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# Vertical Unconsciousness and New Defense Mechanisms

## Abstract

This paper explores the observed transformations in the Ego of clients in the contemporary era, connecting these changes to broader shifts in culture, the structure of modern Western society—under whose strong influence Serbia also falls—lifestyle alterations, and the prevailing value system. These cultural dynamics are examined through the conceptual frameworks of *repressive*, *narcissistic*, and *perverse cultures*. In examining changes in the Ego, the paper introduces the concept of the vertical unconscious, which differs from the traditional horizontal unconscious. While the horizontal unconscious is primarily organized around the defense mechanism of repression, the vertical unconscious is structured through mechanisms such as *splitting* and *atomization*. The paper also addresses newly emerging defense mechanisms, with particular attention to mechanisms aimed at avoiding psychic merging. A dominant defense identified in this context is *partialism*, understood as a core mechanism in the vertical unconscious. These mechanisms contribute to a state of unconscious disconnection between the conscious layers of the psyche, further complicating internal integration.

**Keywords**: vertical unconscious, defense mechanisms, ego, splitting, repression, atomization, narcissism, perversion.

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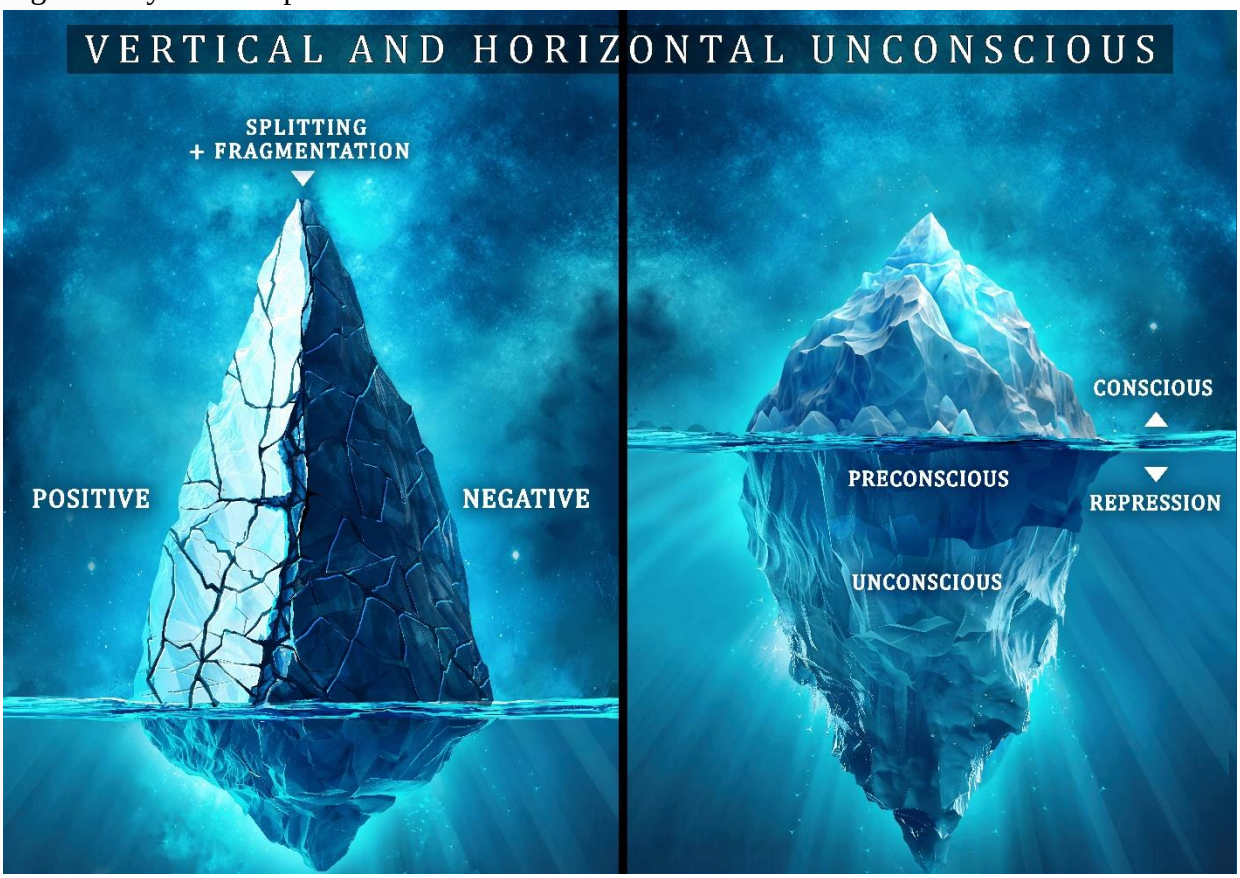
## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two types of unconscious processes, each excluded from conscious awareness through distinct types of defense mechanisms. To better differentiate between these, we introduce two terms not previously established in psychoanalytic literature: the *horizontal unconscious* and the vertical unconscious. We propose that the unconscious may be understood as comprising two dimensions: The *vertical unconscious* arises from splitting as a defense mechanism. It is marked by a polarized, black-and-white perception, where opposing aspects of the psyche alternate in awareness but are never integrated—each becoming the shadow of the other at different points in time. The horizontal unconscious is organized around repression, where undesirable aspects of the personality are "pushed into the basement" of the psyche, excluded from awareness through more mature defenses. (See Figure 1 for visual representation.) Depending on whether a client is primarily governed by splitting and other primitive defenses (such as projection, introjection, and denial), or by more mature mechanisms centered around repression (supported by intellectualization, rationalization, reaction formation, sublimation, etc.), therapeutic techniques are adjusted accordingly.

Figure 1: Symbolic representation of the vertical and horizontal unconscious.

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The  is well established in psychoanalytic literature. It presupposes that repressed contents were once conscious, but came into conflict with the conscience, the Superego, or the Self, thereby provoking anxiety due to their perceived unacceptability. As a result, they were expelled from the "stage" of awareness into the basement of the unconscious. To prevent their return, "guards" were placed—forms of Ego censorship—defense mechanisms that support the process of repression. These include intellectualization, rationalization, reaction formation, sublimation, and other so-called mature defense mechanisms. The horizontal unconscious forms the basis of what is traditionally termed *neurotic conflict*—an ongoing inner struggle between the Superego and the Id, between repressed desires, needs, and emotions seeking expression and satisfaction, and the conscience or fear of external consequences. This conflict often manifests as ambivalent, contradictory emotions toward people or activities to which these needs are directed—a phenomenon referred to as the *conflict of ambivalence*. Individuals may experience ambivalence toward love objects such as parents, partners, children, work, success, or even the psychotherapist from whom they seek relief. This ambivalence extends to nearly all aspects of emotional life. In the therapeutic setting, such dynamics are expressed through resistance to the therapeutic process (the simultaneous desire and refusal to engage), as well as through fluctuations in transference—ranging from idealization to frustration and hostility. In *transference neurosis*, this is often accompanied by intense preoccupation with the therapist's personality, and disappointment or anger when transference needs remain unmet. The therapeutic aim, in this context, is to foster *emotional competence*, which we define as the capacity for *tolerance of ambivalence*.(Jovanović, 2013).

After briefly outlining the concept of the horizontal unconscious, the focus of the paper now shifts to the vertical unconscious and the mechanisms underlying it, which we believe remain insufficiently explored in existing literature. Clinical experience—our own and that of many colleagues—suggests the emergence of characteristic shifts in the organization of the Ego in the contemporary era. These shifts may be understood through the lens of the vertical unconscious and a weakening of the Ego's synthetic function. These developments will be examined in a broader socio-cultural context, interpreted through the framework of repressive, narcissistic, and perverse cultures. These cultural dynamics, and their impact on psychic structure, will be explored in detail in the second part of this paper.

## 2. Defense Mechanisms of the Vertical Unconscious

Unlike the horizontal unconscious, where the primary defense against anxiety focuses on repressing contents deemed inappropriate by the Superego, the vertical unconscious functions differently. In this case, the person defends against forming connections between conscious contents in order to avoid experiencing anxiety related to ambivalence, contradiction, and the complexity of perceiving and experiencing an object. The individual thus protects themselves from engaging in deeper and more realistic connections with people, work, and even the links between thoughts and phenomena, essentially rejecting complexity and thoughtful reflection. These internal processes can be described using different terms— (the reluctance or inability to

These internal processes can be described using different terms—*disconnecting* (the reluctance or inability to form connections and think) and *atomization* (the fragmentation of connections that once existed within the mind). These processes are separated because we believe they represent distinct phenomena. *Splitting* is an active defense mechanism that involves avoiding ambivalence by severing connections and separating the positive and negative aspects of an object within consciousness. This process reduces complexity into simplified opposites and introduces vertical partitions between them, creating the illusion in the mind that these opposites do not belong to the same entity. *Disconnecting*, by contrast, refers to the mind's tendency to avoid thinking or failing to connect phenomena that are, in reality, interrelated.

Kernberg (1967) provides a detailed account of primitive defense mechanisms and makes a clear distinction between repression and splitting. According to his theory, splitting is the developmental precursor to repression and continues to operate pathologically in individuals who are fixated at the pre-Oedipal stage. As a result, they are unable to form coherent relationships with objects or establish constancy. Kernberg identifies two general levels of Ego organization: one related to the pre-Oedipal stage (vertical unconscious) and the other associated with Oedipal pathology (horizontal unconscious). At the pre-Oedipal level, splitting functions as the primary defense mechanism, supported by denial, primitive idealization, primitive devaluation, and projective identification.

These primitive mechanisms related to splitting have been well-established in the literature, and their role is clearly understood. They facilitate splitting by projecting aspects of the self onto others, introjecting parts of others into the self, or denying the existence of certain aspects of oneself or others. These mechanisms prevent the coexistence of opposites in consciousness and avoid the unbearable conflict of ambivalence. Over time, these mechanisms can evolve into more mature defense mechanisms as they develop into higher levels.

For instance, *primitive denial*, as defined by Kernberg (1967), refers to the tendency of patients to negate the emotional significance of an aspect of consciousness that contradicts their current experience. The patient is aware that, at certain moments, their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about themselves or others are in complete opposition to those they have had at other times. However, these conflicting memories hold no emotional significance for the patient and cannot influence their present emotional state. Kernberg (1967) emphasizes that "primitive denial implies that emotions experienced at one moment are denied at another." He further argues that a more advanced form of denial, which he calls "negation," involves denying the emotional significance of something that was never even present in consciousness. It is as though that emotion or content is "pushed into the basement" of the horizontal unconscious. In this way, the more primitive form of denial facilitates splitting, while the more advanced form leads toward repression.

Melanie Klein (Klein, 1934, as cited in Segal, 1973) made a crucial reformulation of the concept of defense mechanisms. She argued that defense mechanisms not only protect the ego from

overwhelming emotions but also serve as the organizational principle of the child's mental life (Lerner, 1998). The child's mind operates by clearly distinguishing between pleasant and unpleasant experiences (Grala, 1980) related to objects, categorizing them into separate "folders" (the "good" and "bad" objects). According to Kernberg (1967), splitting is an inevitable tool by which the child's ego separates pleasant from unpleasant experiences. However, the question arises whether it is accurate to apply the term "splitting" to this early state of the mind. At this stage, the mind simply separates pleasant and unpleasant experiences, which is not yet a defense mechanism. It is more an instinctual tendency of disconnection. It is only when the ability to perceive the whole object develops and the ambivalent feelings that contradictory representations of the object provoke emerge that the unconscious tendency to split them again can be considered a defense mechanism, known as splitting.

Freud (1915) already discussed "different latent mental processes that enjoy a high degree of mutual independence, as if they have no connection with one another and do not know anything about each other." He further suggested that "we must be prepared, if this is the case, to assume the existence within us of not only another consciousness but also a third, a fourth, perhaps an unlimited number of states of consciousness, which are unknown to us and to one another." These statements, while intriguing, appear confusing and contradictory upon closer scrutiny. When Freud refers to "latent mental processes" that "know nothing about each other," he seems to imply *fragmentation within the unconscious*, or what we might call "compartmentalization." But how can these different latent processes remain unaware of each other if no vertical barriers exist within the unconscious? An additional puzzle arises when Freud speaks of "states of consciousness" that are "unknown to each other." Firstly, a "state of consciousness" is, by definition, not the same as a "latent mental process," yet Freud appears to use the two terms interchangeably. Moreover, it remains unclear where such a "state of consciousness" resides when it is "unknown" to us. Can a state of consciousness exist at an unconscious level and still be called a "state of consciousness"? The concept of the *vertical unconscious* provides a potential answer to these questions. It seeks to explain the mechanisms responsible for creating and maintaining this fragmentation of consciousness, in which unconscious connections between phenomena—otherwise perceived at different times—appear only in isolated "mental spaces." How do these different mental processes remain hidden from one another, and why do they fail to connect into meaningful wholes? This central question is the focus of this paper.

In attempting to answer this question, we aim to present a mechanism that is not active, regressive splitting, but rather the prevention of connection. The ***mechanism of avoiding connection*** is an unconscious tendency to avoid linking qualities, representations of another person, oneself, work, or avoiding a more complex picture of anything—what we consider a specific defense mechanism against potential ambivalence or overwhelm. The defense is set up in advance, as the mind's reluctance to connect, similar to the non-valence of chemical elements. We will call this mechanism ***partialization*** (or atomization)—the tendency not to connect. It is important to distinguish the mechanism of splitting something that was previously connected

from partialization, which is the unwillingness to connect, "coupling" information. Partialization can be a more permanent feature of one's thinking or a fragmented state of mind. Maintaining this fragmented state is supported by other defense mechanisms, as defense mechanisms "work as a team," which we assume have arisen or become more frequent as a result of changes in the organization of everyday life in the modern era.

### 2.1. Auxiliary defense mechanisms organized around partialization

The task of these mechanisms is to maintain and support disconnection in thinking and relationships. They typically achieve this by influencing attention, diverting it from the whole to a greater number of disconnected fragments:

" *Scrolling* " (Flowing), "mental promiscuity": Herdi (2023) defines "flowing" as "a modern defense mechanism of a neurotic level involving unconscious engagement with social media applications, quickly scrolling through content without conscious attention, with the goal of temporarily alleviating mental stress." This could also be described as scrolling through connections, tasks, and various superficial content on social media—a form of mental promiscuity. The pursuit of likes, followers, and engaging with unknown individuals satisfies narcissistic needs without genuine object-relatedness. Similarly, a tendency to remain constantly engaged in social interactions or superficial relationships can be seen as mental promiscuity. It resembles "mental bulimia," where the mind is constantly filled without processing, leading to "chronic emotional hunger."

*"The Mechanism of Superficiality*" A little bit of everything, but nothing enough." This mechanism involves engaging with relationships or activities only until ambivalence arises. When ambivalence appears, the person shifts to another object or topic, avoiding deeper connection.

Superficiality is one of the typical defense mechanisms against the ambivalence often experienced during adolescence. It is surprising that superficiality is not commonly listed in traditional defense mechanism literature. Essentially, superficiality represents the fragmentation of relationships into small pieces, which is distinct from the splitting of good and bad, love and hate. This results in the release of tension through "a large number of small holes" across multiple channels, none of which are significant enough to create strong emotional connections. The strategy is "a little bit of everything, but nothing enough." The individual avoids attaching to any single object or activity and does not develop the intensity of attachment that would evoke strong emotions of love and hate, thus sidestepping the conflict of ambivalence (and the need to develop tolerance for it). A younger child cannot practice this, as they are dependent and have fewer ways to release tension. Adolescents, on the other hand, have more relational outlets and often choose superficiality to avoid the internal conflict of ambivalence. Where there is no strong attachment to a person or activity, there is no strong ambivalence.

We believe that the abuse of the mechanism of superficiality is one of the key reasons why many adolescents struggle to develop the ability to tolerate ambivalence. The development of this ability is a continuous process; it does not end in early childhood with the establishment of object constancy but, much like object constancy, continues throughout life (Jovanović, 2013). One possible consequence of failing to develop this competence is that, when faced with "serious matters" such as choosing a profession, university, job, long-term relationships, marriage, or having children, many adolescents experience panic attacks—or even entirely deny the need for development. Further personal growth requires the ability to tolerate frustration and the ambivalent emotions that this frustration brings.

*Mechanism of Not Thinking:* This mechanism is frequently used by adolescents. "Not thinking" is distinct from repression. The individual is aware of both sides of their ambivalent feelings, but when conflict arises, they resolve the issue by diverting their attention to a third area using the "distraction mechanism," which serves as an auxiliary to the "not thinking" mechanism.

*Distraction mechanism:* This often involves activities such as staring at a computer, listening to music, or watching television—with the hope that "things will resolve themselves." Unlike repression, where certain thoughts and emotions are pushed into the unconscious, in "not thinking," they remain conscious. One side of the ambivalence is not devalued ("I don't care about that... school doesn't matter..."), nor is it denied ("there is no problem"), but when a decision needs to be made, the person avoids thinking about it. The mind redirects itself to something else to sidestep the discomfort of the conflict. This is often expressed through statements like, "Oh, forget it, I can't think about that right now..." which tend to surface when something needs to be done. The feeling of ambivalence creates discomfort and tension, which demands resolution. It is easier to defend oneself through superficiality and "not thinking" (as long as there are no immediate, more unpleasant consequences).

*Activism:* This defense mechanism leads the individual to prioritize energetic action over employing practical strategies to solve problems. They engage in a flurry of activities, often avoiding what is truly needed (such as studying or preparing for an exam). Instead, a range of urgent, yet irrelevant, tasks suddenly appears—tasks that require minimal cognitive effort. The person seems very active and busy, as though preparing to address a problem or task, but these actions serve only to distract from the actual solution, creating the illusion of productivity.

*Building Self-Object, Partial Relationships:* The promiscuous mind views the object (whether it be a person, work, or anything emotionally invested in) as a tool to fulfill personal needs—an extension of one's desires. Objectless relationships form, where the object is treated as a mere instrument. It's akin to a transactional relationship: you take what you need when you need it, but you don't truly connect with the object as a person. This dynamic is also observed in psychotherapy, where a new type of countertransference emerges in therapists: feeling needed but insignificant, much like prostitutes. In this scenario, the client's interest in the therapist's personality is minimal. The focus is solely on the therapist's role and the function they serve,

with no classic transference neurosis or obsession. Similar dynamics occur when clients discuss their relationships—everyone feels like they're being used for a specific function, needed in a limited capacity but dismissed as individuals.

*Hyperfocusing:* Concentrating on a fragment of something without the intention of seeing the whole or understanding the broader context. This leads to polarized thinking, a "narrow vision," and intense emotions that accompany polarization, resulting in an incomplete perception. Such emotions often become mistaken for the truth, as they are supported by the following mechanism:

*Emotionalization of Thinking:* The belief that truth is equated with personal feelings—this serves as a defense against complexity, reasoning, and connection. Emotions are rationalized as "honesty" or "spontaneity," which masks impulsive reactions born from thoughtlessness and narrow, partial perspectives. Intense feelings replace logical arguments, knowledge, and reasoning as the standard of truth.

Bion (1962) argued that emotions must undergo a transformation to become part of thinking. Initially, emotions serve as raw material for thought and dreaming. In the second stage, after achieving object constancy, emotions can manifest as knowledge, providing tools for further thought development and personal growth. Affects, in their informative role, signal inconsistencies (e.g., between past and present states, or between desired and current realities) and indicate whether something aligns or conflicts. When this inconsistency exceeds a certain threshold, Principle B is activated, diminishing or eliminating the emotional signal ("I can't see it, hear it, feel it..."). The emotionalization of thinking is the belief that raw emotions validate the truth of something. Many people develop this mindset along with what we call "neurotic pride"—taking pride in thoughtlessness and emotional reactions, seeing them as indicators of "authenticity" and "honesty." As the saying goes, "What the wise man is ashamed of, the fool takes pride in."

*Devaluation of Logic:* Logic provides connections between phenomena, but these connections are often avoided due to ambivalence. Logic relies on rules, and rules are generalizations. Generalizations are rejected as they limit personal experience and the satisfaction of needs—particularly when those needs are partial, contradictory, or disconnected from the need for healthy relationships with others. The mantra of "living in the moment" embodies this, representing the partialization of time: "I live for now, for this moment, and will deal with the consequences later."

*Avoidance of Generalizations:* Similar to the behavior seen in some autistic children, this involves "brain-breaking" attempts to understand the underlying principles or patterns behind individual events, thoughts, or ideas. It results in speaking without a clear purpose. Recounting events or experiences without the mental effort to identify the underlying regularities or messages leads to vague communication—essentially, "what did the author mean to say?"

Speech becomes disconnected and meaningless, offering no clear message. This is an expression of a fragmented, unconnected mind.

### 2.2. Substitutes for thinking - defensive mechanisms against thinking

If the function of thinking—meant to facilitate understanding and adaptation to reality—is threatened, it must be substituted with something that resembles mature, complex thinking but lacks its depth. This creates an orientation without true understanding. As a result, defensive pseudo-thinking develops: childish and immature, a refusal to grow up and "think for oneself." Defense mechanisms, in this context, serve to delay maturation, preventing separation and individuation. A ban on thinking is essentially a ban on growing up, on developing independence in reasoning. Thinking for oneself becomes undesirable for those seeking to maintain control over another person's submission. The prevalence of certain defense mechanisms in different epochs is socially conditioned and is perpetuated through "agents of socialization"—family, school, media, and so on.

*Mainstream "Thinking":* This is the replacement of reflective, integrated principles with uncritically adopted "swallowed" introjects. Functioning in the adult world requires principles, attitudes, general beliefs, and ideas. The absence of thoughtful, tested generalizations is replaced with superficial, unquestioned ones, adopted without critical examination, and internalized to conform to the reference group one wishes to belong to, avoiding rejection or sanction. The previously described defensive mechanisms create a foundation for such thinking. In the fear of rejection and due to a lack of trust in their own reflective thoughts, individuals defend mainstream ideas as if they were sacred truths, memorizing predetermined arguments to support them. Debate becomes intolerable because it threatens the firmness of beliefs that substitute for actual thinking. Those who do not share the "officially accepted" opinion are excluded, a phenomenon now known as "cancel culture."

*Cancel Culture:* This term refers to a cultural phenomenon where an individual deemed "politically incorrect" or who acts or speaks in an unacceptable way is ostracized, boycotted, avoided, fired, or attacked, often with the assistance of social media (Bromwich 2018). This exclusion, or "cancellation," can extend across both social and professional circles, whether on social media or in real life, and typically involves public figures.

*Conformism, Mannerism, and Following Success Trends:* Rather than developing generalizations through reflection, mannerism replaces principles and the ethics derived from them. It presents itself as sincere behavior but is, in reality, mere imitation. Mannerisms are not based on consciously evaluated values or authentic connections, but on swallowed introjects and behaviors that create the illusion of communication, connection, adaptation, and thinking. For example, "give me a hug" becomes a manneristic gesture lacking real emotional connection; manneristic speech becomes a collection of empty phrases, clichés, and formulaic expressions.

In order for these  to be maintained, certain “counter-skills”, , are required:

*Unfinished Thoughts and Sentences, Themes:* When a conclusion that doesn’t align with one’s desires is anticipated or when thinking is required, an inability arises to “hold the thread”—to stay focused on the topic or to continue the conversation. This defensive habit leads to frequent shifts in thought and conversation, resulting in discussions “about everything and anything,” losing track of the point, failing to draw conclusions, and fragmented speech. Ideas or thoughts are not followed through; consequences are not considered, and ideas are not connected to one another, nor to opposing thoughts. The result is a confused, disconnected mind, filled with firmly introjected beliefs that remain unexamined and internally unrelated.

*Blurring and Exclusion:* This occurs when the world is seen as if through fog—there’s no effort to clarify, truly understand, or make something “crystal clear.” The satisfaction comes from simply making something “discernible.” Blurring is facilitated by being poorly or insufficiently informed. It’s a form of avoidance, an absence. One may be physically present but mentally detached, like a bored student in class. As Bajaga describes: "Ba ba bam bam bam, I don’t want to know anything." It’s akin to isolating oneself from a problem, similar to falling asleep under stress. Exclusion refers to being “here” without fully noticing, not registering what is happening. This detachment is often accompanied by a relaxation of the eye muscles, causing blurred vision. When someone has detached themselves through blurring, it can feel as though they are looking through you, rather than at you.

*Labeling:* This involves giving an epithet in place of true mentalization. When asked why someone is acting a certain way, the response is often reduced to a label: "Because they’re an idiot..." The epithet is treated as an explanation, much like the **argumentum ad hominem** fallacy. There is no attempt to psychologically analyze or understand the underlying motivations behind someone's actions. The epithet is accepted as sufficient explanation, masquerading as thought, opinion, or assessment.

*Repetitive Interpretations:* A phenomenon may be noticed, but instead of genuine analysis, repetitive interpretations or opinions are parroted, often those propagated by the media. There is no willingness to question or engage with these interpretations. The person clings to them “like a drunk to a fence,” absorbing others’ thoughts without processing or critically examining them. These introjected ideas are unchallenged, swallowed without reflection or independent thought.

Our understanding of defense mechanisms against thinking can be linked to the cognitive distortions described by Aaron Beck (1972). These distortions—automatic thoughts and habitual thinking—often manifest as a defense mechanism against deeper reflection on specific topics. Below, we will list some cognitive distortions Beck mentioned to illustrate how they break the rules of logic, helping to avoid engaging in deeper reflection.

*Jumping to conclusions:* Instead of drawing logical conclusions based on real evidence, individuals immediately focus on a conclusion (often negative) and then seek out evidence to support it, disregarding any contradictory information. Those who jump to conclusions often believe they are "mind readers" (assuming they know others' true intentions without asking) and "predict the future" (thinking they can foresee how things will unfold and that their predictions will come true).

*Focusing on the negative:* Individuals who engage in this distortion overgeneralize the negative and neglect the positive. They tend to filter their thoughts through a "mental filter," so rather than noticing the many positive aspects of their surroundings, they concentrate only on the one negative thing.

*Overgeneralization*: Negative conclusions are applied to events that are not directly related to the original situation being evaluated. People make sweeping generalizations based on a small sample of experiences, drawing broad conclusions from limited evidence. These excessive, hasty generalizations often replace conclusions that would be formed through deeper thinking and identifying patterns or relationships among phenomena (Beck, 1972).

## 3. Social Influences on the Formation of Vertical Unconscious

In this part of the paper, we will focus on the societal changes that have led to typical shifts in the organization of the Ego and Super Ego, and how these shifts have contributed to the formation of certain prevalent character structures as adaptations to unhealthy social conditions.

### 3.1. Repressive Culture and Neurosis

Repressive culture was defined by overly strict moral norms that clashed with fundamental aspects of human nature—particularly the drive to satisfy sexual and aggressive impulses. Within this cultural framework, the needs of the Id (the instinctual part of the personality) were in constant conflict with the Super Ego (the internalized moral authority or conscience). The Ego, positioned in the middle as the mediator, struggled to reconcile these opposing forces. When the Ego was unable to effectively manage this internal conflict—due to the intensity of the demands or the weakening of its defense mechanisms—psychological symptoms would arise. This internal tension was expressed through neurosis. In essence, neurotic individuals were those who internalized the dominant social norms and repressed the parts of themselves that were incompatible with those norms into the unconscious (Freud, 1938; Fromm, 1955; Reich, 1946).

However, as the constraints of repressive culture loosened over time, this did not lead to the anticipated psychological liberation or the development of more mature, integrated personalities. Quite the opposite: it appears that these cultural changes fostered regression to lower levels of psychological development, contributing to the emergence of narcissistic, perverse, and psychotic cultural patterns.

### 3.2. Narcissistic Culture and Narcissistic Pathologies

Later, Lasch (1991) and other authors expanded upon the mechanisms underlying narcissistic culture. Lasch sought to link the dominance of modern capitalism with the rise of consumer culture and the accompanying consumerist mindset, which fostered the development of a *narcissistic personality structure*. This structure, which perceives individuals as fragile and easily damaged, contributes to phenomena such as the fear of attachment and long-term commitments (including religious ones), the fear of aging (seen in the "youth cult" of the 1960s and 1970s), and an excessive fascination with fame and celebrity (initially cultivated through the film industry and later reinforced by television).

The narcissistic individual becomes a perfect consumer—of things they do not genuinely need but desire in response to vanity and narcissistic cravings. The aim of social influence becomes the shaping of a vain, seduced individual, a willing buyer of images, brands, and all the symbolic markers of worth associated with the narcissistic personality. In this context, the consumer becomes complicit in their own manipulation, eagerly purchasing anything marketed as a measure of their value.

In psychotherapeutic literature, extensive theory and methodology have been developed for working with the narcissistic dimension of the personality—including concepts such as narcissistic transference and self-object transference. Whereas neurotics typically struggle with guilt, narcissists are marked by "narcissistic injuries": wounds to their self-worth, heightened sensitivity to shame (especially when their grandiose self-image is threatened), and pervasive feelings of inner emptiness. For the narcissistic personality, "image," "marketing," and "branding" become central psychological activities. What matters most is not who they are, but how they appear—how they are perceived. Yet, paradoxically, they still strive to present themselves as aligned with certain dominant moral ideals. But what about contemporary society? What type of personality structure is now encouraged through the primary agents of socialization—family, school, peer groups, media, and social networks? Increasingly, many authors suggest that narcissistic culture is giving way to a perverse culture.

### 3.3. Perverse Culture

Narcissism and individualism of the late 20th century, through the valorization of selfishness, greed, material gain, and exploitation, paved the way for the development of a perverse mode of functioning, primarily by “turning a blind eye” to various forms of social and moral deviation (Hoggett, 1992). In everyday discourse, the term *perversion* is often narrowly associated with sexual deviation or sexualized practices that fall outside the dominant norms of a given society. Historically, many such practices were classified as “perverse,” although some have since been redefined as normative or removed from diagnostic or moral classifications altogether.

In their book *The Age of Perversion: Desire and Technology in Psychoanalysis and Culture* (2016), Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco broaden the concept of perversion, placing it within a wider social and cultural framework. The authors open the book by offering an overview of contemporary forms of perversion, emphasizing how they relate not only to individual psychopathologies or mental illness, but to broader social dynamics that shape modern identity, desire, and interpersonal relations.

Susan Long (2002) expands the scope of investigation to problematic organizational dynamics within corporations and institutions, initially conceptualized through neurotic and psychotic processes. This approach promotes the idea of treating organizations as patients requiring treatment. In other words, organizations were viewed within psychotherapeutic frameworks (Bion, 1970), which led to the pathologization of the organizations themselves, people at work, and their group dynamics. The concept of "perversion" challenges this perspective, as it is not easily understood as a disease but rather as a form of corruption involving power dynamics and social relationships with malicious intent.

Long suggests that perversion compels us to think about how people unconsciously connect with one another. This leads to an exploration of how individuals relate to each other and how their beliefs form collective meaning. This has been called the supreme principle of community (social law), where the main dynamic is understood as the principle of action for society as a

whole. There is no suggestion that every, or even most, individuals personally exhibit this dynamic in its clinical sense. Instead, it is proposed that society functions systemically based on this identified dynamic, which then influences individuals and shapes their behavior. A narcissistic society fosters the development of an increasingly perverse society by "turning a blind eye" to injustice, corruption, and exploitation, creating perverse structures by seeking (unconscious) accomplices in corrupt behavior. Perversity differs from the self-love/self-interest of narcissistic dynamics, which remain within the law or at least acknowledge it and attempt to stay within its boundaries. Moreover, (secondary) narcissists crave the love and recognition of others. However, the perverse position exploits others in a much more detached or even cold manner. It carries an exploitative attitude, viewing others primarily as accomplices in achieving exploitation.

In Freudian psychoanalysis (Freud, 1938), perversion is understood as a deviation from the normal goal of adult sexuality. Perverse forms of sexuality are seen as fixations at an earlier stage of sexual development (where an adult exhibits childlike forms of sexuality). The sexual instinct is present, but the object toward which it is directed is inappropriate or immature. For example, in fetishism (specific objects or body parts such as shoes or feet are particularly arousing), sadomasochism, or the sexual abuse of children, there is a clear sexual impulse, but the object is inappropriate, as is the manner of relating to the object (e.g., sadomasochistic or exploitative behavior).

One of the key traits of the perverse mind is the *denial of reality*—an obstinate refusal to accept what is right and true. The individual is aware that something is wrong but simultaneously convinced that what is wrong is, in fact, acceptable. This belief is held with rigid certainty. For example, a sadist knows that torturing another person is wrong, but they convince themselves that it is acceptable, viewing the victim as a mere tool to satisfy their desires. They deny the moral wrongness of their actions and stubbornly pursue their needs. Furthermore, they actively seek *to create an environment that supports their perversity*. Reality TV shows exemplify this, where perverse behaviors are normalized as a way to be "interesting" or "shocking" in order to boost viewership and publicity.

Freud (1938) analyzed this dynamic as stemming from the splitting of the ego, where the person simultaneously holds two contradictory beliefs—one of acceptance and one of rejection. This psychological splitting occurs as a defense against the fear of uncertainty or "ignorance." Freud's analysis of fetishism, which he regarded as a prototype of perverse dynamics, highlights the child's attachment to the fetish as a substitute for the mother's penis—something they refuse to let go of despite clear evidence to the contrary. To abandon this belief would mean admitting that the child was wrong in their early understanding of sexuality. This dynamic works as follows:

- *Denial* of the possibility of castration.

- *Retention of the fantasy* of a phallic mother, with the fetish acting as a replacement for the missing phallus.

The crucial aspect here is the refusal to accept the position of "not knowing." The fetishist's rejection of sexual differentiation means they also deny the truth that their early childhood theory of sexuality—where both mother and father were believed to have a penis—was incorrect. This refusal to acknowledge their earlier misunderstanding seems intolerable to the child, who clings to false knowledge in the face of an uncomfortable truth. The fear of being in a state of unknowing is so overwhelming that the child holds onto this mistaken belief. This avoidance of acknowledging ignorance stems from a deep-seated fear of powerlessness and immaturity. If this fear of unknowing persists, it can lead to a rigid and perverse certainty about the world.

This certainty is often validated by others, and thus, an accomplice becomes necessary or is created. The accomplice is viewed as an extension of the self—someone who aids in confirming the perverse belief. For instance, a sadist requires a victim. This dynamic of "not knowing" versus "rigid certainty" extends beyond the individual to larger social structures, such as media or organizations. The media, for instance, knows that it is promoting content that undermines human dignity and perpetuates perversity, yet it continues to portray it as acceptable. This is because such content generates viewership and profits. The more perverse the content, the more attention it attracts, demonstrating the perverse logic at work in broader societal contexts.

Hinshelwood (1991), in his dictionary of "Kleinian" thinking, suggests that Kleinians "tend to view all perversions as manifestations of the death drive—impulses that distort sexuality." A significant debate in describing perversion is whether the perverse position is merely destructive, corrupt, and criminal, or if it can also be creative. Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984) argues that perversion operates within a cycle of both destruction and creativity, with a central element being the challenge to the laws of nature and society. In this context, every boundary must be transgressed by the perverse, including generational ones. Unable to cope with feelings of inferiority toward the father during the phallic stage, and recognizing their sexual immaturity and inability to fulfill the mother's desire, the child, relying on denial as their primary defense, devalues everything associated with paternal order, authority, and values. In doing so, they construct their own illusory "new normal" world. "My hypothesis," says Chasseguet-Smirgel, "is that perversion represents the reconstruction of chaos, from which a new type of reality emerges—the anal universe. This replaces the psychosexual genital dimension, the domain of the father."

Phillip Rieff (1996) makes a similar argument, claiming that at a certain turning point, culture can no longer sustain a stable range of moral demands. Its authority weakens—less is required, and more is permitted. Spectacle then becomes a functional substitute for values and for what is sacred. Mass regressions occur, with large portions of the population reverting to levels of destructive aggression historically accessible to them. The individual psychic defense of denial,

paired with a desire for security, seems to underpin the dismantling of boundaries. The perverse state of mind thrives in uncertainty because, in this state, nothing holds importance, and anything can pass—it is permitted. Chasseguet-Smirgel and Rieff (1984, 1996) both acknowledge the role this position plays in processes of cataclysmic social change, even while recognizing its deep personal destructiveness.

### 3.4. Differences between neurotic, psychotic, and perverse states of mind

Psychoanalysis has explored the connection between the mind and two mental principles—the pleasure principle (the "primary principle") and the reality principle (the "secondary principle"). The main forms of psychic organization are viewed through the lens of their relationship to pleasure and reality (Freud, 1924). A neurotic/normal position primarily uses repression. Reality is distorted because its parts are unbearable, and when repressed thoughts threaten to become conscious, defense mechanisms are employed. These mechanisms act to distort reality. The relationship to reality is adaptable, and when a neurotic reaches normalcy (i.e., when the neurotic becomes more capable of thinking their thoughts, rather than turning unwanted thoughts into symbolic symptoms), their relationship to reality can be based on non-defensive experience.

The psychotic position involves a severe splitting of both reality and the ego, as a large part of reality is hated and rejected. Libido is turned inward, and thinking is disconnected from reality. It is dominated by fantasy. For Bion (1961), in this position, destructiveness is directed towards the relationship with reality, and as a result, thinking and connection are destroyed because thinking is the transformation of experience in a real but frustrating environment. The psychotic position is narcissistic, and the connection with others is interrupted and severed. In the psychotic position, the mechanisms of fragmentation of thought are evident, characteristic of what we initially called the vertical unconscious.

How, then, can we define perversity? Like the psychotic position, the ego in perversity is split. However, the relationship to reality is more ambivalent. Similar to repression, the defense of denial of reality involves some recognition of reality before it is rejected. Unlike repression, in the perverse structure, the recognition of reality coexists with its denial, even in conscious fantasy. This is a characteristic feature of the "vertical unconscious"—an unconscious refusal to connect conscious phenomena. The negation of logical principles, as Freud (1938) analyzed through the dynamics of fetishism, is achieved by splitting the ego so that contradictory beliefs, both "yes" and "no," are held simultaneously.

Although developmental stagnation and psychoneurotic defense are central to the emergence of a perverse state of mind—placing it within the framework of mental health issues—there are also important social dimensions to consider. These include characteristics related to corruption, aggression, and the violation of social boundaries, which complicate attempts to define perversity. This difficulty is particularly evident in how societies engage with perversity.

Long (2000) introduces another important factor in the psychoanalytic understanding of perversity: the relationship between perversity and dissociation. Perversity is sometimes seen as the opposite of neurosis, in that fantasy is not repressed but rather made manifest. The primary defenses in perversity are denial and displacement. However, denial is also a feature of dissociative states, which are typically considered neurotic (such as amnesia, fugue, or multiple personality disorder).

Dissociative states differ significantly from anxiety states (which are often central to neurosis) and seem to require a relationship to reality that mirrors the dynamics found in perversity. Consider, for example, the extreme case of multiple personality disorder. In such cases, the ego is split, and the subject is both aware and unaware of the different personalities within them. An illusory reality is created, and entire social contexts or fabricated lives are unconsciously reflected as "accomplices." The key characteristic here is the construction of a produced identity. Research tends to show that dissociation is a response to trauma—either psychological or physical—and in some cases, it may represent a delayed reaction to early childhood trauma. The dynamics of dissociation involve a profound desire to escape from a painful body or psyche, making it a more radical form of defense than repression, as it leads to a greater distortion of reality. When a painful set of thoughts or experiences is rejected, the perverse structure of dissociative states becomes clearer. This response is often linked to childhood trauma, wherein not only the pain and trauma are rejected but also the knowledge of the abuse and potentially the abuser—the primary figure of dependency.

This discussion is crucial because it suggests a connection between perverse denial, dissociative states, and the construction of illusory identities. One possible response for victims of sadistic or sexual abuse is to become an accomplice to, or even reenact the abuse later in life through identification with the aggressor. Although the roles of abuser, victim, and accomplice differ significantly and exhibit distinct behavioral symptoms, each individual is ensnared within a parasitic and perverse system, regardless of whether they are consciously aware of it.

The following points related to the perverse state of mind summarize the psychoanalytic understanding of perversity, based on the above discussion as well as the works of Pajaczkowska (2000), Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984), and Lacan (1970).

### 3.4.1. Characteristics of the Perverse State of Mind

1. The perverse state of mind is not merely a deviation from moral norms. It involves deriving pleasure from the suffering or exploitation of others, prioritizing personal gratification over the collective good. In such a mindset, reciprocity—the foundation of mature, reciprocal relationships—is absent. Others are reduced to mere tools or objects, exploited to fulfill personal needs, rather than being recognized as independent individuals.

2. A person with a perverse personality structure perceives reality but actively denies it. They are aware that something is wrong, but choose to reject it because it threatens their self-interest. *They dismiss societal values and construct an illusory world*.

This may reflect a special case of Freud's "and/and" position, wherein opposing ideas are held together, yet their connection is illusory. In the perverse mindset, this dynamic fosters the destruction of truth and reality, allowing for parasitic relationships to flourish. The goal is to obliterate social differentiation, building a distorted world in which boundaries and differences are erased. As repression is not the primary defense, fantasies are more readily accessible to consciousness. This leads to the breakdown of social and generational distinctions, as noted by Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984).

3. A person in a perverse state is inclined to *draw others into their perversity*, whether consciously or unconsciously..

4. *On a societal level, the perverse state of mind flourishes when relationships become instrumental. In such systems, individuals are treated as mere means to achieve specific goals*—such as in reality TV, where the focus is on generating sensation, increasing viewership, and profiting at any cost. Within this perverse system, the truth is simultaneously known and denied; the wrongness of the situation is recognized, yet it is rebranded as acceptable or even desirable to serve selfish interests.

5. *Perversity perpetuates itself*. Corruption breeds further corruption, fueled by the complicity of individuals who deny their role in the system, engaging in self-deception. Perverse defenses can become instinctual, acting as driving forces that sustain and reinforce the destructive cycle.

One of the key tendencies of perverse culture is the transformation of human connections. Bion (1970) identifies three fundamental forms of relatedness: commensal, parasitic, and symbiotic. Commensalism refers to a relationship where two entities share a third for the mutual benefit of all parties involved. Symbiosis, in contrast, refers to a relationship where one entity depends on the other for mutual benefit. Parasitism, on the other hand, describes a relationship in which one entity depends on another to produce a third, resulting in harm or destruction for all parties.

It could be argued that a psychotic structure, existing in its own parallel universe, maintains a commensal relationship with society and reality. However, the psychotic or narcissistic position is not always benign. It often involves the fragmentation of thought processes, and on a societal level, this leads to a severing of connections with the community—thinking that is collaboratively constructed with others. A commensal relationship, where two ideas or entities develop alongside each other without direct interrelation, can be seen as harmless. The key

factor that allows commensal relatedness to be creative rather than destructive is the nature of the "container"—the group or society—that holds and shapes these ideas.

The neurotic or "normal" state of mind, on the other hand, can be understood as more symbiotic in the relationship between the individual and others (and society). In this state, societal attitudes and the thoughts of others influence the individual's thinking, and the individual's thoughts, in turn, shape society. This relationship can be in conflict, but when adequate "containing" (or receiving) occurs, it can lead to therapeutic and sometimes transformative effects.

What, then, is the nature of the perverse state? As discussed earlier, the perverse position is characterized by the persistent denial of reality, despite continuous evidence to the contrary. It can be seen as a form of "persistent error." Moreover, it has been argued that the perverse state is closer to primary narcissism than secondary narcissism. In this position, others are not merely loved or admired, but exploited or used as accomplices to maintain the illusion of self-sufficiency. This is not a state of self-love, but rather one of (illusory) self-sufficiency in which external realities are denied or distorted. When this mindset, coupled with corrupt institutional power, dominates, it has significant implications for collective life.

When considering neurotic, psychotic, and perverse dynamics in terms of the possibility of cognition, we can make the following distinctions:

- The *neurotic* unconsciously knows certain truths but is unable to consciously process them due to the repression of knowledge deemed undesirable by the environment or the Superego. As a result, the neurotic distorts these insights through unconscious defense mechanisms, which allow them to avoid directly confronting this troubling information.

- The *psychotic* on the other hand, holds thoughts that are tightly bound to internal processes but treats them as concrete truths linked to the narcissistic self. This makes reflection on the thought, its processing, or its relationship to others impossible. The psychotic is unable to integrate these thoughts into a shared reality, resulting in disconnection from both external and internal sources of understanding.

- The *perverse* state of mind involves the denial of new information or contradictory thoughts, clinging instead to the certainty of a previous belief or perception, even while, on some level, knowing it is wrong. To manage this contradiction, the individual creates an illusory and idealized world in which their belief remains unquestioned. This certainty demands confirmation from another, meaning that an accomplice is required to validate the individual's position. The accomplice becomes embedded within the perverse structure, but the primary dynamic remains the need for external confirmation of certainty and power, despite the presence of contradictions. In this relationship, the

other is subordinated and treated as an object, turning the relationship into a parasitic one.

In a parasitic relationship, the psychotherapeutic framework of thinking is most severely challenged. The treatment and creation of "the other" as an accomplice, along with the simultaneous denial of reality while being aware of it, positions perversion outside the realm of mere illness. This distinction may explain the difficulties faced by correctional services when working with sexual offenders. As a society, we remain uncertain about whether these individuals should be treated or imprisoned, and whether they should be seen as sick or criminal. Beyond the individual level, psychoanalytic insights into perversion have regrettably been underexplored when applied to groups and organizations.

Understanding perversity not only illuminates perverse systems more broadly—encompassing organizations, institutions, and society—but also provides a shift in how we analyze these entities. It moves the focus away from a strictly psychotherapeutic lens toward an understanding of perverse social relations, the embedding of exploitation, and the treatment of people as objects within social systems, institutions, and organizations. To sustain and expand such a system of governance and exploitation, a particular structure of subjugation is required, one that involves active participation from its members. Furthermore, we must ask: Is the rapid development of technology guiding us toward the creation of a psychological structure where people will lead illusory lives in virtual realities, devoid of mutual communication and disconnected from reality?

### 3.5. Is psychotic culture the next step?

If we observe the ongoing shifts in typical human functioning, we may justifiably ask whether the next step in this progression could be the emergence of a psychotic culture—another step down the developmental scale of mental health and maturity.

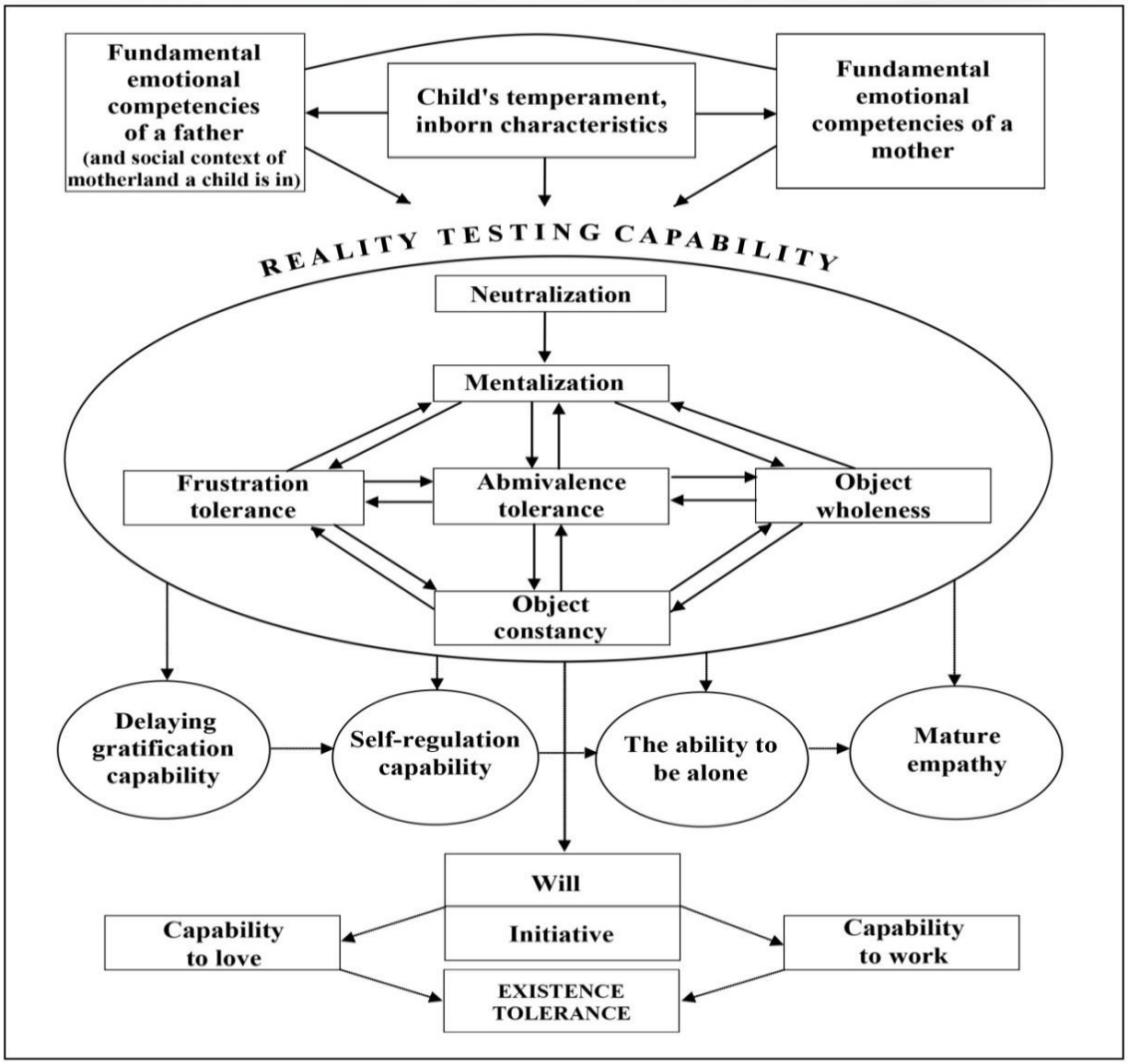
This shift manifests in society in various ways. For instance, the weakening of family bonds and the early exposure of children to TV and computers—environments that cultivate short attention spans and deliver sensory stimulation through brief, bombastic content—hinder the formation of lasting emotional connections. There is an overwhelming emphasis on instant gratification, with information quickly replaced once it ceases to be exciting. This results in a culture of "too much, too soon," where the ability to process, connect, and internalize information is diminished. No effort is required to achieve satisfaction, and intelligence—defined as the ability to adapt to new situations—becomes irrelevant. Over time, this passive engagement leads to difficulties in adapting to real-world challenges, and many regress to this state in times of stress, often turning to psychoactive substances as a coping mechanism.

Psychoanalytic literature has long explored the role of the mother in early childhood development, particularly concerning object constancy and the formation of a cohesive self. It emphasizes the "good enough" mother—the responsive and attuned caregiver. However, there

has been little discussion on how broader societal factors affect not just the mother, but also the father and the family unit as a whole. The reduction of maternity leave, maternal anxiety over job insecurity, the erosion of professional identity, and the social devaluation of motherhood all create substantial barriers to achieving the "good enough" mother ideal proposed by psychoanalytic theory. Even when a mother successfully navigates these societal obstacles, other significant challenges remain for the healthy development of the child. These challenges are part of a broader cultural shift, transitioning from repression, through bribery, to a culture that dulls the mind. Children today face a variety of negative influences from the education system, the media, and social networks—each of which obstructs emotional and cognitive development.

In a previous article (Jovanović, Stevanović, 2024), we discussed the shifts in the Superego and the corresponding changes in psychotherapeutic approaches necessitated by these transformations in the Ego and Superego of an increasing number of individuals—our potential clients. This raises an important question: Do we need to develop a new theory and methodology, or can we adapt existing frameworks to work effectively with these clients? In forthcoming texts on the evolution of the Superego and the development of new psychotherapeutic methodologies—focused on Ego integration, strengthening its synthetic function, and analyzing and maturing introjects through psychotherapy—we will offer perspectives that we believe will be valuable in addressing these contemporary shifts in the human psyche. Concerning basic competencies for processing and managing emotions—foundational for the development of the Ego's synthetic function—we have explored this in (Jovanović, 2013) and in the theoretical-methodological manual for OLI IPP (Jovanović, N., 2023). Here, we present a diagram illustrating how complex abilities develop from basic emotional competencies, akin to building with Lego blocks, ultimately leading to reality testing and the Ego's synthetic function (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Diagram of basic emotional competencies and the development of the synthetic function of the Ego




Soure: The author of the paper

## Conclusion

Numerous clinicians, psychotherapists, and other practitioners have observed shifts in the Ego and Superego of clients, particularly in Western culture, and are attempting to link these changes to social factors, reflected through various agents of socialization, which influence individual transformations.

When discussing changes in the Ego, we can say that traditional mechanisms of the "horizontal unconscious" (we introduced the terms horizontal and vertical unconscious to differentiate between the unconscious resulting from repression and the unconscious resulting from splitting and "partialism"—a mechanism of avoiding connection, where the individual is unaware of the connection between conscious aspects of the mind) have largely been replaced by mechanisms of the vertical unconscious. In this context, new, previously undiscussed defense mechanisms have emerged. Beyond splitting, which has already been described in the literature, and the associated "primitive defense mechanisms" (denial, projection, introjection, projective identification, etc.), we have also identified mechanisms that center around partialization—a tendency to disconnect.

Partialism is not an active, regressive form of splitting but rather a preventive mechanism that hinders integration. *The mechanism of avoiding integration* is distinct from other forms of defense. It represents an unconscious tendency to avoid connecting traits, representations of others, the self, work, or any more complex concept. This is a specific defense mechanism against potential ambivalence or feelings of being overwhelmed. The defense is preemptively set as a reluctance of the mind to connect, akin to the non-valency of certain chemical elements. We term this mechanism partialism (or atomization)—*the avoidance of integration*. In everyday language, a person who fails to make connections that are clearly obvious to others is often described as "not getting it." A "clasp" refers to a mechanism that connects things. It is important to distinguish between the mechanism of splitting—where something once connected is now fragmented—and partialism, which is the reluctance to connect or "clasp." Partialism can be a more enduring characteristic of a person’s thought process, leading to a fragmented state of mind. Other defense mechanisms work to maintain this fragmented state, as defense mechanisms tend to "function as a team," collectively supporting and preserving the disconnection in thinking and relationships. They often achieve this by diverting attention from the whole to a greater number of disconnected fragments. This group of mechanisms includes: excessive scrolling, superficiality, lack of thinking and distraction, activism, the creation of self-objects, partial relationships, hyperfocus, emotionalization of thought, devaluation of logic, avoidance of generalizations, substitutes for thinking—defensive mechanisms against thought—and *counter-skills* (defensive patterns in thinking and speech).

In the second part of the article, we explored the sociocultural context within which changes in the Ego and Superego occurred across different historical periods, evolving from a repressive

culture, through narcissistic tendencies, into a perverse culture, with a tendency toward transitioning into a psychotic culture.

We posed the question: Who benefits from a person who does not think, does not connect, parasitizes, and exploits others without recognizing their humanity? Who requires and why does a perverse mind exist, and does this, logically, lead to the next step: a transhumanist, psychotic culture?

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