

## **The Self according to Heinz Kohut**

Heinz Kohut was an Austrian-American psychoanalyst. His work in self psychology helped to transform the modern practice of analytic and dynamic treatment. In his early life, he undertook medical training in neurology and psychiatry and was a strong proponent of traditional psychoanalysis.

Kohut would later reject Freud's theory of the id, ego and superego in favour of his own ideas around the tripartite self. Kohut's theory stated that the three-part self could only develop when the needs of one's 'self-states' were met in relationships with others. He included the individual's sense of worth and well-being within this theory. This contrasted sharply with traditional psychoanalysis, which focused on drives, internal conflicts, and fantasies.

However, his three-part self theory grew from an initial theory of the bipolar self. It comprised of two systems, firstly the system of ambitions, and secondly a system of ideals. Kohut named the pole of ambitions the narcissistic self, and the latter the grandiose self. Kohut stated that these poles of the self, represented a natural progression in the psychic life of children from infancy, through the toddler years.

Further he argued that when the child's ambitions and exhibitionistic strivings were frequently frustrated, the result was the arresting of what he termed the grandiose self. Where this happens, it can result in the creation of a false sense of self. This in turn leads to narcissistic tendencies that either manifest outwardly or could remain hidden. Where manifested outwardly the individual displays all the visible grandiosity of a recognisable narcissist. Where the tendencies remain hidden, the false sense of self is only discovered during what Kohut termed a 'narcissistic therapeutic transference', where the primitive grandiose fantasies and strivings are exposed.

### **Over to you – What stops you reaching your grandiose self?**

Let's assume for a moment that Kohut's formulation of the poles is

correct. What is your grandiose self? What do you strive to be? Using your chosen medium create an image of that self.

To do this imagine what it is like to have reached that pole, to be where you want to be. Once you begin to work, let your intuitive mind take over the process. And once you feel you are finished stop, and do not add any more.

Now that you have your image of your grandiose self, I want you to consider what it is that is stopping you from reaching that pole. What is frustrating your ambitions. Focus on these elements for a few minutes, and then create your artwork, using your preferred medium, that represent the things that frustrate your journey to the grandiose self.

Again, work with your intuitive mind, and do not over think either the subjects or how you represent them. The less conscious thought you put in, the closer the thought process and the work will be to what you really think.

Once you have finished, take a look at them and note down what they represent for you. Consider whether your frustrations arise out of your environment, your situation, other people, or elements of your own self, such as lack of confidence. Is there a range, or do your frustrations tend to all be from one of these groups? What might this mean for you going forward?

## **Kohut's complexity**

Kohut's formulations of the self are extremely complex, particularly for those new to the area of psychology, and it is worth reading up on his ideas from a range of different sources, if his ideas interest you.

However, despite the complexity, some of the ideas he was a proponent of can be seen in our everyday contact with others. We all probably know at least one person who is a visible and frank narcissist, able to change any event or conversation so that it revolves around them, and who is never the one at fault for the wrong turns and mistakes in their lives.