

The Subconscious Virtual World: Theoretical Construction and Operational Approaches

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Abstract: Since being proposed as a concept by Freud, the subconscious has consistently existed as an “object to be analyzed.” Researchers have sought to approach it through free association, dream interpretation, and symbolic analysis, yet never have they truly managed to “enter” it. This paper proposes a different theoretical path, re-framing the subconscious as an “accessible, interactive, and modifiable” psychological space. Through systematic observation of nearly 500 cases, the study has identified a core theoretical framework comprising four interrelated parts. First, the Subconscious Virtual World, which is a psychological reality generated by the brain’s storage and real-time processing, possesses spatiality, relationality, and regularity, and serves as the operational platform. Second, the First Law of Virtual-Reality Separation, which defines the boundary and interactive pathways between psychological reality and physical reality, and serves as the operational guideline. Third, the Five-Layer Subconscious System, which comprises the individual, familial, cultural, social, and human layers, and serves as the structural model. Fourth, the Xing-Yi (Imagery-Thought) Interactive Technique, which is a standardized seven-step process for entering the subconscious virtual world. This theory proposes an “inside-out” pathway, where change originates from within the subconscious virtual world and radiates outward, effecting changes in subjective awareness and physical symptoms. This forms a directional complementarity with “outside-in” methods like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Through independent practice by nearly one hundred trainees, the teachability and replicability of this technique have been validated. This framework offers an innovative theoretical pathway for the operational study of the subconscious.

Keywords: Subconscious Virtual World; Boundary between psychological reality and physical reality; Mental imagery; Intrinsic transformation pathway; Imagery-Thought Interactive Technique

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1. Introduction

There was a real case of a 45-year-old male who suffered from a right-sided headache for two years. All the cranial CT scans and cervical spine MRIs were normal; doctors found no organic cause and advised him to

relax. Yet his headache was genuinely real. Using the Imagery-Thought Interactive Technique, the author guided him into his subconscious, where he saw a fox with a bleeding wound on the right side of its head. The author invited a positive imagery representing healing within the virtual world to treat the fox's wound, and his headache subsequently disappeared.

This is not an isolated case. In nearly 500 practical applications, this pattern has consistently appeared: the injured site of an imagery within the subconscious shows a relatively stable correspondence with the site of physical symptoms in the body. This observation leads to a fundamental inference that the subconscious can be entered and changed, not merely analyzed.

Since Freud, the subconscious has remained a core subject in psychology. As believed by Freud's "iceberg" metaphor, consciousness is merely the surface of mental activity, while the subconscious represents the deeper driving force ^[1]. Extending this, Jung proposed the collective subconscious and archetype theory, expanding the subconscious from the individual to the human level ^[2]. Fromm further introduced the concept of the "social filter," revealing how culture shapes the subconscious ^[3].

However, a fundamental methodological question has persistently remained unanswered: Must the subconscious only be an object of analysis? All the existing research methods focus on "interpreting" rather than "entering." Techniques like free association, dream interpretation, and symbolic decoding infinitely "approach" the subconscious but never truly enter it. By guiding clients to interact with mental imagery, imagery-based therapies offer a culturally grounded path for accessing the subconscious ^[4]. Integrating Jung's analytical psychology with traditional Chinese culture, Shen Heyong manages his work through "resonance" at the unconscious level ^[5]. Cognitive neuroscience has identified the Default Mode Network (DMN) as the correlation between nerve and self-referential activity at rest ^[6-7]. However, a complete pathway from neural mechanisms to psychological intervention has not yet been established.

This paper proposes a different theoretical approach: reframing the subconscious from an "object to be analyzed" into an "accessible, interactive, and modifiable" psychological space. This theoretical framework emerges from systematic observation of nearly 500 cases and, while developed within a specific cultural context, its core mechanisms possess cross-cultural, transnational applicability.

2. Core concepts

2.1. The Subconscious Virtual World

The Subconscious Virtual World refers to the internal psychological field an individual enters by using the Imagery-Thought Interactive Technique. This is not a metaphor but a precise term for this accessible, interactive, and rule-governed psychological reality. This virtual world possesses three dimensions. First, it has spatiality, with distance, direction, and depth. Second, it has "inhabitant" imagery of people, animals, and scenes within the space that possess their own behavioral patterns and independent thoughts. Third, it has operational rules: imagery within this space cannot be arbitrarily altered by subjective consciousness, and transformation must follow specific procedures. These three dimensions sufficiently distinguish the Subconscious Virtual World from ordinary "imagination" or "fantasy."

At the operational level, the Subconscious Virtual World typically manifests as spontaneously emerging imagery, figures, and scenes perceived in the mind during a relaxed state. This content is passively received, not actively imagined by subjective consciousness. Key characteristics can be summarized as: imagery emerges spontaneously, imagery is not under conscious control, and there is a synchronous correspondence

between the state of the imagery and bodily sensations.

This theory resonates theoretically with the discovery of the Default Mode Network (DMN). The DMN is the brain's spontaneous activation during resting states, closely linked to self-referential processing ^[8-11]. The automatic construction function of the Subconscious Virtual World may be functionally related to DMN activity.

2.2. The first law of virtual-reality separation

Defining the operational boundary of Imagery-Thought Psychotherapy, the First Law of Virtual-Reality Separation includes four principles:

- (1) The virtual cannot directly alter physical reality. Alterations in imagery within the Subconscious Virtual World cannot directly change material objects in the physical world or the behavior of others. Psychological transformation cannot substitute for physical changes and actions.
- (2) The virtual can alter the physical body. Alterations in subconscious imagery can genuinely improve physical symptoms through neuro-endocrine-immune pathways. The transformation pathway is: Imagery transforms → Amygdala stops alarm → HPA axis normalizes → Autonomic nervous system restores balance → Somatic symptoms alleviate. Negative imagery signals the body via the “virtual body,” causing symptoms like palpitations, stomach pain, or insomnia. Once imagery transforms, the amygdala no longer persistently activates the stress response, and symptoms naturally subside ^[6, 8].

It should be clarified that the “virtual body” here refers to a transparent perceptual entity corresponding to the individual within the Subconscious Virtual World. It lacks independent emotions or action capabilities, but through interaction with it, negative imagery can transmit somatic and emotional signals to the physical body. The virtual body serves as an intermediary concept explaining the mechanism that “the virtual can alter the physical body.”

- (3) The virtual can alter cognition and promote action. Insights gained through imagery changes within the Subconscious Virtual World can alter cognition and indirectly facilitate behavioral change. Insight is the seed; action is the fruit.
- (4) Physical reality cannot directly alter the subconscious virtual. Subjective consciousness cannot directly command or change imagery within the Subconscious Virtual World. Change occurs only through interacting with imagery, obtaining the imagery's agreement, and inviting third-party positive imagery to complete the transformation. It should be noted that “interactive questioning” itself does not constitute “direct change”; questioning is a way to understand the imagery's state, while the actual transformation must be accomplished by third-party positive imagery.

The First Law of Virtual-Reality Separation is the fundamental hallmark distinguishing this framework from superstition, mysticism, and spiritual practices. It neither deifies subconscious imagery nor denies its psychological reality. From an epistemological perspective, this law answers a fundamental question in psychology: psychological reality and physical reality are two distinct types of existence; each has its own operational laws, neither interchangeable nor substitutable.

2.3. The five-layer subconscious system

The singular concept of the collective subconscious proposed by Jung is expanded into five identifiable layers in this framework ^[2].

- (1) Individual Layer: Personal memories, traumas, and emotional patterns unique to the individual.
- (2) Familial Layer: Narratives, values, unresolved conflicts, and intergenerational patterns transmitted within the family.
- (3) Cultural Layer: Cultural symbols, beliefs, and archetypal imagery shared within a specific cultural group.
- (4) Social Layer: Symbolic resources, common symbols, historical narratives, and collective identity markers shared across all cultural groups.
- (5) Human Layer: The shared psychological foundation of the human species, such as universal fears, attachment needs, and survival instincts.

These five layers are sequentially inclusive; each layer contains the one below and is contained within the one above. Jung focused on the “content” (archetypes) of the collective subconscious, whereas this framework focuses on the content generation and transformation mechanisms of the five-layer structure. The former is descriptive, the latter is operational.

It should be pointed out that this five-layer structure possesses cross-cultural universality. This universality lies not in the specific content of each layer (as each culture has its own symbols) but in the structure itself. This implies that the methodology of this framework is transferable to any cultural context, requiring only the replacement of specific symbolic content in the cultural layer, without altering the five-layer structure or the Law of Reality-Virtual Separation.

2.4. The dual roles of imagery

This framework distinguishes two functional roles of imagery:

Root Imagery: Images existing in the Subconscious Virtual World that are in a state of being harmed, trapped, or oppressed, which transmit sensations directly to the physical body via the “virtual body” to generate somatic symptoms. The approach involves inviting a third-party positive imagery to heal the negative imagery itself.

Symbolic Imagery: Typically, positive imagery possessing protective or healing qualities, which manifests in negative forms (turning away, glaring, weeping, etc.) and indicates a problem in the individual’s mindset. The approach involves guiding the individual to reflect, acknowledge faults, and change their mindset. Once the mindset genuinely changes, the imagery naturally reverts to its positive form.

Root imagery typically originates from the individual and familial layers, while symbolic imagery often stems from the cultural and social layers. However, they may overlap, and the specific role must be determined through Imagery-Thought interaction rather than presumed by layer of origin. This distinction provides clear direction for imagery work and represents a key difference from other psychological methods.

3. Operational methods

3.1. The seven-step process of the Imagery-Thought Interactive Technique

The Imagery-Thought Interactive Technique is the core means for entering the Subconscious Virtual World. The standardized operational process is as follows:

Step 1: Relax to Stillness. Relax the body, quiet the mind, and enter a naturally relaxed state.

Step 2: Provide momentum. Give the subconscious a clear, specific intention, for example: “I want to

see what imagery corresponds to my left-sided headache.”

Step 3: Wait for Generation. Do not analyze or rush; wait for the imagery to spontaneously present itself in the mind.

Step 4: Explore and Observe. Do nothing else but observe. Note the imagery’s appearance, posture, environment, injured areas, and its emotions.

Step 5: Interact Imagery and Thought. Use consciousness to ask the imagery questions to understand its reasons and needs.

Step 6: Respect the Rule. Do not command or forcibly change the imagery. Invite a third-party positive imagery to transform the negative imagery.

Step 7: Integrate and Return. Gain insights from the imagery transformation process and generate practical actions in reality.

These seven steps form an ascending spiral cycle; each instance of integration and return contributes positively to the alleviation of somatic symptoms.

3.2. Flexible application of cultural symbols

In this framework, “positive imagery” is a functional concept. Within a specific cultural milieu, it manifests as figures accepted by that cultural group, such as compassionate figures, wise figures, courageous figures, or any cultural symbol representing healing power. Beyond the symbols themselves, the interaction process itself — the identification of imagery, dialogue, and transformation — is more critical than analyzing what emotion the imagery represents.

This framework provides an “operational structure” rather than “cultural content.” In different cultural contexts, individuals can invoke positive imagery resources from their own culture and follow the same operational steps. The therapist’s role is to assist the individual in finding effective imagery resources within their culture, rather than prescribing specific cultural symbols.

4. Practical verification and theoretical dialogue

4.1. Practical foundation

Chief complaints of the cases addressed by this framework are psychosomatic symptoms, such as insomnia, stomach discomfort, palpitations, fatigue, and headaches, and organic diseases have been medically ruled out. The cases cover diverse populations, including corporate employees, teachers, healthcare professionals, and freelancers.

Following the completion of the theoretical framework, nearly one hundred trainees, after systematic study, were able to successfully explore the Subconscious Virtual World independently, which validated the teachability and replicability of this technique.

4.2. Dialogue with existing theories

Relationship with Jung: Jung focused on “what exists” (archetypes), while this framework focuses on “how it is structured and operationalized.” Jung discovered the collective subconscious but did not provide a method to enter it. This framework answers the question Jung left unresolved: how to systematically enter and transform the content within the subconscious.

Relationship with Imagery-Based Therapies: Current approaches emphasize interpreting the symbolic

meaning of imagery; this framework emphasizes directly entering the Subconscious Virtual World and interacting with the imagery, rather than analyzing what it “represents.” The former focuses on interpretation, the latter on interaction and transformation.

Relationship with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): This framework works at the level of subconscious imagery, and the two therapies are complementary. CBT addresses cognition and behavior via an “outside-in” pathway; this framework addresses imagery via an “inside-out” pathway. “Inside-out” means change originates from the transformation of imagery within the Subconscious Virtual World and then radiates outward to the effect of conscious awareness and physical symptom improvement. This is directionally complementary with “outside-in” methods like CBT (which aim to influence internal states by changing cognition and external behavior). The former aims to alter the “upstream source” of symptoms (imagery), while the latter aims to adjust the “downstream manifestations” of symptoms (cognition and behavior). Predictive coding theory views the brain as an organ continuously generating predictions; imagery transformation is essentially modifying internal predictive models ^[7]. These contemporary cognitive science frameworks both provide external support for Imagery-Thought Psychotherapy theory and indicate future avenues for validation.

5. Limitations and future directions

Currently, this framework has limitations. First, the theory is based on existing client cases, and large-scale randomized controlled trials (RCT) have not yet been carried out. Second, the framework was developed within the Chinese cultural context, and cross-cultural validation is pending. Third, systematic data collection on symptom improvement is not yet complete.

Future research will be conducted in the following directions: exploring changes in DMN functional connectivity during imagery transformation; performing comparative studies with CBT; recording pre- and post-intervention changes with physiological indicators (HRV, cortisol); developing standardized assessment tools for trainee learning outcomes; and doing cross-cultural applicability studies.

6. Conclusion

Since Freud, the subconscious has primarily been treated as an “object to be analyzed” that is inaccessible; this methodological bottleneck constitutes a profound predicament in psychological research. The theoretical framework proposed herein reformulates the subconscious as an “accessible, interactive, and modifiable” psychological space, providing a complementary approach for the operational study of the subconscious.

Through original concepts such as the “Subconscious Virtual World,” the “First Law of Virtual-Reality Separation,” the “Five-Layer Subconscious System,” and the “Imagery-Thought Interactive Technique,” this framework offers a relatively complete system for subconscious research, extending from theoretical models to operational practice. Systematic observation from nearly 500 cases and independent validation by nearly one hundred trainees demonstrate that this pathway is not merely theoretical deduction, but is teachable, replicable, and standardizable.

For the headache sufferer described in the opening case, the headache disappeared following the healing of the fox imagery in the subconscious virtual world. When the subconscious ceases to be an “analyzed black box” and becomes a “world one can enter,” the relationship between psychology and people can change

correspondingly, from explaining why they suffer to accompanying them on their journey out of suffering.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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