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How I Work with Unconscious Process: A Case Example

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Pages 336-348 | Published online: 19 Dec 2019

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Abstract

I begin with a brief theoretical presentation, to orient the reader for the longer clinical case example that follows. The theory, my conceptualization of unconscious process, is the variety of field theory that I have been developing for some years. The theory grows from the idea of unformulated experience, according to which the unconscious is composed of various, shifting potentials, only some of which will be actualized in conscious experience. Which of these potentials is formulated and thereby emerges in consciousness is determined by the nature of the interpersonal field. Constriction in the field reduces the freedom of thought and feeling of the field's participants. Freeing the field, then, and not understanding via interpretation, becomes the clinical aim.

Keywords: [interpersonal field](#), [unconscious](#), [unformulated experience](#), [enactment](#), [dissociation](#), [relational freedom](#)

Unformulated Experience and The Events of the Field

For Freud (1895, 1915), unconscious contents are fully formed. These contents—that is, thing-presentations—cannot be directly

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grasped by the mind, so we cannot tell what they are except by inference. This is the eternal problem faced by psychoanalysis: given that we are locked out of unconscious process, how can we know its nature? Freud seems to take it for granted that the intimations we do have of thing-presentations—word-presentations—refer to fully formed meanings. Unconscious phantasy, that is, while it cannot be directly perceived, is “there.” It preexists our acquaintance with the word-presentations we use to try to grasp it.

I don't think unconscious process is best conceived as fully formed meaning. For me, unconscious process is *potential* experience, what conscious experience *might become*; and for that reason, I (2010a, 2014) do not accept that the contents of the unconscious are aptly described as unconscious phantasy. I describe the potential meaningfulness that, for me, is unconscious process as “unformulated experience,” and I describe it as states that are vaguely organized, primitive, global, nonideational, and affectively saturated. I take the position that conscious experience is not static, but instead is continuously in the process of coming into being—of being formulated and reformulated—over and over again (Stern, 1983, 1997, 2010b, 2015, 2018).

I hope it makes sense, then, that in my frame of reference, the most crucial clinical events from moment to moment—both inside and outside the consulting room—are those that resolve the ambiguity of unformulated experience into some sort of explicit, conscious shape. In my thinking, the most significant influence on the shape taken by conscious experience is the current configuration of the interpersonal field. That is, the nature of the analytic relatedness is largely responsible for what the analyst and the patient can consciously experience in one another's presence. To the extent that the field is free to develop spontaneously, the conscious thoughts and feelings of both analyst and patient are free to do the same; and to the extent that the field is frozen or constricted, the depth and spontaneity of the participants' conscious experience is compromised. The appearance of novel conscious experience, therefore, depends on a change, or shift, in the field.

And so, in my frame of reference, the revelation of unconscious

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content is not really the point, and interpretation is not necessarily the means of therapeutic action. Taking this point of view is hardly equivalent to dismissing interpretation, of course, because what we say to our patients is an important influence on the next generation of clinical events. But more important, from where I sit, is the spontaneity and freedom of the field. For me, when the analyst is capable of knowing or feeling something new toward or about the patient—that is, when the analyst becomes capable of a new experience, or of making a new interpretation—the particulars of what the analyst says to the patient (the interpretations) play a lesser role in therapeutic action than the newly available freedom in the field that made the interpretation possible in the first place (Stern, 2009, 2013, 2017). Thus, I try to focus my clinical attention on the ways that the field is constricted, ways in which what I have called “relational freedom” is compromised. I generally don’t think about my interventions as consciously chosen interpretations, even though they may take that form, but as participations that grow from my conscious and (especially) unconscious involvement in the field (Stern, 2015). I judge the success of my interventions by asking myself whether they contribute to the field’s spontaneous unfolding, or instead, reinforce some kind of interpersonal constriction.

Clinical Illustration

Now let me introduce you to Alan, a 26-year old patient of mine. He is sweet, emotionally generous, charming, warm, as honest as he can be, and self-effacing. His self-effacement can be misleading, though. It’s sincere, but it does come and go. Alan is often viciously self-critical, to the point of being self-hateful; but in certain significant respects he also has a very high opinion of himself. He has an MBA, a powerful interest in being successful and wealthy, and is highly intelligent. He should probably be called brilliant. Alan came to me through a colleague from another state. I see him three times a week, and we have worked together for about a year. Recently a series of events took place between us that I hope will illustrate my thoughts about working with unconscious process.

Alan is in treatment because of anxiety and depression that have

often become severe enough to be debilitating, making it more or less impossible for him to get out of bed. This, of course, has been a challenge for him in many ways, and certainly in his career. (More about that in a moment.) But when he can work, he takes advantage of the fact that he is unusually knowledgeable and intuitive about finance for someone his age. He has started working for several hedge funds, and in each, he is almost immediately recognized as a *wunderkind*, and is given a surprising amount of responsibility. And each time he fails, because, after starting by firing on all cylinders—enthusiastic, impressive, and full of energy—Alan simply cannot get himself out of bed and into the office. The prospect of success has seemed only to worsen this problem.

Each time this happens, Alan finds a way to pick himself up, to rebuild his hopes and try again. Each time, he has been able to use his father's considerable influence in the world of finance to gain a new toehold and to create high expectations among his older colleagues. As things deteriorated in his most recent job (the only one I have been around to witness), and for a time thereafter, he was overcome with despair, suicidal feeling, and crushing self-hatred. And yet it seems that no one, not even those he has disappointed, reviles or blames him. Alan tends to inspire warm feeling in those around him, and that includes me. So when he fails, it seems to his coworkers that it's just a real shame that he couldn't make it work. He has quite a few close, longstanding friends, young men he has known since the very beginning of his life, a fact that bodes well for the future.

Alan is the oldest of four and has two sisters and a brother. They are all close with one another. The siblings are allies who depend on one another in many ways, and especially in dealing with their parents.

Alan's relationships to father and mother are more complicated. I would say that he is devoted to them; but I would also say that he and they all need to see him that way. His father, who pays his treatment bills and living expenses, seems to me to be sincerely concerned about his son, and calls me for advice now and then, which I have been unwilling to give him. I tell him that I understand that he feels he must do what he can to motivate his son, but that this is between the two of them, and that he must

do what he believes is best. I have recently found that the fact I've taken these calls at all is problematic for Alan, who said, up to that point, that I should feel free to talk to his father. Alan is nothing if not obliging—often to his detriment. Now he agrees with me when I tell him that I think that talking with his father may be making him feel that the treatment belongs just a little less to him. Alan experiences his father as loving and generous, but also as demanding, self-centered, and incapable of seeing Alan's point of view.

Mother has been diagnosed as bipolar and she drinks too much. Alan grew up with her frequent tantrums, during which she screamed at the children in a way that often frightened him. Sometimes these episodes took place in public, which was humiliating for him; sometimes Alan was reduced to tears and terror, hiding for hours in a dark closet. Mother and father are, and always have been, very taken with Alan's talents, especially his intelligence, which mother described to her friends and acquaintances in great detail, sometimes in front of him. Alan tells me he was very well behaved as a boy, and I believe him. His mother helped to create this attribute and then exploited it by displaying him in front of her friends like a show pony. Alan can say that he resented this repeated scenario; but he did not refuse to participate, nor does he now, when the occasion arises.

Alan grew up feeling that he owed it to both his parents to be a good son, which meant that he needed to be obedient and grateful. He seldom if ever talked back to them, and he felt bad on those occasions when he did. It seems to me, when I listen to him, that both his parents insist on, and feel entitled to, continuous devotion from him, and any deviation from that attitude results in either rage or terribly hurt feelings on their parts. Today, the hurt feelings and disappointment feel worse for Alan than the rage, but I can imagine that it was often different when he was younger. Alan and his three siblings talk frankly, with a degree of maturity that I find a little jarring, about how to handle their parents' needs. It often seems to me that the children are the parents.

When Alan was eight, he had an experience that he considers formative. In his own mind, he was what he refers to as a "magnificent" baseball player. One day he had a bad accident on

the field. His mother pooh-poohed the injury, and left the baseball diamond to do some errands. It turned out that Alan had a serious compound fracture. His athletic career was over, he says; he was all washed up. He has told this story to me a number of times, and each time, along with the trauma, I sense a smile hovering just behind his face, conveying what I imagine to be a secret pleasure in being able to *really nail* his mother on this one.

This history is impossibly condensed, but as sketchy as it is, I'm sure that it suggests some of what has happened in his relationship with me. Soon after Alan and I began working together, I spoke to his former analyst (who was the referring out-of-state colleague I mentioned before), someone I like and respect. I told her that I liked Alan. She responded, "Me, too. I just wish he would've come to treatment more often." So here we go. At that time, Alan was missing a session with me now and then. He was absent more often than most of my patients, but not enough to be a serious problem for the treatment. Things were going well for him then: He had just moved into his new apartment with his oldest friends, and he was soaring in his new job.

Then, as he seemed to be on an upward trajectory at work, Alan began missing sessions more often than he came to them. First, he missed one or two per week (out of three); then, within a month, he was missing most of them. Eventually he was missing almost every one. He was depressed, yes, but that wasn't even close to being the whole story. As I began to know his difficulty just getting himself out of his apartment, I started calling him when he was late, having a pretty good idea that he was still at home. Sometimes he picked up his phone, often he didn't. He always had long, complicated explanations for missing the session, and he kept insisting that he would get there if he could. But something always stymied him. I've often heard explanations like these; we all have. But Alan is a champion explainer. Over and over again something happened that seemed unavoidable.

Here's a typical example: One day at the time of his appointment he texted me to say that he was nauseous and dizzy, but hoped to talk to me on the phone. (He texted me quite often, usually between sessions; and, as we shall see, he often did valuable work in these texts, even when he didn't come to sessions.)

However, that day I didn't hear from him and he didn't answer his phone. He wasn't actually sick, it turned out. He had fallen asleep and slept through the ringing phone. I do believe that his text was sincere, and I believe he really did fall asleep and that he managed not to hear the phone. He doesn't lie.

Eventually I asked him if he wanted to continue in treatment. I told him that it wasn't necessary to force himself to do something he really didn't want to do, and that I thought that, if he didn't want to be there, he'd have a terrible time telling me. I also told him that I knew he felt he was wasting my time and his father's money, and that he hated that. This was a theme for him. He wanted to be able to support himself, but couldn't control his expenses, often feeling that just about the only thing in the world that would comfort him was very good food.

But Alan insisted that he did want to come, that he wanted and needed to be in therapy, and that his difficulty getting to me didn't reflect the wish not to be there. He agreed with me when I responded that I thought that he and I got along pretty well, and I told him that this fact made his claim that he did indeed want to continue our work seem plausible. It seemed that he wasn't avoiding treatment in order to avoid me—although, as you'll see, this was not at all the whole story.

Eventually I began spending a significant part of our time together offering Alan interpretations of this problem of getting to his sessions. I communicated my message in many different forms. The most common was to refer to two different parts of him, one that wanted to come and another that didn't. It wasn't hard to connect this little model to Alan's situation with his parents: his wish to be a good boy and his resentment about it. I told him that the ideal solution was to refuse to be a good boy—in this case, being a good patient—without feeling that he bore responsibility for it, because his absences were due to acts of god, not something he chose.

As time passed, I felt increasingly that what I was saying was stale and intellectualized, that, rather than finding what I wanted to say emerging in myself, in the way I generally feel the arrival in my mind of interventions that are vital and affectively alive, I was resorting to stereotyped interpretations. I told Alan more than once that I was unhappy with myself in this respect. I told him

that it seemed that we had to make some kind of sense of his capacity to come to his sessions, but that I felt like I was hitting him over the head with my interpretations. Predictably, Alan was reassuring. I knew he would have liked this reassurance to be sincere, but I also knew it wasn't.

What do you suppose happened in response to all my intellectualized argumentation? How could Alan maintain good-boy status while continuing to carry out his revenge? He did it by finding it impossible to understand what I said. My interpretations, as simple and stereotyped as they were, baffled him. He was genuinely puzzled. He struggled dutifully. But he just couldn't get it. Then, finally, Alan not only didn't come for his sessions, he stopped answering the phone. This went on for a number of sessions, longer than I had been out of touch with him before. I was concerned. At that point I received the following text. It is long even in this abbreviated version, from which, for reasons of confidentiality, I have cut about half.

Hi Dr. Stern, I'm safe in the Hamptons (where his family has a vacation house). You probably know I feel terrible that I haven't responded to you. To be fully transparent I haven't listened to your voice messages because as you might suspect it kinda makes me feel worse. I was feeling on Friday like I was just getting pulled in every direction socially and therefore bound to let everyone down. So anxiety kinda kicked in and said, "Escape to the Hamptons." I wanted to speak to you on the phone this morning during my session time.

What comes next is a long and detailed explanation of what stopped him from calling on that particular morning. Alan continues:

I've been continually ruminating on our conversation last Wednesday (that Wednesday was the last time we had actually talked), and I think I've finally got some understanding of it through my head, but it's still sort of fuzzy. But it didn't help. I just couldn't do what it felt like other people expected me to do...It was like I was telling myself to fuck off because I had already worked so hard in that session. [He meant that he hated

himself for working so hard to satisfy his own expectations, and mine, in that session.] I might be making this up, but perhaps I'm starting to understand what you were getting at when you asked me if I "wanted" to continue working with you. I hesitated and resolved yes, but when I really reflect on it now, I think that during that hesitation the answer is probably more nuanced. In my conscious self, yes, I want to work with you because I want to change my life on my own terms, to be happier. But no, I don't want to work with you, because I feel like I'm doing it to make my parents and friends happy. And it's really dark, actually, it's almost like I want to kill myself but I feel like I need to go to therapy because that's what people think I should do. Changing the perspective to a bit more meta, I think I finally realized what you're trying to get me to understand to get out of this trap. That it's possible that I don't have to be a lazy, selfish person for letting myself feel that I don't want to do something. I really want to talk to you about all that but I'm getting in my own way, like this neurosis is fighting for its life.

Alan had written me many texts as thoughtful as this one. I can't tell you why this particular text unlocked my capacity to think, but it did. I didn't recognize that at the time, though. In the terms I am using in this little essay, the field shifted; but shifts in the field are so much of a piece with living that they are seldom consciously knowable until later on, if at all. Often, until that later time, the events just happen, without being submitted to the rest of the mind for thoughtful consideration.

In my answering text, I said this to Alan:

I have a thought about how we might proceed that might just make it unnecessary to keep pulling on the Chinese finger trap¹—at least between you and me, and then maybe elsewhere as well. Please see if you can come to the session tomorrow and we'll talk about it.

My new thought was very simple. (It seems to me that the most important analytic events usually are.) I saw that I had to back off

my insistence on understanding the problem Alan had in getting to his sessions.

Alan did show up for the next session—he had apparently “heard” something compelling in my text, as I had in his. I told him that, from now on, I thought we ought to ignore everything except what was in his head in the session, whether that made sense or not, and whether it was connected to something obviously meaningful or not. We needed to stop going over and over his attendance issues.

What was important about this, I think, was that I meant it. I felt that I just couldn’t stand to keep hitting him over the head and feeling intellectualized. Of course, my suggestion was hardly radical. It was nothing more than a restatement of free association, although I didn’t think of that at the time. I thought that what I said came completely from me. And I think I was right, actually, even though of course I probably could not have thought of this particular alternative without being a psychoanalyst. I took this step with the sense that I really didn’t know if it would work; but the decision came with a certain serenity. If you will permit me to use a very big expression for a very small event, it was what Neville Symington (1983) called “an act of freedom,” what Emmanuel Ghent (1990) described as “surrender,” or what many of us, including me (Stern, 2010b, 2014), understand as the breach of a mutual unconscious enactment.

When a frozen place in the field melts, the changes that take place are seldom as dramatic as they were in this case. The text exchange took place six months ago. Alan has not missed a session since then.² In the week following the exchange, Alan started talking about what he calls a “hurt little boy” inside him, a part of him responsible for both his compliance and amiability and his resentment about complying. The metaphor may be a cliché in the broader culture, but it’s not when someone really means it, as Alan does. He also began articulating in much more detail the ways in which he doesn’t want to come to sessions. When he talks now about not wanting to come, he identifies it as his own desire, not just something that happens to him.

Why exactly does this vignette deserve to be called work with unconscious process? What exactly was unconscious here? I think that the fact that Alan has started talking directly, and with

agency, about his reluctance to come to sessions points the way. Alan could not tolerate being someone who would refuse to do what was expected of him by those he loved, and who loved him. He could not be a bad boy. If he refused expectation, he would have to suffer self-hatred; and if he agreed to go along, he would be (unconsciously) rageful. Not to mention dishonest. That's another story, but one Alan is starting to tell. The sacrifice of integrity that has been required for all these years in order to comply has been painful for him.

Alan enacted all this with me by missing more and more sessions, all the while feeling he had no other choice. Until now, this aspect of his identity—the boy who wanted to refuse his parents—was dissociated. What has finally come into awareness is the possibility of being the bad boy without being monstrous—or rather, the possibility of being the good boy and the bad boy at the same time, and able to negotiate between them.

Although I am sure we will have to go through various iterations of all this, I also think that Alan is no longer limited to toggling dissociatively back and forth between these two states of being, inhabiting just one of them at a time. Now, I hope and believe he is on the road to mourning the good boy he can never really be, and to accepting the bad boy in him without having to feel that he (that is, the “whole” Alan) is not worthy to live.

We charted jointly the route to this outcome. As Alan was accomplishing the breach of his own dissociation, I was doing the same: I gave up what I now see as the attempt to enforce his obedience, like his parents, all the while trying to convince myself (and doing a pretty good job of it) that I was doing nothing more than trying my damndest to be a good analyst. What happened was not an episode of insight, a packet of information passed from me to him. What I offered him (or perhaps I should say what he offered me—because there's a case to be made that he was as much responsible for the outcome as I was) was a shift in relatedness, an expansion of “relational freedom” (Stern, 2015); and that shift then made it possible for each of us to feel, speak, and think differently.

Alan has given me permission to write about our work, and I have disguised him enough that he is not identifiable to anyone but himself. The only reason that I haven't offered him the







opportunity to read this article is that he and I haven't yet talked about what I've told you—about what happened to get us back on track; and I don't know if we will. To this point, it has felt wrong to me to do that, as if I'd be risking getting all clunky and intellectualized again—as if to talk about it would risk smashing it. But maybe as a result of writing this communication, telling you, the reader, about it in my imagination, I will begin to feel differently. I can sense that possibility as I write. If I come to feel it's right to bring up all this with Alan, it will be because I have been able to find my way into talking about it in a way that is different than I have before, a way that I imagine is right for him. That way is maybe even the way I have written about it here. We shall see.








Notes

1 Alan had described his predicament in life more than once by reference to this childhood toy, which I remember from my own childhood. The Chinese finger trap is a woven wicker cylinder into which you insert your index fingers, one on either end. If you try to pull your fingers out, the cylinder tightens, trapping your fingers. The more you pull, the tighter the trap gets. The only way to get out of the trap is to give up and allow the trap to return to its original state. The solution to our dilemma had always been there in the form of this excellent metaphor. We understood the part about getting caught in a trap that wouldn't let go, but I think that neither of us saw, until later on, the further implication that we needed to stop trying to force the matter. This is not a thought that the field yet gave us the freedom to formulate.

2 Full disclosure: Alan started antidepressants two weeks after the text exchange and the session that followed it, and he has said things that make me think he attributes his new capacity to attend sessions to the medication. I haven't contested this conclusion, and I don't intend to do so; but Alan had already started to come to his sessions again when he started the antidepressants.

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