SELFOBJECT FUNCTIONS OF THE FAMILY: IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPY

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ABSTRACT: The application of Self-Psychology theory to family functioning adds to our models of understanding and intervention in family therapy. This article develops a theory of the family as a supraordinate selfobject and explores diverse clinical applications of the theory. The family as a selfobject matrix enhances the self development of the child by the provision of continuity through the maintenance of proximity over time, and by an enhanced quality and quantity of selfobject responsiveness for the individual. This application of Self Psychology theory has wide implications for family therapy with children in foster care, family therapy with elderly couples coping with dementia in one spouse, and family therapy as a component of treatment with suicidal adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the family as a selfobject may help inform clinical solutions to problems such as the treatment of foster care breakdown, caregiver burden for a dementing spouse, or suicidal adolescents. In each case, breakdown in family functioning can be explained by examining how the family as a unit operates as a supraordinate selfobject. This conceptualization helps frame interventions as the therapist works to reestablish the selfobject functioning of the family as a unit, thereby ameliorating the presenting problem.

Though self psychology has been called a “multi-body psychology” (Bacal & Newman, 1990, p. 228), it has not discussed the interrelationship of the individual and his or her family as a whole. Optimally, the individual, by participating in the family unit, experiences greater self-cohesion and also assists the family to meet the selfobject needs of other members.
In this paper the key concepts of self psychology will be reviewed in an attempt to show their applicability to the family as a functional unit. It will be shown that an individual maintains a specific proximity to his or her family of origin in order to satisfy mirroring and idealizing needs. The family functions to meet these needs in three ways: by providing continuity in attachment for its members which enhances the development of the self; by responding to a qualitatively greater diversity of needs through the complementary responsiveness of its members; and by quantitatively enhancing the experience of empathic attunement through the cumulative effect of family responsiveness to individual experience. The implication of this view of the family as a selfobject will be discussed in relation to the clinical problems identified above.

The Self and Selfobjects

Self Psychology is the study of the self and the way in which its structure is built through internalization of experiences with selfobjects. These selfobjects function to maintain and nurture self structure throughout life.

This structure is the basis for our sense of being an independent center of initiative and perception, integrated with our most central ambitions and ideals and with our experience that our body and mind form a unit in space and a continuum in time (Kohut, 1977, p. 177).

The self is an internal structure, analogous to the respiratory or nervous systems, and as such can never be completely understood or experienced by anyone but the person to whom it belongs (Wolf, 1988). Heinz Kohut (1984) demonstrated that the concept of the self is “not part of physical reality but of psychological reality, observable only via introspection and empathy” (p. 50).

From birth, the child has an emergent self structure which evokes from its environment the empathic responsiveness and material resources it needs for survival (Stern, 1985). Typically, these resources come from the immediate family members which, by providing certain types of experiences, help the infant develop cohesion, vigour and harmony (Kohut & Wolf, 1978; Wolf, 1988).

These experiences, either self-enhancing or faulty, are termed self-object experiences. The individual experiences self-selfobject relationships which function to maintain the self’s cohesion from birth to death. The self, then, is dependent on a “continuing presence of an evoking-

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