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**PROGRESS in PSYCHOTHERAPY RESEARCH**

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Selected papers from the

**2nd European Conference  
on Psychotherapy Research**

Sept. 3-7, 1985

**SPR**

**Society for Psychotherapy Research**

and

**Les Journées de Psychologie Clinique  
de Louvain-la-Neuve**

**Presses Universitaires de Louvain**

Louvain-la-Neuve

1987

# **Resistance and Transference as Two Main Constituents in an « Experimental Analogue » of Free Association**

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## **1. Introduction**

Free association, developed by Freud from its predecessors, the cathartic and the hypnecathartic procedures of Breuer (1985), can be considered as the central method of psychoanalytic treatment. “Lie down on the couch and say whatever comes to your mind” is not only one of the most widely known psychoanalytic stereotypes; it is at the core of this branch of psychotherapy. “The basic rule”, as it is also commonly referred to, and its successive freeing of the suggestive elements characterizing hypnosis, is doubtless one of the great and lasting achievements in Freud’s outline of Psychoanalysis. Leaving the “dead-end-street” of suggestion and building up the “multiple-lane-highway” to the unconscious (at least that is how the early Freud conceived his basic rule) was to mean opening the door to important phenomena, such as transference and resistance for example, which still constitute basic concepts of clinical theory and thinking in psychoanalysis today. In this way, Free Association was not only a new therapeutic procedure for Psychoanalysis, but it was bound to become the most important source of clinical data and theoretical insight. Once Free Association as the clinical method of Psychoanalysis was integrated into the therapeutic framework, transference and resistance, as well as dreams, slips of the tongue, parapraxes, defense mechanisms and their respective clinical manifestations were more likely to be seen as candidates for psychotherapeutic interest than before. Phenomena which have previously conceived as disturbing variables leading to confusion and not infrequently to the premature termination of therapy, and not as valuable information about the patient and his psychological organization, became indispensable parts of the therapeutic discourse.

Clearly then, without the development of this method of Free Association, the basic psychoanalytic paradigm could not have been established in the present form.

However, relative to its importance for the development of theory and technique, empirical research on Free Association is rather limited. Our main goal was to contribute to filling this obviously wide gap and, if possible, to initiate further research on this topic.

## **2. The Design of our Study**

In designing our study, we were mainly guided by Bordin’s investigation on Free Association, particularly by this analogue model of the therapeutic situation and his scales to assess the quality of Free Association. Using an “experimental analogue” (similar to that developed by Bordin et al., 1996) involves an awareness of the intricacy of the therapeutic situation, of the complexity of the relationship between analyst and patient, and knowledge of how to transport that into an experimental setting. We chose the following factors as independent variables.

### **2.1. Variables**

Trait Anxiety: A concept which is based on work done by Spielberger (1966) and which refers to (and only to) anxiety in so-called “Ego-involving-situations”. Since we considered

the task of Free Association as highly Ego-involving, it seemed to us to be the proper anxiety concept for our use.

Verbal Capabilities: It was to be expected that verbal abilities would play an important role in the process of Free Association, particularly as far as the association of nonverbal material (such as imagery and pictorial material) and its “translation” into language is concerned. For that purpose, we chose for our investigation a “Verbal Creativity Test”, developed by Schoppe in 1975, which is closely connected to the quantitative measurement of verbal facilities used in common intelligence tests.

Postural Differences: In accordance with what is often claimed in the literature, we expected the lying down as opposed to the sitting position of subjects to have a facilitating effect on Free Association. Furthermore, we decided to combine the lying and sitting positions with face-to-face and non face-to-face positions. We thought it would be interesting to examine the analytic ritual of lying down and non face-to-face associating within the frame of our study, because it tacitly eliminates one of the most important factors of human communication: eye-contact.

Free Association with and without a stimulus: The stimulus seemed to be likely to vary the degree of “structure” of the experimental situation and in this way its ambiguity. Previous studies in this area could show an effect of ambiguity on Free Association (Kaplan, 1966).

Since we were also highly interested in the question as to whether subsequent Free Association would cause differences in performance, whether or not a “learning effect” of Free Association is involved, several experimental sessions were conducted for each subject.

## 2.2. Experimental Design

16 male subjects (all of them medical students aged between 20 and 30) participated in our study. Each of them associated for eight 30 minute sessions, resulting in 128 total sessions. In all of these sessions, a completely silent investigator was present. The Free Association was tape-recorded for the sake of further analysis. Before the subjects actually started free associating for the first time, they had to fill out a general questionnaire about their feelings, opinions and motivation regarding the experiment, and two special questionnaires referring to their trait-anxiety and their verbal creativity. On the basis of this information, they were assigned to three different anxiety groups (low, middle and high anxiety). Apart from the systematically varied differences of posture and stimulus (which will not be detailed here) each of the 128 sessions was identical.

Before entering the experimental room and starting his Free Association, subjects had to answer the “state-anxiety” questionnaire of Spielberger. Following 30 minutes of Free Association, two more questionnaires assessing their feelings, thoughts, wellbeing, motivation throughout the session were added. Finally there was a semi-structured interview, conducted by a second investigator, about the above-mentioned topics of the questionnaires, some additional questions referring to impressions and feelings of the subject about the experiment itself and about themselves as part of this experiment.

These interviews were written up by the investigator and later analysed with the help of content-analytic procedures. Analysis of the tape-recorded Free Association was twofold. We used both rating-scales developed by Bordin to assess important features of Free Association (Content, Involvement, Spontaneity, Language) and a computer supported content analysis,

which focuses on qualitative features (i.e. the frequency of certain anxiety themes) and quantitative features (i.e. total number of words) of the text as well.

### 3. Findings

We found a very strong correlation between the ability to associate freely and trait-anxiety, and a similar strong but positive correlation between Free Association and both verbal creativity and the “plus stimulus situation”. No significant effects related to the different body-positions of the associating person as well as to face to face contact were found.

Furthermore we found a significant increase in the ability to associate freely in later sessions, which seems to indicate something like a “learning-effect”, at least as far as this experimental setting is concerned.

The overall motivation to participate in this study was relatively highly scored by our subjects. On a scale ranging from 0 to 10, there were only three subjects with a high score (6 or 7 points) and six subjects with motivation scores which can be regarded as considerably high (8 or 9 points).

Furthermore, among different possible attracting aspects of this study, our subjects selected self-experience as the most motivating one. (the mean score for this self-experience factor was 7.3 before and even 8.2 after all sessions, as opposed to a mean score of 2.3 for the financial aspect for example).

These figures show not only that there was a highly motivated sample involved in our experiment, they also show that the opportunity of self-experiencing – which is clearly the aspect most closely linked to a therapeutic situation – played the most important role among all of the motivating factors.

### 4. The Occurrence of Transference and Resistance

The main subject of this paper is the presentation of phenomena which we have chosen to develop at the outcome of examination of the semi-structured interviews and of our numerous questionnaires. That means we want to focus on the questions. “What is going on within a person who is participating in this kind of experiment?”, and “Is there any evidence that such an experimental design is eligible to elicit phenomena similar to those which occur in a real therapeutic situation?”

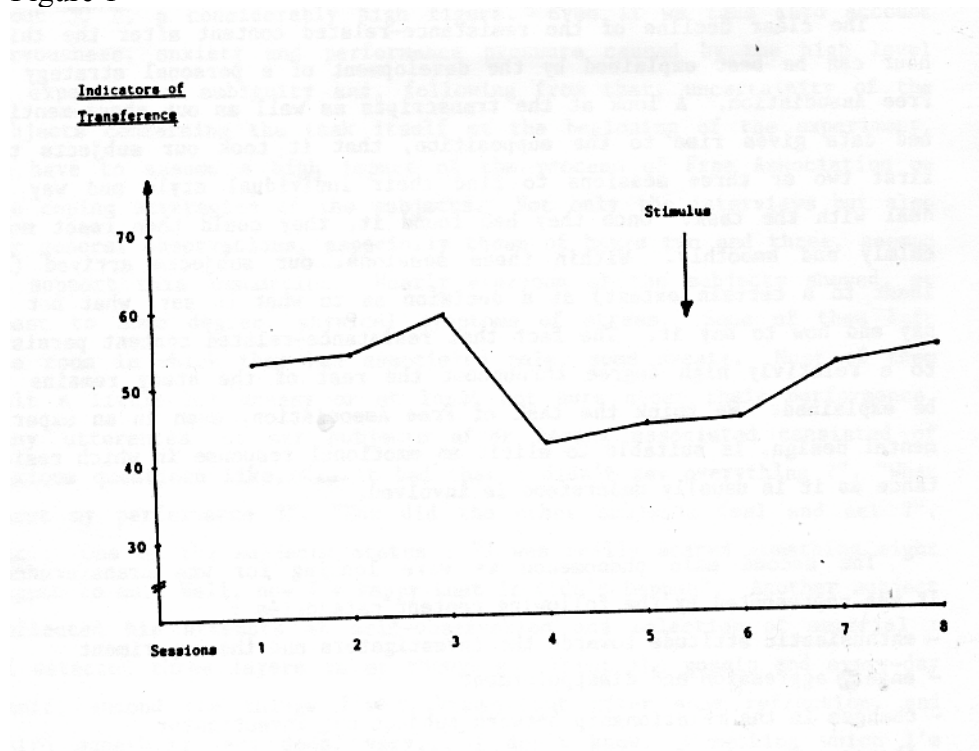
In addition to these various considerations, we tried to examine Free Association under conditions that come as close as possible to those one would expect to find in a real therapeutic situation. Only data and findings based on an experimental design which matches a therapeutic situation in its main features allow meaningful generalizations and conclusions with regard to the therapeutic process itself. Another problem occurring in this context concerned the kind of indicator that could be used to show that a process similar to the therapeutic one was triggered by our experimental task. For that purpose, we decided to look for two clinical phenomena, transference and resistance, which are commonly referred to as main constituents of the patient’s behavior in therapy. The material we examined mainly consisted of our short interviews conducted with our subjects right after each single session, of some special questions in our questionnaires as to their subjective feelings and of observations as to their overall behavior.

The method of analysis of the semi-structured interviews was based on a content analysis, which consisted of seven different content categories. From these we chose the following content categories as indicators for the existence of resistance:

- anxiety, anger, aggression towards the investigators and the experiment
- physical symptoms of stress
- change to a more aggressive or depressed sort of mood

The analysis of our short interviews with these categories shows (Fig. 1) a distinct peak of resistance-related content within the first three hours.

Figure 1



After three hours, the overall amount of this type of content drops sharply to keep a lower level throughout the rest of our study. The proportion of this resistance-related content to the whole body of test was about 30%, a considerably high figure. Even if we take into account nervousness, anxiety and performance pressure caused by the high level of experimental ambiguity and, following from that, uncertainty of the subjects concerning the task itself at the beginning of the experiment, we have to assume a high impact of the process of Free Association on the coping strategies of the subjects. Not only the interviews but also our general observations, especially those of hours two and three, seemed to support this assumption. Nearly everyone of the subjects showed, at least to some degree, physical symptoms of stress. Some of them left the room in which they had associated pale, some sweaty. Most of them felt a little bit uneasy or at least not sure about their performance. Many utterances of our subjects after having associated consisted of anxious questions like, "Is it bad that I didn't say everything?", "What about my performance?", "How did the other subjects feel and act?", etc.. One of the subjects states: "I was really scared something might happen to me. Well, now I'm happy that it didn't happen". Another subject reflected his attempts at self-observation and selection of material: "I detected three layers in my thoughts. First the gossip and avery-day stuff, second the things I'm talking about after some reflection, and third something very deep, very... I don't know. Something which I'm really not able to put into words".

The analysis of our questionnaires supports the assumption of a strong emotional impact of Free Association on subject and the appearance of resistance as well. Analysis of these questionnaires provided important additional information. For example session three also showed the highest value for the subjects' feelings of inhibition caused by the presence of the investigator in the experimental room. Session three also showed the highest value for their feelings of being more able to associate with another investigator. Up to the fourth session, the subjects revealed an increase in their feelings of not being able to say out loud the thoughts and images which occurred to them during the session. On the other hand, and this sheds some light on the conflict from which our subjects suffered, there was also a high value for the wish to continue and be involved with the study in the third session.

The clear decline of the resistance-related content after the third our can be best explained by the development of a personal strategy of Free Association. A look at the transcripts as well as our above-mentioned data gives rise to the supposition, that it took our subjects the first two or three sessions to find their individual style and way to deal with the task. Once they had found it, they could then react more calmly and smoothly. Within these sessions, our subjects arrived (at least to a certain extent) at a decision as to what to say, what not to say and how to say it. The fact that resistance-related content persists to relatively high degree throughout the rest of the study remains to be explained. We think the task of Free Association, even in an experimental design, is suitable to elicit an emotional response in which resistance as it is usually understood is involved.

The second main phenomenon we were looking for was transference.

It was represented by the following content categories:

- enthusiastic attitude towards the investigators and the experiment
- anger, aggression and disappointment
- changes in the relationship between subject and investigator
- changes of mood before and after the experiment

As opposed to the resistance-related content, the transference-related content accounted for a higher percentage of the total material investigated. 47% seems to be a valid indication that an emotional frame of mind or attitude was ruling the behaviour of our subjects, which would be referred to as transference within a psychoanalytic treatment.

Figure 2.

As can be seen in Figure 2, utterances and behaviour of our subjects attributed to transference show a more stable curve during the course of the experiment than the features characteristics of resistance. But a similar decrease is visible after the third session. While the latter can be explained by a partly overlapping area between transference and resistance in terms of our categories (which in turn makes sense in terms of the tight connection between both the clinical phenomena) and in this way by the establishment of a personal strategy of Free Association mentioned above, the high and more or less constant overall percentage of transference-related content is an interesting fact. One possible explanation is that the process of Free Association in this particular setting leads to an intrapsychic state of conflict within each of the subjects, which in turn makes a special relationship between subject and investigator necessary.

However, since both the investigators were to stay as neutral as possible towards our subjects, there was a constant need for subjects to express their wishes and wants regarding the establishment of such a relationship. Many of the utterances, some of which would like to quote here, underscore this need in a surprisingly direct manner. One subject said for example: "This situation is kind of threatening, particularly if I try to become loose. I think it's because you are not really supporting". Some sessions later, the subject uttered: "Gee, I really need the feedback from you!" Furthermore it was striking how often the term "therapy" was mentioned in the short interviews, and how openly the investigators were compared with therapists: "I don't know, I thin I consider you both as my therapists" is an example of the clear articulation of this kind of fantasy.

Other utterances along the same line of thought are: "I would like to be able to really talk to you, you being more responsive". "I'm not sure what would have happened if somebody else had been present". "Would be nice if you lied down and I could listen". "Is time up yet? I'd rather stay!" "It's always strange to leave you!"

The list of these sentences and similar ones could be easily continued. We think it shows pretty clearly what sort of needs are expressed. On the one hand the wish for a closer relationship to the investigators which would have enabled the subjects to get more feedback. On the other hand fantasies which put the investigators in the place of therapists. The subjects consistently showed a constant and strong tendency to use the time following the Free Association to satisfy such needs, to involve the second investigator in several talks about their experiences, to talk to other subjects about similar ideas and so on, sometimes creating situations not very easy to deal with for the investigator in question.

### 3. Summary

Concerning the important as well as necessary question of whether studying Free Association in an experimental analogue instead of the actual therapeutic situation can be regarded as a helpful tool in psychoanalytic research or not, we want to state:

In participating in an experimental study on Free Association, our subjects showed verbal and nonverbal behaviour which can easily be linked to clinical phenomena which in turn can be considered as important constituents of a psychoanalytic treatment. It seems that these phenomena, namely transference and resistance, are elicited by the process of Free Association as such, taking place in an experimental design similar to ours. The occurrence of Transference and resistance (and corresponding material) in short interviews and questionnaires conducted immediately following the experimental task can be seen as a justification for using an "experimental analogue" to study Free Association.

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