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Relationalizing Self Psychology: Commentary on Magid, Fosshage and Shane's The Emerging Paradigm of Relational Self Psychology: An Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This commentary aims at reflecting upon and contextualizing the emergence of relational self psychology and considers how it continues to transform our theoretical and clinical landscapes. It underscores, first, the phenomena of self organization and emergence (of new perspectives and sensibilities) witnessed in our field in general, given that the arena of psychoanalytic self psychology has always been a complex system in its own right. It then addresses the concept of the self, which is rendered increasingly ephemeral, fluid, dynamic, and non-entity-like. And finally, it explores the relationalizing of self psychology, including not only accepting the personhood of the analyst and the bidirectionality of the two analytic participants, but relying upon them as central to therapeutic action.

KEYWORDS

Relational; self psychology; intersubjectivity; complexity; selfhood

If psychoanalysis is to remain the leading force in man's attempt to understand himself, and indeed if it wants to stay alive, it must respond with new insights when it is confronted with new data and thus with new tasks.

–Heinz Kohut (1977, p. 268)

To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.

–Henri Bergson (1911, p. 7)

There is no creation without tradition; the “new” is an inflection on a preceding form; novelty is always a variation on the past.

–Carlos Fuentes (1988, p. 27)

We do not really know why freedom comes to us when it does.

–Donnel Stern (2004, p. 232).

Self psychology is not as self-centered as it used to be. Indeed, the tour de force by Magid, Fosshage, and Shane (2021), on which I've been asked to comment, reflects our expanding breadth of psychoanalytic sensibilities, many with contrasting languages but all sharing the welcome relational/contextualist underpinnings from which we draw much clinical advantage. As the authors state, such underpinnings emerged from a burgeoning “recognition of the bi-directionality of the analytic relationship and, alongside the patient's subjectivity, the centrality of the analyst's subjectivity, which, taken together, transformed self psychology from a one-person to a fully two-person psychology” (p. 2). And this transformation now extends into realms of interconnected complex relational systems, not dyads alone. The authors write that “[r]elational self psychology” is our attempt to encompass the significant changes in perspective that have emerged since Kohut's death with a full appreciation of his core insights that continue to guide us into the future” (p. 4). That's a lot of encompassing to manage, for any of us.

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This commentary is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Lichtenberg, who inspired me.

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Set in four sections, their necessarily prodigious article encompasses a cornucopia of relational/contextualist lenses—some research based, some theoretical, some phenomenological, and some that just make good sense. Broadly, my commentary aims at reflecting upon and contextualizing the emergence of these lenses and considers how they continue to transform our theoretical and clinical landscapes. In particular, it underscores a few of the many themes proffered by these authors: first, the phenomena of self organization and emergence (of new perspectives and sensibilities) witnessed in our field in general, given that the arena of psychoanalytic self psychology has always been a complex system in its own right and, as with any complex system, remains always subject to the adaptive interactions of its component parts and the ebb and flow of concomitant transformations; second, the concept of the self, which is rendered increasingly ephemeral, fluid, dynamic, and non-entity-like; and third, the relationalizing of self psychology, including not only accepting the personhood of the analyst and the bidirectionality of the two analytic participants, but relying upon them as central to therapeutic action.

Self organization and emergence

The rise and evolution of relational self psychology is a fascinating phenomenon in and of itself, in that its surfacing illustrates tenets of one of its principal influences—the concepts of self organization and emergence, cornerstones of nonlinear dynamic systems theory, or complexity theory. Elsewhere I (2000) had commented that “[p]sychoanalysts are beginning to grasp more clearly that ‘new data’ [of which Kohut spoke] unfold in surprising, sometimes unusual, and creative ways—in nonlinear ways—and this applies to the continually evolving [psychoanalytic] field as a system in its own right. This also applies to how psychoanalysts conceptualize theory and think about the medium in which they work—the clinical relationship and the lived experiences it comprises” (p. 751). Here I had argued that our field, including the varying perspectives it encompasses, is a complex system in its own right, with all the familiar features associated with complexity and complex systems. Emergence (the result of the self organizing activity of the system’s components) is one such characteristic, in which novel and unique products and properties of a complex system are the result of seemingly individual, separate agents bumping into each other, thereby altering their nature and comportment. What is novel and unique, here, is an official inculcation and blossoming of a welcome relationality (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Mitchell, 1993, 1997, 2000) and phenomenological contextualism (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984; Stolorow & Atwood, 1979, 1992, 2018) within the self psychology field. I had added, “[w]hen one or more elements perturb the apparent stability of the system’s relative equilibrium, new attractor states emerge. These are often characterized by innovative thinking, creativity, emergent experience, ingenuity, and epiphany. The potential freedom of the component parts to relate to one another, often through dialectical tensions, and to reconfigure themselves in relation to one another in creative and novel ways, is responsible for the system’s developing its unique and unpredictable character” (2000, p. 759).

The self psychology community has always enjoyed competing voices and disparate attitudes, including an admixture of lively debate and the occasional heated argument. Folks have strong feelings about their theories. Shane and Shane (1993) seminal article, “Self-psychology After Kohut: One Theory or Many,” reflects the post-1981 evolution of Kohutian thought through 1993, which punctuated, among other themes, two essential competing perspectives: one that privileged direct experience in grasping the emotional world of the patient, and the other that eagerly welcomed input from other disciplines and other sources of information, such as infant research, neurobiology, and other secondhand accounts of how humans presumably relate and operate. These discrepant points of view emerged from within the early Kohut circle: Not everyone agreed with Kohut’s insistence on theoretical homogeneity (Shane, 2021, personal communication; Strozier, 2001; see also Basch, 1981).¹ My own subsequent article, from 2006, attempted to reflect upon our then more current status, which highlighted our rapidly changing field

¹Shane and Shane (1993) concluded at the time: “As for the question we raise—one self psychology or many?—it is clear that the authors we have discussed are original contributors, dedicated to their own unique perspectives, less interested in sounding like one another, or Kohut, than in clearly defining and putting forth their own views. As the situation stands today, we would have to conclude that there are many self psychologies, not just one, reflecting not only the state of psychoanalysis in general, but also the vigor and ferment that constitutes health in any growing and changing science” (p. 795). See also Strozier (2001) for a thorough explication of the early Kohut circle’s interpersonal dynamics, and also Stolorow (1995) vis-à-vis the distinction between the “loyalists” and the “expansionists.”

When you develop a paradigm that actually turns out to have some meat on its bones (i.e., one that isn't wrong or unimportant),² people, perhaps reflecting the narcissism Kohut wrote about decades ago, will be glad to tell you that they knew it all along. But what people have known all along for more than 45 years now continues to expand in ways that, well, we just couldn't have known all along. This is attributable in part to the relatively recent mushrooming and cross-pollination of essentially disparate disciplines ranging from a variety of psychoanalytic perspectives, philosophy, literary theory, infant research, and attachment theory to neurobiology, cognitive science, complexity theory, and physics, to name a few. It is also due to the high degree of complexity—read unpredictability, self-organization, fluidity, and dynamism—inherent in the multiple psychoanalytic voices that are at once competing with and constituting one another. [p. 1]

A complex system exhibits a spiraling developmental procession emanating from what complexity theorists refer to as 1) performance, 2) credit assignment, and then 3) rule discovery. Performance pertains to the action of the system based on its agents' local rules (read, organizing principles), for example, clinically, detect and respond to the emergence of selfobject transferences. Credit assignment refers to the system's assessment of its rules' or patterns' viability and usefulness (e.g., is it always necessary, or desirable, to interpret selfobject transferences?). And last, rule discovery involves the system's self organization creating new, alternative organizing principles or perspectives (in response to its credit assignments), which are aimed at enhancing the system's overall efficacy. There is a hermeneutic flavor to this process, mirroring the psychoanalytic process itself. We witness this in the emergence of the relationalizing of self psychology: Sometimes a paradigm discards certain aspects of its previous character in favor of adding others, or combines previous facets with newer ones, effectively creating a set of hybrid principles. For our present purposes, some of the "rules" or presumptions about the "bipolar self," for example, that have been overturned here, or at least brought into question, articulate with an array of other more traditional self psychological tenets, which I shall address shortly.

Our purview, and the self

If self psychology had been more or less consigned to the uncovering and articulation of selfobject transferences and the inevitable rupture and repair cycles, resulting in the transmuting of internalizations—admittedly a quintessentially phenomenological endeavor focused primarily on the status of the (patient's) self experience—it might then be concluded that a relational self psychology resituates Kohutian psychology as one among many paradigms aimed at examining a broader array of specific dimensions of experience. Any marginally respectable relational treatment necessarily embraces a selfobject sensibility, though there are many other theories of motivation from which to choose. Michael Basch, for example, felt that self psychology should be more aptly described as a selfobject psychology, or a "selfobject theory of motivation—which is how I characterize Kohut's contribution" (1995, p. 371) and not try to subsume all of psychoanalysis under its rubric (Stolorow, 2021, personal communication; Shane, 2021, personal communication). I am reminded here of Seligman's comments that "[o]verreliance on particular theories can lead to any particular concept being asked to explain more than it can—to do too much conceptual or clinical work. When institutional politics confound ideas, a kind of wayward essentialism can take hold, and merit becomes measured by adherence to one or another analytic persuasion" (2020, p. 655). He continues that "[w]e embrace history and the fullness of the moment, looking at how the past is kept alive in the present, trying to reposition and re-narrate its influence rather than eradicate or ignore it" (p. 663). Indeed, relationalizing self psychology better not detract from it. Perhaps the more the models, if they are held lightly (Orange, 2006), the better, insofar as they are, for me, phenomenologically and contextually based.

²In his introduction to Kohut (1984) *How Does Analysis Cure?* Goldberg reminds us of the prophecy of William James, one that had been conveyed to Kohut in regard to his *The Analysis of the Self* (1971), that, about an idea, "First they will say it is all wrong, then that it is unimportant and trivial, and finally that they knew it all along" (p.xi).

On the one hand, some have been squeamish about looking for cross-disciplinary corroboration and validation from sources outside our immediate self psychological domain; some have outright eschewed articulating self psychology, and psychoanalysis in general for that matter, with other domains of study—neuroscience, for example (Stolorow & Atwood, 2012). On the other hand, others have not hesitated to look to the more scientific domains for more relevant data that may expand our understanding (Basch, 1976; Lichtenberg, Lachmann, & Fosshage, 2011; and many others). Still others look to scientific research methodologies for reassurances that what we psychoanalysts are doing with our patients is indeed legitimate and efficacious (Cieri & Esposito, 2019; Sandell, 1999; Shore, 2003). Still others find considering other non-psychoanalytic disciplines for study and perhaps inclusion or integration downright vertiginous, though perhaps ultimately exciting and truly useful.

Historically, others have been less sanguine about extending our realms of investigation beyond that of the selfobject transferences and experiences. Rowe (1999), for example, writes that “shifts in emphasis away from the selfobject transferences as the focal point of treatment seriously limits the patient’s development” (p. 26). He continues:

If we deemphasize the selfobject transferences as the focus of treatment, we are unlikely to discover yet to be discovered transference needs. Therefore, if self psychology is to benefit fully from Kohut’s foundational contribution to psychoanalysis, we must redouble our efforts to be alert to the patient’s selfobject needs. (1999, p. 26)

I would add, whereas we may want to remain alert to the selfobject transferences and their potential permutations, doing so by foreclosing on a plethora of additional dimensions of relational experience, as elaborated in the article here under discussion, most certainly runs the risk of a psychoanalytic myopia that could threaten our patients’ nonlinear and unpredictable developmental trajectory, however painful such development at times may be. Perhaps we seek more than cohesion, integrity, unification, and harmony. Perhaps we seek an admission of—and a learning-to-live-with—exactly how vulnerable we humans are, in effect, how doomed we are, given that our relational bonds with loved ones will ultimately be severed (Derrida, 2001).³ This certainly applies to our psychoanalytic bonds as well, in that the psychoanalytic dyad, too, lives with the inevitability of termination due to one reason or another—what Lear (2004) refers to as living with “a lively sense of death” (p. 54).

In that light, the emergence of relational self psychology poses an enticing conundrum: what to integrate, and what to discard? Above I had alluded to the rule discovery process inherent in complex systems and its relevance to ushering in newer organizing principles and their concomitant attitudes incommensurable with more traditional theoretical tenets. Examples of those tenets are 1) the idea that the self contains its own predesigned and relatively predictable unfolding program of development, given the right admixture of selfobject nutrients, including its potential for its arrest in the absence of such nutrients; 2) the notion that the self has a bipolar structure and a corresponding tension arc; 3) an unrelenting focus on and privileging of the selfobject transferences; 4) the presumption of a singular core self, not complicated by multiple dimensions of selfhood, dissociation, and enactment, always subject to rapidly changing relational contexts. How might we reconcile these tenets with the “new data” (Kohut, 1977, p. 268) of relational self psychology? I believe the incommensurability between aspects of traditional self psychology and its more contemporary rendering can be resolved by enlisting the distinction between two, often conflated dimensions of discourse—namely, the phenomenological and the explanatory. Here, the phenomenological simply refers to the realm of actual experience, whereas the explanatory conjures the theorizing that attempts to account for such experience.⁴ Frequently the two are not isomorphic.

³Derrida writes: “To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die. One of us, each says to himself, the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other . . .” (2001, p. 107).

⁴Elsewhere I had commented that “ . . . any specific self-state I may experience in my patient or in myself is not really in anything but rather distributed across a broader relational context of which my patient and I are adaptive constituents. This preconception highlights the crucial distinction between how and what we experience and that which gives rise to the experience, a distinction of necessity if we are to avoid the conceptual confusion inherent in many of our theoretical and clinical dialogues. I refer here to the distinction between what is experienced, on a variety of levels of consciousness (Stern, 1997), and the dynamic, unpredictable interplay of the multitude of interpenetrating adaptive relational systems that give rise to such experience. . . it is useful to know on what level of discourse we are speaking from one moment to the next . . . the phenomenological or the explanatory. Explanatorily speaking, I understand a ‘self-state’ to be a dimension of experience that is emergent and always of a context and that it is always a product and a property of a larger relational/historical system” (2006, p. 604).

A simple example of conflating these two dimensions of discourse lies in how some might conceptualize selfhood. If the self is experienced as an entity, predictably familiar, organized, though not necessarily always cohesive (the phenomenological), then it's not a huge leap to confer upon it a sense of substantiality, or entity-ness (the explanatory). Here we've taken a dimension of experience, stripped it of its relational and contextual nature, and reified it into a tangible structure or entity. However reifying Kohut may have been, or may not have been, when it came to the notion of the bipolar self, our understanding of it now necessarily encompasses the larger relational surround of which each of us is a part. Indeed, we could argue that the self, or the wide array of dimensions of experiential selfhood, is the product and property of the surround, just as the surround is a product and property of how we experience the world and how we thereby shape it.⁵

Traditionally, separate bodies meant separate minds. And this was good for analysts who would prefer not to think that their act of observation was necessarily also an act of creation. Witnessing wasn't considered an act of participation in constituting the witnessed.

Experience—and by extension, experiential selfhood—is wave-like, rising and falling, ephemeral, fluid, diachronic, and short-lived (Locke, 1689/1836). Some go so far as to even deny the existence of the self: Self might be an illusion (Nyanatiloka, 1994). For Hume (1740), the self was rather tenuous. He wrote: “When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long I am insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist” (Sec. VI, part 3, line 6). Furthermore, any doubts about the vulnerability, unpredictability, ineffability, fluidity, dynamism, and lack of cohesion of selfhood can easily be dispelled by imbibing a moderate dose of psilocybin (Pollan, 2018). As Magid et al. (2021) aver, the “. . . concept of emergent self development runs counter to ideas about a core or authentic self that is inherent in the person at birth, and unfolds over time in a preordained way, such as is found in Kohut (1971; 1977, 1981/1991), Wolf (1988), or Winnicott (1960)” (p. 17). Most certainly there is no self without context, and no context without self.⁶

Relationality

How might we further understand the emergence of the authors' rendering of a relational self psychology? Has self psychology, as we once knew it, been supplanted by a relational self psychology that indeed insists upon foregrounding the highly context sensitive and context dependent nature of experiential selfhood (including selfobject transferences), of relating, and of meaning making in general? Do the authors posit, as such, a unique branch of self psychology—a contextualizing and relationalizing version—or do they reflect the results of a natural evolution of self psychology overall, given our more contemporary psychoanalytic zeitgeist of the last few decades? The authors depict an “emerging paradigm” and a “critical dimension of self psychology [my italics],” which might suggest both an additional branch and a full-throated evolution of self psychology. It's good to have choices, and perhaps that question can be left to those in the self psychology community to decide. And, how relational is relational self psychology exactly?

I don't wish to open, at least not too wide, the well-digested “what is relational?” can o' worms, but conjuring the term “relational,” now affixed to self psychology, can't help but bring it to mind.⁷ What is it exactly? Some might argue that any psychoanalytic therapy is a relational one, such that the two parties are “relating” to one another, in one fashion or another: One person generates the data, the other person interprets the data (Etchegoyen, 1991). Both parties generate the data, even actually co-

⁵See Maduro (2019) for an in-depth exploration of the ramifications of relationality and embeddedness in the evolution of individual selfhood.

⁶There are continuing disagreements on use of language pertaining to the term self. For example, see Baker (2021) less than charitable response to Stolorow and Atwood's oeuvre vis-à-vis the self, and Stolorow and Atwood (2021) on why language actually matters, underscoring the vital distinction between the designative and the constitutive perspectives on use of language. See also Stolorow & Atwood (2020) Bewitching Oxymorons and Illusions of Harmony.

⁷As a cautionary note, I am reminded of Orange's admonition (2017, p. 93): “. . . we too may commit violence and exclusion against those we refuse to hear, calling them non-psychoanalytic or not-relational-enough, further fragmenting the psychoanalytic community, and engendering more unburied ghosts.”

constitute the data, and both parties interpret the data (Aron, 1992; Bollas, 1983). Or, one person evidences certain longings and expectations for a particular type of responsiveness, and the other person provides (selfobject) functions that insure or promote a more cohesive sense of self in the former (Kohut, 1984). Or, both parties arrive with selfobject longings, however asymmetrical they may be, and both may provide, asymmetrically (Bacal, 2011). This is all relating, I suppose. Our more contemporary rendering of the paradigm, however, obviously far exceeds our traditional psychoanalytic landscapes (Ferenczi, 1988 notwithstanding). Perhaps one egress for those who persist in debating this issue resides in the question: What is it that is deemed therapeutically useful or mutative in a particular psychoanalytic approach? Perhaps if it is simply the conveyance of insight from an observer (the analyst) to a recipient (the patient) about the recipient, it might not be considered particularly relational, despite that there is, presumably, a relationship of some sort that allows for such conveyance (I am not thinking here about the complex intricacies of unconscious communication (Freud, 1939), the realm of the implicit and the procedural (Lyons-Ruth, 1999) or “implicit relational knowing” (Stern et al., 1998), which is a whole other matter). Also, similarly, perhaps if it is simply the offering of functions, it might not be considered especially relational in nature, although clearly, once again, there is a relationship—perhaps a vital one—implicated in the proffering of a needed function—that is, unless said function belies an antidote function (Stolorow, 1999), temporarily neutralizing a gripping organizing principle (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984) or emotional conviction (Orange, 2010). The latter event usually confines us to a quasi-therapeutic hamster wheel.⁸

Yes, there must always be relationality in any and all treatments, even in those of 100 years ago, especially now to the extent we might foreground the realm and undeniable action of the implicit (Stern et al., 1998).⁹ I suspect Freud’s patients could tell whether he liked them or not, though he may not have spoken about it. Sandmeyer (2015), for example, writes that “what makes a theory ‘relational,’ in its most basic form, is that it considers the therapist/analyst’s subjectivity as well as the patient’s, and that it acknowledges that all human experience takes place in the context of relationships with others and their surround” (p. 2). My own inclination in assessing a paradigm as to its degree of relationality lies in examining the attitudes, often implicit, that underlie it. I think of a relational treatment per se as one that aims to investigate, embrace, articulate, and live with a felt sense of the interplay of two or more subjectivities and the histories and contexts that give rise to it; it is one that foregrounds not only accepting and comprehending the repetitive, but also one that privileges spontaneity, enactment, play, freedom, unpredictability, possibility, the courage to sustain painful affect, and radical hope (Lear, 2004). A plethora of theories today, each member of which speaks with their own unique voice, embodies such attitudes, as does a relationalized self psychology. In my view, when close attention is paid to how the analytic participants are, well, participating, in concert with each other, including striving for a sound grasp of the intersubjective contexts in which such contributions are made and experienced, and for maintaining a stout flexibility in determining what is working and what is not, therapeutic action via relationality emerges. At its foundation necessarily lies an unremitting spirit (or attitude) of inquiry (Lichtenberg, Lachmann, & Fosshage, 2002). I am reminded of Pivnick (2015) comments that “[h]aving already survived the internecine hostilities of ‘the relational wars’ of the 1980s and ‘90s, I had forged a professional identity I could live with. Both ‘too relational’ and ‘not relational enough,’ I got used to what Bromberg (1998) termed ‘standing in the spaces,’ a stance that proved helpful . . . ” (p. 21). There are a lot of spaces for us to stand in these days, and with new experiences come new ideas about the nature of change.

⁸See Stolorow (1999) response to Alan Kindler (1999) *The Case of Joanna Churchill*.

⁹See Lothane for how relational Freud actually was: “The advocates of the relational approach in psychoanalysis will be surprised to hear that Freud was a Sullivanian, even though—like the proverbial M. Jourdain who never heard the word prose—he never heard of the word interpersonal” (Lothane, 2003, p. 609).

Personhood and bidirectionality

As Magid et al. (2021) point out, the personhood (of the analyst) and the bidirectionality (of the dyad) are two essential features now insinuated into our self psychological sensibility. They exponentially expand our ideas about human relating in psychoanalysis and about what is therapeutic, either reaching beyond the bounds of selfobject experience, or widely expanding its definition—“that dimension of our experience of another person that relates to the person’s functions in shoring up our self” (Kohut, 1984, pp. 49–50). For Rowe (1999) and others, the means by which we expand the bounds of traditional self psychology, while maintaining its original precepts, entails the search for new forms of selfobject experience. Might the analyst’s and the patient’s appreciation for personhood and bidirectionality indeed be “new” selfobject transference needs? If the extent to which working through, let’s say, enactments, based on investigating and appreciating the uniqueness and inevitable interplay of both individual, yet-to-be-fully formulated (Stern, 2020), subjective worlds, ultimately results in a “shoring up” of the self, then perhaps they are. On the other hand, as alluded to above, should “shoring up” the self be the principal aim of psychoanalysis? Perhaps not necessarily.

In Winnicottian style, we have witnessed, across many psychoanalytic paradigms, the transformation of the analyst-as-function-provider (and historically, analyst-as-insight-provider) into analyst-as-usable-(as in object usage)-person (Winnicott, 1969). From the perspective of analysts picturing analysts, it seems relational self psychology has traversed from an object relating phase to more of an object usage stance—one in which we analysts are not as squeamish as we used to be about the idea that we are more than opaque function-providers (and insight-providers) and are in fact unique subjective beings with the same capacity for enactment and dissociation as are our patients. Turns out we are actually the real people that we actually are. Moreover, it is not just that the analyst has a “personhood,” or perhaps, is a person, but for a while now we understand that said personhood contributes to and influences the personhood of the patient, and vice versa.¹⁰ Stern (2020) reminds us that “[t]he level playing field makes the nature of the analyst’s subjectivity just as relevant to both participants, and to the treatment, as the patient’s . . . ” (p. 541). This is intersubjectivity in action—and is salutary for our patients.

Bacal (1990) writes, “[s]elf psychological theory has, in effect, focused on the experience of self-object function, and has lost sight of the object that provides that function and of the importance of the relationship for the patient” (p. 202). He (1998) subsequently argued for a “relational self psychology” (p. xiv): “ . . . self psychology has always been a relational theory despite its generally remarkable avoidance of conceptualizing itself as such . . . ” (p. xiii). In years prior, when Bacal had voiced his relational sensibility to Kohut directly, it perhaps had not gone over too well.¹¹ This “sight,” though, has continued to blossom over the last few decades. This is coextensive with Magid, Fosshage, and Shane’s observation that “the analyst and patient need to understand and come to terms with their separate and often divergent needs within the treatment” (2021, p. 11). Slavin and Kriegman (1998), and Slavin (2016) subsequently, addressed this theme quite explicitly in the contexts of competing needs and the degree to which deception and self-deception can be sussed out, acknowledged, and explored. We all need and enjoy selfobject experiences, but eventually we want to know who exactly is providing them.

Does appreciating and working within a personhood/bidirectionality/intersubjective/contextualist model in some regard make the patient feel better, i.e., inculcate a sturdier, more cohesive and robust sense of self? If so, shall we then think of any such relationalized paradigm as proffering expanded selfobject experiences? If, for example, a patient at a particular point in time is yearning to know who, indeed, is the “man” behind the curtain (Mitchell, 1988; Tuch, 2016), and if indeed the person pulls the

¹⁰Alice Balint and Michael Balint were onto this as early as 1939.

¹¹Bacal writes: “The frustration of my invitation to Kohut to join me in exploring the commonalities between self psychology and relational theory was not optimal but, fortunately, not disruptive of our therapeutic relationship. I did, however, hold to my view that self psychology and some relational theories not only had a good deal in common but also had much to offer each other” (Bacal, 2017, p. 16).

curtain aside, and if therefrom the patient benefits, who is to say that there is not a selfobject experience afoot? But if we do wildly expand our definition of selfobject experience in this way, does that not then return analysts to the role of function providers? Clearly, subsuming anything that is useful and developmental for the patient under the rubric of selfobject experience can get hilariously out of hand. Not to mention, so much of relational experience is anathema to the recognized definition of selfobject, i.e., something that not only sustains and enhances one's sense of self but that is experienced as part of one's sense of self, again blurring the boundaries between self and other. Such selfobject characterization undermines at least one otherwise essential and widely accepted component of human growth: the capacity to experience the other as a separate, autonomous, and subjective being with his or her own motivations, needs, wishes, dreams, perspectives, attitudinal proclivities, and a capacity for recognition (Benjamin, 2004).

Coda

Sadly, I did not have the opportunity to meet Heinz Kohut, nor even the benefit of a glance or a tip of the hat. But my sense of him, gleaned through his writings, and through the invaluable people in my life who did know him well, has always been that he was a quintessentially phenomenological thinker and theorist. I've always thought that there are at least two avenues by which we invent, or at least nurture, our psychoanalytic presuppositions: one through having drawn from the theorists/philosophers on whose shoulders we stand (Freud certainly leaned on classical philosophical thinkers and the then-accepted neurological claims about the mind/brain) and the other via direct clinical experience from which we might correct and rebuild theory from the ground up. I think of Freud as more inclined toward abductive reasoning. I think of Kohut as birthing theory from his direct clinical experience, more of an inductive approach. Where I might depart company is with the privileging of the metaphysical assumptions at which he arrived about the nature of the unitary, core self and its presumed, universalized, naturally unfolding developmental program, given the right selfobject nutrients. This flies in the face of our understanding human development as soft assembled (Harris, 2005; Thelen & Smith, 1994), always subject to the self organization of the broader bio-socio-cultural-historical system. That said, I cannot imagine Kohut not having arrived at a more relationalized psychoanalytic outlook, had he lived longer.¹² I believe the same has been said of Freud.

As for reasoning in psychoanalysis, inductive or otherwise, a complex systems perspective alternatively envisions the reasoning process and the lightly held conclusions (Orange, 2006) at which it arrives as the result of upward- and downward-propagated management of phenomenological data. This process reflects a kind of hermeneutic approach in which microdata relentlessly impacts the global phenomenological landscape, just as this global landscape perpetually informs the phenomenological microdata, and so on: a self-correcting process in which emotional meaning, truth, reality, and conclusions are always evolving as a function of how the constituents of a complex system are perpetually rearranging themselves in relation to each other. This is how theory-building should work, and this is most certainly how psychoanalysis works.

I am always inspired by Ghent's prescient assertion

Notice the sentence, "These solutions emerge from relations, not from design" (Thelen & Smith, 1994). It reminds me of "the words of the French mathematician, Henri Poincaré, the discoverer of what we now call chaos, that 'the aim of science is not things themselves, as the dogmatists in their simplicity assume, but the relations among things; outside these relations there is no reality knowable'" (Kelso, 1997, p. 97). To my mind it is in this meaning of relational, rather than its more superficial usage as the relations between people, that gives power and significance to the term relational psychoanalysis. [2002, p. 771]

¹²Kohut (1978) once wrote: "I believe that psychoanalysis will in the not too distant future examine itself afresh, will reorganize its basic stance, will transmute its inheritance into new creative initiatives" (p.685)

Given the interaction and self organization of all of our contributing voices, it is in this spirit that I understand the relationalizing of self psychology, as it applies not only to theory building, or theory renovation, but to the thereby-increasing humanness of the ever-evolving psychoanalytic process itself. What will emerge next in all this cross pollination, interaction, and self organization?

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