

Ferenczi, Regression and Shame

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Sandor Ferenczi's work, nourished by his own experience of shame and injury in relation to his analyst Freud, can be seen to link notions of trauma, regression and shame. This paper may be divided into three loosely connected sections. The first concerns the concept of regression. The second, the debate over the place of gratification and abstinence in controlling the depth of regression and in working through the shame which regression necessarily generates, and the third, the relation between trauma, regression and shame in the work of Ferenczi, together with the shame/narcissistic injury over his rift with Freud and the subsequent allegation by Jones and others of paranoid delusions and psychotic disturbance.

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Regression

Like Freud, Ferenczi kept changing his mind about definitions of regression. Analysts will always debate the questions: Is transference necessarily and always regressive? Is regression a necessary part of transference? What does one regress to? And why does one regress? What models of psychic development does Freud rely upon in his definitions of regression? And does Ferenczi follow him? Since Freud, what shifts have there been in generally accepted definitions of regression (together with the models of psychic development on which they depend)?

Freud's notions of regression underwent constant changes over time, influenced by his theory of the developmental stages of the libido and the conceptions of fixation and regression. These ideas are made plain in Lectures XXI and XXII of the *Introductory Lectures* (1). The concept of regression, foreshadowed in the last two sections of Part One of the *Project* (2:281 ff.), continued to change throughout his work. In a footnote to the *Interpretation of Dreams* (3:542) Freud attributed the idea to Albertus Magnus and to Hobbes, and took sufficient interest in the range and shifts in meaning to wish at one point to classify them, identifying three kinds of regression: topographical, temporal and formal. In topographical regression, there is a reversal of the usual direction of excitation, which, in some of Freud's libido formulations, is from the perceptual to the motor. The other kinds of regression identified by Freud include *temporal* regression (which has two subtypes depending upon both object and aim) and *formal* regression "where primitive methods of expression and representation

take the place of the usual ones" (3:548). This begs the question, what are the usual ones and how usual are they? And then, if the reader of Freud begins to think that Freud has gotten somewhat carried away by classificatory fever, let him remember Freud's comment in the *Interpretation of Dreams* "all these three kinds of regression are, however, one at bottom and occur together as a rule" (3:548). Then, further muddying the waters, Freud adds, "for what is older in time is more primitive in form and in psychical topography lies nearer to the perceptual end."¹

For Ferenczi, whose focus was more explicitly on clinical phenomena and less on demonstrations of theoretical positions, the analytic task was to trace the trauma backwards to the underlying repressed memories, the sensate experiences of the traumatic event.² Consider Ferenczi's discussion of regression cum reconstruction in the *Clinical Diaries* (5). During the course of her analysis Patient B was able to reconstruct incestuous rape, combined with a "complete reproduction" of its accompanying

¹ Three lapidary footnotes to this brief discussion of regression: 1. That "regression" as used today implies all the baggage of its opposite, "progression" or "progress," a notion smuggled into ideas of development. The extent to which regression is development in reverse seems highly problematic. 2. That Jones used the term "mental regression" to dismiss Ferenczi as incompetent and to impugn Ferenczi's analytic work with regression in his patients (4) and 3. That Jones' use of "mental regression" for Ferenczi designates a want of seriousness which does justice neither to Ferenczi's clinical acumen, dedication and willingness to take risks, nor to his sense of play, mischief and imagination. Judith Dupont recounted Kata Levy's description of a train ride with Ferenczi in which, Levy says disapprovingly, Ferenczi got down on the floor with the children and played noisily with them.

² There is something rather unmanageable about conceptions of regression dependent upon libidinal direction.

sensations. Here Ferenczi spares us no pertinent detail:

... the same smell of alcohol and tobacco as on the breath of her attacker, violent twisting of her hands at the wrists, a feeling of trying to push off with her palms the weight of a gigantic body; then a feeling of pressing weight on her chest, obstruction of her breathing by clothing, suffocation, violent stimulation of her lower extremities, a most painful sensation in the abdomen with a marked rhythm, a feeling of leakage; finally the feeling of lying as though nailed to the floor, bleeding that will not stop, the sight of an evil, peering face, then only the sight of the enormous legs of a man, arranging his clothes, leaving her to lie there (5:21-2).

The accuracy of detail and power of description are remarkable. I cannot recall a single more impressive account of a patient's physical sensations in the literature. Given what Ferenczi describes "long periods of extreme mistrust and resistance towards me," (5:22) we can infer that the patient's mistrustful feelings in the present here-and-now of the analysis are of primary importance to Ferenczi as an indication of trauma which it is the task of the analysis to work through. Indeed, Ferenczi later criticized Freud for not allowing his (Ferenczi's) mistrust and disappointment to emerge in the analysis.

Abstinence and Gratification

The Freud-Ferenczi debate can be seen as another variant of the debate over the relative place of abstinence and gratification, and the ways in which these are believed to be related to regression and to a concept of "working-through."³

For Freud (see 6:227 ff., 7:68) the function of abstinence is to allow unconscious wishes to emerge; for Ferenczi, the function of gratification is to allow for the healing of traumatic disappointments in an atmosphere of trust, so they can be worked through in the analytic situation rather than being unconsciously repeated in the outside world. Both Freud and Ferenczi claim that abstinence and gratification respectively can further analytic ends by fostering regression, although they disagree on the requisite balance between them. In his 1929 paper, "The

Principle of Relaxation and Neocatharsis", Ferenczi says plainly: "psychoanalysis employs two opposite methods: it produces a heightening of tension by the frustration it imposes and relaxation by the freedom it allows" (8:115).

But there is another difference between the two, which can be understood as having to do with the implicit role which Ferenczi attributed to shame. He thought that abstinence could humiliate, a notion to which Freud was relatively indifferent. Ferenczi's personal experience in his analysis with Freud, and Freud's refusal to "gratify" by (for example) taking him back into analysis, constitute a subtext for much of Ferenczi's writing. I am not implying here that for this reason Ferenczi's discussion of the functions of shame in the analytic situation are any less valuable. Rather, I think it is useful to understand the personal underbelly of Ferenczi's ideas as a way of considering what are always important and difficult technical decisions.

Shame

Ferenczi's concept of mutual analysis may itself be seen as at least in part a reaction to Ferenczi's shame and humiliation over his needs for gratification and response from Freud, and to the shame over his (Ferenczi's) inability to communicate to Freud the pain he felt in such a way that Freud could understand it. Ferenczi longed for an analyst who would not indulge in a "confusion of tongues," the title of what is today perhaps the best known of Ferenczi's papers. Ferenczi writes:

My own analysis could not be pursued deeply enough because my analyst (by his own admission, of a narcissistic nature) with his strong determination to be healthy and his antipathy towards any weakness or abnormalities, could not follow me into those depths and introduced the 'educational' stage too soon. (5:62).⁴

³ To what ends did Freud wish to use abstinence? To what ends did Ferenczi want to use gratification? And how much room was there in the ideas each held for discrepancies between what they thought they were doing and what they were actually doing? What effect did their relationship have on the ideas they held, and what effect did their ideas have on their relationship and on their clinical work?

⁴ Ferenczi pursued this critique of Freud in the diary entry of May 1, 1932, when he writes: "Since making this discovery [that hysterics lie] Freud no longer loves his patients. He has returned to the love of his well-ordered and cultivated superego (a further proof of this being his antipathy toward and deprecating remarks about psychotics, perverts, and everything in general that is 'too abnormal'). And then Ferenczi delivers his blow: "[Freud's] therapeutic method, like his theory, is becoming more and more [influenced] by his interest in order, character, the replacement of a bad superego by a better one; he is becoming pedagogical" (5:93). Not finding Freud willing or ready to admit to failings, Ferenczi, sensitive to shame and narcissistic wounding, writes of the need for the analyst to admit to weakness and traumatic experiences. Such admissions, hold Ferenczi, have the effect of reducing and/or abolishing "that distancing by inferiority which would otherwise be maintained" (5:65).

Significantly, on July 21, 1932, exactly one month to the day before Ferenczi officially declined the presidency of the International Psychoanalytical Association (August 21, 1932), thereby marking irrevocably his rift with Freud, Ferenczi wrote the entry: "On the Feeling of Shame" in his clinical diary. Three days later (August 27, 1932), Freud wrote to Eitingon that "Ferenczi's refusal was a neurotic action of hostility toward the father and the brothers, in order to preserve the regressive pleasure of playing the mother role with his patients" (4).

Immediately after his refusal of the presidency, and before going on to Wiesbaden for the 1932 Congress, Ferenczi stopped in Vienna and read the paper to Freud. Not only did Freud want Brill to be present at the meeting as a third party (apparently anticipating dissention and trouble with Ferenczi), but he explicitly asked Ferenczi not to publish the paper (4). Understandably, Ferenczi was deeply hurt by Freud's reaction. Subsequently Freud denied having done anything to injure him, and implicitly viewed Ferenczi's sense of injury as further evidence that he was out of line.

In "The Confusion of Tongues" (9)⁵ Ferenczi underscores how the analytic situation can cause a re-living of the original trauma, implying that this is what happened in his analysis with Freud, in which "the language of passion and that of tenderness" had been confounded, making it impossible for him to work through childhood trauma. The goal of analysis for Ferenczi is to undo the repetition compulsion set into place by trauma in two ways:

1. by understanding the nature of the childhood trauma and humiliation, and
2. by modifying whatever in the analytic situation contributes to its repetition rather than its working-through.

What makes this paper particularly poignant is the way in which it constitutes a link between Ferenczi's feelings of humiliation and shame over not being able to get Freud to recognize how he (Freud) hurt Ferenczi and fell short of his expectations. In short, Ferenczi felt wounded and abandoned by Freud, who was never able to admit to Ferenczi that he (Freud) might have injured him by telling him not to publish

his paper or by influencing others to turn against him (e.g., the letter to Eitingon).

Ernest Jones and Freud strongly disapproved of Ferenczi's "Confusion of Tongues" paper, which they believed demonstrated Ferenczi's impairment. Freud and his followers held that Ferenczi's approach to trauma was a misconstrual of both regression and the transference, indicating Ferenczi's needs for further analysis. Ferenczi was criticized for over-emphasizing trauma and for engaging in his "active technique" instead of "analyzing."

Concluding Remarks

The subject of shame, therefore, seems useful in appreciating Ferenczi's role in the history of psychoanalysis and in evaluating the pertinence of his notions of analytic technique. "Analysis", writes Ferenczi, "must make possible for the patient, morally and physically, the utmost regression, without shame" (5:116).

At first sight, this comment seems intuitively useful. But if one looks at it more closely, it also acquires a utopian ring, and appears to point to difficulties Ferenczi had in working with shame and regression. Having focused on shame in the analytic situation for the past ten years or so, I have come to believe that there can be no regression without shame. Neither can there be trauma without shame. (Kilborne B. Disappearing persons. Unpublished book ms) In fact, it is the task of the analyst to work through the layers of shame so that regressive fantasies and states can be made accessible to the analysis. Therefore, shame, trauma, and regression are indissociably linked. An instinct to cover up and to hide, shame experiences trigger defenses against *being seen* to be regressed, *being seen* to be traumatized, *being seen* to feel helpless, etc.

To work through these dynamics of shame, clarity over boundaries is, I think, highly desirable. Shame can only be made conscious in the context of an increasing awareness on the part of the patient of fears of separation, which depend upon clarity over boundaries. It is no exaggeration to say that all analytically induced regression (whatever "regression" is construed to mean) brings with it shameful, regressive fears of separation from the analyst which must be addressed as such.⁶

⁵ The original title of was "The Passions and their influence on the sexual and character development of children" (5).

⁶ Also important is what Ferenczi refers to in the "Confusion of Tongues" paper as "tenderness."

One of the sad implications of Jones' false allegations concerning Ferenczi's competence has to do with Jones' own assumption that his (Jones') moral high ground was justified. Unfortunately, the confounding by Jones and others of psychic impairment with theoretical and technical disagreement made the maintenance of irrefutable moral high ground that much more unassailable, and has helped to hide important aspects of the relationship between Freud and Ferenczi dealing with shame.⁷

While Ferenczi may at times have blurred the boundaries between his own psychodynamics and those of his patients, and he certainly made clinical mistakes (as do we all), more important for us today is what we can derive from his clinical efforts and

⁷ Hoffer A and Hoffer, P, 1998, "Ferenczi's fatal illness in historical context." (presented at the meetings of the American Psychoanalytic Association in Toronto.) The Hoffers have admirably analyzed the effects of Ferenczi's pernicious anemia on his psychic state. From their discussion one clear conclusion emerges of pertinence for this paper: that whatever delusions Ferenczi suffered, his contributions to analytic technique and theory remain monumental. In other words, it is both possible and desirable to separate allegations of his mental state in the last months of his life from the value of his writing. The confounding of the two in the public mind has done a grave injustice to Ferenczi and made it unnecessarily difficult to weigh the claims of his detractors, who have sought to discredit him as a major figure in the history of psychoanalysis.

insights, particularly with respect to shame, regression and trauma. There is much to be learned from Ferenczi's work and what it stands for, and from the honesty with which he described the struggles of his patients, as well as the honesty with which he viewed his mistakes and wrote about his own sense of shame and humiliation, chronicling the ways in which he grappled with "our impossible profession" and the complexities of the human soul.

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Summaries in German and Spanish

Kilborne B. Ferenczi, die Regression und die Scham

In Ferenczis Werk, das durch eigene beschämende und verletzende Erfahrungen in der Beziehung zu Freud beeinflusst ist, verbinden sich Aspekte von Trauma, Regression und Scham. In dieser Arbeit wird zunächst das Konzept der Regression dargestellt. Dann wird erörtert, wie die Tiefe der Regression durch Gratifikation und Abstinenz gesteuert wird und welche Bedeutung ihnen beim Durcharbeiten der Scham, die mit der Regression notwendigerweise verbunden ist, zukommen. Schliesslich wird, vor dem Hintergrund der Kränkungen durch Freud und der späteren Unterstellung von Jones u.a., Ferenczi habe unter einem paranioten Wahn und einer psychotischen Störung gelitten, die Beziehung zwischen Trauma, Regression und Scham in Ferenczis Werk dargestellt.

Kilborne B. Ferenczi, regresión y vergüenza

El trabajo de Sandor Ferenczi, sustentado por su propia experiencia de vergüenza y daño en relación con su analista Freud, puede servir para relacionar las nociones de trauma, regresión y vergüenza. Este trabajo debe ser dividido en tres secciones conectadas de forma imprecisa. La primera se refiere al concepto de regresión, la segunda tiene que ver con la discusión del lugar de la gratificación y abstinencia en el control de la regresión profunda y el trabajo de elaboración de la vergüenza, la cual genera regresión, y la tercera la relación entre trauma, regresión y vergüenza en el trabajo de Ferenczi, junto con vergüenza/herida narcisista durante sus desavenencias con Freud y la aseveración posterior de Jones y otros sobre el delirio paranoide y la perturbación psicótica.