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FERENCZI'S CONCEPT OF IDENTIFICATION WITH THE AGGRESSOR: UNDERSTANDING DISSOCIATIVE STRUCTURE WITH INTERACTING VICTIM AND ABUSER SELF-STATES

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No one has described more passionately than Ferenczi the traumatic induction of dissociative trance with its resulting fragmentation of the personality. Ferenczi introduced the concept and term, identification with the aggressor in his seminal "Confusion of Tongues" paper, in which he described how the abused child becomes transfixed and robbed of his senses. Having been traumatically overwhelmed, the child becomes hypnotically transfixed by the aggressor's wishes and behavior, automatically identifying by mimicry rather than by a purposeful identification with the aggressor's role. To expand upon Ferenczi's observations, identification with the aggressor can be understood as a two-stage process. The first stage is automatic and initiated by trauma, but the second stage is defensive and purposeful. While identification with the aggressor begins as an automatic organismic process, with repeated activation and use, gradually it becomes a defensive process. Broadly, as a dissociative defense, it has two enacted relational parts, the part of the victim and the part of the aggressor. This paper describes the intrapersonal aspects (how aggressor and victim self-states interrelate in the internal world), as well as the interpersonal aspects (how these become enacted in the external). This formulation has relevance to understanding the broad spectrum of the dissociative structure of mind, borderline personality disorder, and dissociative identity disorder.

KEY WORDS: Trauma; dissociation; identification; identification with the aggressor; dissociative structure; victim and abuser self states

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In this essay I explore and expand upon some of the implications of Ferenczi's (1933) concept of identification with the aggressor, focusing on

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the trauma-based development of dissociated abuser and victim self-states, and the intrapersonal and interpersonal relational dynamics that follow. From the identification with the aggressor process may develop a dissociative dominant/submissive personality organization that especially characterizes Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), previously known as Multiple Personality Disorder, as well as Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (DDNOS), and to some degree can be observed in everyone. It may also develop into alternating shifts of self-state organization that characterize borderline personality organization, of which Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a prime example. Both DID, DDNOS, BPD, and many somatoform disorders, would have come under the broad rubric of hysteria in Sigmund Freud's and Pierre Janet's time.

FERENCZI'S IDENTIFICATION WITH THE AGGRESSOR

The term, "identification with the aggressor," is much used but is frequently confusing and difficult-to-understand. Part of the reason is that it is often interpreted in accordance with Anna Freud's (1936) later concept of this process (Rachman, 1997), understood to be defensive in a way that connotes a sense of agency and purpose. This has had the result of obfuscating, even at times burying, Ferenczi's profoundly meaningful descriptions along with their psychodynamic implications. Fortunately, Ferenczi's work is currently being revivified. One of the things that Ferenczi's concept of identification with the aggressor helps us to understand is that it is not just that the aggressor has somehow "gotten inside" the former victim, causing reenactments of the aggression, but that the psyche has become split so that a part of the self has become automatically imitative of the behavior of the former aggressor. Ferenczi introduced the term in his seminal "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child" (1933), in his address to the 12th International Psychoanalytic Association Congress, in September 1932 in Wiesbaden, the result of his many years of working with traumatized individuals. (Also see: Ferenczi's *Clinical Diary*, 1932, and his posthumously published "Notes and Fragments," 1930–1932.) In his Wiesbaden address he described how the child who is being abused becomes transfixed and "robbed of his senses," and as a result becomes subject to automatic mimicry of the abuser:

> These children feel physically and morally helpless...for the overpowering force and authority of the adult makes them dumb and can rob them of their senses. The same anxiety, however, if it reaches a certain maximum, compels them to subordinate themselves like automata to the will of the aggressor, to divine each one of his desires and to gratify these; completely oblivious of themselves they identify themselves with the aggressor... the weak and undeveloped personality reacts to sudden unpleasure not by defense, but by anxiety-ridden identification

> and introjection of the menacing person or aggressor.... One part of their personalities, possibly the nucleus, got stuck in its development at a level where it was unable to use the alloplastic way of reaction but could only react in an autoplastic way by a kind of mimicry. (Ferenczi, 1933, pp. 162–163)

I read Ferenczi as saying that as a result of being overwhelmed, the child becomes hypnotically transfixed on the aggressor's wishes and behavior, automatically identifying procedurally and by mimicry rather than by a purposeful and defensive identification with the aggressor's role. Ferenczi is not describing an identification that involves agency and initiative. Nor is he describing healthy identification in which the process augments and expands the child's developing sense of identity—in which the identification is linked with the rest of the self.

In the traumatic moment of being terrified and abused, the child cannot assimilate the events into narrative memory. Like many who are overwhelmed by danger, the child goes into a trance-like state in which the source of the danger, in this case the abuser, is held in focus intently, but in a depersonalized and de-realized way. As Pierre Janet (1907) described, in the traumatic situation consciousness is constricted, and the person focuses in an auto-hypnotic way only on the points of relevance. Because the child is usually intensely attached to the abusive caretaker and because abuse may intensify the attachment, the abuser's behavior, including facial expression, posture, and words are even more automatically mimicked, along with a greater focus on the abuser's wishes.

Current attachment theory provides ways of thinking about identification with the aggressor that rely on processes that Lyons-Ruth (1999) described as "enactive procedural representations of how to do things with others" (p. 585). Such unconscious enactive, procedural, relational knowing is the result of two-person interactions, and these procedural ways of being with another underlie a major portion of our lives. When development has gone fairly well these procedural ways of being are connected with one another. Traumatic procedural learning, however, is much more vulnerable to dissociative processes. When there is no mutuality, no chance to learn both the child's and the adult's roles in an interpersonally connected way, contradictions in behaviors and in communications between caregiver and child remain unexamined. Thus, important parts of experience are likely not only to remain unlinked, but become dissociated.

Children spontaneously imitate the behaviors of those around them, particularly adults, in mannerism, speech and posture. They especially imitate those who are attentive and warm to them (Bandura and Huston, 1961) as well as those who are powerful (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963). Infants, even soon after birth, engage in what appears to be mimicry (Meltzoff and Moore, 1977; Trevarthen, 2009).

Mirror neurons (Gallese, 2009a, 2009b) are most likely involved in this procedural identification. Gallese, Fadiga, Fogassi, and Rizzolatti (1996) in their work with monkeys found that the same premotor neurons fire when the monkey performs an action, such as eating a peanut, as when it observes another monkey performing the action. Gallese (2009a) and his colleagues have also documented in humans what they believe is the "homologue of these monkey areas in which mirror neurons were originally observed" (p. 522). Gallese further stated, "Watching someone grasping a cup of coffee, biting an apple, or kicking a football activates the same neurons of our brain that would fire if we were doing the same" (p. 522). Gallese calls this "embodied simulations" and emphasizes "intentional attunement." In another recent article, he writes:

> According to my model, when we witness the intentional behavior of others, "embodied simulation" generates a specific phenomenal state of "attentional attunement." This phenomenal state in turn generates a peculiar quality of identification with other individuals, produced by the collapse of the other's intentions into the observer's ones. By means of embodied simulation, we do not just "see" an action, an emotion, or a sensation. Side by side with the sensory description of the observed social stimuli, neural correlates of the body states associated with these actions, emotions, and sensations are activated in the observer. (Gallese, 2009b, pp. 171–172, also cited in Koehler, 2011, p. 313)

Gallese emphasized that these neurons function in accordance with integration with other parts of the brain, in particular with the motor system.

Early linking and unlinking of states of mind

The traumatically induced fracturing of the personality can lead to increasing splits, Ferenczi noted. Trauma disrupts a person's sense of continuity, not only by breaking apart the prior organization of experience but also by impeding the linking of states in the course of development. Originally, behavior/mental states are not linked. It is only in the course of development, in a facilitative interpersonal environment, that they become so. According to Frank Putnam's Discrete Behavioral States model of infant development (Putman, 1997), rather than starting out as a unity, the human personality becomes integrated with development over time. Infants go through orderly transitions that involve discontinuous switches from one state to another, for example from sleep to wakefulness to fussiness to crying. At first, these are biological states involving such biological activity as eating and elimination, but soon they become organized in orderly sequences, with transitions between them become regularly linked, along with affective states. As this occurs with increasing complexity, the child gains greater control and ability to self-regulate.

However, such integration is impeded by psychological trauma and neglect. In neglectful interpersonal environments emotions often do not get appropriately labeled. Because trauma and neglect impede the expected linking of associative pathways among self-states, feelings such as terror, rage, longing, and so on, often do not get adequately linked with other states of mind. People who have suffered more interruptions of state linkage have more difficulty knowing what they are feeling and are more easily buffeted by their emotions and environmental circumstances. Trauma also interrupts metacognitive, self-observing, self-reflective functions, which also facilitate the integration of states. As a result of trauma, the child is then left with overwhelming affect without context and without soothing, resulting in disjointed, out-of-context states of mind.

Development of victim and aggressor self-states

In his description of identification with the aggressor Ferenczi said, "one part of their personalities… got stuck … where it was unable to use the *alloplastic* way of reaction but could only react in an *autoplastic* way by a kind of mimicry" (Ferenczi, 1933, p. 163, italics in original) (see also Langan, 2014). The word autoplastic means changing the self. The child's sense of agency, identity, and integrity of self are diminished in the process of identification with the aggressor. The child, experiencing her—or himself as an object of use for the caretaker, rather than as a person of intrinsic value, becomes highly alert to the caretaker's needs and responses, focusing intently on the abuser's postures, motions, facial expressions, words, and feelings.

Thus, it is not like a positive identification in which a person's already coherent identity is augmented (Bonomi, 2002). It is as if the person's agency has been supplanted by the aggressor's goals, as if the person has been "taken over from the outside" filled with the aggressor (Coates and Moore, 1995, 1997). This phrase of Coates' and Moore describes well the assault on the self by relational trauma, in a way that is similar to Ferenczi's identification with the aggressor. Describing this unconscious forced submission and the resulting dissociative compartmentalization involved in identification with the aggressor Ferenczi wrote:

> …the aggressor disappears as part of external reality and becomes intra—as opposed to extra-psychic; the intra-psychic is then subjected, in a dream-like state as is the traumatic trance, to the primary process.... In any case, the attack as a rigid external reality ceases to exist and in the traumatic trance the child succeeds in maintaining the previous situation of tenderness. (Ferenczi, 1933, p. 162)

Thus, we not only have the procedurally enacted identification with the abuser, which becomes unconscious, but now, from the attachment-oriented

victim position, a positive attachment relationship with the abuser, "a situation of tenderness" is preserved in consciousness. But this situation of tenderness is illusory, for in a dissociatively sequestered part of the mind, in the inner world, information and feelings, that are unacceptable from an attachment perspective, live on, often in frightening ways.

Ferenczi's thinking anticipated Fairbairn (1943, 1944) in his description of how abused or frightened children preserve the good object in consciousness by taking the burden of badness of the aggressor into themselves, thereby maintaining the "situation of tenderness" with the aggressor. Both Ferenczi and Fairbairn underscored that this internalized aspect of the traumagenic relationship was deeply buried. Fairbairn's famous statement that

> it is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God, than a saint in a world ruled by the Devil. A sinner in a world ruled by God may be bad, but there is always a sense of security to be derived from the fact that the world around is good. (Fairbairn, 1944, pp. 66–67)

resonates with Ferenczi's insights. Coming from a different angle, Bowlby (1980) made a similar point in his description of defensive exclusion, in which incompatible, segregated patterns of multiple representations develop. In the "disconnection" type of defensive exclusion the child keeps in consciousness favorable views of the parents while knowledge of the bad or disappointing aspects of the parents is excluded from the first information system.

Stressing that dissociation and identification work together, Frankel elaborated on Ferenczi's concept by pointing out that dissociation here clears the way for "identification with the aggressor by emptying the mind of spontaneous emotional reactions so that we can feel what we must" (Frankel, 2002, p. 110). He adds that the process of identification with the aggressor informs not only about what we must feel, but also what we must dissociate.

IDENTIFICATION WITH THE AGGRESSOR AS A TWO-STAGE PROCESS

In my view, identification with the aggressor can be understood as a two-stage process. The first stage is initiated by trauma and is automatic, but the second stage can be characterized as defensive and purposeful. While identification with the aggressor begins as an automatic organismic process, with repeated activation and use it becomes a defensive process.

Once there has been chronic relational trauma, and especially if an abusive environment continues, the development of a self-structure that anticipates the abuser is adaptive in that context. Later on, when the person is out of the abusive environment, as in many defensive processes, it is maladaptive, often involving automatic punishment for the slightest infraction of bizarre rules.

The purpose and activity of abuser parts has much in common with what Bromberg (1996) called an early warning system, a fail-safe security system that is always hypervigilant for trauma. This dissociative vigilance of being "on-alert," which I believe is part of the underlying reason for the reliability and speed at which abuser self-states can appear, is highly protective of sanity. As Bromberg stressed, this dissociative vigilance "doesn't prevent a harmful event from occurring and, in fact, may often increase its likelihood. It prevents it from occurring unexpectedly" (Bromberg, 1996, p. 230). In this sense, it safeguards an ongoing sense of subjectivity and protects against emotional deregulation and annihilation anxiety. Thus, the vigilant intention to avoid current and future trauma ends up contributing to continual internal reenactment of the past traumatic situations.

In addition to preserving safety and sanity, the persecutor self-state also has the job of protecting the child's attachment to the abusive caretaker. Attachment serves survival (Bowlby, 1969) and buffers fear (Lyons-Ruth, 2001). Proximity to an attachment figure provides protection to the infant against predators, whereas separation from the attachment figure signals danger (Bowlby, 1969, 1980). What happens when survival is predicated on attachment to a caretaker who is also a predator? When the person from whom protection is sought is the same one against whom protection is needed? In such situations, the child's ability to maintain attachment will depend on the dissociative compartmentalization of parts of the self that contain contradictory memories and affects. By containing the child's enraged and angry feelings, the aggressor or persecutor self-state helps the individual, or at least that aspect of the individual most frequently interfacing with the world to maintain an idealized attachment relationship with the needed abuser.

DISSOCIATIVE STRUCTURE AND INTRAPERSONAL ORGANIZATION

Ferenczi described an organization of the dissociative mind. This dissociative structure involving identification with the aggressor involves the person being emotionally attached to inner persecutors, just as he or she was to the earlier outside aggressor. It is this inner relational configuration that gives the persecutor self-states their power. Modeled on an abusive caretaker, these self-states often punish the person because they believe this is necessary for the person's safety and protection. In the original family environment it was often not safe for the person to express feelings of dissatisfaction or anger. The development of a self-state that oversees and preemptively curtails thought and behavior by intuiting and predicting the aggressor's behavior is a great asset to the child in this environment. In a way that is like a preemptive strike, this part's enacted behavior often mimics the original abuser. That is, identification with the aggressor works predictively and preventively.

The aggressor-identified part of the self works in a way that is protective of sanity and selfhood and prevents shock! What looks from the outside to be self-abuse is a defensively learned way to provide safety, protect attachment, and finally to protect sanity. (Also see Howell, 1997; Rosenfeld, 1971).

Dissociative structure of mind and dissociative identity disorder

In his "Confusion of Tongues" essay Ferenczi (1933) emphasized how "there is neither shock nor fright without some trace of splitting of the personality." He went on to say that as the shocks increase during a child's development, so do the splits, and soon "it becomes extremely difficult to maintain contact without confusion with all the fragments each of which behaves [as] a separate personality yet does not know of even the existence of others" (Ferenczi, 1933, pp. 164–165). Certainly, in other papers as well, for instance in his "Child Analysis in the Analysis of Adults" (1931), it is clear that he is describing DID, writing of various functions of split-off self-states. Earlier, in his "Principles of relaxation and neocatharsis" paper he described how one part of the psyche might become a caretaker for the rest, protecting it, so that "the task of adaptation to reality being shouldered by the fragment of the personality which has been spared" (1929, p. 124).

He wrote that the "first reaction to a shock seems to be always a transitory psychosis, i.e., a turning away from reality." He went on to say, "It seems likely that a psychotic splitting off of a part of the personality occurs under the influence of shock. The dissociated part, however, lives on hidden, ceaselessly endeavoring to make itself felt, without finding any outlet except in neurotic symptoms" (p. 121). One might add that the hallmark of this "psychotic-like" primary process is that subjectivities are interrelating on the inside.

Alternating victim and abuser states

In addition to self-punitive behaviors—really an attack of one part of the self on another—in which the attachment-oriented victim state receives the punishment, these abuser—and victim self-states can also oscillate in a pattern, often called borderline personality disorder (BPD). For many reasons I dislike this term, preferring Complex Trauma Disorder (Herman, 1992), or Relational Trauma Disorder (Howell and Blizard, 2009).

This oscillation of self-states has been called borderline "splitting." As I see it, "borderline" splitting is quite similar to state switches in DID (Howell 2002, 2005). Splitting, in the sense of opposites, generally involves a dramatic switch or shift in affect state, including experiences of the self and expectations of the other. One difference between DID and BPD is that with BPD there is continuity of memory and acknowledgment of a dramatic shift in

behavior and affect. To manage the experience, its meaning is disavowed. Since there is no amnesia for the switch in BPD, it is a partial, not a full, dissociation. Another difference is that personification of self-states does not characterize BPD as it does in DID. And, finally in BPD there is the characteristic alternation between primarily two self-states (splitting).

With respect to splitting, it might be more specific and experience-near to formulate the inherent alternations in terms of aggressor and victim self-states. Splitting in this sense seems to involve this organization of alternating dissociated submissive/victim and rageful/aggressor self-states of which I have been speaking, that reflect the impact of relational trauma on defense and biological and neurological processes (Nijenhuis, 1999; Perry, 1999). These alternations reenact the relational positions of the victim and aggressor. In the victim-identified position, the child may be passive, submissive, and numbed-out, and experience herself as attached to and dependent on the aggressor/caregiver. But she knows the abuser role well as a result of procedural identification.

Thus, the victimized child learns both roles—victim and abuser. Three of the five "borderline" defenses that Kernberg (1975) relates to splitting can be understood specifically in terms of dissociated victim and aggressor states (Howell, 2002). For instance, primitive idealization is felt from, and only from, the victim state. Omnipotence and devaluation relate to the abuser's experience in relation to, and treatment of, the victim. This is evident in the aggressor state, and may help to explain the isolated rage, contempt, and omnipotence often termed "identification with the aggressor."

More specifically, then how does this dissociative organization work defensively? As long as the person oscillates between a hyper-attached self-state and an aggressive self-state in which attachment has been deactivated, terror is kept out of consciousness. Thus, splitting, like dissociative defenses in general, avoids the traumatic memories and impedes their assimilation and is thereby self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating. While both of these states of mind avoid the terror-filled traumatic memories, the oscillation in tandem is even more rigidly avoidant, producing the "stable instability" of BPD.

This oscillation occurs because the rageful self-state can only be maintained briefly before fear of abandonment or annihilation triggers the idealizing self-state, which, in turn, can only be maintained for a short while before fear of vulnerability triggers the rageful self-state (Howell, 2002). Perhaps it is the ability to switch to an alternating self-state, the splitting, that (like the dissociation in DID) affords some stability and organization that helps to avoid full psychosis. This constant oscillation from victim to bully and back again may become preoccupying, providing some sense of purpose as the person searches for safety or security in one position or the other (Howell, 2008).

SUMMARY

Extrapolating from Ferenczi's concept of identification with the aggressor, I have outlined the development of dissociated attachment-oriented victim self-states and aggressor self-states. The aggressor-identified self-states that often express rage, contempt, and omnipotence, may initially arise as procedural, imitative, dyadic enactments in the context of trauma. Because the abusive event(s) could not be assimilated, the experience could not be connected with other ongoing aspects of self. Ferenczi articulates how the aggressor is "introjected" and removed from conscious awareness thereby preserving "the situation of tenderness." Of course, the development of the victim and aggressor positions that I have described is heuristic and is not so simple in practice. There can be multiple victim and aggressor self-states and multiple kinds of them that interact in multiple ways.

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