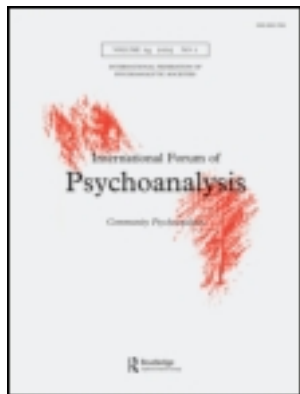


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Jones's Allegation of Ferenczi's Mental Deterioration: a Reassessment¹

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In *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, Volume III*, Ernest Jones explained the third wave of dissension as an effect of the progressive mental deterioration of two members of the Committee, who had governed the psychoanalytic movement: Rank and Ferenczi. While in relation to Rank, Jones made a partial recant, in relation to Ferenczi, he did not modify his assertions. Erich Fromm collected various testimonies by witnesses of Ferenczi's last years, all contrasting Jones's assertions, and challenged Jones's manner of writing history. However, since Fromm was himself a dissident, and his witnesses were pupils, relatives or friends of Ferenczi's, they were discarded as "partisans." The present study aims at reconsidering the question on the basis of many documents, among which the 1958 report of Lajos Levy (Ferenczi's physician) to Anna Freud. The consulted documents do not support Jones's allegation of Ferenczi's insanity. At the same time, they show that Jones's allegation was not a one-man fabrication, but reflected a shared belief. Finally, the author attempts a reading of the possible function of this belief within the psychoanalytic community. It is pointed out that Ferenczi's emphasis on the analyst as a real person was incompatible with the strict conception of psychoanalysis, based on the theoretical rejection of the affective factors which was becoming dominant around 1957, and it is argued that the narrative of Ferenczi's "falling into insanity" represented an expression of the fear of remaining embroiled in the patient's affective net.

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Jones's Allegation

Sándor Ferenczi died on May 22, 1933, at the age of 59. He was affected by pernicious anaemia, which was first diagnosed in September 1932, a few weeks after the Wiesbaden congress. In his obituary, Ernest Jones stated:

in his still later writings Ferenczi showed unmistakable signs of mental regression in his attitude towards fundamental problems of psycho-analysis. Ferenczi blazed like a comet, but did not shine steadily till the end. In this course he illustrated one of his own most important teachings—the astoundingly close interdependence of mind and body (1:466).

What Jones meant becomes clearer when we examine his correspondence with Freud of that period. As put by Jones, he had followed Ferenczi's "pathological evolution" for years, till the "denouement" occurred. The "denouement" consisted in Ferenczi's conflict with Freud in the days before the Wiesbaden congress, in his pale and sick look during the congress, and in his "paranoia," which, according to Jones, became "obvious to all analysts from his ... paper"

(Jones to Freud, September 9, 1932, and June 3, 1933) (2).

Two elements have to be stressed. First, Jones was convinced of Ferenczi's "mental regression" before and independently of the neurological symptoms, characteristic of organic brain disease, which appeared in the last two months of Ferenczi's illness. Second, the belief in Ferenczi's "mental regression" was shared by a group of people, to which Freud belonged as well (see Freud's letter to Jones of 29 May, 1933) (2). However, this belief was strictly dependent on Ferenczi's conflict with Freud (3:363-71, 4), and tended to disappear during the following years. Since the belief did not attain an official level, it did not have formal consequences, except for the withdrawal from publication of the English version of the Wiesbaden paper after Ferenczi's death. The rejection of Ferenczi's last contributions also remained informal and inaccurate. His latest theory and technique was neither studied, nor made object of criticism in public discussions or published papers—with the exception of Franz Alexander (5, 6) who, by the way, later approached more and more the criticised position. In the long run this resulted in a recovery process by means of the publication of his works. A significant moment was the so-called

¹ This paper is based on research reported in a longer paper entitled "Flight into Sanity: Jones' Allegation of Ferenczi's Mental Deterioration Reconsidered".

“Ferenczi issue” of the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, in 1949. In the presentation, Michael Bálint pointed out that “Psycho-analytical thinking is now beginning to re-examine Ferenczi’s ideas” (7:219). On this occasion the Wiesbaden paper too was finally published (8), without meeting Jones’s opposition.

The works on Ferenczi’s technique by his pupils—beside Bálint, Izette de Forest (9, 10) and Clara Thompson (11)—and the forth-going publication of Ferenczi’s collected papers in German and in English, were part of a progressive rehabilitation, which also included the plan of publishing selected portions of the Freud-Ferenczi correspondence and of Ferenczi’s *Clinical Diary* (12, 13). This progressive rehabilitation coincided with the enlargement of the conception of psycho-analysis, as becomes apparent considering the review of the *Final Contributions* (14) by Margaret Little. According to Little, Ferenczi’s final work was illuminated by Winnicott’s latest development. She also pointed out that Ferenczi “went further than his colleagues in ways they found unacceptable for unconscious reasons” (15:123).

However, this trend was contrasted by the arising of a new spirit within the psychoanalytic community. Thus, reviewing the same volume in the same year, Alexander Bromley stated that Ferenczi abandoned psychoanalysis “in favour of what might be described as rapport therapy” (16:113). Such a way of describing Ferenczi’s evolution was a new one, since it was making a retrospective use of a new distinction between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. The astonishing result was that Ferenczi was situated outside of psychoanalysis—something that even for Freud would have been an absurdity. What was happening? “Exact interpretation” was becoming a battle cry, since psychoanalysis “no longer had a monopoly on dynamic treatment. Consequently, as a profession it had a vested interest in advertising what was superior in its approach” (17:536).

In the same year, the third volume of Freud’s biography appeared, in which Jones explained the third wave of dissension (after that with Adler and Jung), as an effect of the progressive mental deterioration of two members of the Committee that governed the psychoanalytic movement:

Two of the members, Rank and Ferenczi, were not able to hold out to the end. Rank in a dramatic fashion presently to be described, and Ferenczi more gradually toward the end of his life, *developed psychotic manifestations that revealed themselves in, among other ways, a turning away*

from Freud and his doctrines. The seed of a destructive psychosis, invisible for so long, at last germinated (18:47; emphasis added).

The “heresy” at the center of the crisis of 1924 consisted in the emphasis put by Rank and Ferenczi on experience (*Erlebnis*) in the psychoanalytic situation or, as put by Jones, in “the theory that study of repeating experience could supersede the need for a deeper genetic analysis: that *Erlebnis* therapy could replace psychoanalysis” (18:77). By reflecting the contemporary “battle cry”, the opposition between *Erlebnis* and intellectual analysis transformed a historical burning question into a contemporary issue of self-definition. According to Jones’s historical reconstruction, the crisis of 1924 ended two years later with Rank’s mental troubles and defection (18:81), while Ferenczi’s mental troubles began to become apparent later when, after the disappointment for not having been made president, he withdrew from the concerns of the *International Association* and “began to develop lines of his own which seriously diverged from those generally accepted in psycho-analytical circles” (18:156). Jones stated that Ferenczi had “*delusions* about Freud’s supposed hostility” (18:190; emphasis added), that his illness “*exacerbated his latent psychotic trends*” (18:188; emphasis added), that “the *mental disturbances* had been making rapid progress in the last few months” (18:190; emphasis added), finally culminating in “*violent paranoid and even homicidal outbursts*, which were followed by a sudden death” (18:190; emphasis added).

Reactions

Jones’s allegation was immediately echoed and sometimes amplified by reviewers, but not everyone accepted it. A few people protested. On October 22, 1957, Izette de Forest sent two recent reviews of Jones’s volume III to Erich Fromm, pointing out the inconsistencies of Jones’s assertions, and inviting him to write a criticism of Jones’s fallacy. Izette de Forest had been in analysis with Ferenczi during the period when “he was becoming acutely aware of his dissatisfaction with some of the crucial aspects of the Freudian approach” (10:XI). Fromm, who was at that time collecting the material for his book *Sigmund Freud’s Mission* (19), accepted the proposal and on October 31 wrote to Izette de Forest:

I believe the main point is the typically Stalinist type of

re-writing history, whereby Stalinists assassinate the character of opponents by calling them spies and traitors. The Freudians do it by calling them "insane". I think even Freud would not have approved of this vicious treatment, and incidentally, Jones does not seem to be aware of the disservice he does to psychoanalysis. The picture he gives of the Secret Committee is, then, that two members, and the most trusted ones, became insane. Of one, Dr. Sachs, he says that Freud said he should not have belonged in the first place. Of Eitingon he says that he was not too bright. There remain Abraham and Jones, who were, according to Jones' own testimony, constantly engaged in the pettiest quarrels with all the other members. *A beautiful picture of the group of those who claim to represent the sanity which follows from psychoanalysis!* (emphasis added).

With the assistance of Izette de Forest, Fromm led an independent inquiry and collected various statements about Ferenczi's mental state by witnesses of his last period of life, all contrasting Jones's assertions. The witnesses were members of Ferenczi's family who assisted him till his last days, as Elma Laurvik (Ferenczi's step-daughter) and Sophie Erdős (Ferenczi's sister), and patients who remained in analysis with Ferenczi till two or three months before his death, as Clara Thompson, Alice Lowell, and Elizabeth Severn. Especially important is Thompson's testimony, because she was a medical doctor and visited Ferenczi till his death. The following passage is taken from her long report:

I went to visit him regularly and we talked, naturally not about deep or disturbing subjects, although he really tried to prepare me for the fact that he was dying. It was I who wouldn't face it.

What I believe is that in the last two months of his life there was some organic mental deterioration. That is, he showed memory defects and forgetfulness characteristic of organic brain disease, but I think it was minimal and a part of the death picture. To try to push it back into preceding years and explain his thinking by this is to say the least—criminal. I think he was a disturbed man and some of his procedures could be criticized, but I do not believe they were evidence of psychosis..... Certainly he was never maniacal and homicidal. To call his belief that Freud was treating him badly, paranoid, is obviously to deny the facts.

Based on this evidence, and pointing out that Jones didn't "claim any first-hand knowledge nor is any proof or evidence whatsoever offered of Ferenczi's psychosis," (20:13) Fromm came to the conclusion that "Jones's assertions ... must be judged to be untrue" (20:55). According to Fromm, the allegation was "motivated by old personal jealousies" and an

expression of a party line spirit, which manifested itself also in the fact that "many reviewers of Jones's book have accepted his data without criticism or question" (20:55).

"The Trustworthy Evidence of an Eye-Witness"

Although Fromm succeeded in collecting many testimonies, he failed in relation to the most important ones: those of Michael Bálint and Lajos Lévy, Ferenczi's literary executor and his physician. Differently from the colleagues living in America, Lévy and Bálint as Hungarian Jews who were living in England after the Nazi era, the war and the invasion of Hungary, depended very much for their living on their good relations with the psychoanalytic establishment in England. In a letter to Elma Laurvik of November 13, 1957, Bálint had written that his and Lévy's intention was to write a joint letter to the editor of the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* to express their criticism of Jones's assertions. The letter (21:66) appeared together with Jones's reply, in which it was claimed that what he "wrote about Ferenczi's last days was based on the trustworthy evidence of an eye-witness" (22:66). For unknown reasons, the letter was not co-signed by Lajos Lévy. Since this silence was fitting in with Jones's assertion about an anonymous eye-witness, Lévy was suspected to be the secret proof claimed by Jones (letter of Izette de Forest to Erich Fromm of May 25, 1958).

Jones died in February 1958. In June Fromm's article was published together with a reply by Jacob Arlow, in which it was acknowledged that Jones's claims about Rank and Ferenczi were "weighty ones" and that, "if proven unjustified, would constitute grievous errors" (23:14). Shortly thereafter, Anna Freud addressed the question to Lajos Lévy, probably exploring the possibility of writing a reply (obviously not in first person) to Erich Fromm's article. Finally, in October, Lévy made a detailed report and addressed it to Robert Wälder. Lévy stated that Ferenczi, before having been affected by pernicious anaemia, never displayed any trace of paranoid manifestations. A few weeks after the Wiesbaden congress the diagnosis of pernicious anaemia was made by Lévy himself. Thanks to a strong cure, Ferenczi could rapidly recover. However, in March 1933, the symptoms of funicular myelitis began to spread rapidly. Walking disorders, ataxia of the upper

limbs, sight disorders and incontinence appeared, and these symptoms were followed by relational and persecutory delusions (“Beziehungs- und Verfolgungswahnvorstellungen”), which also resulted in aggression against his wife. He died of a respiratory paralysis. At this point Lévy explained that paranoid manifestations are frequent in severe anaemia, and that they had to be carefully distinguished from the proper paranoia. In his opinion, Ferenczi did not have a paranoid predisposition.

On October 20, 1958, Anna Freud wrote to Lajos Lévy saying that she had been very impressed by his report and regretted the fact that Jones had not consulted him before writing the biography.

Conclusions

The consulted documents do not support Jones’s allegation of Ferenczi’s insanity. At the same time, they show that Jones’s allegation was not a one-man fabrication, but reflected a shared belief, which originated and spread in two phases. The main elements, which made such a belief possible, were Ferenczi’s previous collaboration with Rank (who became a dissident and was banished), his growing isolation and alienation from Freud, the theoretical and technical divergences from him, and finally Ferenczi’s refusal of the IPA presidency, which Freud offered him as a “forcible cure,” consisting in a process of identification with the common cause.

The second phase of Ferenczi’s pathologisation was characterised by the shift of the belief to a formal level, and its spreading within mainstream of the psychoanalytic community. The means was volume III of Freud’s biography, in which the latest arising of “the evil spirit of dissension” was discussed in a chapter entitled “Disunion” by Jones. Probably, reading the various correspondences in preparation for Freud’s biography reactivated Jones’s old envy and jealousy of Ferenczi. However, the myth of Ferenczi’s insanity cannot be explained on the basis of Jones’s individual psychology. The lack of scrutiny by which this myth was accepted by the reviewers, its rapid spreading, as well as its persistence, indicate that it performed some unconscious function within the psychoanalytic community.

In my opinion, the myth was functional to the “union” of this community, i.e. to the moral definition of its boundaries and obligations. We should consider that after Freud’s death, the doctrinal level became more important for identifying one’s respect

of and dedication to the community. Moreover, Ferenczi’s emphasis on the analyst as a real person was incompatible with the strict conception of psychoanalysis, based on the theoretical rejection of the affective factors, which was becoming dominant in those years. This conception represented a protection against the analysts’ fear of remaining “captives of their patient’s emotional structures,” “embroiled in their patient’s affective net” (17:538). As pointed out by Friedman, the analysts “wanted to be above it, looking at it. If they were caught inside it, they felt, both patient and analyst would be thrown together in a position designed by the patient’s neurosis” (17:538). Winnicott once stated that “Freud’s flight to sanity could be something we psychoanalysts are trying to recover from” (24:450). Now, if by “flight into sanity” we call the recoiling from being caught in the patient’s neurosis, it is easy to see the narrative of Ferenczi’s “insanity” as its mirror image. The narrative of Ferenczi’s case history, tragically ended up in isolation, mental deterioration, self-destruction, and blame represented an admonishment and had a normative value: “see what happens if you let yourself enter in a relationship with your neurotic (or even psychotic) patients!”

The moral freedom of the dissidents from this kind of boundaries might also explain why it was easier for them to protest against Jones’s false allegation. We should be grateful to dissidents like Izette de Forest, Clara Thompson and Erich Fromm for having collected the documents which demonstrate that it was possible to check the validity of Jones’s assertions also in those years.

The story of Anna Freud shows that, even at the centre of the psychoanalytic orthodoxy, it was possible to check the validity of Jones’s assertions. Thanks to the report of Lajos Lévy, Anna Freud came to the conclusion that Jones’s allegation was false. Yet she did not do anything to modify the impression created by Jones. Why? We might suppose that admitting such a serious error in relation to the person of Ferenczi, would have inevitably re-opened the question of Rank as well, i.e. in relation to a chapter of the history of the psychoanalytic movement which was, if possible, even more miserable. And since Jones’s assertions about the insanity of Rank and Ferenczi were not limited to their private life, but were synchronised with the story of the Secret Committee, the crisis of 1924, and the verdict about their theoretical positions and technical innovations, the admission that Jones’s allegations were false, would have

fuelled the criticism on the dogmatic aspects of mainstream psychoanalysis and destroyed the credibility of large portions of Freud's official biography. Therefore, Anna Freud must have come to the conclusion that the preservation of the credibility of the whole, deserved the sacrifice of the part. Precisely this choice represents, as an expression of totalitarianism, a further confirmation that the analysis made by Fromm was basically correct.

As a consequence, the process of rehabilitating Ferenczi promoted by Bálint was kept back for nearly three decades. The publication of Ferenczi's *Clinical Diary* (25), as well as of the Freud-Ferenczi correspondence, was continuously postponed (12,13,25:xi–xxvii), becoming possible only in 1985—a year that represents the beginning of a new interest for Ferenczi, which is well reflected in the increased number of articles dedicated to him. Such an interest has been facilitated by the collapse of a formal and dogmatic definition of psychoanalysis, the overcoming of an authoritarian (one-sided) mode of interaction, the new respect for phenomena explored by Ferenczi like trauma, countertransference, regression and psychic pain. The myth of Ferenczi's insanity did not find in this new mentality the necessary elements for surviving, and tends to disappear with the same indifference and lack of scrutiny that accompanied its onset.

We may finally wonder why Ferenczi was experienced as dangerous, when he had no intention of founding an alternative psychoanalysis, had no interest in power, and as a man was defenceless and extremely vulnerable. In my opinion, it was Ferenczi's critical attitude toward the psychological process of identification, which was experienced as a threat by the members of a group which was functioning mainly on the basis of identification. In spite of his life-long commitment to the psychoanalytic movement, Ferenczi kept a part of his personality separate from the "blind belief" in the cause, the part that corresponded to his social role of "enfant terrible" and his private vocation of "wise baby." His refusal to use the technical language of psychoanalysis and his preference for every-day language, communicated his low consideration for the ritualised means of identification that keep a group together. Moreover, large parts of his theory were based on the conception of the superego as a more or less traumatic "introjection" of an alien will, and he carefully avoided to base his technique on the identification with the analyst. Even his restless experimentation, the ups

and downs, the forcefully pushing everything beyond limits, show the lack of stability which is commonly associated with identification (as well as with sanity). Not to speak of the *Clinical Diary*, which may be considered a glimpse into the world, as it would look like, once it was deprived of benevolent identifications. Or of Ferenczi's own dissolution when, by refusing Freud's benevolent protection, he decided to enter this world—because identification is a protective device, and Ferenczi was lacking it. However, this is not the point. The real point is that his personality and his teachings were in contrast with, and made appear ridiculous, the mimetic abilities required by a psychoanalytic community that was becoming a bureaucratic organization.

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Summaries in German and Spanish

Bonomi C. Überlegungen zu Jones Behauptung einer seelischen Störung bei Ferenczi

Im dritten Band seiner Schrift *Leben und Werk von Sigmund Freud* erklärt Jones die dritte Welle von Meinungsverschiedenheiten über die psychoanalytische Theorie als Folge fortschreitender seelischer Störungen bei zwei Mitgliedern des Komitees, Rank und Ferenczi. In Hinblick auf Ferenczi hat er diese Behauptung nie zurückgenommen. Erich Fromm hat bereits eine Reihe von Zeugnissen gesammelt, die diese Behauptung widerlegen. Als Dissident, der überwiegend Freunde, Schüler oder Verwandte von Ferenczi befragt hatte, fand er mit seinen Belegen aber kaum Gehör. Mit seinen Überlegungen stützt der Autor sich auf neuere Dokumente, darunter den Bericht von Ferenczis Arzt Levy an Anna Freud von 1958. Diese Dokumente stellen Jones Behauptung weiter in Frage. Sie zeigen ausserdem, dass es sich hier nicht um die Behauptung eines einzelnen handelte, sondern dass sie von vielen geteilt wurde. Das lag wohl daran, dass Ferenczis Bemühen, den Analytiker mehr als reale Person zu berücksichtigen, mit den damaligen Konzepten der Psychoanalyse nicht vereinbar war und Ängste auslöste, in das affektive Netz der Patienten verstrickt zu werden.

Bonomi C. La alegación de Jons sobre el deterioro mental de Ferenczi. Una valoración.

En “*La vida y trabajo de Sigmund Freud, volumen III*”, Ernest Jones explicó el Tercer movimiento de disensión como efecto del deterioro mental progresivo de dos miembros del comité, quienes habían gobernado el movimiento psicoanalítico: Rank y Ferenczi. Mientras en relación a Rank, Jones hizo una renuncia parcial, no ocurrió así en relación a Ferenczi, ante quien no modificó sus afirmaciones. Erich Fromm recogió diversos testimonios en los últimos años de testigos de Ferenczi, todos contrastando las afirmaciones de Jones y retando a Jones su forma de escribir la historia. Sin embargo, desde que Freud fue un disidente y sus testigos fueran alumnos, parientes o amigos de Ferenczi fueron rechazados como partisanos. Este estudio se dirige a reconsiderar la cuestión sobre la base de muchos documentos entre los cuales está el informe de 1958 de Lajos Levy (médico de Ferenczi). Al mismo tiempo muestran que alegato de Jones no fue fabricado por un hombre únicamente, sino que reflejaba una creencia compartida. Finalmente el autor intenta hacer una lectura sobre la posible función de esta creencia desde dentro de la comunidad psicoanalítica. Se señala que el énfasis de Ferenczi sobre la persona real del analista era incompatible con la estricta concepción del psicoanálisis, basado sobre el rechazo teórico de los factores afectivos los cuales dominaban en 1957 y se discute que la narrativa de Ferenczi “falling into insanity” representaba una expresión del miedo a permanecer enredado en la red afectiva del paciente.