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Kohut and Continental Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis

Psychology of the Self and the Treatment of Narcissism
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Kohut’s self-psychology is sometimes erroneously claimed to be just another version of “existentialism” or of “continental psychoanalysis,” the implication being that it is not science and not authentic psychoanalysis. But Kohut’s description of clinical material and his experience-distant conception of the bipolar self as a supraordinate concept has little in common with the self as agent of Sartre and Laing or with the emphasis on an authentic self in the writing of Kierkegaard. The latter notion is essentially moral and philosophical, and not derived from empathy or vicarious introspection with patients.

The deepest or at least the most original thinkers in recent continental psychiatry and psychoanalysis as represented, for example, by Lacan and Foucault, wish to decenter the self altogether, either as a psychological or psychoanalytic or even philosophical concept. Although Sartre paradoxically borrowed much from Heidegger, his notion of the self as an agent that chooses is really closer to Husserl’s (1913) “transcendental ego” (which Sartre
paradoxically specifically rejects) than to Heidegger, Lacan, or Foucault. The reason for this lies in the belief, held in common by Heidegger, Lacan, and Foucault, that the self is formed by background social practices which wholly determine its nature. If this is correct, introspective self-reflection (Descartes’ *Cogito*), in which the individual conceives of the self as an independent thinking subject, is really a “misrecognition,” as Lacan calls it.

All this is vastly different from Kohut’s notion of the self, and in no way can Kohut’s thought be labelled “existential,” “structural,” or “poststructural” in nature. There are similarities between Heidegger, Lacan, Foucault, and Kohut, but the basic position of Heidegger, Lacan, and Foucault rests on the decentering of the self and places them in direct opposition to the psychology of the self. Heidegger also, like Sartre, does not accept Freud’s notion of the unconscious. I (1986a) have discussed his work relevant to psychotherapists elsewhere. For Kohut, the sense of self is defined differently and is thought of as arising from within, while for structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers the introspective sense of self is an illusion formed by inherent neurophysiological structures or by forces of culture.
The psychology of the self runs counter to modern French structuralist and poststructuralist psychoanalysis and philosophy. The work of Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, along with the texts of Nietzsche, Freud, and Saussure which they use in their own special way, has called into question the notion of the self as subject or consciousness which might serve as a source of meaning and a principle of explanation for our apparently free choices. Foucault (1972) tells us in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that the “researches” of psychoanalysis, linguistics, and anthropology have “decentered” the subject in relation to setting the shape of its desires, the forms of its language, the rules of its actions, or the play of its mythical and imaginative creations. That is to say, the arguments of these authors have made the self something constituted by or resulting from the accidental influences of external or internal independent conditions rather than viewing the self as a controlling consciousness which is the master and ultimate origin of culture.

These continental thinkers focus only on derivatives of child development that accompany or follow the acquisition of language or symbolic systems. Preverbal issues are ignored for the most part, as are the biological forces of aggression and even Freud’s death instinct.
In self-psychological terms, the structuralists and Lacan ignore the experiential or archaic self-object aspect of development and of the therapeutic relationship, and emphasize exclusively linguistic and symbolic expressions, almost as if the biological and preverbal did not exist, and all communication between humans is capable of verbal or symbolic delineation.

These philosophers are the “existentialist” precursors of Kohut, because they stress a hermeneutic approach that resembles empathy or vicarious introspection instead of observation and experiment; they belong, along with those who are described in Kaplan, Freedman, and Sadock’s (1980) *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, to “a small but vocal group of psychiatrist-philosophers” (p. 1283). For example, Ricoeur (1974) in his essay on “Consciousness and the Unconscious” asks the crucial question of what world view and vision of man will make possible a unique science of man. What must man be in order to assume the responsibility of sound thought and yet be susceptible of falling into insanity; to be obligated to strive for greater intellectual understanding and still remain a product of Freud’s deterministic topographic or structural models insofar as (in the words of Lacan) the id speaks through him? All of these thinkers emphasize the
experience of human living; they deemphasize the biological aspects of man.

It is a superficial resemblance of certain aspects of self-psychology to early existential psychiatry that accounts for the confusion of these quite different approaches. For example, in 1913 Jaspers (1972), in his textbook of phenomenological psychiatry so often cited by existential psychiatrists, distinguished between “rational” and “empathic” understanding. In phenomenological psychiatry, “we sink ourselves into the psychic situation and understand genetically by empathy how one psychic event emerges from another” (p. 301). However, Jaspers was firmly opposed to Freud’s psychoanalysis.

In psychiatry and psychoanalysis on the European continent today, there are many opposing viewpoints ranging from traditional psychoanalysts akin to the American Psychoanalytic Association, to existential psychoanalysts (discussed in Chessick 1977a), to the radical contemporary followers of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucault’s views on psychiatry. I (1986b) have discussed Lacan and Foucault in detail elsewhere and will focus here on comparing
Lacanian psychoanalysis with self-psychology.

**Lacan On Psychopathology**

For Lacan (Lemaire 1981), the “I” of discourse is formed in the “mirror stage” of development, around 6 to 18 months of age, when the infant first looks at its reflection in the mirror and achieves a false sense of the unity of itself. This is an imaginary, quasi-hallucinatory phase of development; a false I.

The second stage of development is “the-name-of-the-father,” in which the child, acquiring speech, enters the symbolic order of language and culture. This curious phrase (a Lacanian pun on the French words *nom* [name] and *non* [no]) is a metaphor that Lacan uses for the social order, the mapping of all human relationships and interchanges which the child enters into via the acquisition of speech. The consequences of this kind of theory held great appeal for French Marxists; the theory united the views of Freud and Marx. It implied that, if you change the culture, a different person will emerge when the infant completes “the name-of-the-father” stage.

In delineating the essential psychopathology of neuroses and
psychoses, Lacan describes the “paternal metaphor”: the father has to be accepted by the mother or the child will remain subjected to her and cannot fit into the symbolic order. This disaster Lacan calls “foreclosure.” Thus the mother’s attitude to both the father and the child is critical to the genesis of mental illness. In the normal state, identification with the father liberates the child and provides the child with a secure place in the family and the culture. If foreclosure occurs, the child fails to enter into the symbolic order. The person so constituted remains in nondistinction between the self and the external world, dwelling in the realm of the imaginary—that is, psychosis. In the neuroses there is a disturbed relationship between the imaginary and the symbolic worlds, so that speech and behavior become deformed, represented by neurotic symptoms. In contrast to the psychotic, who lives in an imaginary world, the neurotic displays what Lacan calls a wish fulfilled but mutilated.

**LACAN’S METHOD**

Muller and Richardson (1982), in their guide to Lacan’s (1977) *Écrits*, explain how Lacan translates the topographic theory of the early Freud into linguistics. Free association is thought of as the flow
of “Signifiers,” a term borrowed from the linguistic theory of Saussure. Each Signifier refers not to an individual “signified” mental concept of desire, but to another Signifier in the chain of free associations. The subject, as he develops and becomes articulated with language, alienates his primary unconscious desire in the Signifier chain. As Lacan puts it, we have the wanderings of true desire caught in the net of Signifiers.

Freud’s “condensation” aspect of primary process is actually metaphor, a linguistic process in which one phrase stands for a set of others suggesting a likeness, for example, “a volley of oaths.” “Condensation” of Freud’s theory is therefore a series of Signifiers connected through metaphor. Freud’s “displacement” is metonymy, a linguistic process in which one contiguous element stands for another, for example, “a good table” for good food. When Lacan makes his most famous statement that the unconscious is structured like a language, he means that the unconscious consists of repressed early Signifiers of desire connected by the rules of metonymy and metaphor. The unconscious consists entirely of early Signifiers, which had to be further disguised due to the demands of fitting into the cultural order. There are no drives and no instincts; no biology is involved.
Lacan’s Theory of Human Development

The phase of inaugural primary narcissism ("unbounded phase") occurs first in human development. Next comes the imaginary or mirror stage which is preverbal, presymbolic, and forms a false ego. This is described at length in Lacan’s (1968) famous 1953 speech delivered in Rome, and forms the basis of his disagreement with traditional psychoanalytic structural theory. Then, in a brief transitory stage, the child comes up against the "forbidden." This results in the symbolic stage as the child acquires language; there is a split between the inner and outer world, between a false "I," (a false ego) and the outer world. In order to resolve this, the child must identify with the father’s laws and cultural order and enter the quest for objects in a manner ever further removed from its original desire.

The child originally desires to be a phallus in union with the mother. It is the desire to be the desired of the mother, to be the mother’s phallus. Lacan uses the world “phallus” here as a symbol; he is not using it only specifically to mean the penis. It is also what the mother wants the most, that which would bring her fulfillment. This is a Hegelian concept; in order to understand Lacan, one must be familiar
with Hegel, who said that “desire” is to be the desired of the other person. As one develops toward adulthood, the chain of Signifiers moves further from the originally signified desire and from one’s true self and, consequently, from understanding the meaning of one’s own speech. The adult individual knows less about what is really meant by his or her linguistic expressions when speaking to another person.

There are three fundamental ideas in Lacan. First, the individual is constituted by language. The individual has no essence, center, or instincts. The unconscious consists only of the earliest Signifiers which are structured like a language. Second, discourse embodies society; a politics is embedded in our language and we are all caught up in it, since the human being is only an individual subject because of language and membership in society. Third, there is no such thing as an autonomous ego. This is a false notion, an *ex post facto* explanation says Lacan. For instance, if one wants to explain why stocks went down today, one might say, “The market is nervous about interest rates.” This gives the stock market a sort of anthropomorphized personality. Lacan, in a form of psychoanalytic heresy, an anathema to the United States “ego psychology” school which he detested, says the concept of ego is false and misleading. It leads to the incorrect false
centering of the human subject, just as the stock market is anthropomorphized in the example above. It may help to compare Lacan’s views on the ego with those of R. D. Laing. Laing moves from an early view of recognizing the value of the ego in adaptation to a later radical position of advocating a smashing of the ego in order to release one's transcendental self (Collier 1977). Lacan says the ego is always false and stands in the way of knowledge of our true desires.

For Lacan, *desire* is the driving human force, not libido. It comes from animal demand, the demand of the brute, as he calls it. Until the human enters the mirror stage, the human is like a brute and has demand—the raw demand that an animal would have. The infant begins in a dual symbiosis with the mother, the realm of primary narcissism. As this ruptures, the infant realizes that it is not the mother. At this point human want begins to appear, the human form of desire. The human desires the paradise of fusion with the mother, to be what the mother desires most and in a fusion with her. Lacan uses for this the symbol “phallus” which is the Signifier of this desire for perfect union with the mother.

For Lacan, a primordial castration has occurred when this fusion
is inevitably disrupted by the vicissitudes of development. Following Heidegger, he says the first experience of human limit occurs when this union is ruptured. Lacan does not distinguish between female and male earliest development. The dialectic of desire, based on Hegel’s theory, occurs next. The ultimate quest is to be recognized and desired by the desired. This is closely related to the “gleam in the mother's eye” that Kohut mentions. Indeed, for Kohut (1971) there is also a “mirror stage” (p. 124) of preverbal beginnings, but there the similarity ends, for Kohut’s mirror stage involves the mirroring and confirming response of the archaic self-object to the emerging self of the infant and does not involve either mirrors or imaginings. Kohut is referring to an experience, not an image. For Lacan, the child wants to be the desired of the mother, her fullness, her phallus, but must end up expressing only culturally legitimate desires through endless derivative Signifier chains, multiple displacements in language.

It is impossible to become the desired of the mother because the father, who has the phallus, is there. When Lacan uses the term “father,” he means three things: the real father, the imaginary father, and the law of the father. For Lacan the father is a “spoil-sport.” He says to the infant, you cannot sleep with your mother. He says to the
mother, you cannot re-appropriate your product. So the oedipal struggle is in having to forego the original desire and channel it through the symbolic cultural order, expressing it in some way through words. It is interesting to compare this with the traditional drive-conflict psychoanalytic view of the resolution of the oedipal struggle. For example, Loewald (1980) describes the father as representing “castrating reality.” He explains, “The longing for the father, seeking his help and protection, is a defensive compromise in order to come to terms with his superior, hostile power” (p. 9). For Lacan, to identify with the father is to find legitimate Signifiers which means accepting the culture, the facts of life, and human finitude. This is a process that Lacan calls oedipization, by means of which one enters the social order. When one has accomplished this, the oedipal struggle is resolved; from then on in one’s language, a chain of Signifiers occurs in which the signified desire becomes hidden, sliding incessantly under the chain of Signifiers.

**Lacan On Psychoanalytic Therapy**

This concept of the signified “sliding” under a chain of Signifiers is central to Lacan’s theory of treatment. He (Turkle 1978) opposed all
alleged authoritarianism and bureaucratic attitudes of psychoanalytic leaders, institutes, and hierarchies. He also opposed the structural theory of Freud and the ego psychology school of the United States and its goal of adaptation. Lacan argued that the psychoanalytic “establishment” represents the middle-class values of the culture, which psychoanalytic therapy must dissect in order to clarify and reveal the demand of the analysand: pure desire hidden in the very symbolic or cultural order.

Lacan’s attack poses a paradox for institutionalized psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Surely there have to be some rules; if we eliminate them all, we end up with a cult. Lacan also recognized the great danger in institutionalized psychiatry and psychoanalysis, the danger of a collusion to hide the truth if the goal of treatment is to adjust to and adapt to a culture to which one should not adjust and adapt.

Lacan flaunts all the rules for diagnoses and standard nomenclatures. His notorious “five minute hour,” the idea of self-proclaimed readiness to be an analyst, the famous “pass” in his institute (where your fellow students decide whether you should be an analyst or not), his own frequent change of institutes, his teaching of
psychoanalysis to university students, his “happenings” or surrealistic seminars, his confrontations and his many broken allegiances, and his esoteric and punning style of communication—all constituted an effort to jolt us from established middle-class hierarchies and values. The details of Lacan’s behavior and flamboyant activities are given by Clement and Schneiderman (1983).

For Lacan psychoanalysis is hermeneutics. It brings out underlying contexts and structures from the unconscious. It reveals a personal code. The past is hidden by linguistic transformations which occur because the individual must fit into the symbolic order. Historical reconstruction in psychoanalysis is not important, for psychoanalysis is a discourse with the “other.” It brings to light the desires that are hidden in the metaphors and tropes, for the human subject is endlessly displaced and reconstituted by the symbolic order of desire through which language passes. This study of the patient’s language then, says Lacan, can guide the patient back to insatiable, unconscious desires.

“Repression” for Lacan is simply a set of linguistic transformations using metaphor and metonym that the child must use
in order to fit into the symbolic order during oedipalization. In this
sense, for Lacan, “Man is a marionette of his culture.” The enemy is the
ego which is born in the mirror phase, a false notion that the
individual has of the self as an entity.

In summary, Lacan decenters the self. Everyone has a divided
self, says Lacan, in contrast to Laing; from the mirror stage on we are
all alienated from our true self. There is no autonomous ego or center
to a person. He changes the focus of theory from biology or instincts to
language, and from mechanisms to tropes. It is clear that Lacan and
Kohut differ entirely in their notions of the self and human
development.

Kohut and Lacan also differ entirely in their methodology. Lacan
never offers a case history. There is no original instinctual unconscious
for Lacan, only chains of Signifiers in the unconscious. His theory is a
surrealist theory that cannot be established by clinical evidence or
research. In psychopathology the person loses his or her grip on the
chain of Signifiers, and the analyst must restore discourse to its owner.
Psychiatric labels are useless, for each person’s unique narrative is
crucial.
For Lacan (1978), psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy is a reversal due to the “dummy” (*le mort*) analyst. The silence of the analyst causes a two-fold regression: backward among the chains of Signifiers “undoing the secret knots,” as Lacan puts it, toward the unconscious primal Signifiers of desire which constitute the unconscious; and to the loss of false narcissistic images by which the ego is constituted in the mirror stage. This regression is caused by the frustration of the patient’s desire in the psychoanalytic situation. The dummy of the analyst frustrates the patient’s demand. Through transference, the chain of Signifiers retrogresses until it reaches the truth of the patient’s desires and restores full speech to the patient.

Leavy (1980) attempts to provide a clinical example in which a patient is constantly complaining of the intrusiveness of the analyst. Leavy tries to demonstrate that underneath this patient’s constant complaint about the intrusiveness of the analyst is the patient’s desire to be intruded upon by the analyst-father: “Why do you ignore my attractiveness?” It is a demand on the part of the patient to be recognized and it is similar to Kohut’s conception of the patient’s demand for mirroring from the self-object analyst. Leavy’s case material illustrates what is meant by the incessant sliding of the
signified under the Signifiers; there is a continual chain of Signifiers in the various complaints of the patient that are quoted by Leavy, under which is sliding the desire to be recognized. The patient wishes to have her attractiveness confirmed by the analyst; perhaps at a deeper Lacanian level, to be the desired of the analyst.

The main advantage of Lacan’s approach is his stress on the informed doctor who relates to patients as people and pays attention to what each patient is uniquely saying. Lacan emphasizes the transaction between the individual and society and, like Foucault, points toward the study of society to explain the individual. A politics is embedded in our language, language embodies society, and we enter society when we develop language, says Lacan. This emphasis on language as constituting the self of the individual is quite different than Kohut’s focus on preverbal self-object experiences.

**Foucault and Kohut**

Michel Foucault (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982) says that the key question of philosophy is the one of what we ourselves are. Since for Foucault we have only cultural practices which made us what we are,
contemporary philosophy must be political, historical, and interpretive. But the human sciences are always to some extent pseudosciences because, while claiming to advance under the banner of science, they have remained intimately involved with micropractices of power. One of Foucault’s most important concepts is that of the repressive hypothesis. It insists that the truth is intrinsically opposed to power and can play a liberating role both personally and politically. The latest representative of this hypothesis is the philosopher Jurgen Habermas of the Frankfurt School, who views self-reflection as a way of liberating man from oppressive societies.

When Kohut (1984) describes Freud’s idea that knowledge will cure as a cognitive ideal of the nineteenth century, he is attributing to Freud the repressive hypothesis. However Kohut would not agree with Foucault’s (1973a) argument that the human sciences are always inherently unstable, derived, epistemologically complex, precarious, and full of disagreement due to the double nature of man. For Foucault, they are dubious, and they can never be considered to be like the natural sciences; because, for example, the psychiatrist as an investigator embodied in a given culture (Foucault 1973), and the
objects he studies, have both been produced by the prevailing paradigms ("epistemes") or, as Foucault later (1980, 1980a) calls it, the biopower of their culture, its manipulations and interactions. Therefore “knowledge” in the human sciences depends on discursive practices (epistemes) or nondiscursive practices (biopower) in any given culture at the time. There are no context-free, value-free, objective human sciences similar to the natural sciences. Kohut, on the other hand, insists that psychoanalysis can be a science, with empathy as its own special method of gathering data, so his view is much less radical and pessimistic.

**CONCLUSION**

The history of the human sciences leads to an unveiling of the non-conscious as constitutive both of the individual and the scientist who investigates the individual. Danger is inherent in the use of the human sciences to serve micropower practices, normalization, and oppression by the investigator who is also so constituted in that service.

This is true regardless of the model psychiatry employs. The
biological model views man as an organic “thing” or groups as “bodies,” leading to sociobiology and ethology. Marx’s economic model views the individual as the simple expression of class and other economic conflicts. The philological model, hermeneutics, began in the field of psychiatry with Freud; hidden meanings are discovered by interpretation, leading to what is called by Ricoeur (1970) the history of desire. The linguistic model claims that there are hidden universal structures in the signifying system of language and myth, from which the discipline of semiotics arises. Hybrid systems such as that of Freud combine the natural science notions of “apparatus” and “energetics” with hermeneutics. That of Kohut combines clinical data gathered by the method of empathy with forces such as those postulated by the Zeigarnik phenomenon. Laing’s political model views diagnosis as a repressive political act. Foucault’s two models (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, Chessick 1986b) are “archaeology,” which reveals that hidden epistemes determine knowledge, and “genealogy,” which reveals that hidden micropower practices determine knowledge. Finally, the nihilistic models of Nietzsche and Derrida (Sturrock 1979) seek to prove that there is a paradox inherent in all systems revealed by deconstruction of their texts.
The psychiatrist can never be merely another medical specialist. If the psychiatrist understands the history of the discipline, the psychiatrist must be aware of all these other models and of the dangers involved in claiming possession of the scientific truth about any person. Jaspers (1972) already in 1913 emphasized this repeatedly.

The psychology of the self, like the work of Foucault, has much to say about social problems. Kohut is not just another psychoanalytic theorist. Like Freud, he had a strong social conscience and attempted repeatedly to understand and discuss contemporary social problems, utilizing his psychoanalytic discoveries for that purpose. The test of the moral worth of a society is the way in which it treats the poor, the sick, and the mad. As Foucault (1973) says, the history of madness, of the poor, or of the deviants in a given culture is the means by which a culture defines itself. Is this not similar to the proposal of Kohut for an extension of empathy as crucial to averting the erasure of the individual, who might suffocate in the world of runaway technology and dehumanization?
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