

Cultural Contexts, Psyche, and Transformation

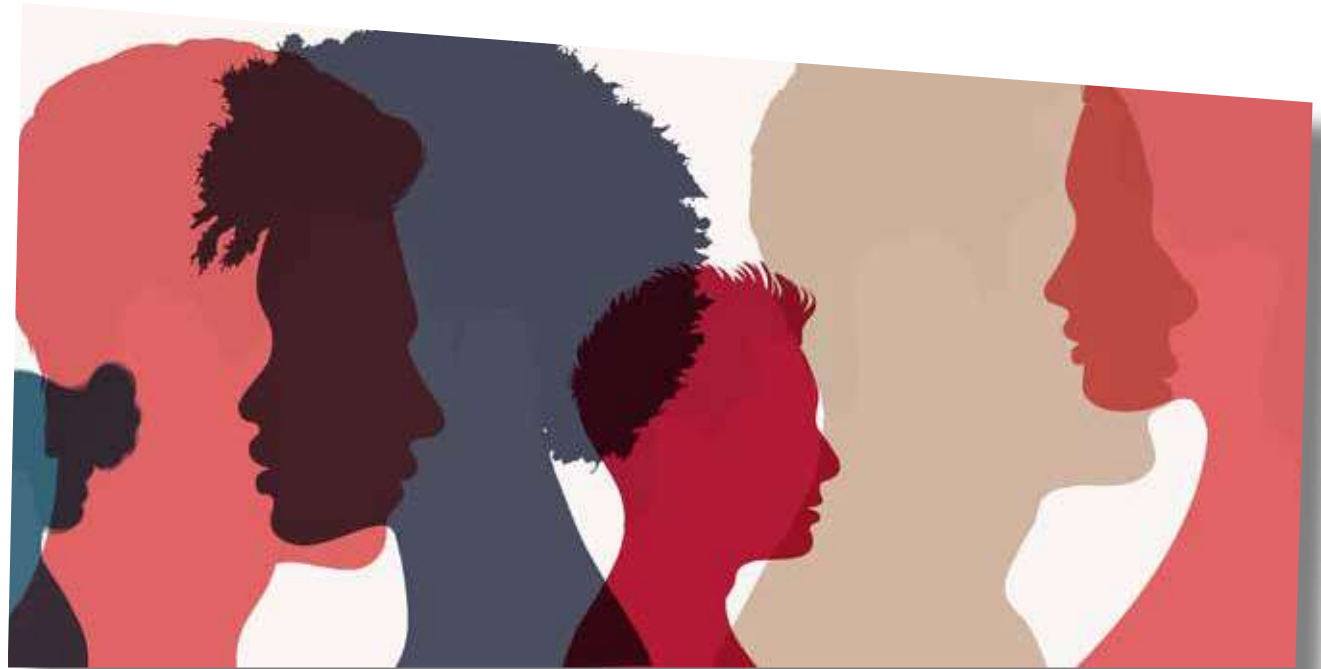
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Abstract

Any explorations into power dynamics call for a psychological work and require considerations of the cultural contexts of the involved parties. Awareness of cultural legacies and cultural complexes on everyone's part play a crucial role. A deepened grasp of the unconscious workings of the psyche that communicates through symbols and that has a tendency to project its own shortcomings onto others when not made conscious, is a particularly significant aspect to be considered. Such reflective insights form a part of transformation and human empowerment. An added empowerment, I suggest, may be gained by engaging one's intuition as a natural ability to seek novel solutions not only for personal growth but for an increased societal well-being.

Cultural Legacies, Symbols, Complexes, and Shadow

Cultural Legacies are cultural practices that have been passed down by generations that affect how a group of people or individuals live today. One place to observe cultural legacies is at monuments. Monuments serve as symbols. They are not only the places where we remember the past; they are places that hold an emotional charge related to the past and affecting the current day. The charge may be observed in the practices of today's individuals wanting or not wanting to gather in front of



certain monuments on certain days. The gatherings and the monuments reflect the psychological needs of those who are meeting there. Strong emotions may be involved. When we talk about strong or disproportional emotions that are triggered in response to places and events, we talk about cultural complexes. The disproportional or exaggerated emotions are typically so overwhelming that the experiencer feels them as ordained from outside his or her own body and mind, as guided by some higher power—God or psychologically speaking, by archetypal forces.

To understand the term cultural complexes better, the perspective of Jungian psychology may help. Carl Jung (1931/1960), a Swiss psychologist whose active life be-



Carl Gustav Jung

longs to the early and mid-20th century, imagined the psyche as consisting of the following layers: (1) the conscious—what we are aware of, our personality our ego; (2) the personal unconscious—all that we do not know about ourselves or that we do not want to know about because we are ashamed of that content; and (3) the collective unconscious—the content collected throughout millennia by those who have come before us, that we do not have direct knowledge of but that affects us nevertheless. The typical patterns of thoughts and emotions

are governed by the structures called *archetypes* that are inherent in the collective unconscious.



Jungian Archetypes

Jungian psychologists who came after Jung proposed a layer of the psyche between the collective and the personal unconscious – the cultural unconscious with cultural attitudes (Henderson, 1984). Thomas Singer and Samuel Kimbles (2004) suggested that the cultural unconscious layer of the psyche contains cultural complexes and described them as affect-ridden, unconscious workings of the psyche of groups of people, clustered around misinformed ideas about the structures of societies. Such complexes, they wrote, are fashioned through “repetitive traumatic experiences” (p. 6). Cultural complexes like personal complexes originate from traumas.

It is good to have this understanding as it may help us see realities with greater clarity. We often hear people saying: I do not understand why this individual or these groups crave wars. The complexes grip a people’s unique cultural identity and character, altering their perceptions of themselves and other groups. As Jung wrote (1954/1966), complexes consist “not just of little weaknesses-and foibles, but of a positively demonic dynamism” (p. 30). A trauma therapist Donald Kalsched (2013) found a sacred childlike part of the individual’s self when talking to trauma patients. He also observed what he called a self-care system. The system attempts to guard the inner child. Sometimes, however, when the person’s

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physical and mental troubles are not properly addressed, the self-care system becomes self-destructive. Often we see that soldiers after wars are self-destroying by alcohol. We see it in clients staying in abusive relationships. We see it in individuals and groups willing to kill themselves and their countrymen in a self-destructive frenzy.

As psychologists, coaches, and supervisors, when clients come to us, we need to ask: “What is the system defending?” In our roles, in our work, as hard as it may be for us as a person, we must look beyond blaming any individuals or groups. *Our role is to make the cultural legacies, cultural traumas, and cultural complexes conscious.* Without consciousness, our inner demons fuel divisions between Us and Them, perpetrate wars and perpetuate self-marginalization and self-destruction.

Another term we often hear is Shadow. When a complex is triggered, it stirs up some dark, hidden aspects of the psyche—or the demons. Those are called Shadow. Kimbels (2000) has said that groups carry each other’s Shadow. In Latvian, there is a saying: Cita acī skabargu meklē, savā balķī neredz! (One is looking for a splinter in somebody else’s eye but does not see a log in his own.)

When I analyse Latvian history which is interconnected to a very large degree with the history of Russia, I see the following Shadow dynamics among the cultural groups: *Latvians carry for Russians their Shadow defensive attackers.* As strange as it may sound when you consider that Latvians count to about 1 million people while there are 144 million Russians, in the minds of Russian people, Latvia is “Russia’s enemy number one” (Rislakki, 2008, p. 23). The idea comes from propaganda. It has been described by Jukka Rislakki (2008), an awarded-winning Finnish political journalist who analysed an enormous amount of news articles and other journalistic sources. He asserted

that the propaganda has worked to foster the image of a Latvian as a violent anti-Semite and racist. Such propaganda stems from a cultural complex. Gert Sauer (2016), a German Jungian psychologist analysed the phenomenon and asserted that Russians struggle with a fear of being surrounded by enemies. It is “the age-old Russian cultural complex of feeling encircled by hungry barbarians” (p. 223). The unconscious complex held in the Russian psyche tells its carriers that everybody hates them, that everyone wants to insult or harm them. The strategy that Russia has taken towards Latvia for many years and the one it is taking against Ukraine now is guided by its own Shadow attacker and its self-care system that has turned demonic and self-destructive. There is no one who benefits from this war!

Note: We need to be very clear, when we speak about Russians, Latvians, or Ukrainians and cultural complexes and Shadow, we do not mean all Russian, Ukrainian or Latvian individuals. We talk about a symbolic meaning held in the cultural unconscious.

My analysis of Latvian cultural narratives makes me conclude that Latvians have a cultural complex of their own (Volfa Vestergaard, 2018). It is the inferiority complex lurking as the ‘poor me’ Shadow. My conclusion is not different from that of Rislakki (2008) who write that Latvians feel “inferior to others [and] find it very hard to praise themselves and their country” (p. 17). There is a fitting Latvian folk story that captures the inferiority dynamics.

A farmer, went to Riga to buy himself a dragon to haul riches for him. With his head bent low, he asked the shop keeper: Would you sell me a tiny wee dragon (in Latvian, “mazu sūda pūķīti” (a tiny shit dragon)). The farmer got his dragon and came back home. The dragon began its work. Very soon the farmer’s house was full of shit. The

farmer cried: Why? Why are you doing this? The dragon replied: You got what you asked for.

The inferiority complex and the ‘poor me’ Shadow feed the belief that all one can do is “shitty” and projects the Shadow onto the others, seeing as crap or of a lesser value.

Everything that we do not recognize in ourselves, comes to hunt us from outside. “Projections change the world into the replica of one’s own unknown face,” wrote Jung (1951/1979, p. 9). The recognition requires awareness. To learn about variety of projections stemming from cultural complexes of many cultural groups in Europe and elsewhere in the world, one can explore valuable resources by numerous authors (Singer & Kimbles, 2004; Roque, Dowd, & Tacey, 2011; Amezaga, Barcellos, Capriles, Gerson, & Ramos, 2012; Rasche & Singer, 2016; Volfa Vestergaard, 2018; Singer, 2020a; Singer 2020b). Such explorations and reflective insights may form a part of human empowerment and transformation. An added transformative source, in my view, is our natural ability to seek novel solutions through our intuitive function.

Transformation

Jung (1921/1976) described intuition as “the instinctive perception of an emergent psychic content” (p. 152) serving as “adaptation to the world . . . by means of unconscious directives which [were perceived] through an especially sensitive and sharpened perception and interpretation of dimly conscious stimuli” (p. 145). Jung drew a distinction between extroverted and introverted intuition. The extraverted intuition was important to adopt “anything new and in the making” (1921/1976, p. 368) and it served this role not only in an individual’s personal maturation but societally. Extraverted intuition “is uncommonly important both economically and culturally

. . . [It] can render exceptional service as the initiator or promoter of new enterprises. . . [It] is the natural champion of all minorities with a future,” wrote Jung (p. 369). The introverted intuition was similarly linked to in-sighting societal solutions and taking on personal responsibility in the process. The question that, according to Jung, the introverted intuition asked was: “What emerges from this vision in the way of duty or a task, for me or the world?” (p. 402).

Recently, Gary Nolan, a Stanford university professor, has offered new understanding about the brain areas involved in the intuitive function. His insights rose out of his analysis of MRI brain scans of hundreds of individuals who had reported encounters with UAP (Unidentified Aerial Phenomena). Nolan discussed his experience and findings in a number of interviews (Michels, 2021; Fridman, 2022) in which he linked the brain region of basal ganglia to intuition. According to the researcher, the basal ganglia showed denser than typical live tissue in those individuals that had highly developed abilities to perform sophisticated mental planning and motor control activities, in the individuals whose line of work required an intelligence to foresee. Thus, in Nolan’s view the basal ganglia was a part of the brain that supported the workings of intuition—an ability to notice what had not been seen before. Such an ability contributed to finding innovative solutions.

Nolan’s viewpoint of fast and intelligent decision-making and intuition parallels the perspectives of cognitive scientists like Myers (2004) and Kahneman (2013) as far as the element of practice is involved in one’s heightened intuitive abilities (in addition, Nolan attributes the abilities to genetics). Myers and Kahneman saw no magic or divine powers in such skills. They argued that intuitive capacities were bolstered by experience and practice rich with accumulated learning, coupled with an ability to imagine, and

a tolerance to take risks. The perspective that intelligent intuitive insights are tied to experience and practice has been substantiated by a team of Japanese researchers who studied players of shogi (Japanese chess). The researchers asserted that “the superior capability of cognitive experts largely depends on automatic, quick information processing, which is often referred to as intuition” (Wan, et al., 2012).

The above research shows that the intuitive perception that may seem as arriving at the grace of invisible divine powers is a natural ability that can be developed. With that in mind, I suggest that we possess a natural ability to intuit societal solutions and the ability can be practised. For that, I propose intuition fitness practices. In sports, we practice to be fit—to have strength, agility, and flexibility. Arguably, we can be more fit to intuit. Below are three practices.

The first practice is to expand our perspectives. It involves flexing our minds and learning about those we consider others—those who are different from us. We humans have not evolved perfectly to care for everyone. As the neurologist and biologist Robert Sapolsky (2018) noted, human brains have fault lines—we have an innate tendency to divide the world into Us and Them. Intuition fitness is practice when we learn about the realities of Them. Reading the stories told by Them is a way to learn. Visiting the places where Them live and sensing those realities in our own bodies is, perhaps, a good route to the intuitive fitness.

The second practice is to deepen our knowledge about symbols of our own culture and those of others. “One culture’s sacred cow is another’s meal, and the discrepancy can be agonizing,” wrote Sapolsky (2018, p. 551). Expanding one’s awareness of a variety of symbols, their

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ecological and cultural contexts, and their deeply held meaning may guard us from the agonies. Arguably, the awareness strengthens intuition evolving it from a greater ability to detect dim unconscious directives to an ability to create unprecedented novel solutions of societal value.

The third practice, I suggest, is a social dreaming rooted in Jungian Socioanalysis devised by Arne Vestergaard¹ and Dorte Odde (2021). The aim of the practice is to innovate by generating a shared intuitive understanding of the surrounding world realities through embracing affect and empathy. The practice follows “five ‘rules’:

- The dream is the focus, not the dreamer.
- We attend to social and collective aspects of dreams, not personal dramas.
- When told, the dream is ‘our’ dream to explore.

- We seek new thoughts and perspectives of the world we share, not of the individual self.
- We embrace uncertainty, not knowing and multiplicity rather than seeking agreement, certainty and rationality” (p. 331).

The dreaming is best to take place in an arranged space where participants are seated in a snow crystal pattern facing away from each other to facilitate the process of emergence of images of the psyche. In a number of experiences with this practice the authors found the process to work as a facilitator of imagining future roles and possibilities for individuals living in the unavoidably interconnected realities. I suggest, such a social dreaming fosters intuitive abilities beyond an individual magnitude and value.

Conclusion

As we near the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, it is time to take on a new responsibility—to engage our intuitions and to look for novel societal solutions. They do not have to be large or ultimate. Each, even the small contributions matter. As we strive to make a difference, let us expand and deepen our learnings about Us and Them, let us dream together to imagine and to cocreate more peaceful and collaborative world.

Notes

1. Not related to the current author.

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