Reflections on Self Psychology

As is readily apparent throughout this book, our intersubjective approach to psychoanalysis owes an enormous debt to Kohut's psychoanalytic psychology of the self. Indeed, the theory of intersubjectivity might be seen as a development and expansion of psychoanalytic self psychology. Our aim in this chapter is twofold. First, by critically examining the theory of self psychology, we hope to bring the assumptions underlying our own approach more clearly into view. And second, by clarifying what we believe are the shortcomings in some of its concepts, we hope to highlight, broaden, and refine self psychology's essential contributions to psychoanalysis.

What are these essential contributions? To our minds, they are threefold and closely interrelated: (1) the unwavering application of the empathic-introspective mode of investigation as defining and delimiting the domain of psychoanalytic inquiry, (2) the central emphasis on the primacy of self-experience, and (3) the concepts of selfobject function and selfobject transference. These three principles constitute the foundational constructs upon which the theoretical superstructure of self psychology rests. The foundational pillars are essentially sound, but, as we will attempt to show, this is not necessarily true of the architecture that has been built upon them. We wish first to draw out briefly certain implications of the aforementioned basic principles of self psychology that have not received sufficient attention.

1. The empathic-introspective mode of investigation refers to the attempt to understand a person's expressions from a perspective within, rather than outside, that person's own subjective frame of reference. In his early landmark position paper, Kohut (1959) argued that this investigatory mode defines and delimits the field of psychoanalysis—that only what is potentially accessible to empathy and introspection falls within the empirical and theoretical domain of psychoanalytic in-
quiry. In making this proposal—and this has not been sufficiently recognized—Kohut took a giant step forward toward reframing psychoanalysis as an autonomous science of human experience, a depth psychology of human subjectivity (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984). Also not sufficiently recognized is the extent to which Kohut's paradigmatic step has been paralleled, complemented, and supported by the efforts of others who have attempted to free the phenomenological insights of clinical psychoanalysis from the Procrustean bed of materialism, determinism, and mechanism that was the heritage of Freud's immersion in nineteenth-century biology—most notably, the work of Guntrip (1967), Gill (1976), Klein (1976), and Schafer (1976). As we attempt to demonstrate later, certain of Kohut's later ideas are retrogressive in this respect—that is, they represent a partial return of mechanistic thinking.

Our own viewpoint fully embraces Kohut's claim that the empathic-introspective mode defines the nature of the psychoanalytic enterprise. As we stated in chapter 1, it is our belief that the concept of an intersubjective field is a theoretical construct precisely matched to the methodology of empathic-introspective inquiry. What we investigate with the psychoanalytic method are organizations of subjective experience, their origins and transformations, and the intersubjective systems formed by their reciprocal mutual interaction.

2. Following closely from its strict adherence to the empathic-introspective stance is self psychology's emphasis on the centrality of self-experience, conscious and unconscious, in both psychological development and pathogenesis. A singularly important implication of this emphasis, which Kohut did not address directly, is that it leads inevitably to a theoretical shift from the motivational primacy of instinctual drive to the motivational primacy of affect and affective experience (see Basch, 1984, 1985; Stolorow, 1984b). It is in the illumination of affective development and its derailments in an intersubjective matrix that self psychology's most significant theoretical contributions may ultimately lie (see chapter 5).

3. It is often forgotten that the term selfobject does not refer to environmental entities or caregiving agents—that is, to people. Rather, it designates a class of psychological functions pertaining to the maintenance, restoration, and transformation of self-experience. The term selfobject refers to an object experienced subjectively as serving certain functions—that is, it refers to a dimension of experiencing an object (Kohut, 1984, p. 49), in which a specific bond is required for maintaining, restoring, or consolidating the organization of self-experience. This concept is of enormous clinical importance because, by illuminating the developmental dimension of the transference, it permits therapists to treat patients with severe developmental arrests psychoanalytically. Once an analyst has grasped the idea that his responsiveness can be experienced subjectively as a vital, functional component of a patient's self-organization, he will never listen to analytic material in quite the same way.

All three of these closely interrelated fundamental principles contribute to making self psychology, as a theoretical framework, exquisitely self-reflexive and potentially self-corrective. For example, the conceptualization of selfobject functions and of the effect of their presence or absence on a person's self-experience alerts us to the continual impact of the observer and his theories on what is being observed. Put slightly differently, the consistent application of the empathic-introspective mode not only to the psychological phenomena being studied but also to the theoretical ideas that guide our observations provides us with an ongoing basis for critically evaluating, refining, expanding, and, when necessary, discarding these theoretical constructs. This, indeed, is the aim of this chapter—to apply a fundamental tenet of self psychology (that psychoanalysis should be defined and delimited by the empathic-introspective mode) to a critique of certain components of self psychological theory.

THE SUPRAORDINATE BIPOLAR SELF

Paradoxically, the concept of the "self" is without a doubt the most problematic one in the theory of self psychology. A conceptual imprecision that has pervaded the self psychology literature since the Restoration of the Self (Kohut, 1977) is the use of the term self to refer both to

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1Similarly, the phrase selfobject failure does not refer to objectively assessed shortcomings of a caregiving agent but to a subjectively experienced absence of requisite selfobject functions. We prefer the phrase selfobject failure to the commonly used empathic failure because, as applied to the psychoanalytic situation, the former more clearly designates a subjective experience of the patient in the transference. Misunderstandings on the part of the analyst may or may not be experienced as selfobject failures, depending on their specific transference meanings for the patient.
a psychological structure (an organization of experience) and an existential agent (an initiator of action). In *Structures of Subjectivity* (1984), we addressed this problem as follows:

While “personality” and “character” are extremely broad concepts pertaining to the overall structure of a subjective universe, *self* is a more delimited and specific term referring to the structure of a person’s experience to himself. The self . . . is a psychological structure through which self-experience acquires cohesion and continuity, and by virtue of which self-experience assumes its characteristic shape and enduring organization. We have found it important to distinguish sharply between the concept of the self as a psychological structure and the concept of the *person* as an experiencing subject and agent who initiates action. Whereas the self-as-structure falls squarely within the domain of psychoanalytic investigation, the ontology of the person-as-agent, in our view, lies beyond the scope of psychoanalytic inquiry (p. 34).

“Psychoanalysis,” we argued, “can only illuminate the experience of personal agency or its absence in specific contexts of meaning” (p. 34). This is because only the experience is accessible to empathy and introspection.

Some of the theoretical difficulties that follow from a failure to distinguish between the self-as-structure and the person-as-agent can be illustrated by the following sentence, typical of many that appear in the literature of self psychology: “The fragmented self strives to restore its cohesion.” Here the term *self* has two distinctly different referents: (1) on the one hand, an organization of experience (called the self) has undergone fragmentation, and (2) an existential agent (unfortunately also called the self) is performing actions to restore cohesion to that organization of experience. This creates a theoretical conundrum. Clearly, it is not the pieces of something (fragments of a self) that strive toward a goal (restoration). More importantly, the second usage of self as an existential entity transforms the personal, agentic “I” into a reified “it,” not unlike the id, ego, and superego of classical theory. This problem can be minimized if we restrict the concept of self to describe organizations of experience and use the term *person* (an irreducible ontological construct that falls outside the domain of empathic-intro-
There are several difficulties with this conceptualization. First, there is the problem of reification, which we discussed earlier, whereby the poles of the self become ossified entities that belie the organic fluidity of human experience. Second, the concept of a tension arc as a motivational construct seems to us to represent a regression to mechanistic thinking, reminiscent of the libidinal hydraulics of classical drive theory. Tension arcs, like drives, are not accessible to empathy and introspection (Kohut, 1959). From an empathic-introspective viewpoint, ambitions and ideals can be conceptualized as systems of affective meanings that are intrinsically motivational, making the concept of a tension arc unnecessary.

Perhaps most important, the assumption of an inevitably bipolar structure for the self—or of a tripolar one, as in Kohut's last theoretical work (1984)—unnecessarily narrows the vast array of selfobject experiences that can shape and color the evolution of a person's self-organization. We suspect that a great variety of selfobject functions and corresponding structural configurations of the self remain yet to be discovered by analysts whose empathic-introspective efforts are guided by differently situated points of view. Kohut (1983) alluded to this himself when he remarked: "We realize, moreover, what an enormous field for further research has opened up before us, challenging us to bring further order to an almost overwhelming range of explanatory possibilities . . ." (pp. 401–402).

In an effort in this direction, we offer in chapter 5 an expansion and refinement of the selfobject concept in which we propose that selfobject functions pertain most fundamentally to the integration of affect into the organization of self-experience, and that the need for selfobject ties pertains most centrally to the need for attuned responsiveness to affect states in all phases of the life cycle. The experience of such attunement contributes vitally to the ongoing process of self-differentiation (chapter 4) and to the consolidation of a belief in the validity of one's own perceptual reality (chapter 9).

Clinically, an expanded conception of selfobject function and selfobject transference enables us to work psychoanalytically with very archaic borderline and psychotic states previously thought by many, including Kohut (1971), to be inaccessible to such treatment (see chapters 8 and 9). What we wish to stress here is that a broadened concept of selfobject function corresponds to a more richly variegated and idiographic conception of the structure of the self. Consistent application of the empathic-introspective mode leads us away from the assumption of bi- or tripolarity and toward an appreciation of the multidimensionality of the self deriving from a multiplicity of selfobject experiences at various levels of psychological organization.

In what sense can this "multidimensional self," as we have conceptualized it, be characterized as supraordinate? Should we picture it as supraordinate to a mental apparatus, as Kohut (1977) suggested? Such a suggestion, in our view, represents another return of mechanistic thinking. The concept of the self and the concept of a drive-discharge apparatus exist on entirely different theoretical planes (Stolorow, 1983), with only the former being accessible to empathy and introspection. From an empathic-introspective perspective, the metapsychological problem of the supraordinance of the self becomes transformed into a set of clinically crucial empirical questions concerning the degree to which a firmly demarcated sense of self predominates in the organization of a person's subjective experiences.

**SELF-FRAGMENTATION AND DISINTEGRATION PRODUCTS**

From an empathic-introspective vantage point, the term *fragmentation* can only refer to disturbances in various structural properties of a person's self-experience—for example, disruptions in the sense of self-coherence, self-continuity, or self-esteem (Stolorow and Lachmann, 1980). With this in mind, let us consider Kohut's (1977) proposition that isolated drive manifestations are "disintegration products" produced by a breakup of the cohesive self in the context of selfobject failure. As with the concept of the bipolar self, there are several difficulties with this formulation. First, as Kohut (1959) himself persuasively demonstrated, drives, as biological forces inaccessible to empathy and introspection, have no place at all in psychoanalytic theory, least of all in self psychology. We believe that what Kohut referred to as isolated drives are best conceptualized as reactive *affect* states, such as erotic lust and narcissistic rage (Jones, 1985; Stolorow, 1986a).

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4It is for this reason that a self theory and a mental-apparatus theory could never, contrary to Kohut's (1977) proposal, exist in a complementary relationship to one another.
Second and more important, the idea of a disintegration product has a mechanistic quality that obscures the meanings and purposes of these reactive states for the experiencing person in specific intersubjective contexts. As Kohut (1971) and others (Goldberg, 1975; Stolorow and Lachmann, 1980) have shown, lustful feelings and stirrings can serve the purpose of self-restoration through the search for an eroticized replacement for a missing or unsteady self-object experience. Similarly, rage and vengefulness in the wake of injuries can serve the purpose of revitalizing a crumbling but urgently needed sense of power and impactfulness (Kohut, 1972; Stolorow, 1984a). In such instances, sexual and aggressive enactments serve to concretize and thereby solidify endangered or fragmenting structures of experience (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984, ch. 4).

In neglecting such meanings and purposes, the concept of disintegration products blurs the important clinical distinction between reactive sexualized and aggressivized transference configurations, on the one hand, and primary sexual and "aggressive" transferences, on the other. The former refers to situations, as described above, in which erotic or hostile feelings pervade the transference in consequence of anticipated or experienced injuries or self-object failures. The latter, by contrast, describes situations in which the patient is attempting, however fearfully and conflictually, to present newly emerging sexual or assertive/competitive aspects of the self to the analyst in the hope that these will be recognized as developmental achievements and affirmed (Stolorow and Lachmann, 1980). Clearly, this distinction holds critical implications for the framing of transference interpretations.

**OPTIMAL Frustration AND Transmuting Internalization**

Throughout his major theoretical writings, Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) conceptualized the formation of psychological structure, both in early development and in psychoanalytic treatment, as a process whereby "optimal frustration" leads to "transmuting internalization." The most detailed account of this process as it was believed to occur in the working through of self-object transferences appeared in *The Analysis of the Self* (1971). There it was formulated within the mechanistic assumptions of classical drive theory: Repeated interpretation of the patient's experiences of optimal frustration by the narcissistically invested self-object was thought to result in a process of fractionalized withdrawal of narcissistic cathexes from the object and a concomitant redeployment of these cathexes in the gradual formation of particles of psychic structure, which then exercise the functions that heretofore had been performed by the object. In *The Restoration of the Self* (1977) Kohut, with a few notable exceptions, dispensed with such mechanistic constructions and framed his formulations in terms of a developmental phenomenology of self-experience. However, the implications of this theoretical shift for reconceptualizing the process of psychological structure formation were never worked out.

Careful study of Kohut's descriptions of transmuting internalization indicates that the concept combines and amalgamates two developmental processes which, as we suggested earlier in discussing the bipolar self, should be more sharply distinguished. One process involves the patient's gradual acquisition of functional capacities (such as self-soothing, self-comforting, and self-empathy) that he had formerly relied upon the self-object tie to the analyst to provide. In referring to the patient's acquisition of these capacities as "internalizations," Kohut adopted Hartmann's (1939) conception of internalization as a process through which autonomous self-regulation replaces regulation by the environment. Schaefer (1976) has demonstrated persuasively that to call this process "internalization" introduces misleading physicalistic and spatial reifications and that the development of self-regulatory capacities may be more adequately conceptualized in nonspatial terms. This developmental process, however, may be experienced as a reorganization of intersubjective space, whereby the analyst's self-object functions become enduring features of the patient's own self-experience. Here the term *internalization* may be correctly applied.

The second developmental process embedded in Kohut's concept of transmuting internalization pertains to the structuralization of self-experience. Empathic-introspective reflection reveals that such structuralization need not take place solely, or even primarily, through a process of internalization. The analyst's consistent acceptance and empathic understanding of the patient's affective states and needs regularly come to be experienced by the patient as a facilitating medium reinstating developmental processes of self-articulation and self-demonstration that had been aborted and arrested during the formative years (see chapter 4). Thus certain articulations and structuralizations of self-experience are directly promoted in the medium of the analyst's empathy, a process that need not include internalization per se. Furthermore, an understanding of these developmental processes does
not require any assumption about optimal frustrations providing their motivational fuel. The idea of optimal frustration as the basis for structure formation is a remnant of drive theory and its quantitative metaphors, which persisted throughout Kohut's theorizing. It is a direct descendant of Freud's (1923) proposal that "the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct [frustrating] influence of the external world" (p. 25). As a mechanistic, experience-distant concept, the notion of optimal frustration is incompatible with an empathic-introspective psychology of the self (Stolorow, 1983).

The clinical observations that the theory of optimal frustration/transmuting internalization was designed to explain concerned the undeniable therapeutic benefit of analyzing ruptures in selfobject transference bonds. The therapeutic action of such analysis, we believe, lies in the integration of the disruptive affect states that such ruptures produce and in the concomitant mending of the broken selfobject tie. Structure formation, we are contending, occurs primarily when the bond is intact or in the process of becoming restored. The selfobject transference tie is thus seen as an archaic intersubjective context in which the patient's derailed psychological growth is permitted to resume, in the medium of the analyst's understanding. This experience-near explanation, compatible with the empathic-introspective mode, replaces "optimal frustration" with some conception of "optimal empathy" (Stolorow, 1983) or "optimal responsiveness" (Bacal, 1985) and the centrality of affect attunement (see chapter 5).

FALSE DICHOTOMIES

From Kohut's early papers on narcissism (1966, 1968) to his final theoretical statement (1984), human subjective worlds have been pictured as populated by two distinct types of psychological objects—selfobjects, experienced as part of oneself and/or serving to maintain the organization of self, and "true" objects, firmly demarcated from oneself and targets of passionate desire. Such dualities, like all typological systems, lend themselves to the irresistible temptation to substantialize the products of human thought, transforming psychological categories into static, immutable entities—reifications that necessarily obscure the complex, ever-shifting flux of human psychological life. These typological reifications lead inevitably to the encrustation of false dichotomies that, in turn, become sources of endless ideological controversy, as in the current heated debate over the centrality of developmental deficit versus psychic conflict in psychoanalytic theory.

The selfobject-true object dichotomy that pervades Kohut's thought originated historically in the embeddedness of his early ideas in classical drive theory. Narcissistic libido and object-instinctual energies were each thought to follow their own distinct developmental pathways, cathecting their respective targets of investment (Kohut, 1971). However, even after Kohut abandoned both classical metapsychology and the idea that selfobject relations evolve into true object relations, claiming instead that one never outgrows one's need for selfobject ties and that such relatedness undergoes development from archaic to mature modes, the essential dichotomy was still retained, forming the basis for a theoretical complementarity between self psychology and conflict psychology (Kohut, 1977). Moreover, as we pointed out earlier, statements about self-selfobject relationships, selves seeking psychological nourishment from their selfobjects, and selfobjects responding empathically to selves, all entail reifications that transform organizations of subjective experience and psychological functions into palpable entities and existential agents performing actions. Such reifications are readily seized upon by critics who would trivialize Kohut's contributions by reducing them to a prescientific soul psychology or crude interpersonality.

These theoretical pitfalls can be avoided if we use the term selfobject always and only to refer to a class of psychological functions, a dimension of experiencing an object. With the aid of this conceptual clarification, empathic-introspective reflection leads us away from the selfobject-true object dichotomy and its attendant reifications toward a multidimensional view of human experience in general and of experiencing an object in particular (Stolorow, 1986b). Our listening perspective becomes thereby focused on the complex figure-ground relationships among the selfobject and other dimensions of experiencing another person (see chapters 3 and 7). It is in these fluctuating figure-ground relationships that the experiential meaning of Kohut's principle of
complementarity between self psychology and conflict psychology can be found (Solorow, 1985). From this perspective, selfobject failure and psychic conflict are seen not as dichotomous but as dimensions of experience that are indissolubly interrelated. Indeed, it can be shown that the formation of inner conflict, whether in early development or in the psychoanalytic situation, always takes place in specific intersubjective contexts of selfobject failure (see chapter 6).

We are suggesting that a multiplicity of such dimensions coexist in any complex object relationship, with certain meanings and functions occupying the experiential foreground and others occupying the background, depending on the subject's motivational priorities at any given moment. Furthermore, the figure-ground relationships among these multiple dimensions of experience may significantly shift, corresponding to shifts in the subject's psychological organization and motivational hierarchy, often in response to alterations or disturbances in the tie to the object. For example, the conflictual dimension invariably comes to the fore in reaction to anticipated or experienced selfobject failure.

These considerations hold critical implications for the understanding and analysis of analytic transferences. In certain transference configurations—for example, those elucidated by Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984)—the selfobject dimension is clearly in the foreground, because the restoration or maintenance of self-experience is the paramount psychological purpose motivating the patient's specific tie to the analyst. In other transference configurations, the selfobject dimension operates silently in the background, enabling the patient to confront frightening feelings and painful dilemmas.

In still other situations, the analyst is perceived as significantly failing to provide requisite selfobject functions. Here the analyst is not experienced as a selfobject, but as a source of painful and conflictual affect states, in turn engendering resistance. When, in such instances, the patient is resisting the emergence of central selfobject needs, it makes no theoretical sense to speak of the analytic relationship as a self-selfobject unit, because the selfobject dimension of the transference has become temporarily obliterated or obstructed by what the patient has perceived as actual or impending selfobject failure from the side of the analyst, and the analysis must focus on the patient's fears of a transference repetition of traumatically damaging childhood experiences (Kohut, 1971; Ornstein, 1974). When such fears or disturbances are sufficiently analyzed and the broken bond to the analyst is thereby mended, then the selfobject dimension of the tie becomes restored, either to its position in the foreground or to the silent background of the transference. The analyst's comprehension of these shifting figure-ground relationships among the selfobject and other dimensions of experience, as they oscillate between the foreground and background of the transference, should determine the content and timing of transference interpretations (see chapter 3). Indeed, it is here, in the analysis of transference, that the unavering application of the empathic-introspective stance produces the greatest yields in both maximizing our therapeutic effectiveness and advancing our psychoanalytic theories. This, we believe, was Kohut's greatest contribution.

CONCLUSION

We have applied a fundamental tenet of self psychology—that psychoanalysis should be defined and delimited by the empathic-introspective mode of inquiry—to a critical examination of self psychological theory. Our aim has been a dual one: to clarify the assumptions underlying our own approach, and to highlight, broaden, and refine self psychology's essential contributions to psychoanalysis. We have hoped to bring this evolving framework one step closer to actualizing Kohut's goal of reframing psychoanalysis as an empathic-introspective depth psychology of human subjectivity, capable of encompassing the full richness and diversity of experience that crystalizes in the microcosm of the psychoanalytic dialogue.

4It is for this reason that we employ the more inclusive concept of an intersubjective field, because it is broad enough to encompass both the selfobject and the conflictual/resistive/repetitive dimensions of the therapeutic system (see chapter 7).