

2221 Theory & Practice 1: Lecture 7 HEINZ KOHUT (1913-1981)

SELF PSYCHOLOGY

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Introduction and personal background



Kohut was born and raised in an upper middle-class, Jewish family in Vienna (Stozier, 2005: n. p.). His father served in WW1 on the eastern front dying in 1937. His mother adored Heinz her only child who was tutored at home initially. He later graduated as a medical doctor in 1938. He was a highly cultured man with strong interests in music and the arts (unlike, say, Jung).

He went into analysis which was terminated by the invasion of Austria by the Nazis in 1938. Kohut felt threatened by this development and left Europe arriving finally in the US in 1940 with \$25 in his pocket (Stozier, 2005: n. p.). He married an Elizabeth Meyers, an analyst herself, in 1948 and they had a son, their only child, one of whose names came from one of Kohut's analysts!

He published an important essay in 1956 in which he 'argued that the essential way of knowing in psychoanalysis was through **empathy**, which he defined as *vicarious introspection*' (Stozier, 2005: n. p., emphases mine). His focus on empathy in therapy

remained with him for the rest of his life¹. This 'new' viewpoint in psychoanalysis was to have far-reaching consequences.

He died of a lymphoma condition which he suffered through the last decade of his life. This condition he kept to himself with only a few of family and friends knowing about it. He was a very private man. Nevertheless, he continued to work right through his illness.

1. Background to self psychology

Freudian psychoanalysis developed with a tripartite division of the psyche as id, ego and superego. Freud's early psychology was an 'id-psychology', the id and its unconscious movements being the centre of his concerns.

However, in time, others began to put more emphasis upon the **ego**: Anna Freud for one but more notably Erik Erikson² and a number of others. Anna Freud examined the defensive actions of the ego but others also hypothesised concerning its 'motivational and adaptive functions' (Browning, 1987: 207). One of these writers, Heinz Hartmann went further and proposed that a fourth agency, the **self**, existed in addition to the id, ego, and superego. However, Hartmann did not develop this idea. Nevertheless, Kohut gave credit to Hartmann's pioneering work as the stimulus to Kohut's formulation of a self psychology. (See diagram below for a schematic presentation of these three versions of the psyche.) Kohut went further than Hartmann in hypothesising the existence of the self but in also contending that the id, ego and superego were parts of that self. (See Figure 1.)

2. Kohut's view of the person (his anthropology)

Kohut understood the self from an empathic standpoint as 'our sense of being an independent center of initiative and perception' (cited in Suesske, 2004: n. p.). We need to bear in mind that Kohut (along with Jung) believed that the self could not be defined or properly described (Corbett, 1989: n. p.). According to Boyd (2000) the self in Kohut is the 'whole person or, especially, the inner or subjective person' (p. 223) which is 'accessible through empathic attunement and listening' (p. 223).

¹Carl Rogers, likewise, made empathy central to his work as a therapist. This convergence occurred because both shared an allegiance to phenomenology which implied that we can only know others by 'walking in their shoes'. We cannot know them by treating them like scientific specimens or as objects.

²Erikson is well known for his 8 stage psychosocial theory of human development. Both Corey and Hurding have relevant pages on Erikson's important work.

Kohut believed that what brought people into psychoanalysis was one of two broad problems: first, those associated with 'drive frustration' (as in Freud); and second, and more importantly, empty depression, a pervasive sense of meaninglessness due to 'a lack of self-cohesion' (Jensma, 1993: 290). He believed that analysis had to aim to bring about a greater cohesiveness of the self in patients; this belief stemmed from his view that humanity's greatest fear was fragmentation (not castration, as in Freud³), the feeling that one is falling apart. Human selves move along a path of inner experience in life which can be likened to the path of a yo-yo (Boyd 2000: 223). At the low point of the yo-yo the self is 'depleted, empty, fragmented, and feels dead' (p. 223) whereas, at the high point, the self is 'enhanced, enlivened, cohesive, full of vitality, restored and replenished' (p. 223).

The first problem area can be treated with classical psychoanalysis. In this category, humanity is understood as '**GUILTY Man**' (Jensma, 1993: 291, bolding mine). Humanity feels guilty because it has broken the law ('thou shalt not') at some point or not lived up to the ideals in the superego. But, the second area cannot be treated or understood using this model. Kohut termed people in this second category, '**TRAGIC Man**'. Patients in this second category do not experience guilt; they experience despair, a sense of emptiness, a sense of having failed to reach their ideals. This condition particularly afflicts those in middle-age. Kohut can be understood to have formulated a view of the person in which humanness is thought to be dual, both guilty and tragic.

Rowe (2002: n. p.) argues that Kohut fully accepted Freud's understandings and the 'essence of analytic technique' (Kohut cited in Rowe, 2002: n. p.). Hence, Rowe says, Kohut must be understood as an innovator who added on to Freud's work not as someone who repudiated or altered Freud's basic position. Rowe (2002: n. p.) contends that Kohut 'was clear that his discoveries were an extension of analytic understanding rather than a deviation from traditional theory'. In Rowe's opinion, too many (non-Freudian) systems have been tacked onto Kohut's basic theories to obscure or severely distort what Kohut was attempting to do. However, other writers paint a different picture of Kohut as breaking with classical drive theory to such an extent that it ended 'his organizational career and many longstanding relationships' (Simpson, 1994: n. p.). The latter developments do not seem to me, at least, like those of someone who has stayed within

³ Importantly, he also believed that Freudian analysis had been more applicable to Vienna in the 19th century but that now the problems of the 20th century were demanding a different type of therapy.

the classical Freudian boundaries and yet his closest colleagues on the international psychoanalytic scene were Anna Freud and Heinz Hartmann.

Some of this difference may be understood by writers trying to understand Kohut from an American 'positivist'⁴ rather than a European 'phenomenological' outlook. The first says that there are basic facts that we can all know with certainty through the scientific method without recourse to any other fact. The second says that we can never know what reality is 'in itself'; we can only know it as it appears (its phenomena) to us.⁵ Kohut grew up in an atmosphere that simply assumed the second way as a normal assumption. Therefore, his work is bound to be misunderstood if one tries to understand him from the standpoint of the first approach (which is more consistent with Freudianism in general). Both of these philosophies lead to different types of therapy: behaviour therapy is positivistic, whereas humanistic and existential therapy is phenomenological.⁶ For Kohut, 'objective' reality is unreachable (as in Kant). We can only deal with reality as it appears to us. Kohut, for much of his life, was an orthodox analysis. He has been described as 'playing expertly by the rules' (Edmundson, 2001: n. p.). However, he published *The Restoration of the Self* (1971) at the age of 58 (!) which marked a greater divergence from Freudian orthodoxy.

3. Kohut's view of therapy

a) How narcissistic selves are made

In this work, Kohut focuses on the issues of narcissism which Freud had analysed in a 1914 work. The Greek myth of Narcissus told of a young man becoming so entranced with his own image in a pool of water that he died from lack of food and drink. Freud believed that love is essentially self-love and that we only love others because we have an excess of love that would make us ill if we did not direct it towards others! Freud believed that we were narcissists primarily (Edmundson, 2001: n. p.).

Kohut believed that children begin life with 'fantasies about a grandiose self and ideal parents' (Edmundson, 2001). If normal development occurs the grandiose self illusion is transformed into healthy self-esteem and the ideal parents illusion becomes a 'basis for our strongest values' (Edmundson, 2001) (See Figure 2 adapted from unknown source).

⁴ Positivism is the philosophy that there are 'positive' [non-relative] facts that are knowable only by the methods of the physical sciences. Questions of ultimate causes are irrelevant to human knowledge.

⁵ Phenomenology developed from Kant's division of reality into the 'thing in itself' (which is unknowable) and the 'thing as it appears' (phenomena).

⁶ Alfred Adler's therapy was also phenomenological.

But if something goes wrong in childrearing, if the parenting process is badly flawed, the grandiose self remains unchanged at its core so that the person develops a *Narcissistic Personality Disorder*. This disorder is revealed in depressiveness, irritability, edginess, and an anger proneness (Edmundson, 2001). A person with this disorder is constantly in need of affirmation from outside because he believes that he is a superstar, a hero who ought to be treated as such. However, life experience does not fit in with this delusion and so he feels rage either towards himself or towards the world.

Narcissistic persons are centred in them-selves like children. They primarily use others to get what they want. They are often arrogant, condescending, and aloof on the outside but inside they feel fragile, empty and worthless. Boyd (2000: 225) says that Humpty Dumpty is an excellent example of a narcissistic self: fragile, easily shattered self, condescending, aloof and arrogant (to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll). His outside manner defends his inside fragility, his fear of falling apart completely, of disintegrating.

People turn out narcissistic because they were raised by caregivers who lacked the ability to show empathy. Most likely, caregivers were the way they were because they also were denied large supplies of empathy. Without empathy, human selves cannot form properly according to Kohut. Such persons are like plants trying to grow without oxygen. They grow up physically but the self is vulnerable to fracturing and disintegrating. The self is fragile and damaged because it did not develop resilience and strength from earliest times.

Those with damaged selves may achieve all sorts of things and through these have various props to get the self somehow together. Famous people will use the fame and attention they get to hold themselves together. But, a day of reckoning will overtake them eventually. They are cracked bridges waiting for the right conditions that will precipitate a collapse and are always susceptible to disintegration.

Fortunately, parents do not need to be perfect! In fact, flawed empathy promotes normal growth, in that, in small doses, the child learns to do for itself what the parents fail to fully do. [This belief has therapeutic implications. See under next section.]

b) Selfobject experience

Selfobject is a word that Kohut coined (made up). Many think it was a bad choice because it seems to put an emphasis on ‘internal objects’ like the object relations theories.⁷ However, selfobject does not seek to emphasise the ‘internal object’ at all.

A selfobject is something or someone who provides something psychological for a person that that person could not provide for himself. The emphasis is not on that something or someone itself but the **experience** it provides to enhance, build up and restore self to a vital state of aliveness. Selfobject ‘is something that gets inside us and resonates with the intrinsic music of ourselves’ (Boyd, 2000: 224). The experience moves the self from low point of the yo-yo path to a higher point, from the negative end of the continuum to the positive end.

So, persons acting in a certain way (e.g., an empathic way) can be selfobjects for me. So also can art, music and culture be selfobjects. So also, can God. In fact, God promises to be a selfobject (using Kohut’s language, though he rarely spoke about God) by promising never to leave or forsake us (Heb 13: 5).

In therapy, selfobject experience is primarily empathy experiences. Empathy means walking in the shoes of another person, to feel and think yourself into the inner life of the other person. When we feel heard and understood we provide others with the means to become more cohesive and less fragmented according to Kohut. Based on this understanding, good counselling is like good parenting. The best test of whether good parenting or good therapy is occurring is whether the other feels understood.

(i) narcissists in therapy

If a person who feels she is falling apart comes into therapy, she will present a narcissistic and condescending attitude to the therapist to protect the damaged self. However, the therapist reminds herself that this outward appearance hides a person who feels empty inside and that this arrogantly-appearing person is really suffering. Therapist does not take offence but listens carefully to all the patient’s complaints and opinions. The therapist enters into the CT’s suffering. This entering into the CT’s experience is the basis for a cure. Therapist becomes a selfobject experience which the CT is able to use to enhance and mend the self. The CT knows that at least one person listens to me!

⁷ Melanie Klein, W. R. D. Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip, etc.

Even if bad experiences occur with the CR such as a cancellation of an appointment, for example, these can become growth experiences if the CR remembers the curative power of empathy and continues to be a selfobject for the CT.

ii) rage

The blowups of rage (e.g., road rage) are understood as reactions to blows delivered by ordinary life happenings to that immature, narcissistic illusion about who or what we are. Therapy can analyse this rage by seeking to find what the particular situations are that elicit rage that is out of proportion to what occurred. Hopefully, by such analysis, growth and transformation would be promoted in his view of himself.

Therapy requires empathy. But, therapists will not always be empathetic in ways that the client wants. This failure is not anti-therapeutic! On the contrary, it can enable the CT to grow beyond his present vulnerable state. CT may also experience rage towards therapist in the therapeutic relationship (transference) which can then be analysed to engender change. Therapist needs to be alert for the signs of rage or anger which can be manifested as counsellee withdrawing or with-holding. The first two sessions after CR takes a holiday, will often reveal anger and even rage about the CR having abandoned the CT.

4. Evaluation

a) Too much concentration on the self?

One possible criticism of self-psychology may be that it concentrates too much on the self and may be in danger of leading to self-centredness. Didn't Jesus say that we have to deny self in order to rightly follow him?

However, (Boyd, 2000)⁸ answers this objection by saying that if you had a broken bone in your foot the doctor would focus on your foot. The medico would be irresponsible not to focus on your foot. A Christian doctor would do likewise and such a focus would still be an expression of Christian values. Therefore, if the problem is with the self, therapy should properly focus on the self. Such a focus can still be a proper focus for a Christian and does not necessarily lead to narcissism (an undue concentration upon the self). In fact, if Kohut is correct, such a focus should gradually transform the infantile narcissism.

⁸Boyd also argues that the Psalms in particular use language about the experience of the soul that is highly suggestive of the disintegration of the self referred to by Kohut. For example, Ps 88: 3-8; 143: 3-7; 55: 4-5 give graphic accounts of death-like experiences which are not primarily to do with actual death but with experiences of the living self. The Psalms also record passages where God is said to strengthen and restore the soul that are reminiscent of the way that Kohut talks about the growth of the self (Ps 138: 3; 107: 5-6; 139 [divine empathy]; 23: 1-3; 33: 18-19). See Boyd's article for many more references.

b) The self

Corbett (1989: n. p.) said that Kohut believed that the self could not be defined or properly described. As Christians, we should take this statement seriously because being *imago dei*, image of God, may mean humanness is unknowable to itself. However, knowing self is a question that is of profound importance. John Calvin understands knowledge of self and of God to be 'mutually connected'. Herman Dooyeweerd believed that without the one you cannot have the other.

c) Knowing the self

Kohut's claim to know the other only through empathy rests on a faith that we can only know phenomena, only know things as they appear (phenomena=appearances) to us. Hence, when we are counselling, we cannot assume that we see what the other sees because each of us sees differently according to the phenomenological position. Kohut assumed this understanding because of his European and therefore Kantian background.

However, Kant's position is based on giving philosophical knowledge precedent over 'naïve' experience. When that is done, we inherit all the problems of the subject-object problem which only arises in philosophic discourse.

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CLASSICAL FREUDIAN EGO PSYCHOLOGY SELF PSYCHOLOGY

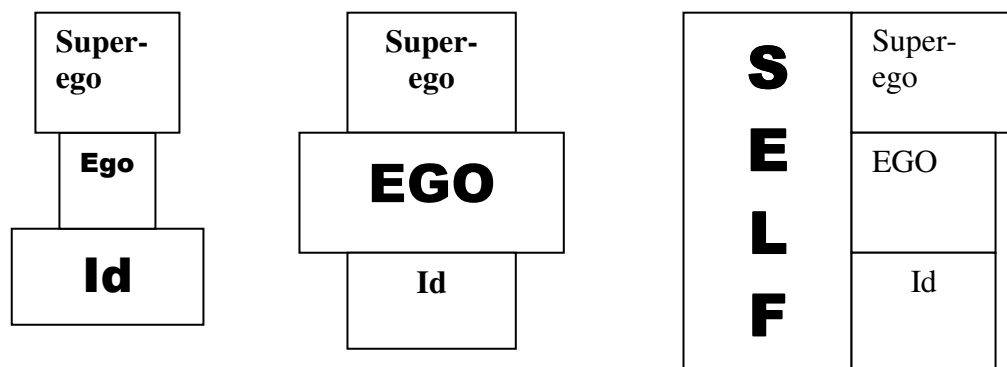


Figure 1. Schematic drawings of personality outlines for Freudian, Ego and Self psychologies

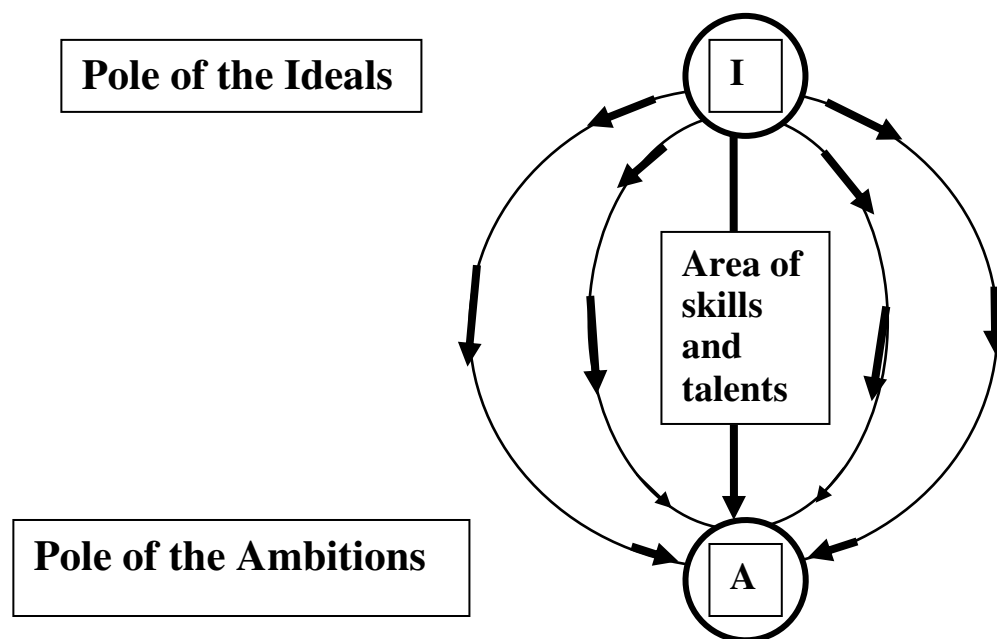


Figure 2. Kohut's personality outline