

Bonomi, C. (2002). Identification with the Aggressor—An Interactive Tactic or an Intrapsychic Tomb?: Commentary on Paper by Jay Frankel. Psychoanalytic Dialogues 12: 153-158

Identification with the Aggressor—An Interactive Tactic or an Intrapsychic Tomb?: Commentary on Paper by Jay Frankel.

Carlo Bonomi, Ph.D.

In Ferenczi's idea of identification with an aggressor we can distinguish two sides. One is what we might call an interactive tactic or a social strategy, which is used in upsetting or unbalanced relations of power in order to forestall lack of control, fear, and the like. This is the side that is explored in great detail by Jay Frankel. The other side consists in a intrapsychic change, which flows from severe trauma. The specific effects of the latter are described by Ferenczi as dissociation/fragmentation of the personality, sequestering of the trauma, emotional abandonment, and isolation. Elsewhere, Ferenczi refers to this as a form of psychic self-mutilation.

Jay Frankel's Article is Noteworthy for its Exceptional Clarity and the breadth and depth of scope he brings to a subject we all seem to know yet have reflected upon but little. He prefaces his own far-reaching discussion of the various aspects of identification with the aggressor with incisive sketches of its historical roots in the pioneering work of Sandor Ferenczi, its later ramification in Anna Freud, Fairbairn, Racker, and the most recent work of researchers in the United States.

The gist of the paper can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The Ferenczian concept of identification with the aggressor (and its derivative, introjection of the aggressor) describes an

Dr. Bonomi is Supervising Analyst at the Istituto di Psicoterapia Analitica, Florence; Professor of the History of Psychology, University of Florence; IFPS EC member, and Associate Editor of the International Forum of Psychoanalysis.

- 2) unconsciously invented response to child abuse or seduction, both of which can be considered to be situations of severe trauma.
- 3) A contemporary look at the concept reveals the need to expand it in several directions and, first of all, the need to point out the nearly ubiquitous nature of responses, similar or identical to the one described by Ferenczi, in people who were not severely traumatized by others or did not sustain childhood abuse.
- 4) Such milder forms of identification with the aggressor can be seen in a variety of social or interactive situations and are in point of fact, a universal tactic of people who find themselves in disproportionately weak positions with respect to others who are seen as powerful and therefore as threatening.
- 5) This new understanding of identification with the aggressor allows Frankel to throw light on some vexing aspects of both transference and countertransference in the psychoanalytic setting, as well as on the obvious discrepancy that exists between the patient—who is “weak” or “vulnerable”—and the analyst—who is invested with “power” and “knowledge.”

A two-sided conclusion seems to emerge: (a) identification with the aggressor is an everyday phenomenon designed to protect ourselves and is not trauma-specific; (b) the nearly universal nature of the identification with the aggressor response implies that trauma itself is, in one form or another, virtually ubiquitous, since identification with the aggressor is used by people whose histories do not feature prominent traumas. We might here recognize the type of sensitivity toward the ruptures of the equilibrium between the individual and his environment that Ferenczi's most prominent pupil, Michael Balint (1968), spoke of. He viewed trauma as “a painful misunderstanding-lack of ‘fit’—between an individual and his environment” (p. 82n) and thought that such a discrepancy was relieved in the psychoanalytic situation as an “inequality between patient and analyst” which could be exacerbated or attenuated by the analyst's attitude (p. 168).

While I can only salute Frankel's exploration of the identification with the aggressor as a widespread interactive phenomenon, I am not sure that this expansion takes full account of the specificity of Ferenczi's original concept. Ferenczi's concept appears to rely heavily on an aspect not treated in Frankel's paper, namely, the “introjection

of the guilt feelings of the aggressor,” which is, according to Ferenczi (1933), “the most important change produced in the mind of the child” (p. 162; italics added). The question is important for both historical and theoretical reasons.

After Freud's abandonment of his early traumatogenic theory (the so-called seduction theory), the issue of real trauma, and especially the issue of real sexual abuse in childhood, was either avoided or treated in questionable ways. I am not here referring to the well-known controversy “fantasy versus reality,” but to the psychoanalytic understanding of the effects of a real sexual abuse. Such a psychoanalytic understanding was elaborated by Karl Abraham (1907) and was based on the idea that the feeling of guilt in an abused child is a sure clinical sign that the sustaining of sexual aggression is actually a form of infantile sexual activity. According to this theory, the child is not an innocent victim. Quite to the contrary, it is actually the child who “unconsciously wishes the trauma”; it is the child who invites or provokes the abuse through seductive behavior or an easy willingness to please the abusing adult.

I am convinced that Ferenczi (1933) introduced the concept of identification with the aggressor and the whole idea of the “confusion” of tongues to enable a different understanding of this clinical situation. He aimed at producing an alternative reading of the feelings of guilt in the abused child, a reading based on a different perception of the child's world of “wishes” or desires. Clearly the child has a “wish” in relation to the powerful adult; Abraham considers the guilt within the child as a direct product of this wish, whereas Ferenczi says that the adult “mistakes the play of children for the desires of a sexually mature person” (p. 161). The adult, therefore, misinterprets the infantile wish and severely damages the infantile wish itself. This is what the “confusion” is about.

Coming back to Frankel's paper, we have to notice that, although it explores the dimension of “fear” exceptionally well, the dimension of “wish” is more or less ignored. Now, this ignorance of the “wish dimension has important consequences for understanding the process called by Ferenczi “identification with the aggressor.” Frankel does not take sufficiently into account that a child desires a powerful adult in order to share the power and enjoy its advantages. Similarly, a patient also desires a powerful analyst in order to take possession of the power the analyst embodies, and taking possession of this power can be done in various ways. We can also say that the patient wants to

introject the analyst. This is a normal wish and a normal process. The crucial problem touched on with the concept of the “identification with the aggressor” is that this normal wish and process are made impossible—they cannot be accomplished. It is something which hinders a real process of introjection—if, by introjection, we intend an enlargement of the ego (as it was originally defined by Ferenczi). In Frankel's paper it is not clear that the normal wish is made impossible because of the blurring of the borders between pathologic and normal processes.

To make this distinction clearer, it is useful to explore the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1978) on introjection versus incorporation which is also quoted by Frankel. These authors discuss a confusion between the normal process of the child's psychic growth (through the child's taking possession of the adult's traits for the child's own beneficial use) with the mechanism of stunted growth, a result of harmful identification with the aggressor pursuant to traumatic situations. Abraham and Torok expand Ferenczi's (1909) original definition of introjection to all life-creating psychic processes. (For a child these processes imply identification with the more fully formed adult.) At the same time, introjection is sharply distinguished from incorporation or inclusion—both mechanisms that describe the forcible grafting of an aggressor as well as his or her mental world, including guilt and shame, onto the child's mental landscape. As Frankel points out, the terms introjection and incorporation have a checkered history in psychoanalytic theory. We would therefore gain from considering more fully the distinction between benevolent espousing of the other (introjection) and the malignant inclusion of the other as a parasitic foreign body (incorporation), suggested by Abraham and Torok.

This line of thought leads to further theoretical considerations. Taking into account the idea of “breaking” the continuity between severe trauma and the simple inequality of the power balance, I am sympathetic with those who want to make a distinction in the use of the word trauma by using it only for severe situations. Yet the distinction cannot be based on the classification of the external events—as psychotraumatologists would have it—but, rather, on the peculiar quality of the “traumatic experience.” Significantly Ferenczi himself came to see the traumatic experience as a “partial death” and based most of his final contribution on this view. In a letter of July 20, 1930, Ferenczi confided to Freud that he had become especially

interested in the “processes … which operate in the moments of real or supposed mortal danger [Todesgefahr],” and that this was the way through which he had come “to renovate the apparently old … theory of trauma” (cited in Brabant and Falzeder, my translation). A few days later he wrote that, when the attempt to resist the traumatic forces is given up, the result “may be described or represented as being partially dead” (Ferenczi, 1930-1932, p. 223; italics added). From that moment on, he began to assume that psychic trauma was an actual coming in contact with death and to explore what he sometimes called the “timeless and spaceless instant of dying.” According to him, this “dying” corresponded to a real process of destruction.

The idea that something in the self is destroyed because of trauma does not appear in Frankel's paper. Yet it seems to me essential if we want to understand the change in the mind that is produced in the traumatized child. According to Ferenczi (1933), this change concerns the “introjection”: the normal process of introjection of the adult as object of the child's wishes and mediator of child's desires cannot take place, since the world of wishes and desires is destroyed in the traumatic experience. Hence, what was originally aimed at enlarging the ego is reversed, becoming a negative process within the ego. This negativity is glimpsed in Ferenczi's (1933) idea that what has been introjected on are “the guilt feelings of the aggressor,” that is, something that hinders the growth, instead of promoting it, something that prevents the acknowledgment of the wishes, and fosters splitting and disavowal. In Bionian terms, we could even speak of a - introjection (minus introjection); Abraham and Torok suggested for it the term incorporation, by which the external aggressor becomes an internal, unmetabolized foreign body.

In Frankel's paper the aggressor remains the external partner in an unbalanced relationship. It is surely cogent to point out the pervasiveness of the tactic of identification with an aggressor in nontraumatic, mildly upsetting, or unbalanced relations of power in order to forestall lack of control, fear, and the like. It seems to me that, in this respect Frankel's paper is a significant contribution to a psychoanalytically based study of interactive behavior in everyday situations of minor verbal or nonverbal abuse, manipulation, or both. The paper explores in great detail the social function of what we might call the “strategy of transitional identification with the aggressor.” According to Ferenczi (1933), the issue of the identification with the aggressor is bound up with and is traceable to trauma or, put another

way, flows from severe trauma. How do we know? The answer is in the effect of what we might call traumatic, traumatogenic, more or less permanent and unconscious identification with the aggressor. The specific effects are described by Ferenczi (1930-1932, Ferenczi 1932) as dissociation/fragmentation of the personality/sequestering of the trauma (i.e., its removal from psychic circulation), emotional abandonment, and isolation. Elsewhere Ferenczi refers to this as a form of psychic self-mutilation. Torok has repeatedly referred to it as a partial death of the self or as the presence of death through trauma in the form of intrapsychic tombs or crypts (see Abraham and Torok, 1978, section IV).

I would say that Frankel and I are actually referring to the two sides of the same coin: transient and free-flowing identification as a building process versus permanent or rigid identification as a destructive mechanism.

References

- Abraham, K. (1907), Das Erleiden sexueller Traumen als Form infantiler Sexualbetätigung. Zentbl. Nervenheilk., N.F., 18: 855-866.
- Abraham, N. & Torok, M. (1978), *The Shell and the Kernel*, Vol. I trans. N. T. Rand. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Balint, M. (1968), *The Basic Fault*. London: Tavistock.
- Brabant, E. & Falzeder, E., eds. (2000), *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi: 1920-1933*, Vol. 3. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Ferenczi, S. (1920), Notes and fragments, In: *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. M. Balint (trans. E. Mosbacher). London: Karnac Books, 1980, pp. 216-218.
- Ferenczi, S. (1930-1932), Notes and fragments, In: *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. M. Balint (trans. E. Mosbacher). London: Karnac Books, 1980, pp. 219-279.
- Ferenczi, S. (1932), *The Clinical Diary of Sándor Ferenczi*, ed. J. Dupont (trans. M. Balint & N. Z. Jackson). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Ferenczi, S. (1933), Confusion of tongues between adults and the child. In: *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. M. Balint (trans. E. Mosbacher). London: Karnac Books, 1980, pp. 156-167.