Self Psychology Theory

Instructors: Gordon Berger, Ph.D. and Daniel Goldin, M.F.T., Psy.D.
Time: 8:30-11:00 AM
Total Instructional Hours: 30

Course Description

Prior to our interest in contemporary psychoanalysis, many of us in the mental health field were trained with a general, often un-articulated, theoretical orientation towards classical psychoanalytic theory and one of its derivatives, ego psychology. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, there were two major disruptions to this theoretical hegemony in the United States, Self Psychology and the expanding influence of Relational theories. When Kohut died in 1981, his ideas about a psychology of the self were still regarded as heretical by much of the American psychoanalytic establishment. The significance of his theories about the psychology of the self lay in the new paradigms they presented for the clinician’s work. This core course is devoted to an examination of the writings of Heinz Kohut, the founder of self psychology, and those who have been inspired by Kohut’s theories to carry them forward in a wide variety of directions since his death.

Course Objectives

Goal for the course

The goal of the course is twofold; to place Self Psychology in its historical context relative to psychoanalysis as a whole, and to develop an understanding of Self Psychological concepts, both original and newly developing. The first two Kohut articles, “Introspection, Empathy and Psychoanalysis—An Examination of the Relationship between Mode of Observation and Theory” (1959) and “Forms and Transformations of Narcissism” (1966), are seminal (and frankly, harder to understand than later presentations of Kohut’s ideas – don’t worry about this), but are equally of interest as reflections of the agony Kohut felt instigating what would become a serious theoretical break with ego psychology and the psychoanalytic establishment. Kohut’s reluctance to surrender the language and conceptualizations of classical analysis, and his place in the elite leadership of American psychoanalysis, is reflected in his cautious, even tortured, efforts to pour the new wine of self psychology into the old bottles of classical theory. This reluctance helps account for the great difficulty in understanding the radical message he was communicating in his writings prior to the 1970s (although the Kohut [1968] article is a bit easier). The dual contexts furnished by Kohut’s personal and professional lives and his theories are inextricably linked, and understanding something of the former will help us to understand more of the latter. So, our first weekend (9/24~25) will look both at Kohut the man and Kohut, the author of the theories of self psychology. We start with Geoffrey Cocks’ introduction to Kohut’s correspondence. Then, before plunging into early Kohut density, it’s helpful to begin with the Geist (2009) introduction to Self Psychology theory. The Curtis article gives a sense of the theoretical context in which Self Psychology emerged, defended itself, and grew. The final one-third of the course addresses certain aspects of the development of self psychology since Kohut’s death in 1981. Kohut’s work attracted the attention of many bright and creative psychoanalysts who were thereafter regarded as self psychologists, but during the 1980s and early 1990s, many of them began building on his work to move in directions of their own. In some instances, they continued to regard themselves as adherents to Kohut’s ideas; in other instances, they came to distinguish their work from Kohut’s, even while acknowledging his impact on the formation and re-formulation of their identities. In following the world of post-Kohut Self Psychology for the final
two weekends, we will draw selectively from a pool of authors who include, from ICP, Bacal, Coburn, Shane and Shane, and Stolorow, and from beyond our own local ranks, Doctors, Fosshage, Lichtenberg, Magid, the Ornstein(s), and the Tolpins. While far from being all-inclusive, their work demonstrates the breadth of the living legacy of self psychology at the cutting edge of contemporary psychoanalytic thought, at ICP, in the United States, and abroad.

Objectives for the course

At the conclusion of the course students will be able to:

1. Describe four foundational Self Psychology concepts and four more recent concepts and compare them to concepts from ego psychology and other theories.
2. Explain the personal and cultural context within which Self Psychology theory developed.
3. Explain the significance of the paradigm shift for theory development and clinical practice.
4. Discuss and critique specific methods Kohut recommended regarding assessment, listening stance, interpretation, the analyst’s attitude, how to train to become a psychoanalyst, framework and boundaries, dream interpretation, transference and resistance.
5. Explain Kohut’s theory of personality development.
6. Explain the following concepts: empathic-introspective stance, selfobject, the experience-near perspective.
7. Apply principles of Self Psychology to understanding a clinical case.
8. Utilize Kohut’s theory of narcissism in clinical work.
9. Critique what aspects of Self Psychology theory are relevant or useful to you today, and compare and contrast with other models with which you are familiar.

SCHEDULE

You may wish to use some pre-Semester time getting started on The Restoration of the Self. (Since we will be reading both The Restoration of the Self and How Does Analysis Cure? in their entirety, you may wish to purchase one or both of them ahead of time.)

Please note that you have regular assigned readings that we will be discussing when classes begin on September 16.

Readings for 9/16~17/2016 Contexts and Texts

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I(A) Contexts


I(B) Texts


Our second (10/28~10/29) and third (12/9~12/10) weekends will focus on a discussion of Kohut’s work between 1972 and 1979, most prominently marked by the publication of The Restoration of the Self in 1977. The goal in this section is to trace specifically how Kohut’s thinking matured into his break with classical ego psychology, and for students to begin to apply these concepts to understands personality development and transference from Kohut’s perspective.

II(A)(B) Readings for the second weekend: (10/28~10/29)

Optional: Heinz Kohut (1971), The Analysis of the Self. This book is difficult to navigate, and is therefore not assigned. The two of us plan to discuss the book’s contents in some detail, so that you won’t need to read it for this course unless you wish to. Kohut (1972) below is in some ways an abridged version.


III(A)(B) Readings for the third weekend (12/9~12/10):
The goal for this weekend is to refine students’ ability to conceptualize transference and the treatment process from a Kohutian perspective.


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IV(A)(B) Reading for the fourth weekend (1/27~1/28/2018):


This book demonstrates Kohut’s later thinking, in which his ideas about empathy expand beyond data-gathering, to an appreciation of the potential healing power of empathy itself. The goal of this class to analyze and critique this foundational idea.

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V(A)(B) Readings for the fifth weekend (3/24~25):

The final one-third of the course addresses certain aspects of the development of self psychology since Kohut’s death in 1981. Kohut’s work attracted the attention of many bright and creative psychoanalysts who were thereafter regarded as self psychologists, but during the 1980s and early 1990s, many of them began building on his work to move in directions of their own. In some instances, they continued to regard themselves as adherents to Kohut’s ideas; in other instances, they came to distinguish their work from Kohut’s, even while acknowledging his impact on the formation and re-formulation of their identities. In following the world of post-Kohut self psychology for the final two weekends, we will draw selectively from a pool of authors who include, from ICP, Bacal, Coburn, Shane and Shane, and Stolorow, and from beyond our own local ranks, Doctors, Fosshage, Lichtenberg, the Ornstein(s), and the Tolpins. While far from being all-inclusive, their work demonstrates the breadth of the living legacy of self psychology at the cutting edge of contemporary psychoanalytic thought, at ICP, in the United States, and abroad. The goal is to analyze and explain how current Self Psychology concepts have been incorporated into other contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives.

V(A) Overviews of post-Kohutian Self Psychology


V(B) Selected “Must Read” Contributions to Self Psychology


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Heinz Kohut (1984), How Does Analysis Cure?, University of Chicago Press, ALL.

VI(A)(B) Readings for the sixth weekend (5/5~5/6): (see description for weekend 5)

VI(A) Important New Currents in 21st Century Psychoanalysis


VI(B) More Important New Currents in 21st Century Psychoanalysis: Changing Views on Self Psychology as a Two-Person Theory
