Psychoanalytic Inquiry
Book Series

Kohut, Loewald, and the Postmoderns
A Comparative Study of Self and Relationship

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THE ANALYTIC PRESS
1999  Hillsdale, NJ  London
There are long stretches of time in a normal infant's life in which a baby does not mind whether he is many bits or one whole being... provided that from time to time he comes together and feels something.
—D. W. Winnicott

Analysis gives me confidence that I can express all the parts of my being.
—Julia Kristeva

Kohut's self psychology is a theory of how, through certain dimensions of relationships with significant others, the individual "comes together and feels something," a theory of how the individual develops a sense of self that enables an optimal expression of "all the parts of [her] being." Some of the commonalities between Kohut's ideas and those of others' may be obfuscated by differences in language, style, and formality of presentation. There are, however, substantive differences, as well, between Kohut's thought and that of the postmoderns, differences that have real implications for how an analysis might be conducted. Since in Loewald's work the self was largely implicit, his thought does not figure importantly in this discussion. I will come back to Loewald in later explorations of the self/object concept, intergenerational conflict, and the analytic relationship, through which his ideas of the analyst's role in relation to developmental needs and his notions concerning autonomy of the self are elaborated.
In this chapter I present and discuss the postmodern critiques of Kohut’s ideas, particularly his concept of self. Besides looking at work that explicitly grapples with concepts from Kohut’s self psychology, I include writings that have not directly named Kohut as a target of criticism but that raise questions about the notion of self and thereby constitute an implicit critique of his work. Indeed, there is a growing literature in philosophy and psychoanalysis that addresses what has been labeled the “problematization of the self” (Ricoeur, 1992; Jacobson, 1997; Procter, 1996).

Is the self unitary or multiple, coherent or fragmented, continuous or discontinuous, bounded or permeable, completed or in process? Is it biologically or interpersonally constituted, autonomous or embedded, separate from or connected to others, known or unknowable, real or illusory? If it should turn out to be multiple, fragmented, discontinuous, permeable, in process, interpersonally constituted, relationally embedded, irrevocably connected to others, unknowable to self or other, and illusory, is it any longer a self? These are some of the questions that contribute to the problematic of the self.

**Postmodern Critiques of Kohut’s Self:**

**Coherence, Continuity, Unity, Autonomy**

Kohut (1984), was not unaware of problems with his self concept, and it is his sensitivity to these problems that contributes to the tension in his writings between the modern and the postmodern: between establishing fundamentals or universals, on one hand, and recognizing the idiosyncracy and immediacy of individual experience, on the other; between itemizing the “constituents” of a bounded self and acknowledging the fluidity among subjects; between establishing cause and effect from early childhood experience to psychopathology in adulthood and insisting on the open-ended creative potential of the individual. Nevertheless, in contemporary analytic discourse, Kohut’s theory of self has been identified almost exclusively with concepts of unity, autonomy, boundedness, and fixedness. Thus, by the mid-1980s, newer theories began to place much more emphasis on the process quality of self. As an influential representative of this shift, Kristeva (1987) writes: “[W]e are subjects in process, ceaselessly losing our identity, destabilized by fluctuations in our relations to the other” (p. 9). Commenting on the continuation of this trend in Barratt’s (1993) book on the postmodern impulse, Sass (1995) writes:

For Barratt, human existence consists in the aleatory freedom of a wandering, ever-transmuting kind of nonself. He opposes any attempt to achieve “ideological stasis,” any attempt to reduce the fundamental ambiguity and mobility, what he calls the vital “contradictoriness” and “incessant transmutation” of the “subject-in-process” [p. 127; italics added].

Not just Kristeva and Barratt, well known for their radical postmodern viewpoints, but also a more moderate voice such as Mitchell’s (1993) has recognized that “consciousness itself is fragmentary, discontinuous… complex and inaccessible” (p. 54). And for me, I have only to catch one moment of my own fleeting reveries, listen to two analytic patients, or read three pages of James Joyce’s Ulysses, to be reminded of these special qualities of consciousness. But must this recognition of the fragmentary and discontinuous nature of consciousness lead us to reject Kohut’s emphasis on a healthy sense of coherence and continuity (a rejection, be it noted, in which Mitchell himself does not participate)? I think not.

Kohut (1977a) spoke of the “sense of continuity despite change” (p. 312), and by analogy we may assume that he also postulated a need for a sense of coherence despite or because of inevitable transient experiences of disintegration and fragmentation. I think that Kohut may have meant that we need a sense of continuity because of the discontinuities in modern living and in development; and that we need a sense of coherence exactly because of the complexity and multifaceted nature of our lives and our psyches, because of the multiplicity of our roles and relationships. As Mitchell (1993), even in the midst of presenting the contemporary argument for multiple selves, reminds us, “[t]he experience of self as singular and constant serves an important adaptive, psychological purpose” (p. 110). With the postmodern emphasis on multiple selves and the discontinuities of experience, Mitchell’s (and Kohut’s) point about the adaptive functionality or necessity of coherence and continuity often gets lost.

To say that we need a sense of coherence and continuity denies neither the experience of multiplicity, the human potentiality for fragmentation and discontinuity, nor that this “sense” may even in part be based on an illusion (Mitchell, 1993). In Kohut’s theory, our needs for feelings of coherence and continuity are directly related to our very
potentialities for all those opposite kinds of experiencing; small and reversible disruptions in these feelings (i.e., mild and short-lived fragmentation experiences and discontinuities) are within the range of normal functioning. In fact, Kohut (1984) described a continuum of mental health in which he placed the greatest vulnerability to fragmentation at the most pathological end (pp. 8–9). But in his schema, “brittle” defenses and other psychic rigidities tended to accompany or alternate with fragmentation at the more severely psychopathological end of the continuum (p. 9). The implied corollary of his recognition of brittleness and rigidity as related to pathology is that greater openness and flexibility would denote health in a context allowing for the broadest possible array of choices for self-expression. I am suggesting that the fullness, richness, and flexibility associated with Kohut’s notion of the “robust self” might be close to what moderate postmodern analysts refer to as “a multiplicity of selves” (Mitchell, 1993; Aron, 1996). But this latter notion does not connote the degree of formlessness and fluidity implied by the more radical concept of “self as process” (Kristeva, 1987; Barratt, 1993).

Some of the confusion in the debates about multiple versus coherent selves can perhaps be clarified by asking what some of the differences might be between those who are diagnosed with “multiple personality disorder” and those who simply live out and express multiple aspects of a more healthy self from one relationship or situation to the next. One difference is that the individual with a so-called sense of coherence can often bring to mind many different aspects of self, can prioritize them at a given moment or within a particular context, can feel the incompatibilities and discontinuities as well as some sense of sameness, continuity, or connection running through them all. Conversely, the healthy individual can also surrender her sense of coherence in the pursuit of artistic creation or pleasure and reengage it as needed. In the patient suffering from what might be called multiple personality disorder, however, the multiple selves cannot be recognized or acknowledged and cannot at any time or for any purpose be brought together. Mitchell (1993) has made a similar point, acknowledging psychopathology when “there is no sense of continuity from one self-organization to the next” (p. 108). In multiple personality disorders, each of these isolated self fragments is more vulnerable to further breakdown than are transient fragmentation products in other individuals and thus frequently render ordinary functioning out of reach.

It is in contrast to these severely dysfunctional phenomena and their milder versions that Kohut spoke of a sense of coherence as an experience to strive for in health: an experiential quality that comes into being through relationships and that is furthered by the development and lived expression of talents and skills in a vitalizing selfobject milieu. This sense of coherence, argued Kohut, in turn makes possible greater mutuality in relationships, as well as the setting of goals, the pursuit of ambitions, and the striving toward ideals: what we might call love, work, and transcendence. All these “achievements” Kohut attributed to a coherent and continuous sense of selfhood and its structural coordinates, “the self.”

It is understandable that Kohut’s emphasis on coherence and continuity should lead many contemporary readers to misinterpret him as suggesting a unidimensionality, a boundedness, and a rigid fixity of self. Much of the current discourse concerning the self centers on whether one needs to have—indeed, whether one can have—a coherent and continuous sense of self in the face of the undeniable complexity, richness, and multifaceted nature of lived experience. Those analysts who lean more toward the postmodern tend to view any such sense as based primarily on illusion (Lacan, 1977; see also discussions by Mitchell, 1993, and Mitchell and Black, 1995), or on arbitrary foreclosure of multiple alternative selves (Barratt, 1993, 1995). The ontological issue, however, is whether we can go about the business of living without a subjective sense of cohesion (Steppansky, 1997, personal communication). Although Lacan (1977), Barratt (1993), and others seem to insist that we can and must give up this illusory sense of self, it is difficult for me to imagine that Barratt himself, for instance, without the sense of self or identity that he theoretically rejects as a foreclosure, could have decided on a project of value and interest to him, such as a book on the postmodern impulse, carried out the sustained research necessary to implement it, and motivated and organized himself to do the writing. In other words, without such concepts as ambitions, goals, and ideals in the Kohutian sense, how can we understand the processes through which any personally meaningful project is chosen, sustained, and implemented?

Is Barratt engaging in a level of discourse that I have failed to grasp when he seems to deny that a subjective sense of self as coherent and continuous is, at the very least, a functional necessity for the business of living a life in the western world as we know it today? Or is he,
having made the judgment that such organizations as have evolved thus far seem to have led us to destroy one another and our planet, perhaps making a plea for a thoroughgoing change in how our psyches (and societies) have been organized in recent centuries? If the latter interpretation comes closer to Barratt’s meaning and intent, then his proposals for change emanate from admirable concerns. But how could such changes, were we to agree on their desirability, be facilitated? And how would we deal with the inevitable collapse of persons and societies in the wake of such a seemingly unimaginable transformation?

Barratt (1993, 1995) seems to deconstruct the self as we have known it but offers nothing in its place beyond the flux of consciousness and the unconscious. As noted earlier, Kohut (1970) certainly shared some of Barratt’s concerns about the direction in which mankind was going and suggested that a greater emphasis on shared cultural values, artistic/creative self-expression, and the inner life might ease rising tensions. I believe that Kohut’s concept of selfobject relating may offer a further solution to the problem of aggression and destructiveness in human societies to the extent that how we theorize about the self can have an impact on how we live our individual and communal lives.

The views of self put forth respectively by Kohut and Barratt offer stark contrasts. There are, however, postmodern analysts proffering ideas more compatible with Kohut’s concept of self, in particular his notion of a self that emerges out of selfobject relationships and is sustained by them. Outstanding among these is Kristeva (1987), who writes: “The analyst looks forward to the ultimate dissolution of desire . . . to be replaced by relationship with another, from which meaning derives” (p. 63). Kristeva believes that Freud’s focus on man’s desire represented “the culmination of the nihilist program” (p. 60), and she approvingly suggests that, in contrast to the self of desire, the postmodern “self has . . . subordinated itself to the other for the sake of a necessary, if temporary, tie” (p. 62). In her radical departure from Freud’s drive theory, Kristeva seems to have moved beyond even Kohut by envisioning a psychic world in which desire is not only peripheral, but is entirely dissolved: a world in which the self prevails only through its bonds with others. Though Kristeva identifies herself as a French intellectual, an analyst, and a feminist philosopher, her position is in fascinating contrast to such American feminist analysts as Benjamin, whose ideas are introduced later in this chapter.

For Kristeva (1987), the dissolution of desire is equated with the dissolution of subjectivity (p. 62), and these valued dissolutions are achieved through the individual’s (transient but repeated) “subordination” of herself to the other. This self-subordination calls to mind Kohut’s concept of an analytic selfobject relationship, in which the individual strives for a sustained immersion in the other’s experience, and a life-long search for what is ideal in the other. According to Kristeva, when this self-subordination is reciprocal, there is no danger of exploitation or domination of one individual over another, no danger of one person’s desire or subjectivity being forced upon another. In fact, it is this very capacity for self-subordination and the human bonds that it makes possible that serve to preserve the larger society and to create the moral basis for human life. Both Kristeva and Kohut thus recognize that, on one hand, we need a relatively coherent sense of self in order to create our lives and live them but that, on the other hand, too much attachment to our own individual self-coherence can make us insensitive to the needs of others (our “fellow subjectivities”) and to the world around us. Kohut’s notion of selfobject relating, I submit, allows for interactions that affirm individual self-coherence and at the same time create or consolidate necessary bonds between individuals.

Again, we can conclude that Kohut’s dual concepts of self and selfobject represent a dialectic, unnamed as such in his own theorizing, that predates the postmoderns and is compatible with their world views. I have already noted that Mitchell (1993) explicitly acknowledges both the illusory quality and the adaptive utility of a sense of coherence. Aron (1996), resonating with Mitchell on this point, suggests that one goal of psychoanalysis is to help patients “achieve a cohesive self, a solid identity . . . [while] another goal is to give them access to their multiplicities” (p. 154). In further enumerating the desired outcomes of psychoanalysis, Aron includes as one goal the achievement of viewing oneself “as autonomous agent, center of one’s own experience, having a core and cohesive self, and as a center of subjectivity” (p. 153). Interestingly, Aron, whose book is full of generous and meticulous references to other writers, does not here cite Kohut as an influential proponent of these ideas. Could it be that, in spite of the ongoing critique of Kohut’s work, some of his ideas have become so commonly accepted that they are completely integrated into contemporary theorists’ basic assumptions?

At the same time that Aron includes the achievement of a cohesive self as being among the goals of psychoanalysis, he also invokes
the ability “to recognize oneself as an object among other objects, including [recognizing oneself as] the object of the other’s desire.” And he adds still another capability, that of being able “to view the other as both an autonomous subject and (as) the object of one’s (own) desires.” Aron concludes: “Achieving these capabilities and maintaining the tension between them may be viewed as a principal goal of psychoanalysis” (p. 153). Aron’s view of psychoanalysis resonates with themes earlier taken up by Benjamin (1988) and makes a unique contribution by going beyond Kohut’s emphasis on the cohesive and unfolding self. These different, relational aspects of self are taken up in later sections of the book when we turn to the feminist critique and contemporary writings on relationship, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity.

Since Kohut consistently avoided attributing a “thingness” or a “location” to the self, and since he consistently spoke of the sense of coherence and continuity rather than of coherence and continuity per se, I think it might be accurate to say that coherence and continuity were for him primarily experiential phenomena, regularly associated with psychic health; therefore he set up both as developmental achievements and treatment goals. The intrapsychic and structural aspects of Kohut’s theory were simply an extension of his empathically derived observation that reliable external or interactional phenomena (i.e., adequate parental selfobject functioning) contribute to more or less stable patterns of internal experience (an adequate “structuring” of the self) in the developing individual. Once established through (optimal) relational experience, these relatively stable internal phenomena or psychic structures enable individuals to weather the storms of external fortune or misfortune in more intact states than might otherwise be possible. Thus, although Kohut did postulate (self) structure, the phenomenological and the structural aspects of his theory were never very far apart. Kohut’s self was, above all, an experiential self, and his notion of self structure was always directly linked to its experiential base and experiential consequences.

Kohut’s “Grand Narrative” and the Postmodern Response

For Kohut, to have normal self structure meant simply to have reliable-enough patterns of self experience: with such patterns, an individual would be able to experience a sense of well-being and to harness inborn potential into a richly expressive life in relationships and personal achievement. The alternative to richness of self was the impoverished or depleted self presented for treatment. The impoverished self for Kohut was fragile and fragmentation prone owing to its disavowal and the exclusion of large tracts of early experience related to fantasies of grandiosity; fantasies required for psychic survival at a particular stage of early development. With too much of the individual’s early fantasy life and experience excluded from its organization, the self became impoverished and therefore fragile. In Kohut’s view, grandiose fantasies were based on developmentally normal feelings of vigor and perfection (Kohut and Wolf, 1978). These early self experiences required an optimal responsiveness from the human environment in order to be, first, mirrored or affirmed and then “tamed” and integrated through inevitable but minor disappointments in one’s own and the caregiver’s capacities. These titrated disappointments went hand in hand with increasing recognition of growing skills and real achievements.

Parents who erred by either failing to modulate their offspring’s grandiosity at the appropriate stage (by a gradually more accurate mirroring process), or by squashing the child’s stage-appropriate grandiosity (through a refusal to mirror), set the stage for an impoverishment of self in their developing child. Without the parents’ optimal responsiveness to the child’s grandiosity, overwhelmingly intense self experiences would either destabilize the child or would constrict the child by being split off and disavowed. If such overwhelming experiences were split off, the child (and later the adult) would tend to be unduly inhibited and without affect in relation to ambitions and goals; if not split off, ambitions and goals would tend to be overreaching and infused with an unmodulated excitement that would interfere with their achievement. The relational corollary to these states of self involved an individual who was either radically cut off from, or overwhelmingly needy of, affirming responses from the environment or who tended to experience dramatic oscillations between these two states. Kohut undertook to spell out the route by which an adult in psychoanalysis might retrieve or integrate (or both) these lost riches of the self, which involved the analyst’s acceptance of, optimal responsiveness to, and eventual interpretation of, the patient’s reawakened grandiosities, often expressed in the form of overreaching ambitions, goals, or ideals as they began to emerge in treatment.
This Kohutian grand narrative of how impoverishment of self is avoided and self potential realized is a modern and not postmodern phenomenon. Contemporary relationists tend to focus on present psychoanalytic interactions and avoid universal historical narratives. Cause-and-effect hypotheses between early experience and current suffering also tend to be minimized in postmodern theorizing. These theoretical and clinical trends present a challenge when contemporary relational theorists discuss how psychoanalytic treatment can make a difference in what sometimes begins to look like a here-and-now vacuum chamber.

Kohut’s attention to issues concerning impoverishment versus richness of self are echoed in Mitchell’s (1993) work, where Mitchell repeatedly suggests that increased “richness of experience” is a primary goal of psychoanalysis. This richness resists definition because it refers to the broadest array and texture of human experience. Mitchell tells us, however, that “[s]atisfaction and the relative richness of life have a great deal to do with the dialectic between multiplicity and integrity in the experience of self, the balance between discontinuity and continuity” (p. 116). And he adds that “[w]here there is too much discontinuity, there is a dread of fragmentation, splitting, dislocation, or dissolution [and where] there is too much continuity, there is a dread of paralysis and stagnation” (p. 116).

Kohut (1977a) explicitly recognized the chaos and terror of too little psychic integrity and continuity but did not often address the potential for “too much continuity.” He did, however, emphasize ongoing needs for idealizable (self)objects, which suggests, in health, a life-long openness to transformative internalizations (Kohut, 1977a; 1984). Kohut (1971, 1977a, 1978a, 1984) also described analytic treatments in which the analyst arrived at creative solutions to old problems, and he emphasized playfulness and creativity in general as outcomes of healthy development and successful analytic treatments. Empathy, humor, and wisdom, which Kohut (1971) saw as further hallmarks of mental health and maturity, all seem to be qualities that entail psychological movement and openness rather than paralysis and stagnation. Thus Kohut would hardly have taken exception to Mitchell’s characterization of the dialectic between multiplicity and integrity in the experience of self.

Still, Mitchell (1993) and other contemporary analysts feel constrained by Kohut’s construction of richness or impoverishment in terms of the integration of early grandiose fantasies and idealizations or of later ambitions, goals, and ongoing selfobject relatedness. Many of Kohut’s critics seem not to recognize just how much of human experience he intended to encompass within these concepts, as indicated by a complete reading of his published case presentations (Kohut, 1971, 1977a, b, 1984), his discussion of historical events (1977a, 1978), public figures (1977, 1978a), creativity (1977a, 1984), and the arts (1978a). Furthermore, the major psychoanalytic theme that is omitted or underemphasized in Kohut’s theory (i.e., instinctual experience, understood as constitutionally determined and as the primary motivator in human life) tends to be omitted or underemphasized in most of the relational theories as well. But, although Kohut did not subscribe to Freud’s drive theory and did not assign to instinctual life a central place in personality development or psychopathology, he still recognized a “body–mind–self” and the importance for the self of experiences that originate in the body (Kohut, 1971, p. 152; pp. 214–218). Be that as it may, relational theorists such as Mitchell feel they are pursuing a non-self-psychological agenda as they strive to broaden and deepen the basis for richness to include the widest array of bodily, intrapsychic, and interpersonal experience. And yet it was Kohut who consistently directed analysts to resonate empathically to all the different kinds of experience that analysts might bring. On this and other points, the differences between Kohut’s self theory and Mitchell’s relational/conflict theory may be more apparent than real.

In fact, in my view, the similarities between the theories are at least as compelling as the differences. Both Kohut and Mitchell speak to the goal of richness and authenticity of self, and both believe that the self emerges through an individual’s relational experiences. The differences between their viewpoints lie primarily in divergent conceptualizations of what contributes to richness and authenticity and of what is essential and curative in relationships.

In particular, Mitchell and other postmodernists see an important role for the analyst in mobilizing the patient’s relational patterns in the transference and helping him or her move beyond them. To this end, they tend to emphasize direct, interpersonal engagement and authentic self-expression on the part of the analyst, in contrast to Kohut’s greater emphasis on the analyst’s affective resonance with, and communication of, empathic understanding of the patient’s experience. Up to a point, Kohut seemed to suggest that, once the analyst, through
understanding and explaining, had “restored” the patient’s self development, the patient’s object relationships would spontaneously take care of themselves. He seemed to believe that the once-impoverished self, having over sustained periods of time received affective responsiveness coupled with cognitive understanding and explanation concerning early development, would gradually become robust. With robustness thus restored, the individual would be able to express creatively her richness and authenticity; to wrestle with, resolve, or tolerate conflict; and to find “objects” with whom she can forge maturely gratifying relationships. In contrast, the relational theorists try to elaborate the qualities of relationship beyond selfobject responsiveness and functioning that might foster richness and authenticity of self. They place their emphasis on the analyst experienced as a separate and different other, rather than on the analyst experienced as an extension of the analysand’s self. This emphasis on the relationship between two separate and different others tends to lead to a new postmodern interest in conflict, especially interpersonal conflict, which is absent in Kohut’s theory. In Mitchell’s and in Slavin and Kriem’s (1992, 1998) writings particularly, we see once again a central role for conflict in human experience, but a role that does not follow Freud’s formulation of intrapsychic conflict.

Further discussion of these differences between Kohut and the postmodern analysts is reserved for chapters focusing on relationship and conflict. For now I am simply observing that there is a paradox at the heart of Kohut’s and Mitchell’s perspectives alike. Mitchell (1993) may have unwittingly touched upon it by observing: “In contemporary analysis, . . . the most important question to be asked has shifted to: How meaningful and authentic is a person’s experience and expression of her self?” (pp. 132–133, italics added). Although we tend to think that relational theories have burgeoned at this moment in history at least partly in response to what was perceived as an excessive emphasis on the self in Kohut’s theory, Mitchell clearly believes that at the heart of most relational theories, there is still an essential concern with the experience and expression of an individual self. Mitchell’s focus on self in his relational theory presents us with the mirror image of the paradox at the center of Kohut’s theory, because at the heart of self psychology, there is always an essential concern with the experience of relationship.

As noted, one significant way of understanding the contemporary emergence of relational theories is in terms of a perception that Kohut’s view of relationship was too narrowly focused on the construction, maintenance, and enhancement of self, to the exclusion of other dimensions of human interaction. The postmoderns (Hoffman, 1993, 1996; Benjamin, 1988; Aron, 1992, 1996; Mitchell, 1993, 1996a; Renik, 1993, 1996) therefore emphasize the subjectivity, authenticity, and self-expression of the analyst (or parent) in explicit or implicit protest against what they feel to be Kohut’s constricted emphasis on the self-object function of the analyst (or parent). These theorists want to broaden our understanding of the kinds of interactions that go into a relationship and the kinds of interactions that go into constructing a self; they also want to expand the range of meanings imputed to these diverse kinds of interactions by the developing individual. Near the end of his life, Kohut (1984) himself spoke of wanting to widen his lens and focus on aspects of relationship beyond the provision of selfobject function (p. 53). He hoped that such a broadened focus would become the next step in the development of self psychology and suggested that his own original narrower focus on selfobject aspects of relating had been necessary as a corrective to Freud’s almost exclusive attention to the drive-discharge dimension of relationships in classical theory.

The Postmodern Analysts On Kohut’s Ideas: Dimensions of Self and Relationship

Among the postmodern analysts, Mitchell (1993, 1996; Mitchell and Black, 1995) stands out as one who has given a most careful reading to Kohut’s work; he explicitly recognizes and credits his contribution while offering a thoughtful critique. As an indication of how seriously Mitchell (1993) explores the concept of self, we note first that he devotes three chapters of Hope and Dread to discussing it. Aron (1996) has also given a fair-minded appraisal of Kohut’s ideas, while other postmoderns have tended to present his work more summarily than either Aron or Mitchell has and with less consistency. For example, Hoffman (1983) criticizes an incomplete rendering of Kohut’s selfobject concept and questions Kohut’s self-psychological focus on empathy (Hoffman, 1994); Benjamin (1988, 1990), acknowledging some areas of overlap between Kohut’s and her own ideas, at the same time arrives at a close convergence with certain other of his ideas with no apparent recognition of Kohut as their source; Stolorow and Atwood (1992) emphasize and extend the intersubjective aspects of Kohut’s
theory but go on to criticize what seems to be a significant misrepresent-
ation of his thought in what they call the "myth of the isolated mind"; and Renik (1993) criticizes certain ideas that seem to derive from Kohut's self psychology but without citing his work as the object of the critical analysis.

While offering his own radical critique of Freud's blank screen metaphor, Hoffman (1983) has identified Kohut, Loewald, Strachey, and Stone as "conservative" critics of Freud's notion. Hoffman credits these authors with "some kind of amplification of the realistically benign and facilitating aspects of the therapist's influence" (p. 396); but he faulted Kohut, in particular, for conveying "the impression that a friendly, naturally responsive attitude on the part of the analyst will promote the unfolding of transference...without specific reference to other aspects of the analyst's personality" (p. 400). Although Hoffman was perhaps expressing a legitimate concern with the narrowness of Kohut's (self/object) relational focus, his 1983 representation of Kohut's ideas seems to reduce the entire self/object concept to a "friendly, naturally responsive attitude." In 1994, Hoffman again lumped Kohut with another theorist, this time with fellow "deficit" theorist Winnicott. Hoffman suggests that, while Kohut and Winnicott "legitimized certain kinds of gratification as an intrinsic part of the psychoanalytic process," they "introduced a new kind of institutionalized disguise for personal, countertransferential tendencies" (p. 196). But since post-modern analysts emphasize that all theorizing expresses the subjectivity (and therefore presumably the "countertransferential tendencies") of its authors, it is not clear why Kohut and Winnicott should be singled out in this regard. Do their theories express countertransferential tendencies to a greater degree than do, for instance, those of the post-modern analysts, whose theories are concerned with issues of the analyst's self-expression, authenticity, and self-disclosure?

Hoffman (1994) also expresses concern that the self psychologist's "conformity" to the "benign principle" of sustained empathic inquiry could "cast the shadow of the bad object on the analyst" (p. 191). Citing Slavin and Kriegman (1992) to support this viewpoint, he quotes a passage in which they refer to empathy practiced "as a technique, rather than as [a] general intimate act and sign of mutuality." Slavin and Kriegman further describe the self psychologist as one "whose only substantial utterances take the form of validating affirmations of the patient's own subjective world and developmental strivings" (pp. 252-253);

they add that such an analyst is necessarily engaged in one or another kind of self-deception (p. 253).

In citing Slavin and Kriegman's comments, Hoffman joins those authors in a caricature of the self psychologist that portrays her more as an empathy machine (an oxymoron, I suggest) than as an individual struggling to find an empathic connection between her own experience and that of the analysand. An equivalent critique of the postmodern analytic stance would be to suggest that every analyst writing about the analyst's subjectivity or self-expression is a veiled narcissist, unable to focus attention on anyone outside himself; or that those contemporary analysts arguing for negotiation as an aspect of the analytic relationship (i.e., Slavin and Kriegman, 1992) are aggressive egotists exploiting the vulnerability of their patients in dealings that are rigged from the start owing to the analyst's relative position of power. Such assertions are sustainable only by removal of the authors' words from their original contexts and an almost willful distortion of their authors' intent; they involve a ludicrous exaggeration of an author's central point through the portrayal of a mindless and perseverative execution of a recommended stance. In spite of this transient lapse, Hoffman's (1994) rendering of Kohut's concept of empathy is not typical of his usual dealings with others' ideas. Least of all can such exaggerations accurately be applied to Hoffman (1983, 1994, 1996) himself, who despite his sometimes less than optimal treatment of self psychology, has moved toward ever-increasing richness, complexity, and balance in the presentation of his own ideas. This movement is evident particularly in his portrayal of the analyst's tension and struggle to remain true to the multiple dialectics of the analytic situation.

Aron (1992) credits Kohut, Winnicott, and Loewald with having made significant contributions to changes in how contemporary analysts view interpretation in the analytic process. He sees Kohut as having "shifted the focus of our interpretive efforts from explanation to understanding and [as having] proposed that new experience with the analyst as selfobject is as important as explanation" (p. 491). Aron (1996) offers an excellent précis of self psychology and its areas of difference and overlap with other relational theories:

Self psychology makes an important contribution to clinical psychoanalysis in its emphasis on the need for the analyst to be responsive and empathic; in recognizing the vital experience of emotional attunement...; and in its rich description of self-
object transferences. Self psychology, however ... in the work of its more conservative practitioners, maintains an emphasis both on a one-person psychology, by placing the self in a suproordinate position, and on the individual's talents and ideals. More important, however, self psychology in its conservative form maintains the classical view that who the analyst is as a unique character is irrelevant to the process of the analysis [p. 53].

Aron's comments cut to the heart of critiques of ("conservative") self psychology. In fact, much of the postmodern movement is engaged in "rounding out" the relational field, which was placed in center stage by self psychology but with the spotlight focused almost exclusively on the selfobject aspects of relating. I argue, however, that, although Kohut was far less adept than Benjamin, Hoffman, Aron, and Mitchell at pointing out the dialectics of his own theory, his theory nevertheless embodies significant tensions between a "one-person" and a "two-person" psychology. Aron (1992) suggests that Kohut's suproordinate self was one of the features of self psychology that rendered it a one-person, as opposed to a two-person, psychology. Even in Kohut's broadest rendering of the self, however, he never made a claim for its suproordinate in the relational field: it was suproordinate only in the intrapsychic realm (in its relationship to ego, id, or superego). It was a self that always needed the second person, the other, for its development and sustenance.

Furthermore, Kohut's (1977a) emphasis on his patients' selfobject transferences, defined by "preanalytically established internal factors in the analysand's personality structure" (p. 217), was balanced by his simultaneous emphasis on the analyst's contribution to selfobject failures and the importance of the analyst's acknowledgment of such. I have earlier noted my understanding of empathy and vicarious introspection as concepts that, in spite of the focus on the patient's viewpoint, keep the analyst's own person and his affective experience and expression, at the center of the therapeutic action. The analyst's empathy is made possible only through her open and imaginative reference to her own subjectivity. Therefore, although the postmoderns tend to interpret Kohut's concept of empathy as a method of inquiry that transcends the analyst's subjectivity, it can also be understood as a mode of interaction in which the analyst selectively uses her subjectivity in the service of her affective resonance with and understanding of the patient. But this very selectivity is a problem for the postmoderns. They tend to see it as limiting and also as constituting a denial of the analyst's contribution to the meanings that are constructed within the analyst dyad. Perhaps there is a chronic tension in Kohut's self psychology between one- and two-person phenomena, which accounts for a diversity of interpretation and practice in the application of his writings to the clinical situation.

Aron (1996), finally, makes the point that in Kohut's theory, "who the analyst is as a unique character is irrelevant to the analytic process" (p. 53). This central criticism of self psychology is in some form repeated in every postmodern discussion of Kohut's ideas. I have begun to address it in my explication of empathy and vicarious introspection and will return to it in later chapters.

Benjamin pays brief tribute to Kohut's contribution while emphasizing its limitations for relational psychoanalytic theory. In several contexts, Benjamin (1988, 1995a) offers only one-sentence summaries of his contribution; in another context Benjamin (1991) uses one of his case vignettes to illustrate a child's turn from a disappointing, hurtful, and mentally ill mother to a more emotionally responsive father. Benjamin, offering her own addendum to Kohut's case discussion, suggests that his vignette also reflects the "developmentally appropriate wish [of a child] to be seen by the father ... as like him" (pp. 291-292, italics added). Benjamin does not acknowledge that the wish to be recognized in one's similarity to one's parents is subsumed in Kohut's twinship concept. I also see Benjamin's (1988, 1990) central concept of recognition as conceptually and experientially related to Kohut's mirroring; throughout her work there are both acknowledged and unacknowledged resonances with this and other self-psychological ideas. As an example of her simultaneous appreciation and frustration in relation to self psychology, Benjamin (1990) writes:

Even self psychology, which has placed such emphasis on attunement and empathy, which has focused on the intersubjectivity of the analytic encounter, has been tacitly one-sided in its understanding of the parent-child relationship. Perhaps in reaction against the oedipal reality principal, Kohut (1977, 1984) defined the necessary confrontation with the others' needs or with limits in a self-referential way—optimal failures in empathy ... as if there were nothing for children to learn about the others' rights or feelings. Although the goal was to enable indi-
viduals to open “new channels of empathy” (p. 27) and “intuneness between self and selfobject” (1984, p. 66), the self was always the recipient, never the giver of empathy. The responsiveness of the selfobject, by definition, serves the function of “shoring up the self” throughout life, but at what point does it become the responsiveness of the outside other whom we love? [pp. 36–37, italics added].

In this passage, Benjamin explicitly recognizes the intersubjective thrust of Kohut’s self psychology at the same time as she criticizes its failure to go far enough in this dimension of relating. I have earlier argued that there is a greater allowance for mutuality and intersubjectivity in Kohut’s selfobject concept than is usually granted by postmodern authors; this is so in his concept of archaic selfobject experience but especially in the notion of mature selfobject relating. The selfobject is an “outside other whom we love,” even when the child does not experience her as such. In other words, although not recognized as such, an actual outside other is required in order for the child to have a selfobject experience. The child’s experience is broadened by virtue of participating in this outside other’s capacities as if they were the child’s own. And the “shoring up” of self involved in selfobject experience results in the child’s moving toward the experience and acceptance of the outside other as separate and different. It also leads the child toward increasing mutual participation in the selfobject dimension of relationships. Kohut believed that it is only through the parental affirmation of, and resonance with, the child’s “rights or feelings” that the child comes to know and accept the rights and feelings of “outside others”; whereas the postmoderns seem to expect the child to achieve recognition of the parents’ subjectivity simply by virtue of the parents’ insistence on it. Current preoccupation with the analyst’s subjectivity and self-disclosure is based on this commonly held conviction that development is generally facilitated by the encounter with the separate and different other.

Benjamin (1988) is concerned that a child whose (m)other consistently defers to the child’s rights and feelings may grow up to be an adult who fails to recognize and accept the rights and feelings (i.e., the subjectivity) of others. In Benjamin’s view, girls tend to grow up identifying with their mothers’ abdication of their subjectivity and desire, whereas boys, in rejecting such identification, continue to expect (m)others to subordinate their subjectivity to the boys’ own. Adult rela-

tionships between the sexes therefore remain complementary, in subject–object patterns, rather than developing into subject–subject connections, the mark of true intersubjectivity. Benjamin sees these subject–object, complementary relationships as being at the root of sadomasochism in men and women.

Through her description of parent–child relationships in complementary terms—with the mother (actually) subordinating her subjectivity to the infant’s needs—Benjamin suggests a link between Kohut’s concept of archaic selfobject relating and later complementary power relationships between men and women. How has it come about that Kohut’s concept of the selfobject, initially intended to challenge the dichotomy and complementarity of subject and object, is now seen as having been instrumental in perpetuating this complementarity? Benjamin, in her dual loyalties to object relations and feminist theory, is understandably alien to any formulation that undermines societal recognition of the mother’s autonomy and desire. In her view, such undermining has led women to become the object of men’s desire at the expense of becoming the subjects of their own desire.

Does Kohut’s concept of selfobject functioning necessarily entail the giving up of subjectivity and the negation of desire by the parent or analyst? On a transient and discrete interactional basis, perhaps yes. But neither the mother nor the analyst need restrict her life or her relationships entirely to those in which she performs a selfobject role; furthermore, not all parent–child or patient–analyst interactions are experienced primarily in the selfobject realm by child or patient. In Kohut’s view, archaic selfobject experience optimally evolves into mature selfobject experience, which involves the recognition of the other’s subjectivity through mutual empathy and vicarious introspection. Ultimately, the selfobject/mother can joyfully recognize her daughter’s autonomy and desire only by reference to her own subjective experience. This is implied, if not spelled out, in Kohut’s notion of vicarious introspection. Nevertheless, Benjamin has responded to the real tension and duality in Kohut’s theory by pointing out the limits of its intersubjective dimension. And it is through her elaboration of this dimension of relationships that she has made her very significant contribution to psychoanalysis.

Renik (1993, 1996) does not cite Kohut, but his writings on the analyst’s subjectivity nonetheless constitute an implicit commentary on Kohut’s selfobject concept. For instance, Renik (1993) writes that “the
problem with an analyst believing that he or she can transcend subjectivity and focus on the patient’s inner reality is that it can promote idealization of the analyst” (p. 568). Renik joins other postmoderns here in equating the focus on the patient’s inner reality with the analyst’s attempt to transcend his own subjectivity. In Kohut’s empathy as vicarious introspection, however, the analyst does not transcend, but rather taps into, his subjective experience in order to understand the experience of his patient.

Renik speaks also of the patient’s autonomy as being “coopted in the name of empathy” (p. 568). He asserts that “an analyst is much more disposed to being inadvertently coercive toward agreement with his or her underlying assumptions when the analyst believes that he or she has been successful in putting aside subjectivity and allowing the patient’s inner reality to determine the investigation” (p. 568). He sees this belief as being “mistaken” (p. 568) and the analyst as “self-deceived” (p. 564). I agree with Renik to the extent that aspects of the analyst’s subjectivity and countertransference are always operating outside of awareness and inevitably affect the analytic process in ways that the analyst cannot know. But Kohut (1984) himself acknowledged this problem, and it should be no more true for the self-psychologically oriented analyst than it is for the various postmoderns. Whether we undertake to resonate affectively with our patients or to confront them with what we take to be our unique subjectivities, we are similarly limited in our capacities to know ourselves and the other.

Renik believes that the analyst’s attempts to “put aside” or transcend her subjectivity will have negative effects on the analyst’s functioning and on the patient’s autonomy; Benjamin is concerned that the child’s or the patient’s capacity to recognize the other’s subjectivity will be compromised by an absence of confrontation with the other’s separateness and difference. These different concerns reflect varying difficulties that all postmodern analysts have with Kohut’s selfobject concept, which by definition involves the child’s or the analyst’s transient failure to recognize the other’s subjectivity. Some contemporary analysts join Kohut in the recognition of the other’s subjectivity as a developmental achievement, whereas others assume it to be a capacity present from birth. Even those who join Kohut in seeing it as an achievement (Benjamin, 1988; Aron, 1996) do not share his view of how this achievement is most likely to come about. Aron and Benjamin both argue that it is the analyst’s very confrontation of the patient with her separateness and difference that facilitates the patient’s growing capacity to recognize the other’s subjectivity, whereas self psychologists are more likely to argue that it is the analyst’s success in transiently protecting the patient from this confrontation that contributes to the patient’s eventual recognition and acceptance of the analyst’s “otherness.”

One question for later discussion is whether the selfobject functioning of the analyst (or mother) precludes her own experience of her subjectivity and whether it precludes the full expression of her subjectivity in other contexts (Benjamin, 1988). Another is whether the patient’s or the child’s repeated experiences of the analyst or the mother in the selfobject dimension, as an extension of self, will ultimately contribute to the developing individual’s greater capacity for recognition and acceptance of the separateness and subjectivity of others, as Kohut argues, or whether these repeated experiences are more likely, in the long run, to constrict and interfere with the developing individual’s capacity to recognize and accept the subjectivity of others, as all the postmoderns seem to suggest. The postmoderns are concerned with the analyst’s expression of his own subjectivity within the analytic relationship because they see in the analyst’s selfobject functioning a constriction of self-expression, and they believe that a fuller and more explicit expression of the analyst’s separate subjectivity will contribute more effectively to the patient’s essential recognition of others, as well as to the patient’s unique development of self (Benjamin, 1988; Mitchell, 1996a).

Renik (1993), as noted, has spoken out against what he sees as the mistaken belief that the analyst can transcend his subjectivity (p. 568). But in Kohut’s (1982, 1984) later writings, he moved beyond his earlier suggestion of transcendence in this regard (Kohut, 1959). Although many self psychologists still might argue that the analyst transiently puts aside his needs, interests, and value judgments in the service of imaginatively entering the patient’s inner world, Kohut (1982, 1984) explicitly rendered psychoanalysis a subjective undertaking by the analyst and did not ultimately aspire to transcendence. I suggest that a father who feeds his infant before feeding himself is not transcending his subjectivity; he is simply temporarily putting aside his own need for food to take care of his baby first. Similarly, mothers and analysts may temporarily put aside varying psychological needs of their own in the interests of carrying out their maternal or analytic functions, but they do so without necessarily compromising their own subjective sense of self.
Most contemporary discussions of the analyst’s subjectivity and its expression in the analytic encounter either explicitly or implicitly contrast such expression with selfobject functioning in general, or with the analyst’s expression of empathy in particular. The postmoderns only inconsistently recognize that they share with Kohut a concern for the goal of mutual human recognition and only inconsistently realize that Kohut’s selfobject concept expressed his attempt to deal with the very problems of humanity that have come about because of the failure of such recognition.

Mitchell and Black (1995) provide careful, balanced, and appreciative descriptions of important post-Freudian theorists, and their treatment of Kohut’s ideas is one of the best available expositions of his work. Two years earlier, in presenting his new relational/conflict paradigm, Mitchell (1993) raised several questions about the concept of self. He elucidated his new ideas and extensively cited other important writers within and outside the field of psychoanalysis. He began by asking where we can locate the “core self” in a relational paradigm (p. 112; pp. 124–131) and suggested that in classical theory the drives and other bodily experiences played a central role in “locating” the core self. Since most relational theories no longer see the drives as centrally expressive of individuality, however, the core self can neither derive from, nor be located in, the drives. Having lost the drives as determinative of personal experience and intrapsychic structure, Mitchell sees the question of a core self and its location in theory as “a real problem” (p. 124).

Not only have we given up the drives as determinative of the self’s “location” in theory but, as Mitchell (1993) points out, in relational theories the core self cannot even be attributed to, or “located” in, an isolated individual. Relational theories tend to see “the meanings generated by the self [as] all interactive products” (p. 125). Finally, in his critique of the concept of a core self, Mitchell observes that such a concept tends to evoke spatial imagery (i.e., the “core” of an apple is at its physical center and is its innermost part). He suggests that our theoretical and clinical understanding and communication might be enhanced by adding temporal metaphors to our spatial ones or perhaps even by substituting temporal language for the spatial in our elucidation of the self.

The word core can mean either “the innermost” or “the most important” part of something (American Heritage Dictionary). To the extent that the concept of a core self represents a spatial metaphor denoting an innermost self, then that is a concept which Kohut did not try to address. If, on the other hand, by core Mitchell means the most important aspect of the self, then Kohut may well have conceived of the self as having a core in the form of what he termed a nuclear self. In spite of the spatial imagery and meaning easily evoked by Kohut’s term nuclear, the nuclear self was not intended as a spatial metaphor, and he never spoke of its “location.” It was simply the term he used to refer to “the basic ambitions and ideals” of the individual (Kohut, 1974, p. 757n). Kohut’s emphasis on the sense of coherence serves to remind us that he was referring to individual experience rather than to “places” in the mind. And his emphasis on the sense of continuity reminds us of the central temporal dimension of the self. Thus Kohut (1982) wrote of “that joyful awareness of the human self of being temporal” (p. 404). He would not have disagreed either with Mitchell regarding the applicability of temporal metaphors to the self or with the contemporary philosopher Ricoeur (1992), who observed that “a primary trait of the self [is] its temporality” (p. 2).

In fact, Kohut, who was the founder of self psychology, and Mitchell, who is the principal architect of a new relational/conflict paradigm, sound surprisingly resonant themes in their respective discussions. Whether it is a matter of the origins or the content of the self, these two theorists sing in considerable harmony and counterpoint, with fewer significant discordances than one would expect. Much in the spirit of Kohut’s self psychology, Mitchell (1993) wrestles with the loss of drives as primary motivators and organizers of the self. He asks, “How do we understand the meaning that body parts and experiences take on for the individual” when we no longer see drives as providing that meaning? And he answers: “They [the meanings] must derive to a significant degree from the mutually regulatory, interpersonal, linguistic, and cultural matrix into which the individual is born” (p. 126). Similarly Kohut (1977a) discussing the origins of the nuclear self, wrote:

At the moment when the mother sees her baby for the first time and is also in contact with him (through tactile, olfactory, and proprioceptive channels as she feeds, carries, bathes him), a process that lays down a person’s self has its virtual beginning. I have in mind the specific interactions . . . through which, in countless repetitions, the self-objects empathically respond to certain potentialities of the child . . . but not to others . . . The nuclear
self... is... formed... by the deeply anchored responsiveness of the self-objects [p. 100, italics added].

Thus both Mitchell and Kohut address the question of the origins of a core or nuclear self in terms of interactions between the developing individual and the human environment. So where is the disagreement between these two paradigms? At particular points in his writings, Mitchell (1993), like Stolorow and Atwood (1992), seems to have misunderstood Kohut’s nuclear self to be a preexperiential, inborn phenomenon. But Kohut (1978a) made it clear that his notion of the nuclear self was a developmental achievement that had its “birth” following specific interactions between the infant and the selfobject milieu (p. 741). Thus the inborn versus socially constructed self does not really hold up as a battle line between self psychology and more purely relational theories. In later chapters, we will see that real differences between Kohut and Mitchell’s renderings of self and relationship have to do with the nature of the growing individual’s experience and use of the (self)object, not with whether the self is an inborn given or a relationally determined achievement. The differences hinge on our interpretation of “how phenomenologically and dynamically rich [Kohut’s] notion of selfobject responsiveness” is and whether or not his concept of selfobject milieu “can really account for and address the cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic dynamics of individual experience and relationships” (Stepansky, 1997, personal communication).

Mitchell (1993) generally offers a thoughtful and balanced rendering of Kohut’s work. Nonetheless, he is intent on highlighting particular differences between Kohut’s self psychology and other psychoanalytic theories; in my reading, some of the differences on which he focuses seem minimal or even nonexistent. For instance, Mitchell at one point, contrasting Kohut with Sullivan, states that Sullivan “believes that our commonality with others, not our distinctness, holds the key to a richer life” (p. 108). Yet we need to remember that, early in the development of self psychology, Kohut (1971) identified twinship needs as a regularly occurring feature of development. These needs had to do with a sense, required for optimal development, that a young child was similar to the others by whom he was surrounded. This sense of similarity consisted of mutual recognition of experiences and qualities in common (i.e., of commonalities), between the child and her caretakers. Although Kohut originally saw these as a subclass of mirroring needs, he ultimately placed twinship on a par with mirroring and idealization (1984)

as one of three major classes of selfobject need. Explaining what he meant by twinship needs, Kohut (1984) wrote:

[T]he young child, even the baby, obtains a vague but intense and pervasive sense of security as he feels himself to be a human among humans... The mere presence of people in a child’s surroundings—their voices and body odors, the emotions they express, the noises they produce as they engage in human activities, the specific aromas of the foods they prepare and eat—creates a security in the child, a sense of belonging and participating... These feelings derive from confirmation of the feeling that one is a human being among other human beings [p. 200].

To be sure, not every reader of Kohut will see in his specific concept of twinship, or in his general concept of selfobject relating, an appreciation of commonality among individuals that approximates his appreciation of individuality and uniqueness; in my reading of Kohut, however, this is a plausible interpretation of his intent. For what could speak more clearly to Kohut’s recognition of our need for commonality with others than his having designated a sense of twinship, or likeness with others, as one of three basic and universal needs of the individual? Since Kohut (1971) described twinship phenomena early in his career but did not designate it as a selfobject function in its own right until the end of his life (Kohut, 1984), we may reasonably infer that he would have attended further to this aspect of commonality had he lived longer (Stepansky, 1997, personal communication).

In Kohut’s (1984) clinical examples, he described normative strivings in children for experiences in which their feelings of commonality with their parents are confirmed: commonalities of affect, interest, abilities, and shared pleasure in activities. I wonder if Kohut didn’t finally place equal emphasis on the individual’s uniqueness (expressed through her ambitions and goals) and the individual’s commonality with others (through her sense of twinship and through her idealizations and ideals). Insofar as Kohut saw all these experiences, including the achievement of uniqueness, as mediated through essential self–selfobject relationships, perhaps we may even claim that Kohut ultimately weighted the “commonality” aspects of the self a little more heavily than the “singularity” aspects. It may be part of the genius of his work, however, that it does not seem to be entirely clear, one way or the other,
whether the singularities of selves or the commonalities among them are more essential to their being.

In a further effort to differentiate relational theories from self-psychology, Mitchell (1993) claims that, according to self-psychology, “it is not possible to connect with others in a way that is vital and alive without first being centered in and deeply connected with one’s own distinctive subjectivity” (p. 108). And yet, in Kohut’s (1971, 1977a, 1982, 1984) portrayal of the infant–mother relationship there is certainly the potential of a vital and alive connection from birth onward. Even though an infant has only primitive or archaic ways of experiencing, there is room for joy in relating from the start (Kohut, 1971), joy being an expression of vitality and aliveness. Mitchell may have in mind Kohut’s (1984) description of more mature forms of love and object relations, in which a capacity develops to provide selfobject functioning for others while simultaneously experiencing others in their selfobject functioning toward oneself. In other words, it is true that for Kohut mature forms of connectedness required a relatively coherent sense of self, but it does not follow that, for Kohut, a vital and alive connection with another was possible only when one was “centered in and deeply connected with one’s own distinctive subjectivity.”

What I think Mitchell has left out here (although he has recognized it in other contexts) is that, for Kohut, “distinctive subjectivities,” or the ongoing sense of self, come about through the vital and alive connection with others. Kohut (1975) defined empathy as a “psychological bond between individuals” and spoke about “mutual empathy” between mother and infant (Kohut, 1977a, p. 99), strongly implying a vital and alive connection before a “distinctive” subjectivity has developed in the infant. Throughout his writings, Kohut referred to joyful exchanges between parents and their infants, well before the children could have been expected to develop very much in the way of “distinctive subjectivities.” As I read Mitchell and Kohut, both claim that it is, at least in part, the repeated experience of the parents’ “vital and alive” responsiveness to the growing child’s potentialities, and to her spontaneous gestures, that contributes to the child’s ongoing development, confidence, and pleasure in her own “distinctive subjectivity.” After all, it was Mitchell (1996) who, in another context, spoke charmingly of the impossibility of pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps, from which I extrapolate that he would also agree to the impossibility of creating one’s own “distinctive subjectivity” without the necessary “platform” (p. 176) of (selfobject) relationship underneath one’s feet (or self). Can Mitchell doubt that he and Kohut would be in basic agreement about this?

I have singled out select passages in Mitchell’s writing to draw attention to what I see as a tendency, even among the most astute readers of Kohut’s work, subtly to transform Kohut’s ideas and then to claim a difference from self-psychology on the basis of these slightly altered conceptualizations. In another example of this tendency, Mitchell (1993) represents Kohut’s view of the analytic process as a situation in which the analyst, “in her empathic attitude, finds and mirrors [the patient’s] core subjectivity.” Mitchell suggests that this core subjectivity, for Kohut, represents just “one thread or one voice” (p. 108).

The contrast seems to be between a multifaceted “unraveling” of the self, which Mitchell sees in his own work, and what he mistakenly imputes to Kohut: a process in which the analyst identifies and empathically responds to just a single thread or voice of the analysis, one that exists independently of relationship. But for Kohut (1971, 1977a, 1984), the process of the unfolding of the self in psychoanalytic treatment allowed for a broad and diverse elaboration of self-experience from all periods of development and in relation to the full spectrum of early objects. The attribution to Kohut of a concept of the patient’s “core” subjectivity, in the sense of a single thread or voice seems to fly in the face of what Kohut explicated about his clinical work and the theory that he derived from it.

In my reading of Kohut, then, I find throughout his work multifaceted, rich, and textured pictures of the self, a self that is supposed to be able to unfold in all its multiple aspects through the analytic process. For Kohut (1974), “Body parts and single physical and mental functions are not only the foci of intense pleasure strivings . . . they are the leading narcissistic zones of the body–mind self” (p. 763). And he went on to speak of pleasure aims, self-preservation aims, ambitions, and ideals, all contributing to a richness of experience within a milieu of mutual selfobject empathy. In much of Kohut’s writing, the schematicization of the concept of self and its delimitation in terms of a few universal basic needs masks this richness. Yet, despite his penchant for schematicization, the view of the self as comprising multiple woven threads can be found throughout his work. In one such passage he likened the analytic process to the experience of reading great works of literature, such as those by Tolstoy: “The deep reverberations of our
nuclear selves as we participate in the works of great novelists and dramatists intensifies our reactions to the world and thus heightens our self-awareness... [enabling] us to experience our existence more fully" (Kohut, 1974, p. 761). Kohut's (1971, 1977a, 1984) concern with more intensified reactions, more heightened self-awareness, and a fuller experience of our existence gains expression in his extensive consideration of joy, creativity, transformation, wisdom, and humor. None of these concepts is compatible with a view of the self as unidimensional or as represented by a single thread or voice. I conclude that Kohut's ideas about the self are much more resonant with Mitchell's own concern for the multiplicity, texture, and richness of experience than Mitchell himself grants.

Is There a Private Self?

If Kohut's view of the self cannot be represented by one thread or one voice, it is not surprising that his self can also be neither a self of separateness nor a self of privacy. One might have expected that a Kohutian perspective on these questions of separate and private selves would line up on the side of modernity, with its emphasis on the bounded individual, rather than on the side of postmodernity, with its breaking down of boundaries. But Kohut never seemed to express an interest in the privacy of the self, and he did not address the topic in his writings.

Perhaps his discussion of lying comes closest to giving us insight into his notion of a private self. Here Kohut (1984) differentiated between childhood and adult lies and attributed to some childhood lies an attempt to test the omniscience of selfobjects and discover whether or not the parents "can penetrate into his mind" (p. 72). In my reading of this discussion, however, it seems that Kohut equivocated about the possible consequences of the child's lie in such a way that the lying child cannot lose: if the child's lie goes undetected, the experience is likely to constitute an optimal frustration through the manageable and growth-promoting loss of an omnipotent view of the parent as all-knowing; this occurs along with the child's sense of success in Kohut's assertion of "the rights of an individual self" to construe and present his experience as he chooses (p. 72). The manageable disappointment, and the new self-experience it entails, can lead to a miniscule step in the accretion of psychic function for the child. But even if the lie is detected, the child still achieves a growth-promoting confrontation with the reality of the other and an accurate mirroring of his own knowledge of the falsehood. Thus, regardless of its immediate interpersonal consequence, the lie yields the potential for a constructive developmental outcome. In this as in other elaborations, Kohut straddled the fence between a bounded individual for whom secrets, privacy, and lies are understood as one-person phenomena in the service of a separate self and a permeable or unbounded individual for whom these activities are understood primarily as relational events with relational consequences.

Winnicott (1963), who, like Kohut, seemed to give equal weight to self and relationship, assigned a role to the analyst's interpretation similar to that which Kohut assigned to the undetected lie: it establishes "the limits of the analyst's understanding" (p. 189) and thereby aids the analysand in his "discovery that his own understanding of his mental states and attitudes is at times better than that of the analyst" (Kohut, 1984, p. 72). To the extent that people have secrets and undetected lies, to the extent that their analysts are unable to understand them accurately, to that degree they may feel themselves to be separate individuals with bounded selves. To the extent that the responses of an individual's selfobjects or facilitating environment are constitutive of self-feeling and development, on the other hand, the individual is inextricably entwined in relationships with others. Both Winnicott and Kohut seem to have made sure that we can never accuse them of standing permanently on one side of these questions or the other.

In spite of Kohut's intentional straddling of these issues of self-and-other, he often elicited criticism for the concept of a bounded self. Yet, it is theorists like Winnicott (1963), Khan (1974), and Modell (1993) who address far more fully the notion of a private self capable of remaining isolated from relational pressures that impinge or interpersonal rewards that seduce. Modell, for instance, argues that "the need to protect the private self from intrusions by others is universal" (p. 75). And in Winnicott's (1963) words:

I am putting forward and stressing the importance of the idea of the permanent isolation of the individual and claiming that at the core of the individual there is no communication with the not-me world... This preservation of isolation is part of the search for identity, and for the establishment of a personal
technique for communicating which does not lead to violation of the central self [pp. 189–190].

This seems to be a statement on behalf of the individual as “an isolate” that Kohut would never have accepted in so unequivocal a form. With these words, we might say, Winnicott established himself as more of a self psychologist than Kohut, in spite of Winnicott’s customary emphasis on the facilitating environment.

Despite this portrayal of the individual as an isolate, Winnicott seems to have been one of a small handful of analysts who rival Kohut in a seamless embrace of self and relationship in development and treatment. Many of Winnicott’s relational comments have achieved the status of analytic aphorisms, such as “there is no such thing as an infant” (Winnicott, 1960b, p. 39n). But as we have just seen, Winnicott occasionally made statements on the self side of the equation that went far beyond anything Kohut ever wrote. As for a final example of this tendency, consider Winnicott’s (1945) remark: “In the earliest, theoretical primitive state, the self has its own environment, self-created” (p. 155n). But Winnicott then went on to make a very Kohutian point concerning the necessity for the external human environment to meet the child’s self-created world in a way that provides the child with an essential experience of omnipotence. In Winnicott’s view, when the caretaker is able to “meet” the child’s omnipotence, the child is allowed the fantasy that she has created the means of her own fulfillment. Winnicott’s concept of omnipotence comes close to what Kohut (1977a) labeled the fantasy of omnipotent merger, a necessary precursor of the later self-object experiences of mirroring, twinship, and idealization. Kohut’s omnipotent merger allows the child a fantasy of sharing in the adult’s capacities that are inevitably exaggerated in the small child’s eyes.

One important difference between Winnicott’s and Kohut’s notions of childhood omnipotence was expressed in Winnicott’s suggestion that, through the adult’s meeting of the infant’s needs, the infant will have a fantasy of her own (separate) omnipotence; whereas, for Kohut, the infant’s fantasy is of sharing in or merging with the adult’s fantasized omnipotence. Here again Winnicott seems more of a pure “self psychologist” than Kohut. Another difference between Winnicott’s and Kohut’s notions of developmental omnipotence is that, in Winnicott’s (1963) depiction of omnipotence, he explicitly included an element pertaining to the child’s early experience of creativity, an element that Kohut did not directly address in relation to this particular concept. For both Winnicott and Kohut, however, these experiences of fantasized omnipotence were needed to protect the infant from what would otherwise have been a terrifying awareness of actual helplessness and vulnerability in the face of basic needs. With these concepts, Winnicott and Kohut set themselves apart from Freud and other classical theorists who emphasized renunciation of infantile fantasies of omnipotence; both theorists clearly stressed the normal and essential function of such fantasies. Whatever Kohut’s and Winnicott’s further divergences, their respective concepts of omnipotence speak to a shared insistence on the necessity of the selfobject matrix or the facilitating environment for the development of self.

The discussion of how much “self” lies outside the “self–other matrix” continues as we head toward the millennium, perhaps because the complexities of the subject matter, including its paradoxical treatment by both Winnicott and Kohut, require each serious theorist to go through her own private struggle with the elements of this seeming duality. Thus Benjamin (1988), like other contemporary relational theorists, tries to balance within herself the opposing views. Sounding eerily like Kohut, but apparently not aware of retracing his ground, she writes:

Of course not all actions are undertaken in direct relation to a recognizing other. The child . . . feels . . . pleasure in mastery as well as self-expression. Yet we know that such pleasure in one’s own assertion requires and is associated with a supportive social context. We know that serious impairment of the sense of mastery and the capacity for pleasure results when the self–other matrix is disrupted, when the life-giving exchange with others is blocked [p. 22].

Bollas (1992), like Benjamin, starts out by addressing what might be intrinsic to the individual, but then goes on to invoke an essential environmental ingredient. He writes that “the infant has his own intrinsic ‘form,’ given the design of his inherent disposition” (p. 32) and goes on to say that “the true self is the historical kernel of the infant’s instinctual and ego dispositions” (p. 51). In spite of these tributes to the self’s unique and inherent dispositions, however, Bollas also significantly brings in the environment. Sounding very close not only to Winnicott but also to Mitchell and Kohut, he adds that the ego is structured through the “interplay of the inherent (true self) and the environment” (p. 59). Ultimately, then, Winnicott, Bollas,
Benjamin, Kohut, and Mitchell all seem to agree that some central psychological aspect of experiencing, whether it is called ego, self, or distinctive subjectivity, is based on the "convergence" (Kohut), the "interactions" (Kohut), the "mutually regulatory matrix" (Mitchell), the "self-other matrix" (Benjamin), or the "interplay" (Bolas) between certain inborn potentialities of the individual and his or her human (facilitating) environment.

Although not directly addressing issues of early development, Modell (1992, 1993) sings in a different key, suggesting that, for some people, the pleasures in functional capacities and personal well-being may outweigh the value placed on the responses of others. Modell, be it noted, is one of very few voices today arguing for the possibility of an uncompromised and nonpathological separateness of self. In so doing, he stands apart from the many contemporary voices joining the intersubjective and relational choruses. Aron (1996), for instance, at first seems to join Winnicott, Khan, and Modell in insisting that the individual has "a preexperiential motivational push" to remain hidden, unfound, untouchable by others. But for Aron this push clearly goes hand in hand with a counterbalancing push to know and be known, achieving what he calls an essential "meeting of minds" (p. 80). In discussing problems of treatment, Jacobson (1997) joins the colloquy. He struggles to find a theoretical place for the self between what he sees as its "temporally flattened" form in the here-and-now relational world (p. 83), where it becomes a self with no past and no substance outside of the current context; and the self as "a deep isolate," cut off from impingements from others, but carrying deep reservoirs of experience within, which are never shared or communicated.

There are indeed new developments in the many contemporary relational and intersubjective theories that challenge aspects of Kohut's thinking, and these ideas are addressed on their own terms in the chapters to follow. For now, what is intriguing is that many voices in the postmodern chorus think that they are striking a discordant note with Kohut concerning the self, whereas, in certain significant ways, they seem to be adding verses, counterpoint, harmonies, and improvisations while substantively continuing his tune.

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KOHUT'S CONCEPT OF THE SELF-OBJECT

I am an other.

—Rimbaud

Kohut's selfobject concept, from the start, held within it the seeds of a deconstruction of the self. Because of the self-selfobject milieu in which the self developed and was sustained, the self was never seen as an entity that could or should be able to stand on its own. Many theorists who have explicitly expressed their appreciation of Kohut's contribution to psychoanalysis nevertheless seem to have underestimated the implications of Kohut's selfobject concept for his theory of self as a whole. They tend to see the Kohutian self as far more autonomous and bounded than a careful and complete reading of Kohut's work should allow. The unhyphenated, compound noun selfobject denotes a process of self-development in which equal weight is given to the inseparable contributions of self and object. I suggest that, together with his insistence on the empathic mode of observation in psychoanalysis, Kohut's selfobject concept has rendered self psychology a postmodern, more than a modern, theory of self. In its breaking down of boundaries, both within and among selves, the selfobject concept very much anticipated, and perhaps even precipitated, current psychoanalytic preoccupations with issues of subjectivity, objectivity, and intersubjectivity.