

Free Association

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Because of the coronavirus, many of us are in isolation. Literally, we are no longer able to associate freely. This raises questions about free association in the psychoanalytic sense. Is psychoanalytic free association merely a verbal representation of our actual daily associations with others? No. If this were the case, the “social distancing” we’re experiencing would leave analysands with little to say in sessions. Is psychoanalytic free association, then, wholly independent of our social life? No. If this were the case, then psychoanalysis would be the mere mental exercise of navel gazing that its detractors sometimes accuse it of being.

Freud addressed the connection between psychoanalysis and real life when he considered how many sessions of psychoanalysis were optimal: “When the hours of work are less frequent, there is a risk of not being able to keep pace with the patient’s real life and of the treatment losing contact with the present” (SE 12, 127). So Freud expected psychoanalytic free association in some sense to parallel real life, though obviously psychoanalytic free association involves discrepancies between real life and the analysand’s session-by-session description of it. The analyst hears these—call them “logical”—inconsistencies in the analysand’s speech.

But there’s another kind of inconsistency, between the analysand’s lived experience in the present and his or her memories of the past. Freud was concerned that if the number of sessions fell to fewer than five per week, the analysis would be in danger of “losing contact with the present.” This suggests that the analysis is constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by the past. What is the past for the analysand? The family. Left to their own devices, analysands will

most often talk only of *mom-dad-me*. Lacan noted this fact, that family structure “actually involves a greater variety than . . . what analysands say about it. But what remains striking is that it’s all that analysands themselves speak about.” For Lacan, free association is “analysands’ constant rehashing of their relationship to their parents” (Seminar 24, 19 April 1977).

So analysands’ accounts of daily life—stated in plain language—get verbally distorted by another grammar, the grammar of the family. But the analysand, naively, thinks that this is the *only* grammar. Continuing the passage of Lacan just quoted: “There’s not a single case in which the analysand recognizes the specificity that differentiates his particular relation to his parents more or less immediately. The fact that this is all that he talks about blocks off from him all the nuances of his specific relation” (Seminar 24, 19 April 1977). Psychoanalysis, then, becomes a practice of teasing apart two strands of language that are usually inseparably united: the social strand and the familial strand. Who knows what effects social distancing may have? We are undoubtedly in a time of illness, isolation, hardship, and tragedy. Isolation might lead to navel gazing, but isolation, might, on the other hand, help us each to “recognize the specificity” of our own familial relations and to allow the social—thrown into relief by its absence—*finally* to be the social.