

Theory: Empathic attunement and transference in Kohut's Self-Psychology

The relational psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1984) theorised that it was the therapist's task is to provide the client with a 'corrective emotional experience' through empathy/attunement. Through empathy, he suggested, the therapist can be used (as an object) to gratify the early developmental needs relating to 'narcissism' (in Kohut's theory this is a healthy stage in child development). In other words, empathy permits the natural occurrence of different narcissistic transferences from the client. He called these: the *mirroring* transference, the *idealizing* transference and the *twinship* transference. Kohut's theory suggested that if these needs for mirroring, idealising and twinship were not adequately met, the child would not develop a healthy sense of self. The process can be seen as one of going from having the therapist as an internal self-object to having an 'inner good parent'.

Mirroring transference – Kohut posited that the growing infant needed to be shown by significant caregivers that they are special and wanted. The infant needs to have their mini-achievements celebrated. Kohut saw this as the infant's natural egocentric grandiosity which in being valued by the caregivers helped them to gain a healthy self-esteem and a sense that they will be loved for who they are (whatever they do). In therapy terms, the therapist helps the client to work through this transference by mirroring: praising, applauding, acknowledging and valuing clients' feelings of pride in their achievements.

Idealising transference – Then, as infants grow and explore their world, they look up to their parent/s as strong, powerful and confident; they learn to count on their parents to provide a sense of safety, security and freedom. Thus the child admires (idealises) this all-powerful caregiver and absorbs these admired qualities into their own values and ambitions (internalising the parent). The process is similar in therapy, where – in transference - the client may initially idealise the therapist. Eventually clients come to develop a more realistic picture of the therapist's limitations and fallibility. If this process involves small 'optimal frustrations' (such as the therapist being late for an appointment) rather than dramatic, unmanageable disillusionment (forgetting the client's name and history) causing a rupture in the relationship, the client's narcissism is thought to follow a healthy pattern of development.

Twinship transference – Eventually, children learn they share important characteristics with their parent/s: this helps them develop a sense of belonging. And their perspective widens as they grow. They begin to long for and develop other affirming relationships and they develop social skills with family, friends and the wider community. In therapy, twinship might occur as therapist and client acknowledge similar experiences or share a joke or interests or engage a friendly philosophical discussion. In this stage therapists might disclose more of themselves.