

Implicit or Unconscious? Commentary on Paper by the Boston Change Process Study Group

Arnold H. Modell, M.D.

This commentary examines a very fundamental aspect of human psychology: the nature of unconscious knowledge and the process of self-reflection. However the term *implicit* is associated in cognitive science with unconscious procedural knowledge (of motor acts) rather than unconscious meaning, which is the business of psychoanalysis. Further, the Boston Change Process Study Group authors do not compare or contrast their ideas to analogous concepts within psychoanalytic theory such as Freud's concept of the pre-conscious, which was descriptive of a reflective verbal domain.

THIS IS A VERY AMBITIOUS ARTICLE IN WHICH THE BOSTON CHANGE Process Study Group (BCPSG) attempts to explore the relationship between unconscious meaning, unconscious knowledge, and conscious verbal reflection. This relationship is at the center of all the intersubjective exchanges that occur in psychoanalytically informed treatments. It is perhaps the major issue in understanding psychotherapeutic process, so its importance can hardly be exaggerated.

Psychoanalysts and psychotherapists know that meaning can be communicated without language and that speech can be emptied of meaning if communicated without feeling. Some years ago (Modell, 1980), I noted

Arnold H. Modell, M.D., is a practicing psychoanalyst, Training and Supervising analyst at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute and Society and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He is the author of *Object Love and Reality*; *Psychoanalysis in a New Context*; *Other Times, Other Realities*; *The Private Self*; and *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain*.

that if our analysand is in a state of nonrelatedness, his or her speech becomes boring and monotonous and therefore without meaning. To respond to the other empathically, speech must contain an element of prosody, of musicality, consisting of variations in pitch, tone, and rhythm. Language becomes alive and meaningful only in the presence of feeling.

Another way of stating this is *intentionality, which includes the unconscious communication of feeling, trumps the literal meaning of spoken language*. In *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain* (Modell, 2003), I also emphasized the centrality of intentionality and the unconscious use of metaphor in the creation of meaning. A multidisciplinary approach is obviously needed, and I applaud their use of cognitive science and phenomenology to buttress their positions. However, in attempting to integrate these other disciplines with the knowledge gained from our therapeutic experience, there is a danger that the unique and hard-won knowledge that we have obtained from our immersion in our psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic practice may be lost. We have a certain kind of experience that is not known to cognitive scientists, neurobiologists, or philosophers. In addition, there is a risk in employing the terminology of cognitive science. I can illustrate this problem by referring to the group's use of the term *implicit* derived from the category of memory described by cognitive scientists as implicit (procedural) memory. This term when used as a substitute for the word *unconscious* leads, I believe, to a conceptual confusion.

The BCPSG introduce their paper as an examination of "the relations between the implicit and the reflective-verbal domains" (this issue, p. 125). I believe the use of the term *implicit*, as a synonym for unconscious, was borrowed from cognitive scientists who refer to implicit memory to denote the unconscious memory of *procedural motor acts*. *Implicit memory* refers to a form of memory that cannot be retrieved and can never become conscious. Implicit memory, as I show, is assumed to be an entirely different category as compared to autobiographical memory.

I suspect that memory researchers avoided using the term *unconscious*, as they did not wish their unconscious to be confused with the Freudian dynamic unconscious, and indeed as we see, the unconscious of implicit memory is very different from the Freudian unconscious. I believe that Freud's theory of the unconscious is due for a major revision, but avoiding the term *unconscious* does not help. Their paper may be an attempt to indirectly revise psychoanalytic ideas regarding the relations of the conscious and unconscious mind and the problem of verbalizing experience. It should also be remembered that Freud believed that language had a privileged role in the preconscious, a role that attracted unconscious thoughts to consciousness.

I would enthusiastically support such an attempt to revise our fundamental assumptions, but in doing so one cannot simply ignore Freud's ideas. I note that Freud is not even referenced in their reference list. So I have to conclude that when BCPSG many years ago employed the term *implicit* it was a signal that BCPSG was not going to tangle with psychoanalytic theory.

Leaving psychoanalytic theory aside, the term *implicit* carries other problems. BCPSG has conflated two different categories of memory—unconscious autobiographical memory and the memory of motor procedures. They also avoid referring to consciousness and self-consciousness, referring instead to a dictionary account of reflection. Are they considering the relation between unconscious process and self reflection, or something else?

In their definition of “implicit relational knowing” they state,

We view implicit relational knowing as one variety of procedural representation. Procedural representations in cognitive psychology are representations of how to proceed, of how to do things. Such representations, like knowing how to ride a bicycle, for example, may never become symbolically coded. (this issue, p. 128)

I find this statement to be enormously confusing. Unconscious knowledge, as applied to a therapeutic relationship, is not procedural knowledge, as defined by cognitive science, but is based on unconscious autobiographical memory and unconscious fantasy, as I shortly describe. This confusion of memory categories is not simply an academic matter, for it omits consideration of the processing of the memory of certain determinant childhood fantasies that are reactive compensations to relational traumas. Some researchers even question whether the (implicit) procedural memory of motor acts, implicit memory as described by cognitive science, can be thought of as “mental.”

As is true of psychoanalysts, cognitive scientists have many disagreements, but with regard to the categories of memory there is a surprising unanimity of opinion. There is an established taxonomy of memory that includes working (short-term) memory and long-term memory and explicit (retrievable) and implicit (nonretrievable) memory. The most significant categories from our point of view is the distinction that psychologist Endel Tulving (1972, p. 385) made between autobiographical memory and semantic memory. Tulving stated, Episodic (autobiographical) memory receives and stores information about temporally dated episodes or events and the (temporal) relations among these events, whereas “semantic memory is the memory necessary for the use of language. It is a mental thesaurus

of (the) organized knowledge a person possesses.” Neuroscientists have confirmed that this distinction between autobiographical and semantic memory does in fact represent different neural pathways. Children who sustained bilateral damage to their hippocampus develop amnesia for autobiographical memory while preserving the memory of acquired knowledge (Vargha-Khadem et al., 1997).

Implicit or procedural memory is something else entirely. The neural circuits that facilitate implicit memory are distinct from that of autobiographical memory in that the hippocampus is not involved in implicit procedural memories. (For a more detailed discussion, see LeDoux, 2002). It is of further significance that the neural circuitry of procedural memory is isolated from the rest of the brain. Neuroscientists have described this memory system as encapsulated and unavailable to other cognitive operations (Frackowiak, Friston, Frith, Dolan, & Mazziotta, 1997) This memory system could therefore hardly be the source of meaning construction.

Perhaps a fact of even greater significance is that implicit memory, unlike autobiographical memory, is not subject to recontextualization. One of our major tasks as therapists is promoting, facilitating, and furthering in any way possible the recontextualization of the memory of trauma. This process of the recontextualization of memory and the inability to recontextualize memory is crucial to our understanding of unconscious knowledge. Freud introduced this concept of recontextualization of memory (in his December 6, 1896, letter to Fliess) with his term *nachträglichkeit* (Masson, 1985). Freud said,

Memory is present not once but several times over. I would like to emphasize the fact that the successive registrations (of memory) represent the psychic achievement of successive epochs in life. At the boundary between two such epochs a translation of the psychic material must take place. I explain the peculiarities of the psycho-neurosis by supposing that this translation has not taken place.

As Freud observed, the process of recontextualizing memory determines whether a traumatic experience will prove to be pathologic. I found this to be a brilliant insight that has direct application to our therapeutic work. It should also be noted that Freud’s concept of the recontextualization of memory has been confirmed by neuroscientists such as Gerald Edelman (1992), who understand autobiographical memory as subject to constant recontextualization, which Freud described as reentry. The inability to recontextualize memory, rather than repression, separates the memory of

relational trauma from other autobiographical memories. Such traumatic memories, as we know, contribute to the unconscious intentionality of transference and other involuntary actions. In addition, the memory of certain unacceptable childish fantasies and desires may not be subject to recontextualization as the child grows older and thus become a significant part of the child's unconscious knowledge. (I described these unconscious processes in Modell, 1990, 1993, 2003). I think of the recontextualization of memory or its failure as an involuntary and automatic process that mobilizes all of the resources of the self. It is unquestionably part of the unconscious process that determines relational meaning.

The group's definition of *reflection* possibly is suggestive of recontextualization of memory, but I would judge it to be different. They define reflection as- "to re-experience a relational happening but in a different context" (this issue, p. 127). It would seem that in their definition, although referring to a different context, makes no mention of an unconscious memorial process. Perhaps this issue will become clarified in their response.

I fully agree with their placing intentionality at the center. But I view intentionality somewhat differently. In *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain* my discussion of intentionality was highly influenced by the work of Walter Freeman (1999). He in turn quoted Thomas Aquinas, who defined "an intent is the directing of action toward some future goal that is defined and chosen by the actor." Intentionality, as redefined in this pre-Cartesian manner, is quite different from the term as used by Brentano and other philosophers. Meaning is achieved through action in the world, and in turn the self is altered by that action. When Aquinas said that "an intent is defined and chosen by the actor," in the light of our current knowledge, one might say that an intent represents *an unconscious selection of value*. Value in turn is determined by salient autobiographical memories, memories that are salient by virtue of having been invested with feelings.

My overall criticism of the BCPSPG paper is that it investigates the relation between unconscious meaning and self-awareness, a topic that occupied Freud throughout his life, without any reference to psychoanalytic theory. Freud considered that the unconscious became conscious by means of verbal attachments that occurred in of the preconscious. He considered this to be the only means through which thought, in contrast to feelings, became conscious. The preconscious for Freud was undoubtedly the area of mind in which verbal reflection took place. Freud's account may not be entirely accurate, for metaphor rather than inner speech is more likely to bridge the gap between the unconscious and conscious mind. I have no argument with their wish to approach these issues from a different perspec-

tive (from that of linguistics, philosophy, etc.), but whether or not one agrees with Freud, he cannot be ignored.

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