Dualistic thinking has been characteristic of psychoanalytic theory since its inception. In the development of Freud’s ideas, such dualism became enshrined in the doctrine of instinctual drive and the psychoeconomic point of view: self-preservation instincts versus sexual instincts, Eros versus Thanatos, libidinal drives versus aggressive drives, narcissistic libido versus object libido. This dualistic tradition has persisted in psychoanalytic self psychology as well. From Kohut’s early papers on narcissism (1966, 1968) to his final theoretical statement (1984), human subjective worlds have been pictured as populated by two distinct types of psychological objects—selfobjects, experienced as part of oneself and/or serving to maintain the organization of self, and “true” objects, firmly demarcated from oneself and targets of passionate desire. Such dualities, like all typological systems, lend themselves to the irresistible temptation to substance the products of human thought, transforming psychological categories into static, immutable entities—reifications that necessarily obscure the complex, ever-shifting flux of human psychological life. These typological reifications lead inevitably to the encrustation of false dichotomies that, in turn, become sources of endless ideological controversy, as in the current heated debate over the centrality of developmental deficit versus psychic conflict in psychoanalytic theory.

The selfobject—true object dichotomy that pervades Kohut’s thought originated in the Procrustean bed of classical drive theory. Narcissistic libido and object—instinctual energies each followed their own distinct developmental pathways, cathecting their respective targets of investment (Kohut, 1971). However, even after Kohut abandoned both classical metapsychology and the idea that selfobject relations evolve into

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ture object relations, claiming instead that one never outgrows one’s need for selfobjects and that such relatedness undergoes development from archaic to mature modes, the essential dichotomy was still retained, forming the basis for a theoretical complementarity between self psychology and conflict psychology (Kohut, 1977). Moreover, statements about self—selfobject relationships, selves seeking psychological nourishment from their selfobjects, and selfobjects responding empathically to selves all entail reifications that transform organizations of subjective experience and psychological functions into palpable entities and existential agents performing actions. Such reifications can all too readily be seized upon by critics who would trivialize Kohut’s monumental clinical and theoretical contributions by reducing them to a prescientific soul psychology or crude interpersonalism (e.g., Oremland, 1985).

These theoretical pitfalls can be avoided if the term “selfobject” is used in accord with its strictly psychoanalytic meaning. “Selfobject” does not refer to an environmental entity or caregiving agent. Rather, it designates a class of psychological functions pertaining to the maintenance, restoration, and transformation of self experience.1 Thus, when we use the term “selfobject,” we refer to an object experienced subjectively as serving selfobject functions (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984/1985). We refer, in other words, to a dimension of experiencing an object (Kohut, 1984, p. 49), in which a specific bond is required for maintaining, restoring, or consolidating the organization of self experience.

With this conceptual clarification we are thus led away from the selfobject—true object dichotomy and its attendant reifications toward a multidimensional view of human experience in general and of experiencing an object in particular. Our listening perspective becomes thereby focused on the complex, continuously shifting figure—ground relationships among the selfobject and other dimensions of experiencing another person (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984, Chap. 2; Stolorow & Lachmann, 1984/1985). It is in these shifting figure—ground relationships that the experiential meaning of Kohut’s principle of complementarity between self psychology and conflict psychology can be found (Stolorow, 1985). From this perspective, selfobject failure and psychic conflict are seen not as dichotomous, but as dimensions of experience that are indissolubly interrelated. Indeed, it can be shown that the formation of inner

1 Similarly, the term “self,” as a psychoanalytic construct, should not refer to an existential agent (a person) but to a psychological structure—that is, an organization of experience characterized by varying degrees of cohesion and continuity (see Atwood & Stolorow, 1984, Chap. 1).

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conflict, whether in early development or in the psychoanalytic situation, always takes place in specific “intersubjective contexts” of selfobject failure (Stolorow & Brandchaft, in press).

As an example of this multidimensional perspective, let us consider some of the many meanings and functions that may be involved in a sexual act. Sexual union with another person may include a prominent selfobject dimension, serving mirroring and/or idealized soothing functions, lending cohesion, continuity, and positive affective tone to the subject's self experience. On the other hand, the sexual act may be required when the selfobject functions of the tie to the object are experienced as absent, insufficient, or endangered. Here the object is not experienced as a reliable source of selfobject functions, and the sexual enactment, often perverse in quality, serves as an eroticized substitute for the missing or unsteady selfobject experience (Goldberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Stolorow & Lachmann, 1980). If the object is experienced not only as failing to provide needed selfobject functions but also as potentially rejective or hostile, the sexual act may serve the purpose of pacifying the object, fending off anticipat responses that would be destructive to the subject. Sexual union may also serve the purpose of reassuring against the danger of separation from an object, whether the selfobject dimension of the tie is figure or ground. The sexual act binds the object to the subject, preventing an inner experience of object loss. Finally, the selfobject functions of the bond may be present only as a reliable background feature of the experience, with the object being perceived as clearly demarcated from the subject and passionately desired primarily for its own exciting and pleasurable qualities.

I am suggesting that a multiplicity of such dimensions coexist in any complex object relationship, with certain meanings and functions occupying the experiential foreground and others occupying the background, depending on the subject's motivational priorities at any given moment. Furthermore, the figure—ground relationships among these multiple dimensions of experience may significantly shift, corresponding to shifts in the subject's psychological organization and motivational hierarchy, often in response to alterations or disturbances in the tie to the object. For example, the conflictual dimension invariably comes to the fore in reaction to anticipated or experienced selfobject failure (Stolorow & Brandchaft, in press).

These considerations hold critical implications for the understanding and analysis of analytic transferences. In certain transference configurations—for example, those elucidated by Kohut (1971, 1977)—the selfobject dimension is clearly in the foreground, as the restoration or maintenance of self experience is the paramount psychological purpose motivating the patient's specific tie to the analyst. In other transference configurations, the selfobject dimension operates silently in the background, enabling the patient to confront frightening feelings and painful dilemmas (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984, ch. 2; Stolorow & Lachmann, 1984/1985). In still other situations, the analyst is perceived as significantly failing to provide requisite selfobject functions.2 Here the analyst is not experienced as a selfobject, but as a source of painful and conflictual affect states, in turn engendering resistance.3 When, in such instances, the patient is resisting the emergence of central selfobject needs, it makes no theoretical sense to speak of the analytic relationship as a self—selfobject unit,4 because the selfobject dimension of the transference has become temporarily obliterated or obstructed by what the patient has perceived as actual or impending selfobject failure from the side of the analyst, and the analysis must focus on the patient's fears of a transference repetition of traumatically damaging childhood experiences (Kohut, 1971; Ornstein, 1974). When such fears or disturbances are sufficiently analyzed and the broken bond with the analyst is thereby

2 There has been a tendency in clinical discourse to reify such experiences of selfobject failure by introducing such unfortunate phrases as “negative selfobjects” or “bad selfobjects.” In such expressions, the term “selfobject” is again being employed erroneously, as if it referred to people rather than to a dimension of experience. If “selfobject” is defined, as I believe it should be, as a class of functions, then the notion of a “negative selfobject” is a contradiction in terms. An object not experienced as a source of selfobject functions is simply not a selfobject—good, bad, or indifferent. If a person uses painful experiences with an object for the purpose of self-restoration, as in certain forms of masochism, this is best conceptualized as a substitute for a missing selfobject experience, not as a relationship with a “negative selfobject.”

3 In two earlier contributions (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984/1985; Stolorow & Brandchaft, in press), it was argued that the specific intersubjective contexts in which conflict originally takes form are those in which central affect states of the child cannot be integrated because they fail to evoke the requisite, attuned responsiveness from the caregiving surrogate. Such un integrated affect states become the source of lifelong inner conflict because they are experienced as threats both to the person's established psychological organization and to the maintenance of vitally needed ties. Thus, affect-dissociating defensive operations are called into play, which reappear in the analytic situation in the form of resistance. Such resistance must be understood as being rooted in the patient's expectation or fear in the transference that his emerging selfobject needs and feeling states will meet with the same faulty responsiveness that they received from the original caregivers.

4 It is for this and other reasons that I prefer the broader, more inclusive concept of an “intersubjective field” (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984;
Stolorow & Brandchaft, in press), referring to the interplay between the differently organized subjective worlds of patient and analyst.

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mended, then the selfobject dimension of the tie becomes restored, either to its position in the foreground or to the silent background of the transference. The analyst's empathic grasp of these shifting figure—ground relationships among the selfobject and other dimensions of experience, as they oscillate between the foreground and the background of the transference, determines the content and timing of transference interpretations (Stolorow & Lachmann, 1984/1985).

What is meant, from this multidimensional perspective, by the maturation of selfobject relations from archaic to mature, either in healthy childhood development (Wolf, 1980) or in analytic treatment? What this means is that both the requisite selfobject functions and the subject's predominant mode of acquiring these from an object undergo developmental transformation.

With regard to requisite selfobject functions, in the more archaic states the tie to the object is required for the maintenance of fundamental self-regulatory capacities—that is, for sustaining the basic structural integrity and stability of self experience. In these states, dimensions of experience other than the selfobject may recede or be unavailable, since the need for psychological survival is overwhelmingly preeminent. In such instances, significant selfobject failure produces profound experiences of self fragmentation or self dissolution. In more mature states, by contrast, in which a nuclear sense of self cohesion has become more or less reliably structuralized, the tie to the object is required primarily for the affective quality of self experience, not for its essential coherence. Hence, dimensions other than the selfobject one can become salient or predominant. Disturbances in the bond produce only fluctuations in self-esteem, with no significant experiences of structural disintegration.

With regard to the mode of acquiring needed selfobject functions, in the more archaic states such modes ordinarily require experiences of merger or oneness with the object, together with an illusion of more or less continuous union. Hence, intrusions of the object's separateness or disruptions in the continuity of the bond can have a profoundly disintegrative impact on the subject's psychological organization. In more mature states, on the other hand, there is greater recognition and tolerance of the distinctness of the object as an independent center of initiative. Here experiences of separateness and discontinuity do not obliterate the bond to the object as a source of selfobject functions and, hence, produce at most only mild disturbances in the organization and affective quality of the subject's self experience.

This multidimensional perspective on experiencing an object thus

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highlights a critically important area for further investigation, namely, the mutual interaction between the evolving selfobject dimension of experience and other developmental progressions, including especially the consolidation of cognitive—affective structures. It seems apparent that while attuned provision of requisite selfobject functions contributes vitally to the formation of psychological structure, such structuralization, in turn, makes possible more mature modes of selfobject experience, along with increasing complexity in one's experiencing of the object world.

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**References**


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