The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and Societies, Volume 3: The Foundation Matrix Extended and Re-Configured

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BOOK REVIEW

The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and Societies, Volume 3: The Foundation Matrix Extended and Re-Configured edited by Earl Hopper and Haim Weinberg. London, UK: Karnac, 2017. 262 pp

Those of us who have dedicated our professional lives to the study of group therapy and group processes realize the limitations of our work. Group therapists understand that our patients cannot make deep personal changes in a group unless it consists of individuals who are willing to travel with them along an uncertain path of questioning their own beliefs about themselves and the roles they play in their family and culture. Earl Hopper and Haim Weinberg, by editing this book, are challenging readers to do just that: to join with them and explore the unconscious side of the social matrix that influences their behavior in their own culture. The authors speak of this social matrix as a Foundation Matrix that encompasses the social interactions, beliefs, and self-defining myths and folklore peculiar to a people or nation and lays the ground for the social unconscious. They quote the creator of the concept, S. H. Foulkes:

> The Matrix is the hypothetical web of communication and relationship in a given group. It is the common ground which ultimately determines the meaning and significance of all events and upon which all communications and interpretations, verbal and non-verbal, rest. (Foulkes, 1964, p. 292)

The authors go on to describe the Matrix as the context for the meaning or meanings of group events, much as Kurt Lewin uses context and situation as one of the determining conditions of human behavior—through continuous interaction (Lewin, 1947). They further define the social unconscious that emerges from this Matrix:

> We use the concept of the social unconscious in order to refer to the social, cultural, and communicational constraints and restraints of which people are to varying degrees unconscious. The social unconscious emphasizes shared anxieties, fantasies, defences, myths, and memories of the members of a particular social system. Its most important building bricks are chosen traumas and chosen glories. (Hopper & Weinberg, 2017, p. xxii)

In compiling this book, the editors have extended and reconfigured the Foundation Matrix as conceived by S. H. Foulkes. This they have done while keeping to the essential meaning and dynamic project of his singular creation—group analysis. It is an ambitious undertaking, and by and large they have succeeded in a way that Foulkes might be said to have anticipated when he described the transpersonal and suprapersonal processes that come alive in the dynamic matrix: "… all mental processes, including of course, all therapeutic ones, take place in this hypothetical web of communication and communion …" (Foulkes, 1975, p. 63).

THEORETICAL PRECURSORS OF FOULKES'S MATRIX

Several theoretical influences helped shape Foulkes's thinking. The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and his notion of the *intentionality of consciousness*—wherein all human awareness is always directed toward objects or external events in the world—is a central concept. This idea freed consciousness from the reef of solipsism posited by Descartes—wherein human consciousness was always self-reflective (Husserl, 1964). Perception was thus conceived as an intersubjective phenomenon cocreated by the social context in which people are embedded. Once freed, consciousness could be subject to what phenomenologists called a *hermeneutics*, or a process of interpretation where the text being interpreted is the *context* of the particular society or culture that is being analyzed.

From this perspective, the analysis of the social unconscious is a hermeneutics of social interconnectedness and shared beliefs applied to specific nations and peoples. It is the interpretation of a particular society's goals, beliefs, values, and norms, including political and ethical behavior. This is not unlike the conductor who fosters the interpretation of dreams, fantasies, and enactments in group analysis (Ricoeur, 1970).

The Viennese psychiatrist and pioneer in group therapy, Paul Schilder (1923), was also an early influence on Foulkes while he was a student at the Psychoanalytic Institute in Vienna. "Schilder's writings have a great deal to do with what I learned from him. I'm particularly thinking of his book *The Body Image* …" (Shaskan & Roller, 1985, p. 50). Schilder defined the Body Image by its power of nonverbal communication and thereby embraced Foulkes's notion of communion or communal network among members of a group: "What we traditionally look upon as the innermost self, the intrapsychic as against the external world is thus not only shareable, but is in fact already shared" (Foulkes, 1975, p. 62).

THE RELEVANCE OF THE SOCIAL UNCONSCIOUS TO CLINICIANS

The concept of the social unconscious has special relevance to clinicians and group analysts because of its applicability to our own social sphere in which we practice. It is particularly salient by virtue of the ethical questions that inevitably arise in how nations treat other nations and how people of different cultures treat other cultures. The social unconscious affects most profoundly the ethical behavior of people and the foreign and domestic policies of the nations to which they belong. The nations explored in this volume include Israel, Palestine, Egypt, and the transitory Islamic state of Iraq (Isis). Revealing the social unconscious of a nation is akin to the skill of an analyst making an analytical intervention with the tone and sensitivity that does not demean nor inflict humiliation on the patient nor arouse defensiveness that inhibits the patient's power to listen and interpret for her- or himself. It involves delivering a message from deep below to those whose lives have been nurtured on a contrary message. This new image of their nation is foreign to their eyes and ears and yet may seem strangely familiar. It's just too difficult to identify with the new image being presented—and so the old image must be embraced all the more fervently.

So the task of the analyst of the social unconscious is twofold: to cast doubt on the national foundational myths while still affirming the essential dignity and resilience of the people whose myths are being questioned and deconstructed. One must approach this task with deep respect for the capacity of people to gradually reimagine their

foundational beliefs in the interest of making them more in line with the present social reality. The several authors of this book demonstrate this respect—and one hopes they can contribute to the noble work of comprehending cross-cultural conflicts. As Foulkes and other thinkers like Erich Fromm remind us, the goal is to free ourselves as much as possible from the biases of clan and culture that we all inherit (Fromm, 1965, p. 40). Reading the essays in this volume, one begins to grasp the personal psychological liberation possible for entire groups of individuals. As Foulkes stated:

> Our overall aim is naturally change, but in the direction of the increased liberty of the individual which enables him to find himself no longer—to the same extent—dependent on or hampered by the groups in which he inevitably exists. (Foulkes, 1975, p. 63)

NAMING THE SOCIAL UNCONSCIOUS IN ONE'S NATIVE LAND

If I understand correctly how the concept of the social unconscious applies to a nation, there are limits to what a citizen of a nation is allowed to imagine to be true. Regine Scholz defines it as "… matters and operations that are actively excluded from large scale group communication and thus from becoming conscious to its members"(Hopper & Weinberg, 2017, p. 35).

As a thought experiment, let's see how this applies as I explore one aspect of the social unconscious of my country, the United States. I choose "American" Exceptionalism, which embraces a number of beliefs, including the notion that we are the only "American" state—whereas we share the Western Hemisphere with a number of sovereign states that also rightly claim to be "American." This Exceptionalism had its origin with the 17th-century Puritans who envisioned themselves "The New Canaan" or "The New Jerusalem." These people were "ordained" or divinely called to occupy and inherit the North American continent. The authors of the United States Constitution used the word in their founding document, meaning that the country was "called into being" by divine provenance. Therefore, we are forever exceptional, beyond the reach of human laws and subject only to God's judgment, protection, and Manifest Destiny.

The following beliefs flow from this cardinal principle. We are forever innocent, since our intentions are always good. If a particular strategy does not work out as planned, we are not to blame. We take no responsibility for the unintended consequences of our wars and military invasions. This disclaimer includes the economic and civil collapse of nations, the dislocation of populations as refugees, or the inestimable deaths and injuries caused by wars of aggression in Vietnam and Indo-China (1965–1975), Central America (1980–1989), and Iraq (2003–present).

We are not subject to International Law, since by definition we can never commit war crimes. If things turn out badly, we call them "mistakes." Those leaders in charge are never held accountable for their actions, whether it be war or torture. If we lose a war, we must never openly acknowledge it. To do so would mean we question our place as the Exceptional nation. As a consequence, we learn nothing and we become mired in endlessly protracted wars, like Afghanistan and Iraq.

How does the naming of a nation's social unconscious affect its citizens? Does it make them more aware and thoughtful? Or does it cause them to angrily retreat into deep defensiveness and remain profoundly unreflective? The utility of the volume written by Earl Hopper and Haim Weinberg rests on the capacity of the listener to transcend her or his native cultural prejudice and identification. This is exceedingly difficult to do unless one finds a context in which it is possible to question one's own deep beliefs along with supportive others also engaged in a deep process of reflection and change. Of course, this is precisely what Foulkes's group analysis provides in a small-group context. But how does one replicate that level of personal engagement on a grand national scale?

It takes courage for authors Weinberg, Yael Doron, Sa'ed Tali, Martin Weegman, and Mohamed Taha to point out the social unconscious as they see them in their respective native countries. Reflections on a nation's social unconscious are instructive and enlightening only insofar as a nation's citizens can be open to the possibility that such beliefs hold sway over how their nation conducts public policy and foreign relations. Otherwise, citizens recoil and find shelter in the comforting mythologies of their nation. The practical and ethical value of researching the social unconscious is then lost along with the possibility of change.

As group clinicians, we often wonder how our work can apply to a wider world beyond the treatment of our patients. The authors have written an important and challenging book, not just for clinicians and group analysts but also for those engaged in the study and practice of political science and international relations.

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