



Heinz Kohut 1: Self-Psychology Theory

Freudian Revisionists

Heinz Kohut was one of the Freudian revisionists – that is, those who, having been attracted to and initially having accepted the ideas of Sigmund Freud, later developed their own version of psychoanalysis.

The most well-known Freudian revisionists were perhaps Alfred Adler and Carl Jung, but there were also various others, who fall into three key categories (Seligman, 2006: 113):

- ego psychologists – e.g. Karen Horney and Anna Freud
- object relations theorists – e.g. Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby
- self psychologists.

Heinz Kohut was the key Freudian revisionist in the third group.

Biography

Kohut was an only child, and was born in Austria in 1913. Like most psychoanalysts at that time, he was a medical doctor. He was married to a social worker. While a diligent worker who produced a large body of work, he was also known to be good at setting healthy boundaries and living in the moment. He died in 1981.

The Self

In self psychology, the self is seen as the centre of each person's psychological universe. Kohut saw the self as evolving from childhood attachment to parents. Because children are naturally dependent on others to meet their needs, they have at that time 'selfobjects' (other people upon whom they rely for support, such as parents).

If raised in an appropriate environment, the child – as they become an adult – has a healthy sense of self, and is able to meet their own needs, through internalising their self-objects. For example, the soothing they once received from a caring parent is internalised into an ability to self-soothe.

Kohut termed this developmental 'transmuting internalisation'. It is similar to Bowlby's ideas about 'the internalization of positive interactions with significant others and the formation of a sense of attachment security' (Banai et al. 2005: 228).

Those who have not had this good fortune, meanwhile, may continue in adulthood to rely on other people (i.e. on selfobjects) to get their needs met.

Transference

Transference also plays an important role in self psychology. As GoodTherapy (2016) writes: 'In psychoanalysis, transference is understood as the process in which a person in treatment redirects feelings and desires from childhood to a new object (usually the analyst).'

Kohut asserted that there are three types of transference that reflect unmet selfobject needs:

- ***Mirroring transference*** is where the person uses others as a mirror to reflect to them a sense of self-worth and value. In other words, the person depends on receiving positive feedback from others to boost how they see themselves. This is similar to the person-centred concept of having an external locus of evaluation.
- ***Idealising transference*** is where the person needs others to help them feel calm; this relates to the example given above of being unable to self-soothe, instead relying on others for comfort.

- ***Twinship or alter-ego transference*** is where the person feels a strong need to find similarities between themselves and other people, struggling with the idea of individual difference. This is a remnant from the normal developmental stage where young children want to be like their parents.

Narcissism

Kohut saw narcissism as a continuum, ranging from a healthy form of this (which makes the person confident) to pathological narcissism (which leads the person to see themselves as highly important and entitled, and to view others as objects to be used in their own needs gratification). Kohut believed that pathological narcissism forms part of a wide range of mental-health conditions, including depression and anxiety.

Again, Kohut's view of narcissism relates to childhood development. While young children frequently believe themselves and/or their parents to have some kind of superpowers, most people – as they grow into adults – realise this is not so, and adjust to a more accurate perception of reality. They are more likely to achieve this if they have received a good level of empathy from their parents, so supporting the process of transmuting internalisation.

References

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