Heinz Kohut and the Future of Psychoanalysis

Charles B. Strozier, Ph.D.

The author begins with a discussion of Heinz Kohut’s musings on the future of psychoanalysis at the celebration of his 60th birthday party in 1973. In that speech, Kohut clearly defines the paradigm shift he introduced. Kohut’s robust enthusiasm for the future of psychoanalysis leads to discussion of four themes, three of which represent incomplete thoughts in his body of work, which are particularly relevant for understanding his impact on psychoanalysis as it has developed since his death in 1981: First, empathy, the coin of the realm, raises questions about the nature of interpretation; second, termination is murky, at best, in self psychology, although it may be that anything more concrete would be inappropriate to our basic assumptions; third, boundaries that were once too rigid may have become too loose; finally, Kohut’s ideas on rage provide a fundamentally important idea for understanding the current world of terrorism and political violence.

Keywords: empathy; interpretation; self psychology; rage; terrorism

Dr. Strozier is Professor of History, John Jay College and the Graduate Center, The City University of New York, and Training and Supervising Analyst, Training and Research Institute in Self Psychology. He is the author of Heinz Kohut: The Making of a Psychoanalyst (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2001; revised edition in paperback published by Other Press, 2004), which won the Gradiva Award from the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis, the Goethe Prize from the Canadian Psychoanalytic Association, and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.
Heinz Kohut himself addressed the future of psychoanalysis in a talk after his 60th birthday celebration in May of 1973 (Kohut, 1978, pp. 663–685; Strozier, 2001, pp. 239–240). The day-long symposium honoring him had been a great success with a number of talks by distinguished scholars throughout the day, although there had been some drama leading up to the event itself. Many of the old guard in the Chicago psychoanalytic community found it distasteful that such a celebration would be held for Kohut when nothing of the kind was ever done for Freud when he turned 60. The idea was, in fact, solidly voted down and even laughed at when Ernest Wolf brought up the idea to the program committee of the Chicago Psychoanalytic Society and later from the floor of a society meeting. There was even a murky and anonymous threat made by someone to reveal some undisclosed incriminating information about Kohut, although, in the end, nothing materialized. Not to be deterred, Wolf got a few friends to contribute $150 to seed a fund for the event and secured the support of George Pollock, the Director of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. After many months of work by the organizing committee of those close to Kohut (Arnold Goldberg and Michael Franz Basch, besides Wolf himself), an honorary committee of Anna Freud, Ruth Eissler, Rudolph Loewenstein, and Marianne Kris, and its volunteer “secretary,” Ina Wolf, what came together in May of 1973 was, in effect, the first self psychology conference. The program featured quite a remarkable and diverse line-up: Foreign guests included Alexander Mitscherlich from Frankfurt, Paul Parin from Zurich, and Jacques Palaci from Paris; from the United States, Albert Solnit came from Yale, Robert LeVine from Harvard, Rene Spitz from Denver, Lawrence Friedman from New York, Joseph Lichtenberg from Washington, and the keynote address was by Carl Schorske from Princeton.

Kohut had been coy in the planning of the event about whether he would make a presentation. He begged off with an absurd story to Wolf about how he had developed a hysterical symptom that made him choke sometimes when he was talking. In retrospect, Wolf suspects that Kohut was actually uncertain about his health, as his cancer was then still in its

---

1The supporting documentation for my account of this conference, and for what follows, can be found in the backnotes of my biography of Kohut. I also personally attended.

2The rumor that got back to Kohut was that Robert Kohrman, a psychoanalyst who actually lived a block away from Kohut in Hyde Park, made the threat. In his typically indirect way, Kohut asked his friend, Charles Kligerman, also a resident of Hyde Park, to confront Kohrman, who vigorously denied the charge. Kohut accepted his denial, at least in a formal sense, and moved on.
early stages and he was not yet certain of its future course. He did agree to allow himself to be listed on the program as giving “Some Thoughts in Response” to what was billed as the major after-dinner address by John Gedo. Typically, Kohut worked on these comments without anyone knowing of his labors throughout the Winter and Spring of 1973. He wrote them out and then memorized his talk, which he delivered extemporaneously and even without notes, as was entirely suited for the occasion. Gedo had been formal and even stiff in his written speech that he read aloud, so everyone in the room warmed to an enthusiastic and unusually spry Kohut as he came to the podium.

At first, Kohut was personal and reflective, telling a story about his visit to Vienna in 1957 with his wife and son. Then he settled into his topic (Kohut, 1978, p. 666): “The question to which I shall address myself this evening concerns not the value or the validity of the contributions made so far by individual psychoanalysts, not even the significance of the immense oeuvre of Freud, but the vitality of psychoanalysis—in other words, I shall address myself to the question of its future.” The science of psychoanalysis that he held so dear, this “new and pioneering foray into the hitherto unexplored,” was, he said, still new and young with a bright future ahead (Kohut, 1978, pp. 666–667). Kohut pondered what it meant that the next generation of psychoanalysts would have no direct tie to Freud himself and in that context critically evaluated such issues as Freud’s advice in 1912 that an analyst should act like surgeon, his disdain for religion, and his annoyance with and lack of empathy for the insane (Kohut, 1978, pp. 760–672). Kohut treated these issues with great care, as he was careful in those days not to take on Freud too directly. His barbs came in velvet gloves. But, his points were clear. Kohut also thought the future required a welcome into the field of scholars from many other disciplines, especially history, although he noted, wisely (Kohut, 1978, p. 675), that “a science grows older in proportion to the shift of its emphasis from the field it investigates to the specific tools it employs in investigating it.”

Kohut (1978, pp. 674–684) then turns to the topic of the basic values that should govern the future of psychoanalysis. He notes how our ideals and values are rooted in our relationships with those “idealized omnipotent” adults who tower above us but with whom we merge and “whose power we experience as our own.” This origin of values explains in large part the quality of absoluteness that they often maintain in people. Yet, we can change, bringing the new into the self in ways that can make ideals and values an almost invisible part of experience. He is keenly aware that such
new values can themselves become absolutist in their own way, but argues, subtly and almost indirectly, that empathy is the kind of value in psychoanalysis that inevitably resists dogmatism. It is too much in us from the start, although it can also be “trained, refined, and employed with scientific rigor.” That embrace of empathy is at the center of the psychoanalysis of the future.

The world of yesterday, he says, as it descended form the Renaissance, is that of the individual. It was a world of the “independent mind”—of the proud scientist: standing tall, clear-sighted,” and of “intense interrelationships between clearly defined people.” The world of tomorrow will be different, one of understimulation, emptiness, and depression. The prophets of this tomorrow (Kohut, 1978, p. 680) are the “musicians of atonal sound, the sculptors of disjointed form the painters of disintegrated line and color, the poets of decomposed language—who in their work are demonstrating the breakup of the unresponded self and its artistic reassemblage.” Kohut’s favorite example of the new prophet is Franz Kafka (2006), whose story, Metamorphosis, he loved above all others, although he often referred to The Trial (1999) and The Castle (1998), which portray the character K as the “everyman” of tomorrow. This world is “empty, flat, yearning” and “cold voices” speak of him in the impersonal third pronoun as a cockroach (Kohut, 1978, p. 680). It is like, he says, being caught as a patient in the “wheels of a big impersonal hospital,” an allusion that few in the audience understood was to his traumatic experience with his spleenectomy for his lymphoma in the Fall of 1971. But, the issues are historical as well. The future world will contain stable populations that are increasingly uniform with less space in which to roam and which generate totalitarianism in their politics. In this new psychological space, “the individual will be confronted by new problems of psychological survival.”

In such a context psychoanalysis is uniquely suited to find ways to reach and heal the patients of tomorrow. Empathy is, of course, the key (although he pointedly rejects the “maneuvers of the aging Ferenczi” to let his patients “sit on his knees” to make up for their childhood deprivations; Kohut, 1978, p. 685). A new vision can be realized. “I believe that psychoanalysis will in the not too distant future examine itself afresh, will reorganize its basic stance, will transmute its inheritance into new, creative initiatives” (p. 685). The psychoanalyst of the future will engage the battle between the human world and the nonhuman world of Kafka. There is no doubt which side psychoanalysis, “this new sun among the sciences of man, will shed its understanding warmth and its explaining light.”
Kohut’s robust enthusiasm for the future of psychoanalysis in what he felt would inevitably be the embrace of empathy as its core commitment is worth pondering a generation later. There is no question most of those who occupy center stage in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking are children of Kohut, just as the many and varied orientations in the field—from relational psychoanalysis, to intersubjectivity, to postmodern theory, and so on—are offshoots of the conceptual paradigm he introduced. And he was undoubtedly right that his radical new theory of empathy is at the heart of all that is new and exciting in psychoanalysis, even if there is much narcissism of small differences between the orientations. What modern theories agree on is actually much more striking than their noisy disputes. In many ways, Kohut’s emphasis on empathy has become so much the coin of the realm that his place in remaking the theory has been forgotten. William James (1975, p. 95) once commented on the classic steps in the life of a theory. First, it is attacked as utterly absurd. Then, it gets accepted as obvious and insignificant. Finally, it is understood as so important that its opponents claim that they had said it all before.3

But, in evaluating the future of Kohut’s work there is, in fact, more to say in the specifics of his theories than in his global emphasis on empathy. Along those lines, I take up four themes in Kohut’s work that are worth careful reconsideration in terms of thinking about the future of our field. These themes are hardly the only ones he dealt with intelligently and critically. His wide-ranging mind covered a host of fascinating topics. I make no pretense to completeness in my selection of topics to consider. But, I do apply a crucial criterion of selection: What are the issues Kohut dealt with in his work that have endured since his death and will, I think, continue to occupy a central place in the foreseeable future of self psychology and indeed of psychoanalysis itself?

One qualification to keep in mind is that Kohut was not alone in thinking critically about the issues I discuss. In some areas he was more of a pioneer than in others. Sometimes he took wrong turns (e.g., regarding the “tension arc” between mirroring and idealization; see Strozier, 2001, pp. 336–337). He also never adequately acknowledged the work of others. He was not unaware of the problem, arguing it would be the task of future scholars to complete the footnotes he never wrote. He airily waved off the problem of attribution, which bothered many observers at the time and

3I am grateful to Arnold Goldberg for bringing to my attention this passage from William James.
continues to trouble critics. I think the issue is posed incorrectly. Of course, Kohut should have given more explicit credit to others. But, the problem was more general and really existential. Kohut had to close out from his mind the thinking of others whose work impinged on his own creativity in order to maintain the clarity of his vision and his own focus, precisely because much of what many others had touched on was so close. He was, of course, also sick and rushed in his last decade, but that was of marginal significance. He had the time to check his notes. It was rather than he lacked the will. He lived for his work, even sacrificing his life to his creativity. He needed to maintain a laser beam focus literally to survive.

**Empathy and Explanation**

Empathy came to have quite a range for Kohut. From his first explorations into what he felt was its status as the core epistemological stance of psychoanalysis (Kohut, 1978, pp. 205–232), Kohut argued, first, that empathy is the oxygen of psychological life. We cannot live without it. Experience itself is dependent on empathy. To imagine that empathy is somehow outside of the self makes no sense. Second, therapists who systematically employ empathy not only see things differently but change the experience itself of their patients. Even psychosis, he once noted, is “in the mind of the beholder” (Kohut, 1996, p. 148), which he further elaborated in a letter of February 16, 1981 (Kohut, 1994, p. 424): “Insofar, in other words, as the therapist is able to build an empathic bridge to the patient, the patient has in a way ceased to be a borderline case (a crypto-psychotic) or a psychotic and has become a case of (severe) narcissistic personality disorder.” Kohut moved a great distance in his understanding of empathy from epistemology to healing. Third, Kohut believed empathy was not gender-specific. Men, as well as women, equally possessed the capacity to use empathy in their therapeutic work. Fourth, empathy, which is a much more powerful force con-

---

4Some have argued Kohut simply never read people like Winnicott, or Erikson, or Klein, which is basically a foolish argument. There were others as well informed as Kohut, but no one had more mastery of the field than Heinz Kohut. See Strozier (2001, pp. 243–248) for a longer and more detailed discussion of Kohut’s relation to other thinkers in psychoanalysis, an account of some of the absurd claims to prior credit, and one case in which Kohut clearly plagiarized.

5Robert Jay Lifton helped me clarify the survival quality of this aspect of Kohut’s thinking in our 20 years of conversations on the subject.
necting people than sex, is a force to counteract human destructiveness. It is the hope of peace.

One logical extension of Kohut’s emphasis on empathy as the fundamental basis of the psychoanalytic encounter is the awareness of process that has proven of particular significance for thinkers after Kohut. Empathy involves listening to what is said and not said, to imagining one’s way into the shoes of the other, to reflecting on a patient’s affect states, and responding with warmth and humane kindness. As Kohut argued so eloquently in his last lecture, such relatedness in and of itself cures, even without anything else happening in the therapy. That basic idea of Kohut’s has proven instrumental in inspiring the burst of creative theoretical work by Robert Stolorow and those interested in intersubjectivity (Stolorow, Atwood, and Brandchaft, 1994; Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow, 1997; Stolorow and Atwood, 2000; and a good recent review of this literature and an extension of it by William Coburn, 2002), to those in relational psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1988), who privilege process over everything, to Russell Meares (2000, 2005) and his “conversational model,” and many others. It took Kohut himself a long time to arrive so unambiguously at the idea that empathy in and of itself cures—that is, finally to wrest himself from the weight of 75 years of emphasis in the field on interpretation—but, the fact that he did so decisively at the end proved liberating for others eager to pick up the baton and run with it.

Despite his emphasis on empathy, Kohut never relinquished the significance of explanation as perhaps the most distinctive dimension of psychoanalysis and what most distinguished it from other therapies. He resolved this apparent contradiction by reinterpreting what he meant by explanation. For one thing, explanation must occur in the context of an empathic therapeutic relationship, which alters the texture of an interpretation. Empathy, furthermore (Kohut, 1984), may define the sole quality of the therapy for prolonged periods, especially in the beginning phases, before allowing explanations gradually to begin. That sequence, in turn, makes the two much more synergistic than has been recognized in psychoanalysis and turns the healing process in a seamless web of experience. The right interpretation, in this sense, is a kind of mirroring. Good explanation expands cognition, to be sure, but it also helps build psychic structure. It is this line of argument that led Kohut (1991, p. 534) to argue, as he does in his Berkeley lecture four days before his death, that interpretation is a “higher form of empathy.”
For all its eloquence, the problem with Kohut’s argument is that he collapses interpretation into empathy. Is that adequate theoretically? It is perhaps worth remembering how absolutist and dogmatic psychoanalysis had become in its ego psychological phase about the centrality of interpretation as the defining characteristic of the field. Kurt Eissler (1953, p. 110), ever the guardian of orthodoxy, defined a parameter as “the deviation, both quantitative and qualitative, from the basic model of technique which requires interpretation as the exclusive tool.” A parameter, he said, “should be introduced into treatment only when nothing else works; should never be used except minimally; should led to self-elimination; and its effect on the transfer must never be such that it cannot be abolished by interpretation.” David Rapaport and Merton Gill (1959) further elaborated somewhat later on how a “good” interpretation encompassed all the basic points of view (although to meet that requirement would certainly mean the therapist would have to do all the talking in a session). Such radical privileging of interpretation created a chilling discourse in which an unseen, older, mostly White, male therapist told you what was wrong with your life. The one thing Kohut at even his most critical admired about the ideas of people like Eissler and Rapaport and, of course, most of all Freud is that they were clear, elegant, and systematic, even if he came to understand how impossible it was to heal someone well and humanely within the confines of classical rules of practice. He was most troubled by the conundrum that he knew many people were, in fact, extremely well treated by classical analysts. He resolved that issue with the idea that good therapists in the old days either ignored the theory in their practice or did not really understand it.

Self psychological views of interpretation are more humane, but are they clear? If would seem the field has a very good understanding of empathy but lacks an equally clear grasp of interpretation. To leave interpretation as merely a higher form of empathy may well beg the question. What is it that we are explaining in self psychology or, indeed, in any of the orientations that have branched out from his work? Certainly, without a firm grounding in drive theory there is precious little to interpret about the points of view that Rappaport describes (except for the genetic point of view, or the origins of experience). The wonderful William James (as cited in Richardson, 2006, p. 240) said of his own life that it was a “buzzing, blooming confusion.” If we can generalize that, the best one can hope for in psychoanalytic practice is to connect a few dots in the haze. If done well, as Kohut argued, such explanation in the context of warmth and empathy helps build psychic structure.
Perhaps the most coherent and elegant aspect of drive theory was its elaborate construction of termination. In the theory of treatment, the Oedipus Complex gets mobilized, which results in the unfolding of the defense transference. Everything you say means its opposite. You may say you love the therapist, but you really want to kill him because he has become transferentially your oedipal father who intruded on your forbidden desires for you know whom. In termination, then, in a clear set of steps over about half a year of working through, the patient dissolves the defense transference, relinquishes the childhood libidinal objects, and re-enters life, wiser and more autonomous. The affect of termination is tinged with sadness as one relinquishes those infantile oedipal objects.

It is an elegant theory that is eminently clear. The only problem is that it is entirely wrong. At the clinical level, Kohut realized early on (but not until after about 10 years of practice) that patients do not feel sad at the end of a good analysis but happy. But, how is that measured? Using Kohut’s criteria for understanding the transformation of narcissism, one might say a patient is ready to terminate when there has been enough expansion of empathy, creativity gained, humor, and self-perspective acquired, and even some wisdom wrought about the awareness of death. But, that is exceedingly vague and subjective and relies on a construct about narcissism that remains still a bridge between Kohut’s early Freudian thinking and his truly self psychological formulations. In Kohut’s own therapeutic work, he tended to let things drift. Marian Tolpin told me in interview she did not even remember when she ended her three times a week therapy with Kohut in the 1970s, let alone how the process of termination took place (Strozier, 2001). Of the scores of other former patients I interviewed, most of whom were in therapy with Kohut in the last 15 years of his life, no one discussed a termination phase in his or her therapy. They seemed not to have let go at all.

It may well be misleading to use Kohut’s own practice in the last phase of his life as the basis for determining self psychological criteria for termination. He was sick with cancer the entire last decade of his life, and his death in 1981 at 68 years of age inevitably left most treatments in mid-stream (he saw patients up to about six months before his death). But, there is no question that to the extent it is relevant Kohut himself in his last decade or so seems to have consciously abandoned any attempt to define termination. His last, posthumously published book (How Does Analysis Cure?; Kohut,
1984) is about what constitutes healing in psychoanalysis, not how we know when treatment ends. For someone who once defined psychoanalysis as the “science of the human soul” (Kohut, 1978, p. 686), it is not surprising that about as specific as Kohut ever got in defining criteria for termination was that, at the end, a patient feels himself or herself as “a cohesive harmonious firm unit in time and space,” connected with his or her past and moving toward a “creative-productive future” (Kohut, 1984, p. 52).

Perhaps we simply need to accept the ambiguity of such a conceptualization and recognize that our theory will not allow for much greater specificity. In practice, it means things are a bit messy. I certainly have found in my own practice that termination is a decidedly ambiguous phase of treatment. It follows no logical or predictable course of action and cannot be governed by a coherent set of theoretical principles. I find that some people never want to leave and need to be gently nudged on (but never forced). Others go through long and serious work and then “terminate” by slowly decreasing the number of sessions per week, then per month, in a process that can linger for years. Some people leave and six months later are back again, but generally let go very slowly, if at all. At some point, everyone asks, “How does one know when therapy is over?” I always answer that question humorously by pointing out that the goal of therapy is to end therapy but add, honestly, that I have no real idea when it should end. There are, of course, patients who prematurely flee from treatment, and it is our duty to try and help them stay with the agony of searching for increased insight. But, it is another matter to know clearly when a good self psychological analysis is over.

Boundaries

In 1965, Victor Rosen, President-Elect of the American Psychoanalytic Association, fell in love with one of his former patients and planned to marry her. Heinz Kohut, then President of the American Psychoanalytic Association, wrote Rosen and put heavy pressure on him not to go through with the marriage (Kohut to Victor Rosen, November 7, 1965; Kohut, 1994, pp. 128–129). He urged Rosen to undertake more analytic work so that he could come to understand the irrational motivations for his actions. Kohut was greatly concerned for the effect of such a relationship on “our students and patients.” Perhaps, as an individual, Kohut said, Rosen was challenging rigid and outworn conventions of society. But, there was more at stake. His
action might loosen the ethical insistence that analysts not make use of “their patients’ emotional attachment for any purpose other than to enlarge their mastery over themselves through insight.”

What Kohut was so worried about in his letter to Rosen—the erotic connection between patient and analyst, not to mention a host of other kinds of lesser transgressions—has occasioned an abundance of rules in psychoanalysis. Freud, of course, was the originator of the rules of technique in a series of papers he wrote between 1911 and 1915. But, what an epigone like Kurt Eissler (quoted earlier) became so earnest about, Freud himself airily ignored. In a study from the late 1990s, David Lynn and George Vaillant (1998, pp. 163–171) reviewed whether Freud actually followed his own rules of clinical decorum. Based on 43 cases that can be studied from historical sources (such as an autobiography written by the patient), in 100% of the time Freud was not the opaque mirror he recommended; in 86% of the cases, he deviated from his rule of neutrality; and nearly 50% of the time, he gossiped shamelessly with patients about other patients.

The dilemma for classical analysts (including for Freud) is that the theory did not allow for easy, relaxed, empathic encounters between analysts and their patients. Now that the theory has changed so radically, of course, in large part, I would say, due to Kohut’s work, we struggle for coherent boundaries. People hug patients, hold their hands, serve them coffee, and, yes, marry them from time to time (although usually after some delay following the end of treatment). If in the old days the problem was that the boundaries were much too rigid, now it is fair to say we lack a theory to define meaningful boundaries at all. The most interesting, recent discussion of the philosophical basis for any rules in psychoanalysis is Arnold Goldberg’s (2007), *Moral Stealth: How “Correct Behavior” Insinuates Itself Into Psychotherapeutic Practice*. Goldberg (p. 42) argues for moral ambiguity, which implicitly makes almost all principles and rules of technique meaningless (except, of course, harming or abusing patients). Goldberg is not arguing for moral laxity. He is making a “plea for pragmatism.” He says: “There are no absolute guiding truths save those that we gain from conversation with one another.”

The greatest misunderstanding of Kohut’s work is the idea that he minimized sex and aggression, perhaps out of an inability to face the full meanings of the Oedipus Complex. I once asked Kohut a variation of this question in an interview I did with him in 1981, some six months before he
died (later published in our joint 1985 book, *Self Psychology and the Humanities*). He leaned forward in his study with great intensity and said, “Chuck, man wants to fuck and kill.” He then elaborated that of course the drives are important and have played a huge role in human history and exist as a basic part of human psychology. What he did not believe is that such drives constitute the essential make-up of what it means to be human, nor that if we see such manifestations of drive expressions in children it is entirely normal (he always said that if a child is acting the way Freud’s theory predicts you are witnessing a family in crisis, not one tiny example of what is universal), and finally and most importantly, the self is not an epiphenomenal byproduct of the dissolution of the Oedipus Complex as Freud first described in 1923 and which became enshrined in countless texts after that.

Kohut was interested in a self that is dependent and relational. His “baby” as he conceptualized things is a fully formed self IF seen in its mutual engagements with its caretakers, most of all the mother. This “virtual self,” as he called it rather presciently since there was no internet then, in time matures from such complete enmeshment with idealizing and mirroring selfobjects, as he called them, not into an autonomous and separate self, as Freud’s teleological theory had it, but into simply more mature and increasingly symbolic relationships with the selfobjects in one’s life. What he called the selfobject transferences are not to fully formed beings; in this sense, his theory is not really relational, as one can only comprehend how the self uses those functions of the selfobjects from within the psychology of the self using empathy. He felt that we use functions of others to keep our own selves together and cohesive (one of his most often used words). In the clinic this works both ways. Our patients, for example, need us to be idealizable to provide images worthy of their regard and aspiration, a hero they can admire and trust, perhaps for the first time, just as we find meaning in our lives at the gleam in their grateful eyes at the discovery of joy in their lives, and so on. A deep empathy defines that field of mutual interaction.

In diseased forms—and I used the medical term here advisedly—selfobject strivings often find expression in sexualized form. Sexualization, as Kohut uses the concept, is the translation or transformation of self needs into erotic metaphors. But, we must not be fooled by the noise of sexual dis-

6In the published version of the interview, Mrs. Kohut, the literary executor of Heinz Kohut’s estate, insisted that I edit out the passage I discuss in this paragraph. I did not reveal it until my own biography came out in 2001.
course. What matters are profoundly significant and unrealized self needs that employ erotic images and action as a form of language. As clinicians, we need to be simultaneous translators, rather like in the United Nations.

In his own practice, once he had moved beyond his own classical phase and begun to formulate his self psychology between the late 1960s and his death in 1981, Kohut easily and naturally modified the old rules. He never wrote about his evolving technique. I recovered the story through extensive interviews with former patients over the 19 years of my own research. But, it was his theory that opened him to more responsive, empathic relations with patients. He once described how he let a depressed patient hold onto two fingers as she lay on the couch. Another time he humorously kicked a tightly wound lawyer in the butt as he walked out of the office. Marian Tolpin, who was in treatment with him three times a week for most of the 1970s, would sit in a chair opposite him when she wanted to talk about her patients, and would lie on the couch when she felt like doing her own therapy. Kohut often called people after difficult sessions. He was deeply loved. The lilt of his Viennese accent lingered in the transferences of a thousand patients.

Rage

Rage, Kohut notes, comes with many faces, from the fleeting annoyance of a minor criticism, to the furor of the catatonic, or the grudges of the paranoid (Kohut, 1978, pp. 615–658; Strozier, 2001, pp. 250–251). But, rage is never “normal” and part of a developmental phase to which one returns under stress. We do not regress to rage. There is no such thing as primary and secondary rage, just as there is no developmental line of rage. Rage only exists in its raw, primitive, elemental form when aggression is mobilized in the service of images from early childhood. Mature aggressions, on the other hand, are bounded. Their aim is definite, such as defeating an enemy who stands in the way of a cherished goal or the aggressive pursuit of someone we love. One’s object in such encounters is regarded as a separate center of initiative, someone who is relatively autonomous and whom we relate to as a whole being. The enemy that calls forth rage, on the other hand, is not a person but a flaw in a world experienced as a mere extension of self, an infantile psychological environment that precariously maintains self-esteem.

The phenomenology of rage is that it consists of a desperate need for revenge, an unforgiving fury for righting the wrong of a minor irritant and undoing a hurt by any means, along with a “deeply anchored, unrelenting
compulsion” in the pursuit of one’s aims (Kohut, 1978, p. 638). There can be no rest for someone who has suffered a narcissistic injury, which suggests the origin of rage in perceived psychological injuries like ridicule, contempt, and conspicuous defeat. The sequence here is important. The narcissistically vulnerable person responds with heated imagination to an otherwise minor slight that, in turn, provokes a state of fragmentation that unravels the self. Rage is the by-product. For Frueed, it is worth noting, the sequence is exactly the opposite. We are constantly stirred by aggressive impulses that are ultimately of a biological origin and are only contained by the thin defensive wall erected in the process of ego development. It is only natural that things break through at times. In fact, the capacity to “sublimate” aggressive drive urges is a rare gift. The human norm for Freud is aggression and violence. His is a grim view of human nature and his theory a grand elaboration of his dark pessimism.

In rage, as Kohut sees it, there is always a lack of proportion between the perceived injury and the nature of the revenge that is pursued. There is an utter disregard for reasonable limitations on the hurt one can cause others. Rage involves a boundless wish to obtain revenge. Empathy, most of all, is missing for those felt to be offenders. At the same time, the pursuit of that goal sharpens one’s reasoning capacities. Cognition is not compromised but enhanced. Rage, like death, focuses the self.

In a world of terrorism and global threats to security, it is rage most of all that we must understand. All of Freud’s philosophizing about aggression and the death instinct is simply beside the point. Kohut’s astonishingly sensitive understanding of the synergies between shame, slights, self-esteem, and rage points the way to a grasp of the world that provides insight into the forms of contemporary political violence and the fury that fuels jihadism. Freud sought biological explanations for violence and war. Such a discourse takes us out of history. Kohut stayed within history in his focus on shame and humiliation that motivates rage.

**Conclusion**

Kohut’s work fundamentally altered psychoanalysis and created the paradigm shift that allowed for the emergence of contemporary theory and practice. Others were important in this process of transformation, and it is always wrong to simplify analysis in intellectual history. But, there is also no question Kohut was the most significant thinker both to articulate the fun-
damental problems with drive theory as it hardened into a rigid orthodoxy by the 1960s and to offer a coherent psychoanalytic alternative grounded in empathy. Kohut never thought he was devising a new psychological theory de novo and out of context. He was convinced that he was revising psychoanalysis itself, that he was the voice of the future for the field and not just another dissident (which is why he resisted so fiercely allowing some of his followers who were inclined to split off from the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis in 1978). Revisiting Kohut’s legacy in relation to four specific themes reminds us how prescient and profound he was but how, in certain areas, there were conceptual threads left hanging. Interpretation and termination are two themes that cry out for clarification. The fascinating question of boundaries is one that Kohut opened up but left for others to ponder and extend. And his consideration of rage needs to be recovered so that we can better grasp the modern world.

Anyone in a new field must return to origins in order to move forward in creative ways. Intellectual history is not a linear process. It circles forward on itself in an endless loop of analysis and re-evaluation. To discover Kohut again is to question the future of psychoanalysis and find ourselves in it.

References


Charles B. Strozier
453 3rd St.
Brooklyn, NY 11215
212–237–8432
charlesbstrozier@yahoo.com

Translations of Abstract

El autor empieza con una discusión de las reflexiones de Kohut sobre el futuro del psicoanálisis con motivo de la celebración de su 60 aniversario en 1973. En esta presentación, Kohut claramente define el cambio de paradigma que introdujo. El entusiasmo de Kohut por el futuro del psicoanálisis conduce a la discusión de cuatro temas, tres de los cuales representan pensamientos incompletos en el cuerpo de su obra, que son particularmente relevantes para la comprensión de su impacto en el psicoanálisis tal como se ha desarrollado desde su muerte en 1981: primero, la empatía, su concepto más representativo, plantea preguntas acerca de la naturaleza de la interpretación; segundo, la terminación es algo que resulta difuso en la psicología del self, aunque algo más concreto no encajaría con nuestros supuestos; tercero, límites que en un momento fueron demasiado rígidos se han convertido en demasiado laxos; finalmente, las ideas de Kohut sobre la rabia nos proporcionan una idea
importante y fundamental para comprender el mundo actual de terrorismo y violencia política.

L'auteur commence par examiner les réflexions de Heinz Kohut sur l'avenir de la psychanalyse lors de la célébration de son 60e anniversaire de naissance en 1973. Dans ce discours, Kohut définit clairement le changement de paradigme qu'il a introduit. Le solide enthousiasme de Kohut quant à l'avenir de la psychanalyse mène à une discussion autour de quatre thèmes, trois d'entre eux touchant à des parties incomplètes de sa pensée dans ses ouvrages. Ces thèmes sont particulièrement pertinents pour comprendre l'impact de Kohut sur la psychanalyse telle qu'elle s'est développée depuis sa mort en 1981. En premier lieu, l'empathie, délimitant le domaine, soulève des questions sur la nature de l'interprétation; en deuxième lieu, la terminaison est au mieux obscure en psychologie du soi, bien qu'il soit possible que tout autre chose plus concrète serait inappropriée à nos hypothèses fondamentales; troisièmement, les frontières qui étaient autrefois trop rigides peuvent être devenues trop relâchées; finalement, les idées de Kohut sur la rage offrent une base importante pour la compréhension du monde actuel de terrorisme et de violence politique.


Zuerst die Empathie, gewissermaßen die Währung in unserem Bereich; sie wirft Fragen in Bezug auf das Wesen der Interpretationen auf; zweitens die Frage der Beendigung einer Analyse, die in der Selbtspsychologie im besten Fall als unklar zu bezeichnen ist, so als ob es mit unseren grundlegenden Annahmen nicht in Einklang zu bringen wäre, irgendetwas Konkretes darüber zu sagen; drittens in Bezug auf die Regeln und Grenzen in der Analyse, die früher zu streng waren und jetzt vielleicht zu locker gehandhabt würden; zuletzt: Kohuts Konzept der narzisstischen Wut bietet uns grundlegende Möglichkeiten, unsere gegenwärtige Welt des Terrorismus und der politischen Gewalt zu verstehen.