

ON FERENCZI'S RELAXATION PRINCIPLE¹.

Franz Alexander, M.D.

The increasing appreciation and knowledge of the emotional factors in the psycho-analytical situation are a characteristic of the recent development of psycho-analytic technique. It is well known that in the beginning the method of free association was used without recognition of the importance of the emotional relation between patient and physician which develops while using this technique. Very soon, however, apart from the more intellectual device of eliminating conscious control over the trains of thought, the emotional factor, the transference, proved to be the most powerful agent in mobilizing unconscious material. The original idea was that the analyst, through his passive, unemotional attitude, plays the neutral role of a screen on which the patient projects according to infantile patterns different qualities and at the same time develops the corresponding emotions. The easy, objective, matter-of-fact atmosphere of the analytical situation facilitates indisguised manifestation of these infantile reactions, which have been repressed as such and expressed only in the unintelligible language of symptoms.

This objective unemotional attitude, however, appears to be contradictory to the different roles which the patient attributes to the analyst. The patient may see in the analyst a tyrannical or a weak father, an understanding mother, or competitive brother, etc.; but in contrast to these projections the real attitude of the analyst is neutral, unemotional and objective. As is well known, just this contrast supplies one of the therapeutic factors of the treatment. The patient is forced constantly to confront his subjective projections with the real attitude of the analyst, and this comparison works as a natural brake on the emotions, keeps them at a certain optimum level, and makes possible emotional experience and simultaneous insight into the emotions. But in spite of this, in many cases the emotional participation of the patient is either above or below this desirable optimum. I refer to the over-intellectual character of some analyses of obsessional neurotics and to the over-emotional episodes in the analyses of certain schizoid and infantile personalities.

Repeated attempts have been made, therefore, to experiment with different forms of activity in order to adjust the analytical atmosphere to these different types. One has to realize that in every form of activity, in forbidding or allowing something to the patient, the analyst assumes a certain role which is independent of the patient's subjectively motivated projection. In forbidding or allowing something, the analyst actually and dramatically plays a part, and because of this the patient's reactions are no longer determined exclusively by subjective factors, but also by the analyst's behavior. For example, a patient may no longer fear the analyst because he attributes to him a paternal role, but because the analyst actually assumes a paternal role. It is evident this dramatic participation of the analyst in the emotional situation, if appropriately chosen, will stimulate the emotional process, especially if it corresponds to the subjective situation of the patient. This kind of experimentation, however, requires systematic dealing with the problem of how the analyst's behavior influences the patient's mental processes during the analysis. In the classical technique, this problem is not significant, because the analyst's behavior is prescribed; it is constant and undramatic. The therapeutic significance of this constant and passive behavior is sufficiently well known. As soon as the analyst, however, purposely changes his own behavior in order to stimulate the analytical process, he introduces a new technical device, which requires a careful and critical investigation.

Ferenczi unquestionably deserves first credit for developing this new technical possibility. After several studies dealing with active therapy, in a recent publication, "Child Analysis in the Analysis of Adults, "(²)

1.- Conferencia dictada en el encuentro de la Asociación Americana Ortopsiquiátrica en Baltimore, Febrero 20, 1932, bajo el título "La Significación de las Actitudes Emocionales en la situación Psicoanalítica"-

2.- This Journal, Vol, XII., 1931, p. 468.

he gives us more details of his “relaxation principle”. The gist of this principle is that the analyst should consciously attempt to increase the easy atmosphere of the analytical situation by adjusting his own attitude to the unconscious mood of the patient. For example, Ferenczi says that he assumes a childish manner at the moment when the patient emotionally regresses to an early infantile mentality, i.e. he actually assumes a behavior characteristic of the play-room, and thus dramatically participates in the transference situation. With his playacting, he makes it easier for the patient to express in a dramatic fashion his infantile emotions. The patient can much more easily give in to his infantile reactions if he feels that the analyst assumes the same attitude; he is no more inhibited by his own criticism. One-sided acting makes the patient self-conscious, and a dramatic acting-out of certain situations is easier if both patient and analyst participate in it.

I myself have often felt it of great advantage deliberately to relieve the solemn atmosphere of the analytical situation which many patients connect with it. The attitude of objectivity and understanding alone very often does not suffice to make the patient feel easy enough to express himself. His unconscious needs encouragement through the analyst’s manifest sympathy for his infantile manifestations, and the analyst should for a time become actively an advocate of the repressed tendencies and not of those of the repressing forces. Objectivity and understanding are characteristics of the intellect of the more highly developed part of the personality, and therefore are foreign to the emotional atmosphere of the unconscious. Ferenczi was indeed bold enough consistently to follow through this principle to its utmost application.

It must, however, be left for future experience whether and in just what form the principle of a histrionic activity by the analyst can be incorporated into psychoanalytical technique. Probably in the extreme form in which Ferenczi describes this technique it will remain a last refuge to which we shall only resort to break up the emotional resistance of certain exceptionally difficult patients. I do not think, however, that a general principle can be worked out on this basis; although it is possible that a more conscious handling of the analyst’s own behavior within certain limits will prove of advantage in most cases for mobilizing the deeper unconscious layers. A less radical application of the relaxation principle I have used for a long time, which the following example illustrates, together with its therapeutic value:

A twenty-year-old delinquent boy with a tendency toward impulsive stealing and truancy had the habit of telling phantastic lies. He told everybody elaborate stories about his travels round the world as a sailor or steward. He maintained that he had been in India and China, London, Paris, Hamburg, and Berlin, and he could speak in detail of his interesting experiences in these different parts of the world. It had never been established that his stories were invented, although some of the psychiatrists who knew him and had examined him before had some doubts about them. The vivid way, however, in which he spoke about his experiences and the many plausible details were able to dissipate the scepticism of his hearers. At the beginning of his analysis, he told me also about these stories, but never came back to them again until after he had been in analysis for three months. The analysis revealed an extreme, unusually strong form of sense of inferiority connected with envy and jealousy towards almost everybody, especially towards his older brother. His impulsive stealing and truancy were closely related with these emotions of inferiority, envy, and jealousy. In the third month of his analysis, he spontaneously spoke again about his travels. The way he confessed the phantastic nature of his can best be demonstrated by quoting the records of two consecutive analytical sessions.

He started one session by talking of his travels. He asked me whether he had spoken about them before.

(Analyst.) “Not very much. You don’t like to talk about them. You mentioned at the beginning that you had traveled round the world, but you never mentioned it again, which is peculiar, because you like to boast about the things you have done.”

That was because he did not see what tourists see-but only saloons and public houses. After he got on shore, he saw very little that was interesting and went with the other sailors to the nearest saloon or brothel. It was only on his own initiative that he saw anything worth while at all. So, for example, when they went from Le Havre to Paris, or to Calcutta; he also saw a good deal of China. He saw Shanghai and the Great Wall, and the Yellow River, the Yangtze. One Chinese steward told him interesting stories.

He would like to write. That is one of his permanent ambitions. That would make him feel important. That would relieve his inferiority feeling.

(Analyst.) "I think you do that also by speaking about your travels."

Yes, he admits that he does brag. He wants to confess to me that some of his stories are not true, but some are true. For example, he did not see the Great Wall, but he saw China. Also, his trip to Paris is true.

(Analyst.) "Now I really do not know what is true and what is no true. Tell me the truth. There is no sense in your telling me these stories and not confessing their phantastic nature."

He will tell me the truth. He was in Calcutta, but he was not in Bombay. That is all.

(Analyst.) "But you have been in Paris and Berlin and in London?"

No, he was not in Berlin. That was bragging. But he really was in Hamburg, London, and Liverpool, but in London he did not see all the things which he said he saw.

Now I tell him an anecdote about bragging.

A hunter was telling about his experiences in Russia. "One winter I was driving along in my sleigh," he said, "and suddenly realized that a hundred wolves were following me."

One of the listeners interrupted him and said, "Were there actually so many as a hundred wolves?"

"Well, I don't know exactly," he replied, "but at least fifty. They came nearer and nearer and..."

Again he was interrupted. "Perhaps there were not even fifty wolves, either." "Oh, yes," said hunter, "for I saw at least ten distinctly. And then one of them, a big one, came quite near to the sleigh."

(Another voice interrupted.) "Perhaps there were not even ten wolves." "But," said he, "I saw a big one quite clearly approaching the sleigh." "Perhaps there was no wolf at all?"

"Then what was that black shadow I saw in the bush?"

The patient laughs and tells me in exchange another story about bragging. Two Jews met on the street. One admired the overcoat of the other and asked,

"How much did it cost?" "\$120.00," was the answer. "But your coat is also nice, how much did it cost?" "Oh, this one cost \$200.00." "Oh, that is too much, that is impossible," "If you come down, I will come down too," answered the first Jew. (Analyst.) "Now you come down first."

"Well, I was not in Berlin, and I was not in Bombay, but I was in China, but I did not see the Great Wall. All the other things are true, but I can't prove it. Ask me, for example, about Hamburg."

(Analyst.) "I won't ask you. If you tell me, then I have to relieve you."

He starts describing the harbor in Hamburg. He has pictures he snapped in Hamburg. If I want, he will bring them to me.

(Analyst.) "You did not mention whether the story about Paris is true or not." "Yes, it is." (Silence.) "No, it is not. But I have told it so often that I relieve it

now myself. But London and Liverpool are true." (Analyst.) "Have you clear memories of London?"

Yes, he saw Hyde Park and was in the Coliseum. He has picture postcards which he brought from London. He was in Bond Street, in Threadneedle Street, where the Bank of England is. He saw a monument, he does not exactly remember what it was, but like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He saw Piccadilly Circus.

(Analyst.) "You remember the Circus?" No, he has forgotten it.

(Analyst.) "Why don't you tell me now the whole truth? I don't want to force you to tell me, but I see that you want to tell me, only you have not the courage now."

He was in London, but he did not see all these things which he told me about. (Analyst.) "It seems to be very difficult for you to confess all that."

"Yes, it disturbs my illusion of having seen all these things. It brings me back to earth." (In a complaining voice, almost weeping): "I can't tell these stories any more to anyone. You must

think I am a terrible liar. You won't believe anything now. How long will the analysis last?"
"Why?"

"Because it destroys all my illusions and does not substitute anything for them."

I tell him that I think he will be able to substitute reality for phantasy only after he has renounced living entirely in phantasy.

In the following session he wants to speak again about his travels. "I never was in Europe. I once went to China with an oil tanker, but I couldn't get out of the ship. I saw nothing." He was otherwise only around here, in America.

(Analyst.) "It was difficult to confess that, was it not?"

"Yes, it was, because that was the only thing in which I could show my superiority to others. Even towards you, that was a source of superiority. Towards you, I feel so inferior. You are much more educated, but in that way, I could build up a kind of superiority. It was also difficult to confess because I did not want to appear to be a liar. But the anecdote you told me made it easier for me to change my mind and tell the truth."

(Analyst.) "Do you still feel it as a great loss that you told me the truth?"

"To be frank, I shall, for a time, go on telling these stories to other people. But it relieved me to tell you the truth." He says that it does not do him any good to deceive me.

Two days later, he confessed to me that he never had been even in China. This last lie he kept for two days after he confessed everything else, because he says this story was the most glamorous one of all and gave him the greatest satisfaction in phantasy.

The psychological effect of my technique was that by telling the anecdote I showed understanding and sympathy for this kind of bragging. Furthermore, I showed him the universality of bragging and of phantastic pseudologia, that it is a rather common human manifestation and not his own special defect. Moreover, by telling him the anecdote I gave up the attitude of an authority and relieved his sense of inferiority towards me. But the motive of his phantastic lying was just this sense of inferiority, and only after this was diminished by telling him the anecdote was he able to confess his lies. In this case the relaxation principle was used not to mobilize unconscious material, but to facilitate conscious confession.

In working with criminals the principle of relaxation has especial importance and, I should say, almost general application. The only way to gain the confidence of the criminals is to eliminate from the analytical situation the usual attitude of discrimination against this group of individuals, as if they were different human beings. At the very beginning of my criminal work I learned the importance of this principle. In the case of a twenty-one-year-old delinquent boy I succeeded at the first meeting in gaining his full confidence and was myself astonished at the amount of confidential material obtained compared with the results of the two court psychiatrists who had investigated him before. To my question, "Why didn't you tell any of these things to the other doctors? That would have helped you very much," he answered that it was impossible for him to talk freely to them because their psychiatric investigation reminded him so much of the investigation of the police and of the judge. "But you talk with me," he said, "as with a human being, and I do not even feel that you think I did something wrong."

As you see, that is essentially the same principle as Ferenczi's assuming the infantile attitude. The unconscious feels at home in the atmosphere which Ferenczi purposely creates and can manifest itself most freely. The inhibiting factor, the critical attitude of the superego, is eliminated by the analyst descending to the level of the unconscious. The psychology of conscious confession is the same: the analyst, in discarding the conventional critical attitude towards the criminal, diminishes the criminal's own inhibitions which block his confession, and he can talk freely if he does not feel the discrimination which he experienced from the first moment he came in contact with the official representatives of criminal justice.

But even after obtaining a conscious confession, the relaxation principle is of great importance to get unconscious material, because of the extreme sense of guilt which is so common with the neurotic type of criminals. Moreover, the confession of unconscious tendencies usually follows conscious confessions, and so long as the patient withholds conscious material, there is no hope of progressing to unconscious layers. Thus the principle of relaxation facilitates both conscious confession and the revelation of unconscious material. Of course nothing is essentially new in these technical devices. According to Freud's statement

that one cannot attack an enemy who is not present, our first attempt must be to get the unconscious material into consciousness. Without coaxing out the repressed and condemned unconscious tendencies from their hidden position, the intellect cannot deal with them. It is indeed sometimes necessary that the analyst not only becomes the benign super-ego in contrast to the over-harsh super-ego of the neurotic criminal, but that he often avoids being any super-ego at all and simply is an equal of the unconscious. It should be realized, however, that if we go too far with our activity in order to mobilize unconscious material, difficulty will arise when we try to force the patient to insight. He will feel cheated, if we now change our attitude. At first we were accomplices of the unconscious, we played the role of an “agent provocateur”, and then we suddenly change our attitude and force him to take an intellectual attitude towards all the unconscious tendencies which are brought to the surface with the help of technical devices. It is hard, therefore, to give general prescriptions. At present analytical tact is the only means of estimating how far we can go in changing our roles during the analytical process.

We must remember the dynamic difficulty which Freud met while using the method of cathartic hypnosis, which by eliminating the conscious layers of the personality brought unconscious material eruptively to the surface. With this abreaction the essential therapeutic problem was not solved, namely, that of inducing the conscious ego to face this unconscious material. As Ferenczi himself remarks, the effects of his relaxation principle reminded him very much of abreaction in hypnosis. The chief economic principle of psychoanalytical technique, which makes it superior to cathartic hypnosis, is that of keeping the emergence of unconscious material into consciousness as a gradual flow regulated by the patient’s resistance. This resistance we have learned not to attempt to circumvent by different technical devices and tricks, but gradually to decrease by giving insight. My patient, after he confessed that my telling of the anecdote made his confession possible, later reproached me for having robbed him of something which he still needed. He predicted that he would go on telling his phantastic stories to other people; and indeed a long time after his confession he still lied to others about his travels round the world.

Probably everyone knows from experience a similar phenomenon of everyday life regarding the psychological effect of jokes. In a group of respectable persons, after one or two questionable jokes have been told with great success and followed by laughter, in the very next moment an unpleasant atmosphere spreads out and everyone is ashamed, or at least annoyed, for having given in to laughter. The more respectable the conscious personality of the hearer is, the greater is the subsequent feeling of having been cheated or seduced to give in to emotions which were not controlled at the moment. Resentment for having laughed is essentially the same phenomenon as the increased resistance of the patient which he shows after repressed material has been forcibly coaxed out of him with the help of technical tricks, such as hypnosis or the related method of extreme relaxation. Although I do not see any other possibility of getting into good rapport in a relatively short time with criminals than by a deliberate use of the relaxation principle, yet I think that less we have to give in to this necessity of discarding the objective and unemotional attitude of the classical technique, the better for the procedure of the analysis. In the period of working through, that is to say, in the period of conscious digestion of the unconscious material, we have to pay for every deviation from the classical analytical attitude. For analysis is a dynamic process, consisting in the interplay of repressing and repressed forces, and we have to base our progress in revealing unconscious material on solid grounds.

Every sudden gain of ground is necessarily followed by the increased resistance of the patient, and consequently only such progress can be considered as really sound which is not followed by a vehement counterattack of the repressive forces. Even though in difficult cases we shall not be able to avoid entirely the active employment of the relaxation principle, while using it we have to know its disadvantages and consider it a necessary evil.

(1933) ON FERENCZI’S RELAXATION PRINCIPLE. IT. J. PSYCHO-ANAL., 14:183(IJP)

Instituto de Desarrollo Psicológico. INDEPSI. LTDA.

ALSF-CHILE