

# SOCIAL PANORAMAS

Changing the unconscious  
landscape with NLP and  
psychotherapy



Lucas Derks

*Social Panoramas*  
*Changing the Unconscious*  
*Landscape with NLP*  
*and Psychotherapy*

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# *Introduction*

Is passionate love only possible when our central nervous system has generated the right pictures, feelings, sounds, smells and tastes? Is sexual excitement exclusively dependent on sufficient external stimulation? Do you, as a participant-observer, have an answer to this question?

When I am lecturing about the subject matter of this book, this sort of question immediately catches the attention of any type of audience. Advertising executives, as a matter of course, put a little piece of nakedness in between the insurance and the washing powder in order to do so. For a while, if I may continue in the role of sex-educator: “Boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, how do you actually make love to someone? What must you be aware of, what should you imagine and what do you tell yourself? In short, what steps must your brain take to create the feeling of love in your body?”<sup>1</sup>

However, once this has gone on for 10 minutes, questions are no longer sufficient – people want answers. Curious but already tired, most of my colleague psychologists in such an audience will want chi-squares<sup>2</sup> or PowerPoint pictures with tables and graphs. To accommodate them I offer the following:

People can love other people just as well when they are on the other side of the globe as when they are right next to them. Passionate love depends on the manipulation of social images held in the brain. These inner images – sounds, smells, tastes and feelings – must be in the correct proportions to one another in order to create love for someone. The mental constructs involved must match the requirements that the individual has put in place throughout his or her life. For example, if you think about loving someone yourself, you could notice that the ‘love of your life’ may

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<sup>1</sup> Cameron Bandler wrote the first sex therapy handbook for therapists based on cognitive linguistics in 1987. Bolstad and Hamblett gave a presentation of the more ‘tantric aspects’ at the Finnish NLP Congress in 1997.

<sup>2</sup> A test of statistical significance to inform whether we should accept or reject a hypothesis.

become optimally attractive if you imagine him or her at the right distance (five centimetres/two inches away), in the right place (in front of you), in the right colours (orange and pink) and surrounded by the right smell (chestnut blossom) for example.

Are you beginning to worry that this might be a pornographic book? Let me reassure you, after this things start to get rather more serious. This book is about patterns in unconscious social thinking and cognitive therapeutic interventions to improve human relationships in the broadest sense. In other words, it is about understanding how people unconsciously see one another, and how the insight thus gained can be used as a problem-solving device. This is an extremely useful subject because people think almost constantly about other people, and also because most human suffering is connected with social thought.

In this book you will read a large number of educated guesses about the patterns in unconscious social mental processes.<sup>3</sup> These guesses are based, in the main, on hundreds of case examples from my own clinical practice, from my therapy demonstrations in seminars and from many cases reported to me by my colleagues. A lot of additional data came from observing my students doing exercises in workshops, from daily life, from a few small-scale experiments and from browsing through the literature.

### ***About the expression 'unconscious social cognition'***

It would be splendid if this book were only about love, but it is equally as much about all the other varieties of social experience. It is about emotions such as irritation, hate, togetherness, loneliness, self-confidence, isolation, discrimination, loss, shame, pride, authority, loyalty, subservience, etc. As a social psychologist, I would say that this book is about structures in social cognition, where I define social cognition as: 'All the mental processes on which our social lives are based.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Approximately 534 clients have been involved in the development of the techniques in this book. About another 150 cases come from demonstrations in workshops.

<sup>4</sup> See Greenspan (1997) who seems to mean 'social-affective' whenever he writes 'emotional'.

The problem in tracing these patterns of social cognition is precisely the fact that they are largely unconscious.<sup>5</sup> In other words, if you are in love with someone the only thing you will actually be aware of is the fact that you are in love. This conscious part, namely the feeling of being in love and knowing with whom, is, however, only the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface of your consciousness many hidden processes are at work. All the evidence suggests that, although they remain unnoticed by your conscious mind, these hidden processes are the ones in control of your experience. In this book I assume that our social behaviour is driven by unconscious social cognition, in which patterns can be found at individual, cultural and universal levels.

## *Theory and practice*

To give you a quick idea of the sort of experimentation that has given rise to my social panorama theories I will begin with a small experiment. To do this, I will ask you to create a few experiences. If you have the luxury of having someone with you, ask him or her to read out this paragraph to you, because it works best that way. If you are alone, just read slowly...

To begin with, think of humanity, the greatest social whole that exists. Think of it in your own usual way.

How do you perceive it? Do you see the whole of mankind at a distance or do you experience all the other human beings as surrounding you? About one third of my subjects spontaneously take the distant view. Are you one of them? If you are, try to put yourself in among the rest of mankind and then step into your 'self'. I want you to imagine that you are in the middle, amongst everyone else in the world. Experience yourself as a person surrounded by all the others. Once you have that, then let your thoughts turn to a person you really love and care for. We will call this person your 'loved one'.

Think of your loved one, and make sure that you create a strong feeling of love for this person. Feel only love. I'll wait a moment...

---

<sup>5</sup> In this book I use 'unconscious' in the way Milton H. Erickson started to use it in the 1950s, and not in the way that is common in psychoanalysis.

## Chapter 2

# *The social panorama model*



## ***2.1 Personifications in mental space***

When I conceived the central idea of this book, I considered names like 'socio-sphere', 'psycho-topography' and 'socio-geography'. In the end I preferred 'Social Panorama' – a 360° landscape full of social images.

In Chapter 1 I introduced the elements that compose this landscape: the five types of personifications. I also explained that these elements derive their socio-emotional meaning from their location in mental space. This chapter is about the specific spatial patterns to which this leads and what these patterns imply for social life and how it may be improved by therapy.

Before I understood these patterns, I saw clients suffering from incomprehensibly complex symptoms and I didn't have a clue about what to look for or what to do about them. I was totally unaware of the social cognitive creations that were hiding right in front of my eyes and I never imagined what my survey of this landscape could mean for education, coaching and psychotherapy.

Recently I met a client called Frederique who suffered from a general phobia for life, a state of depression and an extreme lack of self-confidence. I immediately began to explore her mental space. With the aid of the social panorama model I found out that she had four personifications located within her body limits, her mother, her father, her abusive grandfather and her boyfriend. Over the last decade I have come to understand that this can cause the sort of severe symptoms that Frederique was suffering from. The best thing about the current state of the social panorama is that it gives clear directions for helping to solve such an enmeshment.

## ***2.2 The centre and the scale***

The size of the universe exceeds even the imagination of such extremely large-scale thinkers as, for instance, the physicist Stephen Hawking. He is an expert on the age and size of the universe – it is an estimated 14 billion light-years across, plus or minus three billion light-years or so – but if we were to ask him for the dimensions of the mental space in which he represents human-

ity, he will probably be able to tell us far more exactly and, if we apply the right imagination techniques with him, he will also be able to pinpoint the exact location of every single personification. Given this technical condition, it is possible for practically anybody to give a precise description of his or her social panorama.

But even if we just ask a person, 'Where do you sense your Dad, your boss or your mum?' we will usually get useful answers, for example, 'Yes ... up here', 'In here', 'Over there' or 'About seven metres in front of me,' and all such answers will be supported by clear nods and gestures.

Several years of systematic questioning have taught me that many people are surrounded by hundreds of cubic metres of social representations, while a few exceptions have compressed the whole of mankind into the tight limits of their own bodies. In the course of my observations I have come to the conclusion, as yet untested, that the size of a person's social panorama is a basic personality trait that corresponds with their position in society. However, before we can test such an idea, we must first determine what constitutes the point of origin for the social panorama, the point from which to measure.

As in Frederique's case, many clients project other-personifications within the boundaries of their own body. This observation forces us to conclude that the core of the social panorama is smaller than the body. It also raises the question of whether there is a natural centre in people's social panoramas. Is it perhaps the spot they tend to point to when they talk about 'me'? Is it the same location from which they experience their relationships? Is there a spot that functions as the subjective middle of it all?

In order to answer this, I asked everyone round me for the location of his or her 'self'. From this research emerged the notion of the 'kinaesthetic self', which, in common language, is called the 'feeling of self' or the 'centre of self'. The kinaesthetic self is the area in the body that has the strongest association with the experience of 'me' and is most often to be found in the stomach or the chest. This spot is the point of origin. It is the nucleus of our social cocoon or, in astronomic terms, we may call it the sun in our social solar system. The planets in this configuration, however, are relatively stable, generalised social images, which, in contrast to the physical planets, are fixed in place – they do not spin, turn or cycle.

Many therapists have noticed that clients hold on to these familiar feelings even when they are negative – ‘give me my good old depression back’ – and a therapeutic change can be hindered by fear of the unknown. Wessler (1990) speaks of the ‘emotional set point’ – the threshold of emotional overreaction. If a change forces someone to abandon this point he will become scared and resistant.

### *3.4.2 Visual patterns in the awareness of self*

As already described in the introduction, the speed at which the human brain can process pictures is greater than we are consciously able to comprehend. From clinical and other observations it is possible to deduce that in this stream of pictures there are also pictures which have to do with the person themselves. Herein will be mental ‘snapshots’ as well as more generalised visual self-constructions. These last mental creations determine the more permanent self-concept, the part that has to do with relationships and with ‘being’. The awareness of self is the meaning-construction that lets you know who you are – which is why we are thinking of generalised visualisations when we speak of ‘self-images’.

Many psychologists assume that the ‘self-image’ is an abstraction that is not specially related to any particular visual construction. It is relatively rare among social scientists to take the concept ‘self-image’ literally to mean a visual image.

Self-images in this literal sense are used in the so-called ‘swish-technique’ (Bandler, 1985; Andreas, Faulkner and McDonald, 1994; McDonald, 1997) This technique also illustrates the great therapeutic influence a positive self-image can have, particularly when directly connected to problem behaviour (Derks and Hollander, 1996a).

The difficulty in becoming fully aware of spontaneous self-images is an obstacle for experimenters and therapists alike. It makes the scientist suspicious – do these images really exist? The therapist or counsellor needs to take it on trust. In order to be able to work with it in practice the therapist has to believe that all people make such visual constructions. This belief allows the therapist to



remain open for all the variations that clients can demonstrate. Therapists who doubt the existence of self-images, will be unable to help a doubtful client through their initial barriers. The scientific researcher, however, is caught (should be caught) within the dilemma of whether they have created the images with suggestion or made visible something which pre-existed. As far as I can see, this difficult situation is inherent in the exploration of unconscious cognition.

#### *3.4.2.1 Hunting for self-images*

Someone's visual activity will receive an extra impulse when we ask: 'Can you *see* a picture of yourself?' and it will start many people off on a frenetic search. Unfortunately this kind of question starts such a broad search that it is impossible to indicate which one of all the resulting images is *the* self-image. If, as a therapist, you know what you are looking for, then you ask leading questions which you support with body language. So ask yourself, what exactly are you looking for when you explore someone's self-image?

Within the framework of the social panorama techniques we seldom look for the *content* of self-images, but rather for their sensory qualities (sub-modalities) and, in particular, their location. In other words: we have found the self-image when we know *where* someone sees it, *how big* it is, at *what level the eyes are*, in *what direction it is looking* and, possibly, how light or dark it is. Sometimes we also need to know whether its content has a positive or a negative connotation.

When looking for someone's self-image I always assume the following:

1. Self-images show the person who they are and also what social role they have to play. They give constant subconscious information about someone's social position. (Metaphor: The self-image is a social compass that shows 'social north'.) A question to find a self-image: Which picture shows you who you are and what your role or position is? Where do you see that image? How big is it?

2. Self-images come into play in contexts in which knowledge of your own position and role is important. This is valid as much for imaginary as actual interaction. A metaphorical question to explore self-images: Is there a picture that shows what your part in that play is? A literal question: Can you see who you are in that situation with those people?
3. At any given moment there is always a 'leading' self-image that defines the awareness of self and the social role to be played. Question: Who do you choose to be?
4. The self-image can be absent when you think you are alone, 'turned inwards', 'on your own' or meditating. It can also be absent in interactions where you are 'completely open', 'completely, spontaneously yourself', or in a similar state. It can be very important information if all the signals, both verbal and non-verbal, point to the absence of a self-image. Usually a part of the client is censoring their self-image because it is emotionally negative and needs to be suppressed. Logically, a self-image can also be absent in people with very limited social skills or a very weak ego.
5. Self-images are unconscious until you are reminded of them. A question to make someone aware of an unconscious self-image: Just pretend that you can see your self-image. Where would you see it, if you could? How big would it be?
6. It is practical for a therapist to behave as if there is only one self-image possible, and also to realise that many unstable flashes of self-awareness can, if you're lucky, slowly turn into one clear visualisation. As trance deepens, the quality of the picture usually improves. Suggestion: Relax and wait and see if a self-image appears. Where do you see it?
7. Self-images are located in the space in front of you and are connected to the kinaesthetic self. Question: Imagine that there is a connecting line going forward from your feeling of self. Does it join to an image? How far away is it? (Support this question with gestures in the space in front of the client.)

## **5.1 *Patterns in unconscious 'pigeonhole' thinking***

In the last decades cognitive psychologists have tacitly agreed on one thing: that our thinking is ruled by classification and hierarchy, which people use to give shape to their mental maps of the world. Social cognition psychologists, too, use this as a theoretical starting point into how people categorise and assign ranks to themselves and others (Kunda, 1999) when they create their blueprint of social reality.

In Chapter 4, I described the mechanism by which people create hierarchical relationships, big fish and little fish – the relative status aspect of the social panorama. The processes used in categorisation will be the central subject of this chapter. This is obviously important as problems between groups are caused by social maps in which some personifications are put in wrong, negative or inimical pigeonholes. The key to the social cartography of peace would seem to lie in the answer to the question, 'How do people classify one another?' (Derks and Hollander, 1996a).

Social psychological research into this question looks at individual and cultural patterns within social classifications. What are the types into which people are divided within a particular culture or subculture? Which groups engender positive feelings, and which negative? Who is seen as being powerful, intelligent, rich, aggressive or submissive? Augoustinos and Innes (1990) found a way to cluster this sort of data so that it could be represented schematically. Their two dimensional graphs show a population's 'average' map of social reality. In such an integrated social representation model you can see which group is rated positive, which negative and which groups are considered the most important.

When we translate this area of research into the three-dimensional space of the social panorama it appears that there is a specific location behind every pigeonhole. Using Technique 2: "Finding the location among all mankind" (Chapter 2) we can see what categories a person uses and where they are located in his social panorama. If you ask a hundred people, 'Where do you see skip-pers, Bedouins or the royal family?' and then combine the

answers, the result will be an average 'three-dimensional social reality'.

The data that has been collated in this chapter emerged from a large number of therapy sessions that dealt with problematical relationships between groups. Many insights came also from demonstrations and exercises in more than 50 workshops in which groups were formed and made to feel hostile to one another by means of competition and gossip. The subsequent resolution of those negative attitudes yielded much insight into the cognitive mechanism.

### *5.1.1 Group-personifications*

Group-personifications are the result of people putting one another into categories. They consist of multiple individuals who function as a single 'person-like cognitive construction'. Or, in lay terms, group-personifications come into existence when different individuals are all 'tared with the same brush' on the basis of one characteristic. Expressions such as 'social scientists', 'Germans', or 'tourists', all betray such cognitive constructions. We can recognise particularly strong group-personifications by the word 'the' – for instance '*the* Belgians', '*the* methodologists', '*the* fishermen' or, even more clearly, by making the noun singular as well; 'the Spaniard', 'the Frenchman', 'the Boche', 'the Jap', 'the Geordie'. Such group-personifications are also furnished with abilities, feelings, motives, self-awareness, perspective, spiritual connections and their own location in a person's social panorama.

The necessary cognitive processes for the formation of group-personifications are often referred to by the words 'generalisation' and 'stereotype'. If the group-personification is coupled with the formation of negative attitudes then we can speak of 'discrimination', 'racism', 'prejudice', 'ethnocentricity', 'inter-group polarisation' or 'in-group/out-group thinking'. If a large number of people within a society use this social pigeonhole thinking in a similar way, it can result in uncontrollable forces. Here I think it will be enough to say that throughout human history pigeonhole thinking has formed the social-cognitive fuel for an endless series of bloody confrontations. Wars like those in the Balkans, Afghanistan,

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L. Michael Hall, PhD  
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