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THE INNER LIFE / ESSAY 01

The Patterns That Make Us

On repetition, memory and the unconscious



ESSAYS ON THE HUMAN MIND

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The familiarity of the unfamiliar

A person can change cities, professions or partners and still encounter a remarkably familiar emotional situation. An accomplished colleague may experience ordinary feedback as humiliation; someone who longs for intimacy may retreat when affection becomes available. What appears puzzling from the outside may possess an emotional logic that has not yet become available to reflection.

Psychoanalytic thinking begins with the possibility that conscious intention does not exhaust the meaning of an action. This is not a claim that every event conceals a secret motive. Rather, it invites attention to the gap between what we intend, what we feel and what we repeatedly do. A pattern is worth exploring when it constrains life, not merely because it occurs more than once.

In his 1914 essay on remembering, repeating and working through, Freud proposed that aspects of experience may become visible through present conduct in treatment rather than through recollection alone [1]. The historical model is influential, but its language of repression and resistance is a theoretical account, not a universal explanation established by experiment. Its enduring clinical question is simpler: what can a recurring experience reveal that a straightforward account of the past cannot?

How a pattern acquires meaning

Imagine a fictional person who becomes indispensable at work, rarely asks for help and privately resents being relied upon. Several explanations deserve consideration. The workplace may genuinely be exploitative. The person may have learned that achievement brings recognition, or may fear the vulnerability of depending on others. Economic necessity, family obligations and discrimination could also shape the situation. A useful formulation remains open to these possibilities rather than assigning a childhood cause in advance.

Attachment-informed and mentalizing approaches offer a related but distinct perspective. Mentalizing concerns our ability to make sense of conduct in light of feelings, intentions and beliefs [2]. Under emotional pressure, we may become more certain about what another person means while becoming less able to consider alternatives. A delayed reply can then feel like rejection rather than an ambiguous event.

This framework allows a distinction between the event, its subjective meaning and the response it evokes. None of these is irrelevant. A person may be accurately perceiving danger

or disrespect; reflective exploration should never become a demand to reinterpret real harm as fantasy. The task is to increase room for thought while remaining attentive to the actual environment.

From recognition to working through

Recognizing a pattern is different from being able to respond differently when it arises. A person may understand intellectually why criticism feels threatening and nevertheless feel overwhelmed in the moment. Working through, in the classical sense, involves returning to difficult material over time rather than assuming a single interpretation produces lasting change [1].

The therapeutic relationship may provide another setting in which expectations become visible. For instance, concern that a clinician will be disappointed by disagreement might inhibit a patient from saying that an interpretation felt inaccurate. Exploring that moment can make room for a new experience of expressing disagreement. The clinician must also consider whether the interpretation actually was insensitive. Transference is a useful hypothesis about how expectations from other relationships enter the present, not permission to disregard the clinician’s contribution.

Research offers qualified support for studying reflective capacities as possible mechanisms of change. A 2024 systematic review of 29 studies involving 3,124 participants suggested a possible role for mentalizing in psychological treatment, but differences in methods and populations prevented formal quantitative pooling [3]. It would be premature to conclude that insight or mentalizing alone accounts for improvement.

A wider range of possibilities

Contemporary evidence supports psychodynamic psychotherapy as a treatment option for several common adult mental disorders. A 2023 umbrella review assessed recent randomized-trial meta-analyses and considered evidence quality, concluding that psychodynamic therapy meets updated criteria for empirical support in several diagnostic groups [4]. This is evidence about particular treatments and populations, not proof of every psychoanalytic theory or of the effectiveness of every form of intensive analysis.

Some people benefit from structured skills, medication, practical assistance or other psychological approaches; combinations may be appropriate. A psychiatric assessment can help distinguish recurring emotional difficulties from symptoms associated with medical illness, mood disorders, substance use, sleep disruption or other conditions.

The aim of exploring patterns is not to eliminate individuality or to search endlessly for origins. It is to make more responses available. A person who recognizes the familiar impulse

to withdraw may sometimes choose to remain in conversation; someone who habitually accepts responsibility may begin to distinguish generosity from obligation. Change can be uneven, and external conditions matter.

Perhaps the most useful question is not simply why a pattern exists, but what becomes possible when it is noticed with enough curiosity, care and freedom to respond differently.

References & reading notes

1. Freud, S. (1914/1958). Remembering, repeating and working-through. Standard Edition, 12, 145–156. https://marcuse.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/classes/201/articles/1914FreudRemembering.pdf

2. Luyten, P., Campbell, C., Allison, E., & Fonagy, P. (2020). The mentalizing approach to psychopathology. Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 16, 297–325. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-071919-015355

3. Luyten, P., Campbell, C., Moser, M., & Fonagy, P. (2024). The role of mentalizing in psychological interventions in adults. Clinical Psychology Review, 108, 102380. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2024.102380

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Editorial note

This narrative essay draws on selected classical writings and contemporary research reviews. It is not a systematic literature review. Illustrative situations are fictional; no patient records or clinical experiences of Dr. Valladares are represented. Educational material only, not individualized medical advice. Cover artwork is reused from the website prototype.