EGO PSYCHOLOGY AND SELF PSYCHOLOGY IN
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: Ego Psychology and Self Psychology are compared by examining how each theory would imply different treatment techniques. These differences are discussed at both a theoretical level and in terms of their applications to the same case. At the level of theory, Mahler’s and Kohut’s views are compared along five dimensions: definition of the problem, motivation, conflict, the nature of the therapeutic process, and the therapist’s role in that process. At the level of technique, specific attention is paid to when the differences aid or impede the therapeutic process.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence and gradual acceptance of self psychology as a theoretical framework for understanding psychological development and the psychotherapeutic process has provoked some controversy. On one side of the controversy are those who prefer to retain ego psychology as their primary theoretical perspective, only incorporating and integrating insights from self psychology when they seem most useful. On the other side are those who have elected self psychology as their primary theoretical framework and have sought to articulate its technical applications to various clinical populations.

In social work, comparative study of the influence of theory on practice is relatively recent (Bellow, 1986). Still, it is clear from Dorfman’s (1988) study that social workers with different conceptual frameworks would do quite different things even on the same case. And in other disciplines, systematic study has begun to differentiate the contribution therapist techniques make to client outcomes (Hill, 1989). In this article, we illustrate and discuss how two alternative conceptualizations—ego psychology and self psychology—produce different understandings.
of psychological activity (both developmentally and dynamically) and
different responses, or alterations in technique, on the part of the
worker/therapist.

We will compare and contrast the two theoretical frameworks illustrat-
ing some of the differences with material from a case treated by the
first author. Although this case does not permit the degree of controlled
comparison provided by Kohut (1979) in "The Two Analyses of Mr. Z," it
does provide an opportunity to examine how the perspective of self psy-
chology can produce a different approach to the practice of clinical social
work than would be the case if only the perspective of ego psychology
were guiding the treatment.

One way of contrasting the two approaches (Ornstein, 1985) is to
say that in an ego psychologically based therapy, the therapist seeks to
"pull the patient up to a higher level of functioning" (p. 49), whereas in
a self psychologically based therapy, the therapist makes and sustains
empathic contact with whatever may be the client's level of functioning
and remains in contact with her as she rediscovers and then pursues her
own nuclear program of action (Kohut, 1984). As we note below in our
Theoretical Discussion, these two perspectives, while not necessarily in-
compatible, do imply quite different techniques.

We begin now with a presentation of the case material. It may aid
the reader to know in advance that the treatment ran for 22 sessions
over a period of nine months. The worker's primary orientation at the
beginning was that of ego psychology/object relations and the case pro-
cceeds initially as a brief term treatment contact involving both ego sup-
portive and ego modifying activity. Just prior to the 16th session, how-
ever, she sought out consultation on the case from the second author
who brought a self psychological perspective to the case. Thus, not all
the contrasting differences in treatment stemming from the two per-
spectives are illustrated in the case material, although some clearly are.
Others can only be illustrated in our discussion about what the worker
might have done. We discuss the case from the two perspectives address-
ing both theoretical and technical differences between the two approaches
generally and then five in detail: definition of the problem, motivation,
conflict, the nature of the therapeutic process, and the therapist's role.
These five were selected because we think they most clearly delineate
the differences between the two perspectives.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Kathy was a 24-year-old woman who came to the agency requesting help in
understanding why she could not commit herself to one relationship. She was
involved with two different men, in what she considered to be serious rela-
tionships with them both. Because this had happened once before, she feared that it