

## Identification and “Traumatic Aloneness”

Reply to Commentaries by Berman and Bonomi

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To anchor my response to three issues raised by Berman and Bonomi, I rely on Ferenczi’s concept of “traumatic aloneness.” First, I agree with both discussants that identification often has constructive and life-creating effects, but I suggest that it may generally *arise* in response to (sometimes hidden) anxiety, specifically about separation or aloneness. Second, I examine what Ferenczi termed “introjection of the guilt feelings of the adult”—trauma victims frequently feel that they are “bad”—and explore this complex feeling both as an effort to preserve others as good objects and as a way to protect oneself from a frightening aggressor. Finally, I consider the idea that trauma leads to partial psychic death. While I think it is clinically dangerous to assume that trauma can cause the actual, permanent destruction of part of the personality—this assumption can lead to unwarranted therapeutic pessimism—trauma certainly often carries the *subjective experience* of partial death or dying. The therapeutic effort to undo dissociations and achieve authenticity and intimacy can be thought of as rediscovering one’s aliveness through the process of sharing it with someone.

THE MAIN THESIS OF MY REPLY TO BERMAN AND BONOMI IS THAT “traumatic aloneness”—a term Ferenczi (1932, p. 193; also see p. 201) used—may be the core motivator for identification. This is the thread that ties together most (though not all) of my responses to their discussions. I like the phrase both because it captures a particular feeling of fear and also because it is inclusive, a broad umbrella for other closely related terms: isolation, loss, separateness, otherness, rejection, being unwanted, banishment, emotional abandonment (which I emphasized in my paper), and so on.

I want to start by acknowledging these two stimulating discussions. I appreciated Berman’s applications of the dynamics of identification with the aggressor to an understanding of multiple personality, to the

field of psychoanalytic training, and to an examination of the dangers of egalitarianism as a Utopian ideal; this ideal can become a trigger for identification with the aggressor just as asymmetrical power arrangements can. I found Bonomi's ideas about the historical context for Ferenczi's developing the concept of introjecting the aggressor's guilt feelings very useful, and I was also very interested in his discussions of the role of the child's wishes as part of her response to trauma and the idea that trauma results in "partial death."

Of all the food for thought in their discussions, I'm going to chew on three points where I take issue or have something to add: the idea, raised by both, that identification serves what Bonomi calls "life-creating" ends; the nature of "introjecting the aggressor's guilt feelings"; and the idea of trauma as a partial psychic death.

Before I get into these issues, I want briefly to question Bonomi's hard distinction between extreme responses to gross trauma and transient, mild, quasi-traumatic reactions. I think he leaves out the very important phenomenon that lies in-between these extremes, which I tried to document and explore in my paper: that milder forms of trauma color human experience and behavior in less extreme and subtler *but nevertheless enduring and limiting ways* in most if not all people.<sup>1</sup>

### The Life-Creating Role of Identification

Although it was not my focus, I want to second Bonomi's and Berman's emphasis on the important, life-creating role of identification, broadly defined, in development and to say that I believe identification, including its constructive manifestations, is an underappreciated

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<sup>1</sup>It was Ferenczi himself who first expanded the idea of what constitutes trauma. He included as traumatic events not being loved (Ferenczi, 1929) and other forms of emotional abandonment (Ferenczi, 1931, p. 138; 1932, pp. 115, 164, 202; 1933, pp. 163-164); adults' *disguised* eroticism (Ferenczi, 1930, p. 121; 1932, pp. 115, 175) and *disguised* aggression (Ferenczi, 1932, pp. 115-116, 200) toward children; "the *terrorism of suffering*. . . . A mother complaining of her constant miseries" (Ferenczi, 1933, p. 166); and adults requiring precocious achievements from children (Ferenczi, 1930-1932, p. 272; 1932, p. 190). All these forms of trauma can be understood, at least in many instances, as reflecting parents' narcissistic use of their children and their consequent emotional abandonment of them.

element in interpersonal relationships. But my endorsement comes with a crucial reservation, which I will get to shortly.

Fairbairn (1941) believed that identification is our most basic mode of relationship. It is not just used in situations of fear but constitutes the basis for empathy, social play, and even for all coordination among people in social relationships. It is the social lubricant that allows us to walk down the street without bumping into people: through identification, we understand what they are about to do.

Berman suggests that partial identifications freely made, as opposed to compelled, “fearful, massive identifications,” enrich rather than foreclose personality growth. I would add that these enriching, partial identifications can be thought of as a form of play, a phenomenon characterized by freedom, flexibility, and expansiveness (see Frankel, 1998a, 2000); play is itself a growth-facilitating activity. This idea is consistent with Ferenczi’s thinking. In his “Confusion of Tongues” paper (Ferenczi, 1933), where he laid out the damaging consequences of identification with the aggressor, Ferenczi also linked children’s play to a more benign version of identification: “in a playful way in fantasies. . . the hidden play of taking the place of the parent of the same sex in order to be married to the other parent” (p. 163). These playful identifications lead to problems, he believed, only when adults disregard the playful element, mistake the child’s play for real attempts to seduce, and compel the child to comply with the adults’ own desires (p. 164).

What is my reservation about sharing Berman’s and Bonomi’s enthusiasm for the idea that identification is initiated for purely positive reasons? Briefly, while I do not doubt that identifications enrich the personality, indeed that personality is built on identifications, I do wonder if any identification is *initiated* for purely positive reasons. I suggest that identification, even in essentially benign situations, may be used specifically to address the fear embedded in those situations *by creating a feeling of connection to someone*.<sup>2</sup> This hypothesis places the fear of aloneness or separation (often in the

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<sup>2</sup>Berman cites three examples of identification from my paper that seem to him to support the idea that some instances of identification are not responses to aggression. Indeed they are not, but they can all be understood primarily as attempts to cope with a fear of emotional abandonment, and in at least two of the cases the fear seems justified by the parent’s behavior.

form of emotional abandonment) at the root of the identification response.

A few brief examples of benign, even benevolent, identification allow me to begin to develop the logic of this hypothesis. The first two involve dogs. I include these partly because I think they demonstrate the extent to which the capacity for identification is part of our genetic heritage. I came into my house out of a driving rain. My dog, who was inside and perfectly dry, looked at me, dripping wet, and shook off as if she herself were the one who was soaking wet. The other dog story was told to me by a friend. In that instance, someone who had food poisoning was in the bathroom vomiting. His dog was outside the bathroom and also vomited. For a human example: I observed my cousin speaking with his young daughter. She was having difficulty saying something to him. As he listened, he silently (and, I think, unconsciously) began to mouth the words he knew she was trying to say.

If we agree that identification is used in situations of both fear and—as with my cousin—love, what, more specifically, determines when identification is the response of choice? Freud (1917), in his early writing about identification, suggested that it is used to cope with loss—essentially, it creates a feeling of continued connection when we lose someone. Bowlby (1980, pp. 166–169) also suggested that we may identify with those we lose.<sup>3</sup> While Freud and Bowlby were talking about concordant identifications, I think their ideas also apply to complementary ones.

These observations and thoughts suggest that identification is used as a way to connect with others, to bridge a gap, whatever the motive. In the most threatening situations, identification with the aggressor is an attempt to become virtually absorbed into the dangerous person. In more benign situations, as with my cousin, we may identify for the most positive reason: love. My cousin's identification with his daughter put him inside her head, allowed him to *feel for* her, to feel something of her experience, and to feel close to her; and through his understanding of her, gained by way of this identification, he was able *actually* to reach out to her, help her, care for her and nurture her, and thus be close to her not only in his feelings but also in his behavior.

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<sup>3</sup> Although like Freud of 1917, Bowlby (1980) thought identification and other forms of what he saw as disordered mourning were more likely to occur when the subject felt ambivalent toward the lost person (ch. 11). Perhaps the identification is used to overcome this inner obstacle to feeling more easily connected to the lost person.

Yet we can also easily see my cousin's anxiety in that situation. While his identification was a gesture of love, it seems likely that he also felt mildly upset that his daughter was struggling, and he probably felt some pain about his limited ability to help her. Identifying with her was how he tried to bridge the gap between them. We can even imagine anxiety in the two dogs. Both of them may have identified with their masters' distress or felt frightened seeing their masters in what looked like a compromised state (my dog does not like to get wet). These examples raise the question of *whether there is generally an admixture of anxiety in situations where constructive identification occurs.*

More precisely, I wonder *whether the use of identification is specific to anxiety about some kind of separateness from someone else*, whether this anxiety is felt as an extreme or a more subtle, less noticeable fear of emotional abandonment or aloneness. In grossly dangerous situations, the anxiety results from being separate, isolated, exposed, an "other" to the other person and thus a potential target. Even in the most positive situations in which identification is an important aspect—for instance, romantic love—there are likely to be anxious elements. Person (1988, ch. 3) suggests that the pain of separateness constitutes an essential root of love, and Becker (1973) believes the motive for love is the terror of death.

I question if any "good" situation in which identification occurs is purely good and if the use of identification is not an effort to cope with its frightening or painful aspects. (Berman reminds us that conflict and vulnerability are intrinsic to all intimate relationships.) In any particular clinical situation, the issue is whether what appears to be (and may in fact be) primarily a positive transference is not partly a way to cope with some anxiety, even if hidden. Positive transferences *may* reflect compliance based on unconscious anxiety; therapists should be alert to what they may need their patients to be.

I think there is an element of anxiety even in playful identifications. I have previously proposed that danger is inherent in play (Frankel, 2000). It is often the feeling of danger that compels us to play because we feel we need to master the danger (see Freud, 1920). Play is an attempt to master a frightening reality or mental state by approaching it actively (though in a provisional and experimental way) within a context of safety. It may be relevant that the Old English word for play also means "to take a risk, to expose oneself to danger for someone or something" (Huizinga, 1950, p. 39). Many forms of play flirt with danger, at least symbolically.

In summary, identification is a universal capacity, something we share with many other animals. It can result in either self-expansion or self-crippling. I think it likely that fear, whether the primary characteristic of a situation or a hidden element of an essentially positive situation, may especially evoke the use of identification; perhaps this is most strongly true of the fear of separateness or aloneness.

### Introjection of the Aggressor's Guilt Feelings

I thank Bonomi for reminding me of Ferenczi's (1933) emphasis on "*introjection of the guilt feelings of the adult*" (p. 162), which Ferenczi said was the most damaging aspect of identification with the aggressor and which I did *not* emphasize in my paper. I have always had difficulty not with Ferenczi's clinical observation—abuse victims often do indeed feel bad about themselves—but with his explanation of this phenomenon, which requires that aggressors feel guilty. This is certainly not always true. It may be better to start my discussion by labeling what victims feel simply as "bad" and explore the nature of this feeling as I proceed. I address this phenomenon mainly from two angles: the child's taking on the parent's badness to preserve the adult as a good object, and feeling bad as a particular example of identification due to fear.

I think Fairbairn (1943), who struggled with the same clinical observation a decade after Ferenczi did, was closer to the mark in his discussion of what he called the "moral defense." Fairbairn believed that an abused child takes on the aggressor/parent's badness (the parent is bad because the relationship with him *feels* bad) in order to exonerate the parent; however badly her parent treats her, she can see him as being loving and good because *she* is bad and deserves the abuse. More than self-esteem, Fairbairn believed, children need to feel that they love and are loved by a parent who is good (also see Russell, 1998). They cannot feel that they are good or that there is hope of love and goodness if they see their parent as bad. They are so identified with their parent—Fairbairn (e.g., 1941) saw identification as the most basic form of relatedness—that their sense of their own goodness is derived more from this identification than from their evaluation of their own behavior.

I also understand Fairbairn's view of identification in a slightly different way: the abused child identifies with the *feeling* of the

relationship; when a relationship *feels* bad, the child feels he *is* bad. The idea that we identify with our feelings—concretize them into personifications of ourselves—raises the question of whether a feeling of shame is inherent in victimization and even in suffering. Perhaps helplessness naturally tends to feel like a fault and power like a virtue.

Nothing in Fairbairn's explanations requires that the perpetrator feel guilty.

I think the bad feeling Fairbairn and Ferenczi described is only partly and perhaps not mainly guilt.<sup>4</sup> Victims often do feel that they are to blame, but the bad feeling also includes a more basic, down-to-the-core badness. Ferenczi (1933) himself noted that the abused child feels ashamed as well as guilty (p. 162). Jones (1995) has linked shame to what I have called emotional abandonment: "the ultimate threat [of shame is] banishment. Thus guilt threatens punishment—perhaps even death—but not exclusion from the community; shame threatens an end to the relationship" (p. 138).<sup>5</sup> Ferenczi (1932, pp. 18, 182, 193; 1933, p. 163) believed that the worst aspect of the traumatic situation is the second parent's turning her back on her child, discounting the terrible reality of what he experienced; the child is then left feeling profoundly, unbearably alone. This is the aspect of trauma that causes lasting damage. To the extent that trauma causes someone to feel outcast from human community, the response may be a more basic feeling of badness: shame rather than guilt.

Ferenczi's ideas about identification with the aggressor *as a response to fear* suggest another understanding of victims' feelings of shame and guilt, a more parsimonious Ferenczian hypothesis than Ferenczi's own questionable idea about introjecting the aggressor's guilt feelings. Perpetrators may treat the child/victim as if she is guilty, and the child may simply identify and comply with this attribution owing to her fear of the aggressor. Not simply acting but *feeling* guilty makes her display

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<sup>4</sup>Two points about feelings of guilt as an aspect of identification with the aggressor. First, Ferenczi (1930–1932, pp. 252–253; also see Barish and Vida, 1998) believed that feelings of guilt are often about a failure of responsibility to oneself. In cases of identification with the aggressor, the victim's collusion with the aggressor may provide ample basis for this. Second, perhaps Ferenczi's focus on guilt reflects his immersion in the psychoanalytic theory of his time in which guilt was a prime concern while shame was not.

<sup>5</sup>Also see Lewis's (1971) characterizing shame as, "At least in our culture . . . probably a universal reaction to unrequited or thwarted love" (p. 16).

of guilt more convincing. In this way, feeling guilty or ashamed are part of an act of identification and submission motivated by fear.

One result of identifying with the attribution of guilt, Ferenczi (1933) said, is that the victim feels confused about his personal responsibility, both culpable (as part of her identification) and innocent (as a result of what is preserved of her own independent judgment) at the same time (p. 162). Ferenczi (1932) felt that no identification with the aggressor is complete; some part of the victim's mind resists the identification (pp. 17, 19, 113). A specific case of such a split occurs when a victim identifies with the aggressor's actions while maintaining her own values. In this case, she feels ashamed of what the other has done as if she had done those things herself.

We can think of the guilt-resulting-from-fear hypothesis in terms of self- and mutual-regulation. In the latter, one feels and displays guilt in order to signal the other not to hurt oneself: "See, I am already hurt. I am hurting myself, so don't hurt me"—a preemptive strike against oneself in order to neutralize the other as a threat. Similarly, Jones (1995) describes shame as an "appeasement ritual" (p. 147), a sign of submission in order to avoid attack by a more powerful figure. In self-regulation, since guilt and shame tell the other, "Don't hurt me," they are therefore also ways of regulating one's own state, specifically by controlling the source of threat. Further, feeling guilt is preferable to feeling fear since guilt, unlike fear, represents only an internal, illusory danger that is somewhat under one's control. In this way, guilt confers a feeling of power when one is powerless. This is precisely what Fairbairn (1944) meant by internalizing bad objects.

### Trauma and "Partial Death"

I was compelled by Bonomi's discussion of Ferenczi's ideas about trauma and partial death. Bonomi, following Ferenczi, talks about partial death in essentially two ways. First, he views trauma as causing not simply dissociation of part of the personality into a kind of cold storage, at least theoretically retrievable given the right circumstances, but "*a real process of destruction.*" More specifically, Bonomi talks about how introjecting the aggressor's guilt feelings destroys the capacity for wishing and for desire and consequently damages the ability to take into oneself potentially growth-producing experiences.

Undoubtedly, trauma—including subtle traumas—can damage the capacity to desire and even to know what one wants. Identification with the aggressor is the process by which our own desires are deactivated in favor of acting and feeling the “desires” that someone else would have us feel. The result, as Ferenczi described (1933, pp. 89, 162; also see Frankel, 1998b), is perpetual uncertainty and lack of conviction about one’s feelings.

But I am not clear what it means to talk about the *death*—the permanent destruction—of part of the personality. How do we know if something in someone is gone permanently or is simply in suspended animation, capable of later revivification? Even assuming that partial psychic death is *possible* (and I do *not* think we can assume this), we can never know if it applies in any given instance. This makes the very idea dangerous since it may lead to unwarranted therapeutic pessimism.

Bonomi’s other angle on this topic is that someone in the moment of trauma partakes of the *subjective experience* of partial death. Certainly, on an experiential level, dissociation feels like a partial death—the loss of part of one’s aliveness and of the feeling of meaning in one’s life. And people facing extreme traumatic situations may *feel* they are about to die or are dying and may give up their attachment to life, which is too painful, and turn toward death. Ferenczi (1932, p. 179) described a little bird who was about to be eaten by a falcon. At the last moment, the bird gave up its futile attempts to escape and flew into the falcon’s mouth.<sup>6</sup> Ferenczi (1929) also said that the will to live depends on being loved. Conversely, I believe that the experience of emotional abandonment may feel like dying.

### Concluding Thoughts about Authenticity and Intimacy

The concept of identification with the aggressor elucidates but complicates our understanding of certain central aims and values of contemporary clinical psychoanalysis, including undoing the dissociation of exiled aspects of self, promoting authenticity, and developing mutuality and intimacy in human relationships. All

<sup>6</sup>See also Herman’s (1992, ch. 2) summary of literature documenting that surrender is a typical element of the response to trauma.

these concepts are ways to think about reversing the experience of psychic death. The feeling of authenticity is a feeling of aliveness. Dissociation is a process of detaching ourselves from some aspect of our own aliveness. And the less alive we are, the less we can connect or share with other people. Clinical psychoanalysis is a process of reawakening and deepening our sense of aliveness by sharing it with someone else.

The idea of identification with the aggressor requires us to look at these concepts in a new way. In terms of authenticity, it is not enough to ask what feels authentic: feelings based on identifying with an aggressor in a moment of great fear *can* feel real—for instance, sexual arousal while being abused. On a theoretical level, identification with the aggressor is the extreme example of what the relational viewpoint asserts is *inevitably and always* the case: that human subjective experience is shaped and partly defined by the environment (see Mitchell, 1993, chap. 4). And, as I proposed in my paper, not only interpersonal influence in general but identification with the aggressor, specifically, is universal (due to at least occasional, inevitable threats of emotional abandonment and helplessness in the face of another's power over oneself). These considerations raise the possibility that aspects of ourselves that come to feel central and authentic include identifications that were impressed upon us in moments of fear. And they raise further questions about which conditions or processes allow us to take something into ourselves in a way that comes to feel authentically "us."

On an intersubjective level, authenticity translates into intimacy—people sharing their aliveness. The concept of identification with the aggressor brings us to a particular understanding of intimacy. The inevitable anxieties that arise in every close relationship create identifications with the other as aggressor in both people. These identifications are efforts to avoid these anxieties and involve sensing and fitting in seamlessly to the other's requirements. The result is an invisible web of interlocking identifications: collusions (see Frankel, 1993). While collusions often *feel* intimate—identifications create a feeling of connection—they actually constrict the possibilities for aliveness and intimacy in the relationship. Any aspect of self that may stir up anxiety and threaten the smooth functioning of these collusions is deadened and hidden. Yet collusion and intimacy are not simply alternatives. Collusions are an *obstacle* to intimacy but also the *vehicle* for working through identifications with the aggressor. Ultimately, the shared working through of collusions becomes the

*substance* of a more authentic intimacy based on shared aliveness and mutual recognition.

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