The Wounded Self: the "screaming" child within.

By
Jeffrey M. Georgi, M.Div., MAH, LASC, LPC, CCS

This document is meant as an aid to the lectures delivered to the South Carolina Project on Alcohol and Drug Studies in Group Psychotherapy. Please read the document and come prepared to discuss it and the review questions at the accompanying training session.

Although some feel that Adult Children Of Addiction (ACOA) is an “outdated term,” I continue to use it because it still seems to fit. Participants are again cautioned not to consider ACOA as a diagnostic category. Rather ACOAs form a heterogeneous group of people ranging from those who have been profoundly wounded by their childhood experience to those whose show remarkable resiliency in the face of their family's dysfunction. The reasons for these differences are as varied as the ACOAs themselves and include: birth order, gender of child and/or addicted parent, age of onset of addictive behavior, other family/social supports, individual childhood resilience, the presence of physical violence, and/or a whole host of other variables that impact individual development. Self-psychology is offered in order to provide a theoretical construct to better understand the impact of addiction on childhood development, and therefore on adult personality.

In his theory of self-psychology, Heinz Kohut extends the advances of psychoanalytic theory in a fashion particularly applicable to the conceptualization of the ACOA experience. Well anchored in object relations theory, Kohut's presentation of the cohesive nuclear self emphasizes the essential role of empathy in the child's development of self-esteem and individuality. In his theoretical construct, Kohut sees the nuclear self as predominately bipolar (Kohut introduces the tripartite self in his final book published in 1984). These two poles, in constant tension with each other, help the child move toward a cohesive self when and if that child receives "good enough parenting" in his or her early years.

Kohut believed that the exhibitionistic grandiosity associated with narcissism is a primary ingredient in the development of healthy self-esteem. Indeed, it is the mirroring of grandiosity,
the child being the apple in its mother's eye that is one of the poles that Kohut defines as essential in the development of a mature cohesive self. In a sense, Kohut sees the infant as a boundless and powerful being. From the child's perspective he/she controls all the objects in his/her life through the magic of his/her desires and thoughts. The child experiences him/herself as the center of the universe and expects all others to act accordingly. This apparently extreme expression of narcissism is for Kohut healthy and necessary.

In the ideal world the parents of this little infant “king/queen baby” consistently and accurately mirror the child's internal emotional states and respond immediately to all his/her needs. In essence, the child gets in touch with his/her own wonderfulness as this wonderfulness is mirrored back to the child through the gleam, smiles and energies of his/her mother and father. However, such precise mirroring, although at times automatic, can be difficult. As the child grows the parents may misread his/her emotional state. Given the fallibilities of human existence, even the best of mother/father is at times tired or distracted. Consequently, there are inevitable failures in this empathetic mirroring, attuned and empathetic process.

An example of this mirroring, both its success and failure, can be seen in an interaction years ago between my then ten-year-old son, Matthew and myself. Matthew had just gone to his first "real" dance held for his fifth grade class. He came home after this experience full of energy and excitement. (Although Matthew was far from an infant, he was still very much a child and the mirroring process was important to him although not as essential as it was when he was younger. Kohut believes that we do not completely out grow our need for such mirroring although our need does diminish as we mature.) As Matthew leaped out of the van that returned him home from the dance, his excitement was contagious. Not only had he enjoyed the dance, but he had also danced with ten girls including, and most importantly, a slow dance with the girl who had captured his fifth grade heart. Despite the lateness of the hour (almost 11:00 p.m.), Matthew wanted to go into intricate detail regarding this potent social success. In the beginning, it was hard not to join with him in his enthusiasm and with no effort, I was able to mirror back to him some portion of his grandiosity by the simple but energized statement "wow, it sounds like you had a wonderful time and that you are still feeling really, really good. In fact, this sounds
like one of the best nights of your whole life." After receiving a "step by step" review of the entire three-hour dance, my own fallibility and weariness began to show. As Matthew was preparing to retrace the evening for a second time, I pointed out to him that the night had, indeed, been wonderful and that in his excitement he might find it difficult to sleep. Clearly, sleep was my agenda, not his. Although understandable, my failure to continue to mirror Matthew's exhibitionistic grandiosity was experienced by my ten-year-old son as an emotional let-down. As soon as he realized that I was no longer as caught-up in the wonderfulness of his dance as he was and hence knew I was no longer "with him," a momentary sadness came over him as he contemplated bedtime. Because Matthew had already internalized and transmuted much of his self-esteem, his sadness did not last and he was able to mirror his own "wonderfulness" skipping off to his room smiling.

In this example, Kohut would stress that the inevitable failure in my mirroring is necessary. Using Donald Winnicott's concept of the "good enough" parent, Kohut believes that it is through the many mini-failures of the mirroring process, that the infant "king/queen baby" slowly comes down from his/her high chair thrown and joins the rest of us in the real world. In a sense, through these mini failures, the child is forced to internalize his/her grandiosity realizing that he/she cannot consistently count on others to provide these needs. It is through this transmuting internalization that the child develops his/her own sense of self-esteem within the confines of appropriate boundaries.

According to Kohut, there is, however, another pole pulling on the developing child. This is the side of the child that must come to term with the world of giants in which he/she lives. Again in its infancy the child, although the center of its universe does not have the ability to meet his/her needs and must rely on adults to do so. Because the child does not see his/her boundaries these helping adult (self-objects) are seen as part of the child. The child is dependent on these self-objects for its bodily needs and emotional security. These self-objects are particularly important if the child is distressed. Unable to provide his/her own self soothing the child needs a parent to "act for the child" if the child is to be comforted. Again, Kohut sees the child's ability to identify with strong consistent parents who are ever present to pick the child up when he/she
skins a knee or fix the arm on a broken doll as essential. According to Kohut, if there is that strong consistent object in the child's life, the child slowly learns through idealizing that parent(s) to internalize these strengths. As long as the strong parent is present and attuned to the child, the child feels safe and experiences that safety as a powerful soothing.

Much as in the case of mirroring, however, parental fallibility expresses itself in the mini-failures of this idealizing process. It can be simply that the bottle is not brought fast enough, or the tears are not wiped away with enough tenderness after a fall. Regardless of the source of the failure, the child slowly internalizes the same idealized needs once provided by the idealized parent. In other words, over time, in the face of these mini-failures, the child learns his/her own set of values, a sense of his/her own competencies and, perhaps, most importantly the child learns to soothe him/herself. With these two polarities, one represented by the grandiose and exhibitionistic needs and the others by the idealizing needs within the child, the individual through the process of transmuting internalization achieves a mature and cohesive self as long as these needs are met through "good enough parenting."

However, if there is genuine traumatic failure in either the mirroring process or the idealizing process, the child cannot creatively resolve his/her narcissistic needs nor meet his/her idealizing needs. According to Kohut and particularly relevant to children growing up in homes where addictive disease is present, when there is such a traumatic failure in parenting, the grandiose narcissistic needs of the infant “king/queen baby” do not simply disappear, but rather these needs are walled off as a separate structure in the psyche. Left un-transmuted in its archaic form, this narcissistic self-structure is best understood by thinking of a little 14 to 18-month-old child. At this stage, often referenced as the terrible twos, the child wants what he/she wants when he/she wants it. The child has no sensitivity to parental needs, responding only to his/her own immediate desires. Although capable of some self-entertainment at this time, the child is dependent upon the parent to soothe, particularly during stress or injury. When hungry, tired or frightened, a child this age places extreme demands upon all those around him/her. It is this demanding, needy, and powerful expression that the narcissistic self-structure brings to the psyche.

© Georgi Educational and Counseling Services 2012
In terms of personality structure this grandiose self-structure exerts tremendous pressure on the "true self" and can cause major difficulty. Again, the image to keep in mind is that of a hungry, tired child either demanding to get his/her way or completely withdrawing behind his/her unmet needs. For almost all of us there are aspects of this unresolved grandiosity in our unconscious, but for the child growing up in a home of addiction, this narcissistic grandiose self-structure is likely to represent intense pressures with which the psyche must contend. If the defenses employed by the ego become too inflexible, the person may present as a personality disorder. Even if there remains some flexibility in these defenses, the psyche must use significant energy to deal with this self-structure just to keep itself together. It is this energy drain that can express itself in the variety of symptoms and characteristics associated with the adult child of addiction. The adult may struggle with envy "attacks" or need constant approval to feel secure. There may be a lack of personal definition or feeling states may be unclear. Unaware of how truly wonderful he/she really is, such an adult may feel internal demands to preform and still be very critical of him/herself and others. In order not to deal with these pressures the adult may unconsciously defend against his/her grandiosity by walling off this energy and becoming depressed. Again the message is that given the potential early relational traumatic failures of growing up in a home of addiction or illness or distraction, the adult child may suffer from deficits in his self-structure which express themselves in self-defeating ways known as Shame.

**Questions for Review**

1. What are some ways that an unresolved grandiose self-structure can contribute to an ACOA’s shame?

© Georgi Educational and Counseling Services 2012
2. How do parental mini-failures facilitate the resolution of children’s narcissistic needs?