

Complexes and the personal unconscious

The personal unconscious

Like Freud Jung uses the term 'unconscious' both to describe mental contents which are inaccessible to the ego and to delimit a psychic place with its own character, laws and functions...the *personal unconscious* was seen as resting on upon the...*collective unconscious*.

A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis, p. 155, entry: unconscious.

Jung on the unconscious

'The unconscious is a psychological borderline concept, which covers all psychic contents or processes that are not conscious, i.e. not related to the ego in any perceptible way. [...] we have undoubted proof that, in the case of hysterical amnesia, for example, the ego knows nothing of numerous psychic complexes [...] As to the actual state an unconscious content is in when not attached to consciousness, this is something that eludes all possibility of cognition [...]

Conscious contents can become unconscious through the loss of energetic value. This is the normal process of "forgetting". That these contents do not simply get lost below the threshold of consciousness we know from the experience that occasionally, under suitable conditions, they can emerge from their submersion decades later [...] for instance in dreams, or under hypnosis, or in the form of cryptomenisia, or through the revival of associations with the forgotten content.

We also know that conscious contents can fall below the threshold of consciousness through 'intentional forgetting", or what Freud calls repression of a painful content, with no appreciable loss of value. A similar effect is produced by the dissociation of the personality. [...] The functional relationship of the unconscious processes to consciousness may be described as compensatory, since experience shows that they bring to the surface the subliminal material that is constellated by the conscious situation. [...] The compensatory function of the unconscious becomes more obvious the more one-sided the conscious attitude'

Jung, CW. 6, par. 837-844.

Articulation: what is the personal unconscious?

- The unconscious in depth psychology is a term used to denote a psychological domain with a positive substantive existence, not merely the negation or absence of consciousness.
- Reservoir of all experiences, memories, knowledge, ideas, beliefs, desires, hopes, traumas, affirmations, successes, failures, forgotten dreams etc. that have fallen below the threshold of the conscious mind.
- These contents are no longer directly accessible to consciousness, i.e. to the ego
- These contents are indirectly accessible through dreams, spontaneous fantasies (reverie), parapraxes and affective or irrational responses.
- The personal unconscious is irrational and contains/expresses the drives or instincts (triebe) (Freud).
- Freud makes a very useful distinction between the unconscious, governed by *the pleasure principal (desire)* vs. the conscious mind governed by *the reality principle*.
- There is a threshold between the conscious and unconscious mind. Different commentators (Freud, Janet, and Jung) describe the dynamics of this threshold differently. However a converged view would be one that (roughly) understands the contents of the unconscious as being:
 - i. Threatening to the ego, and as such incompatible to the conscious sense of identity.
 - ii. A necessary repression of instinctive impulses to allow the emergence of civilisation.
 - iii. Lacking sufficient libido (psychic energy) to cross the threshold into consciousness.
 - iv. A consequence of the necessarily incomplete realisation of the personality due primarily to circumstances.
- The personal unconscious is populated by complexes (Jung). And the complex stands in relation to the personal unconscious in much the same way as the archetype to the collective unconscious.

Complexes

Everyone knows nowadays that people have complexes. But what is less known, though far more important theoretically, is that complexes have people.

The complex is not under the control of the will and for this reason it possesses the quality of psychic autonomy. Its autonomy consists in its power to manifest itself independently of the will and even in direct opposition to conscious tendencies.

A complex becomes pathological only when we think we have not got it.

C.G. Jung, *The practice of psychotherapy*, CW 16

A complex is a collection of images and ideas, clustered round a core derived from one or more archetypes, and characterised by a common emotional tone. When they come into play (become constellated), complexes contribute to behaviour and are marked by affect whether a person is conscious of them or not. They are particularly useful in the analysis of neurotic symptoms.

A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis, p. 34, entry: complex

A brief history on the origins of the theory of complexes

- Plato (Phaedo; The Republic) and Aristotle (De Anima) in the 4th century BC spoke of complexes in the form of part souls. The idea being that man was composed of distinct, partial, and potentially competing, souls. In *The Republic* Socrates speaks of the tripartite nature of mans (unitary or complete) soul as containing different parts or aspects: reason, spirit and appetite.
- Breuer and Freud were the first to articulate the concept of a “complex” for psychology in a joint paper written in 1893, as “a cluster of interrelated and usually repressed ideas with a strong emotional content that may compel an individual to adopt abnormal patters of thought or behaviour.”¹
- Pierre Janet (1859-1947), dissociative disorder, automatism and *Abaissement du niveau mental* (the lowering of ego consciousness)

Abaissement du niveau mental

A lowering of the level of consciousness, a mental and emotional condition experienced as "loss of soul "[i.e. it is depressive in character].

It is a slackening of the tensivity of consciousness, which might be compared to a low barometric reading, presaging bad weather. The tonus has given way, and this is felt subjectively as listlessness, moroseness, and depression. One no longer has any wish or courage to face the tasks of the day. One feels like lead, because no part of one's body seems willing to move, and this is due to the fact that one no longer has any disposable energy. . . . The listlessness and paralysis of will can go so far that the whole personality falls apart, so to speak, and consciousness loses its unity.²

Abaissement du niveau mental can be the result of physical and mental fatigue, bodily illness, violent emotions, and shock, of which the last has a particularly deleterious effect on one's self-assurance. The abaissement always has a restrictive influence on the personality as a whole. It reduces one's self-confidence and the spirit of enterprise, and, as a result of increasing egocentricity, narrows the mental horizon.³

- Jung's PhD dissertation and the medium Héléne Preiswerk.
- Jung's *Word Association Test*.

¹ Donahue, B, 2003, p. vi.

² <http://www.nyaap.org/jung-lexicon/a>

³ Jung, 'Concerning Rebirth', CW 9, part 1, par. 213f.
Copyright Centre for Applied Jungian Studies, 2023

Articulation: what is a complex?

- A cluster of sympathetic feeling-toned thoughts, ideas, emotions, beliefs, memories (objective and subjective), feelings, desires, aversions etc.
- The complex acts as an autonomous personality or subject in the psyche.
- By definition a complex is opposed to the ego, in that it is not the ego. A complex stands in relation to the ego as not-self to self.
- A complex can be healthy (e.g. a talent), neurotic or psychotic.
- A complex is typically (although not always) unconscious, meaning it has no conscious relationship to the ego personality. In the case that complex becomes partially conscious a portion still remains unconscious.
- A useful metaphor for behavior as the actualization of a complex is provided by the image of the zombie from contemporary cinematic culture. A type of inhuman or undead spirit that inhabits the human soul.

Affects and influences: how a complex behaves

- Like ego consciousness a complex has hopes, desires, fears and ambitions.
- Perhaps most significantly it has intentionality, but not consciousness.
- The complex seeks the expression of this intentionality and takes any opportunity presented to express itself.
- The most opportune time for a complex to emerge is when consciousness is lowered (*abaissement du niveau mental*) typically at a time of high emotion, trauma, inebriation, physical or mental exhaustion.
- It is experienced as an irrational impulse or behavior pattern, 'I don't know what came over me', 'I wasn't myself' etc. or simply a perennial compulsion.
- Unlike ego consciousness, a complex, consistent with all unconscious content, is one sided. The ability to see the opposite of any situation is, for Jung, a key characteristic of consciousness.
- A complex has a dispositional character. It will respond to a predetermined set of circumstances that act as a catalyst to its activation.
- The constituted presence of the complex its affects, thoughts, associations etc. will in the case of most complexes, at least those that are repeatedly activated, be familiar to the subject.

How to recognize a complex (becoming conscious of)

- Pay careful attention to your dreams, with an eye to a metaphorical rather than literal interpretation.
- Consider:
 - What do you fantasise about?
 - What has a powerful allure for you?
 - What do you dread or find repulsive?
 - What are you very good at?
 - What are you totally incompetent at?
 - What qualities in others do you aspire to?
 - What qualities in others do you find very off putting?
- If you were to describe your behavior in terms of significant patterns- what would they be?
- Describe your greatest talents (your superpowers☺).
- Describe your greatest challenges (your kryptonite☺).
- Listen very carefully to what others say about you before dismissing their comments as ill informed.
A strategy employed by complexes is to encourage dismissal in the face of exposure. Conscious exposure threatens the complex with disintegration.

Assimilation and integration

- Identification.
- Articulation.
- Personification
- Assimilation: *awareness, acknowledgement, acceptance, assimilation, accommodation, adaptation.*
- Re-imagining the ego with the inclusion of the new content.
- Conscious strategies for the best expression of the re-imagined psyche.

References

A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analyses, (1986), A. Samuels, B. Shorter, F. Plaut, Routledge: London

C. G. Jung, (1960), *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, vol. 8, The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Trans. Hull, Edit. Read, Fordham, Adler, McGuire, Routledge: London

C. G. Jung, (1954), *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, vol. 16, The Practice of Psychotherapy*, Trans. Hull, Edit. Read, Fordham, Adler, McGuire, Routledge: London

Donahue, B. (2003), *One map for mystery: C. G. Jung's complex dynamics and the clinical relationship*, Thomas: Sprinfield.

Lorenz, Hendrik, "Ancient Theories of Soul", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>>.