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FREEDOM IN FREE ASSOCIATION. IRED

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Chair: Stefano Bolognini.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PANEL

Stefano Bolognini

The panel we are presenting today is dedicated to one of the most fertile and controversial concepts in psychoanalysis: that of Free Association, for which IRED has produced a specific entry. Following its methodology, IRED explores the history and geography of the concept, and we will have the opportunity to listen directly to the personal testimonies of some of our colleagues who collaborated in the preparation of this and other entries.

For my part, I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to all the IRED Contributors, while emphasising today a particular aspect of their participation that should not go unnoticed: I am referring to the courage (not to say, in some cases, the audacity...) to produce presentations that could easily provoke criticism from other colleagues, given the great complexity of the topics covered.

Creating an entry may mean - on some real or imaginary level - challenging a sort of collective psychoanalytic Super Ego, and proposing a historical-geographical version of the concept examined implies in any case an assumption of scientific and editorial responsibility.

For this, I would like to thank in particular our Contributors, who bring not only culture, time and work, but also responsibility and courage to our community.

Our speakers today will be Eva Papiasvili (IRED Chair) Antonio Perez-Sanchez (Co-chair for Europe) and Jerome Blackman (Consultant for North America to the IRED Committee), who were members of the inter-regional team on FREE ASSOCIATION entry.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF FREE ASSOCIATION AND ITS CONSTRAINTS

Eva D. Papiasvili

"Let's free associate about free association",

Harold Blum, at the beginning of regional drafting of FREE ASSOCIATION for IRED

The above was said with a tongue in cheek, but it is a way how IRED work proceeds. The instruction is, "Feel free to write anything that occurs to you when you think of a particular concept, do not over censor or overedit yourself. Editing comes later." So, it can be said that writing FREE ASSOCIATION had a certain free associative quality.

It was not necessarily easy: Freud's increasingly complex evolving conceptualization of FREE ASSOCIATION contains areas of ambiguity, uncertainty, temporary propositions and juxtapositions. These can be viewed from different perspectives through different lenses, such that *the release of meaning* is subject to many (if not endless) meaningful reinterpretations.

To begin with, there are **two meanings** to the concept itself:

1.As a form of mental activity characterized by the suspension of conscious control (censorship) over subjective experiences, encompassing anything that 'comes to mind';

2. As a fundamental principle (rule), one of the pillars structuring the psychoanalytic situation and process. As the fundamental methodology of psychoanalytic inquiry, free association contributed greatly to the formulations of dynamic unconscious, psychic determinism, continuity and meaning, but also to the progression of Freud's understanding of the forces at play in psychic conflict. In IRED, it is cross-referenced with CONFLICT, CONTAINMENT, COUNTERTRANSFERENCE, DRIVES, EGO PSYCHOLOGY, ENACTMENT, INTERSUBJECTIVITY, OBJECT RELATIONS THEORIES, PSYCHOANALYTIC FIELD THEORIES AND CONCEPTS, TRANSFERENCE, TRANSFORMATIONS, SETTING, and THE UNCONSCIOUS.

There is also **a terminological ambiguity** of Freud's German terminology and its translation: From the start of the evolution of the concept, in Freud's original German terms for free associative processes were "Assoziation' (association) and/or 'Einfall' (occurrence). Appearing as contradictory, they may be complementary:

"A good *Einfall* (spontaneously occurring idea) has a creative quality about it, whereas the word *Assoziation* stresses a connection. At least for subjective experience, an *Einfall* is the spontaneous expression of thought processes which lead to a new

configuration. The patient's *Assoziationen,* however, are assembled by the analyst into a meaningful whole." (Thomä and Kachele, 1987, p. 222).

It may be no accident that Freud kept both words. In fact, one encounters here another of Freud's ambiguous formulations wherein apparently opposing meanings coexist. “A spontaneous occurrence', which is apparently detached from everything; and 'association-connection' which links this occurrence, are both part of the conceptual formulation, as free association addresses unconscious phenomena through the realm of consciousness.

Word *free* in Free Association indicates freedom from censorship; “there would be no predetermined point from which the session begins and no steering of the thought chain by the analyst” (Akhtar 2009, p. 115). Even when there is a starting point (a dream), it is possible to look upon the unfolding associations as ‘free’, as long as they are not steered or ordered by any consideration, prioritization or selection.

From Interdisciplinary Roots to Contemporary Complexity

Historically, the notion of a native human ability to make mental connections while thinking, arose from the concept of “association of ideas” of **Plato** and **Aristotle**. Ancient Greeks apparently practiced ‘therapy’ which included use of the couch, dream analysis, a version of free association, and the employment of rhetoric, dialectic, and catharsis. For example, the play**,** “Clouds,” by Athenian playwright **Aristophanes**, involves a caricature of a consultation conducted by Socrates. Socrates asks Strepsiades to lie on a couch and let his thoughts ‘emerge in his mind**.**’ Meanwhile, Socrates draws inferences from any inconsistencies.

Other indirect influences include the meditative and interpretative techniques of **Medieval Judaism of Abulafia and Zohar**, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries **British Empiricists John Locke, David Hume and Thomas Hartle**y, who highlighted the importance of elements of empirical experience, and later elaboration of empiricism in the work of **James Mill,** and **John Stewart Mill,** whose essay on Plato Freud translated from English to German.

Among direct influences, Freud referenced (1906) the ‘School of **Wilhelm Wundt’** (1883), in Leipzig, who theorized about the interconnections of psychic components in his *association experiments*, and **Hans Gross**, a professor of criminal law in Prague, who initiated a broad application of word association tests in criminal proceedings (Freud 1906). **Carl Jung** (1906) further developed Wundt's notion of the

connections between psychic elements and word association testing — from a dynamic point of view.

In "A Note on the Prehistory of the Technique of Psychoanalysis", Freud (1920) credits **Dr. J. J. Garth Wilkinson's "new method"** of writing poetry, where "reason and will are left aside…" (Wilkinson 1857, in Freud 1920, p. 264). Additionally, Freud (1920) cites **Ludwig Börne's** (1823) essay "The Art of Becoming an Original Writer in Three Days", which, besides using the word 'censorship' instructs to "write down…everything that comes into your head …" (Börne 1823, in Freud 1920, p. 265). Elsewhere, Freud (1900) references poet philosopher **Friedrich Schiller'**s description of the 'relaxation of the watch' (Schiller's correspondence with Körner 1788, in: Freud 1900, p. 103).

In his own work, Freud gradually developed the procedure of free association as fundamental to psychoanalytic technique along two lines: 1. In his clinical work with patients, in relation to his discovery and further exploration of the dynamics of resistance, starting with "Studies on Hysteria" (Freud 1893a, b); and, 2. Through the analysis of his dreams (Freud 1900).

Both lines of development demonstrated the determinate order of the unconscious and the meaningfulness of ostensibly irrational dreams and neurotic symptoms.

In his last writing on the subject, in "An Outline to Psychoanalysis", Freud (1938/40) described the fundamental rule as one of the structuring elements of the analytic situation in the context of a collaborative 'analytic pact', a forerunner to the later concept of 'working alliance' (Greenson 1967). This set the stage not only for delimiting the suitability of the psychoanalytic method for non-psychotic individuals, who have a relatively firm hold on external reality and are not overwhelmed by the primary process, but also for an unfolding of the psychoanalytic process as a collaborative endeavor with a therapeutic objective of instilling adaptive 'ego alterations', with many challenges throughout.

Today, across all regions, post-Freudian developments of the conceptualization, instruction, timing, and use of free association as part of the fundamental methodology of psychoanalysis has become more complex, nuanced, and individually calibrated.

Depending on the particular analyst and patient, such considerations may result in preserving free association as the core element of the psychoanalytic situation, or implementing conceptual and technical modifications, including broadening the content of free associations beyond words (dream drawing, prosody of language, sensations, etc.)

As psychoanalysis reaches patients of a ‘wider scope’ with traumatic histories, complex personality disorders, psychosomatic problems with impaired symbolization and representational processes, interest across regions has branched out into study of developing the capacity to represent and symbolize. Reaching ‘pre-psychic’, pre-symbolic, and pre-representational experiential domain and ‘translating it’ into the patients’ inner world of primary process symbolism of dreams accessible to free association, may require more prominent participation of the analyst. To what degree this trend represents a conceptual expansion and /or transformation in service of restoration of psychic growth, inner structurization and psychic continuity, and to what degree it needs to be differentiated from free association, so free association does not lose its specificity, remains a controversy among regions and different theoretical orientations.

The Use of Free Association Outside of The Therapeutic Context

Björn Salomonsson's (2012) method, used to reflect associatively on clinical material presented in a group setting, is an indirect descendant of ‘Balint’s Groups’ (Balint and Balint 1976/77) where medical practitioners discussed their countertransference, free associating to each other’s material. Specifically, Salomonsson’s "weaving thoughts” method of reading clinical material in a group of senior psychoanalysts with one of the participants associating freely, as if he were on the couch, facilitates occurrence of fresh ideas in a state of uncertainty.

Similar methods of ongoing clinical-research groups of senior analysts, relying in part on free association of the participants, have been employed in North America at the Center for Advanced Psychoanalytic Studies (CAPS) since its founding in 1960.

Neuroscience and Free Associations

Summarizing the interdisciplinary research, James Grotstein (1995) points out that with free association Freud ‘discovered the right brain hemisphere!’. When a person lies down and does not make eye contact with the other person in the discourse, she seems to activate a cerebral hemispheric shift in terms of modes of data processing. The shift is from a highly controlled, organized, linear, abstract mode to a looser, free-flowing, holistic/field-dependent mode. This *‘right-brain shift’* in the lying-down position in analysis is manifested by the patient's free associations: these are *‘free’ from ‘left-brain editing*’ and censorship, and would instead be increasingly organized by the unconscious. Findings from the recent neuro-psychoanalytic study of Villa, Shevrin, Songrass, Bazan

and Brakel (2006) that *ambiguous words can be processed for multiple meanings* has clinical implications in understanding how linguistic elements are used in free associations. The authors conclude that "We can follow the free associative path to insight with greater clarity if we understand that *the perceptual use of words* draws upon this deeper, earlier level of emotional and relational significance, and we can thereby understand how ambiguity …in language operates in primary process thinking…"

Macro-social and organizational context

In the societal or organizational context, undue censorship and restriction of information stifles and derails growth in individuals, organizations, and societies.

During his tenure as the Executive Director of Freud's archives, Harold Blum opened many previously restricted documents for public study; as the Vice-President of IPA, he traveled behind the iron curtain and lent his support to the fledging IPA study group in then still communist Prague, which was to later become the Czech Psychoanalytic Society, full member of the IPA. "Under the cover of the night, behind the curtains, down under the windows, sitting on the carpet, Harold met with us in secrecy…", the Czech analysts recall. To them, under communism, which forbade psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis stood for freedom from censorship of thought, their meetings symbolically and literally stood for a 'free association', and Harold was a brave ambassador of a free thought. It took some years until the Czech analysts did not have to draw curtains to 'freely associate', meaning to think and practice. IRED contributor Michael Šebek shepherded Czech psychoanalysis through this period.

In February 2024, during IRED Contributors' Meeting in New York, Harold reflected that IRED's representation of plurality and diversity of perspectives, controversies and contradictions of evolving psychoanalytic thought, provides for a built-in guard against dogmatism of any kind. Complex thought can tolerate contradictions, which, upon deeper examination may prove to be complementary, as in FREE ASSOCIATION.

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***HOW FREE IS FREE ASSOCIATION*?**

Jerome S. Blackman

The free association entry first defines free association, as described by Freud, as a means of the patient and analyst accessing unconscious material pertinent the analysand's pathology. The technique involves the patient reclining on a couch with the analyst out of view. The patient is instructed to try to capture thoughts that occur, in a famous analogy: like a passenger on a train trying to describe the environment passing by the window.

Because Freud first utilized what is today known as topographic theory (or to many Europeans, the first topography) the material sought was considered primary process, that is, governed by condensation, symbolization, and displacement. Dreams and parapraxes were considered the royal road to The Unconscious, where "word cathexes" had been added in the Preconscious to make the material Conscious.

The history of free association is then traced from its beginnings in hypnotic theory, e.g., hypnoid states, through structural theory, eventually looking at contributions regarding modern conflict theory (Brenner, 2006). Now, unconscious elements of ego, superego, and perceptions of reality were added to what would be unearthed during free association. In addition, the working through of transferences was facilitated by free association. The recognition of transferences, and their defensive utilization, was discovered and described by Freud through the 1920's.

With the advent of structural theory, instead of making the Unconscious conscious, the goal of free association changed to understanding layered compromise formations, much of which were unconscious. Primary process fantasy was not elided; other material was added. The activity of the analyst was also modified. Interpretation of unconscious defense (which Freud had first recognized in the 1890's) took the front seat in the analyst's interventions.

As object relations theories, self psychology, and developmental revisions of drive and superego theories evolved, free association was also modified to fit each case. Kernberg, et al., in particular, recommended against using the couch in severe borderline cases due to those patients' difficulties with self and object constancy. This shift in technique interfered with free association since the patient was sitting, looking at

the therapist. Volkan, alternatively, retained the use of the couch, but advised how to manage psychotic transferences as they occurred.

As psychoanalytic psychotherapies developed using some supportive techniques in addition to interpretation, "guided associations "(Langs) were suggested.

Current theoretical formulations about free association are then described at length. These include the use of secondary process in describing thoughts verbally, as well as looking at reality and defense, as well as fantasy in dreams. Intersubjectivity recognized the analyst's effects on the patient's associations. The analyst was seen as having "irreducible subjectivity," for example. These effects caused current theoreticians to recategorize how "free" such free associations actually are. These effects were brought into the analyst's understanding of the patient's associations.

Other complications have also been addressed. These include the instruction to free associate, itself, which can cause reactions in the patient (such as passivity or rebellion).

All in all, this encyclopedia entry is comprehensive, illuminating and highly useful.

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FREE ASSOCIATION: ANOTHER PARADOX/OXYMORON OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Antonio Pérez-Sánchez

I am not going to summarise the Free Association's IRED entry, but rather offer a reflection arising both from my participation in the entry's writing team and from my reading after its completion. In doing so, I intend to illustrate that IRED entries are not limited to offering a definitional, historical and encyclopaedic content of each concept. As one of its characteristics is to include all historical and contemporary perspectives, it is inevitable to expose contradictions and oppositions. Consequently, the reader will have to make an effort of reflection and dialogue between them and with himself.

I

According to Ernest Jones, the discovery of the method of free association "was one of the two great deeds of Freud's scientific life…". Indeed, most analysts today can endorse this statement, although it must be supplemented with the contributions and

refinements made by successive generations of psychoanalysts over the years since Freud. Nevertheless, it remains a fundamental tool for accessing the unconscious. It is striking, even today, that such a seemingly simple instruction as “talk about whatever comes to mind” can serve as the pathway to exploring the depths of psychic life.

To simplify matters, I will focus on the concept of "free association" as defined in Freud's fundamental rule: to verbalise everything that comes to mind, even if it seems irrelevant or unpleasant.

When this commitment is proposed to the patient, they might respond: “How is it possible to speak by saying whatever comes to mind, constructing a discourse where the elements are ordered, and at the same time, ‘speak with total freedom’ without respecting any order? You are proposing an impossible task.”

We must admit that the patient’s objection is reasonable. Reflecting on the terms “association” and “free,” we immediately notice an apparent contradiction. If associating means connecting one thing with another, how can it be done freely, without hindering the emergence of ideas that seem unrelated to the previous one?

The proposal of the fundamental rule to the patient entails the following idea: “To understand what is happening to you, you must commit to saying everything that comes to mind. I will listen carefully and try — that is my task — to find the connections between the different ideas. Some of these might not seem related to one another. However, if you verbalise them freely, without ordering them, just as they come to mind, my hypothesis is that there is a hidden ‘reason’ for them to appear in that precise sequence. Sometimes, as the analyst, I may be able to identify those hidden connections.”

There is an element of ambiguity, even trickery, in the proposal of the fundamental rule, because we know from the outset that the patient will not be able to fulfil it literally at the start. If we interpret the rule strictly, it would require consciously connecting closely related ideas to produce a coherent discourse. Furthermore, when a patient delivers a rational discourse, we know they are avoiding free association and resisting the proposed method. Every patient, like every individual, has limited freedom to express themselves spontaneously, a limitation that becomes more pronounced with the severity of their pathology. Therefore, it is expected that, at the beginning of the analysis, the patient’s collaboration in this regard will be restricted. Consequently, as is well-known, the greater the patient’s capacity for free association, the greater their mental freedom and, accordingly, their mental health.

In fact, this is one of the crucial aspects of the psychoanalytic method. If the patient were capable of doing this on their own, they would not need psychoanalysis. The specificity of psychoanalysis lies (not to state the obvious) in establishing connections between the conscious and the unconscious within a framework defined by the analytic relationship.

In professional contexts, we commonly use the term “free association.” However, with patients, we avoid this technical expression and prefer phrases like “talk about whatever comes to mind.” This distinction reflects the different roles of each party: for the patient, the objective is to express what they feel and think, while for the analyst, the task is to identify the possible "hidden associations" in the patient’s discourse. Nevertheless, given that the purpose of analysis is precisely to uncover these connections, it is legitimate to retain the term “free association” as a psychoanalytic concept to refer to the fundamental rule.

Regarding the paradox or oxymoron of the relative freedom in free association, Freud himself, when developing the method, highlighted its (apparent) impossibility in a strict sense. Free association is neither a purely associative act nor does it achieve absolute freedom. Freud stated: *“The so-called ‘free’ association would prove, in fact, to be unfree… the ideas that emerge would be seen to be determined by unconscious material”* (1924, p.195).

This determinism forms the basis of the limitations on freedom of expression. We can expand on this assertion by considering various factors that condition expression. Firstly, the phenomenon of transference: when the analyst asks the patient to collaborate by talking about whatever comes to mind, they do so from the position of an authority figure onto whom the patient projects, from the very beginning of the relationship, aspects of their internal objects associated with authority figures. Consequently, the patient tends to interpret this instruction not as an act of individual self-expression but as a way of fulfilling what they believe the analyst expects.

Moreover, especially during the diagnostic process and the initial phases of analysis, the patient approaches the analyst with the expectation of alleviating their suffering, which inevitably shapes their discourse. This distress focuses their attention and reduces the scope for addressing other aspects of their mental life.

Once immersed in the analysis, the course of the patient’s free associations is influenced by the analyst’s interventions, as the latter must interpret and provide their understanding. This introduces another paradox: “You ask me to speak freely, but you

interrupt me." This contradiction is well-known in psychoanalytic practice, as illustrated by Freud's anecdote regarding hysterical patients who complained that he did not allow them to speak freely before he had established the fundamental rule. Freud learned from these experiences, and we, in turn, have learned from him the importance of giving space to the patient's discourse. Nevertheless, interpretation is also an essential part of the psychoanalytic method, which inevitably requires intervening in the course of the patient's free associations.

Finally, the patient's adherence to the analyst's initial proposal regarding free association must be seen as a necessary act of collaboration for the application of the psychoanalytic method. This effort entails a discipline that limits the supposed "complete" freedom of expression.

Therefore, factors such as unconscious *determinism*, *transference*, the patient's initial *suffering*, the analyst's *interpretations* that alter the course of associations, and the patient's disciplined *collaboration* are sufficient to assert that "free association" is limited. Like all human activities, it is conditioned both by the unconscious and by the essential relationships of the individual with their environment.

II

Thus, we can agree with Ernest Jones that the fundamental rule is one of Freud's most important discoveries. And not only because it provided a tool for opening the doors to the unconscious, but also because it serves as a paradigmatic example of the essence of psychoanalysis. This is due to the fact that every psychoanalytic concept shares the particularity we have discussed regarding free association: the presence of paradoxes and, in some cases, oxymorons. It could not be otherwise, considering that the unconscious and the conscious coexist as parts of the same psychic life.

We can mention other psychoanalytic concepts that also reflect this characteristic. Freud delves into this issue in various texts. For example, when referring to language in *"The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words"* (1910), he wrote: *"*The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictions is highly remarkable. They simply disregard it. 'No' seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or representing them as one and the same thing*"* (1910, p. 155). He later concluded: *"*In view of these and many similar cases of antithetical meaning,… it is beyond doubt that in at least one language there was a large number of words that simultaneously designated a thing and its opposite.

However astonishing this may seem, we must face the fact and take it into account*"* (p. 156).

Therefore, in any aspect of psychoanalysis that we examine, we will find contradictions. It is this paradoxical nature that likely led Freud to claim that psychoanalysis is an impossible profession. To better understand this idea, it would be helpful to analyse his original text rather than making quick extrapolations suggesting that psychoanalysis is, literally, an impossible profession. Freud writes: *"One can imagine, if one wishes, that government, education, and analytic therapy are the three impossible professions, in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfactory results"* (Analysis Terminable and Interminable, 1937).

It is evident that we cannot take this statement literally. Otherwise, what profession are the more than 12,000 members of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) practising? Are they all frauds? What Freud seems to indicate with this "impossibility" is that a psychoanalyst can hardly guarantee that a psychoanalytic treatment will be successful, unlike, for instance, a (skilled) shoemaker, who can confidently assure that a pair of shoes is well-made.

Continuing with examples of the contradictions that permeate psychoanalytic concepts, we can mention the paradox of striving for life and creativity while coexisting with destructive tendencies and death drives. Another example is the idea that the deepest truths of a person (such as repressed desires) are not consciously accessible, even though they influence their actions and thoughts. The task of psychoanalysis lies in exploring this "unknown knowledge," understood as that which is repressed, dissociated, or projected: the unconscious material that is excluded from the individual's awareness. This is achieved precisely through the aforementioned method of free association, which, in addition to its previously mentioned paradoxes, involves another: it is through the surface — that is, the conscious material revealed by free association — that we gain access to the depths.

Masochism can also be considered an oxymoron, as in this case, suffering becomes a source of pleasure. The tension generated by the simultaneity of seeking pleasure and desiring suffering reflects an oxymoron in psychic life, where pain can be interpreted as a form of gratification.

The very title of Freud's work *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* provides another paradoxical example. How can both things be true? We must understand that each term refers to different aspects. Analysis is "terminable" when referring to the therapeutic

process with the analyst, which concludes when both patient and analyst agree that the work accomplished thus far is sufficient and set an end date. It is "interminable" with respect to the continuity of analysis that the patient must undertake independently thereafter: self-analysis.

There is also a paradox in the analytic framework, which is established without a predetermined end date. Once in treatment, this can lead the patient to unconsciously sustain the fantasy that analysis might last forever. This is often evident in the patient's surprise when the analyst suggests that the treatment is expected to end at some point. Related to this is another paradox: it is necessary to establish a relationship of dependence between the patient and the analyst in order to help the patient achieve independence.

Similarly, transference arises as an obstacle to the patient's gaining insight, while simultaneously being crucial for the therapeutic process. This contradiction is intrinsic to all analytic relationships.

In sum, many psychoanalytic concepts are built upon paradoxes and the tension they generate. The conflicts between the life drives (Eros) and death drives (Thanatos), as well as the interaction between (unconscious) truths and (conscious and unconscious) defences, are examples of the contradictions inherent in psychoanalytic theory. These contradictions reflect the complexity and multifaceted nature of the human mind. Paradoxically, the tension inherent in these contradictions seems to be a source of mental stimulation and growth.

Finally, it is important to note that Freud's discussions of free association primarily refer to verbal communication. Today, thanks to the cumulative experience of subsequent generations, we know that unconscious communication also includes non-verbal and para-verbal forms. These modalities involve a bodily participation that is indispensable for accessing the primitive, pre-verbal levels of psychic life.

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All references are from the entry FREE ASSOCIATION, IPA IRED E-Book

www.ipa.world/IPA/en/Encyclopedic_Dictionary/English/Home.aspx.