

ARCHIVE CHOICE

On the Psychoanalytic Listening Process

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Richard House writes: This wonderful article, though perhaps more analytic than humanistic, spoke to me about listening in a quite new way when I first read it. When lecturing in psychotherapy and counselling at Roehampton University, I strongly recommended that students/trainees read and then discuss this article – and it was almost invariably very enthusiastically received. Though I have my significant reservations about the *practice* of Robert Langs’ ‘communicative psychoanalysis’, David Smith’s 1991 book *Hidden Conversations* is a masterpiece (penetratingly reviewed by John Rowan in *S&S*, 21 (5), 1993, pp. 56–8).

I would like to discuss the most fundamental aspect of the psychoanalytic listening process; the practice of what is called ‘free-floating attention’. In order to do this a brief historical review is necessary.

In the early 1890s, Freud was engaged in the psychotherapy of his hysterical patients through hypnotism. He gradually abandoned the attempt to recover traumatic memories through full trance induction and employed what he called ‘pressing and insisting’ – a method which involved massaging the patient’s forehead whilst asserting that they *would* remember. In these practices Freud was labouring under the mistaken belief that special, active methods are required in order to unearth the patient’s ‘material’ and that this material is to be taken at face value.

According to one account, it was while working with Fri. Elizabeth von R. in the Autumn of 1892 that Freud was reproved by his patient for interrupting her thoughts with his questions. It is fortunate that Fri. von R. was so forthright and that Freud possessed sufficient humility to act upon her comment, for it was this experience – presumably along with many others like it – which led Freud to develop the technique of free-association.

Free-association, the so-called ‘basic rule’ of psychoanalysis, is the very *essence* of the

psychoanalytic technique. It is surprisingly widely misunderstood. Free-association involves being passive to oneself. One simply permits impressions to form in consciousness and one describes this process as it occurs. One says *everything* without concern for propriety, relevance, significance or intelligibility. In free-association, one gives up the idea that one (consciously) knows what is important and relevant, and one places faith in the spontaneous activity of the unconscious. As Kohut has pointed out, this process is inherently painful: in addition to opening one up to long-buried distress, it also hurts one's pride, for it involves the admission that the conscious ego must to a great extent be set aside in order for the reality of oneself to emerge. When teaching students on the counselling course at South West London College about this fundamentally meditative process (it is, in fact, strikingly similar to the Buddhist *vipassana* or 'insight' meditation), I inevitably find most of them highly resistant to the idea. 'Surely the client must focus on the problem!' 'But they will get away from the point!' To a certain extent these objections stem from contrary teaching, which in turn is an expression of the long-standing distrust of passivity which characterises certain traditions of Western thought. A more immediate source of objection, however, is the student's mistrust of himself or herself. This mistrust renders the student incapable of empathising with and trusting the free-associating client.

This takes us to our main topic – the psychoanalytic listening process. Freud discovered that the free-associating patient must be listened to in a special sort of way. The analyst must listen with *free-floating attention* (*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*, which is also commonly translated as 'evenly suspended' or 'evenly poised' attention). Free-floating attention is the exact counterpart of free-association. One listens in a non-linear way, setting aside theoretical preconceptions, expectations, desires, attempts to fix

information in memory, etc. One does not censor as 'inappropriate' any sensations, feelings or fantasies arising during this procedure. The analytic process, then, when correctly carried out is in many respects a form of mutual meditation. Freud makes it clear in several of his works that the purpose of free-floating attention is to facilitate direct communication between the unconscious of the therapist and the unconscious of the patient. The analyst's unconscious has to relate to the patient's unconscious 'as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone' (Freud, 1912). This is why one must pay great attention to the emerging productions of one's own unconscious when doing psychoanalytic therapy. Free-floating attention enhances opportunities for intuitive perception.

Students tend to greet this technique with incredulity. It is often difficult for them to believe that anyone in their right mind could recommend to them that they, as therapists and counsellors, listen to their clients in a totally passive, unstructured and meandering way. We can look at this resistance as stemming from the same factors identified in the earlier discussion of free-association.

I think that there is one more element that could be brought in at this juncture: the resistance stemming from a fear born of arrogance. In order to work in this way it is necessary to set aside both one's pretensions of omniscience and one's therapeutic ambitions. This can be very, very difficult if one's choice of profession is emotionally rooted in the desire to gain self-esteem through being all-knowing and all-helping. In analytic work properly carried out, one must permit oneself to be in the dark about the client and about oneself. Keats called this 'negative capability', and regarded it as an essential piece of the poet's psychological endowment. In analytic work the 'therapeutic ego' must be set aside for a good deal of the time. I think that free-floating attention is the most fundamental psycho-analytic skill, and

the most difficult one to teach. It is certainly given insufficient attention in the literature. It is a meditative skill which grows with practice and the expansion of knowledge. Blanco demonstrates, for example, that in order to comprehend the unconscious world of another, it may even be necessary to abandon the notion that space is three dimensional and that events can be ordered temporally.

By way of conclusion I would like to relate to you three elements of the psychoanalytic listening process described by Wilfred Bion. The first of these is the '0', a symbol used by Bion to represent the unknowable ultimate reality which one encounters in every therapeutic interaction. He reminds us that

However thorough an analysis is, the person undergoing it will be only partially revealed; at any point in the analysis the proportion of what is known to what is unknown is small.

Therefore the dominant feature of a session is the unknown personality and not what the analysand or analyst thinks he knows. (Bion, 1970, p. 87)

The next concept that I want to leave you with is Bion's conception of *faith*. Faith for Bion is a fundamental belief that the client will put into the therapist all that he or she requires for the therapeutic task. It implies the principle that each session should be its own creation structured by the unconscious of the client.

The precondition for entering a session with faith is what I like to call the attitude of *nothingness*, which Bion describes as entering the session without memory, desire or understanding. This does not mean that one must *avoid*, say, remembering what occurred last week. It rather means that one should begin with a mental state of receptive blankness, allowing the client to evoke in you the memories that are relevant and, in this manner, float you out of the closed circle of your preconceptions. The same holds true for desire and understanding.

Note

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