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POSTMODERN SELF PSYCHOLOGY

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Chapter 1

Self Psychology Since Kohut

Arnold Goldberg

This paper is in the nature of a historical progress note. For many students of psychoanalytic psychology, the advent of self psychology was an interesting moment in the growth and development of depth psychology, one that began with the publications of Heinz Kohut and that continues on with the adoption of several of his ideas and concepts. Most psychoanalysts do not keep up with the literature of self psychology, and most have only a casual acquaintance with its vocabulary and even less familiarity with its internal struggles. Kohut's original aim for self psychology, to have an established place within organized psychoanalysis, has given way to its rather surprising emergence embodied in a solid group of clinicians and investigators outside of the psychoanalysis that Kohut knew. This emergence has been accompanied by conflicts, disagreements, and, perhaps predictably, different branches. That a significant partisanship has arisen within the domain of self psychology is one of those inevitable events that plague much of psychoanalysis, but it should not conceal the fact that self psychology itself has seemed to travel along distinctly different ideological lines.

It is always difficult to lift out the pure theoretical concepts from the political surround, but there does seem to be a rather clear clustering of concepts that differ from one another while still claiming an allegiance to self psychology, an origin from self psychology, as well as an advance of and beyond self psychology. Only one of these branches has a definite name, that is, intersubjectivity, and so one is immediately at a disadvantage in pursuing an effort to single out and describe these other chosen branches without falling into the political pitfalls of

organizational controversy. My attempt therefore will be to sketch the separate tributaries of self psychology without in any way laying claim to either completeness or correctness, which will necessarily result in certain omissions, such as the role of social constructivism, the concept of motivational systems (Lichtenberg, 1989), and narrative theory. These are significant and important issues in contemporary psychoanalysis, but they seem to me to be less representative of a movement in self psychology than of general themes in psychoanalysis. Each, however, does play a significant role in the growth of self psychology but has not, as yet, become more of a member of one branch than another; that is, they are ecumenical.

One often hears of a fantasy involving the return of an originator, like Freud, to consider what has happened to his or her brainchild. One example of this would be to recall the time when the rules for admission to candidacy were so strict that it was claimed that Freud would never have passed muster. Just as that period in time has also passed, so has the question of whether or not Freud would have embraced one or another advance in psychoanalysis such as ego psychology. The field is too fluid. The same is true of self psychology, since fidelity is often more to persons than to ideas. Beyond the cry of whether or not Kohut might have agreed or disagreed with any idea lies the more powerful plea of whether or not the idea is a worthwhile one. The answer to that remains more with the perspective of history than anything else. Much of the original work of Kohut has found a significant place in psychoanalysis. The significance of the narcissistic transferences, the perception of the maturation of narcissism, and the focus upon the phenomenology of narcissistic disorders have all entered into the ordinary discourse of most analysts (Gill, 1994).

The continuing evolution of self psychology has articulated with the emergence of a number of other psychoanalytic excursions such as seen in interpersonal and social constructivist concepts (Hoffman, 1991). Thus, the path of self psychology can be seen as a clue to the entire postmodern era for psychoanalysis (Barrett, 1993). To view psychoanalysis as an evolving system allows us to see the emergence of a host of ideas that may or may not survive the rigors of clinical experience.

Inasmuch as the varied branches that have emerged in self psychology, perhaps because of their shared origin, have survived in a competitive atmosphere, it is almost impossible to describe them in anything approaching pure form. Each claims a status that seems to depend upon being different from the others, and so any listing or description carries a weight of a value judgment. With the impossible

goal of evenhandedness, the references will therefore be directed primarily to a few representative works and will aim to avoid as much as possible the spirit of competition that presently exists in and about the students of self psychology. It is selective, rather than inclusive.

Following from the excellent book review by Morton and Estelle Shane (1993), which emphasized the differences of opinion about the basic tenets of self psychology, all of which derived from different authors, my paper will be directed toward the trends or movements in self psychology that are crystallizing out without a particular allegiance to a particular person. Just as self psychology is working itself free from an absolute allegiance to Kohut, so, too, will we see these branches survive less on the basis of their fidelity to their founders and more on the basis of what we hope will be essentially pragmatic factors. Although a theory may be inextricably tied to its originator, its destiny depends upon its use over time. And for many, it is much too early to judge their staying power.

One unhappy result of any selection of current forces in self psychology, as in any dynamic field, is an arbitrary delineation of exclusion and inclusion. Some people insist that they are not self psychologists although they seem to be. Some insist that they are but appear otherwise. Probably it does not matter, except in an overview such as this, which aims to identify trends within the field. Therefore, it seems best to minimize the personal references and to highlight the ideas, and so some omissions are therefore inevitable.

I will exclude some issues that seem closely tied to self psychology but have over time become integrated into all of psychoanalysis. Prominent among these issues is the position of empathy, which Kohut felt was the basis of all depth psychology but which he insisted had no particular tie or special affinity to self psychology. There is no doubt that there is a number of different emphases on the nature and role of empathy, but at present, there seem not enough crucial differences in its definition and employment. Its popularity may be ascribed to self psychology but not its utilization. Everyone now seems to include empathy as an essential component within psychoanalysis.

Another notable feature of self psychology has been its altered consideration of aggression as reactive, rather than primary. Putting aside the enormous misunderstandings that have grown up outside of self psychology about aggression, there does not seem to be much serious debate within self psychology itself about Kohut's original position (Ornstein, 1993). That position certainly had room for normal assertiveness alongside that of narcissistic rage. The parallel issue that has had only a minority of psychoanalysts preoccupied, that is, the

place of inborn destruction and the death instinct, is probably one that self psychology has effectively bypassed. Indeed, the entire consideration of psychoanalysis as posited on drive psychology is not one entertained by self psychology and is now embraced beyond self psychology (Lichtenberg, 1989).

With these provisos in mind, I will now turn to a brief examination of three main trends in self psychology since Kohut.

TRADITIONAL SELF PSYCHOLOGY

The major theoretical contribution offered by Kohut in his delineation of psychoanalytic self psychology was that of the selfobject, and the major clinical contribution was the description of the selfobject transferences: their formation, working through, and resolution. The work that followed upon and flowed from these central theses was primarily one of elaboration and variation on these themes. All kinds of forms and types of selfobjects were considered and described. These ranged from nonanimate things such as musical themes and animals to a further categorization of selfobjects from archaic to mature. As might be expected, the concept became overloaded, with almost anything that seemed to play a role in growth and development quickly and readily being assigned the role of a selfobject. In the evolution of any idea, a popular term becomes overpopular and then—usually after a plea to dispense with it entirely—it starts to get a more focused definition. This happened within and outside of self psychology with the overuse of empathy, which still awaits a rescue from its overzealous proponents.

Selfobject was originally intended by Kohut to mean another person who served to perform a function that one could not perform for oneself, which he meant to be thought of as a forerunner for psychic structure, since he described the phase-specific taking over of these functions as resulting in further structuralization. That some selfobjects remain with us throughout life seemed to allow a modification of this theoretical contribution, since it opened the door to a new definition of maturity, which seemed to have room for lifelong structural deficiency; that is, the selfobject was ever needed to maintain the self.

Along with the ongoing work on a better definition of selfobject, there has been a continuing debate about whether the selfobject need be considered as an inner experience or an actual entity. This struggle over the correct positioning of the psyche in the world is equally waged throughout all of psychoanalysis, which has yet to clarify the true nature of objects. Noteworthy, however, is that the selfobject is a theoretical bridge to the controversy that goes on between one-person and two-person psychologies, and self psychology is no stranger to this debate.

For some, the selfobject is a part of the self and thus is best considered as a one-person psychology. For others, it is a connection to another and is therefore a clear example of a two-person psychology. The concept of the selfobject and its reliance on a theory of self-development, however, does serve to differentiate it from most of the other two-person psychologies.

Without too much of an excursion into some knotty philosophic issues, the distinction between one- and two-person psychologies must begin with some agreed-upon and accepted definition of a person. From William James on, we have learned not to limit the notion of person to that which is contained within one's skin, but to extend it to a larger area involving ownership. Since self psychology regards selfobjects as part of the self, it extends the concept of the person to include those others who function as part of the self. The self is composed of or constituted by its selfobjects. Therefore, the concept of a person seen socially or from the position of an external observer becomes transformed into that of the person seen in a psychological sense, that is, from within a mind. Two persons in conversation seen by an observer is the social, or interpersonal, perspective. However, from the vantage point of the inner psychology of one or the other social person, there may be only one self with his or her selfobjects; therefore, self psychology is now conceptualized as a one-person psychology (Goldberg, 1990, p. 126).

The clinical elaboration of the selfobject transference is also a definite demarcation for self psychology. The literature of self psychology has followed a trend seen in much of psychiatry outside of psychoanalysis in a pursuit of shorter modes of treatment. There seem to be more reports of psychotherapy than psychoanalysis and thus more inferences about the nature of the transference rather than a fully explored and resolved description of its course. Concurrent with the abbreviation of the therapeutic efforts has been the use of what are called principles of self psychology in child therapy, couples therapy, family therapy, and even organizational psychiatry (Goldberg, 1985-1996). Since this trend too has usually been felt to be a dilution of psychoanalysis, it needs to be carefully studied for its ultimate value.

One area of inquiry concerns the narcissistic behavior disorders, a diagnostic category of the addictions, delinquencies, and perversions that Kohut felt were a particular form of self disorder. These pathological states have been examined in terms of their self structure, which is characterized by a vertical split: a form of self pathology described by Kohut. There is as well a particular kind of interpretive intervention that seems applicable in the analytic treatment of the disorders. An offshoot of this inquiry has been a significant amount of clinical material

that highlights the analyst's enactments during treatment. The change of the position of the analyst from dispassionate observer and interpreter to active participant and performer is being discussed throughout psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, and so it is natural to see its significant emergence in self psychology (Bacal and Thomson, 1996). Perhaps it is most fitting to launch our description of the other trends in self psychology by considering the change in their conceptualization of the place and role of the analyst.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Intersubjective theory is presented as a field or system theory. In one sense, all of psychoanalytic theory can be considered an open system, but the original ideas of Kohut were certainly confined and limited to a narrow consideration of the self and its selfobjects. Therefore, one must alter his or her perspective in thinking of *reciprocal interacting worlds of experience* versus intrapsychic structural relations. There certainly must be a gain and loss in each perspective, and one result of a new or different outlook is a new vocabulary. Some critics claim that a retranslation of some of the new words and phrases back into familiar words such as that of "unconscious organizing principles" back into "transference" will show no essential difference between the two lexicons, but that of course may rob the new theory of much of its originality and scope (Ornstein, 1995). Therefore, the ideas of intersubjectivity theory ask for a shift from drives to affectivity and a consideration of the psychoanalytic situation as a system with a fluid boundary between patient and analyst. The interplay between patient and analyst is viewed as a situation of conjunction and disjunction: the first characterizing assimilation of experiences into familiar configurations, the second into configurations that alter meanings for the patient. Both patient and analyst make contributions to the therapeutic action.

Intersubjectivists claim few concrete recommendations to style or technique in therapy since they wish it to be a perspective broad enough to accommodate a range of practice. Indeed, intersubjective ideas are said to be but a call to an increased sensibility (Orange, 1996) or a theory, perhaps like information theory, that can accommodate a number of clinical theories. In order to achieve this position, however, it may be a contradiction to make certain clinical claims, such as those made about transference (Stolorow and Atwood, 1996). These views are not simply another statement about the analyst as growth-promoting versus the analyst as an object of old. The crucial difference between traditional self psychology and the theory of intersubjectivity is that, for the latter, the transference is felt to have two basic dimensions: the

selfobject dimension and the repetitive dimension. The first is said to encompass development-enhancing experiences and the second to illustrate experiences of developmental failure. The essence of transference analysis lies in investigating the dimensions of transference as they take form in the ongoing intersubjective system. This system is formed by the interplay between the transference of the patient and that of the analyst. The focus is ever upon this shared construction and not upon the singular contribution of the patient projected onto the analyst.

At first blush one can hardly take exception to many of the views of intersubjectivity; it must await a test of usefulness to see if it adds much to the traditional approach. However, further difficulties have to do with the recent claim that intersubjectivity is more broad-based than the singular concept of the selfobject, has a different definition of empathy and a different view of the curative process, and originated independent of Kohut's contributions (Trop, 1995). Unfortunately, problems of territoriality seem to contaminate many scientific arguments. It may well be the case that some ideas need to stake out a claim of independence in order to prosper. This does seem to be the present direction of intersubjectivity theory.

From the stance of the selfobject as a component function of the self to that of the analyst as a reciprocal interacting world of experience, we move on to the next category in which the selfobject is a variant of an object relation and in which the analyst necessarily has an impact upon the patient.

RELATIONAL SELF PSYCHOLOGY

This category is less of an organized movement than is that of intersubjectivity theory, but there is no doubt that a significant number of self psychologists see themselves as concerned with a better delineation of the object as separate and as gratifying. We can loosely call this group relational self psychology (Bacal and Newman, 1990).

Heinz Kohut originally conceived of narcissism as a separate line of development: separate from the known and accepted line attributed to objects of love and hate. Over time, he seemed to modify this duality as he moved the study of the self to center stage and as the self and its selfobjects became the fundamental features of all psychopathology. With his emphasis on oedipal selfobjects, he made these the pivotal issues for this developmental phase and so relegated the objects of love and hate to a secondary role in the transference neuroses. Thus the self became central, and the independent objects moved to the periphery. To bring the object as an "independent center of initiative"

back to the fore does ask one to develop some scheme of relations between the self and the object. To do so involves either a commitment to the drives that self psychology has abjured or a looser use of the term *relations* which is not uncommon in much present-day analytic writing. The insistence on relations between the self and objects has led some to focus on the need for the person to be aware of the presence, needs, and impact on others and to include these factors in assessing growth and development. It is said that traditional self psychology has simply bypassed this area and that no treatment can make a claim to comprehensiveness without recognizing the status of the other as a separate entity. The affinity to schools of interpersonal analysis is apparent (Mitchell, 1988).

The other area where self psychology differs from the standard view of growth and development of the self has to do with the insistence by Kohut that optimal frustration is the *sine qua non* for the structuralization of the psyche. His viewing this as a result of interpretation has been challenged by those who claim that optimal gratification is a more felicitous description of what serves to promote change (Shane and Shane, 1996). From this there is but a short step toward concluding that interpretation *per se* need no longer carry the sole burden in the therapeutic effort for change. The comparison of the child's learning a language is offered as the best example of a major step in growth occurring in a properly gratifying and supportive environment with no need for frustration to serve as impetus or indeed as a factor at all. With a perspective on analytic treatment as a new growth experience, an entry becomes available to parallel the features of analysis with those of optimal development. The knotty problem of "critical periods," those that allow for language acquisition and reading comprehension and others, is yet to be solved, since in this crucial area analysis is clearly not the same as the child's experience of growing up. How can analysis recreate a period of development that has been closed? Language acquisition seems to occupy a very special place in development and so perhaps is not a valid example of how a gratifying environment can aid in structure formation. For the most part, the claims made for an optimal environment suggest that growth takes place both in the life cycle and in the treatment situation without frustration (Shane and Shane, 1996), which, of course, differs from Kohut's original position.

THE PLACE OF UNCONSCIOUS FANTASY

It seems likely that any evolving branch of self psychology will strain against tradition and at some point move on to an independent course.

If one considers the role of unconscious fantasy, as an example, it is not difficult to see that both the branches of intersubjectivity and relational self psychology either make little use of it or dispense with it altogether. Rather than concern ourselves with the faithfulness to tradition of the new enterprise, we perhaps can think about the point at which—just as in biological evolution—we decide that a new species has emerged. If we do embark on a new course, much like may have happened with self psychology and classical analysis, we are justified in reexamining all of the taken-for-granted concepts that constituted the old one. Surely the concept of unconscious fantasy is a legitimate member of that group of tacit assumptions. To the degree that any core concept is eliminated, one can expect a certain ripple effect as others will necessarily be altered or themselves eliminated. No doubt this sort of straightening out of the disorganization that follows from a radical restudy is often left to be done by others at a later time. One needs to be aware, however, that even minor modifications can have significant repercussions and lasting effects.

There is little doubt that Kohut, who was well schooled in psychoanalytic theory and practice, wanted to retain what he felt were the foundations of his own training and beliefs and that he developed self psychology as a step in the evolution of that theory. Quite aside from the social and political pressures that come from fidelity to a group dogma, he initially believed that self psychology was a natural outgrowth of the tenets of psychoanalysis. He felt that, just as Heinz Hartmann had seen it necessary to expand ego psychology with the elaboration of the concept of neutralized energy, he had to expand the theory of narcissism with the description and elaboration of the fate of unconscious fantasies by way of the deployment of selfobjects. Kohut's development of the foundation for the notion of selfobjects went hand-in-hand with the modification and transformation of these unconscious fantasies. The fantasy of greatness, which can have a pathological printout in megalomaniacal visions, can also fuel the mirroring needs and have an adult resolution in the internal feeling of pride. Such fantasies are the underpinning of ambition. The fantasy of connecting with a powerful and benevolent other, which can have a pathological deviance in the influencing machine, can fuel the idealizing needs and result in an adult resolution characterized by an internal feeling of enthusiasm. The initial poles of self psychology were posited on the existence of a transformation of a set of unconscious fantasies without which there seemed no psychological sense to their continued existence. The unconscious fantasy appeared to be the motor for ongoing growth and its fate the measuring rod for the success or failure of this growth. Change could be measured with this yardstick, and

pathology could be viewed with this as a background barometer. If it becomes viable to consider new and different selfobjects such as adversarial selfobjects or twinships transferences, then it seems proper to see if there were a corresponding set of fantasies that can accompany the path for their developmental course.

These minimal considerations about unconscious fantasy must be played out in the future against the further development of the different branches of self psychology. If a patient enters your office and remarks after a bit that she feels you are somewhat preoccupied, the range of options that present themselves for appraisal and scrutiny are quite clearly derived from your own position and stance vis à vis these options. You may wonder about your own participation in her view of you and thus see the intersecting subjectivities as forming this present state. However, a stance that reduces your contribution, albeit without eliminating it, might focus upon the patient's struggle with some grandiose fantasy that she fears will not be properly mirrored. A response on your part about her perception of you and your needs, along with the question of whether or not you should aim to correct that perception, would direct the treatment along an entirely different path than a mere interpretation of a grandiose fantasy struggling for recognition and modification. No one would argue for one position as necessarily exclusive, and most would agree with the absolute necessity for considering and ideally integrating all of the possible perspectives. But any one of them has a certain magnetic pull of its own, as it tends to encourage one approach rather than another. From the concentration upon a possible unconscious fantasy, one is inevitably led toward thinking about the next point in the sequence that asks whether it is from her or from me or from both of us.

The unconscious need not be thought of as a thing or a place. Instead, it is a way of looking at things: we assume that manifest issues have concealed meaning behind them. It is what Kohut called a part of our introspective intentions. One approaches reality only by way of a background of experience, and a part of a psychoanalyst's background is the concept of the unconscious. Every encounter with a patient can be studied within a frame that allows for a major contribution from an unconscious fantasy or for a major contribution from the immediate actions of the participants. The line that we choose to draw determines our varied approach to the patient (Goldberg, 1990, p. 127). Much of present-day self psychology seems to divide along this line.

INTRAPSYCHIC VERSUS INTERPERSONAL

Kohut's study of the self was the study of a psychic structure, and he considered the selfobject a component of that structure (see Leider,

1996). He often contrasted his stance with that of interpersonal psy-
chology and usually managed to denigrate the latter in spite of his
protest of innocence. His main criticism of the interpersonal was that
it was from a third-person perspective, but the implicit criticism was
that it was superficial. He felt that psychoanalysis studied the makeup
of the psyche and that empathy was the tool for such a study, while
social interactions were exteroceptive inspections by more distant
observers. Gill (1994) was one person able to be clear in his view that
analysis was interpersonal and so that we did study the goings on
between persons. He never could quite understand why self psycholo-
gists could not see that. It takes no great feat of intellect to see that
looking at what you think goes on inside is different than what you
think goes on between and that thinking about what A does to B is
different than what B does to A. Putting aside all arguments about
methods and models, it seems unlikely that a concentration on an
unconscious fantasy will not take precedence over a supportive
comment from a therapist if one chooses up sides with Kohut versus if
one goes along with Gill. The patient's perception of the analyst's
feelings counts more for Gill than does the patient's projection of her
own discontent. That is how it should be in our world of heterogene-
ity; it underlines the differences that exist between the branches with-
out, in any way, valuing one over the other, save in their ultimate
usefulness to both patient and analyst. These three branches do seem
to separate out once again when we choose to look for emphases. The
failed parent of Kohut comes necessarily from the patient, is co-
constructed with the analyst by Gill, and asks for a new and potentially
curative response from our third group. Although such oversimplifica-
tion does a disservice to all three groups, it does do the service of
recognizing that they are not all of a piece. From whatever common
core they derive, they are spreading apart, and it seems highly likely
that they will continue to do so.

DISCUSSION

Organizations make for easy distinctions, while the distinctions made
of a heterogeneous field may seem quite arbitrary. However, a greater
problem seems to occur if the nonmembers of a scientific field assume
that it is a static one and that one need only refer to whatever original
works have endured in order to be informed. This is surely the case
with psychoanalytic self psychology no less than with any other sector
of the psychoanalytic world. One may wonder how Freud would
consider the present-day content of literature in the field about his
own brain child; this is an equally imaginative exercise for Heinz Kohut,
Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan and many others.

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It may or may not be true that the changes within self psychology are a microcosm of the changes within all of analysis, but there is no doubt that they give hints of general trends. These trends have to do with the recognition of the dialectic exchange that takes place in all of treatment, the more careful study of the different forms that treatment can take, the application of the data and knowledge of the treatment outside of the one-to-one setting, and the incorporation of information from other disciplines into the overall comprehension of therapy. This, of course, is not to mention the enormous changes brought about by the changing place of analytic treatment in our society that ranges from altering training and credentials to modifications in practice. The accompanying social changes that characterize self psychology are, of course, a topic for another discussion.

In conclusion, if we confine ourselves to the clinical and theoretical aspects of self psychology, we see that the central concepts have given birth to a set of separate tributaries, each of which lays some claim to serve as the major voice in the field. The traditional, the intersubjective, and the relational may go on to have distinctive lives of their own or may become reabsorbed in one another or evolved in a totally new form. It may be most important to recognize that efforts to diminish differences or to integrate disparate ideas into some sort of uniformity could turn out not to be in the best interests of the field. That remains to be seen, and it is to be hoped that we shall all continue to look.

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