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Unformulated Experience, —From Familiar Chaos to Creative Disorder¹

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WHEN A PATIENT IS FINALLY ABLE TO THINK about a previously unaccepted part of life, seldom are fully formulated thoughts simply waiting to be discovered, ready for exposition. Instead, what is usually experienced is a kind of confusion—a confusion with newly appreciable possibilities, and perhaps an intriguing confusion, but a confusion or a puzzle nevertheless. Unconscious clarity rarely underlies defense. On the evidence of our observations of them as they emerge in awareness, the perceptions, ideas, and memories we prefer not to have, the observations we prefer not to make, are most often murky and poorly defined, different in kind than they will be when the process of completion has progressed to the level of words. "Unformulated experience" is the label I have chosen to refer to mentation characterized by lack of clarity and differentiation.²

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² William James (**1890**) and Bergson (**1903**), (**1907**) have written about the emergence of thought from a less differentiated state. Their work has influenced the overall view of the paper. For James especially, the content of consciousness is a small selection of clearly articulated thoughts made from a vast array of vague and unformed possibilities. Language and focal attention formulate what is formless. Polanyi (1958) and Maritain (1963) have also been helpful in the development of the views presented here.

But for a general scheme, I am most indebted to Schachtel (**1959**), (**1966**), whose concept of embeddedness stimulated the idea of unformulated experience. The argument of the paper owes a great deal to his descriptions of curiosity and creativity, and to his dialectic of embeddedness vs. openness to one's world. I have cited Schachtel wherever I thought it was appropriate, but the reader may recognize the cast of his thought more frequently than I have been able to separate it from my own.

Cognitions do not necessarily exist in the unformulated state, though, since the unformulated is a conglomeration not yet knowable in the separate and definable terms of language. As will be spelled out later, it is more accurate to say that unformulated material is composed of vague tendencies which, if allowed to develop to the point at which they could be shaped and articulated, would become this more lucid kind of experience.

The meaning in unformulated experience may take any one of the more precise forms toward which it moves. It is content without shape, "a beginning of insight, still unformulated, a kind of many-eyed cloud... a humble and trembling inchoation, yet invaluable, tending toward an intelligible content to be grasped" (Maritain, 1953p. 99). In William James's (1890) metaphor, each of us "sculpts" conscious experience from a block of the unformulated, which might have been carved in any number of different ways. Meaning becomes creation, not discovery. "Insight into an unconscious wish," says Fingarette (1963), "is like noticing a well-formed 'ship' in the cloud instead of a poorly formed 'rabbit.' On the other hand, insight is not like discovering an animal which has been hiding in the bushes" (p. 20).

1. Familiar chaos

The idea that thoughts can exist in an inchoate form was not available to Freud (1900), (1915), who based his theory on "the fundamental and false assumption" that perception is a sensory given and immediately known to the subject (Eccles, 1970); (cited by Basch, 1981). (See also Schimek, 1975). This meant that any lack of clarity in a psychic element always had to be the consequence of later events, a product of the distorting effects of drive and defense. The contents of the Freudian unconscious and the materials of the primary process, which certainly seem to qualify as "inchoate," are not actually unformulated. It is true that the associations between elements and the form of the elements themselves are fluid, but cognitions

in the Freudian scheme, even when they are disguised, are never anything less than fully realized. That is, they are carriers of meaning sufficiently well defined that the meaning could (if one would allow it) be put into words. "Thing-presentations" await only cathexis by the secondary process to become "word-presentations," and thus to gain access to the preconscious. But there is no true evolution in form here. The transformation of thing-presentation to word-presentation does not represent the growth of meaning into a more complete form—quite the contrary: Often the "real" meaning—the wish behind the idea—can exist only in the unconscious (or in later terminology, in the id). The word-presentation, in fact, is the paler form. In entering consciousness, a thing-presentation must become "less itself"; it must shed its primary process attributes and emerge tamed. In contrast, in order to enter consciousness, an unformulated thought must become "more itself."

Today, partially because of data and theory which have accrued since Freud wrote, it has become clear that experience, even at its most basic levels, is not a given: It is made, or constructed, and its construction proceeds in levels of progressive articulation. Experience may exist at any level of its construction, and thus the way is paved for a view of unformulated experience as a normal and natural phenomenon indicative neither of psychopathology nor conflict. It seems that we can be unaware of material not only because we refuse to acknowledge that we know it, but also because it has not yet attained a form in which consciousness can grasp it.

However, we also seem to have at least some influence over what parts of our own unformulated experience fail to attain a form assimilable by consciousness. Defensively motivated unformulated experience is a kind of "familiar chaos," to borrow a phrase from Paul Valéry, a state of mind cultivated and perpetuated in the service of the wish not to think. The "chaos" refers to the natural form of undeveloped thought, and though we do not know exactly what it is, it does carry with it a comforting sense of familiarity. It may be banal and unquestioned, but it feels like our own. Familiarity is its camouflage. Defensively motivated unformulated experience is a lack of clarity and differentiation permitted or encouraged in cognitive material that, in more complete form, would be noxious.

Just as unformulated experience differs from thing-presentations,

familiar chaos differs in its very nature from repressed experience or experience distorted by the other traditional defensive processes. Unformulated material is experience which has never been articulated clearly enough to allow application of the traditional defensive operations. One can forget or distort only those experiences which are formed with a certain degree of clarity in the first place. The unformulated has not yet reached the level of differentiation at which terms like memory and distortion are meaningful.

Most psychoanalysts seem to operate on the basis of the implicit hypothesis that people may resist the clarification of certain aspects of their experience, preferring vague, impressionistic formulations for which there genuinely are no words. We work as if the meaning in familiar chaos remains to be formed, as if there is not necessarily an underlying and pre-existing clarity in experience. Of course, the uncovering of veridical repressed memories has not been the central event in even the Freudian scheme of clinical psychoanalysis for many years (**Freud, 1937**); (**Kris, 1956**). But even when Freud suggested that construction of the past was necessary, he still claimed that useful constructions presented purely historical truth, and that the unconscious was a storehouse of veridical memories. One might have to put up with the making of constructions as a practicality of the treatment, but theoretically speaking, "All of the essentials are preserved" (**Freud, 1937p. 260**).

Harry Stack Sullivan made several references to lack of formulation as defense. Sullivan's work in this area was the earliest contribution, and it remains the most complete clinically derived description available.

Because the approach was a new one at the time, and not clearly differentiated from the classical theory of the defenses, it is not always obvious when Sullivan means repression (rejection or exclusion from consciousness of a fully formulated psychic element) and when he means lack of formulation. Nevertheless, the idea of defensively motivated lack of formulation is natural to Sullivan's theory, particularly to his notions of anxiety and the self-system.

The self-system includes all those experiences and ways of relating to others which have been found through experience to be safe and secure. Or from the other direction: The self-system rejects all experiences and modes of relating which are associated with anxiety. The

predominant characteristic of the self-system is that it perpetuates itself. Once one finds for an interpersonal dilemma a solution which minimizes anxiety, or an apparent solution—a mode of perception, thought, feeling, or behavior—one may apply that solution indiscriminately from then on. New experiences come to be mistrusted simply because they are new. One does not know what they will bring, and so extracts from them only that which is already within the purview of the self-system. When this happens, the new disappears without ever having been noticed—or without being formulated. Anxiety leads us to search for the familiar and comfortable in experience, and throw out the rest.

Sullivan's clearest statement about lack of formulation is the following:

... one has information about one's experience only to the extent that one has tended to communicate it to another or thought about it in the manner of communicative speech. Much of that which is ordinarily said to be *repressed* is merely unformulated (1940p. 185).

That is, one keeps certain material unformulated in order not to "know" it. What is more, Sullivan seems to be suggesting that this is not material that has ever been formulated. Unlike repression, in which at least the original repression is a rejection from awareness, material affected by the process Sullivan describes here was never banished from consciousness—because it has never "been there."

This is a very different notion of defense, and Sullivan is only able to come to it because of his startlingly modern position (we will come across it later in a discussion of current cognitive theory) that lack of formulation as defense is merely a special use of processes that serve far more general cognitive functions. This position is never explicitly stated, but is implicit in Sullivan's (1953) concept of the three modes of experience.

The *prototaxic* mode appears chiefly in infancy and consists of a continuous present, a succession of momentary states without a "before" or "after." The *parataxic* mode is also non-rational. In it, experience is broken into parts for the first time, but different kinds of experience are not related to each other in a logical way. "They 'just happen' together or they do not, depending upon circumstances... What is experienced is assumed to be the 'natural' way of such occurrences, without reflection and comparison" (Mullahy, 1947, pp. 287–288). This is the personal, subjective language of dreams and fantasies. The *syntaxic* mode is the realm of

consensually validated meaning, meaning embodied in symbols which have the same significance to all of us. Language, as in Freud's secondary process, is the most important vehicle of the syntactic mode, though words (again like Freud) can also be used in a parataxic—personal, autistic—way which makes one's meaning indecipherable. What Sullivan means in the passage about repression and lack of formulation is that if one keeps a meaning at the parataxic level, one prevents oneself from reflecting upon it. Reflection—thought—requires the symbolization of meaning. It requires that one either communicate a meaning to another person in a comprehensible linguistic form, or be able to. Because we mistrust the unfamiliar, being afraid that it will threaten our security, we may not symbolize it in communicable terms. It remains organized at the parataxic level, the fully formulated meaning never entering explicit awareness.

Thus, for Sullivan, one of the primary defenses is essentially "not thinking about it." This is accomplished by means of selective inattention, a process on which Sullivan (1953) lays heavy emphasis. What it means is that the control of focal attention, which helps separate the wheat from the chaff in everyday experiencing (again notice the adaptation of normal cognitive processes to defensive purposes), can also be used to keep something out of awareness. If one's focal attention is never trained on this "something," one is never aware of it; and if one is never aware of it, it remains parataxic—or unformulated. It is never elaborated into an experience in the syntactic mode. In turn, this means one can never reflect on it. Anxiety is prevented, of course, but the strategy is equally effective in the prevention of learning. (It might be noted here that Freud [1900], too, proposed that attention was the final gateway into consciousness. But for Freud, this gateway was merely the entry into consciousness of material from the preconscious. Sullivan is proposing that the control of attention can result in something much more radical—in Freud's terms, something like keeping the material unconscious.)

Sullivan's concept of dissociation also employs the concept of unformulated experience. In the following passage, Sullivan suggests that unless an experience is reacted to, either positively or negatively, it does not become part of the self-system. It exists in dissociation, prototaxic (rarely) or parataxic (usually) in form, and is never known. It cannot develop, can never be elaborated. The

concept is unique, since repression or dissociation is usually said to occur only as a result of, or in anticipation of, an unpleasant consequence.

The facilitations and deprivations by the parents and significant others are the source of the material which is built into the self dynamism. Out of all that happens to the infant, only this "marked" experience is incorporated into the self... For the expression of all things in the personality other than those which were approved and disapproved by the parent and other significant persons, the self refuses awareness, so to speak. It does not accord awareness, it does not notice; and these impulses, desires, and needs come to exist disassociated from the self, or dissociated (1940pp. 21–22).

Sullivan suggests that dissociated material makes people anxious because they have never thought about it. One has built a whole self around these gaps in experience—sudden awareness of one of them would be devastating, disequilibrating, throwing off a whole system of anxiety avoidance. Thus, in consequence of the self-perpetuation of the self-system, dissociation, too, must be perpetuated. In the beginning of life, dissociation may simply be an "empty space" in the developing structure of experience, but as time passes and the self-system grows, the dissociation is no longer just "a place where something isn't," but an element of the self as vital to its continuing integrity as, say, the white space is to the visual structure of a painting. It thus becomes a matter of some delicacy to raise a patient's curiosity about this material without at the same time raising anxiety to unbearable intensity.

Sullivan's view is compatible with the observation that when resistance abates, disavowed thoughts do not suddenly pop up, fully formed, ready to take their place in the continuing unfolding of the treatment. Parataxic experience remains to be formed. However, I think Sullivan's position would be that the eventual syntactic form of parataxically organized experience is predetermined by what has actually happened in the patient's life. Like Freud, Sullivan believed that the only truth that makes people free is historical truth. We shall later come across a different view.

Unformulated experience is for Sullivan merely the absence of mutuality and reason. (See Klenbort, 1978), (and Bromberg, 1979.) Sullivan had great respect for the tenacity of the nonrational, but did not seem to share Freud's conviction that the nonrational was the source of the greatest contributions as well as the greatest suffering.

2. Constructions and associations

Like Sullivan, we might, entirely on the basis of clinical observations of its utility, accept the proposition that experience can exist in an unformulated state; or, like William James (1890), we might accept the idea on purely phenomenological grounds. However, today, unlike either James or Sullivan, we can turn to a body of scientific literature which adduces this same concept, unformulated experience, from the results of experimentation.

The theoretical view of thought from which the concept of unformulated experience is best understood might be called constructivism. The theories in this broad category, which includes most of present-day cognitive psychology, have in common an emphasis on experience as "made" or constructed, not merely received, as in the older associationist view. In associationist theories, such as Freud's, new experience is received, clear and fully formulated, and added to the store of memories as if it were an additional crate being stacked in a warehouse. Experience is a series of discrete mental entities, and concepts arise from various combinations, or associations, of these entities (Freud, 1900), (1925).³ Memory is thus very much like that warehouse: Nothing need be changed by the addition of something new, and, like objects or entities, experiences are either present and fully formed or altogether absent. There is no place for the shadowy or unformed.

Many psychoanalysts who identify themselves as Freudian would undoubtedly accept without a second thought the idea that experience can exist in an unformulated mode. As long ago as 1939, Hartmann described a similar concept. In his view, though, unformulated experience was not the natural phenomenon we will see it to be from the constructivist vantage point, but an indirect result of the repression of earlier experiences which the ego would have needed to make a mature formulation. This view is not infrequently present in the work of contemporary theorists of drive and defense (e.g., Kernberg, 1980). However, there have been Freudian writers (Gill, 1963); (Klein, 1976); (Schafer, 1976) who have conceptualized the defensive process in ways not unsympathetic to

³ Outside psychoanalysis, there is probably no student of cognition today who holds an exclusively associationist theory, but there are constructivist theorists, both in psychoanalysis (Paul, 1967) and academic psychology (Claxton, 1980), who believe that an adequate theory of cognition will have to contain associationist elements.

defensive lack of formulation. The basic proposition that the fully formed experience exists unchanged in the unconscious memory trace (Freud, 1900), (1915); (Lewy and Rapaport, 1944), though, has only infrequently been criticized from within the classical psychoanalytic tradition (Paul, 1967); (Basch, 1981), and as recently as 1976, as eminent a theoretician as Loewald wrote that there was no reason to question the idea.

According to Freud, each experience is recorded and stored more or less permanently in the unconscious, much like a film or tape library. Conscious memories and other experience are the result of the distorting effects of drive and defense on the permanent unconscious record. This leads to the familiar psychoanalytic concept of self-deception: Deceiving ourselves means convincing ourselves that we do not know something when we actually do know it. The Freudian defensive processes are always processes of masking, or disguise, or outright expulsion and banishment of (fully formed) experience from consciousness. Again, the defenses take this form because all mental contents—conscious, preconscious, and unconscious—are conceptualized as fully formulated. The concept of unformulated experience makes no sense in an associationist theory. For Freud, experiences may be forgotten, transformed, masked or disguised, distorted, blended with other experiences until undetectable, defused by breaking all links to other experiences, or simply denied—but in all cases the experience still exists "in the psyche." Despite appearances to the contrary, the fully formulated experience is hidden somehow in the form of what we can see, like the prince in the frog. Fingarette (1963) calls this the "hidden reality" view; Neisser (1967) calls it the "reappearance hypothesis."

Argyris and Schön (1976) describe two kinds of theories people use in deciding what actions to take, "theories-in-use" and "espoused theories." Whatever we say about what we do (our espoused theories), we often base our actions on theories for which we have no words (our theories-in-use). We take many wise and correct actions for reasons we cannot specify. For many psychotherapists, lack of formulation as defense is just such a theory-in-use. In an associationist psychology, that is what it will have to remain, because the associationist language, and the habits of thought this language inculcates, cannot capture it.

From the constructivist point of view, however, the concept of

unformulated experience makes sense as espoused theory as well. In this general view of thought, mental activity is seen as organic, continuous, and unitary. New experiences are not simply added on, like the crates stacked in the warehouse, but integrated with everything that has come before, in the way rain water becomes part of a lake, say, or the way salt dissolves in water. New experience often makes it necessary to attain a new cognitive equilibrium. One of the first theories available for description of this way of conceptualizing thought was Piaget's (1952), in which a mental organization adapts to the new by a dual process of assimilating it to pre-existing schemata and changing the schemata themselves, accommodating the form of the new experience. Arieti (1976), drawing on this general conceptual scheme, has given a description of thought consisting of levels of increasing differentiation. The most primitive level, but one which is still available to the adult, is imagery, by which Arieti means fleeting and uncontrollable mental representations. Of most interest for the present purpose is Arieti's intermediate level, amorphous cognition, "a kind of cognition that occurs without representation—that is, without being expressed in images, words, thoughts, or actions of any kind" (p. 54). To differentiate the functioning of amorphous cognition from other types of thought, Arieti calls its concept the "endocept," signifying its private, incommunicable nature.

The most pervasive language of progressive clarification is the language of information processing, which is derived from the workings of computers and has revolutionized academic psychology over the last fifteen years, replacing behaviorism as the dominant paradigm. The information processing metaphor refers to the forms through which information passes from the moment the stimulus hits the sense receptor, through perception, into consciousness and short-term memory, and eventually into long-term memory, where the information is used for a variety of purposes. Information at any stage in this process may feed back to an earlier stage, thereby influencing what comes after it.⁴

At each stage in this process, the form of the information

⁴ I will not attempt here to cover the data themselves, but will restrict consideration to those ideas growing out of the data which have relevance to the topic at hand. For reviews of the field, the reader is referred to the general texts which have appeared in recent years (e.g., Neisser, 1967); (Posner, 1973); (Lindsay and Norman, 1977).

changes, becoming more and more clearly articulated, and there are stages of processing occurring prior to the entry of the material into awareness. It is quite natural in this frame of reference for there to be forms of information which cannot be cognized within consciousness. This is not to say that the theorists in this area believe that motivation has anything to do with this lack of awareness. Generally, the view seems to be that consciousness is merely one stage through which information passes. For most cognitive psychologists, consciousness is merely a way station, no more and no less significant than any other station on the route.

However, there are some cognitive psychologists who doubt that cognition can be so neatly separated from affect and motivation (**Broadbent, 1977**); (**Erdelyi, 1974**); (**Erdelyi and Goldberg, 1979**); (**Neisser, 1967**), (**1976**); (**Rosenblatt and Thickstun, 1977**). These psychologists have proposed links between the information processing model of cognition and the psychoanalytic model of the defenses. Their accounts dovetail nicely with the idea of lack of formulation as defense. Bowlby (**1980**) has recently gone so far as to propose a comprehensive model of the defenses in which "the basic concept ... is that of the exclusion from further processing of information of certain specific types for relatively long periods or even permanently" (p. 45).

Neisser (**1967**), the acknowledged father of cognitive psychology, was the first to use the information processing model to conceptualize the defenses. He spends most of his classic text discussing relatively immediate processes, i.e., those taking place within a very short time after the presence of a stimulus, such as attention, perception, immediate encoding, and short-term memory. In his last chapter, though, he speculates about long-term memory and thought, basing his ideas on the experimental work and theory he has presented on the more immediate processes. His work on defense, which includes some of the prefatory material, is worth presenting in some detail. The relationship of these ideas to Sullivan's will be obvious; what Neisser does here is to offer a look at the microscopic processes which might underlie Sullivan's broader scheme.

Neisser's basic point is that memories and thoughts are constructions, just as perceptions are, and that the processes of memory and thought go on in a way analogous to perception—especially analogous to visual perception. Neisser analyzes visual cognition as a

⁵ Readers of earlier drafts have been confused by the usage of the term "iconic." In general usage, an "icon" is usually a static image. In cognitive psychology, "iconic" is a general reference to visual representation, including movement.

two-stage process. In the first stage, incoming information is broken up into large and vague chunks or blocks of visual information, which might be organized, for example, as sky, building, street, movement (though of course not in these verbal terms). Neisser labels this primitive organizing function as the *preattentive processes*. The products of the preattentive processes are represented in *iconic storage*.⁵ Iconic storage is a short-term system: If items in it do not become the object of focal attention in a very few moments, they disappear from storage—which means they are no longer represented in psychic life at all. Some sort of automatic selection process is necessary if we are not to be constantly overwhelmed by incoming stimuli, and thus the vast majority of the vague elements in iconic storage simply disappear without further processing. However, if these elements do become the object of focal attention, they are subject to further processing, which results in greater differentiation and detail. They enter consciousness and short-term memory at this point, and, depending on certain other factors, may enter long-term memory.

Thus I may focus my attention on a block of information organized as "movement," and I may note that there are many such movements, that they are automobiles, and that approximately half of them are taxis. In the meantime, the vague visual phenomenon representing "sky" has decayed in iconic storage, making it impossible for me ever to know whether during my concentration on the cars an airplane or a cloud passed overhead. This point in the processing of information—the point at which information must either be processed further in consciousness or allowed to decay (i.e., the area of the preattentive processes and iconic storage) is one probable locus for perceptual defense effects and perceptual vigilance effects.

In Neisser's view, a memory or a thought is created analogously. Corresponding to the preattentive processes is what Neisser calls the primary process. This process is not identical to Freud's concept of the same name, but it bears certain similarities: irrational, uncontrollable, motivated, full of affect. It is a parallel form of information processing, everything going on at once, as opposed to the linear or serial or sequential secondary process (again, Neisser's

version, not Freud's), which is the form of logical thought over which we have control—one element leads to another in orderly fashion.

Neisser, in a passage reminiscent of James, speculates that the primary process constantly casts up vague and unformed ideas and memories, analogous to the vague chunks or blocks into which the visual field is broken by the preattentive processes. And in the same way that focal attention continues the processing of only some of the preattentive material, leaving the rest of it to decay and disappear without ever having reached awareness (i.e., without ever having been "known"), the secondary process seizes upon and develops only some of the offerings of the primary process. Those offerings selected are then differentiated and formulated into complete thoughts or memories. But those primary process products not selected, and therefore not cognitively elaborated, just like the contents of ionic storage, either never enter consciousness at all, or like something on the tip of the tongue, disappear after only the briefest visitation, leaving a feeling that something was there, but we know not what. We may even know it was a dream, or a memory, or a thought of what to do after lunch; but even if its category and context can be identified, it is itself lost.

In Neisser's model, the point at which material is either attended to and elaborated by the secondary process or allowed to decay is open to emotional influence. He calls this "*deliberately avoiding construction in certain areas*" (p. 303; Neisser's italics). We are forcibly reminded of Sullivan's notions here, especially in the similarity between Neisser's transition from primary to secondary process and Sullivan's between parataxic and syntactic modes. Neisser argues that any number of factors determine whether or not a particular cognition reaches an end point clearly enough defined to permit symbolization in language (consciousness), and he would agree with Sullivan that there is no reason that anxiety should not be among these factors. Here we have come full circle and discovered, from a contemporary experimental perspective, an idea quite similar to those Sullivan formulated entirely on the basis of clinical experience. Both writers agree that preventing material from reaching clarity is simply a special use of cognitive mechanisms which prevent us from being flooded with excess stimulation. Neisser, of course, would also agree with Sullivan that unformulated material cannot be reflected on.

However, Neisser takes a further step: In his model, unformulated experience is not available to memory. And therefore, we can add, historical truth is not necessarily available when the motivation not to know it has been analyzed. Instead, in Neisser's version, unformulated material has literally never been thought. It has decayed before it could ever be added to consciousness or memory. In psychoanalysis, from this point of view, when a patient has come to the point where he or she is willing to be curious about this experience, the cognitive representation must be at least partially created, not discovered. From other directions, both clinical and philosophical, this conclusion has been reached by a number of psychoanalytic writers (**Blum, 1980**); (**Fingarette, 1963**), (**1969**); (**Issacharoff and Hunt, 1978**); (**Loch, 1977**); (**Loewald, 1960**); (**Noy, 1978**); (**Rosenberg and Medini, 1978**); (**Spence, 1982**); (Viderman, 1980); (**Wolstein, 1982**).

Summarizing: Lack of formulation as defense is difficult to conceptualize in an associationist psychology, but from a constructivist vantage point, such as Neisser's, it seems natural and perhaps even inevitable. In Freud's view, because all experience has been laid down, clear and fully formulated in the unconscious memory trace, defense always means finding a way not to know (consciously) something already known (unconsciously). In the view incorporating motivated lack of formulation, defense may also include purposefully never having known.

3. Resolving a paradox: James's "feelings of tendency"

The last statement highlights what may seem to be a problem for the whole concept of purposive lack of formulation: How can one tell oneself to refuse to formulate a thought without having first formulated it? How does one know what not to formulate? Erdelyi (**1974**), Neisser (**1967**), and Bowlby (**1980**) have each offered solutions to the problem from the information processing viewpoint. All three hold that the problem exists only as long as cognition is seen as an all-or-none phenomenon—i.e., as long as one either sees or does not see, hears or does not hear, remembers or does not remember. Cognition is all-or-none only if we restrict attention to what goes on in awareness. The problem disappears as soon as cognition is understood as a multistage phenomenon, only parts of which take place within awareness (as, for example, in Neisser's

model). Processing can simply be stopped at any one of these stages. Erdelyi says, for example, that "the perceiver, on the basis of partial analysis of the information in ionic storage, may terminate further processing of remaining ionic materials" (p. 17). This particular process, as well as many others which might be imagined, would take place entirely outside awareness.

This solution to the paradox is viable if we assume something like Neisser's (1967) "executive" or Bowlby's (1980) subliminal perception. Bowlby has based his information processing model of the defenses on the proposition that we "perceive" more about our developing thoughts and feelings than we can be aware of. On the basis of this information (the "partial analysis of information in ionic storage," for example), we can either choose to continue the processing of the information, allowing it to enter awareness, or "terminate" processing before the information arrives. This model depends on the hypothesis that, on the basis of one's biases, long-term memory can feed back to the very beginning of the process of thought, extrapolate the eventual form the unformulated material would take if it entered consciousness, and on that basis select what material will be processed further and what material will be allowed to decay (Broadbent, 1958); (Deutsch and Deutsch, 1963). Neisser's "executive" is an analogue of the "executive routine," a computer subprogram that can be written so that it tells all other subprograms when to operate. The executive itself does not have the capacity to carry out the work of the other subprograms; it is merely a carrier and applier of rules. Thus, it is possible in cognition to be the executive without having simultaneously to be the one who is told what to do. The model, Neisser concludes with relief, can run without homunculi.

However, it also seems reasonable to posit that we can turn away, or "terminate processing," on the basis of disturbing glimmers of meaning of which we are aware, at least for moments. It would seem that this, too, can occur without the complete formulation of an experience. An advantage of this alternative is that we do not have to take it on faith. As expressed (below) in the words of William James (1890), it is phenomenologically satisfying as well as scientifically plausible. And it is no small thing that conceptualizing the problem this way offers more hope that the process is amenable to psychoanalysis—for it is immensely difficult to understand in one's own personal terms a process, such as Bowlby's subliminal

perception or Neisser's executive, which is by its very nature sealed off from consciousness.

James described these glimmers of meaning, or in his words, "feelings of tendency," in the following passages. If we add the wish to minimize anxiety to these descriptions of the kind of awareness we have of unformulated meanings, it becomes phenomenologically plausible that a thought or feeling can be discarded before it is formed.

But namelessness is compatible with existence. There are innumerable consciousness of emptiness, no one of which taken in itself has a name, but all different from each other. The ordinary way is to assume that they are all emptinesses of consciousness, and so the same state. But the feeling of an absence is *toto coelo* other than the absence of a feeling. It is an intense feeling (Volume I, pp. 251–252).

The truth is that large tracts of human speech are nothing but signs of direction in thought, of which direction we nevertheless have an acutely discriminative sense, though no sensorial image plays any part in it whatsoever... One may admit that a good third of our psychic life consists in these rapid premonitory perspective views of schemes of thought not yet articulate (Volume I, pp. 252–253).

Now what I contend for, and accumulate examples to show, is that "tendencies" are not only descriptions from without, but that they are among the objects of the stream, which is thus aware of them from within, and must be described as in very large measure constituted of *feelings of tendency*, often so vague that we are unable to name them. It is, in short, the reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention (Volume I, p. 254).

Great thinkers have vast premonitory glimpses of schemes of relation between terms, which hardly even as verbal images enter the mind, so rapid is the whole process. We all of us have this permanent consciousness of whither our thought is going. It is a feeling like any other, a feeling of what thoughts are next to arise, before they have arisen (Volume I, pp. 255–256).

4. Creative disorder

Chaos, subjectivity, and disorder are more than the absence of communicability and mutuality—they are also the source of novelty. Piaget, emulating Bergson, was apparently fond of referring to the "creative disorder" of his office, presumably making reference to a comparable inner state. Isadora Duncan referred to "a state of complete suspense" as one of the stages in her invention of a dance. Brewster Ghiselin wrote, "In order to invent, one must

yield to the indeterminate within him." Stephen Spender, when he came close to a new poem, said it was "something still vague, a dim cloud of an idea which I feel must be condensed into a shower of words." Alfred North Whitehead speaks of "the state of imaginative muddled confusion which precedes successful inductive generalization." **(For the testimony of artists and philosophers, see Ghiselin, 1952). (For scientists and mathematicians, see Hadamard, 1945), (and Poincaré, 1908).** The mathematician Marston Morse **(1951)** offers what could be a rejoinder to Sullivan's view of the nonrational:

The first essential bond between mathematics and the arts is found in the fact that discovery in mathematics is not a matter of logic. It is rather the result of mysterious powers which no one understands, and in which the unconscious recognition of beauty must play an important part. Out of an infinity of designs a mathematician chooses one pattern for beauty's sake, and pulls it down to earth, no one knows how. Afterward the logic of words and of forms sets the pattern right. Only then can one tell someone else. The first pattern remains in the shadows of the mind **(quoted by Maritain, 1953).**

Sullivan never wrote about the roots of the creative process, and perhaps would have considered the topic outside the bounds of the operational psychiatry he wanted to found. For him, unformulated experience was always immature experience. It played no positive part in living. Furthermore, in Sullivan's view, and quite different from the view that comes to us from accounts of the creative process, unformulated experience, left to its own devices, could never coalesce or crystallize—could never formulate itself. Unless attention was directed to it, it never changed, developed, or cast up new thoughts. Unformulated experience, to use a word characteristic of Sullivan, was unfortunate—useless until it could be made communicable, syntactic.

One can hardly disagree with the goal of formulating the unformulated. Obviously, formulation of some kind is always the aim. But to view all unformulated experience as parataxis, and thus immature, is to ignore the very means by which formulation is accomplished. Formulations derive from the unformulated.

Is an invention, a new idea, a poem—or, for that matter, a new thought about oneself—"immature" prior to the moment the thought can be captured in words? Is it not more accurate to say that the eventual product was in a state of possibility? If we value

the eventual products, should we not also value the unformulated experience from which these products emerge?

The unformulated is possibility as well as parataxis, creative disorder as well as familiar chaos. And, however difficult we may acknowledge it to be to attend to unformulated material, attention by itself, contrary to Sullivan, just does not seem to be enough to bring the unformulated into reflective awareness. After all, if the unformulated is not assimilable by consciousness, what is it that attention can focus on? We know how uncommon it is for the ineffable to spring suddenly into the realm of the communicable as soon as resistance relaxes. It is not as if the unformulated is leaning against the door, just waiting for a chance to overcome resistance and tumble into the room.

The unformulated must organize itself first. It must begin to coalesce, perhaps by some process like that described by Neisser (1967). It must send up tendrils, or feelings of tendency. Then the function of attention can be focused and used to help a fully formed product emerge into awareness.⁶

As artists tell it, the unformulated often does coalesce without

⁶ Kris (1952) describes the creative process as an oscillation between purposeful intellectual activity and passive receptivity. This part of his view is consistent with the position taken in this paper, and has probably even influenced it. Kris is not cited in this discussion, though, for two reasons. First, since his view of cognition is based on Freud's, there is no place in it for the concept of unformulated experience. Second, the idea that the creative process depends on regression, even a controlled regression in the service of the ego, seems more true to the form of Freudian thought than to the phenomenon of creativity itself. Kris's position requires the assumption that the management of drive, not the formulation and emergence of meaning, is the primary work of cognition. In Schachtel's words,

What distinguishes the creative process from regression to primary-process thought is that the freedom of the approach is due not to a drive discharge function, but to the openness in the encounter with the object of the creative labor (1959p. 245).

Arieti (1976) avoids regression in his theory of creativity by postulating a "tertiary process" which integrates the secondary process and the primary process. Certain more classically oriented psychoanalytic writers (Kubie, 1958), (Ehrenzweig, 1967); (Noy, 1969), (1972); (Roland, 1972) have stressed that the creative process and (under some circumstances) the primary process are integrative and generative in function, and that the concept of regression is therefore unnecessary as an explanatory principle in the field of creativity. Others (Winnicott, 1971); (Pruyser, 1979) have removed the study of the creative process from the context of drive altogether, doing away with regression by substituting object relations for biology.

conscious intervention, but it must brew, and it takes its own time to do it. Mozart is one famous example: He could compose in a room full of noise and traffic, and could be interrupted at any point without being disturbed, because by the time he sat down to write, he was merely copying onto the page a piece of music which already existed in its entirety in his mind. About his ideas he wrote: "*Whence and how they come I know not; nor can I force them*" (Ghiselin, 1952p. 44). Marina Tsvetaeva wrote that, if you are a poet (as she was), your hand belongs not to yourself, but to "that which wants to exist through you." In a letter to Pasternak she said, "We dream and write not when we please but when it pleases: a letter to be written, a dream to be seen" (Muchnic, 1980p. 7). Burnshaw (1970) scatters through his text on artistic creation other testimony to the autonomous crystallization of the unformulated: The poet "does not know what he has to say until he has said it" (Keats); "It is not I who think but my ideas who think for me" (Lamartine); "Words rise up unaided and in ecstasy" (Mallarmé); "We get a new song when the words we want to use shoot up of themselves" (Orpingalik, an Eskimo poet); "It will come if it is there and you let it come" (Gertrude Stein); the thing to do is "to let each impression and each germ of feeling come to completion quite in itself ... beyond the reach of one's own understanding" (Rilke).

We cannot force formulation. We can only prepare ourselves by immersion in our field of interest and then remain open to possibility, seizing it (attending to it) whenever it appears. It is not enough to "put our backs into" the forging of new formulations, though we must be willing to do this when the time comes and the vague outlines of something new begin to emerge. We must also work toward an acceptance of the uncertainty which is sometimes all that can be known of the content of the unformulated. This applies no less to the rest of us than it does to the artists who have captured the process in words.

Sullivan's goal, then, should be broadened to include not only formulation of the unformulated, but also acceptance of unformulated experience as creative disorder. In practice, this means that when the need for a particular piece of familiar chaos (i.e., defensively motivated unformulated experience) is successfully understood, what replaces it, and what makes new formulations eventually possible, is the acceptance of previously rejected uncertainty.

Now it is possible to specify the two uses of unformulated experience. In its use as creative disorder, its uncertainty is accepted, and feelings of tendency are encouraged, valued, and nurtured. One tries to capture in symbolic representation as many of them as possible, selecting and discarding only later. In familiar chaos, by contrast, there is little interest in what may emerge, and in fact, as Sullivan suggested, one is interested primarily in keeping the unformulated experience just as it is. What is defended against is not a thought, because no thought has been formed, but the process of thinking itself. When one prevents attention from focusing on feelings of tendency, the possibility and uncertainty of creative disorder are frozen into the autistic certainty of parataxis.

The link between chaos and creativity is reflected in Arieti's (1976) discussion of amorphous cognition, or "endoception," briefly cited above. Arieti's descriptions realize something of the nonrepresentational mental activity from which creative products emerge.

In creative persons this endoceptual cognition is an indeterminate entity in search of a form, a groping for some definite structure. When a suitable form is found, this activity is transformed into creative work ... (p. 62).

Arieti shares with Sullivan an emphasis on communicability, but he also sees in disorder the potential for growth:

The endocept of the future creative work contains no more than possibilities of what can be actualized in different ways, according to what the author may choose to do (p. 64).

From this vantage point, we can return to Neisser's position that thought and memory are creation: A new thought about oneself or one's world, even a new memory, may be the same kind of phenomenon as the product of an artistic effort. Some of the experiences which emerge when resistance is resolved are no more predetermined than the daubs and streams of color in a Pollock painting. One may have only intimations of the mental activity that will take place when obstruction vanishes.

Gendlin (1964) takes just this position, bringing into the realm of psychotherapy the kind of observations that Arieti makes about the creative process, and that James and Neisser make about cognition in general.

... a felt meaning can contain very many meanings and can be further and further elaborated. Thus, the felt meaning is not the same in kind as the precise symbolized explicit meaning. The reason the difference in kind is so important is because if we ignore it we assume that explicit meanings are (or were) already in the implicit felt meaning. We are led to make the felt, implicit meaning a kind of dark place in which countless explicit meanings are hidden. We then wrongly assume that these meanings are "implicit" and felt only in the sense that they are "hidden." I must emphasize that the "implicit" or "felt" datum of experiencing is a sensing of body life. As such it may have countless organized aspects, but this does not mean that they are conceptually formed, explicit, and hidden. Rather, we complete and form them when we explicate.

Before symbolization, the "felt" meanings are incomplete (pp. 113–114).

Once seen, a new clarity may seem so inevitable that it is experienced as having "been there all the time," deceiving us into believing that it actually was (the "hidden reality" view). The previous lack of awareness is astonishing. The right words, once found, pull the figure out of a background that until a moment before was homogeneous. Alternatively, if the meaning remains implicit or felt, as in the case of many dreams, the moment may pass with only the awareness of the presence of a vague something. Yet enough is left that we recognize the thought if we have it again; and if someone else says it, or if the thought appears in print, we have a reaction of puzzlement and surprise that we ourselves have not thought of this very thing, something like, "I *knew* that."

Lack of formulation is lack of symbolization. Not to have a thought means not to translate unformulated experience into language. In the case of defense, it amounts to a refusal to make this leap into meaning, while in the case of the cultural blinders that rob us, as we grow up, of the vividness and intensity that experience seems to have for children, we are actually unable to make meanings (Schachtel, 1947). According to Schachtel's tragic view, because direct apperception and memory of true and raw experience would "explode the restrictive social order," society forces individual experience, which is all we really have, into banal, conventional schemata. Bergson (1903), (1907) and James (1890) conclude that language, although it formulates the formless and is therefore constitutive of experience, also seduces us into accepting a mythology of the world around us that is based—circularly—on the properties of language itself. In these ways, language and culture set the limits beyond which even creative disorder cannot spread.

5. Curiosity and acceptance of the familiar

There is always more than one meaningful interpretation of an event, of course, and we take it equally for granted how often people talk and act as if only the particular one they have selected could possibly be true. These constructions, defended so doggedly, may be the only visible evidence of lack of formulation being used defensively. One can stifle the uncertainty of creative disorder just as effectively by forcing an interpretation, usually a safe, conventional one, as by refusing to make one at all. Assumptions carried from one situation to the next, applied over and over again, are methods of structuring the world in such a way that one can avoid having to think about it. These assumptions and expectations are ways of keeping the process of attention reined in, fixed in a routine of illuminating only that which one already knows it will illuminate. If uncertainty cannot be made to disappear altogether, it can at least be dampened, made to die down. Everything often seems perfectly clear in this kind of world, though it may feel nearly unbearable. It is hard to conjure up the questions one might ask oneself. *In extremis*, this may be the world of psychosis, of the psychotically depressed person, for instance, who is absolutely sure of his or her failure and complete lack of worth. It is the world of the paranoid, peopled with beings who menace one terribly, but who always behave in predictable ways.

Every psychotherapist has worked with people who, when they begin to ask themselves questions, using their capacity to construct new interpretations, are surprised to find that they have never done it before. Looking back on it, they say, to paraphrase Mullahy's description of the parataxic mode, "That's just the way things were. It didn't require an explanation." The restriction of thought is a kind of stupidity in which everything smoothes out, and questions disappear into the familiar. (Even the "sharpening" attitude of the vigilant paranoid implies a "smoothing out"—there may be such attention to salient details that the person gives the illusion of perceptiveness, but the vastness of experience is actually left nearly untouched.) Unquestioning acceptance of the familiar ensures that there will be no inadvertent deployment of curiosity. The familiar swallows anything. It is bottomless. When experience fades into the familiar, it loses substance, it becomes a ghost. It may be gone forever, irretrievable in its original form. Bartlett's (1932) classic

experiments on memory show that, as time passes, people remember a more and more conventional form of a story they have been told, even if the original form of the story deviated radically from conventionality. "The known," said Hegel, "just because it is the known, is the unknown." Unquestioning acceptance of the familiar is the attitude by which maintenance of unformulated experience as familiar chaos is accomplished.

If what is dreaded remains unformulated, it may be unclear what it is that one is afraid of, only that whatever is there is dreadful. And the solution is there for the taking: The solution is to restrict freedom of thought. The process is self-perpetuating, an aspect of the self-system. Like a totalitarian state, the heavily defended person has more to fear from freeing thought itself than from any particular construction thought might make. Open inquiry must be put to a stop. The capacity to see the familiar in the unfamiliar, one of the great achievements of infancy, becomes in adulthood an equally great impediment to thought's growth (**Schachtel, 1959**).

In the constructivist view, since each person is the author of his or her own experience, the only thing to be learned about oneself that can really be counted on to be the truth is that one is afraid to be curious. As a matter of fact, ever since Freud rejected the seduction theory, curiosity, not truth, has been the guiding value of psychoanalysis. The ideal patient is curious about everything. To be this curious requires the tolerance of enormous uncertainty almost constantly. It also requires the strength to anticipate being able to tolerate any and all thoughts and feelings one might have. It means allowing oneself, even encouraging oneself to the extent that it is possible, to complete all interpretations and constructions one finds undeveloped in oneself. Curiosity preserves the uncertainty in unformulated experience. Curiosity is the attitude by which unformulated experience is maintained as creative disorder. In these terms, psychoanalysis is the progressive awakening of curiosity, a movement from familiar chaos to creative disorder.

I have said that curiosity means allowing oneself to make constructions. "Allowing" may seem strange wording—or it may sound like some kind of conscious granting of permission to oneself to "go ahead and work on" thinking. To "work on" thinking is precisely the meaning not intended. Curiosity is an active attitude of openness (**Schachtel, 1959**), not a focused search, at least not to begin with. It means that rather than employing a focused beam of attention,

a searchlight to look *for* things in experience, which in one way or another usually seems to result in conventionalizing, one allows the things that are there to impress themselves on one's consciousness. This involves taking one's hand off the tiller and letting what Schachtel (1973) called "global attention and perception" drift as it will. Then, when an interesting construction begins to form itself out of the preattentive material, one may stop and perform a more focused search on and around this construction to fill in the detail and give it the convincing quality Freud (1937) knew it had to have to be useful. Of course, it is no accident that this description of "allowing" is essentially a description of free association; but it is the ideal of free association.

In this view, then, psychoanalysis is not a search for the hidden truth about the patient and the patient's life. It is instead the emergence, through curiosity and the acceptance of uncertainty, of constructions which may never have been thought before. Furthermore, these constructions are not merely sensible stabs at history and description: As Sullivan was the first to see, they are part and parcel of the new world patient and analyst are creating between them. This fact permeates them and is at least as important as their degree of historical accuracy. As Rosenberg and Medini (1978) put it, "There is an emergent *process* of truth finding... And it is developmental in the sense that it assumes continuities between past and present, although the past may become very changed as it is remembered" (p. 427).

In the same vein, Loewald (1960) proposes that change in psychoanalysis is the result of the reorganization of experience, not of the uncovering of fully formed truth.

Language, in its most specific function in analysis, as interpretation, is thus a creative act similar to that in poetry, where language is found for phenomena, contexts, experiences not previously known and speakable. New phenomena and new experiences are made available as a result of reorganization of material according to hitherto unknown principles, contexts, and connections (p. 242).

Issacharoff and Hunt (1978), arguing that scientific truth is not the object of psychoanalysis, and further, that each "new truth" in psychoanalysis is a product of the "shared experience and understanding" of this particular patient and analyst, agree that an interpretation is not only a way to rediscover lost experience.

It also does more, it defines, organizes, and expresses some previously inchoate, unstructured conglomerate of experience, perhaps something even too formless to be called "an experience." It creates a new experience and adds something new to the self of the experience (p. 293).

Wolstein (e.g., 1981), especially, has emphasized over the years the subjectivity of psychoanalytic truth and the dependence of the content of this truth on the unique, emergent qualities of the two participants' interaction. Even more recently, Wolstein (1982) has presented the view that this unique interaction leads to

transconscious psychic experience that becomes conscious as new actuality. It is transconscious in that it was never conscious before, and now becomes conscious for the first time (p. 415).

Fingarette (1963) writes, "Insight does not reveal a hidden past reality; it is a reorganization of the meaning of present experience, a present reorientation toward both future *and* past" (p. 20). Loch (1977), Viderman (1980), and Spence (1982)⁷ make similar points about the nature of psychoanalytic truth and the interpersonal process by which it is created.

It is implicit in each of these papers (explicit in the cases of Loewald, and Issacharoff and Hunt) that the psychoanalytic process and the creative process have certain communalities. In both, the process is emergent, not predetermined. The outcome is unknowable, and a final outcome is unreachable. In both, an initial stage of receptivity is followed by inspiration, then by the application of directed, ordered thinking. In both, constructions appear, are honed, and then themselves become springboards for the next generation of constructions. Each new construction, if it is useful, has something of the quality of "effective surprise," a term Bruner (1962) uses to describe the result of a truly creative act. Effective surprise, says Bruner,

need not be rare or infrequent or bizarre and is often none of these things. Effective surprises ... seem rather to have the quality of obviousness about them when they occur, producing a shock of recognition following which there is no longer astonishment (p. 18).

Effective surprise marks the symbolization of unformulated experience, the creation of explicit meaning. It provokes the feeling

⁷ By the time I read Spence's exciting work, it was too late to include it in the present paper. Some of Spence's views are similar to those taken here, although Spence arrives at them from a different direction.

of recognition, the shock of recognition, because we have seen its vague outlines before—in parataxic, amorphous, felt form, in our feelings of tendency. It is as if we had been looking through poorly focused binoculars without realizing it. Somehow the adjustment is made, and suddenly and unexpectedly, the view leaps out at us in fine detail. In just this way, by creating between them a world of thought and curiosity, patient and analyst rescue unformulated experience from the oblivion of the familiar.

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