THE EVOLUTION OF THE SELF THROUGH OPTIMAL GRATIFICATION

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ABSTRACT: In an attempt to more accurately grasp how the psychotherapeutic process heals self pathology, this paper explores the Self Psychological construct of transmuting internalization which has always assumed a climate of attunement, but has emphasized the frustration inherent in the therapeutic process. An alternative way of conceptualizing the process is offered in an attempt to refine theory to better reflect current research, clinical observations, and therapeutic experience. Specifically, the primacy of optimal frustration as the curative factor is challenged. Gratification of basic needs through an attuned environment is proposed as the fundamental foundation for the process of self structuralization. It is argued that first one must be able to express, identify and interpret affect, and that these abilities are acquired through the activation and gratification of the fundamental needs as delineated by Kohut's concepts of mirroring, idealizing, and twinship. One must have sufficient experiences in feeling valued, confirmed, comforted, affiliated, etc. by a self-object milieu before she or he can develop self-regulating behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

In his quest to better understand how the therapeutic process heals Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) revolutionized psychoanalytic theory. His search led him to question the primacy of insight and also caused him to explore questions about the nurturant role of the therapist. Based on the clinical observation of his patients and those of therapists he supervised, he ultimately found it useful to reformulate beliefs long held by psychoanalysts.

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He proposed a developmental model in which the lack of parent attunement creates deficits in the developing child's sense of self. In contrast, traditional psychoanalytic theory emphasizes intrapsychic conflict created by oedipal strivings. In Kohut's self psychology, the failure of caregivers to properly respond to the child is central to psychopathology. Unsatisfactory resolution of conflicted drives is believed to arise secondary to a fragmented self structure (Kohut, 1977).

Unlike most developmental theories Kohut's model does not emphasize mastery of specific skills during certain stages. Instead, it encompasses stage theories of development in so far as they enhance the parent's or therapist's understanding of the child. Being cognizant of theories on cognitive, social, or moral development may help the caregiver understand the nature of certain developmental tasks, and thus respond in a more attuned manner. The individual's developmental history is important in comprehending pathology relative to the timing and duration of specific circumstances and events. In assessing self pathology, one must evaluate the premorbid self structure in terms of the degree to which it has attained cohesion as well as determining where the areas of deficit lie.

The primary tenet of Self Psychology is that unmet childhood needs can be re-activated in therapy, and that the therapist can respond to these needs in ways that facilitate greater self-esteem and create a more cohesive self structure (Kohut, 1977). This belief contrasts with the classic positions in psychoanalytic and cognitive psychology that emphasize the importance of intellectual awareness of the individual's drives and/or motives in which accumulated insight is believed to create cognitive control over behavior. Although classic psychoanalytic theory has valued the expression of affect and the use of transference material, it has maintained a dedication to exploring drive-wishes rather than focusing on how emotional needs may be gratified through the therapeutic process.

In contemporary western culture it is assumed that humans have basic physical needs that must be met by fundamental elements. It would be considered foolish to deny the necessity of carbon, oxygen or hydrogen or the need for essential amino acids, vitamins, or minerals. The gratification of any of these requirements is willingly accepted as natural to human survival. When the elements are found in abundance we not only expect to minimally survive, but to actually thrive. When insufficient nutriment exists, pathology arises.

Our culture creates an atmosphere in which it is difficult to acknowledge fundamental emotional needs. As social animals, human's emotional needs are usually met in the context of relationships with others. When they are only minimally met the individual can survive just as he would without adequate food. In the same way that the indi-