The Concept of Trauma According to Ferenczi and Its Effects on Subsequent Psychoanalytical Research

Judith Dupont

Available online: 06 Nov 2010

To cite this article: Judith Dupont (1998): The Concept of Trauma According to Ferenczi and Its Effects on Subsequent Psychoanalytical Research, International Forum of Psychoanalysis, 7:4, 235-241

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/080370698436736
The Concept of Trauma According to Ferenczi and Its Effects on Subsequent Psychoanalytical Research

Judith Dupont, Paris, France

Freud abandoned his belief that all the traumas reported by his hysterical patients were true. He came to the conclusion that pathogenic fantasy was more frequent than real trauma. Ferenczi was the first one to return to the idea that most of the neuroses have a real trauma at their root. His pupil and follower, Michael Balint developed this idea and proposed new ways of describing the mechanism of trauma and some of the therapeutic consequences. Since then much further research has been done about the problems of pathogenic trauma. The ideas of Maria Torok & Nicolas Abraham as well as some of Leonard Shengold’s theories are described in this paper.

Judith Dupont, M.D. 24, Place Dauphine, 75001 Paris, France

Discussions are still going on about the nature of trauma and its mechanisms, its level of action and the factors involved. Not to mention the historical and classical controversy between psychogenic or exogenous trauma, real event or fantasy, or both, but in what proportions?

During treatment, the psychoanalyst does not attempt to verify what has effectively happened. He is only concerned with that to which the patient bears witness during the analysis. The real event only appears in the form of reconstruction based on this evidence. Can one say, however, that this real level is of no importance?

Is traumatism integrated into the coherence of the traumatised psyche as an endogenous fantasy would be, or does one observe a sort of fracture in this coherence?

Does this traumatic effect depend on the intensity, the circumstances, the time of the trauma, or the reaction of the subject to it? In fact, what is really a traumatic event? Can one define previously what will be traumatic or not? Can imperceptible traumas or repetitive micro-traumas give rise to shock effects? Is trauma, spectacular or not, always combined with fantasy life to trigger a traumatic effect, or may certain traumatic shocks, by their intensity or their unexpected nature, inhibit all fantasy activity?

Among all these questions, we might perhaps risk a statement: the early occurrence of trauma in personalities not yet structured and poorly protected, certainly aggravates the effects. It is among all these perplexities that I approach the question of trauma according to Ferenczi, followed by a rapid skimming over of the works of four authors claiming explicitly their relationship with Ferenczi’s way of thinking; that is, Michael Balint, Nicolas Abraham & Maria Torok, and Leonard Shengold. Many other authors could be quoted in this respect, Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, Masud Khan, Margaret Mahler, to mention but a few. Most of them meet on one point: the disclosure of an original or arch-original trauma, traces of which are found behind any subsequent traumatic effect. Thus, Freud before Rank, refers to the birth-trauma; Ferenczi talks about catastrophes which have occurred during the evolution of life on earth; Hermann about the trauma of the child who must lose his grip on a mother with no fur.

Let us begin with Ferenczi. Above all a therapist, he multiplied his technical experiences in order to give his traumatized patients enough sense of security to be able to go back to the original trauma. According to him, this generally involves a trauma suffered in early childhood, which has never been experienced consciously and therefore cannot be remembered. He presents trauma as a concussion, producing a split in the personality. In order to illustrate this split, he uses a whole series of images: splitting off of a dead part, killed by the violence of the shock, enabling thus the rest to live a normal life, but with part of the personality missing and out of reach, like a sort of cyst inside the personality; or multiple splits under the effect of repeated shocks which may go as far as atomisation: the personality fragments in order to present a larger surface area to the shock.
evolution of this idea in the course of Ferenczi’s theorization was remarkably studied by Marcel Hudon, in Montréal (1).

Ferenczi constructed his theory of trauma, which by the way was never completed, gradually, on the basis of clinical observations (2–8). He also considered that two moments in time are necessary to make a trauma pathogenic. The trauma in itself may not necessarily be so. But it could become so if, at a second moment in time, the child is disavowed by the people on whom he depends, in first place the mother. It is first of all the effect of surprise, or the repetition of the trauma, followed by a reaction of hypocrisie, arising out of guilt feelings, rejection and mendacity on the part of the people in charge of the child which make the trauma pathogenic.

Ferenczi insists on the frequency of sexual trauma, even in the best families. It happens, he says, that under cover of displays of affection the adults indulge in erotic games with the child. The latter responds with eagerness, “far more intensely and far more precociously” than one would have thought. But its demands remain at the level of play and tenderness. The adult responds with a passion, which the child cannot understand. Then, under the effect of guilt, the adult scolds and punishes the child; the sudden nature of this reversal in the adult’s attitude is an essential traumatic factor. It should be noted that when Ferenczi talks about the innocence of the child, he does not mean that childhood sexuality does not exist, but that it is free from guilt feelings. Insufficient stimulation, lack of affection may have the same traumatic effect as overstimulation.

The initial reaction to an unforeseen shock is a “fleeting psychosis”, a break with reality. The subject reacts with a psychotic split, paralysis of all psychic activity, of motility, perceptions and thought. A state of passivity, of non-resistance comes about. The subject becomes malleable and reacts with fragmentation or even atomization of the personality. The traumatized child, physically and psychically weaker, finding himself without defences, can but identify with the aggressor, submitting to all his desires, or even anticipating them, and eventually realizing that he can find some satisfaction in this.

The concept of identification with the aggressor was taken up again by Anna Freud in 1936, but in a quite different sense, as shown by Mathias Hirsch in an interesting study published in 1996 (9). He explains that Ferenczi applies this concept to children who have been seriously abused and terrorized, and who react by internalization of the violence suffered and complete surrender to the external will, in order to identify with the aggressor and thus making survival possible. The aggressions in question are serious, passionate actions, such as rape, our punishment for offences which do not appear like such to the child. This identification with the aggressor allows the child to maintain a sufficiently good image of the abusing adult upon whom it is entirely dependent.

Anna Freud applies this concept to children who have not been abused, but who anticipate a dreaded aggression by identifying with the aggressor and preventively becoming aggressors themselves. For Anna Freud, this concept implies minor or fantasised aggressions; for Ferenczi a real and serious danger.

The introjection of the aggressor allows the situation of tenderness to be maintained in a hallucinatory way. However, the adult’s feeling of guilt is also introjected in this way. What was previously an anodyne game becomes sinful and deserves punishment. Hence the split: the child is both innocent and guilty; it no more believes its own senses. On the other hand, the aggressor, pushed by his own guilt feelings, denies the facts, further increasing the child’s guilt feelings through an attitude of moral rigidity.

Another way of reacting to trauma is what Ferenczi calls “traumatic progression”. The traumatized and split child suddenly develops astonishing faculties of intelligence and wisdom: it becomes the nurse or psychiatrist of its parents. It was in this respect that Ferenczi devised his concept of the “wise baby”, who takes charge of his deficient parent’s problems.

Following the split, the object relation is transformed into a narcissistic relationship: one part of the personality starts mothering the other and becomes a sort of “guardian angel”, who, in turn, may find himself overwhelmed.

In a note entitled “Revision of the Interpretation of Dreams”(10), Ferenczi develops and generalises the Freudian idea of the traumatolytic function of the dream: the repetition of the trauma in dreams, where the critical mind is disconnected, corresponds to an attempt to bring the traumatic event to a better resolution than before. If the attempt fails, the dream becomes a nightmare.

Concerning the therapeutic aspect, Ferenczi shows that frustration—part of the classical psychoanalytic technique—may in certain circumstances function as
a repetition of the original trauma, reproducing the rigid authority of the parents. He therefore experimented with the technique of relaxation and neocatharsis. ‘‘Analysis should not be considered as terminated’’, he writes, ‘‘at least in theory, if the traumatic memory material could not be uncovered’’. With help of relaxation and permissiveness, Ferenczi encouraged regression in his patients, going sometimes as far as a state of trance. During the trance, or when dreaming, patients have the possibility to relive the original trauma, or even to live it for the first time if it has occurred in a state of unconsciousness.

Ferenczi was aware of the dangers of regression. With a patient in this state, the analyst has to show much tact, since too much sadism under the pretext of frustration or too much tenderness under the pretext of relaxation and flexibility could make him lose control of the situation. However Ferenczi himself could not avoid some reverses: each repetition in state of trance was followed by temporary relief, but often patients oscillated between emotion without understanding and understanding without emotion, never achieving true conviction.

In ‘‘Confusion of Tongues between the Adults and the Child’’ (6), Ferenczi insists on the necessity to take regression to the infantile stage literally. In this regressed state, the patient can no longer reason, he only reacts to attitudes. He refers here to what Balint later called the level of the Basic Fault, where adult language is not in current use (11). In this state, the patient is endowed with an extraordinary sensitivity and clairvoyance; the analyst must then show an extreme sincerity in order not to confront his patient with the former hypocrisy, disavowal and rejection. Ferenczi realized that at this level of regression it was necessary to give something to the patient. But he did not know, or did not have the time to find out what could and should be granted in order to make regression evolve in a favourable direction, or refused in case the patient fell in an uncontrollable spiral of endless demands. It was Balint who found the answer to this question. Ferenczi felt that Balint was on the right way when he wrote, in a short note while staying in Luchon in the fall of 1932, that Balint had taken things up where he himself got stuck.

Ferenczi’s followers

Four psychoanalytic authors explicitly claim their affiliation to Ferenczi: Michael Balint, Nicholas Abraham, María Torok and Leornard Shengold.

Michael Balint

Michael Balint was Ferenczi’s analysand, pupil and direct successor. In his book Thrills and regresions (12), he studies the effects of trauma and the way to approach these problems in analysis. He distinguishes between two types of regression: the benign and the malignant one. The first enables the patient to relive the trauma in a regressed state, and then start his life anew, with renewed strength, although still bearing the scar of the shock suffered before. Malignant regression, on the other hand, does not lead to resolution but initiates an endless spiral of repetitions and demands, which are impossible to satisfy. As we have seen, the regressed patient needs to obtain certain gratifications. But Ferenczi attempted to meet all of the patient’s expectations. He was not clear about which type of gratification lead to a benign, therapeutic regression, and which to the endless spiral in the malignant kind.

In The Basic Fault (11) Balint goes through the entire development of his theory and specifies the nature of the gratifications, which may be granted. They must remain at the level of preliminary pleasure, and should only be intended to show that the patient’s desires and needs have been perceived and recognized.

In his paper ‘‘Trauma and Object Relationship’’ (13), published in 1969 in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis, Balint presents his views about the structure and origin of trauma. He states that no theory gives account of all the phenomena met with in clinical practice. He comes to the conclusion that these theories must be incomplete. On the basis of his clinical experience he lists three points which are always involved:

1. The pathogenically most important traumas happen in early childhood.
2. They are inflicted by people in close and intimate relationship with the child, by people it loves and on whom it depends.
3. This means parents, or people invested with parental authority, such as teachers or educators. The role of the mother, long ignored, is predominant since she is the essential person in early childhood.

On the basis of his observations, Balint devised a structure of trauma in three phases, combining in some way the two moments in time according to Freud and the two ones according to Ferenczi:

1. There is a relationship of trust and dependence between the child and the adult.
2. The adult does something highly exciting, painful or frightening in a sudden or repetitive manner. The child who feels the suffering or the need of the adult having determined his action wants to comfort him. This kind of mutual seduction can lead to passionate actions finally followed by rejection.

3. The child approaches his partner again, in order to pursue the game or to put an end to the rejection, and then meets with refusal or denial of what has happened.

According to Balint, trauma can only be understood in the context of an object relationship, in a two-person psychology. The “aggressor”, especially when it is the mother, is not always driven by passion. We know that at the beginning of the child’s life the mother has to divine all its needs. The risk of misunderstanding is therefore very high and may lead to phase 2 of the trauma.

This three-phase structure has technical consequences: the repetition in transference leads to phase 2. In phase 3, “neutrality” might possibly work. But the analyst must avoid seduction, without, however, remaining passive, thus reproducing the rejection of the past.

Balint considers the disagreement which arose between Freud and Ferenczi in the last years of their relationship as a real trauma for the analytic community: “The impact of this event was so painful”, he writes, “that the first reaction of the analytic movement was denial and silence...”

The analytic world reacted to this trauma by discarding Ferenczi as well as his work. However this work could never be totally put aside and remained a problematic but immovable point in the development of analysis. Rarely quoted, but much used, it was finally rediscovered about twenty years ago. Perhaps this might be seen as a sort of therapeutic regression of the analytic community back to the original trauma. Was the arch-original trauma the Freudian discovery itself? Are there some other arch-arch-original traumas behind this one?

**Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok**

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have also focussed on the problem of trauma. They have attempted to clarify its mechanisms by proposing a structure for human beings largely based on Ferenczi’s conceptual heritage (and also Hermann’s), in the most Ferenzian way: they have used his work as their point of departure in order to continue it.

One of their books, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (14) comprises essays based on their joint research. Their procedure is too complex to be summarized exhaustively here. I shall here try to sort out what is most directly relevant to trauma.

Abraham and Torok propose a topographical conception consisting of a Shell, the realm of the Psychic, and a Kernel, the realm of the Somatic. The messages between the two realms are carried by instincts and drives, and are accompanied by affects, representations and fantasies. The Sexual (which has nothing to do with the difference between the sexes) concerns only a small part of the Envelope or Shell, (the Psychic realm), and the whole of the Kernel, (the Somatic). Messages issuing from the Kernel are therefore always necessarily related to the Sexual. Fantasies of the primal scene, whether they concern seduction or rape, are prototypes representing various dynamic moments or positions in the relationship between the Shell and the Kernel, a dynamic that fantasy serves to objectivate on the imaginary level.

Drives express the requirements of the organic Kernel in the language of the unconscious and are conveyed to the conscious by affects and fantasies. Messages moving in the opposite direction, from the periphery, or Shell, towards the Kernel are carried by memory traces. They are registered at the interface between the Shell and the Kernel. These memory traces represent the reception by the unconscious of messages coming from the conscious-preconscious system. The unconscious may return these messages in the form of representations or affects, or retain them by means of censorship. The memory trace unifies perception and fantasy. All these points relate to the fact that the famous dilemma: real trauma or pathogenic fantasy, could well be a false problem.

In order to understand the mechanism of trauma, it is essential, according to Abraham & Torok, to distinguish between two concepts which are often confused: introjection and incorporation. The authors start from the Ferenczian principle that an individual can only love himself. He may extend this love to others by means of a process of introjection, a process that allows the Ego to expand through the mediation of a love object. In this case, the object provides a pretext or opportunity for the Ego to integrate new drives into itself. Introjection therefore always represents an extension of the Ego.
Incorporation is not a process, it is a fantasy, and ultimately a restriction of the Ego; it is a form of magic designed to recover the lost pleasure-object and compensate for the failure of introjection. The loss is equivalent to prohibition; incorporation occurs in order to circumvent the prohibition without transgressing it. Yet it does so without any real success. That which could not be introjected, and was incorporated in the Ego fantastically, is called Imago.

Abraham & Torok state that because satisfaction was granted and then withdrawn at the time of the trauma suffered in childhood, a fixation occurs; this fixation is what leads to the constitution of an Imago. Absence, deprivation or seduction by the object—the adult—may obstruct the possibility for introjection of any new drive and create fixation by an Imago. This Imago concerns an object, an adult who is generally incomplete, that is, unable to fulfill his own desires. If the adult, disabled in this way, welcomes the child’s desire for some time, simultaneously with his own desire, only to reject it subsequently, this will create an infantile fixation. The child continually hopes that the object will once more revert to what it was during the privileged moment.

In Mourning or Melancholia (16), Nicolas Abraham & Maria Torok define what is reality and fantasy. Reality is everything that forces the psyche to undergo a topographical change. On the contrary, fantasy tends to maintain the topographical status quo by means of representations, beliefs, bodily states; it has a conservative function of preservation. Fantasy transforms the world rather than oneself. The fantasy is unconscious when a secretly incestuous topography is involved.

The Reality of a loss suffered by the psyche creates an intrapsychic situation expressed paradoxically by a fantasy. In order not to have to “swallow” the loss, it is fantasized that the lost object has been swallowed.

Incorporation is used in order to deny that there has been a loss, when the loss is unbearable. It is impossible, forbidden, to acknowledge ones own grief. The trauma and the affect it has caused are relegated to a psychic tomb, a crypt. The crypt is the result of a shared, shameful secret. The secret partner, who has disappeared, is absent or has turned hostile, and who has become an Ego ideal, must be preserved at all costs. And so the child takes over on himself the shame and the guilt. This would be the identification with the aggressor in Ferenczi’s sense.

Nicolas Rand, a close collaborator with Abraham & Torok, provides some clarifying definitions concerning their conception of trauma in his introduction to the Wolf Man’s Magic Word (16) Rand writes: “Trauma (in the Wolf Man’s case) is neither an act (e.g. of seduction) nor a hindrance for the development of drives (e.g. an identification with the mother in the passive position), but a contradictory dialogue and therefore bewildering”. In the Wolf Man’s case this creates a “double-bind” situation, which puts the subject in a position of unresolvable contradiction. “What becomes traumatic for the subject”, says Rand, “is the impossibility of working through an event and making an experience of it”. It is therefore not the event itself that is directly traumatic.

Leonard Shengold

Finally, the research carried out by the American psychoanalyst Leonard Shengold is also based directly and explicitly on the work of Ferenczi (17–19).

Shengold describes aggression on the personality of a child as soul murder. The expression is well known from the Memoirs of President Schreber. However, Shengold indicates that the expression appeared for the first time in 1832, in the book by Anselm von Feuerbach about Kaspar Hauser, the found child with mysterious origins. Later it appears in 1887 as the title of Strindberg’s review about Ibsen’s play “Rosmersholm”. Some years later, in 1896, Ibsen himself uses the expression in his play “John Gabriel Borkmann”. Schreber took it up in 1903. It is not forbidden to think that this highly cultured man might have read the works of these authors and recognized in them something of his own experience.

Shengold maintains that real trauma is more pathogenic than traumatic fantasy. However, he does not join in the controversy: real trauma or fantasy. He thinks there is always an interaction between the two.

Soul murder consists in taking possession of the mind, the personality of somebody else. The child, because of its dependence, is specially exposed to this process. The aggressor is generally a psychotic or psychopathic parent who takes advantage of his power. Shengold describes the mechanism of soul murder as follows: excessive stimulation has the same effects as deprivation. The victim defends himself by insensitivity; he becomes an obedient mechanical automaton. Confusion reigns in him along with a loss of confidence in his own senses,
as well as rage for what he has suffered. However, the child needs his abusing parent; he is therefore obliged to create a mental image of a good parent in order to avoid the split, which would isolate the good from the bad. Since the parent cannot be bad, it is the child who must be the bad one. It is forbidden for him to record and remember the facts. The parent implants in the child what he wishes to have happened. There is a latent transferece to the Superego, resulting in what Shengold calls autohypnosis.

On this basis, Shengold makes an interesting connection between the mechanisms of soul murder and brainwashing, which became a dubious speciality of our twentieth century. In order to illustrate his idea, he studies Orwell’s novel, “1984”. Big Brother’s police reigns by terror. The population is under constant police surveillance. All personal emotion is repressed, “thought crime” is severely punished. Subjects are made to believe and think contradictory things: this is called “doublethinking”. Analysts would say, split. The hero, Wilson Smith, revolts. He is arrested and subjected to soul murder and brainwashing: friendly treatment alternates with torture, isolation and total deprivation, to the point of having such need of his torturer that he is eventually led to introject him and identify with all his demands. Orwell indicates that Smith’s torturer has himself gone through the same process, thus tying up with the observation that abused children often become abusing parents.

Of course, there are still many mysteries around this central phenomenon in human life, an the problems it represents for the theory and practice of psycho-analysis. I have in no means covered all of them in this attempt to present them from a Ferenczian point of view.

Summaries in German and Spanish

**Dupont J. Das Traumkonzept nach Ferenczi und seine Wirkungen auf die spätere psychoanalytische Forschung**


**References**

10. Ferenczi S. Revision of the interpretation of dreams.
15. Abraham N, Torok M. Deuil ou malanocile (Mourning or melancholia?)

**Dupont J. El concepto de trauma de acuerdo con Ferenczi y sus efectos en la investigación psicoanalítica.**

Ferenczi abandonó su creencia de que los traumas relatados por sus pacientes histéricas fueran verdad. Llegó a la conclusión que la fantasía patógena era más frecuente que el trauma real. Ferenczi fue el primero en volver a la idea de que la mayoría de las neurosis tienen en sus raíces un trauma real. Su alumno y seguidor Michael Balint desarrolló esta idea y propuso algunos nuevos caminos para describir el mecanismo del trauma y algunas de sus consecuencias terapéuticas. Desde entonces muchos otros investigadores han hablado acerca del trauma patológico. Las ideas de Maria Torok y Nicolás Abraham como también de aquellos descritos por Leonard Shengold son descritos en este trabajo.