



**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

## **Psychosomatic Manifestation: An Analysis of the Psychic and Symbolic Function of the Symptom**

*Manifestação Psicossomática: Uma Análise da Função Psíquica e Simbólica do Sintoma*  
Manifestación psicossomática: un análisis de la función psíquica y simbólica del síntoma

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to discuss psychosomatics from the psychoanalytic perspective of Sándor Ferenczi, emphasizing the contributions of his trauma theory to the understanding of the manifestations of human suffering. Through bibliographic research, Ferenczi's formulations on trauma, denial, splitting, and regression were analyzed, as well as the contributions of authors who engage with his thought to the field of psychosomatics. The study shows that traumatic experiences cannot be understood solely in terms of the event itself, but also in terms of the relational conditions in which they are received and recognized. From this perspective, it is observed that certain experiences can produce lasting effects on subjective constitution, especially when they do not find acceptance or validation in the environment. The analysis developed allowed us to understand that Ferenczi's work offers important contributions to psychosomatics by questioning the traditional separation between body and psyche. In this direction, psychosomatic phenomena are understood not as simple displacements of psychic contents onto the body, but as expressions of an integrated subjective experience, in which body and psyche participate jointly in the constitution and manifestation of suffering. It is concluded that the Ferenczian perspective broadens the understanding of psychosomatics by recognizing the complexity of human experience and the inseparability between body and psyche.

**Keywords :** Psychosomatics; Psychoanalysis; Sándor Ferenczi; Trauma; Body and Psyche.

### **Resumo**

A presente pesquisa tem como objetivo discutir a psicossomática sob a perspectiva psicanalítica de Sándor Ferenczi, enfatizando as contribuições de sua teoria do trauma para a compreensão das manifestações do sofrimento humano. Por meio de pesquisa bibliográfica, foram analisadas as formulações ferenczianas acerca do trauma, do desmentido, da clivagem e da regressão, bem como as contribuições de autores que dialogam com seu pensamento para o campo da psicossomática. O estudo evidencia que as experiências traumáticas não podem ser compreendidas apenas em função do acontecimento vivido, mas também das condições relacionais em que são recebidas e reconhecidas. A partir dessa perspectiva, observa-se que determinadas experiências podem produzir efeitos duradouros na constituição subjetiva, especialmente quando não encontram acolhimento ou validação no ambiente. A análise desenvolvida permitiu compreender que a obra de Ferenczi oferece importantes contribuições à psicossomática ao questionar a separação tradicional entre corpo e psiquismo. Nessa direção, os fenômenos psicossomáticos são compreendidos não como simples deslocamentos de

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conteúdos psíquicos para o corpo, mas como expressões de uma experiência subjetiva integrada, na qual corpo e psiquismo participam conjuntamente da constituição e da manifestação do sofrimento. Conclui-se que a perspectiva ferencziana amplia a compreensão da psicossomática ao reconhecer a complexidade da experiência humana e a indissociabilidade entre corpo e psiquismo.

**Palavras-chave:** Psicossomática; Psicanálise; Sándor Ferenczi; Trauma; Corpo e Psiquismo.

### **Resumen**

La presente investigación tiene como objetivo discutir la psicossomática desde la perspectiva psicoanalítica de Sándor Ferenczi, destacando las contribuciones de su teoría del trauma a la comprensión de las manifestaciones del sufrimiento humano. Mediante una investigación bibliográfica, se analizaron las formulaciones ferenczianas sobre el trauma, el desmentido, la escisión y la regresión, así como las contribuciones de autores que dialogan con su pensamiento en el campo de la psicossomática. El estudio evidencia que las experiencias traumáticas no pueden comprenderse únicamente a partir del acontecimiento vivido, sino también a partir de las condiciones relacionales en las que son recibidas y reconocidas. Desde esta perspectiva, determinadas experiencias pueden producir efectos duraderos en la constitución subjetiva, especialmente cuando no encuentran acogida ni validación en el entorno. El análisis desarrollado permitió comprender que la obra de Ferenczi ofrece importantes aportes a la psicossomática al cuestionar la separación tradicional entre el cuerpo y el psiquismo. En este sentido, los fenómenos psicossomáticos se entienden no como simples desplazamientos de contenidos psíquicos hacia el cuerpo, sino como expresiones de una experiencia subjetiva integrada, en la que el cuerpo y el psiquismo participan conjuntamente en la constitución y manifestación del sufrimiento. Se concluye que la perspectiva ferencziana amplía la comprensión de la psicossomática al reconocer la complejidad de la experiencia humana y la inseparabilidad entre el cuerpo y el psiquismo.

**Palabras clave:** Psicossomática; Psicoanálisis; Sándor Ferenczi; Trauma; Cuerpo y Psiquismo.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The work of Sándor Ferenczi occupies a prominent place in the history of psychoanalysis for broadening the understanding of the effects of traumatic experiences on the psychic constitution of the subject. By shifting the focus of trauma from the event itself to the relational conditions in which it is experienced, Ferenczi (1932/2011) emphasizes the importance of recognizing subjective experience and the resulting impacts when this recognition fails. In his formulations, human suffering cannot be understood solely from

**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

isolated intrapsychic processes, but must be considered in articulation with the relationships established throughout life.

Based on his studies of trauma, denial, and splitting, Ferenczi (1932/2011; 1932/1990) developed contributions that allowed for new ways of understanding experiences that remain on the margins of symbolization processes. For the author, certain experiences can produce lasting effects on subjective organization, especially when they do not find acceptance or validation in the environment. In these situations, suffering does not disappear, but remains active, influencing different dimensions of human experience.

Although Ferenczi did not formulate a systematized psychosomatic theory, his conceptions about the relationship between body and psyche opened important paths for understanding psychosomatic phenomena. In his writings, the author demonstrates an interest in the bodily manifestations of suffering and proposes an integrated view of human functioning, in which body and psyche do not constitute separate or independent instances (Ferenczi, 1922/2011; 1926/2011). This perspective has been taken up by contemporary authors who identify, in his works, fundamental contributions to the field of psychosomatics (Oliveira, 2024).

According to Oliveira (2024), reading psychosomatics from Ferenczi's perspective allows us to understand the body and the psyche as inseparable dimensions of subjective experience. From this perspective, psychosomatic phenomena are not understood as simple displacements of psychic conflicts onto the body, but as expressions of a subjective organization in which both participate jointly in the experience of suffering.

Given these considerations, this work aims to discuss psychosomatics from a Ferenczian perspective, seeking to understand the contributions of the concepts of trauma, disavowal, splitting, and regression to the interpretation of psychosomatic phenomena. To this end, a bibliographic research was conducted based on the work of Ferenczi and authors who engage with his thought. Initially, Ferencz's formulations on trauma and its effects on subjective constitution will be presented. Next, the contributions of psychoanalytic psychosomatics to the understanding of bodily manifestations of suffering will be discussed. Finally, the specificities of psychosomatics from a Ferenczian perspective will be addressed, emphasizing the integrated conception between body and psyche.

**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

The concept of trauma developed by Sándor Ferenczi in his 1932 texts shifts the focus from the isolated traumatic event to the relational conditions in which the experience is lived and subsequently received. In *Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and Children*, Ferenczi (1932/2011) argues that trauma occurs when a child, after experiencing excessive or intrusive excitement, turns to an adult for support and finds, instead, incomprehension, denial, or violence. The decisive element of trauma lies not only in the impact of the initial experience but also in the subsequent denial of the child's psychic reality.

Ferenczi (1932/2011) describes how, faced with denial, the child is confronted with a paradoxical situation: what was experienced intensely finds no confirmation in the other on whom they depend. To preserve the bond with the adult figure, the psyche may resort to an internal division, separating the suffered experience from the functioning that remains adapted to external demands. This division, which Ferenczi calls splitting, does not correspond to a process of symbolic elaboration, but to a defensive solution in the face of the impossibility of integrating the traumatic experience.

In his *Clinical Diary*, Ferenczi (1932/1990) elaborates on this concept by stating that traumatic experiences marked by denial tend to produce parts of psychic life that remain outside the processes of integration. The suffering linked to these experiences is not organized as a memory that can be elaborated, but persists as something that could not be linked, integrated, or transformed by psychic activity. Under these conditions, the trauma is not forgotten, but remains active in the form of lasting effects on the organization of the Ego.

Ferenczi (1932/1990) observes that, in the face of early trauma, the ego can develop a split functioning, in which one part remains attached to the suffered experience, while another organizes itself in a prematurely adapted way to external reality. This adaptation does not indicate elaboration, but rather a form of self-preservation in the face of an environment perceived as unpredictable or threatening. The author describes this functioning as a direct consequence of the environment's failure to recognize and support the child's experience.

Based on Ferenczi's (1932) formulations on trauma and denial, Gondar (2016) proposes the notion of the analyst as a witness to experiences that could not be recognized at the time of their occurrence. By revisiting Ferenczi's later work, the author argues that, in the face of

**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

traumatic experiences marked by denial, analytical listening cannot reproduce the logic of negation. It is up to the analyst to offer a space in which the subjective experience can be recognized, without this implying a factual reconstruction of the traumatic event.

Thus, according to Ferenczi (1932/1990; 1932/2011), trauma is understood as an experience that could not be integrated into psychic life due to denial and failure of the environment. It is a suffering that is not primarily organized in the field of representation, but remains active in the organization of the Ego, producing lasting effects on the subject's relationship with himself and with others.

Ferencz's conception of trauma, centered on the denial of experience and the interruption of psychic integration processes, offers a fundamental axis for understanding psychosomatic phenomena. When certain emotional experiences do not find recognition in the relational field and cannot be integrated into psychic life, their effects are not exhausted on the intrapsychic plane. On the contrary, such experiences tend to remain active, seeking other avenues of expression. It is at this point that psychoanalytic psychosomatics presents itself as a privileged theoretical-clinical field for considering the possible destinies of suffering that could not be symbolized.

According to McDougall (1989), psychoanalytic psychosomatics understands the physical symptom as a way of expressing emotional content that has not found symbolic means of elaboration. From this perspective, the body can assume the function of supporting affective experiences that could not be translated into words, becoming a form of expression when the psyche fails to contain and connect affects. Psychosomatic illness, therefore, is not reduced to the biological dimension, but acquires a specific psychic value, functioning as a silent language of suffering.

McDougall (1989) argues that when symbolic function is compromised, language loses its capacity to contain affects, opening space for more concrete forms of discharge. Under these conditions, emotional tension can manifest itself through bodily symptoms or acting out, configuring attempts at psychic regulation in the face of experiences that exceed the capacity for elaboration. The author emphasizes that the psychosomatic symptom does not stem from the mere presence of conflict, but from the impossibility of representing it psychically.

According to McDougall (1989), the choice of symptom is not random and is related to the unique way in which each individual deals with their unconscious conflicts. Faced with

**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

similar emotional experiences, some individuals may organize neurotic responses, while others find in the body a privileged way of expressing suffering. This diversity of symptomatic outcomes points to the importance of considering the psychic and relational history of each individual in understanding psychosomatic illness.

Volich (2006), in turn, proposes a critical reading of rigid psychopathological classifications and approaches that understand illness as a failure or deficit. For the author, the psychosomatic symptom should be understood as a subjective attempt at psychic survival in the face of emotional situations that exceed the capacity for symbolization. From this perspective, illness does not represent the absence of psychic work, but a possible—albeit costly—way of maintaining a certain internal coherence.

Oliveira (2024) revisits this field of questions from a contemporary perspective anchored in Ferenczi's thought, recognizing in Ferenczi a fundamental precursor of psychoanalytic psychosomatics. By developing his work from this theoretical heritage, the author proposes an understanding of psychosomatic suffering that goes beyond the exclusively pathological register.

When considering the phenomenon from the extrapolation of a natural, vital, or playful function of an organ, Oliveira (2024) understands illness as an event of being, and not merely as an expression of dysfunction. From this perspective, bodily suffering is not organized as a symbolic message susceptible to interpretation, but as a manifestation of a psychic experience that could not be symbolized and remains inaccessible to interpretation, which justifies the use of the term psychosomatic phenomenon to designate such conditions.

Based on the readings and the theoretical approach adopted here, from a Ferenczian perspective, it becomes possible to argue that body and psyche are not separate entities, but inseparable dimensions of subjective experience. In the face of trauma, when the processes of psychic integration are interrupted, suffering is not limited to a single register. On the contrary, body and mind respond in a unified way, so that what cannot be sustained or elaborated on the psychic plane can find expression in the body. In this sense, psychosomatic illness can be understood as an attempt to sustain the experience in the face of excessive trauma.

Oliveira (2024) highlights that Sándor Ferenczi's theory is deeply marked by the study of the effects of regression on psychic functioning. In this context, the author suggests that Ferenczian thought is characterized by a constant return to more primitive states of development

**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

as a way of understanding human suffering. Thus, when faced with experiences of dissatisfaction or conflict, the subject can mobilize modes of psychic functioning that refer to earlier moments in their history.

Oliveira (2024) explains that regression corresponds to a return to a more primitive state in relation to the subject's current experience. This movement can manifest itself in different ways throughout life. In adults, for example, regression can manifest itself through symptoms or certain forms of psychic suffering. In childhood, it can be observed when the child, faced with difficulties in their current context, begins to exhibit behaviors characteristic of earlier stages of development .

Ferenczi (1909/2011) emphasizes the persistence of the infantile dimension in the psyche when To assert that, by "scraping away the adult," one finds the child that remains within. This formulation highlights that childhood experiences continue to influence psychic organization throughout life, which reinforces the importance of considering them in understanding manifestations of suffering in adulthood.

Oliveira (2024) further highlights that, in Ferenczi's thought, the concept of infantile omnipotence plays a central role in understanding psychic development. This concept refers to the initial moment in life when the child experiences the feeling that their desires can be fully satisfied. During this period, there is still no clear differentiation between the internal world and external reality, which contributes to the subjective experience of completeness.

Ferenczi (1913/2011) defines omnipotence as the impression of possessing everything one desires, without anything left to desire. However, throughout development, the subject begins to confront limits imposed by reality. This process enables the progressive construction of a sense of reality and fosters the formation of a more complex relationship with the external world.

According to Oliveira (2024), the constitution of a sense of reality occurs precisely from the overcoming of this childhood fantasy of omnipotence. As the subject encounters frustrations and limitations, it becomes possible to develop new forms of relationship with the environment and with others. In this way, psychic maturation implies a gradual transformation of this initial experience of completeness.

Oliveira (2024) also points out that, in Ferenczian theory , body and psyche should not be understood as separate instances. For Ferenczi, the body is not merely a consequence of

**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

psychic processes, nor is it an autonomous instance that determines thoughts and emotions. On the contrary, both participate in an integrated functioning, in which they mutually influence each other.

In the interpretation proposed by Oliveira (2024), this integrated functioning is described as ultracystic , which indicates a relationship of interdependence between the body and the psyche. This concept becomes particularly relevant to the field of psychosomatics, as it allows us to understand bodily manifestations as part of a broader process of expressing psychic suffering.

Oliveira (2024) emphasizes that, in the study of psychosomatics from a Ferenczian perspective , the concept of the language of tenderness assumes special importance. This concept refers to the forms of affective communication present in the initial relationships between the child and their caregiver.

When these relational experiences are marked by conflict or rupture, different forms of expression of suffering may arise, including bodily manifestations.

Oliveira (2024) observes that, for Ferenczi, manifestations of psychic and psychosomatic suffering do not necessarily respond to a fixed structural organization. Instead, they may result from the interaction between individual predispositions, experiences throughout development, and situational factors in the subject's life.

According to Oliveira (2024), this perspective allows us to understand that the same individual can experience different forms of suffering throughout life. Certain situations can trigger psychic responses that relate to more primitive levels of functioning, highlighting the complexity of the relationship between psychic experiences and bodily manifestations.

Oliveira (2024) highlights that understanding psychosomatic phenomena, from a Ferenczian perspective , involves the articulation of concepts such as infantile omnipotence, thalassic regression, and the language of tenderness. These concepts allow us to understand the human being as an integrated system, in which body and psyche are deeply interconnected.

Oliveira (2024) also highlights that Ferenczi demonstrated great interest in the ways in which the body expresses itself in the context of psychic suffering. His perspective was not limited to the verbal content of communications, but also included bodily and instinctual manifestations that transcend the limits of language.

**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

Ferenczi (1926/2011) states that several illnesses can have a psychic origin and yet manifest themselves through real organic alterations in certain organs of the body. These conditions have been termed organ neuroses, as they simultaneously present subjective and objective aspects, which makes their distinction from hysteria or certain organic diseases complex.

Ferenczi (1926/2011) adds that, in these neuroses, certain bodily functions may receive excessive erotic or playful investment. This investment can interfere with the organ's usual functioning, producing alterations that go beyond the exclusively psychic field.

Ferenczi (1922/2011) further observes that the experience of illness can cause a retraction of the subject's affective investment in relation to the external world. In this process, interest and love, previously directed towards objects, become concentrated on the subject himself or on the organ affected by the illness, configuring a regression to earlier stages of development.

Câmara (2021) proposes that understanding the symptom should not be restricted to the search for a repressed content to be interpreted. For the author, it becomes necessary to investigate the ways in which suffering manifests itself, shifting attention from the hidden content to how the symptom expresses itself in the subject's current experience.

Câmara (2021) adds that each form of expression of suffering involves a specific organization, in which certain aspects—sensory, motor, or verbal—may become predominant. Even so, the other processes remain present, even if they are not immediately perceived, as they are part of the dynamics that structure the subjective experience.

Based on these theoretical contributions, it becomes possible to understand psychosomatics, from a Ferenczian perspective, as a field that emphasizes the profound articulation between body and psyche. In this sense, bodily manifestations cease to be interpreted merely as isolated phenomena and come to be understood as forms of expression of psychic processes that are articulated with the history and experiences of the subject.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Based on the theoretical framework used in this work, we were able to understand psychosomatics, from a Ferenczian perspective, as a field that questions the conceptions that

**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication: 11/06/2026**

traditionally separate the body and the psyche. The contributions of Sándor Ferenczi, especially through the concepts of trauma, disavowal, and splitting, allow for an understanding of human suffering that transcends exclusively psychic or bodily explanations, by recognizing the profound articulation between these dimensions of subjective experience.

Throughout this study, it was observed that traumatic experiences marked by a lack of recognition and validation can produce lasting effects on subjective constitution. However, such effects are not limited to a single register of human experience. From a Ferenczian perspective, body and psyche participate jointly in the experience of suffering, expressing, in different ways, the same subjective reality.

The contributions of contemporary authors who engage with Ferenczi's work, especially Oliveira (2024), have broadened this understanding by highlighting the integrated conception of body and psyche. From this perspective, psychosomatic phenomena are not understood as simple overflows of psychic content into the body, but as manifestations of a subject whose experience is constituted simultaneously in bodily and psychic registers.

Thus, this work allowed us to reflect on the relevance of Ferenczi's theory to the field of psychosomatics, highlighting its contribution to a broader and more complex understanding of human suffering. Finally, it is understood that thinking about psychosomatics from Ferenczi's perspective implies recognizing that body and psyche are not separate instances, but inseparable dimensions of subjective experience, which are continuously articulated in the constitution and expression of suffering.

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**Year VII, v.1 2026 | Submission: 05/06/2026 | Accepted: 08/06/2026 | Publication:  
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