

Kohut's Freudian Vision
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During his lifetime, Heinz Kohut's *Psychology of the Self* was widely misunderstood as a non-traditional theory and treatment with some people asking that age-old question, "Is it really psychoanalysis?" Since his untimely death in 1981 that misunderstanding has sadly broadened, aided in part by an assortment of differing theories that travel under the singular banner of Self Psychology. Through scholarly effort Rubovitz-Seitz demonstrates the many continuities that exist between major elements in Kohut's work and that of Freud. In so doing, he seems to offer his book, *Kohut's Freudian Vision*, as an antidote to these misconceptions. Addressing this issue, Rubovitz-Seitz writes, "Despite the care that Kohut took to acknowledge and to spell out the continuities between his concepts and Freud's, a widespread misconception has persisted that his contributions were not Freudian but a deviation from traditional psychoanalysis. The misconception has been promulgated by both opponents and proponents of Kohut's concepts" (Rubovitz-Seitz, 1999 p 209).

Rubovitz-Seitz writes from a unique perspective since he was a co-teacher with Kohut at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. In the introduction to his book he describes how his collaboration with Kohut began in 1958. At that time Kohut taught a course on the history and development of Freud's psychoanalytic theories at the Chicago Institute. He was a highly valued teacher and it was not unusual for faculty members to audit his course. When Rubovitz-Seitz, a faculty member of the Institute, heard the excitement over Kohut's course he too decided to audit it.

The two-year course reviewed Freud's theory viewed through Kohut's unique lens. The first year of Kohut's course covered the first period in psychoanalysis, a period characterized and dominated by the topographic point of view that began with Breuer and Anna O's tumultuous work and continued until the early 1920's when Freud developed his tripartite model of the mind. The second year of the course considered the second phase in psychoanalytic history. This was a phase dominated by structural theory, Freud's differentiation of the mind into ego, id and superego and his study of the relationships of each agency to the other. The course ended with the beginning of the third phase in the history of psychoanalysis, the shift to ego psychology that occurred with the publication of Anna Freud's *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936) and Heinz Hartmann's *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation* (1939). While Kohut, in 1958, was not yet a self psychologist, one can see threads emerging in his interpretation of Freud's ideas that will eventually coalesce to form the cloth of his Psychology of the Self (Siegel, 1996).

As an auditor Rubovitz-Seitz did not participate actively in the classroom discussions. Instead he took meticulous notes and met with Kohut after class to discuss his questions. These discussions included a review of revisions Rubovitz-Seitz's had made of the previous week's notes, based on Kohut's earlier clarifications, as well as the material of that day. When the two-year course was over Rubovitz-Seitz created a compendium of Kohut's lectures. He was guided by two goals in this effort: "to record the substantive content of the

lectures accurately and to make the material as clear, readable, and understandable as possible” (Rubovitz-Seitz, 1999 p xvi).

When the course was completed, Rubovitz-Seitz made two copies of his notes. He presented one copy to Kohut and he kept one for himself. Eventually copies of these notes made their way to the library at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis where candidates used them as a favorite study aid in preparation for the comprehensive examination that came at the end of the Institute’s five years of course work. This is how I first came to know these notes. Reading them was a somewhat magical experience for Kohut possessed an almost magical ability to clarify confusing ideas as well as to move fluidly from the theoretical realm to the clinical and then back again. The notes were a joy to use.

Rubovitz-Seitz offers an edited version of his original notes as the starting point for his study of the continuities between Kohut and Freud. I recall the “fresh-air feeling” as I used Rubovitz-Seitz’s notes to prepare for my exam twenty years ago and it delights me today to know that these notes, even in edited form, are available to a broader audience through the publication of this book. If Rubovitz-Seitz did nothing else in this book, the publication of these notes would be a significant contribution in itself. Fortunately, as you will see, he has made additional contributions of his own.

What impressed me then, and impresses me even more as I review the notes today, is Kohut’s emphasis on what he considered to be the central nature of Freud’s genius. For Kohut, Freud’s major contribution was not merely his

ability to conceive of an aspect of mind that is not conscious, an accomplishment of great moment, but to conceive of an unconscious mind in which psychic reality is determined by the absence of negation. In this conceptualization, all unconscious wishes, strivings, and fantasies are experienced as fulfilled. Within the unconscious there simply is no possibility that psychic experiences will be disappointed. For Kohut, the analyst's grasp of this concept was essential to understanding patients in a psychoanalytic way. This understanding is independent of any ideas about content and it is difficult to imagine any analyst, regardless of theoretical persuasion, taking issue with this basic idea.

Kohut and Rubovitz-Seitz continued their collaboration in a 1963 essay that was based upon Kohut's lectures. Rubovitz-Seitz presents that essay as the second section of his book. Entitled "Concepts and Theories of Psychoanalysis," the essay is a condensation of the material Kohut taught in his course with the addition of a sophisticated expansion of Freud's 1923 model of the mind. In this expansion, Kohut describes the repression barrier as forming out of the unconscious protections a child erects in response to traumatic frustrations experienced at the hands of its parents. In Freud's tripartite model, the area below the repression barrier is responsible for the formation of transferences. It is an area of walled off memories of traumatic experiences with the childhood parents. In contrast to this area of transferences, Kohut calls attention to another area in Freud's tripartite model. In this area, located on the left-hand side of Freud's diagram, there is no repression barrier. Kohut asserts that since no repression barrier exists in this area it is, by definition, a non-transferential

area. This repression free area develops as a result of the inevitable, minute, “bite-sized” and, hence, manageable frustrations of childhood. These frustrations are the “optimal frustrations,” out of which the child is able to internalize the non-hostile, calming attitudes of its parents. Kohut calls this repression-free area the “area of progressive neutralization.” He notes that, “The most important source of a well functioning psychological structure, however, is the personality of the parents, specifically their ability to respond to the child’s drive demands with non-hostile firmness and non-seductive affection” (Kohut, H. & Seitz, P. 1963 p).

After presenting Kohut’s work in the first two sections of his book, Rubovitz-Seitz then makes his own significant contribution in the third and fourth sections. In the third section he clarifies the nature of Kohut’s unique conceptual method and demystifies Kohut’s “almost magical ability to clarify confusing ideas.” Rubovitz-Seitz attributes this ability to Kohut’s capacity for syncretic thinking. He cleverly demonstrates how Kohut, along with Freud, had a syncretic ability that enabled him to unite disparate ideas by building various types of conceptual bridges between them. A brief example of Kohut’s syncretic thought lies in his seemingly simple response to a student’s questions during Lecture 26. The student asked what is internalized during the process of internalization, the object or the experience. Kohut responded, “The object, as it is experienced.”

The final section of this book is an in depth analysis of Kohut’s concepts of narcissism and Self Psychology. Here Rubovitz-Seitz demonstrates with depth and precision how, “at the level of basic methods and concepts, the continuities between self psychology and traditional psychoanalysis are as significant as their

differences” (Rubovitz-Seitz, 1999 p 164). In this regard he persuasively argues that Self Psychology is not a deviation from traditional theory but an expansion of psychoanalytic understanding. He quotes Kohut as asserting that “self psychology does not advocate a change in the essence of analytic technique” (Kohut, 1984 p 208).

Rubovitz-Seitz closes his book with a message to Kohut’s proponents who are unhappy with Kohut’s Freudian ties. He writes:

“Kohut’s Freudian vision may have become a sticking point for some self psychologists, preventing them from accepting, perpetuating, and building on Kohut’s concepts. In an attempt to establish its group self as an “ independent center of initiative,” self psychology may be trying to emancipate itself from both of its progenitors, Freud and Kohut. But as philosopher Toulmin (1990, p 178) reminds us: “The belief that, by cutting ourselves off from the inherited ideas of our cultures, we can ‘clean the slate’ and make a fresh start, is as illusory as the hope for a comprehensive system of theory that is capable of giving us timeless certainty and coherence.” (Rubovitz-Seitz, P.F.D., 1999 p 210)

This is an important and interesting book from both historical and theoretical perspectives. Rubovitz-Seitz convincingly accomplishes the task he established for himself of clearly defining the continuities between Freud and

Kohut. I highly recommend it to anyone curious about or interested in Kohut's work, regardless of his or her theoretical persuasion.

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