



The Influence of Ferenczi on Bowlby¹

Marco Bacciagaluppi, Milan, Italy

Bacciagaluppi M. The Influence of Ferenczi on Bowlby. Int Forum Psychoanal 1994;3:97–101. Stockholm. ISSN 0803-706X.

Bowlby may be viewed as one of the strongest exponents of the alternative psychoanalytic approach initiated by Ferenczi. His most important contributions are, on a theoretical level, to have potentially placed psychoanalysis onto a firm evolutionary basis, and, at a practical level, to have generated an enormous amount of empirical research. The main traits he shares with Ferenczi are independence of mind and the stress on a loving relationship in normal development and on real-life traumatic events in psychopathology. The similarities between them seem to be due to a convergence, or at the most to an indirect influence of Ferenczi, due to Bowlby's associations with Melanie Klein and the British Middle Group. As regards the specific issue of real-life experience, although Bowlby acknowledges Ferenczi's priority, he seems to have arrived at this concept independently.

Marco Bacciagaluppi, M.D. Via Edolo 46, I-20125 Milano, Italy

I have repeatedly suggested that Ferenczi gave rise to an alternative approach in psychoanalysis, based on the recognition of the importance of real-life events in early development, and in particular of parental love in normal development and of traumatic events in psychopathology (1, 2). Ferenczi's influence took two directions: one in the United Kingdom, through the Balints and partly through Melanie Klein; the other in the United States, through Clara Thompson and Erich Fromm. In the United Kingdom his influence is most manifest in what is known as the Middle, or Independent, Group.

In this connection I wish to discuss in particular the position of John Bowlby. In what follows I rely especially on two interviews with Bowlby, both of which took place in 1986 (3, 4). Another important primary source is his 1988 Foreword (5) to the Free Association edition of Ian Suttie's *The Origins of Love and Hate* (6). An important secondary source is Inge Bretherton's historical account of the development of attachment theory (7).

Links Between Bowlby and Ferenczi

As regards his relation with the psychoanalytic community, Bowlby's commitment was formally to the Middle Group (3:55), namely that group of

independent British analysts who followed neither Anna Freud nor Melanie Klein. The preliminary papers to his three-volume work on attachment theory (8, 9, 10) received a mainly hostile reception in the British Psycho-Analytical Society (7: 18–20), but Bowlby never resigned from the Society, although he seldom went to their meetings (3:55). This is already one similarity between Bowlby and Ferenczi (and many others, among whom Fromm, Horney, Sullivan and Clara Thompson): originality of thought leading to ostracism on the part of the psychoanalytic establishment.

As regards Bowlby's scientific position and its links with Ferenczi's, in his Foreword to the recent reprint of Ian Suttie's prewar book, already quoted (6), Bowlby discusses two fundamental contributions of Ferenczi. One was the critique of Freud's model of "human beings as isolates wrestling with their instincts. . . That was the model that both Suttie in London and Sandor Ferenczi, with Imre Hermann, and Alice and Michael Balint in Budapest, were criticizing. . . All of them saw the infant as striving from the first to relate to his mother" (5: xv–xvi). The other contribution was the role of real-life events. "That opinion was first voiced clearly by Ferenczi" (5: xvi).

1. A first link between Bowlby and Ferenczi is therefore the stress on the child's primary relatedness. Bowlby's contribution was to give this relatedness an evolutionary foundation. He

¹ This paper was presented at the IX Forum IFPS, Florence, May 12–15, 1994.



stated that the child's tie to the mother is primary, not secondary to need satisfaction as claimed by Freudian psychoanalysis, and that it was selected in the course of evolution because of its survival value. Here Bowlby is following the model of ethology, namely the study of innate behavior patterns in animals.

2. His recognition of the importance of real-life events is Bowlby's main characterization in Christopher Fortune's interview (4), which is titled "Psychoanalytic Champion of 'Real-Life Experience'".

Bowlby and Ferenczi differ in the content of the real-life events considered. Freud's original stress, which he rejected in 1897, was on sexual abuse. The whole thrust of Ferenczi's later work was to reverse what Bowlby called Freud's "disastrous volte-face in 1897" (11:9), or his "theoretical somersault" (4:77), and to restore sexual abuse to its rightful place. In the Fortune interview, Bowlby states that acknowledgment of the importance of real-life traumatic events has taken place by stages: the recognition of the widespread occurrence of physical abuse, to which he devoted a paper (11), took place in the 60's, and that of sexual abuse only took place twenty years later (4:71). Bowlby himself selected separation and loss as traumatic factors for study because they lent themselves to empirical research. At the time, he admits to having been unaware of the importance of sexual abuse (4). This neglect of sexual abuse, of course, is the same problem with which Ferenczi originally had to contend.

Maybe a discussion of the concept of trauma is appropriate. In *Attachment* (8:10–11) Bowlby reviews Freud's concept of trauma. He remarks first of all that according to Freud trauma is a function of interaction between the event itself and the constitution of the individual experiencing it. An event is traumatic when the mental apparatus is subjected to excessive quantities of excitation. This is also a function of a specially vulnerable age-range. As regards consequences, the psychological changes that succeed a traumatic event are repression, splitting and denial. Bowlby concludes that "the aetiological agent selected for study [namely separation and loss] is simply a particular example of the kind of event that Freud conceived as traumatic" (8:11).

3. What stands out clearly in Fortune's interview is Bowlby's great independence of mind and

his firmness in resisting pressure to conform. He says: "In my psychoanalytic training there was an extreme pressure to turn your back on real-life events" (7:71). "But I never swallowed it" (7:72). The rejection of real-life experiences he considers "dreadful" (7:71). In this, Bowlby's position is identical to that held by Ferenczi in his "Confusion of Tongues" paper (12), in which he writes: "The analytical situation—i.e. the restrained coolness, the professional hypocrisy... was not essentially different from that which in [the patient's] childhood had led to the illness" (12:159).

Bowlby was well aware, and proud, of his independence of mind. In the Foreword to Suttie's book (5:xvi) he speaks of "native-born Britons given to independent thinking, of whom Ronald Fairbairn and Donald Winnicott are the best known. In addition to Ian Suttie, another in this group is Harry Guntrip; and I count myself yet another." Independence of mind was a trait which he shared with both Ferenczi and Fromm (1). On the other hand, Bowlby and Fromm also shared great determination in defending their views against the psychoanalytic establishment, whereas Ferenczi, though steadfast in expressing his views, suffered greatly for it. As Bowlby himself says in the passage already quoted (5:xvi): "the role of real-life events... was first voiced clearly by Ferenczi, and is one for which he and others have suffered." Bowlby himself had a group around him at the Tavistock and went on steadfastly with his work notwithstanding the hostility of the analytic movement. "I had quite enough support" (3:48).

The Fortune interview indicates that in the originality of his outlook and in his determination Bowlby was aided by alternative experiences and reference groups, such as (a) his work in the London Child Guidance Clinic, which led him to the notion that "children's problems are the product of the emotional difficulties of parents, stemming from their own childhood" (4:72) and (b) the empirical approach of Cambridge science (4:76, 81). A third, more theoretical influence on Bowlby was that of ethology, which dates back to 1951 (3:41), and which led him to place the object relations school on an evolutionary basis (see point 1 above), thus providing the whole of psychoanalysis, potentially, with an alternative theoretical framework (13).



4. A fourth Ferenczian theme which is present in Bowlby's work is that of love, both at the theoretical and at a therapeutic level. At the theoretical level, at the center of Bowlby's theory we find two innate and complementary sets of behavior: attachment and parental caregiving—fundamentally, a reciprocal loving relationship. It is possible that Ferenczi's indirect influence, through Melanie Klein, may be at work here. In mainstream psychoanalysis, it is Melanie Klein who stressed the theme of love. As Friedman writes: "By emphasizing guilt and the "drive" to make reparation as deriving from *love* she corrected Freud's one-sided emphasis on self-interest and fear as the primary motivation in human life" (14:517; italics added). Bowlby knew Melanie Klein quite well because she supervised a case of his (4:79). However, her influence on him seems to have been mainly negative: "I was exasperated by her inability to give attention to real-life experience" (7:82). The theme of love seems to come to Bowlby from his empirical observation of mother-child interactions and from the ethological concept of complementary attachment and caregiving behaviors. The presence of this theme in both Ferenczi and Bowlby thus seems to be due to convergence rather than to a direct or indirect influence of Ferenczi on Bowlby.

At a therapeutic level, Bowlby's position is identical to that of Guntrip. Bowlby (15) quotes the following description by Guntrip of the therapist's role:

It is, as I see it, the provision of a reliable and understanding human relationship of a kind that makes contact with the deeply repressed traumatized child in a way that enables [the patient] to become steadily more able to live, in the security of a new real relationship (15:155).

By this quote Bowlby shows that he shares with other British authors Ferenczi's effort to reach a split-off infantile core.

5. A fifth important link between Ferenczi and Bowlby concerns the denial of trauma on the part of the environment and the dissociation of the traumatic experience on the part of the child, which figure so prominently in Ferenczi's clinical discussions, culminating in his *Clinical Diary* (16). In one of his last papers, "Child analysis in the analysis of adults", published in 1931 (17), Ferenczi writes: "to be left deserted results in a

split of personality (. . .) the splitting of the self into a suffering, brutally destroyed part and a part which, as it were, knows everything but feels nothing" (17:135). "Probably the worst way of dealing with such situations is to deny their existence (. . .) Sometimes [the child] is actually beaten or scolded" (17:138).

In one of Bowlby's most important writings, Chapter 4 (titled "An Information Processing Approach to Defence") of *Loss* (10), he points out that information can be stored in two different forms, *episodic* and *semantic storage*. Episodic storage reflects preverbal experience, semantic storage occurs after the development of language and is influenced by the parents' communications, such as the denial of trauma. Control systems may not be unified, so that, whilst one such system might have ready access to information held in one type of storage, another might have access to complementary information. "*It would be the self that has the readier access to images from episodic storage that the subject would experience as his real self*" (10:64; italics added). Here Bowlby is describing in terms of cognitive psychology the splits in the personality which were of concern to Ferenczi.

In a paper published shortly before, titled "On knowing what you are not supposed to know and feeling what you are not supposed to feel", Bowlby (18) also discussed this subject at a clinical level. In it he writes:

parents sometimes press their children to shut off from further conscious processing, information the children already have about events that the parents wish they had never observed. Perhaps the most vivid concerns the efforts made by a surviving parent to obliterate his or her child's knowledge of the (other) parent's suicide (18:405).

In other situations the information to be shut away relates to events in the child's private world of feeling. Nowhere does this occur more commonly than in situations of separation and loss (18:406).

Finally, a more subtle situation in which knowledge and feelings are required to be shut away is the inversion of the normal parent-child relationship (18:406).

Here Bowlby is describing at a family level what Fromm called, in more general terms, "social filters" (19:99). Fromm writes: "Every society (. . .) develops a system of categories which determines the forms of awareness. This system works, as it were, like a *socially conditioned filter*;



experience cannot enter awareness unless it can penetrate this filter” (19:99; italics in the original). This is an example of a convergence between Bowlby and Fromm, possibly due to a shared, and more or less direct, influence of Ferenczi on both sides of the Atlantic, as was indicated in the Introduction.

Differences Between Bowlby and Ferenczi

The main difference between these two authors lies in their evolutionary thinking. Ferenczi's main contribution in this area is *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, published in 1924 (20). The opinion of modern biology in this connection is set forth at some length by Stephen Jay Gould in *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (21). Gould points out that “Freud was a devout recapitulationist” (21:156). Namely, he subscribed to the doctrine of the nineteenth-century biologist Ernst Haeckel, according to which ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny—a doctrine completely discredited by modern biology. “By his own admission, Ferenczi wrote *Thalassa* ‘as an adherent of Haeckel’s recapitulation theory’” (21:163). According to Ferenczi, sexual intercourse expresses not only a longing for return to the womb, viewed as a primal ocean, but also the repose of the era before life originated, in other words, the deathlike repose of the inorganic world. At this stage of his thinking, Ferenczi is obviously subscribing to Freud’s later metapsychology of the death instinct. Gould’s comment is that in *Thalassa* Ferenczi “carried Haeckel’s doctrine to previously unimagined heights of folly” (21:163).

In contrast with Ferenczi, Bowlby was critical of Freudian metapsychology. His more scholarly critique is set forth in *Attachment* (8:3–21). In more colloquial terms, he says in his interview with Figlio and Young (3:46): “when it comes to metapsychology, I part company. I have never adopted it.” His own training was based on the natural sciences and in particular, as mentioned above, on “Cambridge science”. Long before he took an interest in ethology in 1951, his grounding in evolutionary theory was evident in a prewar book on *Personal Aggressiveness and War* which he co-authored with Evan Durbin (22) and to which I drew attention in a paper of mine (23). In an unpublished letter which Dr. Bowlby sent me on October 1, 1986, he wrote: “Reading your

article has drawn my attention to the extent to which I was ethologically-oriented before I had ever heard of ethology”.

This is why I think that Bowlby’s evolutionary thinking is important, and should be used as an alternative framework for psychoanalysis: by discarding antiquated and discredited notions, psychoanalysis could once more be in contact with other scientific developments, in a mutually enriching relationship.

Conclusions

To sum up: Bowlby may be viewed as one of the strongest exponents of the alternative psychoanalytic approach initiated by Ferenczi. His most important contributions are, at a theoretical level, to have potentially placed psychoanalysis onto a firm evolutionary basis, and, at a practical level, to have generated an enormous amount of empirical research, which I have summarized elsewhere (24).

The main traits he shares with Ferenczi are (1) the emphasis on the child’s primary relatedness, (2) the stress on real-life traumatic events in psychopathology, (3) a great independence of mind, (4) the stress on a loving relationship in normal development. (5) A fifth important link between Ferenczi and Bowlby concerns the denial of trauma on the part of the environment and the dissociation of the traumatic experience on the part of the child.

The similarities between them seem to be due to a convergence, or at the most to an indirect influence of Ferenczi due to Bowlby’s association with Melanie Klein and the British Middle Group. As regards the specific issue of real-life experience, although Bowlby acknowledges Ferenczi’s priority, he seems to have arrived at this concept independently.

References

1. Bacciagaluppi M. Ferenczi’s influence on Fromm. In: Aron L, Harris A, eds. *The legacy of Sandor Ferenczi*. Hillsdale, NJ and London: The Analytic Press, 1993: 185–98.
2. Bacciagaluppi M, Biancoli R. Frommian themes in a case of narcissistic personality disorder. *Contemp Psychoanal* 1993; 29: 441–52.
3. Bowlby J, Figlio K, Young RM. An interview with John Bowlby on the origins and reception of his work. *Free Ass* 1986; 6: 36–64.
4. Fortune C. Psychoanalytic champion of “real-life experience”: an interview with John Bowlby, Mel Klein & Obj Rel 1991; 9: 70–86.



5. Bowlby J. Foreword. In: Suttie ID. The origins of love and hate. (1935). London: Free Association Books, 1988: xv–xviii.
6. Suttie ID. The origins of love and hate (1935). London: Free Association Books, 1988.
7. Bretherton I. The roots and growing points of attachment theory. In: Parkes CM, Stevenson-Hinde J, Marris P, eds. Attachment across the life cycle. London and New York: Routledge, 1991: 9–32.
8. Bowlby J. Attachment and loss, vol. 1: Attachment. New York: Basic Books, and London: Hogarth, 1969/1982.
9. Bowlby J. Attachment and loss, vol. 2: Separation: anxiety and anger. New York: Basic Books, and London: Hogarth, 1973.
10. Bowlby J. Attachment and loss, vol. 3: Loss: sadness and depression. New York: Basic Books, and London: Hogarth, 1980.
11. Bowlby J. Violence in the family as a disorder of the attachment and caregiving systems. *Am J Psychoanal* 1984; 44: 9–27.
12. Ferenczi S. Confusion of tongues between adults and the child. (1933). In: Final contributions to the problems and methods of psychoanalysis. London: Maresfield Reprints, 1980: 156–67.
13. Bacciagaluppi M. 1989. Attachment theory as an alternative basis of psychoanalysis. *Am J Psychoanal* 1989; 49: 311–8.
14. Friedman M. Toward a reconceptualization of guilt. *Contemp Psychoanal* 1985; 21: 501–47.
15. Bowlby J. The making and breaking of affectional bonds. London: Tavistock, 1979.
16. Ferenczi S. Clinical diary. (1932). The clinical diary of Sandor Ferenczi. Cambridge, MA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988.
17. Ferenczi S. Child analysis in the analysis of adults. (1931). In: Final contributions to the problems and methods of psychoanalysis. London: Maresfield Reprints, 1980: 126–142.
18. Bowlby J. On knowing what you are not supposed to know and feeling what you are not supposed to feel. *Can J Psychiatry* 1979; 24: 403–8. Reprinted in: A secure base: parent-child attachment and healthy human development. New York: Basic Books, 1988: 99–118.
19. Suzuki DT, Fromm E, De Martino R. Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis (1960). New York: Grove Press, 1963.
20. Ferenczi S. Thalassa: A theory of genitality (1924). London: Maresfield Library, 1989.
21. Gould SJ. Ontogeny and phylogeny. Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977.
22. Durbin EFM, Bowlby J. Personal aggressiveness and war. (1938). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950.
23. Bacciagaluppi M. The role of aggressiveness in the work of John Bowlby. *Free Ass* 1989; 16: 123–34.
24. Bacciagaluppi M. The relevance of attachment research to psychoanalysis and to analytic social psychology. Presented at the Joint Meeting AAP/IFPS, Florence, May 11, 1994.

Summaries in German and Spanish

Bacciagaluppi M. Der Einfluß von Ferenczi auf Bowlby.

Mann kann in Bowlby einen der wichtigsten Vertreter des alternativen psychoanalytischen Ansatzes sehen, der von Ferenczi eingeführt wurde. Seine wichtigsten Beiträge sind auf theoretischem Gebiet, daß er die Psychoanalyse auf eine feste Entwicklungsbasis gestellt hat, und auf praktischem Gebiet, daß er eine erstaunliche Menge empirischer Forschungen geleistet hat. Seine wichtigsten Gemeinsamkeiten mit Ferenczi sind die Unabhängigkeit seines Denkens und der besondere Wert, den er einer liebevollen Beziehung für die normale Entwicklung und Realtraumatisierungen für die Psychopathologie beimißt. Die Ähnlichkeiten zwischen beiden scheinen auf einer Art Konvergenz zu beruhen oder sogar auf einem indirekten Einfluß, den Ferenczi auf Bowlby durch die Verbindung über Melanie Klein und die britische "Mittelgruppe" ausübte. Allerdings scheint Bowlby mit seinem Ansatz der realen Lebenserfahrung einen eigenständigen Weg beschritten zu haben, obwohl er von Ferenczis Priorität in diesem Punkt wußte.

Bacciagaluppi M. La influencia de Ferenczi en Bowlby

Bowlby puede ser visto como uno de los máximos esponentes de la alternativa psicoanalítica iniciada por Ferenczi. Sus más importantes contribuciones son, en el nivel teórico el haber potenciado y colocado al psicoanálisis sobre firmes bases evolutivas, y, en el nivel práctico, el haber generado una enorme cantidad de investigaciones empíricas. Los más importantes rasgos que comparte con Ferenczi son la importancia de la relación amorosa en el desarrollo normal y el acontecimiento traumático real en psicopatología. Las similitudes entre ellos parece ser debido a la convergencia, o sobre todo a una indirecta influencia de Ferenczi debido a la asociación de Bowlby con M. Klein y el middle Group británico. Con referencia al aspecto específico de la experiencia en la vida real, aunque Bowlby reconoce la prioridad de Ferenczi, él parece haber llegado a este concepto de forma independiente.