



Everyday Life and the Unconscious Mind

AN INTRODUCTION TO
.....PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPTS.....

HANNAH CURTIS



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**An Introduction to
Psychoanalytic Concepts**

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CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
One <i>The background to the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind</i>	1
Two <i>Trauma</i>	15
Three <i>Anxiety</i>	30
Four <i>Defence mechanisms</i>	45
Five <i>Remembering, repeating, and working through</i>	60
Six <i>Envy and guilt</i>	76
Seven <i>Transference</i>	91
Eight <i>Countertransference, the response to transference</i>	107
Nine <i>Projective identification</i>	120
Conclusion	135
References	137



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INTRODUCTION

It was a Friday afternoon, the end of the week and I had been leading a seminar with a group of mature students who were undertaking a degree course in therapeutic communication. We had been discussing the use of psychotherapeutic approaches in their work with challenging and vulnerable young people. The seminar came to an end and I began to think of going home, unwinding for the weekend and turning my attention to personal and family events. At last it was time to switch off and relax. As I pulled on my coat one of the students said, "Hannah, what is transference? I just can't get my head around this transference business, I don't get it." Her challenge was joined by a chorus of voices saying "I don't get it either, every time I use it in an essay I get a margin comment that says *this is not transference*, so what is it?"

Another voice piped up, "And I don't understand the difference between countertransference and projective identification, can you explain that as well?"

They wanted a succinct and accurate definition that they could understand and use, in essays and in their daily work with children and young adults in emotional distress.

My fondly imagined escape to the weekend was put on hold as I attempted to offer the briefest of explanations of these concepts in the shortest time possible.

Introduction

The students generously acknowledged that they understood better when we finished, but I went home feeling somewhat dissatisfied that I had not done justice to such important and useful concepts, and that I needed to find a way of addressing their complexity with simplicity and everyday thinking. I began by writing three short papers that became the last three chapters of this book. I did not realise that a book was in the making, I was just sorting out my thoughts.

But, as is the way with psychoanalytic thinking, one thing led to another. It was not long before the notion that it might be useful to write more, began to take hold. To some extent this notion was based on my own experience of being a social worker, and subsequently wishing that I had had an understanding of these concepts to support me when I was doing such difficult and emotionally draining work. Psychoanalytic thinking would have helped me to make sense of the demands of the professional task, not only directly in contact with clients and colleagues, but also in managing my own feelings. In other words, I would have been strengthened by such a framework for thinking, and that would have made me more confident, more solid and less anxious. A little less anxiety would, I believe, have released more energy to work more creatively.

Hence the book became an introduction to the concepts that I wish I had been able to draw upon, and that I do now draw upon, in my daily working life. It includes those that are applicable to everyday encounters with colleagues and with those who call upon our services in our working environment, whatever that may be. It is to do with the ways in which we all bring our own psychological selves to every aspect of our relational interactions with others. It is to do with having a framework within which to think about what others may be bringing to their interactions with us. I believe that such a framework supports people in being able to think carefully,

Introduction

in becoming more able to see the wood for the trees when they are engaged in complicated and puzzling connections with others.

All of the concepts that are introduced in the chapters in this book have been formed, developed, elaborated and expanded in the context of the work that takes place between a psychoanalyst or psychotherapist and the person with whom they are working. There are many books available that fulfil the task of introducing the reader to the application of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic thinking to a therapy relationship, but this book is about the application of psychoanalysis to everyday life as opposed to its use in the consulting room. Such concepts are applicable to other forms of relational work, and indeed to ordinary every day encounters. In my experience they help to make for a richer and more honest connection with others, at all levels of relationship.

I hope that a book like this might be useful to a range of people who undertake the difficult and demanding work of becoming involved with those in our society who are vulnerable, and challenging. There are increasing numbers of people who struggle with emotional and psychological distress, from very small children to the elderly. We know that mental health problems affect everyone across the social spectrum. We desperately need to be able to think about their state of mind and how it interacts with our own if we are to offer them a human connection that is supportive and helpful. We need to be able to make some sense of what lies beyond the apparent behaviour, not just in them but also in ourselves.

The book began as a book for people with no clinical training, who work with the most vulnerable members of our society. It is not a scholarly book and I am aware that in some respects it does not do full justice to the complexities of each concept, to the difference of opinions about each concept, or to the degree to which psychoanalysis has developed and continues to develop. Psychoanalysis today is a rigorous and highly disciplined school of thought

Introduction

with very high academic standards, but it is my hope that this book will be useful to those who work at the coal face, to employers in the care sector, to the general public who are interested in how their colleagues or employees may be thinking and feeling about the work that they do, and to students of psychoanalysis who simply find the subject as fascinating as I do.

It is for, and because of, my students, particularly those students who ask the apparently simple but actually most challenging questions.

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Nobody writes a book without a lot of support, encouragement and help from others. I have my students to thank for the inspiration. My very dear friend Glynis Gadd, read all the chapters, commenting, correcting, and challenging each one as it developed. Some of her comments were integrated into the final version and some were not.

I also have to thank Laura Pearse and Timothy Phillips for reading, commenting, and offering feedback on the final draft.

As always I have to thank my husband Alan, who unfailingly sees me through everything.

ONE

The background to the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind

Sigmund Freud's working life spanned well over fifty years. Between 1886 and 1939 when he died, he produced twenty-four volumes of work that formed the foundation stones of the discipline to which he gave the name "psychoanalysis". His adult life was characterised by a huge output of work and the development of many ideas and ways of thinking. He was one of the most original and brilliant thinkers of all time. He effected a revolution in the way in which we think about, and understand ourselves and our relationships with others. Other brilliantly clever historical figures, such as Newton, Galileo, Einstein, Darwin, have revolutionised the way in which we understand the world around us, but Freud is the person who radically changed forever, the way in which we understand and can think about, the world within ourselves. This revolution has had a profound impact upon our personal, social, and political lives. Psychoanalysis has something to say about the everyday detail of the most ordinary humdrum life and something to say about the momentous events of war and of social change. It has something to say about the intimacy of the new born infant's relationship to the mother, and about how this

Everyday life and the unconscious mind

can link to an ambition to be powerful, to rule a nation, to subject others to one's own will.

It is a difficult subject to attempt to study because not only is there a lot to study, but it is complex and it has evolved and is evolving all the time. There are never any absolutes in psychoanalysis, and it continues to be a discipline in which, and about which there is debate, argument, and disagreement. There are old ideas being regenerated and new ideas being put forward, and this keeps the study of psychoanalysis fresh and pertinent to modern day life. All the schools of psychological thought that thrive today began with psychoanalysis. It was the precursor of cognitive psychology, behavioural psychology, neurological psychology, forensic psychology. All the different types of therapy and therapeutic interventions that have started up, faded or thrived, began with psychoanalysis and it is not possible to begin to think about how people function psychologically and emotionally without acknowledging Freud and his ongoing influence in this field.

Psychoanalysis is both a discipline for understanding the way in which we function in the world and a method of treatment, but it is from the treatment that the understanding grows. It is from listening to patients in the consulting room, and attending carefully to what they are conveying, that the ideas, the theories, and body of knowledge has built up. It is from the attempt to help people with their internal conflicts, that we have learned over many years something about how the mental life of the individual, and the group, operates.

It was originally developed on three fronts. It was a procedure by which unconscious mental processes could be investigated. The methodological model for this was simple, the analyst invited the patient to say whatever was on their mind without attempting to edit out any thoughts or images that came to mind. It was also a method of treatment for “neurotic” symptoms, the treatment being

The background to the mind

the understanding of the symbolic meaning of the symptoms as a result of the careful attention to the patients "free associations" as they were called. This is no quick treatment, but if it is continued for long enough and changes can be observed and experienced, it can profoundly alter and enrich the emotional and psychological life of the individual and of those amongst whom they live. These two strands can then be used as the basis for an authentic and experiential method of collecting and examining information about human functioning on a broader scale, which is the third front.

There is not room to go any further into these aspects of psychoanalysis here as to do so would take the discussion away from its purpose which is to think about the idea of an unconscious mind, but there is one feature of trying to understand psychoanalysis which does matter here at the beginning. This is that there is an inherent frustration and requirement for patience in trying to learn about psychoanalysis, because there are many strands. These strands need to be separated out and thought through and understood independently of the other strands in order to be clear about them and to distinguish them one from another. But the problem with this is that they are also interlinked with each other, and it is not really possible to fully grasp the meaning of one concept without doing so in relation to another, and another and so on.

The student, (and indeed the learned person, for this is not a subject that lends itself to ever being fully comprehended) has to be prepared to tolerate a sense of not understanding something very well until one has got to its related concepts and has started to be able to bring them together and to see how they may fit into the bigger picture.

Even then there is the fact that the concepts as they were originally conceived have undergone development and modification, and these developments have not been the same in all

Everyday life and the unconscious mind

countries, or in all the psychological disciplines, so that it is the case that a concept can be defined in one way by one person and another way by another person, and neither is absolutely right or wrong. This is a strength and a weakness of psychoanalysis. There is strength in its capacity to be used, rethought, and reworked, and a weakness in its difficulty in ever being finally defined or proven.

These features make it undeniably interesting, thought provoking, and intellectually challenging. It is nothing if not a dynamic and a provocative discipline, and it has the capacity to offer profound insights into the nature of the human person and human relationships.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable achievements of Freud's work, and from this examination of the mind, was to make us all realise that we have a large part of our mind that is unconscious. We now take for granted the fact that we all have aspects of our thinking and our feelings, of which we are entirely unaware. We take this so much for granted that it is as though this was always known, there was never a time when people did not realise this. Indeed many thinkers before Freud did acknowledge an unconscious aspect of the mind and it has always been the stuff of poetry, philosophy, literature, and the arts, but it was Freud who thought about it and wrote about it in a way that made such an idea available to the general populace, and enabled us all to take ownership of such a way of understanding ourselves and others.

Freud (1915e) developed a model of the mind that divided it into three areas of consciousness; the conscious, the subconscious, and the unconscious. This is known as the topographical model. The conscious part of our mind is that of awareness. We know what we are consciously thinking and feeling. We know what is on our mind at any given moment. If we are choosing something to have for our lunch we know that we are thinking about food and what we might enjoy or what we think would be good for us.