to-day parenting, nothing regarding their experiences of failed attunement and empathy, the cumulative traumas of everyday life. It was the Freudian and Kleinian neglect of exogenous factors in neurogenesis that led to infant observational research regarding the actual events in the maternal dyad. This work has advanced our understanding of the important distinction between discrete trauma and cumulative trauma.

The advent of video camera recording allowed for the systematic study of the mother-infant dyad beginning in the 1960's. Thus, the focus shifted from discrete events that could be recalled by the patient, to a consideration of more subtle interactional failures that were so much the fabric of patients' histories that they could not be recalled as discrete events, though they might be experienced as particular kinds of relatedness in the transference (Stern *et al.*, 1998). This has led to a vast literature on cumulative trauma, those patterns of mis-attunement and empathic lapses that form the fabric of mother-infant relatedness in the pre-verbal dyad (Erreich, 2003).

Discrete trauma is always experienced against the backdrop of an individual's history of cumulative trauma in the mother-infant dyad, which had rendered that individual either more resilient, or more vulnerable, to the inevitable discrete traumas of life, the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

Evidence for unconscious fantasy and defensive behavior in 12 month old children: Attachment research and the Strange Situation

Infant research on cumulative trauma is complementary to Freud's exclusive focus on the effects of discrete trauma. The Strange Situation, a research paradigm from attachment theory, provides an excellent example of the interplay of discrete and cumulative trauma. In the Strange Situation, all three groups of children, secure, ambivalent, and avoidant, demonstrate heightened heart arousal patterns and cortisol levels when left alone in a strange setting by their mothers (a discrete trauma). The secure and ambivalent children are also overtly distressed, their behavior is congruent with their subjective state, and when their mothers return, the children seek them out for comfort. In contrast, the avoidantly attached children's behavior is incongruent with their subjective state: although they demonstrate the same heightened physiological distress as the other two groups, they are not overtly distressed when mother leaves, and they do not seek contact with her upon reunion (a defensive inhibition). Home observations of this group suggest that they behave this way because their mothers are frankly rejecting of their children's neediness (a cumulative trauma). These avoidantly attached children hide their distress and neediness from others, and in time, come to hide these feelings from themselves as well, perhaps with accompanying somatic symptoms. Research supports this claim, including the finding that avoidantly attached adults show dismissive behavior toward attachment needs and tend to be compulsively self-reliant (Eagle, 1996).

Notice that the avoidant behavior of this last group of children provides stunning evidence of organized defensive activity in 12-month-old children, indicating that the mental capacities that underlie defense formation and unconscious fantasy are present even before the age of 12 months. The avoidant children show physiological distress, but act as if they do not need mother, and they reject her as they expect to be rejected by her. This composite set of mental events---the wish for closeness, the veridical expectation of rejection, the resulting defensive behavior, and the mistaken belief that their flawed self is the reason for the rejection, a misattribution regularly encountered in the analysis of neglected, even adopted, children and adults, all these components provide evidence for unconscious fantasy activity and defense in children as young as twelve months.

Part 2: The place of unconscious fantasy in a model of the mind, and a possible solution to the problem of theoretical pluralism

Where does unconscious fantasy, as I have redefined it, fit into an overall model of the mind; that is, in a psychoanalytic metapsychology?

Unconscious fantasy: the content of the psychoanalytic model of mind

There seem to be patients whose characteristic modes of adaptation are best captured by one theory or another. For example, we might think that a patient who experiences intense guilt over hostile impulses toward authority figures exemplifies a prototypical oedipal conflict. We might refer to an individual as a Kleinian patient if they typically rely on manic defenses to exert omnipotent control over objects. We might refer to someone as a Kohutian patient because that individual tends to idealize certain objects so as to elevate their own self-esteem via connection to these objects.

Our interpretations often articulate the unconscious fantasy that underlies a patient's typical mode of object relatedness. For example, to the oedipally conflicted patient: "You are afraid to voice your anger at me for fear that I will retaliate, or that you will harm me with your ferocity"; to the "Kleinian" patient: "By missing hours randomly without notice, you force me to think even more about you, as I wonder whether or not you'll show up on any given day"; to the "Kohutian" patient: "It's very disturbing to you when I make an error, you need to be connected to a 'perfect' analyst, it helps you to feel better about yourself." Each of these interpretations represents an unconscious fantasy that the patient is thought to be enacting in the transference. It would be useful to have some principled way of conceptualizing all these fantasies in a unitary model of the mind despite their different theoretical origins.

Mental representation: the content of the cognitive model of mind

Philosophers of mind commonly refer to the belief/desire narratives contained in such unconscious fantasies as "intentional states," and they assume that such narratives are encoded as "mental representations." Mental representations are the contents of "mind" as currently defined in cognitive and developmental psychology, and contemporary philosophy of mind. These mental structures represent the encoding of all subjective experience, all knowledge, memory, and affect, attached to endogenous and exogenous events, whether experienced consciously or unconsciously; "the square of 3 equals 9," "Washington, DC is the US capital," the subjective experience of stubbing one's toe, all are encoded in mental representations. Freud himself suggested the integration of affect into intentional states: While intentional states are about something in the outside world, affects are "about" internal physical states, that is, affects represent the internal state of the body in the way that perceptions represent external physical objects (Freud, 1915, 1923).

The development of mental representations

When do mental representations arise in development? The capacity for representing knowledge and experience in the mind is thought to be innate, and encoding of subjective experience begins at birth, likely even in the womb (Carey, 2009).

The developmental literature suggests that evolutionary selection pressures favored our ability to understand others, and endowed humans with what Carey (2009) calls "core cognition," which includes innate knowledge of concepts such as agents, their goals, their communicative interactions with each other and the physical world, and their causal potentials. Evidence for innate knowledge includes the newborn's preference for a schematic drawing of the human face, versus the same elements when they are randomly arrayed (Mondloch *et al.*, 1999), a finding that has recently been demonstrated in fetuses in the third trimester of pregnancy (Reid *et al.*, 2017). Developmental

research indicates that infants are intentional agents; as Carey (2009) notes, they “form mental representations with symbolic content, and their behavior is goal directed, and mediated by their representations of the world....” In the experimental literature on infant cognition, we find evidence for object representations by 2 months of age, for comprehension of intentional agency by 3 months, and for representations of causality by 6 months of age.

In this view, mind consists of constellations of mental representations that contain the inferences we draw, the predictions we make, and the explanations we build, about the world, and most importantly, about the people in our lives. The parallel between mental representation and unconscious fantasy is clear, if the latter is re-defined to include wish, veridical perception of reality, and misinterpretation of events.

Mental representation: conscious and unconscious

Learning and memory require the capacity to consciously represent information, beliefs, and desires. Without that capacity, the continuity of experience and memory, indeed, of the self, would be impossible. Thus, it is safe to say that no psychoanalytic theory that makes reference to mental events can dispense with the need for mental representation. From this perspective, the analytic task might be understood as the systematic mapping of the mental representations of an individual mind.

What about unconscious mental representation? Since The so-called “cognitive revolution” of the late 1960’s and 1970’s, research programs in cognitive psychology have assumed the dominance and immense power of out-of-awareness processes in the explanation of thought and behavior (Mandler, 1988). However, the content and processes of out-of-awareness mentation, that is, the “cognitive unconscious,” generally ignored the psychoanalytic interest in desire, affect, conflict, and defense, all those aspects of mentation necessary for a motivational psychology.

Unconscious fantasy as a type of mental representation offers a possible solution to the problem of theoretical pluralism

From a clinical perspective, I have argued that the psychoanalytic model of the mind is populated by unconscious fantasies that underlie patients’ characteristic modes of functioning, their wishes, defensive styles, and modes of object relatedness. From an academic perspective, I have presented the contemporary view that mind consists of constellations of mental representations, conscious and unconscious, which are present very early in infancy.

The parallel status of unconscious fantasies and mental representations in an overall model of mind is evident. This parallel suggests that unconscious fantasies, as I have re-defined them, are a special subset of the universe of mental representations, that is, those mental representations that contain wishes, affects, conflicts, and defensive solutions, all of which pertain to our self and object relatedness, and are of great interest to psychoanalysts.

One advantage of this proposal is that it fulfills Freud’s hope that, rather than being narrowly limited to psychopathology, psychoanalysis would participate in an overall theory of mind, a metapsychology.

A second advantage is that this proposal offers a principled solution to our problem of theoretical pluralism. Here’s how the argument goes:

First: Because the re-defined unconscious fantasy construct contains exogenous as well as endogenous components, unconscious fantasy can operate across various theories that have emphasized one or the other component. Certain modes of functioning are better captured by one or another of our theories, there is something descriptively accurate and useful about different theories’ ways of formulating the inner lives of individuals (Erreich, 2015, p. 261).

Second: The proposal that unconscious fantasies are a subset of mental representations applies to all these theories as long as they meet three criteria: representationality (an innate and indispensable

property of mind), some form of defensive isolation from consciousness (for example, disavowal, repression, splitting, etc.), and mentalization (the capacity to attribute thoughts and feelings to self and others).

Third: As long as these criteria are met, one can feel free to borrow insights from all such theories without committing meta-theoretical malpractice, because all their theoretical conceptualizations take the form of mental representations that exist within a unitary model of the mind.

My suggested re-definition of unconscious fantasy allows it to function as a supra-ordinate construct across a variety of theories, providing a principled solution to our problem of theoretical pluralism. As a profession, we have been struggling for our entire existence with how to deal with the multiplicity of theories called “psychoanalytic.” The form of pluralism I am proposing has two advantages: First, the conceptualization of unconscious fantasies as a sub-domain of mental representations secures a place for it in a generally accepted model of mind. Second, by distinguishing between description and explanation, my proposal allows for the phenomenological difference represented by various psychoanalytic theories, while accommodating those differences within a unitary model of mind. Thus, one is no longer obliged to declare allegiance to any one theory, while simultaneously being relieved of the worry that an ad hoc appeal to multiple theories traps one in contradictory models of mind.

Part 3: Unconscious Fantasy and the Priming Phenomenon

This last part of my talk will propose that experimental evidence on the phenomenon of “priming” supports one of the seminal claims in our field: that the past matters, whether it is encoded consciously or unconsciously, or stored in declarative or procedural memory. In common parlance, we are “primed” to respond to some situations in predetermined, unique, and personal ways. Furthermore, there is evidence that the encoding of subjective experience and the priming mechanism operate very early in life.

Clinical data

It is the second month that I am handing out statements using stationery from a recently arrived shipment. A female patient in her 50’s, in the second year of a four time weekly psychoanalysis, hesitantly reports a subtle misspelling error in my address that she’d noticed in the previous month’s bill. I wonder why neither my inspection of the stationery, nor any other patient, had caught this error. Several years pass, and my patient recalls a childhood event for the first time. As a twelve year old in her father’s office looking for a pen, she came across some stationery with her father’s name, but with an address different from their home address. When she questioned her father, he tersely replied that it was for an apartment he rented, but warned my patient not to mention this to her mother. This incident occurred during a difficult time in the parents’ marriage; my patient overheard her mother complaining about the father’s secretary and his frequent absences. The patient did not connect her heightened attention to the address on my stationery several years earlier to this newly recalled event.

We are well aware that aspects of patients’ histories make them acutely alert to certain things in their present lives; that is, mental representations of our past experiences make us hyper-sensitive to aspects of our present experience. This is one of Freud’s seminal insights. I add only two things: first, that past experience, like all experience, is encoded in mental representations; second, that because they are a subset of mental representations, unconscious fantasies, especially those derived from traumatic events, act via “priming,” a well-established psychological mechanism, to transport past experience into present experience (Erreich, 2017). Like the formation of unconscious fantasies, the priming phenomenon operates from very early in life.

The structure of long term memory

The consensus among cognitive scientists is that memory is composed of multiple systems characterized by differing logic and neuroanatomy (Kandel & Squire, 2001). One common taxonomy proposes that the organization of long-term memory involves at least two systems: explicit/declarative memory and implicit/procedural memory.

Explicit/declarative memory contains our general storage of facts as well as temporal memories of specific events including autobiographical memories (Tulving, 1972).

Implicit/procedural memory contains muscle memory and skill sets, but also contingency expectations from one's history with others that lead to habitual modes of relatedness. The repeated experience of maternal unavailability or misattunement is encoded in procedural memory as a pattern of object relatedness without necessarily being recalled as specific events (Erreich, 2003).

Unconscious versus non-conscious memory systems

Both declarative and procedural memory can operate either consciously or unconsciously.

Freud found that certain elements of declarative memory, such as a sexual seduction, were actively being kept out of patients' awareness for defensive purposes. That is, he discovered that declarative memory could be unconscious as well as conscious, which is how we still think of it today.

Procedural memory also operates consciously or unconsciously. For example, the ability to play a complex composition on the violin is eventually stored out of awareness in procedural memory, but initial learning involves considerable conscious attention (Roediger, 1990; Schacter, 1992; Westen, 1999; Davis, 2001). It is obvious that even skills involving muscle memory require both conscious and unconscious attention and memory. This same balance seems to be true for object relational patterns stored in procedural memory.

For example, avoidantly attached children may initially be consciously aware that their mother rejects their need for attunement and empathy, but the accumulation of such instances results in contingency expectations that eventually operate out of the child's awareness as procedural interpersonal routines, resulting in a defensive denial of their attachment needs due to the expectation of painful rejection. These complex unconscious representations of cumulative trauma, including what we used to call "ego syntonic character traits," can be brought to an individual's conscious attention, especially as they operate in the transference.

Some analysts have written that cumulative trauma in procedural memory is "non-conscious" rather than unconscious, and cannot be made conscious because it was never subjectively encoded and repressed in the traditional sense (Stern, *et al.*, 1998; Paley, 2007; Erreich, 2003, p. 561, footnote 4). This view cannot be correct on two accounts: First, all subjective experience is encoded in mental representations, as noted earlier. Second: the view that relational patterns in procedural memory derive only from veridical perception of reality, leaving out endogenous wishes and naïve misinterpretation, leads to a simplistic view of human behavior as governed by simple stimulus-response behavioral repertoires, rather than the fantasy-rich internal world of even a very young child's mind. Research findings provide little support for the view of a mindless infant or toddler who doesn't initially register consciously and painfully, their mother's rebuff. More likely, an initial awareness of maternal mis-attunement becomes an out-of-awareness expectation, resulting in a defensive inhibition of the subjective experience of neediness and need-seeking behavior, that is, a characteristic style of relating to self and others.

Priming

Contemporary memory research has shown that autobiographical memory appears to be organized along networks of associations representing admixtures of content that is both in-and-out-of-awareness, a prescient insight of Freud's instantiated in the technique of free association.

In order to systematically investigate implicit/procedural memory networks, researchers have employed a technique called priming (Erreich, 2017). Priming is a procedure that indicates whether previous exposure to some stimulus influences an individual's subsequent judgment or behavior. Priming studies demonstrate that individuals can be influenced by fairly neutral stimuli that they are unaware of when the stimuli are presented subliminally, that is, below the level of conscious awareness.

For example, subjects are subliminally primed with the word "dog"; then they are asked to press a button when they recognize that sets of letters shown on a screen represent an actual word. Subjects who have been primed with the word "dog" respond significantly faster to words like "terrier" and "poodle" than subjects who have not been primed (Westen, 1999). Despite no awareness of the subliminally presented word, the subjects are hyper-alert to words that are part of the associative network of the prime "dog"; the priming procedure renders words representing dog breeds more accessible.

Priming effects show robust durability over time even for rather trivial stimuli, their effects are still active long after subjects have been exposed to a stimulus that they have no conscious memory of having ever seen. Mitchell (2006), who has demonstrated some rather dramatic long-term effects of priming, argues that implicit memory is "an invulnerable memory system that functions below conscious awareness," which leads other researchers to conclude that "implicit memory -- like the dynamic unconscious -- is timeless" (Stoycheva et al., p.107).

Developmental status of early memory

How early in life are children able to encode perceptual events in memory so that priming is possible? We now know that the infant has a rather sophisticated ability to register and encode fundamental aspects of their physical and social experience very early in life, and probably has innate knowledge of universal basics including agency, language, number, and causality.

There is abundant research evidence for early memory capacity, including what appears to be pre-natal memory: that is, newborns are able to recognize a Dr. Seuss story when it is read to them by their mothers in the third trimester of pregnancy, and they are able to differentiate between two different Dr. Seuss books (DeCasper & Fifer, 1980). Meltzoff (1990) concludes "there is a kernel of some higher level memory system right from the earliest phases of human infancy" (p. 25).

Traumatic events appear to have particular salience even in preverbal children. Gaensbauer (1995) suggests that traumatic events lead to "the massive overconsolidation of stress-responsive neurohormones and neuroregulators... resulting in an overconsolidation of memory traces, a kind of 'superconditioning.'" The requisite neural substrates may be present by seven to nine months of age.

Clinical evidence for pre-verbal procedural and declarative memory, and evidence for the priming mechanism in both domains

Psychoanalytic researchers and practitioners have demonstrated that pre-verbal memory exists for both discrete and cumulative experience, that such memories can be represented symbolically in bodily sensations and behavior that appear in later childhood, and when expressive language develops, it too can be recruited to represent these autobiographical experiences.

For cumulative trauma, the behavior of avoidantly attached children in the Strange Situation provides evidence for the encoding of maternal unavailability in the mother-infant dyad within the first year of life, and its later recall in the Strange Situation. Early object relational patterns "prime" infants to seek out or re-create those kinds of object ties in later life.

For discrete trauma, Bernstein and Blacher (1967) present clinical evidence to demonstrate that very young infants encode and symbolically represent discrete traumatic events in autobiographical memory. The youngest case, Laura, was born with hydrocephalus that required painful surgical procedures at three months. The hospital was undergoing renovation, resulting in constant loud banging during her pneumoencephalogram; she awoke screaming and terrified. At 28 months, Laura became terrified at the sound of hammering from next door and would awaken frightened from naps. She explained “man is knocking.... In the hospital the man knocked my head off,” reminding her mother of the construction work during her daughter’s procedure. When questioned further, Laura responded “man stuck me in the tushie and knocked my head off,” indicating that the procedures had hurt her head. Here we have evidence of the priming effect of sounds that accompanied a discrete traumatic experience encoded in declarative memory at three months of age. Note also that after the onset of expressive language, the child is able to articulate her memory of the traumatic experience.

Coates (2015) presents additional clinical material from children who experienced discrete traumatic events at ten months and twelve months. One final citation regarding evidence for early encoding of discrete traumatic events in declarative memory comes from Jacobs’ (2015) report of an anniversary reaction in a four-year-old child.

Thus, we have evidence that very young infants are able to encode cumulative trauma in procedural memory, to encode discrete traumatic events in declarative memory, to measure the passage of time in a rather precise manner, and with the onset of expressive language, to add language to the somatic and behavioral representation of these experiences. All these capabilities allow very young children to be “primed” by their traumatic experiences, which can be then be re-awakened when they are faced with analogous circumstances.

Notice that the innate capacity for the registration and representation of conscious or unconscious experience, in combination with abundant infant research demonstrating the infant’s early, acute capacity for perceptual discrimination (e.g., Carey, 2009; Daniel Stern, 1985; Gaensbauer, 1995; Erreich, 2003) may pose a significant challenge for psychoanalytic theories which espouse so-called “primitive mental states” (e.g., Grotstein, 1980; Bromberg, 1996; Caper, 1998; Ogden, 2016) or “unrepresented,” “unformulated,” “unsymbolized” experience (e.g., Donnel Stern, 1997; Levine, 2012; Diamond, 2014). Observations of very early preverbal trauma (Bernstein & Blacher, 1967; Gaensbauer, 1995) indicate that these experiences are not “unrepresented,” and furthermore, that they are capable of being transformed and expressed in symbolic terms, demonstrating capacities for the registration and mental representation of traumatic experience as early as three months. Thus, both research and clinical findings suggest that the presence of fantasies of split or merged objects, “empty” minds, or other distortions of subjective and objective reality, are defensively motivated and arise as the result of parenting experiences after birth, rather than being characteristic of inborn infant mentation. It seems reasonable to expect that theories that claim the existence of such states, ought to specify the nature of those states in a manner that does not violate our growing knowledge of infants’ mental capacities.

Unconscious fantasies serve as “primes”

Given all this, we might say that a parapraxis results from an unconscious fantasy acting as a prime when an individual is faced with an experience analogous to an earlier trauma. For example, after a female psychiatry resident relocated her training to live with a man she had dated for some years, he summarily ended the relationship, and she was forced to find other housing. Her outpatient work required that she write her name in a space that said “therapist” on a slip of paper that each patient handed her from the admissions desk. In her own treatment, she reported that she continually kept “misreading” the word “therapist” as “the rapist.” She quickly realized that this parapraxis represented her not-so-unconscious fantasy that she had been violently abused by her former boyfriend, nevertheless, the “misreading” continued. Over time, however, we came to discover that her recent traumatic romantic experience was an analog for an episode of childhood sexual abuse in

which she had also felt “tricked” into following a man to his “place” where she was vulnerable to his sexual advances. Thus, she was primed to re-live that first traumatic experience in analogous circumstances in which another man “tricked and abused her in his place.”

Let me return to my first clinical vignette: the female patient who noticed a subtle misspelling of the address on my stationary, and years later recalled an episode from preadolescence when she had found her father’s name on stationary with an unknown address; her father admitted to renting another apartment but admonished her not to tell her mother. Once again, we notice heightened attention due to an earlier traumatic event that has primed the patient’s attention to stationary addresses. The prime takes the form of an unconscious fantasy: She wished to tell me, as she wished to tell her mother, but she had been warned not to, and so, although she had noticed the error the previous month, a veridical perception, it took two months for her to “tell”, and years more for the anecdote that included her father to come out. In this “don’t ask, don’t tell” family there seemed to be a shared fantasy that it was best to keep not only feelings, but even information, to oneself. The third element of a re-defined unconscious fantasy construct, the naïve misinterpretation of events, included many aspects of this patient’s pathology, including the belief that it was dangerous to “know” anything about her inner life and that of others.

Summary

I have tried to lay out an updated metatheoretical vision for psychoanalysis. I have proposed 1) a re-definition of the nature and development of unconscious fantasy, 2) a hypothesis regarding its place in a contemporary model of the mind, one which suggests a possible solution to the problem of theoretical pluralism, and 3) a proposal regarding unconscious fantasy’s mode of operation in the mind of an individual (Erreich, 2003, 2015, 2017).

From the beginning of life, perhaps even before birth, our perceptual experiences with the physical and social world are registered and encoded as mental representations; those that pertain to self and object relatedness, consisting of desire, affect, conflict, and defensive solutions, are the mental representations we call unconscious fantasies. Some of these fantasies represent discrete events, and they may be conscious or defensively unconscious, while others represent the accumulation of relational experiences which originate in conscious awareness but whose repetition ultimately ends in out-of-awareness ways-of-being with others. Unconscious fantasies represent both discrete and cumulative trauma, and they act as primes for experience in the present, that is, we are “primed” to respond to some situations in unique and personal ways.

None of this is news to practicing psychoanalysts. What is news, is that there is experimental evidence that supports one of the seminal claims in our field, one that is frequently attacked as an outmoded shibboleth: that is, that the past matters because it contours our present-day lives, and that the power of the priming phenomenon for both declarative and procedural memory is intensely robust, such that, when kept out of awareness, past events act like black holes, engulfing meaningful aspects of our lives, while bending and distorting others to their shapes.

Note

This talk is an overview of three papers related to unconscious fantasy. Thus, all the references for the talk can be found in the following three papers:

- Erreich A. (2003). A modest proposal: (Re)Defining unconscious fantasy. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 72: 541-574.
- Erreich A. (2015). Unconscious fantasy as a special class of mental representation: A contribution to a model of mind. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 63: 247-270.
- Erreich A. (2017). Unconscious fantasy and the priming phenomenon. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 65: 195-219.