

The Structure of Consciousness Imprisoned by the Impasse

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This article will present three levels of consciousness: the central figure, the peripheral background and the “activated” but not presently conscious “working memory.” Previous articles on the Impasse in the Stream of Consciousness have already developed our awareness of the first two levels. The **central figure** of consciousness is relatively clear, explicit and often transmitted with words. The **peripheral background** is more vague, implicit and frequently escapes definition by words, although nonverbal expression may transmit several aspects. The **working memory** involves elements of **potential** consciousness – ideas, images, attitudes, etc. – that are “activated” by the conscious flow, but that are not called up, at the moment, into the central field of consciousness. When a person talks openly about his experience or by means of “free association,” elements of the activated working memory will emerge into the periphery of consciousness and then its center, at least momentarily. Following this, central components of consciousness return to the periphery and then to the non-conscious working memory.

What is the Impasse? This is an unhappy or negative component that becomes stuck and repeats itself in the central arena of consciousness. The repeating Impasse that disturbs us cannot be simply “thought away,” but has a tenacity and force that

can only be explained by the fact that it emerges from the deep brain's subcortical impulses.

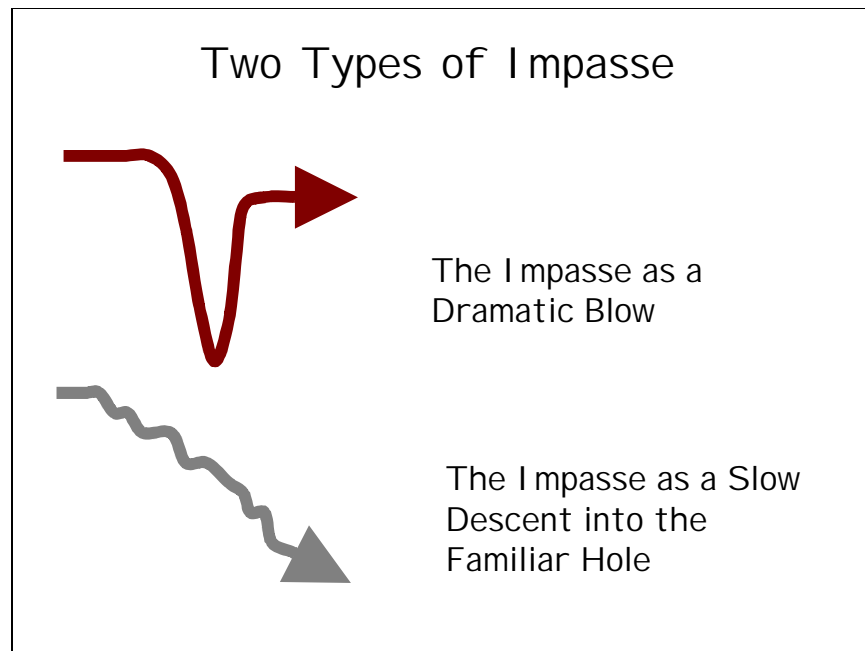
Visual designs will be used throughout the article, just as they were used in the previous articles regarding the Stream of Consciousness. **Designs reveal a multiplicity of elements in relationship. This reproduces concepts presented in the verbal text and gives them a spacial organization.** In that way "the verbal string" is projected onto a two-dimensional plane, permitting us to decipher in an instant a complexity of ideas that is otherwise shown by the limited sequences of word-elements produced by verbal language.

Part I – The Impasse during Solitude

Two Types of Impasses: Dramatic Descents Vs. Thoughts that Deteriorate Slowly

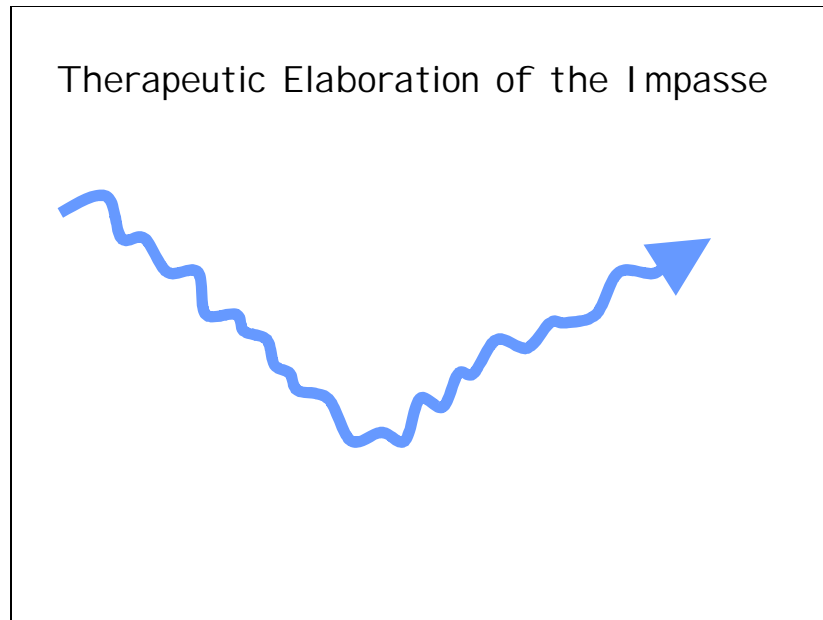
A person feels unhappy and in a bad mood. One possibility is that this person has suffered from a recent disappointment: "I didn't win that competition." "I felt bothered by their criticisms." "I received a letter that says I will be out of a job next month." **"She didn't come to our rendezvous, and I was really counting on it."** The thoughts of hurt, disappointment and loss keep coming to mind, meaning that they invade the Stream of Consciousness. Each repetition of thoughts feels like someone has thrown a grenade that explodes inside the belly. The recent event creates an **acute crisis** in which spontaneous thoughts fall into a black hole of suffering.

There is another possibility. The unhappiness and bad mood can come from events of the distant past, but that nevertheless repeat themselves inexorably when the person finds himself alone. (This is the Impasse in the Stream of Consciousness.) "I was the black sheep of the family." **"My father didn't recognize me as his daughter."** "I was the last in the family, the others were always more important than me." These thoughts return in solitude like a large rock that is pushed from the top of a hill and always takes the same pathway to roll downhill. We can call it **chronic suffering**. The descent is more gradual than in the acute crisis, but just as regular and inevitable.



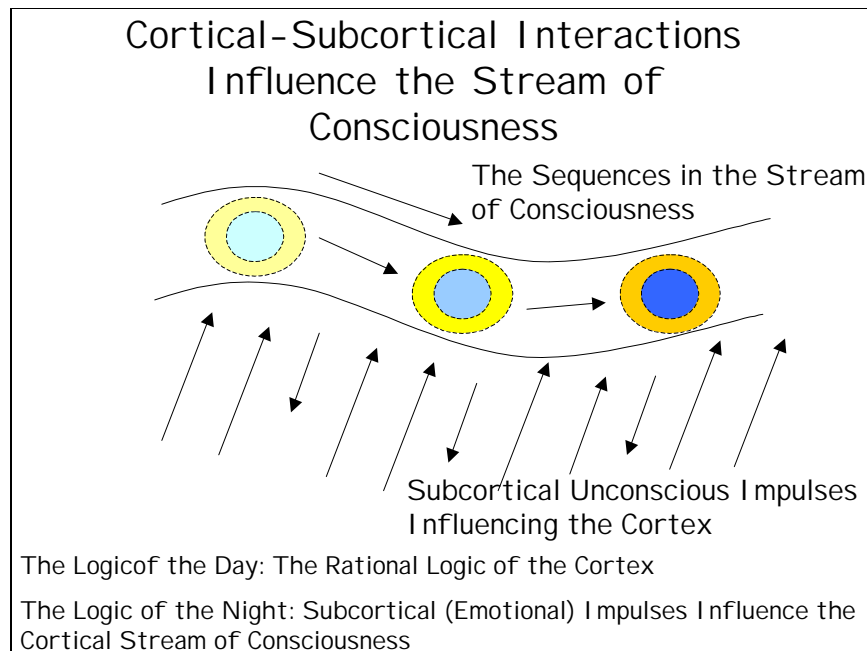
The Psychotherapeutic Approach: Elaboration

Psychotherapy treats different Impasses in different ways. But in all cases the approach includes a period of **elaboration**. The patient shares what is remembered of the unhappy event. This gives a slight feeling of relief, and also helps articulate with words events that come to mind without being harnessed to language. The result can be more self awareness, sometimes more distance from the problem, and in all cases in which the psychotherapist is empathic and receptive, a feeling of “I’m being understood.” **“To be understood by another” changes how thoughts run through the mind, even when alone**, a point that was clarified in the previous article regarding the beneficial effects of empathic dyadic relationships.



Cortical Logic and Subcortical Influences

The first article on the Impasse in the Stream of Consciousness showed the forward movement of conscious sequences. The design that was presented will be repeated here. We see horizontal arrows that portray the forces of cortical-to-cortical logic. At the same time, **the circles of conscious experience are riding upon subcortical arrows; the subcortex is constantly throwing up impulses that energize and influence the moods and contents of the thought sequences.** Smaller arrows shooting downwards portray the influence of conscious thought upon the unconscious subcortex, which is less powerful than the upgoing subcortex-to-cortex regulation.



Cortex-to-Cortex Logic: This organizes our strategies for dealing with everyday life situations. “I must get to the store on time to buy some milk, cheese and vegetables. I’d better go now because the store closes at 7:30PM.” This strategy of rational problem-solving is called **the Logic of the Day**. Although the horizontal arrows in the design represent such logical and rational sequences, there are probably subcortical influences that also organize and stabilize the rational strategy. When Gerald Edelman (Edelman, 1989) talks of the Basal Ganglia influences upon consciousness, with the intermediary as the discrete lateral nuclei of the thalamus, he is indicating that our rational sequences can also be regulated by this particular subcortical origin. In any case, this rational logic is quite different from the emotional logic regulated by another large area of the subcortex, namely, the Limbic System.

Subcortex-to-Cortex Logic: This makes us feel incredibly well, at certain moments, without understanding why. Olga (in Chekhov): “I woke up this morning, and I felt so good. I don’t know why.” (Jer: fix) In fact, all of our moods come from this regulation, such as when we feel dull, irritable, enthusiastic, confused, satisfied, at peace or in turmoil. And this is **the Logic of the Night**, which can fill our minds with the repetitive thoughts of the Impasse, “I feel lost,” “It’s no use,” “I’ll never be happy.” The Limbic System is the source. These subcortical areas send up impulses that change cortical logic from the straight running rails of Daytime Logic to the labyrinths, holes, clouds and poisoned rivers of Nighttime Logic.

Alan Schore (Schore, 2003) emphasizes the upgoing pathways of the Limbic System (ventral tegmentum, central gray matter, hypothalamus, amygdala,

hippocampus, insula and cingular cortex) that send messages to the orbito-frontal Lobe. From there, messages are sent to the posterior parts of the brain (parietal, temporal and occipital lobes) and influence our states of consciousness. At the same time, Gerald Edelman presents two other routes **to explain the influence of the Limbic System upon consciousness**. One route goes **from the amygdala directly to the medial diffuse nuclei of the thalamus**; the other route **from the amygdala and hypothalamus to a part of the basal ganglia** that is different from the regions receiving logical strategies from the frontal lobes. These emotional impulses are sent from the basal ganglia to the medial diffuse areas of the thalamus and then shoot upward to influence all regions of the cortex, from the posterior perception areas to the temporal memory areas to the space-time parietal areas as well as to the strategy-planning frontal lobes. It is typical for the brain to have multiple pathways that lead to a common final point (concept of Edelman), in this case, the influence of Limbic System emotion, through different pathways, that conclude with an overall impact upon Cortical consciousness.

Therapeutic Approaches: Recent Events Vs. Events from the Distant Past

The upshot of this analysis is simple: Our states of consciousness are regulated by our subcortical emotions. We can now investigate more precisely **two different therapeutic approaches for dealing with unhappiness**. If the unhappiness is attached to **recent events**, the elaboration involves remembering these events: What happened? Where did it take place? Who was there? What was said? What were the expressions in peoples' faces? Thus the memory focuses on "real events" in daily life that continue to provoke the unhappiness.

But **if the provocative events were long ago** – family negativity, physical or sexual abuse, long separations for hospitalization, rejection by important figures, severe illnesses, even the intuition of trauma during birth or during the fetal period, etc. – the specific memory could be limited. Intuitions and fantasies of "what might have happened" could fill in the memory blanks. But the psychotherapist's awareness regarding the dynamics of the Impasse in the Stream of Consciousness could lead him, in another stage of elaboration, to focus on the patient's memory regarding his Stream of Consciousness. (See "Three Levels of Deepening in Psychotherapy," for a more detailed presentation regarding how deeper experience is elaborated and shared in the psychotherapeutic session.) For example, "When you are alone, and your mind keeps returning to this point, can you recall what happens to you... in your inner world?" Or: "Let's see if you can remember how this unhappy feeling returns to mind when you're all alone... Take your time... Perhaps it's a feeling in the body or an image that keeps repeating itself..." It's not easy to find the right words for this level of inquiry. More important, the therapist can use with intuition a tone of voice and rhythm which encourages the patient to return to ineffable memories, memories that have few words attached to them, that disappear

easily from lucid consciousness and that nevertheless repeat themselves, frequently, in exactly the same way again and again.

A strange truth emerges through the study of the Stream of Consciousness. **The repetitions of the unhappy thoughts and feelings that repeat themselves during the Impasse of the Stream of Consciousness can be more intense, and can exert more effect, than the original events that provoked the problem.** Readers of Anton Chekhov (his stories more than his plays) will find this deep truth conveyed to the reader again and again. In “The Lady and the Pet Dog,” for example, two people meet and spend ten days together with some degree of satisfaction. Then each one returns to his and her usual daily life and family and finds the return more boring and banal than ever. The constant thought of the Other gives a continuous input of excitement, but there is no contact with the real person. Therefore, **it is during these several months of separation, each having constant thoughts of the other, that the two people “fall in love” and discover an overwhelming need to be with each other.**

In the next section we will see how this inquiry into the Impasse that repeats one’s suffering during the Stream of Consciousness is a project that has many challenges and obstacles.



Part II: An Experience that is Almost Invisible

Difficulties in Remembering the Stream of Consciousness

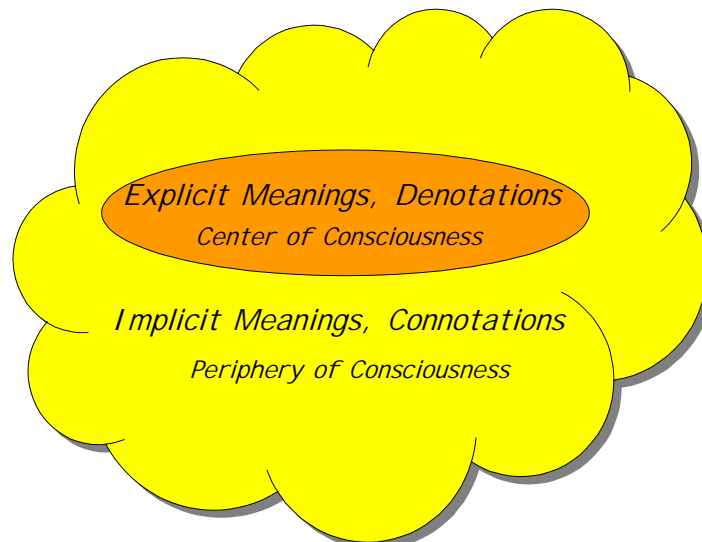
Do we have a clear memory of our Stream of Consciousness? Rarely. Is our memory of the Stream accurate, without distortions or simplifications? Never! Why is this? Our Stream of Consciousness is complex and multidimensional, meaning that there are many components at any one time, and its multidimensionality includes visceral sensations, muscular tensions, breath, sense of time, feeling of internal volume and external space, significance and mood, beyond some more evident components like verbal thoughts, flash images, and the feeling of completion or incompleteness in the sequences. Then, too, **ordinary memory cannot easily access these components**, that are usually vague and wispy drifts in the background of our Daytime consciousness. One might say that the inner Stream, that flows through us in solitude, is a sequence of experiences that is mainly ineffable, impalpable, fleeting, indescribable and inexpressible. Nevertheless, this is our “natural system of real events” (term of the Philosopher of Science, Carl Hempel) that we wish to investigate, describe and understand. In a word, **our wish is to make visible what is almost invisible!**

As a first step, let us make a rudimentary map. Successive maps will then give more scope and definition.

What first comes to mind is a thought that is transmitted with words. Let's take a simple thought, “What a disaster!” A hurt: “Why did he do that?” “A revenge: “They won't get away with that!” The following design gives us our rudimentary map: “The Words with their Explicit and Implicit Meanings.”

The word and its primary meaning are clear in the mind. That means that word and meaning are explicit and in the central light of consciousness. At the same time, the word has implicit meanings; the “disaster” was a surprise, something toppled and crumbled. The hurt was because of something unjust, but behind the question, “Why did he do that?”, the person can have suspicions of the motivation of the other (“He's an egoist!”, or even suspicions of one's own contribution (“I showed him too many expectations, and he wasn't ready for that!”) The revenge is for an explicit attack that was unjust, but behind the denotative meaning, “They won't get away with that!”, there could be connotative meanings that are in opposition, such as, “My power is not sufficient. They could wipe me out if they knew of my rebellion.” **All of these connotative and implicit meanings of the explicit phrase are in the periphery of consciousness.** The design represents the implicit meanings or the connotations of the verbal phrase as a cloud that surrounds its explicit central meaning,

The Explicit and Implicit Meanings of a Verbal Phrase



A man thinks of his brother's incessant demands for receiving financial help, while it seems that the brother squanders the money in gambling. "Enough! Stop it!", comes to his central consciousness. At the same time comes a flash image of the brother sitting at the table, drinking wine excessively, with a face paunchy with excessive eating and drinking and other signs of a dissolute life. In the periphery of his mind, other thoughts are vaguely present, such as the indulgence of the mother towards the brother's weakness, a feeling of guilt for not having helped the brother when he separated from his wife and child, and a slight feeling of squallor and disgust that seems more general than just the brother's situation. When alone, this man's Stream of Conscious will allow all these implicit thoughts and other uncomfortable reflections to come into the central consciousness. To talk frankly with the psychotherapist encourages this elaboration and interior research.

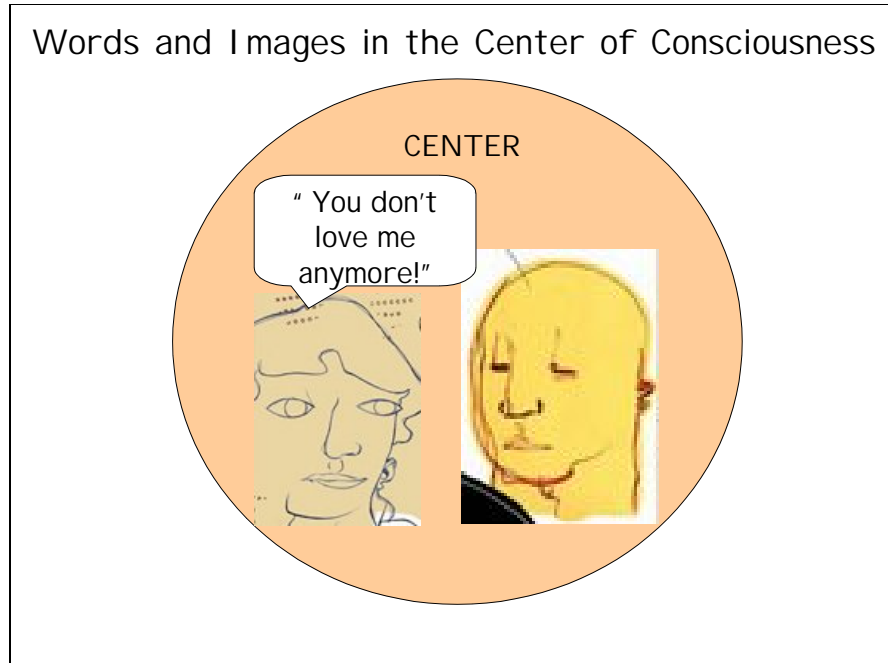
A mother is exasperated with the continuous opposition of her adolescent son. In her mind comes the repetitive phrase, said like a last gasp of breath, "My son!" This phrase of irritation and confusion often comes to mind (explicit consciousness), and at the same time, there often comes to mind **an image of the son's face at the dinner table**, when they are having their typical push and pull argument, and he looks away as if fed up with and at the same time indifferent to her pleading. A series of implicit thoughts "almost come to mind," meaning that they are still in the periphery, but come closer to explicit consciousness and even in the same order, each time the son comes to mind. To better understand this repetition "at the back of the mind," we can imagine a train departing from a station, each time with the same wagons being pulled from behind, and in the same sequence. In this case, the mother

ruminates, “Just like his father!” “I tried my best!” “Why doesn’t he help out, it would be so simple.” “Maybe he resents me for having separated from his father.” “I know he could do more. Even the teachers say he’s bright. But he’s also lazy.” Each time the sequences of the Impasse finish with a visceral feeling of, “Ooof! I feel bad. But I don’t know what to do.” And the mother has a hazy feeling of confusion.

This entire “train of thought” was present in the periphery of consciousness each time the mother had the exasperated thought, “My son!”

“You Don’t Love Me Any More!”

Let’s take a frequent example in psychotherapy. **A person is deeply disappointed with his or her partner.** Let’s imagine that it’s a woman. Her disappointment is with her husband’s absences, coldness and hard words. Like a song of anguish, her mind keeps singing and crying, “You Don’t Love Me Any More.” With these explicit and repeated words comes an image of his face, with an expression of coldness, disapproval, distance and indifference.

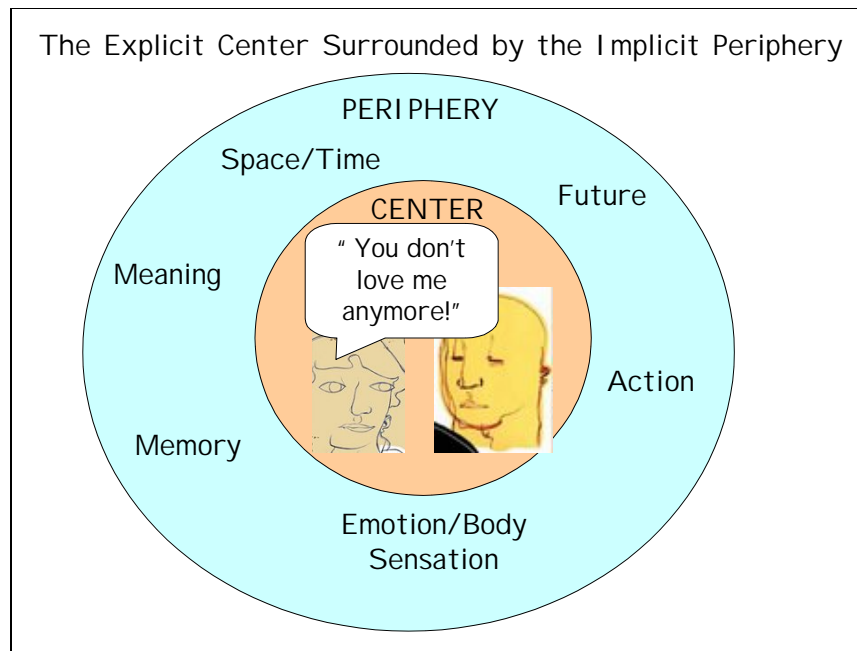


As we have already seen, this heavily charged explicit phrase and image of disapproval are surrounded by a cloud of misty thoughts that unravel themselves whenever her mind returns to the same hot point. What are the vague thoughts that are present at the very same moment that she thinks, “You don’t love me any more”? “How could you?” “Where are we?” A vague image of the telephone and his call that he will be absent that night. A sagging down feeling of the preceding years that were “all right,” but perhaps not really so. A more painful sensation like a tiny electric point between the belly and heart are connected to the simultaneous memory of their romantic beginning; there was a row boat and a warm evening when they were both surprised in their first encounter. And a vague picture of dancing later. The point is that it’s all there, in that very moment of consciousness when the disappointment and bitterness are clear and lacerating.

Of course, to experience this mass of intertwining thoughts and sensations, emotions and memories, and so on, and to hear it as well when one is a psychotherapist, can feel a bit overwhelming. But a map can give some order to what otherwise seems a hopeless morass. Let’s imagine that we have a ball of yarn all knotted up. What we wish is to pull a single red thread so that the entire ball unknots itself and is laid out before us like a pathway that’s familiar and that leads to an unknown future.

A General Map of Consciousness

We will return to the General Map of consciousness offered in the first article on the Impasse.



In summary, this design points to the several dimensions of experience that repeat themselves and that implicitly surround the explicit consciousness of every important event. The unravelling of the knotted morass of thoughts and sensations that surround an unhappy event requires the time and patience of a Helpful Listener. Otherwise the Stream of Consciousness repeats the amorphous whole with only the initial central elements returning to consciousness – the obsession -- while the emotion builds up into an insurmountable mountain.

Two Epistemological Context

In the following section, we will apply this map by offering examples of different Impasses, each one elaborated with words. In these examples there will be a verbal recounting of the words that repeat themselves in the Impasse, as well as the images and the visceral feelings. However, before offering these examples, we must present two considerations that will be more fully developed at a later point: **1. Subcortical dynamics underly these cortical experiences of lucid central and vague peripheral consciousness. (The map must get larger.)** **2. The use of verbal language**, even when integrated with nonverbal expressions of the face, voice tone and gestures, **is quite limited** in terms of conveying what actually happens is in that silent and dramatic inner world that we call the Impasse. (*We can appreciate what we don't know.*)

1. Subcortical dynamics underly these cortical experiences of lucid central and vague peripheral consciousness. This means that we must keep in the back of our mind a picture of **all of these mental cortical components floating on top of the**

subcortical unconscious. It is possible to suggest different subcortical areas — amygdala, hippocampus, basal ganglia, cingular gyrus, locus coeruleus, tegmentum and visceral nuclei – that create all together the subterranean forces which root these experiences in **neuronal-chemical circuits**, and that explain their **force and tenacity**. (See previous articles on the Impasse for this subcortical analysis.)

2. The use of verbal language is quite limited. This means that although we rely on verbal language, as well as nonverbal accompaniment (expression of the eyes, mouth, voice tone and rate, breathing, and shoulder-arm-and-hand gestures), the true contents of the Impasse during the Stream of Consciousness – an experience linked to the depths of solitude – is still not accurately represented. “Words are all that we have,” describes our situation of limited access to the actual Impasse. And although we will continue to rely on verbal and non-verbal language, we might keep in mind that **the verbal elaboration simplifies, distorts, reduces and adulterates the original experience of the Impasse**, an event which occurs in solitude and (almost entirely) without words. But this obstacle for investigation and treatment of the Impasse will be treated later.

The Dyadic Relationship “Energy” Could Make it Difficult to Access the Monadic State of Consciousness

In the article, “Three Levels of Deepening,” we clarify how the therapist can envision, during the psychotherapeutic encounter, three types of experience that can permit an investigation into deeper realms. The first is the “here and now” focus to understand how the problem is being experienced in the present moment. (The “here and now” Gestalt question) This is followed by a request to deepen memories regarding “real events”, that is, events involving other persons and situations, that provoked the problem. Often, this is sufficient for the psychotherapeutic work.

Nevertheless, there are times when the deepening can pinpoint the third dimension, “the Impasse during the Stream of Consciousness.” Therapist: “Can you try to recall what happens when you’re alone and this problem is returning to your mind?” **The difficulty is that during a Dyad experience with the therapist, the patient is being asked to access another state of consciousness, namely, the Monad experience which occurs when one is alone. This is no easy job.** To access that memory of repeated thoughts and fleeting sensations that take place when one is alone, the patient must “drop back” into the recesses of his consciousness. We are assuming that trust in the psychotherapist is complete; if not, this creates another barrier. **But even when there is complete trust, the state of Monadic consciousness is covered over by the higher energy interactions of Dyadic consciousness.** In the following examples, the patients have some degree of access to their Impasse, but one can still sense intuitively the gap between what is said and the original experience of the Impasse.

What Comes First to Consciousness?

Here we will present three dimensions that frequently come to mind, when the orientation is to remember what happens during the Impasse. The following dimensions often appear and sometimes in the following order: the verbalized thought, the visceral-emotional sensation, the image.

1. The Verbalized Thought: Therapist, “What comes to mind, when you’re feeling this problem we’ve been talking about, and you’re all alone?”...” Patient: “I’m often thinking, ‘What happened? It’s my fault!’ (The thought is contracted, abbreviated, telegraphic. But often the repeated Impasse when alone has the same characteristics.) Other frequent phrases from various patients describing their Impasse: “I can’t make it... just can’t...” “But why?! There’s no reason!” “It’s too much! Just too much.” “What can I do? Nothing! Dammit! Shit!” (Swear words are important elements of some people’s Stream of Consciousness, and it’s essential that they are said without inhibition. See Steven Pinker’s work (Pinker,) on **cursing** for a fuller appreciation of these phrases which, according to Pinker, arise from right-lower brain areas different from Broca’s and Wernicke’s left hemisphere cortical-based language.)

2. The Emotion and Visceral Body Sensation: Therapist, “Do you remember, when having those thoughts, the feeling in your body?” Different patients: “A tension in the belly.” “I couldn’t breathe.” “It felt like rage, but without any force.” “A burning sensation...in my chest.” “Like drowning, or being pulled under...”

3. The Image: Therapist, “Is there any image that flashes by your mind when you’re feeling this way?” “I see a very severe face, a scowling expression.” “Eyes that are pleading, saying, ‘Don’t go away!’” “People are laughing at me.” “It’s like a desert. Nobody is there.”

4, Non-verbal Expression of the the Hands: When the patient seems to be feeling and taken up by the psychophysical state of the remembered Impasse, the therapist can suggest another dimension of expression, namely, the non-verbal. Therapist, “Can you try to express with your hands this feeling of the Impasse?” Patient: Gives a blow of the fist into the palm of the other hand, “Boom!” This could express a war of wills between two people or a surprising and crushing event coming in from the outside. Another patient: His two hands begin twisting one another, while his mouth becomes deformed into an expression of disgust or contempt. This could express the feeling of being strangled, or of a conflict which seems inextricable.

The therapist can suggest, “Other feelings that come up when you’re feeling the Impasse?” Patient: (extending the hands, palms down) “Everything is dark, covered

up.” (Experiencing in the visual dimension the inner knot) Another patient: (hands oscillating together from side to side) “I don’t know where to go.” (confusion about a strategy of action) Another patient: (hands extended in front, palms forward, showing a wish for protection) “I’m feeling attacked!” (fear, danger) Another patient: (hands hanging down, flapping) “I feel stupid, no dignity...” (feeling of weakness and lack of self-esteem)

If we imagine packets of neurons all over the brain, we can understand the importance of getting this far for an evolution toward self awareness. At any moment, certain neuronal-chemical packets are being activated, while countless – thousands and tens of thousands – are necessarily outside of consciousness and mainly non-activated, or else partially and incompletely activated. When we are cut off from major neuronal packets, we can say that there is “scission,” “splitting,” separation of dimensions or “repression.” That is no problem if certain packets remain sleeping and inactive. But if certain packets (or modules) keep returning to consciousness everytime that there is a break from our action program or external relationships, then these split off packets do create a problem. In fact, they create the suffering of the repeated Impasse. Therefore, **just to get in touch with the experience, which is Monadic, during the Dyadic relationship, is an incredibly important first step.** We can give a psychological interpretation: **“We have to know what the problem is to begin to change it.”** Equally useful is the neurophysiological Law of D.O. Hebbian for explaining neuronal change: **“Neurons that fire together, wire together.”** The activation of these neuronal circuits will permit new wiring through the “trustmg” Dyad relationship and the therapeutic work of elaboration and re-evaluation.

Part III: The Stream of Consciousness and Language

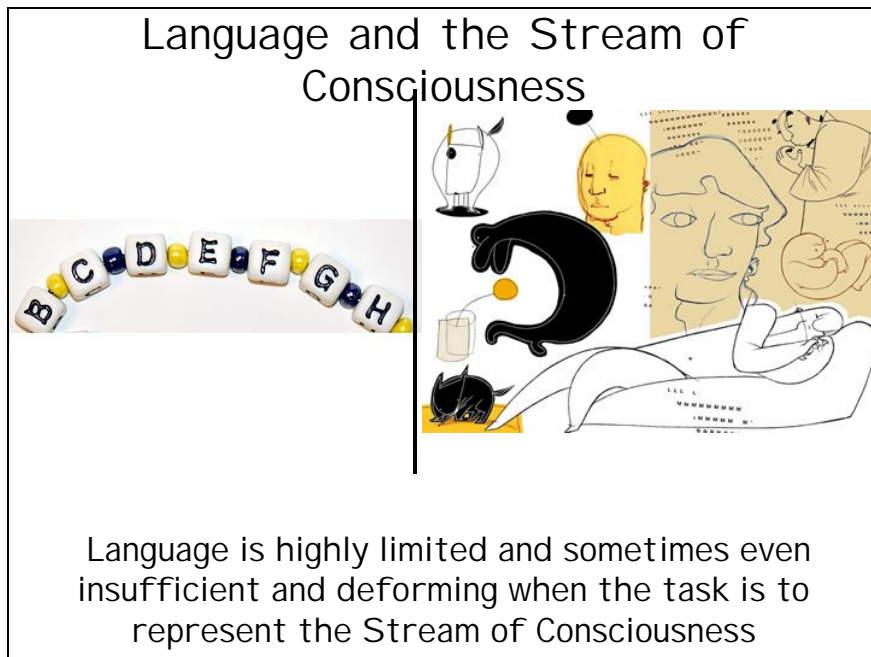
Certain Implicit Apects of the Stream of Consciousness Cannot Become Explicit, But Are Essential Elements of the Impasse

The preceding section giving examples of what a patient might say when verbally sharing his Impasse might make us optimistic. “We are getting to the heart of this invisible world.” But that is not really the case. The main part of the Stream of Conscious, yes, visible and partly visible to the Subject, has hardly been transmitted by this verbal sharing. There are **ineffable contents** of every sequence of Consciousness which constitute an Impasse: the implicit self esteem, the implicit trust or distrust of the other, the implicit sense of time and of space, the implicit meanings that create hopelessness and defeat, the “irretrievable” sensation when the basic feeling is one of “irretrievable loss,” the previous moments of similar experiences that are being re-ignited by the current hurt, the future being lived as a closed door, the subtle shame in just recounting these unhappy episodes outside of one’s self-

control. Even more **ineffable and almost indescribable are the dynamics** of intensity, form, complexity and stability or change during the several seconds, or long minutes, or eternal hours, in which the Impasse is repeating its unwelcome visit.

The Limits of Verbal Language

The structure of language is like “beads on a string.” (Pinker, 2007) When we raccount our experience of the Impasse, we are trying to remember (already a precarious task) and put into a verbal string an entire sequence of states of consciousness that have **contents and dynamics** that are unexpressed and largely unexpressible. The job is almost absurd. But, nevertheless, it is our professional task as psychotherapists. Yes, we can add **the non-verbal elements of communication**. But if we picture the neuronal net of the Dyadic state in psychotherapy, and the neuronal net of the Monadic state during the Stream of Consciousness in solitude, we can see that we are speaking of two different worlds. (See the illustration in the previous article, Impasse II) As a metaphor, to explore the Impasse in psychotherapy is like having a small lantern to explore a cloud-covered mountain.



Using designs: One help, at times, is when the therapist suggests, “Can you make a **design** of this inner state?” This gives another point of reference, a visual scheme, that will help ground the verbal string by means of a spacial framework. In fact, certain non-verbal dimensions such as sense of space, size differences between Self and Other, closeness or distance from the Other, non-verbal expressions of the figures, visceral sensations transmitted through color, and so on, can be interpreted through the design. But the single design freezes the moment in time, and so truncates the sense of a dynamic sequence. Multiple designs? Yes, if time allows.

What are the consequences? It depends upon our job. If the task is to investigate the nature of the Stream of Consciousness, we have to admit that our knowledge is very incomplete and deformed. If the task, however, is to influence the Stream of Consciousness, the outlook is not so bleak. By exploring the Stream of Consciousness with a certain **intensity** for re-living the invisible moments, **exploring and elaborating** the available memories, and **developing new perspectives** and strategies for the future, all within the context of a **trusting relationship**, then we have invoked the key elements for effective change.

Part IV: The “Stream” that Flows within Three Levels of Consciousness

We will explore the depths of consciousness by means of an example. The story is about Theresa, a thirty-six year old woman who has been dealing with frequent conflicts and difficult communication with her husband. They have two children, two girls, six and four years old. In this episode, Theresa describes an unhappy and intense fight with her husband that took place the previous evening. That night she slept very little, and felt pushed and pulled by different thoughts and anxieties regarding her marital situation.,

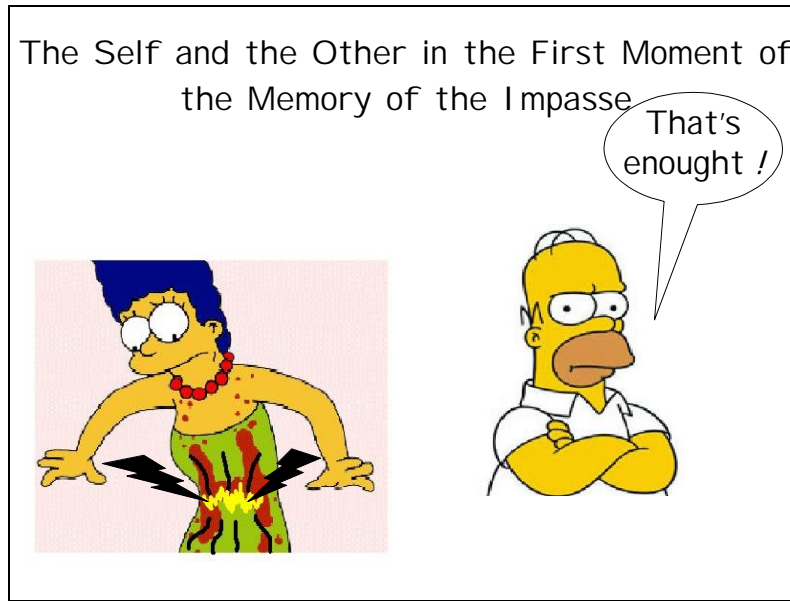
All Components of an Impasse in Seven Seconds

Theresa starts out with two **explicit** thoughts. “I’m feeling very bad right now... Last night I had a terrible fight with my husband.” These two phrases are said within seven seconds. They are like the first wagons of a train, that is, the first explicit thoughts that will be followed by other explicit thoughts. But the other thoughts, which were surging through her mind all night long, are held back, for the moment, in the periphery of consciousness.

The first thought to arise is the **image** of the husband’s face, which seems cold and critical with accusing eyes. At the same time there comes to her mind a single **word**, “Enough!”, that he had shouted out toward the end of the argument and that made her feel like an electric shock had gone through her **belly**. These three components – word, image, emotion – were more or less explicitly conscious in those first seven

seconds of the session, and Theresa was able to put them into words, one after the other.

Here is a design to portray that first moment of explicit consciousness.

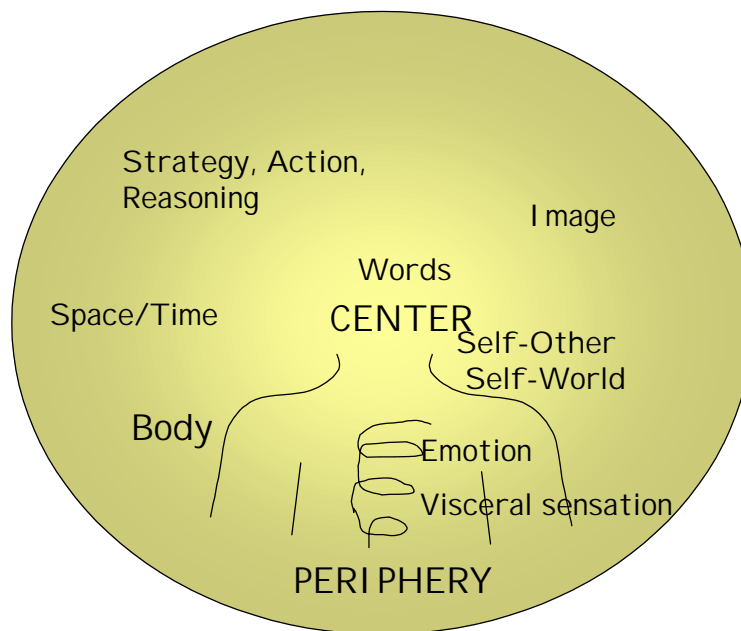


While sharing these very first explicit thoughts, the whole complex situation of Theresa's difficulties with her husband are being activated. It is like there is a memory bank, that may be called the Working Memory, and giving attention to this basic issue starts waking up various strings of thought that create her disappointment for the past and fear for the future. The morass of vague thoughts turned round and round in disorder and with repetition throughout Theresa's sleepless night. Now **explicit consciousness can allow these thought currents to emerge, one after the other, as words spell them out, giving each current definition and form.** The long sequence of train cars are pulled ahead as if each car (or phrase) comes from the peripheral consciousness, **crosses the bridge of explicit consciousness,** and then returns once again, first to the periphery and then to the memory bank. Another way to see it is to imagine unknotting a knotted up ball of string, with each strand being pulled from the morass, becoming unknotted, and then pulling out the subsequent knotted strand, until the therapeutic elaboration allows the entire ball to be unknotted and splayed out before one's eyes. There is certainly an immediate sense of relief and clarification after this therapeutic work. However, will it last? For this reason, we ask, "Have the **subcortical structures** that nourish and regulate these conscious manifestations been modified?" This basic question will be looked at in a subsequent article.

A General Design of Consciousness

Theresa will unravel other thoughts as she shares the uncertainties and anxieties that were provoked by the serious argument with her husband. But before we present this long sequence of thoughts, we can foresee the categories that are fairly universal. The following design, “A General Map of Consciousness,” shows the typical categories of thought that spontaneously run through our mind when we are facing an unhappy situation.

A General Map of Consciousness

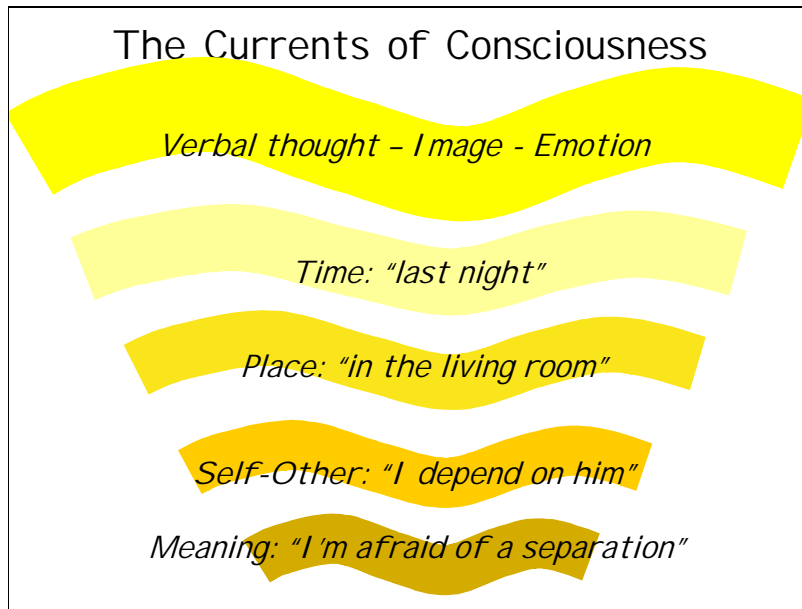


Theresa’s case already demonstrated the priority of verbal thoughts, image and body sensations (or emotions). This can be followed, in varying order, by other categories of “mental elements” that may appear to come from cortical-conscious evaluations and perceptions, but that, we must remember, are always emerging from a basic energy and prototypical form determined by subcortical circuits. Here are the universal categories: **Self-Other evaluations** (esteem, trust, closeness), **Self-World perceptions** (“Others don’t suffer the same thing,” “what will happen to my

family?”), **space-time considerations** (“it’s been going on for years”), **reasoning about responsibility and cause** (“is it my fault or his?”), **and action strategy** (“I don’t know what to do now”). The list is not exhaustive, and other categories could be added.

The Currents of Consciousness

We will imagine that these various thoughts are like currents. This means that **the Stream of Consciousness is a composite of many streams that come to the surface** and then fall back into the undercurrents. Theresa’s elaborations are now recounted:



Each of these undercurrents was “almost conscious,” that is, flowing in the **periphery** of consciousness, before emerging to the surface. But as the therapeutic session goes on, thoughts that were “further back” in the recesses of the mind, begin to surface.

The Currents of the Working Memory

Context: (Place and Self-Other): "I'm afraid that the children heard us arguing."

Self-Other evaluation: "He's always a difficult person."

Self-Self evaluation, feeling of Guilt: "Maybe I was asking him too many things."

Strategy for action: "I don't know what to do."

Memory: "Things were getting better. And now this had happened."

Metaphor: "Now I feel against a wall."

Self-Other, family: "My family doesn't understand this problem. They always think he's so narvellous."

Economics: "Even though I have a good job, a separation would create great difficulties."

Self-Other: "I know other people who are separated. Would I become depressed like them?"

These thoughts were not even in the periphery of consciousness, at the beginning of the therapeutic session, but emerged from a memory bank that is still further removed and that is called the Working Memory. Imagine that we have 50,000 thoughts that are "asleep" at this moment. These thoughts are outside of the Working Memory. Then what happens? Whenever a particular theme comes to mind with emotional importance, many neuronal circuits (i.e., thoughts) become "activated," and therefore enter the Working Memory. Then through a process of association, the various thought strands come to mind, meaning that the entire package ("modulo," or "ball of string") becomes unravelled.

We might be surprised by the number of thoughts generated by a single issue. But we are less surprised when we remember that the brain has sixty billion neurons, and that means 60 trillion connections. In practice, therefore, the "elaboration" opens up many currents that are hidden in the back of the mind and that create suffering from their accumulation when they cannot be expressed. The "relief" that comes is not only due to the **cortical components** that have been splayed out before our eyes, but also because of the **subcortical pressure of impulses** that needs to be expressed and released.

Other Images, Other Thoughts

Theresa continues to unwind her packet of accumulated inner experiences, all of which were activated in the subterranean regions of her mind when she was sleepless the preceding night. Several thoughts were preceded by a flash image. Some examples:

Thoughts Preceded by a Flash Image



Future, Self-Other: "I'm afraid that the children would suffer if I become separated from my husband."



Self Esteem: "I'd feel like a failure if the marriage doesn't succeed."



Space-Time: "The house would be empty if we separate"

The packet of thoughts continues to unravel.

Memory, Self-Other: My parents always fought. They didn't know how to make peace.

Memory, Self-Other: He grew up in an orphanage. He was always isolated, a hermit. And he always says that the family is the only thing that counts.

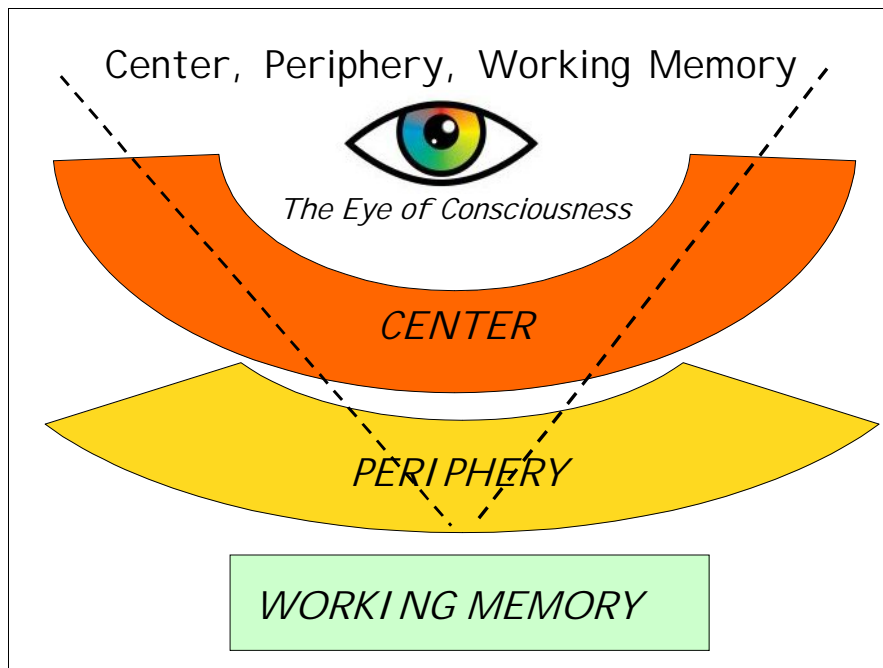
Action: I'm confused. If I say something, we begin to fight. If I don't say anything, I feel...like nothing...

When we listen to the great abundance and intensity of thoughts that come up around a deeply disturbing event, we can be impressed by the mind's fecundity in

producing such a harvest. When the precipitating event was very recent, as in this case, the elaboration can take many directions, like exploring a labyrinth that breaks off continuously into side-pathways and then returns to the main corridor. And this abundance makes it clearer **why the Impasse is so tenacious and powerful**; an underground geyser is pushing up from a deeper terrain, and the contents and force need release.

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In the following design, we give a spacial representation of **the three layers of consciousness that underly the Impasse: the central explicit, the peripheral implicit and the hidden but fecund Working Memory**. The Eye of Consciousness is depicted as fully “seeing” the center and as “seeing,” though less fully, the periphery. The Working Memory is out of view, but its neuronal-chemical circuits, activated by the theme, can also contain emotional thoughts that will eventually surface. This elaboration presupposes that there is sufficient Self-Other trust during the therapeutic session and that there is sufficient time and space.



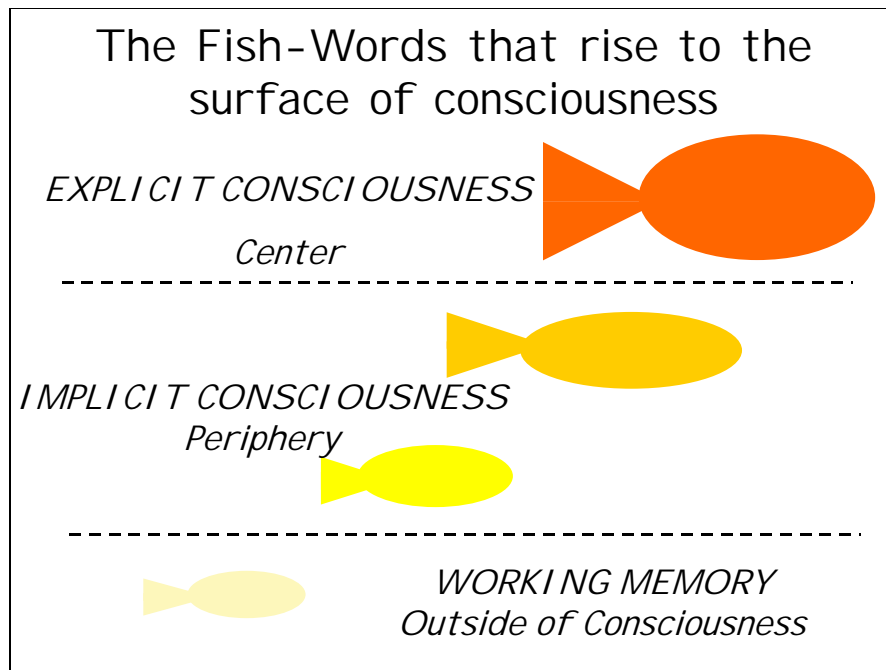
The design helps us create a more complete mental map of the Stream of Consciousness. From the point of view of “experience” (the phenomenological perspective) each thought comes to mind as a verbal string. This is experienced at the surface. The design gives a side view which reveals three levels of depth: central, peripheral and Working memory. By seeing how this System works, we have tools for **reflecting** still further on the Impasse, which is like a blocage of the currents, and on how the Stream of Consciousness can **be changed** into a moving current.

Part V: Thoughts that Enlarge

When the Implicit Thought Becomes Explicit: “It’s Like a Big Monster!”

When a thought or feeling is still in the periphery of consciousness, it is vague, wispy and impalpable. Let’s return to the metaphor of word-thoughts like fish swimming in the current. Implicit thoughts are like fish swimming in the depths of the Stream. They are small, unclear, without much color or definition. And if these fish-thoughts were still in the Working Memory, they would not be seen at all.

What happens with their “becoming conscious”? When they receive the “light” of our attention, these fish (word-thoughts) **come to the surface**. They become **larger, more clear, more well-defined and more strongly colored** to reveal their emotional charge. As one person described it, “In the night, everything becomes **gigantic!**” The entire mental space is invaded by the experience. Other dimensions of life, other considerations for our Self-Other and space-time coordinates lose power and relevance. Once the inner tempest begins, the ship of our consciousness is hurled back and forth while we search to survive in the turbulent sea of the Unconscious.



The drama unrolls and becomes more complex. Theresa starts with her initial image and thought, “I see his scowling face, and I hear, ‘Enough!’” As this fish comes to the center, a school of fish belonging to the same situation come to the surface. One by one, each fish emerges from the vague periphery into the clear light of the surface, enlarging, taking on color and definition, and then falling back into the depths. This moment of **intensification** is absolutely essential for the subcortical substrates to remain connected; otherwise, we have “intellectualizing” with deeper feelings cut off. And we can now better understand the imprisonment of prolonged isolation. When we are left stranded with our repetitions, the Impasse, **it is as if a single fish rises to the surface of awareness, a fish that seems gigantic, overwhelming and threatening, and we feel attacked by the Monster of our inner depths.**

Summary and Conclusion:

We are studying the Impasse that disturbs and blocks our Stream of Consciousness, making us unhappy and feeling trapped by our inner world. The structure of Consciousness is divided into three levels. The central part is explicit and clear. The peripheral part is vague, imprecise, barely perceptible and almost indescribable. The Working Memory is the storage house of those memories “activated” (no longer “dormant”) by the explicit and implicit components, but that are still outside of the domain of consciousness.

While we sometimes have the impression that “one thought leads to another,” and that this is all controllable by our rational intentions, such an experience is only a result of “Daytime Logic.” In contrast, “Nighttime Logic” can lead our consciousness into the unhappy Impasse of tenacious anxieties, regrets, fears and resentments. At that time the subcortical Limbic System, where emotions are dominant, is regulating our consciousness, and so we can twist and turn in bed, oppressed by the Impasse.

Words and non-verbal expression are our major instruments for elaboration during psychotherapy. Even though the Stream of Consciousness contains many other components that cannot be directly transmitted by verbal communication, the use of verbal language, when it is connected to the underlying feeling sense, can carry the work forward. The psychotherapeutic process with the “trusted Other” unblocks the Impasse by allowing the string of thought full expression. The “ball of string” becomes unwound and the emotions wind down.

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