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More Light for a Darker Age: Contextualist Sensibilities in Child and Adolescent Treatment¹

William J. Coburn, Ph.D. and Psy.D.

This article introduces several articles (in this current issue) centered on contemporary, psychoanalytically informed clinical treatments of children and adolescents. In doing so, it revisits the concept of expansionism in psychoanalytic self psychology and underscores a new type of “expansionism”: The application of contemporary theories to non-psychoanalytic clinical milieus, particularly those pertaining to contexts of working with children and adolescents.

Introduction

Truly wonderful the mind of a child is.

[Yoda, *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, George Lucas and Jonathan Hale, 2002].

Frequently, new theory and its clinical applications emerge from controversy, and psychoanalytic self psychology has seen plenty of that, much to our field's credit and advantage. Controversy breeds novelty. **Stolorow (1995)** once delineated various aspects of theoretical controversy through distinguishing between the “loyalists” and the “expansionists”—between those who more or less adhered to the basic principles

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of self psychology, as elaborated by Heinz Kohut, and those who, perhaps less intimately and personally familiar with Kohut, found greater conceptual and clinical utility in the inclusion of additional paradigms. Thus, for Stolorow, and for many others (Bacal, M. Shane, E. Shane, Gales, Lachmann, Beebe, Basch, Lichtenberg, Fosshage, and Sucharov, to name a few), expansionism included (re)interpretations of Kohut's psychology of the self and, perhaps to an even greater extent, the integration of other perspectives into the self psychological canon.

More recently, we have witnessed the continuing expansion of psychoanalytic self psychology through a plethora of additional theoretical lenses, not the least of which is an increasing appreciation for and emphasis on our inextricable context embeddedness in dynamic, complex systems. These days, we speak of self *and* systems in the same breath, almost as if they had never been artificially disentangled and segregated from one another in the first place. There is no self apart from its system.

Our radical paradigm shifts of the last 25 years indeed have expanded theory in salutary directions. In addition, a different, perhaps less publicized, type of expansionism continues to emerge as well—that is, one that may not necessarily “expand” or reinterpret accepted theory, but one that instead aims to apply our current theories to non-psychoanalytic clinical milieus (in contrast to the many clinical contexts that remain under sway of the scientism of cognitive-behavioral dogma, the pop psychology of self-help groups, the dictates and politics of mental health administrations, and the ever-ubiquitous [and ironically and strangely termed] arena of “managed care.”) Authors are increasingly considering psychoanalytic self psychology, intersubjective systems theory, relational self psychology, psychoanalytic complexity, and many other perspectives in their work in community mental health clinics and other larger, government-administered mental health programs. Some authors have even expanded the concept of listening perspectives (**Fosshage, 2003**) to include a child-centered listening perspective (**Paris, 2011**), and this is good for our kids.

In that light, the “oppositional-defiant” child or adolescent, for example, need not—should not—any longer be perceived simply as an antisocial, amoral, malfunctioning, and recalcitrant being in need of constraints, discipline, and punishment. It behooves us to question, “oppositional” and “defiant” toward what and whom? Even if sometimes violent, the wayward adolescent's behavioral expressiveness serves the same functions as do the more typically verbal communications of the presumably healthy adult: embody affect, generate and communicate emotional meaning, seek human

connections. This is obvious when non-accommodative kids are considered through the lens of contemporary psychoanalytic theory.

In the two articles and the two Brief Communications that follow, Powell, Manuel, Smaller, and Ryan separately take up a kind of expansionism that well deserves our attention. Powell considers and applies self psychology and intersubjective systems theory in her work with a young boy, in which context we are challenged to determine who is the more recalcitrant: her young patient or the mental health machinery that dictates the behavior of therapists. Similarly, Manuel finds strong utility in applying these perspectives in his work with African American male adolescents in a group therapy setting. Smaller, in his Brief Communication, invites us into his rich autobiographical experiences of off-the-couch psychoanalysis with kids, underscoring that “[b]eing a psychoanalyst in the year 2010 is making our ideas and our science accessible, not only to patients in our offices, but to a world in great need of what we know and how we think” (p. 126). Ryan, in his Brief Communication, elaborates a culture of play and spontaneity in child art therapy that is as refreshing as it is insightful. Each author is to be commended for their spirit of adventure, courage, and expansionism in thinking contextually; for their stepping outside the administrative, political norms of the mental health industry; and for their listening deeply and creatively to the needs, affects, and meaning-making processes embodied by children and adolescents.

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