

## HUMILITY, EMPATHY, AND REBIRTH: THE DYNAMICS OF FERENCZI'S METAPSYCHOLOGY

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### SUMMARY

Concentrating on humility, empathy, and rebirth, Sándor Ferenczi's compassionate psychology attunes itself to the fundamentals of the human condition. Unlike Freud, Ferenczi did not dismiss reports of abuse in childhood but listened in an effort to heal the wounds. Ferenczi's work with traumatized individuals reflected his non-hierarchical approach to the therapeutic relationship while his empathic method posits the transformation of the analyst as well as the client. Examined here as a metapsychology, Ferenczi's theory has correlates with modern scientific research and the philosophy of ancient civilizations. Because his psychology is congruent with aspects of linguistics; mathematics; chaos theory; catastrophe theory; Greek philosophy; Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist religious thought; humanistic psychology (especially client-centered therapy); initiation rituals; and shamanic practices, it demonstrates the universality of his ideas.

**Keywords:** humility; empathy; rebirth; Ferenczi; compassion; mirroring; trauma; transformation; abuse; metaphor; parable; pain; language; symbol; phase space

Sándor Ferenczi's gentle and compassionate psychology finds its culmination in one of his last works *The Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child: The Language of Tenderness and Passion* (1933/1980). Published posthumously and suppressed in its day, this pioneering effort to recognize and treat the effects of child abuse is only now beginning to receive the accord that is its due (Rachman, 1989, 1994, 1997a, 1997b). Unlike Freud, who originally gave credence to memories of early sexual abuse but later pronounced them to be fantasies, Ferenczi did not dismiss reports of trauma but worked to heal them. His investigative and therapeutic technique discussed in the *Confusion of Tongues* and his *Clinical Diary* (cited in Rachman, 1997a) remains a monument of compassion.

In those works and in Ferenczi's earlier writings, there appears to be an underlying premise: the emotional rebirth of the client facilitated by a humble empathic therapist. Because humility, empathy, and rebirth are potentially within all of us, analogies to Ferenczi's psychology may be found in sources as seemingly diverse as modern scientific research and the philosophy of ancient civilizations.

That his psychology is congruent with aspects of linguistics; nonlinear dynamics; mathematics; Greek philosophy; Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist religious thought; initiation rituals; and shamanic practices shows the universality of his ideas and his attunement to the fundamentals of the human condition. In presenting comparisons between Ferenczi's work and multiple disciplines, his theory is viewed as a metapsychology, which he defined as a group of interrelated ideas concerning the structure and dynamics of the mind (Ferenczi, 1928/1955). The metapsychological concepts discussed will be humility, empathy, and rebirth in the dynamics of the healing process.

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## **HUMILITY**

The poet T. S. Eliot (1943/1971) wrote, “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (p. 27). For Ferenczi (1920/1950, 1928/1955, 1933/1980), humility, gentleness, and the absence of pride are essential to the therapist.

His attitude may be found in Hinduism, in which The Bhagavad Gita (5th - 2nd century B.C.E./1968, p. 137) counsels freedom from egotism, force, and arrogance, while his manner of speech is reminiscent of the Buddhist ideal of the enlightened person, whose “words are clear but never harsh” (The Dhammapada, 6th century B.C.E./1976, p. 158). Ferenczi (1933/1980) believed that the therapist—speaking in a gentle, non intrusive manner—should admit any mistakes; this admission could be healing for the patient, instilling greater communication and confidence in the therapeutic process. It is also possible that a therapist’s apology might be seen by the patient as a parent apologizing and thus be of enormous benefit to someone whose childhood experience included parental denial of harm or abuse.

Ferenczi (1920/1950) not only valued confession over self-justification but, as a deeply humble man, believed that the analyst as well as the patient must be analyzed. He stated clearly that this should be an analysis with another therapist rather than a self-analysis because the outcome would have greater profundity. His objections to self-analysis have a mathematical correlate in Godel’s (1930/1962) incompleteness theorem, which states that no system can ever answer all of its postulates but can only be completed using information from another system outside itself.

Because humility produces openness, Ferenczian therapy became a fluid unblocked process free of preimposed structures (Ferenczi, 1928/1955) with similarities to Buddhism and Judaism. Both religions counsel a state of non ego involvement and the ability to receive information without prejudice. Lack of self-absorption fosters attunement to one’s surroundings and openness to events that would otherwise be hidden from consciousness. His listening without preconception is reminiscent of the teachings of Buddha, who said, “A mind beyond judgment watches and understands”(The Dhammapada, 6th century B.C.E./1976, p. 14). In addition, the heightened awareness that a non judgmental approach produces is similar to practices in Judaism, where a prayer states, “Fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing” (Gates of Prayer, 1975). Because he was open, Ferenczi (1933/ 1980) did not dismiss reports of sexual abuse as childish fantasy but recognized them as what they were: cries for help.

## **LANGUAGE, SYMBOL, METAPHOR, AND PARABLE**

Although the person crying for help may feel the communication is direct, language is a set of symbols, not the thing it describes (Hayakawa, 1941). Only approximating the emotions they express, words are general while emotions are individual. Exact communication is an unreachable Platonic ideal (Plato, 4th century B.C.E./ 1950). Even though we attempt exactness through shared language and grammar, subjectivity filters common language into metaphor. This fundamental of linguistic theory finds a correlate in Ferenczi’s psychology. He speaks about the communication gap between the speech of children and adults but acknowledges that a confusion of tongues exists to some extent in all verbal interaction (1933/1980).

Because no words can exactly capture a feeling, all language is metaphoric. However, when communication has high emotional content, its metaphoric aspect escalates (Hayakawa, 1941). As a result, a person speaking of trauma uses highly metaphoric language. Realizing this, Ferenczi heard through the language and into the emotional experience, which the client attempted to convey.

By going deeper than the spoken word, Ferenczi posited a metalanguage of interpersonal congruence. In his desire to understand, he heard through the speech and into the intent the way one learns the message of a parable.

When subjective viewpoints produce highly metaphoric speech, even individual words become parables of their own meaning. Werner Heisenberg (1971), whose uncertainty theory forms a basis for quantum physics, believed there is an inherent uncertainty about the meaning of words and that more oblique forms of communication, such as parables, may refer to a reality that cannot be grasped in any other way. Religious ideas, such as the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 13.18-33, Mark 4.1-33, Luke 8.4-15), are often conveyed through parables. As parables teach through identification with their subject matter, so Ferenczi, through empathic identification with the metaphoric utterances of his patients, learned about the trauma they were expressing.

Feeling what another human being is feeling and listening without preconception is an early introduction of phenomenology into psychoanalysis (A.W. Rachman, personal communication, November 4, 1999). To do this, it is necessary to let go of the demands of the ego. Through giving up one's self as the center, empathic identification becomes possible. The reach to achieve union with the intent of another person is a leap of consciousness, and in this leap we repattern ourselves into a new awareness. It becomes self-evolution through interpersonal communication, enhancing the therapist as well as the client.

## FERENCZIAN DYNAMICS IN PHASE SPACE

To understand the client's metaphoric communication and Ferenczi's empathic repatterning, it may be helpful to visualize them as dynamic systems in a phase space, which would be the field of their interactions. Phase space—used in mathematics and the sciences to chart the paths of dynamic systems (Abraham & Shaw, 1988)—is an appropriate method for psychology because human behavior is a dynamic process and human beings are dynamic systems. One of the earliest exponents of phase space was Lewin (1935), who proposed a field theory of interaction. A more recent researcher who applied mathematical mapping to psychological systems is Hampden-Turner (1981). Dynamical systems are also fundamental to chaos theory, which has likewise been used to model human behavior (Abraham, 1995; Abraham, Abraham, & Shaw, 1989; Zausner, 1995, 1996, 1998).

In the dynamics of a Ferenczian interaction, the therapist and the client may be seen as separate entities in a phase space or field where their actions take place. The client's metaphoric communication, which is a potential bridge between them, exists as an emotionally laden pattern coming from the client and arching toward the therapist. Ferenczi decoded this communication as if listening to a parable. As one understands a parable by identifying with its subject matter, so Ferenczi empathically matched himself with the client's utterance. In matching himself, he changed his consciousness and empathically understood the meaning of the words and the client's situation.

A model for this jump in consciousness may be found in chaos theory and catastrophe theory. In chaos theory, a fundamental qualitative change to a new state of being is called a bifurcation (Goerner, 1994). In catastrophe theory (Thom, 1975), where the word catastrophe means a sudden or discontinuous change and does not have the pejorative associations of disaster that are attached to it in common usage, an abrupt change is called a singularity and denotes a sudden shift to a new position. In chaos theory and catastrophe theory, transformation is only achieved through an increase of energy.

Through psychological interaction the therapist and the client produce energy. The client's energy is verbal communication, distress, and the desire to change. The therapist's energy is empathy, verbal communication, and the desire to heal—all of which are assisted by humility. Communicating empathy and the desire to help impel the therapist forward whereas humility acts as a facilitator.

The energies of the individuals become forces or variables in the vector field of the phase space (Abraham et al., 1989) and interact with one another to enhance the therapeutic process. Empathy and the desire to heal fuel Ferenczi's ability to decode metaphoric communication, while humility lessens ego involvement and subjectivity, which may block a true understanding of another person's intention.

When Ferenczi matches the metaphor and becomes, for that moment, psychologically congruent with the client, the empathic experience is enhanced. With a common language and syntax, we may easily hear the words another person speaks, but to recognize the depth of a trauma requires an empathic repatterning of oneself to match the metaphoric communication of that person. Conversely, a misunderstanding or a refusal to listen may be seen as an inability or resistance to change one's position or to repattern oneself. Empathic repatterning becomes a necessary gateway for healing trauma, because an already traumatized individual may experience empathic failure on the part of the therapist as a retraumatization (Rachman, 1996, 1997a, personal communication, November 4, 1999).

## EMPATHY

Empathic repatterning aids therapist and client. Repatterning the self to understand another is a manifestation of empathy, a quality central to Ferenczian therapy. Empathy, which is *emfühlung* in German, derives from the Greek *empathia* and refers to the capacity to understand things beyond oneself (The

Oxford Dictionary, 1966/1995), especially the ability to feel the emotions of another person. Rogers, who also emphasized attunement with the client, considered empathy to be essential to the therapeutic process along with “unconditional positive regard” and “congruence/ genuineness” (as cited in Doi & Ikemi, in press).

For Ferenczi, emotional congruence with a client enabled him to understand the person’s situation, and for a traumatized individual it became an act of kindness and acceptance. Ferenczi also acknowledged exogenous factors as generative of neurosis, demonstrating that children sometimes absorb the guilt of the aggressor and feel it is their own (Ferenczi, 1933/1980). By exonerating his analysands from blame and guilt, he strengthened the empathic bond. Through empathy and tenderness, Ferenczi endeavored to restore the unconditional love that is everyone’s birthright.

For a person in therapy, empathy may act as emotional growth in three ways. First, and most obviously, empathy is a fundamental human need (May, 1977). It is also experienced as kindness, and kindness is healing. Sensing the therapist’s kind empathic approach, a person may open and become more receptive to therapy. In certain cases, empathic repatterning may be the only way to reach a severely wounded individual, whose trauma has sealed off other methods of communication.

Second, unlike trauma, empathy is nonhierarchical. In relating empathically, the therapist becomes the child in the adult and so relinquishes the potentially frightening stance of an adult. This is especially important for individuals who were sexually molested as children or were otherwise traumatized by adults. Their resulting fear of an adult-child interaction may preclude effective communication.

Terror and mistrust are a legacy of trauma and serve to keep an abused person isolated. By experiencing an empathic therapist as nonthreatening, the person may begin to relate and, in doing so, begin changing. Third, Ferenczi’s empathic congruence becomes a mirror to the person’s own situation. Only possible through humility, it relinquishes all dominance inherent in the therapeutic relationship.

## **MIRRORING**

Empathic mirroring is a conscious attunement to the emotional state of another individual. It is experienced by the mirrored person as a positive confirmation and acceptance of their existence as a human being (Kohut, 1987). Unlike the narcissistic mirroring of the “as if” personality, which is a manipulation aimed toward taking something from the mirrored individual, empathic mirroring gives to the mirrored person by furnishing acknowledgment and a way to see oneself more clearly.

In Ferenczian practice, empathic mirroring becomes a healing reflection providing an increase in energy for the client. Until now, the person’s energy has been stress and the desire to change. The process of mirroring gives the individual additional energy in the form of information, and this increased awareness allows the person to move to a place of greater well-being.

Empathic mirroring is akin to the therapeutic process described by Sundararajan (1995) as “reflective listening.” In this type of client-centered therapy, the therapist mirrors the patient’s state by reflecting what has been heard and inquiring whether it has been heard correctly. More than just the repeating of words, it is an attempt to convey a deep understanding and enhance the client’s experience. This enables patients to see themselves more clearly and advance therapeutically. Another analogy may be found in the creative process where artists have been known to photograph stages of a painting as a basis from which to continue their work (Zausner, 1996). In therapy, the moment of mirroring may build a base from which to move on to a place of greater fulfillment. It is difficult to truly see oneself, perhaps, in our limited human way, impossible, but if helped by the mirroring of another, we may—in their acknowledgment of our situation—be able to see ourselves more clearly and, in facing ourselves, move forward.

Empathic mirroring is especially important for persons who have suffered trauma. Empathy provides acceptance and a belief that what they say is true. These individuals have experienced the reverse of empathy; they have been used, negated, and suffer from the effects of inauthentic interaction and communication (e.g., a “confusion of tongues”). In addition, their material is so distressing that a listener may dismiss it and, in doing so, have a destructive effect on the individual. The traumatized person whose cry for help is ignored becomes doubly traumatized and may manifest antisocial behavior (Ferenczi, 1933/1980). It was Ferenczi’s



effort to reach people with full acceptance and avoid the possibility of a life filled with anger and cut off from love.

Absorption of the client's pain. Empathic repatterning, which entails experiencing the subjective state of the other, includes feeling the pain and, in a sense, experiencing the trauma that the client experienced. Although difficult, it may be the only way for the therapist to fully comprehend and also absorb some of the client's pain. By being empathically understood, a person may feel that the pain is shared and the burden lessened. With this, Ferenczian healing becomes threefold: an acknowledgement of the client through empathic listening, a repatterning of the self to mirror the client, and an absorption of the client's pain.

In its absorption of pain, Ferenczian therapy is similar to a type of shamanic healing where the shaman empathically becomes the person to be cured, absorbs the illness into his or her body, and then releases it (Eliade, 1951/1974). In shamanic cures, the patient may be considered reborn. Rebirth also appears to be a part of Ferenczi's psychology.

## **REBIRTH**

Ferenczi uses birth terminology for the therapeutic process by referring to midwifery and parenting. At one point he describes an auxiliary therapeutic technique as the use of obstetric forceps (1920/1950), implying that the regular therapeutic process would entail psychological rebirth without extreme measures. Through Ferenczi's gentle method, the therapist's interpretation of his or her patient's symptoms becomes a "midwifery of thought" (1920/1950, p. 200). His process is maieutic, which comes from the Greek maia, meaning midwife (Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 1983). It refers to the Socratic method of assisting an individual to bring forth latent potential. In this way,

Ferenczi is midwife to the patient's psychological rebirth of self.

Ferenczi (1928/1955) also refers to the therapist as the new parent of the client. He spoke about replacing the biological father with a new father—the analyst—and also of the necessity for "maternal friendliness" (1933/1980, p. 160), without which the client feels abandoned. Becoming both parents in one, the analyst replaces the traumatogenic parents with a person who will provide tenderness rather than abuse, so that the client is psychologically reborn into a nurturing environment. Rebirth to higher level of functioning has ancient roots. The Bhagavad Gita (5th - 2nd century B.C.E./1968) spoke of the "twice born," and The Hymns of Hermes (Mead, 1906/1991) refer to a spiritual rebirth or regeneration.

Archaic societies, which viewed the first birth as the emergence of the physical body, believed the second birth, which was later and of a spiritual or psychological nature, to be a sign of maturation (Eliade, 1958/1965).

## **TRANSFORMATION OF THE ANALYST**

In the therapeutic relationship established by Ferenczi, there is also a psychological rebirth of the analyst. The therapist-patient dialogue becomes a metacommunication transforming both. In depth communication necessitates transformation. An effort to truly communicate produces a state of heightened awareness in the speaker and the listener, which increases the impact of their interaction. An analogy may be found in chaos theory, in which a system in an energized state displays a heightened sensitivity and may reorganize itself in response to even a very small stimulus (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Richards, 1996).

The Ferenczian dialogue, which counsels an understanding of metaphoric speech and an empathic repatterning of the self, further transforms the therapist. By humility and repeated repatternings, the therapist lets go of ego constraints and lives in the moment of awareness and possibility. Through respect for another, the therapist grows as a human being.

## **FERENCZI'S LEGACY**

Ferenczi was a father without biological children, yet he gave psychological birth to many children. They were his clients reborn in therapy and his ideas on psychology. Ferenczi's legacy includes his influence on the development of object relations, interpersonal/humanistic psychology, self-psychology, and psychoanalysis

(A.W. Rachman, personal communication, November 4, 1999). Plato (4th century B.C.E./1950) said works of art are an artist's children, so ideas and methods of analysis are a therapist's children. We may not have Ferenczi's genes, but we have his units of cultural transmission, his memes (Dawkins, 1976). They still transform our lives, and in that sense we are all Ferenczi's children.

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