

## The Self Psychology Perspective

NEW CREATIVE ENDEAVORS DEEPLY engage three aspects of the innovator's life: their thought, their work, and their person. These three are interrelated yet separate domains. It is possible to "read" Heinz Kohut in these three ways. One way is to look at his thought. This has to do with the ideas and conceptualizations at the heart of his self psychology. Another way is to look at his work. This involves a consideration of his self psychology as a treatment approach for those suffering from disturbances of the self. A third way is to look at his person. This focuses on the imprint Kohut has left on self psychology that gives it a distinctive cast. We intend to present the self psychology perspective in these three ways.

### THE BASICS OF SELF PSYCHOLOGY

You already know a lot about the "self" that Kohut talks about. You know it implicitly, through your experiences. You probably have used different words than self psychology uses, and you may not have consciously known the broader importance of the self as revealed by Kohut. But you are a self, and you already have an in-the-bones understanding of your self. We begin with that.

As you sit reading these words, it would be peculiar for you to say, or to acutely feel, "I am these hands holding this book," or "I am these eyes scanning these words." As individuals we exist through our body, yes, but we sense being more than our body parts or body processes. In the same way, you do not ordinarily say, "I am these thoughts going on in my head." You experience your self as more than just mental processes, more than just what you are thinking at the moment. Similarly, in normal living you do not exist in a state of depersonalization where you feel

that all you are is the role you play. That may happen from time to time, as all of us know, yet we typically experience that there is more to us than the performance of roles.

You implicitly know that there is this more inclusive dimension to you, something that holds all the parts, processes, and roles together. We typically refer to this core as our “self.” It is natural for us to sense and refer to our essential personhood as our “self,” by which we indicate the central structure and wholeness of our being. The points are these: first, without being taught it you sense that you are a self; and second, you also sense that your self is the nucleus, the core, of who you are.

There’s something else we implicitly know. The state of our self—its level of assuredness, its sense of well-being—is subject to fluctuations. Sometimes we feel alive and full of zest. We have energy for our own ambitions; we feel uplifted by our ideals; and we have deep empathy for the needs and struggles of others. Indeed, at moments we feel like singing, “I’m sitting on top of the world!” At other times we may feel depressed and limp. Projects and values seem empty, and our capacity for empathizing with others is depleted. It is then that we are inclined to sing the mournful spiritual, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.”

Hopefully you do not regularly swing back and forth between these extremes, but you know, implicitly, what those extremes are. And you know that all of us experience some fluctuations in the firmness of our self. We know this is normal, but we are also aware that some people seem able to maintain a generally positive feeling about their self even during stressful times, while other people feel their self threatened by nearly everything. To say it more precisely, we know persons who experience their selves as firm and consistent, who have positive and reliable self-esteem, whose body, mind, and emotions are balanced and harmonious. We know other people who experience their self as shaky and always on the verge of falling apart, whose self-esteem is unsteady and easily injured, and whose emotional, physical, and mental activities are listless, excessive, or in conflict. The first group has what self psychology calls “firm self cohesion.” The second group has what self psychology calls “weak self cohesion.”

There are varying degrees of self cohesion between these two extremes, of course. Hopefully your self has developed so that you feel basically strong and resilient. If so, then you tend to bounce back to some healthy state of self cohesion after encountering blows to your self (which

self psychology calls “self injuries”) rather than experiencing your self falling apart to some degree (which self psychology calls “fragmenting”). The point here is this: not only do you implicitly sense you have/are a self and that it is the center of who you are, you also know that the condition of the self fluctuates between a general state of cohesion and a general state of disequilibrium.

What brings about this fluctuation in the self? Why do we sometimes feel so great and other times so lousy? The answer has to do with how responsive we feel others have been to us and how responsive we feel they presently are. We experience that in three main ways.

- When we experience others approving of and applauding us we feel confident inside. Over time our self-esteem builds up from these affirming responses of others so that we are able to healthily affirm our own values and goals and self-perceptions.
- When others are reliably available to us to lean on when the going gets rough and we are upset, we feel calmed and fortified inside. As a result of being responded to and feeling merged with uplifting individuals, we become able, over time, to soothe our own self when we are alone or hurt.
- When others typically convey to us that they are like us and we like them, we feel that we belong, that we are included, that we are connected to others in deeply meaningful ways. As a consequence of being responded to by people who demonstrate that they are like us and we like them, over time we grow in the capacity to assure our self that we are normal and acceptable.

What wonderful, life-giving experiences these are! They are the essential experiences necessary for the development and maintenance of a cohesive, balanced, and vital self. For some of you these experiences are so naturally present that you take them for granted. Blessed art thou, for these are the roots of your basic sense of well-being in life. Others of us whose self is chronically shaky may not have known specifically what was absent in our life, but we have been painfully aware that something critical was missing.

From childhood on we have learned in our bones that how we feel and respond is in large measure influenced by how we experience others being for us. Self psychology gives the term “selfobjects” to those whose

empathic responses we need for the development and well-being of our self throughout life. Sometimes we have an intense, urgent need for people to empathically respond to us so that we can hold our self together. And we may do whatever is necessary to get those responses. At other times we have a more quiet need for people to respond to us so that we can continue to feel adequate. The crucial point is that the fluctuations in our self cohesion are the results of how we experience others affirming or disconfirming us.

Something else happens to us when we feel let down by persons we rely upon to help us feel good about our self. When we are criticized or disappointed or rejected, we tend to respond by drawing back or by striking out. Injuries to the self lead us to withdraw in hurt or to react with rage. There is a wide range of depressive-withdrawal responses: from mild dismay to deep melancholy marked by grave self-doubts and even suicidal thoughts, for example. There is also a wide range of rage responses: from passive-aggressive acts to obsessive efforts for revenge, for example.

Although the world frequently does not seem to understand, we know inside that our withdrawal and/or rage are often our ways of trying to hold our self together. When our self is injured, we do all we can to feel reassured inside. Sometimes we do that by pitying ourselves; sometimes by getting hopping mad.

There are many other ways in which we strive to regain our self cohesion when we are injured. A person might attempt to reinstate self-esteem by remembering how he was affirmed as special by persons in the past. Or, a person may engage in some creative or physical activity that reaffirms physical and mental strength. Or, a person may immerse her self in comforting communion with God. Then again, we may engage in showy, impulsive, even risky behavior as ways to ward off terrible feelings of emptiness or uncertainty. The points to be made are these: we recognize how we search for empathic responses from others so that we can feel safe and strong; we also recognize our active efforts to restore and preserve our self cohesion when it is disturbed.

In our rich storehouse of implicit knowing is one final gem we want to unpack, namely the central needs of the self. We have already alluded to them.

1. From the time when we were small we can remember how the applause and words of praise from others made us feel really good about our self. Eventually those affirming responses built up and lodged within us and became the basis for our positive self-esteem throughout life. As a result, we are now able, as grown-ups, to be motivated and supported by our own mature ambitions and plans, and are able to still feel good about our self even when we fail at something, or when, alas, others criticize us.

If you think about it, however, you realize that you the grown-up, with the blessing of secure self-esteem, still want those experiences of being recognized, made special. You sense that you still need “mirroring” responses, as self psychology terms them: those responses of admiration and praise that keep you feeling confident. While hopefully you may not need mirroring responses in the same intense form you did as a child (mother jumping up and down applauding when you learned how to ride a bike, for example), you still rely upon more mature forms of mirroring for your ongoing, inner sense of well-being (dignified but appreciative applause after you give a speech, for example).

We do not outgrow mirroring needs; we just need them in more mature forms—if, that is, our self cohesion and self-esteem have originally been made strong by empathic responses in our growing up. If we have not been adequately mirrored by our early selfobjects, our self will fail to reach its full maturity. We will still operate out of our childhood grandiose self that needs, if not demands, mirroring responses to whatever we do or say. You see these traits in others; you may have some your self. Here our self is still needy, still vulnerable, still not firm, still in need of others to give us that assurance that we are special which we cannot give to our self. That’s a very difficult position to be in. Kohut helps us understand that we need to have deep empathy for those who try to hold their self together by seeking mirroring applause for their often obnoxious behavior.

2. Similarly, we can sense how from the beginning we have needed strong comforting figures to run to with our tears and bruises when we have fallen down. We can remember how the reassuring words and actions of Mother or Dad soothed the hurt when kids picked on us and gave us the courage we needed to go back and try again. Those empathic responses over time became part of our own ability to regulate our internal tensions

and to soothe our own self. Consequently, as mature grown-up selves we are now able to find inspiration through our own ideals and values that lift us up. Furthermore, we can find encouragement in the memory of empathic responses from idealized persons in our past, and can experience joyful satisfaction from knowing that we share the visions and values of admired individuals we have never met. In this secure self state we are energized to present our self as a source of peace and strength for others, doing for them what has been done for us.

Have we outgrown this need for “merger” responses, or “idealizing responses,” as self psychology terms them: those responses from idealized, uplifting individuals in whose embracing presence we feel assured and whose courage we borrow for our own? What does your heart say? It says we have not outgrown them. If our self cohesion has a firm foundation, then we won’t need idealizing responses in the same form we needed them as a child. We will no longer need to sit in Dad’s lap and have him stoke our head as he comforts away our fear. Instead, we may feel a comforting glow by remembering his calm demeanor and the wisdom he imparted to us. But we never outgrow the necessity for reassuring responses from individuals we maturely idealize.

If, however, our life was void of idealized figures to merge with, or the responses of our idealized figures hurt us more than soothed us, then our self may not have adequately matured. We will still operate out of our childhood idealizing self, needing to feel an intimate part of individuals and groups we declare are great and powerful and “the best.” Only then can we feel safe. Only then can we feel any sense of calm certainty. This, too, is a painful situation to be in. As Kohut helps us understand, people will do nearly anything to escape the ravishing fears within them over which they feel powerless.

3. Finally, we can also recall those actions and words from important persons, inside the family and out, who conveyed to us that we were not weird, not an outsider, but just like them and they just like us. How wonderful it was to feel that we belonged and were not left out! If we were fortunate enough in our early years to experience reliable responses that assured us that we were included by self-same others, or that they were in essential ways almost like our twin, then our self matured in this area. As a consequence, we do not worry so much about “fitting in” because we have a deep conviction—often unrecognized—that we are the included

kind. We are also able to enjoy shared activities and to cultivate occasions of togetherness. In addition, we possess the ability to feel an abiding and broad sense of belonging: not just to our family or friends or colleagues but to the whole of culture, to the whole of one's generation, even to the whole of humanity.

Have we outgrown this need for "alterego" responses, as self psychology terms them: those responses from others that assure us we that we are normal and acceptable? Implicitly you know the answer is no. They, too, along with mirroring and idealizing needs, are a normal part of us, present when we were children and present with us now as grown-ups. If our self has matured, that is, has developed reliable self cohesion and self-esteem, then we will not need alterego responses in the form we did as a child. We will not still need those around us to dress and think and act just like we do, as a kind of copy of us, in order for us to feel connected to others. Instead, an assured sense of connectedness may be reconfirmed as we say with alike-enough others the prayer Jesus taught us.

However, if we have suffered from absent or weak alterego responses to our need for inclusion with self-same others, then this aspect of our self remains stuck with its childhood yearnings. Our self does not mature adequately; it does not achieve reliable self cohesion and reliable self-esteem. We still hanker for those who will mold themselves to be just like us, either in essential ways or in identical ways. While we search intensely for places to belong, we are quick to reject any person or group whose looks or speech or dress does not match our own. We are super-sensitive to being disappointed by those we thought shared our mind and outlook on something, especially if we have expected them to be a comforting echo of our own self. This, too, is a painful situation. Kohut helps us understand that when an individual suffers from not feeling included, not feeling like others, and not feeling normal, they may then desperately do anything that will assuage this pain of isolation.

One last realization: Every one of us, even the most self-secure, even those with highly empathic selfobjects in our past, can lose our self cohesion and begin to fragment to some degree when burdens and injuries become too heavy. Every one of us can regress to those childhood ways of needing intense mirroring, idealizing, and alterego responses. Hopefully that is only temporary until our self regains its equilibrium. In the meantime it can be a harrowing journey until that happens.

Perhaps we can now begin to accept these narcissistic/self needs as part of who we are. Maybe we can even accept them wholeheartedly rather than begrudgingly. To do that is to move toward fuller empathic understanding of this lived reality we call our “self.”

### THE THERAPEUTIC WORK OF SELF PSYCHOLOGY

Kohut’s self psychology insights developed out of his many years of psychoanalytic work with patients in analysis with him. Some of these patients were struggling with problems of conflicting drives, which the psychological literature called, in general, “neuroses.” For these drive-conflicted difficulties, the traditional psychoanalytic approach, which focused on drives and defenses against drives, was considered the appropriate treatment method.

But Kohut also worked with another type of patient, those struggling with problems of “narcissism,” as the psychological literature generally defined them. This type of patient was characterized by a specific vulnerability: his or her self-esteem was unusually unstable, and, in particular, he or she was extremely sensitive to failures, disappointments, and slights from others.

Psychoanalysts and psychologists had long observed these narcissistic characteristics in some of the people they treated. The analytic approach called “classical psychoanalysis,” which closely followed Sigmund Freud’s formulations and methods, considered a narcissistic individual to be fixated at a primitive phase of development referred to as the “autoerotic stage.” Briefly stated, the individual was considered self-absorbed, involved more with self-love than with love for others (thus the term “narcissism” after the figure in Greek mythology, Narcissus, who fell in love with a reflection of himself in a pool and was unable to love others). Normal psychic development meant, for traditional/classical psychoanalysis, that an individual would eventually pass through and basically relinquish this early narcissistic, self-love stage in the process of forming solid “object relationships.” At this advanced developmental stage other persons would be experienced and related to as “objects,” separate from the individual’s self, but to whom, in the forming of “object love” ties, the individual would become emotionally invested rather than remaining invested in the individual’s autoerotic self.

This understanding of narcissism determined the treatment of persons stuck in this stage of self-love. In short, there was no treat-



ment. Traditional Freudian psychoanalysis believed that narcissistically bound individuals *could not* be treated by psychoanalysis since, being so focus on their self (self-love), and not sufficiently able to relate to others in an object-relations way, they were unable to form a transference relationship to the therapist, which was considered the prime means for analytic cure.

As Kohut worked with “narcissistic” individuals, however, the formulations of classical Freudian psychoanalysis did not seem to fit what he was experiencing. In the first place, Kohut found that these individuals *could* and *did* form a particular type of relationship to him in the therapy setting. A transference *was* established. A person with narcissistic problems (whom Kohut later referred to as suffering from a “narcissistic personality disorder,” later changed to “self disorder”) would emotionally respond to Kohut as if Kohut were inseparable from the individual’s very self. The patient made Kohut a psychological extension of the person’s own inner world, where Kohut was expected to function in ways the self needed, and at times, demanded. Kohut felt himself no longer engaged as a person in his own right (a separate object), but as one whose existence now was to be responsive, indeed, perfectly responsive, to the self of his patient. As Kohut came to name it, he had become the person’s “selfobject,” an object only insofar as he was connected to the person’s self.

Kohut’s narcissistic patients were not psychotic. They did not generally hallucinate or lose touch with reality. They knew Kohut was a real person, that his education was different from theirs, that he had his own family of which they were not members. Nonetheless, the essential psychological nature of their human relationship was the appropriation and experience of Kohut as an extension of their self, as their selfobject.

Kohut quickly realized that such person’s self was very vulnerable. Psychologically they lacked centeredness and cohesion, lacked firm self-esteem, lacked the ability to function with balance and harmony, and lacked the capacity to keep their anxieties and angers in check. Because they suffered from inadequate psychological capacities necessary to sustain their own mental, emotional, and physical equilibrium, these persons needed Kohut to respond to them in reassuring, affirming, and soothing ways. The vulnerable, easily fragmented person needed either “mirroring,” “idealizing,” or “alterego” selfobject responses, as Kohut eventually understood and named the particular types of relationships (transferences) that persons eventually established with him.

Kohut began to realize that this ebb and flow in a patient's self-esteem and self cohesion—as Kohut either adequately fulfilled his particular selfobject role or failed in it—were re-dramatizations of traumatic selfobject responses from the patient's past. Persistent narcissistic needs not met by unresponsive or unavailable parental selfobjects were played out with Kohut and others again and again.

How then did one interpret what was happening with these individuals suffering from self disorders? Did the traditional perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis seem to fit, which held that the person was fixated at a primitive stage of development and could not be treated and could not be healed? In the face of all that he had been taught as a classical psychoanalyst, Kohut said no.

Kohut observed and then articulated a new perspective in which the history of the self's empathic relationships was as crucial for the development of a person as the history of the person's psychosexual drive experiences. That is, Kohut posited that narcissism is not disposed of on the way to the development of object relations. Instead, narcissism has its own separate line of development: from immature selfobject needs to mature selfobject needs, in the same way that there is development from immature object relations to mature object relations. More than that, Kohut began to see that not only does narcissism not go away, and not only does it have its own line of development, but that it is also the psychological bedrock of all life. The primary way in which individuals engage each other and approach things in the world is through making them selfobjects. The central psychological relationship is one that Kohut called the "self-selfobject relationship."

But finally, and perhaps more an occasion for grace than anything else, Kohut found and articulated a therapeutic approach in which the vulnerable and fragmenting self could be restored. When the person's narcissistic needs and history of selfobject traumas were empathically considered; when Kohut let himself become an empathically responding selfobject figure; and when Kohut empathically interpreted to his patients the meaning of their narcissistic yearnings and their reactions to selfobject failures, then gradually the person began to experience having a stable sense of self and a stable state of self-esteem. More and more such persons were able to keep their self together rather than have it fragment to some degree when they felt injured by others. Slowly their narcissistic rage and/or their depressive withdrawal lessened as they be-

gan to employ new ways to handle the tensions that arose within them when their selfobjects failed to function as they wanted. In short, Kohut's new self psychology work had resulted in new possibilities for the healing of the injured self.

### THE IMPRINT OF KOHUT'S PERSON ON SELF PSYCHOLOGY

Self psychology is more than a body of clinical thought, more than a particular therapeutic approach. It is also a value system. Those values come from the person of Kohut. This in itself is not peculiar. Kohut is very clear that "There is no science of man that is thinkable without some value system behind it."<sup>1</sup> But what is remarkable are the subtle—and not so subtle—ways in which Kohut expands both the role and the value of self psychology and its viewpoint. These role and value expansions are not disconnected from self psychology as a body of thought and as a clinical approach, but they are not logical, inevitable extensions of Kohut's original self psychology insights into the development and cure of the self. They emerge from Kohut himself, from his personal reframing of self psychology's role and value in human life. A psychologist or psychoanalyst could generally accept Kohut's developmental interpretations and clinical techniques but leave out the elevated role and value-laden ethos with which Kohut eventually casts the role of self psychology.

Stated in self psychology terms, but in a folksy way, self psychology became Kohut's selfobject baby. After a hard gestation period, in which some in the traditional psychoanalytic field chastised him for getting pregnant with alien ideas, and after a hard delivery, in which he was rejected by some admirers once close to him for actually giving birth, Kohut began to delight in the unfolding of his self psychology perspective. He took enormous pleasure watching others begin to admire his selfobject baby. He was deeply gratified when others offered, even competed with each other for the chance, to nourish this new analytic infant.

Kohut knew his selfobject creation would eventually, and appropriately, begin to have a life of its own—and it still has. Self psychology as a general movement has gone in many different directions. But Kohut was also intensely protective of his selfobject baby. Especially in the last decade of his life he strived to infuse it with certain roles and values that would endure no matter what form it took. He expected his selfobject

creation to grow up and flourish, but he wanted it to always retain certain elevated purposes and aims.

We do not intend to present a psycho-biographical study of the origins of Kohut's self psychology. What we now do is simply lift up three areas that indicate how Kohut engaged in the process of role and value expansion. The insertion of Kohut's own person via his expanding role and value efforts is part of the whole ensemble we have called the "self psychology perspective." Understanding self psychology involves grasping this dimension of its makeup.

### *Empathy as the Way to Be in the World*

From the time that Kohut delivered his first paper on empathy at the Psychoanalytic Congress in Paris in 1957, he highlighted empathy as a means of investigation and data collecting.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he considered empathy the only valid method for gaining psychological access into the subjectivity of another person. To understand the outer world, we use the methods of extrospection, such as microscopes, telescopes, and other mechanical methods of measuring the external world. These are completely appropriate means for investigating external reality. When we focus on the inner world of a person, however, these various forms of extrospection are not appropriate for the task. For Kohut, psychology is the study of complex emotional states, and empathy is the only appropriate data-gathering tool that helps us vicariously experience and adequately interpret the experiences of other selves. Indeed, only material gained via this empathic immersion method can be legitimately called "psychological."

Of all the subjects Kohut could have addressed in the final presentation of his life, he chose to come back to the topic of empathy. The occasion was the 1981 Self Psychology Conference.<sup>3</sup> Kohut, who was dying of cancer, gathered strength and courage to speak to his colleagues and followers one more time. He died four days later. Kohut declared that he had chosen the topic of empathy precisely because it had been so confused in the minds of many people.

Perhaps so. But perhaps Kohut needed to reaffirm that empathy was not sentimentality or sympathy, but a research tool for entering into the subjective life of another, *because Kohut himself was responsible for much of that confusion*. Over the years Kohut had intentionally expanded the meaning and role and value of empathy to the point where empathy as a

research tool had become somewhat lost or minimized. Kohut, however, did not entertain that as a reason for why people might have been confused about empathy.

As we have noted, Kohut began his self psychology work by defining empathy as an epistemological, scientific mode of research. Empathy was “vicarious introspection,” the process in which we put ourselves in the other person’s shoes and then try, through consulting our own resonating feelings and through using thought experiments, to decipher the inner world of that other. From early on, empathy became for Kohut the *means* for accessing the inner life of others. There was no other entry. Indeed, for Kohut empathy was also the *determiner* of psychological data. Only that material gained through the empathic-immersion method could be considered “psychological.”

But Kohut moved beyond this, expanding the role and value of empathy. Although in that final public presentation in 1981 he expressed great reluctance in having to admit his belief that empathy has a “therapeutic effect—both in the clinical setting and in human life in general,”<sup>4</sup> this was a somewhat disingenuous admission. Throughout his writings Kohut wove the theme that healing comes from the life-giving experience of feeling connected to those who empathically understand us. Grace for the injured self does not come, for Kohut, from what we might call a “corrective cognitive experience”—from new knowledge about psychological reality and consequent living according to that knowledge. Neither does restoration of the self come basically through a “corrective emotional experience”—experiencing true love; establishing trust, for example. And neither does cure of the self come through a “corrective actualizing experience”—forming a solid identity, achieving independence, becoming individuated. Finally, neither does healing come through a “corrective moral experience”—doing one’s duty; abiding by values and ideals, for example. Healing comes when a person feels empathically understood. Then it is that insights help us along; then it is that we are open to new emotions that enhance our living; then it is that self-actualizing efforts become efficacious; then it is that new moral imperatives uplift and sustain us. It is empathy that cures.

The point is that Kohut expanded the meaning, role, and value of empathy. Empathy is more than the *means* for psychological investigation, more than the *determiner* of what is and is not psychological material. It is the *agency* by which souls are restored. It is the glue that

holds a broken person together until they begin to heal, and then it becomes the nourishment that keeps them going, keeps them striving to live fully and vibrantly. Kohut expands the role of empathy and gives it elevated value.

But Kohut expands empathy's role and value beyond this. Kohut makes empathy a mark of maturity, perhaps even *the* mark of the ultimately healthy self. A person whose narcissism has been successfully transformed into the highest forms of self-expression will exhibit capacities for deep humor, true joy, and penetrating wisdom. Although Kohut says that man's capacity to acknowledge the finiteness of his existence "may well be his greatest psychological achievement"<sup>5</sup> in most of Kohut's work the mark of a mature, transformed self is the ability to live each day with broad, encompassing empathy for others and for one's self. Humor, joy, wisdom, and acceptance of death become certified, as it were, as they become expressions of an empathically filled individual. Being able to respond empathically becomes implicitly as well as explicitly the standard of health for individual and group selves, on which those in the practice field should keep their eye. Indeed, it may even be plausible to say that for Kohut responding empathically is also the *moral obligation* that should be espoused by all concerned because it fits best into the specific self needs Kohut deems of ultimate significance in our culture.<sup>6</sup>

There is more. Even beyond this Kohut envisioned empathy as the *essence* of humanity, as the essential humanizing power we possess. Empathy is more than the *means* for psychological research tool, more than the *determiner* of psychological data, more than the *agency* for therapeutic cure, more than the *mark and standard* of psychological health, more than the *obligatory behavior* we should practice as the model of social conduct. Empathy is elevated as the *essence* of the human spirit.<sup>7</sup> What it means to be human is to be empathic. Only via empathy are we truly human. Indeed, one can sense in Kohut that empathy is also the *hope* we have for the biological and spiritual survival of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Those who want to utilize the self psychology perspective may not be swayed by this expanded role and value of empathy. Empathy may be taken merely as "one way of knowing," or as an appropriate opening move that establishes the "therapeutic alliance," for example. But Kohut would never want empathy to be reduced to this alone. For him empathy was elevated to a vaulted position. He strongly espoused it repeatedly in order to protect it from any effort to redefine or devalue its celebrated

role in determining insights, goals, standards, behavior, and the survival of humankind.

*Religion as an Indispensable Great Cultural Selfobject*

A memorial service for Dr. Kohut was held at the First Unitarian Church in Chicago, where he was a member. Charles Kligerman, a close friend and colleague of Kohut's, stated in that service that during the last two years of his life Kohut held body and soul together by sheer will power alone. With all that was pressing from within and from without at that time, it seems highly significant that Kohut would have spent a portion of his precious final days talking to Robert Randall, a clergyman-psychologist, about religion and self psychology.

Throughout his writings and lectures, Kohut never despised religion. He refused to apply Freud's harshly dismissive evaluation of religion as merely an illusory system with detrimental consequences for humankind. He did, however, strongly reject religious expressions proclaimed to be "facts" of the same order as scientific facts, and he clinically analyzed how archaic narcissistic needs could be expressed in religious forms. His approach to religion expanded, however, just as it did with empathy.

Simply summarized, at first religion was seen as merely an expression of the self, one of the self's unfolding manifestations. Furthermore, he valued religion not only as a creative expression of the self but also as a means for understanding the self—both in its mature and archaic states. Religion, along with other humanities, became a royal road into understanding and appreciating the subjective life of individuals and groups.

Kohut began to posit, however, that religion was not only an expression of the self but something that served to sustain the self. "[A]s a supportive selfobject, religion is not poor by a long shot."<sup>9</sup> Religion and other humanities began to be called "cultural selfobjects."<sup>10</sup> Religion functioned healthily as a kind of large selfobject whose idealization by others helped overcome their dreary and empty lives. Here Kohut expands the place and significance of religion along with its value. Not only is religion to be valued as an expression of the self by which we can learn about the self, it is also to be affirmed as a valued support of the self's own being.

There was one more major expansion of the role and significance of religion. In the following interviews, Kohut no longer speaks in general about cultural selfobjects. He clearly and intentionally identifies three “great” cultural selfobjects and lifts them to prominence. He speaks to Randall about religion as one of these three. Here he not only lifts up the power of religion to sustain selves, but affirms how religion serves in unique and indispensable ways to preserve selves and all humanity. Religion is endorsed, redeemed, and elevated.

Do mental health professionals in general have to accept this about religion in order to utilize the self psychology perspective? No. Do self psychologists have to embrace religion as a legitimate, indispensable source for the healing of selves if they want to be self psychologists? No. Do those who want to feel healthily merged with Kohut and his insights, who want to share the ethos of his perspective, have to embrace religion positively? Probably so. Kohut sent his analytic baby out in the world with the not-so-subtle admonition to embrace the humanities in general and religion in particular as partners in the struggle to make selves whole. This orientation toward religion gives a particular value-cast to self psychology. It is part of the imprint of Kohut’s person on the creative movement he started.

### *Self Psychology as Supraordinate Enterprise*

Establishing self psychology as a supraordinate enterprise started early. We have seen how Kohut via the empathic method elevated self psychology to superiority over other ways of psychological knowing, and over the claims of others to possess “psychological data” that was not gleaned through Kohut’s method of empathic introspection. As we will see in following chapters, Kohut also asserted supraordinancy of self psychology over Freudian psychology. Here he proclaimed the primacy of narcissistic needs over drive needs, and elevated the developmental primacy of narcissistic needs over drive needs as the bedrock of psychological life.

As time went on, Kohut espoused other ways in which self psychology was the supraordinate enterprise. All other developmental concepts, he suggested, should be subordinated to the developmental insights of self psychology, and all therapeutic approaches should be subordinated in their understanding of themselves, if not in their practice, to the self psychology approach.



But even beyond this, Kohut expanded the role and value of self psychology as an enterprise that was battling for the biological and spiritual survival of humankind.<sup>11</sup> Self psychology is not just a clinical approach for helping individuals with self disorders. Self psychology is engaged in warfare, in the fierce battle for the survival of our present culture and of humanity itself. Indeed, Kohut suggests that self psychology is not only involved in a great battle for human survival, but that self psychology is the *primary hope* by which that survival can happen. Self psychology is subtly proposed as the prescription for “salvation”—individually and culturally.<sup>12</sup>

A cursory introspective assessment regarding Kohut’s motivation for this elevation of self psychology could suggest that he was living out fully his nuclear ambitions and ideals. This would be fair to Kohut. But on another level, it is tempting to wonder if Kohut’s effort to make self psychology a supraordinate enterprise emerged from internal narcissistic pressures to make sure he left an indelible memorial of his self; an effort to keep his name and creative perspective so vividly alive after his death that he would not suffer a repeat of being forgotten the way he had been as a child. In any case, these elevated roles are value-laden visions in which Kohut has cast self psychology. These are its expanded “reasons for being.”

Kohut’s analytic baby here takes on warrior and hero dimensions. We authors here have no trouble with the warrior dimension. We support any human endeavor that attempts—with high morals practiced honestly—to battle for the enhancement and endurance of human life. We are, however—perhaps like others who come receptively to the self psychology perspective—more circumspect about the hero dimension. We write this book because we are highly persuaded that Kohut’s self psychology perspective can make a hugely deciding difference in how individuals and groups live their lives. We idealize Kohut for this. But we are not his devotees. Kohut’s perspective aids greatly in the restoration of humanity, but it is not *the* means by which this can occur. On his best and most cohesive day Kohut would probably concur. Deep in the recesses of his self, however, he may still harbor the vision of self psychology as the Excalibur of hope.

One final observation—or, more accurately, one final hypothesis. There was likely one other somewhat disguised reason Kohut returned to the issue of empathy as a scientific method of observation in his final

address. If Kohut could succeed in getting those in the field of psychology to open themselves to using the empathic-introspective method, and if he could get them to practice it accurately and consistently, then he perhaps expected that they, like him, would inevitably see, and become convinced: (a) that self needs are the bedrock of psychological life; (b) that empathy is the indispensable and ultimate healing power in any and all therapeutic approaches to healing; and (c) that self psychology is the default leader in the battle for human survival. Rather than simply saying, "This is my vision for self psychology; this is how I personally highly value it and have hopes for its use now and in the future," Kohut tries to make his case for self psychology's supraordinate status by espousing a scientific method that would presumably lead to that conclusion. While externally it seems he is merely going back in his 1981 address to erase confusion about the empathic-introspective approach, he is also going back to establish self psychology, via the science of the empathic method, as the supraordinate psychological viewpoint.

Brief as it is, this is our presentation of Heinz Kohut's self psychology perspective. In the following chapters we will be applying this perspective as it helps illuminate the reader's own thought, work, and person.

#### END NOTES

1. Kohut, *Self Psychology and the Humanities*, 261.
2. Kohut, "Introspection, Empathy, and Psychoanalysis."
3. Kohut, "Introspection, Empathy, and the Semicircle of Mental Health."
4. *Ibid.*, 544.
5. Kohut, "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism," 454.
6. Kohut, *Self Psychology and the Humanities*, 261.
7. Kohut, *Search for the Self*, 1:451–52; 2:714–15.
8. *Ibid.*, 2:705.
9. Kohut, *Self Psychology and the Humanities*, 261.
10. *Ibid.*, 224–31.
11. Kohut, *Search for the Self*, 2:516.
12. Randall, "Soteriological Dimensions in the Work of Heinz Kohut."