

Is childhood beginning to dominate adulthood?

September 2013

[James Heartfield](#) and [Ian Parker](#) spoke of the impact childhood experiences and Freud's unconscious has on adulthood, chaired by [Ken McLaughlin](#)



Freud's theories of the *unconscious*, the importance of early *childhood experiences* and *repression*

have had an enormous impact on society. The debate over

recovered and false memories

in the 1980s and 1990s centred on whether adult patients were accurately recovering repressed memories of childhood abuse, or whether such memories were constructed during therapy and/or implanted by the therapist. Today, many TV dramas use the theme of disturbing experiences in childhood to set up and explain character motivation.



Past abuse has also been used to explain anything from the onset of psychotic experiences to violent or criminal behaviour. Pete Townsend, of rock group The Who, on being found to have downloaded images of child pornography said in mitigation that whilst he could not remember being abused in the past he thought that he might have been. If we add to this the current trend in **neuroscience** to explain behaviour as not consciously chosen but merely as a result of brain activity – my brain made me do it, your honour; is Freud's legacy the **psychoanalytic equivalent** – it wasn't me constable, it was my unconscious.

Perhaps it is not Freud's work that is the problem here but its subsequent interpretation within a changing social and political context. For example, in ***Freud and Man's Soul***, Bruno Bettelheim argues that in the translation of Freud's work into English his ideas got distorted. The German word Seele, which means 'soul', being translated as 'mental apparatus', a move which allowed Freud's theories to be wrongly rearticulated as part of the natural sciences, with the mind being reduced to discrete parts that can be studied, manipulated and corrected.

So, what is Freud's legacy and what challenges does the unconscious pose for those of us who like to see ourselves as rational actors? What role has his 'talking cure' played in the development of a wider **therapeutic culture**? And how powerful an influence is our past on our present behaviour? The discussion will attempt to dig into these and many related issues.

Some background readings

[The myth of 'infant determinism'](#) , by Dr Helene Guldberg, spiked 5 October 2004

[Our brains aren't moulded by abuse](#) , by Ken McLaughlin, spiked 15 May 2013

[Colorado transgender first-grader Coy Mathis wins civil rights case](#) , by Joey Bunch, The Denver Post 23 June 2013

[Don't tell me my affair with a teacher was abusive – I'll be the judge of that](#) , by Bernadette Rooney, Guardian 24 June 2013

[The deterministic myth of the 'early years'](#) , by Helene Guldberg, spiked 16 July 2013

[Swedish serial killer who raped and ate his victims to be freed – because he made it all up](#) , by Charlotte McDonald-Gibson, The Independent 31 July 2013

Watch video of the speaker and audience discussion below. Thanks to Dan Clayton the [documentary filmmaker](#) from Leeds for this.