SSRG International Journal of Nursing and Health Science
ISSN: 2454–7484 / https://doi.org/10.14445/24547484/IJNHS-V10I3P101

Volume 10 Issue 3, 1-5, Sep-Dec 2024

Original Article

An Exploration of the Induction of Free Association from a Psychoanalytic Perspective

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Received: 27 July 2024 Revised: 02 September 2024 Accepted: 18 September 2024 Published: 04 October 2024

Abstract - *This paper has examined psychoanalytic theory, providing a systematic explanation of the concepts of consciousness, preconsciousness, and the unconscious. Following this foundation, the discussion explored the definition of free association and how it can be used to investigate unconscious clues. Finally, the paper presented the author's recommendations on methods for guiding free association. It is hoped that this work will contribute to further innovation in both the theory and practice of free association within this field and offer valuable insights for related researchers.*

Keywords - *Psychoanalysis, Free association, Psychotherapy, Preconscious, Consciousness.*

1. Introduction

Amidst the high-pressure lifestyle of modern society, psychological issues are increasingly affecting a broader segment of the population. Correspondingly, psychological interventions have garnered growing attention. Within the realm of psychological intervention, various schools of psychology hold distinct perspectives on addressing mental abnormalities. For instance, cognitive therapy focuses on irrational beliefs at the conscious level of individuals, while behavioral therapy examines the mechanisms behind the formation of inappropriate conditioned responses. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, delves into deep-seated conflicts and anxieties within the unconscious mind. According to psychoanalytic theory, external manifestations of abnormal behavior and emotional disturbances originate from unresolved crises within the unconscious. In the practice of psychoanalytic therapy, clients can alleviate these issues by releasing negative energies through techniques such as catharsis and free association, thereby facilitating the resolution of related problems. In fact, psychoanalysis is one of the primary schools of psychology and serves as a fundamental theoretical and practical tool in clinical psychology, particularly in counseling and psychotherapy. It was founded by the Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud and later expanded upon by notable psychoanalysts such as Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Melanie Klein, Erik Erikson, and Jacques Lacan. These developments have shaped the current framework of psychoanalysis, which explores various dimensions of the individual's internal characteristics. To be specific, Freud introduced key concepts such as the unconscious mind, dream analysis, and the structural model of personality, comprising the id, ego, and superego. He also developed the psychosexual stages of development, including the oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages, and explored the drives of life and death instincts. Jung contributed to the theory of the collective unconscious, which posits that humans share universal archetypes and symbols. His work also included the development of archetype theory (e.g., anima and animus) and psychological typology. Adler founded individual psychology, emphasizing the importance of social relationships and social interest, as well as exploring feelings of inferiority and the striving for superiority. Klein, a pioneer in child psychoanalysis, used play to analyze the unconscious of children.

She also introduced object relations theory, which posits that early intimate relationships, particularly the mother-child bond, play a crucial role in psychological development. Erikson proposed eight psychosocial stages of development, each addressing specific social and psychological conflicts individuals encounter. He highlighted the universal features of psychological development and emphasized the importance of addressing identity crises. Lacan, through his mirror stage theory, explained how infants develop self-awareness and gradually form self-identity. He also underscored the role of language in structuring the unconscious, proposing that the unconscious is structured like a language. Furthermore, he divided psychological experience into the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders. These psychoanalysts laid a critical foundation for the development of psychoanalytic thought, significantly contributing to both theoretical and practical aspects of psychological intervention. Although different psychologists have focused on various aspects of psychoanalysis, often leading to divergent perspectives, one

distinguishing feature of psychoanalysis—especially when compared to other prominent schools of thought—is its emphasis on the unconscious in the study of abnormal psychology. Psychoanalysis, which emerged from the field of mental illness intervention, uniquely highlights the role of the unconscious mind. As one of the core concepts in psychoanalytic theory, the unconscious refers to those aspects of mental activity that lie outside the realm of conscious awareness yet profoundly influence an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Sigmund Freud posited that the human mind is composed of three parts: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. The conscious mind encompasses the thoughts and perceptions that an individual is actively aware of. The preconscious consists of memories and information that are not currently in awareness but can be readily accessed with some effort. The unconscious, however, contains thoughts, desires, impulses, and memories that are not directly accessible to conscious awareness. These elements are often repressed because they conflict with societal norms or personal ideals. While these repressed contents are hidden in the unconscious, they continue to exert a significant influence on an individual's psychological state and behavior. One of the primary functions of the unconscious, as proposed by Freud, is to serve as the foundation of psychological defense mechanisms.

Freud believed that individuals unconsciously repress anxiety-inducing, fearful, or painful emotions into the unconscious to maintain psychological equilibrium. While this repression may offer short-term protection, over time, the repressed material may re-emerge into consciousness in various forms, such as dreams, slips of the tongue, or neurotic symptoms. Freud referred to these phenomena as "Freudian slips," which provide clues to the contents of the unconscious. In practical psychological interventions, understanding and exploring the unconscious is a central task of psychoanalysis. Therapists employ techniques such as free association, dream analysis, and hypnosis to help clients uncover repressed content within the unconscious. By bringing these repressed elements into conscious awareness, individuals can re-evaluate their self-perceptions and resolve inner conflicts. Many psychoanalytic psychologists believe that simply recognizing and identifying the true conflicts within the unconscious—without necessarily resolving them—can lead to a significant alleviation of related psychological symptoms.

While the above discussion primarily pertains to the individual unconscious, Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious is also of great importance. The collective unconscious describes a layer of the psyche composed of shared human experiences and inherited information, containing archetypes such as the Shadow, the Self, and the Anima/Animus. These archetypes transcend cultural and temporal boundaries, influencing individual psychology and behavior. The collective unconscious provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding collective or social psychological phenomena. In summary, the unconscious is essential for understanding human mental activity and behavioral patterns. It not only explains the deep-seated motives behind seemingly unconscious behaviors but also provides a crucial theoretical foundation and methodological approach for psychological therapy. As psychoanalysis has evolved, the concept of the unconscious has been continually enriched and expanded, making a lasting impact on modern psychological research and practice. Understanding and exploring the unconscious not only enhances individual self-awareness but also offers effective avenues for addressing psychological issues.

2. Literature Review of Consciousness, Preconscious, and Unconscious

As discussed earlier, investigating conflicts within the unconscious is a key objective for psychoanalysts when exploring individual psychological abnormalities. The unique nature of the unconscious means that it cannot be accessed using ordinary methods. On one hand, individuals are often unable to detect unconscious information at the conscious level. In other words, what an individual can consciously recognize are the contents of the conscious or preconscious mind. Thus, asking a client directly, "What are you thinking in your unconscious?" will likely only result in confused looks or lead the client to question your professionalism. On the other hand, the cognitions, emotions, and even wills that are repressed into the unconscious often consist of "toxic materials" that cause the individual pain or anxiety. Therefore, when a psychologist gets closer to uncovering the true unconscious conflict, they may encounter resistance, rejection, or even aggression from both the unconscious and conscious levels of the client. This resistance occurs because every desire, impulse, and feeling that is repressed or cast into the unconscious has already been tacitly approved by the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious minds. The act of repression at the time serves as a form of self-protection or an attempt to maintain psychological balance at the conscious level. Recklessly releasing negative energy can disrupt this balance and potentially exacerbate the client's psychological and physical symptoms. In psychological interventions, discovering the problem is never the most difficult stage; it is the subtle handling of chaotic and negative energy that presents the greatest challenge. For instance, if we liken an individual's mental space to a labyrinth of rooms, the conscious mind functions like a head steward, constantly patrolling the spacious living room, categorizing valuable items (newly received stimuli) based on past structured experiences and placing them in various unlocked rooms. These rooms are interconnected, with related rooms (containing related, mutually influential information) linked together. When the head steward needs to use these items (information), they are retrieved from the rooms and processed in the living room. Items that are hard to judge in value or might not be needed soon are placed in specific locked rooms, managed by a subordinate steward

(preconscious) who is responsible for storage and organization. These items are not discarded but are stored due to the head steward's limited attention span. When the head steward needs these items, an appropriate key (cue) is needed to unlock the room and retrieve them. However, sometimes, the key itself may be stored in another room. For example, recalling what you had for dinner three nights ago might require additional cues (keys), such as the location, people involved, or significant events. Since the individual is constantly interacting with the external world while awake, continuously receiving and processing new information (items), the head steward is perpetually busy, managing new items and placing them in new rooms. As a result, the number of rooms in the mental space can increase indefinitely. However, rooms that are unused for extended periods may be locked, and over time, the corresponding key (cue) may be lost, making it difficult to retrieve the items (information) within, such as passwords that were used early on and then abandoned. There is a problem here: not all the stimuli we receive are valuable; some may even be harmful, such as external attacks. In these cases, different head stewards may adopt different strategies for dealing with harmful items.

A well-trained head steward will quickly identify toxic items and "detoxify" them according to pre-set procedures. For example, when an individual experiences anger in response to external criticism, it is not the criticism itself that causes harm but the individual's cognition of being criticized and the accompanying negative emotions. Many psychologists believe that negative emotions contain energy that needs to be channeled away through catharsis. The head steward may regulate the individual to introspect, rationally analyze the criticism received, adjust irrational cognitions, and engage in related behaviors, such as exercising, to release energy. The detoxified items (information) are then stored in rooms. However, sometimes, new items (information) carry destructive power far beyond the head steward's capacity, rendering them unable to effectively manage or even process other items. They can only watch as this force wreaks havoc in the mental space, disrupting the existing peaceful order. For example, when an individual experiences a major life event, such as the death of a significant other, the overwhelming sadness may overload the conscious mind, making it impossible to handle other matters, leading to immersion in grief. Most negative energy, if not fueled by a source stimulus, will gradually dissipate over time, allowing the mental space to restore order.

However, this is not always the case. Some traumatic experiences are so overwhelming that they exceed the capacity of an untrained head steward (often during infancy or childhood), forcing them to resort to biologically instinctual stress mechanisms for self-protection, expelling potentially devastating items (information) to the unorganized rooms outside, into the vast, chaotic space known as the unconscious. Items (information) banished into the unconscious escape the head steward's sight, preventing further interference with the conscious mind. For example, an individual who experienced family violence in childhood might completely repress the traumatic memory into the chaotic unconscious, showing no recollection of the event at the conscious level.

However, does banishing items (information) to the unconscious mean they no longer affect the individual's psyche? Obviously not, otherwise, everyone could simply dump unwanted items (information) into the unconscious and avoid harm. Negative emotions, as a form of energy, can only be transferred, not vanish into thin air. Even when repressed into the unperceivable chaotic space, they can influence the individual's mind and body in obscure and distorted ways. For example, a person who suffered family violence might unconsciously harbor anger or hatred towards the perpetrator or experience difficulties in forming intimate relationships in adulthood. Of course, not everything repressed into the unconscious chaos carries enormous energy. As Freud's research suggests, besides traumatic memories, the unconscious also holds ideas, desires, and impulses that the head steward does not recognize (often because they conflict with social morals or self-image), which are tightly locked in specific rooms.

Although the head steward can still sense these items (information) to some extent, they often add extra burdens and cause painful experiences, sometimes failing to undergo effective "detoxification." Over time, these negative items (information) accumulate, attracting negative distorted forces from the unconscious chaos. Under certain circumstances, these rooms may be dragged into the unconscious, creating a rift between the areas controlled by the head steward and those in the unconscious. This rift carries not only the negative energy of the rooms themselves but also the complex forces within the unconscious, profoundly impacting the individual's psyche and behavior. Specifically, this dissociation prevents the individual from acquiring new experiences for reorganization or optimization, leading to a dissociative state. For example, suppose an individual's unconscious desire for parental love is unmet, and they experience betrayal in an intimate relationship. In that case, they may find it impossible to gain stable positive experiences from interactions with a (new) partner, impeding the reorganization of trauma and possibly manifesting as a belief that they are unworthy of good feelings.

Overall, psychoanalysis holds that the primary issue in patients with severe mental disorders, aside from physiological or organic changes, is that the negative energy stemming from various unconscious conflicts is too powerful, continuously disrupting the effective functioning of the mental space. Moreover, this destructive force is subtle and variable, often attaching itself to stimuli in the conscious or preconscious that also contain negative energy. As a result, the conflicts or problems that clients perceive at the conscious

level during initial psychological intervention often differ from the true internal conflicts. In psychoanalytic interventions, early efforts often focus on circumventing conscious oversight through various techniques, such as free association and hypnosis, to find pathways to the unconscious and trace the root causes of the individual's psychological problems.

3. Free Association

3.1. Overview of Free Association

As previously discussed, free association is one of the most effective methods for therapists to explore a client's unconscious mind. In fact, free association is one of the earliest techniques employed by Freud, and it is not only a crucial component of psychoanalytic theory but also a central tool in psychotherapeutic practice. This method requires clients to articulate whatever thoughts come to mind without any filtering or restriction. Such an approach can reveal repressed content from the unconscious, as clients often unconsciously divulge latent information while in a relaxed state.

Compared to other methods, free association has several unique features and functions. It is a counseling technique grounded in spontaneity and non-structure. During the conversation, there may be no fixed themes or routines. Under general guidance from the therapist, clients are free to express any thoughts that emerge, regardless of whether these thoughts are directly related to their issues. This type of discourse offers multiple benefits. First, free association imposes minimal pressure on clients. For some, it is challenging to disclose personal problems directly to a stranger; however, in free association, clients can begin the conversation with topics that make them feel safe and steer the discussion themselves, thereby reducing their psychological burden. Second, free association effectively avoids client pretense and assists the therapist in identifying the characteristics of the client's defense mechanisms. Many clients, when recalling significant events, may, due to self-image preservation or mere memory lapses, embellish or obscure key details, which could lead to misunderstandings or misjudgments by the therapist.

In a sense, free association is akin to projective tests, whereas traditional counseling dialogue resembles self-report tests. In self-report tests, the objective is clear, and respondents are often aware of the questions' intent, allowing them to manipulate their answers based on common sense and social desirability, thereby introducing the possibility of deception. Conversely, the advantage of projective tests lies in the fact that clients are unaware of the test's objective or the correct answers, eliminating the opportunity for concealment. Additionally, while the unconscious mind does not directly surface during the monitoring of the conscious psychological space, the characteristics of the unconscious defense mechanisms can manifest.

Psychological defense mechanisms are strategies employed by individuals to protect themselves when confronting unconscious conflicts, such as repression, projection, and denial. During free association, clients may encounter phenomena such as thought blockage, repetition, or circular reasoning, which could indicate the activation of defense mechanisms. Individuals often employ established defense mechanisms to avoid stimuli that may pose a severe threat to the core of their personality. When a client exhibits circular reasoning on a particular topic, abruptly interrupts the association, changes the subject, or experiences sudden and inappropriate emotional fluctuations, it may suggest that the topic has touched a sensitive area within their unconscious, possibly indicating an important point of conflict. Moreover, free association also facilitates the establishment of an initial therapeutic relationship. The effectiveness of counseling largely depends on a positive therapeutic alliance, with many therapists believing that such a relationship is the driving force behind the resolution of the client's issues. A strong therapeutic relationship is built on the client's trust and sense of safety with the therapist. Through non-contentious topic guidance during free association, the therapist can better foster a positive working relationship, avoiding sharp topic discussions in the early stages that might disrupt the continuation of therapy.

Despite its significant role in psychoanalysis, free association also has its limitations. First, due to its non-structured nature, free association requires a substantial amount of time and patience, and its fragmented and disjointed characteristics demand high levels of therapist competence, including the ability to capture valuable unconscious clues with sufficient patience and sensitivity. Second, for clients who are highly self-controlled, self-restrained, or lacking in imagination, it may be difficult to quickly adapt to the free association approach. Additionally, for psychoanalytic therapy to be effective, it requires a prolonged period, and the initial lack of purpose in free association may lead some clients to feel that they are wasting time on ineffective interventions. Therefore, it is essential to communicate with clients beforehand, ensuring they fully understand the characteristics of this method. Finally, free association may inadvertently touch upon severe psychological trauma within the client's unconscious, potentially triggering sudden, intense emotional reactions. This unpredictability necessitates that therapists remain vigilant when employing free association, providing sufficient safety and psychological support.

3.2. Guidance in Free Association

As previously mentioned, free association allows clients to express themselves freely without being constrained by logic, sequence, or social norms. Consequently, this type of counseling dialogue requires special forms of guidance, and there is no single "best" method for therapists to use with different clients; rather, it often requires a tailored approach, experimenting with various methods that suit the individual

client. In general, the common guidance methods can be categorized into two main types: verbal and non-verbal cues. Verbal cues may involve open-ended questions, such as “What are you thinking about right now?” or “What does this remind you of?”; keyword prompts, such as asking “What does anxiety remind you of?” when the client repeatedly mentions or exhibits anxiety; or timeline prompts, guiding clients to associate their childhood, adolescence, or other critical periods or to reflect on a particular event's past, present, and future. Non-verbal cues, on the other hand, are more subtle. They might involve the therapist's body language, facial expressions, or other changes to convey positive support and facilitate free association; the use of environmental or situational changes, such as altering the lighting, music, or decor of the consultation room; or the use of artistic means, such as painting or gardening, as a medium to trigger the client's free association.

Comparatively, verbal cue guidance is more directive, with therapists following up on unconscious clues revealed by the client during the conversation, especially in later stages, guiding the direction of free association. Therefore, this type of guidance is suitable for clients who are mentally agile, articulate, and adaptable. Non-verbal cue guidance, however, emphasizes the client as the primary agent, downplaying the therapist’s role. This is similar to the classic psychoanalytic theory, where the therapist is expected to act as a "blank screen." In this process, highlighting the client’s subjectivity encourages them to break through their repression and constraints, expressing deep-seated emotions while describing their associations in a relaxed manner.

This type of guidance is suitable for introverted, passive, inarticulate, or dependent clients. In the initial stages, therapists should attempt various guiding methods and choose the one that most effectively facilitates deeper guidance based on the specific outcomes. In the author's recent counseling practice, a preference for primarily using verbal cue guidance, supplemented by non-verbal cue guidance, has emerged. This approach is recommended primarily because domestic clients often have limited awareness of psychological counseling. Many clients display discomfort with a fully client-centered approach, expressing a desire for more guidance from the counselor, and some even criticize counselors for speaking too little. Therefore, in the process of localizing psychological counseling, it is essential to consider the acceptance and preferences of domestic clients. In the course of using verbal cue guidance, a commonly employed method by the author can be termed "Utopia." Specifically, during the guidance process, the author asks the client to attempt to create a novel through free association, titled "Utopia," while trying to perfect the details of this place throughout the association process. The reason for choosing this theme is that the author has found that compared to foreign clients, many domestic clients tend to exhibit repression and projection in their psychological defense mechanisms.

The framework of "Utopia," which embodies ideal aspirations, serves multiple purposes. First, the client's narration helps the counselor understand their cognitive level, including their knowledge structure, logical coherence, worldview, and more, thereby optimizing the counselor's subsequent dialogue methods and strategies.

Second, this design does not position the client as the protagonist, avoiding excessive involvement of the client's self-image and thus reducing the likelihood of triggering psychological defense mechanisms. Finally, this construction aids in guiding the client to project their various repressed motivations, conflicts, and irrational cognitions from their subconscious into the scenario, comprehensively assisting the counselor in exploring the client's issues.

4. Conclusion

This paper has thoroughly elucidated the concepts of consciousness, preconsciousness, and the unconscious within the framework of psychoanalytic theory. Building on this foundation, the discussion explored how free association can be employed to uncover clues about the unconscious. The paper also integrated the author's personal recommendations regarding methods of guiding free association.

Despite extensive academic research over the years, our understanding of the unconscious remains superficial. As illustrated by the examples provided, the unconscious resembles a vast, chaotic wilderness within which we navigate, using language and other symbols to construct the meanings of our conscious selves, thereby reflecting the significance of the unconscious. Free association serves as an effective method for identifying traces of the unconscious. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to further discoveries in this field.

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