ABSTRACT: The subjective experience of depression is reviewed. The dynamics of that experience are then explicated from the perspective of self psychology. It is proposed that some depressions may best be understood as reflective of the patient's feeling of depletion. This feeling may be related to the loss of a selfobject, or may be reflective of a deficit in the self, which gives rise to unsatisfiable yearnings.

I. Introduction

Depression as a human experience has been the lot of humanity since time immemorial. As an expression of mood states, it is part of some people's essentially pessimistic world view or of a religious context expressing guilt over the evil nature of humanity. Depression is also characteristic of the way impoverished and deprived people feel much of the time. It often is accompanied by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness characteristic of the poor, the handicapped, the sick, and those who feel victimized by society's lack of concern for their affliction.

The affective state of depression becomes a clinical concern when people seek relief for the condition. Questions may then be raised as to its nature: Is it an illness? Is it a symptom of some other condition from which the person suffers? Or, is it a state of mind? The type of answer given to such questions will depend upon the orientation of the person posing the question. Each answer will restructure the question to make it fit the categories with which the person approaches the problem (Basch, 1975).

If the question is posed by investigators who subscribe to a medical model approach to solving human problems, then the expectation is that it will be answered in one of several ways: it is an illness, a syndrome, or the symptom of an illness. Such investigators will attempt to explain the
illness through its causes, which may be organically determined (Fawcett, 1975), biochemically or genetically produced (Winokur, 1975), or induced by some actual external trauma (Pollock, 1975; Palombo, 1981; Furman, 1974). Descriptively, in this medical model depressions are said to be exogenous or endogenous; they are bipolar or monopolar; or, they are primary affective disorders or secondary affective disorders. These categorizations, however, separate out an essential component of depression, that is, the person's experience of his or her illness.

In contrast to this approach investigators who take a more psychodynamic view attempt to understand depression through the person's intrapsychic experience. The causes or reasons for the condition are sought either in an early trauma, such as a separation or loss that led to a developmental arrest (Altschul, 1968), or in an unresolved conflict that redirected aggression against the self (Mendelson, 1974). The first of these positions is problematic. Attempts to correlate external childhood events with internal responses have produced inconsistent results. What occurs externally (extrospectively) does not have the same meaning to every person. The introspective approach clearly demonstrates that external events often have diverse and sometimes opposite internal meanings. The hypothesis that depression can be correlated with the loss of an external object has, in fact, been refuted: rather it is the emotional meaning of a sustaining relationship that can lead to depression (Lewis & Lewis, 1979). The second set of psychodynamic formulations is found to be applicable to neurotic depressions, but not to the other types (Benedek, 1975; Mendelson, 1974).

If we approach the problem simply from an introspective point of view, then the question of the nature of depression may be reformulated to take into account the meaning of the experiences that may have produced it. The question would be: what is the nature of the experience of depression? The external events or circumstances that create the condition, whether they be genetic, biochemical, or environmental, are certainly significant but do not permit making generalizations about the intrapsychic states that accompany the condition. These may be understood as precipitants or even as necessary conditions for the creation of the depression. However, it is the person's psychological vulnerability which leads to the conditions that are experienced in a "depression" (Goldberg, 1975).

In this article an attempt will be made to describe the experience of depression from the empathic perspective. The psychodynamics of this experience will be discussed from the point of view of self psychology. It will be proposed that the affect of depression is best understood as reflective of a depletion of the self, a depletion associated with a deficit in the self or as resulting from an irreconcilable yearning within the self for a missing self-object function. The issue of the specific causes for the condition of self depletion will not be addressed. Also excluded from this