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The Shaping of the Self: Patterns and Pathways in Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen

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This article offers a heuristic framework that links several key aspects of the psychological models of John Bowlby, Heinz Kohut, and Murray Bowen, generating insight into an underlying set of isomorphic patterns in the shaping and reshaping of the self. This theoretical matrix of interlocking perspectives can facilitate our understanding of the formation – and promote the transformation – of selves as they engage within their familial and social worlds. The first section introduces some of these three authors' key theoretical and therapeutic contributions and provides our rationale for linking some of their ideas and intervention strategies. The second section offers a brief review of earlier attempts at partial integration of these theories and describes the distinctiveness of our proposal. The third section outlines our proposed heuristic framework, which identifies some of the underlying structural similarities in the formation of the self, described in different ways and with varying emphases by these three scholars. Finally, we briefly explore some of the implications of the model for producing clinical insights into distinctive pathways for the transformation of the self.

Keywords: Bowlby, Kohut, Bowen, self, integration

Key Points

1. Clinicians can benefit from a framework that links insights from the theories of John Bowlby, Heinz Kohut, and Murray Bowen.
2. This matrix of interlocking perspectives sheds light on some of the underlying formative patterns that can lead selves to become more or less 'resilient,' 'compliant,' or 'defiant.'
3. Gaining deeper insight into the hidden structures shaping clients' experience of self in their family and social systems can lead to ideas for exploring healing pathways that might otherwise have been missed.
4. The proposed framework can contribute to the therapist's self-reflection and self-understanding.

Family therapists and other counselling psychology professionals are motivated to understand the formation and facilitate the transformation of the individuals and groups they engage in therapy or other clinical settings. The shaping (and reshaping) of human selves typically occurs within biologically related familial systems embedded within wider and more socially complex cultural systems, and so therapists encounter a wide array of psychological theories and intervention techniques in their initial training and lifelong professional development. The diversity of (and debates over) theories and therapies can be overwhelming. In this article we outline a heuristic framework that is intended to simplify and clarify part of this complex domain by identifying and comparing similar patterns (isomorphic structures) in three major scholars and psychological schools that have influenced family therapy: John Bowlby's 'attachment theory,' Heinz Kohut's 'self psychology,' and Murray Bowen's 'family systems theory.'

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In the first section we briefly introduce some of the key contributions of these theoretical and therapeutic approaches and provide our rationale for interlacing some of their ideas and practices. The second section offers a brief review of several earlier attempts at partial integration of these theories and describes the distinctiveness of our proposal, which aims to highlight the reciprocal reinforcement between clear understanding of psychological theory and skilful therapeutic engagement. The third section outlines our proposed theoretical framework for illuminating some of the underlying isomorphic patterns in the shaping of the self, described in different ways and with varying emphases by the three scholars. The fourth section briefly explores practical implications of the model for generating therapeutic insights related to transformational pathways in the healthy reshaping of selves in their familial and social contexts, as well as for fostering self-reflection and self-understanding among practicing clinicians.

Why Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen?

The most obvious way to answer this question is by pointing to the enormous influence that each of these scholars has had on the theories and practices informing family therapy and other fields in the counselling, therapy, and psychology professions. Moreover, their models of the way in which selves are formed and transformed in relational systems are among the most empirically studied and validated theories in psychology (e.g., Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005; Brown, 2020; Jankowski & Hooper, 2012; Kerr, 2019; Lampis et al., 2019; Roisman et al., 2007). But this does not yet answer the more specific question: Why try to link *these three* influential and well-validated theories? As we explain in sections 3 and 4 below, our main interest is identifying and explicating previously unnoticed or underemphasised structural similarities in the theoretical patterns and therapeutic pathways proposed by these authors and their followers. The primary goal of this article is to highlight some of these isomorphisms as a first step toward fostering a more robust dialogue between (and integrated use of) their approaches to the (re)shaping of the self.

Before outlining our initial integrative efforts, however, in this section we briefly introduce each approach in the context of highlighting two other good reasons for linking their approaches. Weaving together complementary aspects of the theories of Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen enables the construction of an overarching framework that can account for various stages of human development and promote interdisciplinarity more adequately than any one of them can do alone. While all three are attentive to the dynamics shaping the self during its whole life course, they tend to ground their analysis and to focus more strongly either on the very early years (Bowlby), the childhood years (Kohut), or the teenage and adult years (Bowen). And while all three are explicitly interdisciplinary, their integration can provide an interlocking framework that facilitates even more robust connections between psychology and disciplines whose analysis operates at the level of phenomena that are constitutive conditions of the self (e.g., neuroscience, biology) or that include selves as constitutive parts (e.g., sociology, economics).

Bowlby's *attachment theory* is based primarily on his research on the first weeks and early years of a child's life and relies heavily on insights from evolutionary biology and ethology (Bowlby, 2005, 2008). He proposes that a human 'attachment behavioural system' was naturally selected in the early ancestral environment because

it provided a survival advantage to infants. Compared to other animals, human babies are more dependent on their caregivers, and those who are capable of emotionally attaching to (and eliciting the attachment of) the latter are generally more likely to receive the care they need to survive before they develop sufficiently to care for themselves. Bowlby's theory about the existence of such an attachment system was later tested by Mary Ainsworth, whose 'strange situation' experiments involved triggering the attachment system by having the caregiver (usually the mother) leave the observatory room in which the child is playing and then return after a few minutes (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). This research revealed three distinct modes of attachment: *secure* (in which the child reacts with stress but quickly reconnects and resumes playing), *ambivalent* (in which the child hyperactively reacts with distress and cannot calm down when the caregiver returns), and *avoidant* (in which the child appears not to react, calmly deactivating the attachment system, but whose heart rates and cortisol levels show that they are at least as anxious as securely or ambivalently attached children). This attachment style informs a default 'internal working model' that shapes the way in which the child will later relate to friends, family, and romantic partners during adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Kohut's *self psychology* emerged as his response to concerns about the way in which the psychoanalytic tradition had become theoretically fixated on the ego (along with the id and the superego) and therapeutically dismissive of the importance of an empathic relationship between the analyst and the analysand. His focus was primarily on the way in which events during the early childhood years through puberty shed light on the analysis and restoration of the self in adulthood (Kohut, 2009a, 2009b). Although Kohut was clearly motivated by broader sociological and cultural issues (Kohut, 1985), his theorising was not deeply influenced by discoveries in the biological disciplines. One of the key concepts in Kohut's approach was 'selfobject' needs in relation to which a cohesive and solid sense of self can develop: the need to experience acceptance ('mirroring'), merging with greatness and calmness ('idealisation'), and the presence of essential likeness ('twinship'). The development of a cohesive self occurs as an individual internalises a healthy 'psychic structure' (Kohut, 1984, p. 99) along these three axes in response to experiences of optimal frustration in relation to selfobjects (e.g., parents and other external objects). As the self is shaped, it may become *healthily narcissistic* – capable of forming and maintaining a positive sense of self-esteem, a stable system of goal-setting ideals, and communicative intimate relationships. However, experiences of empathic failure or unresolved needs from childhood can result in immature narcissism, which may take form as *selfobject hunger* (protecting the vulnerable self by lending or borrowing a self) or as *selfobject denial* (positing a false self with a façade of grandiosity and independence).

Bowen's *family systems theory* is focused more directly than the other two on the way in which the self is shaped by broader intergenerational patterns and social systems. He was also interested in setting early human development in the context of ethology and evolutionary biology, but his theoretical and therapeutic approach attended more explicitly to ways in which adults (and teens) bind anxiety through triangulation. He postulated the existence of an 'emotional system,' which occurs naturally in all forms of life and enables 'an organism to receive information (from within itself and from the environment), to integrate that information, and to respond on the basis of it' (Kerr & Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Among social animals in general, and humans in particular, the system is characterised by the counterbalancing life forces of

'individuality' and 'togetherness.' For Bowen, the healthy shaping of the self involves 'differentiation' – the capacity to remain in emotional contact with significant others while maintaining one's own emotional and intellectual functioning. A solid or *well differentiated* self is able to remain more stable under stress and is less influenced by the togetherness pressures of the relationship system (Bowen, 1993, p. 306). A poorly differentiated self, on the other hand, will tend to become *fused* within emotional systems either by constantly *trading* the self with others (through over- or under-functioning) or by *cutting off* from others (especially one's family of origin; see Titelman, 2014b). Both forms of fusion lead to emotional reactivity under stressful conditions.

Each of these theories has its own coherence, explanatory power, and therapeutic intervention strategies. However, linking insights about the structure of the self-in-relation derived from all three of these approaches can produce an even more stable and useful theoretical framework (like a stool with three legs). Identifying the isomorphism within the psychological patterns conceptualised and analysed by Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen can provide a way of better accounting for all of the stages of human development in the formation of the self. Identifying the isomorphism in the therapeutic pathways discovered and explored by these thinkers can provide a way of better accounting for the processes that facilitate the transformation of the self. When taken together, these approaches can promote a more robust openness to and engagement with a wider range of scientific disciplines that shed light on the (re)shaping of the self. We argue that the family therapist (and other professional caregivers or social workers) can benefit from a more comprehensive heuristic framework that is informed by combining aspects of these schools of thought and practice.

Earlier Integrative Attempts: A Brief Review

Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen developed their theories and therapies during roughly the same time period (1960s through 1980s) but did not directly engage with one another's work in much detail. In recent decades, however, several scholars have noticed similarities (as well as differences) between them and pointed out ways in which aspects of their theories might be partially integrated.

Bowlby and Bowen have been more influential than Kohut within the field of family therapy and so it is not surprising that most integrative attempts in this discipline have focused primarily on the approaches of the two former authors. It is generally agreed that although the two theories operate at different levels of analysis, they are wholly compatible and at least partially susceptible to integration both theoretically and practically (van Ecke et al., 2006; Katafiasz, 2012). Several empirical studies have shown correlations between individual-level variables operationalised using concepts from Bowlby's and Bowen's theories. For example, insecure forms of attachment in general are associated with lower levels of differentiation of self (Hainlen, Jankowski, Paine, & Sandage, 2016; Xue et al., 2018). More specifically, attachment avoidance is significantly correlated with emotional cutoff as is attachment anxiety to emotional reactivity (Skowron & Dendy, 2004; see Wei, Vogel, Ku, & Zakalik, 2005, for a discussion of mediating factors). Putting it more positively, path analysis modelling has shown that both healthy differentiation of self and secure adult attachment are important variables contributing to sexual and marital satisfaction (Timm & Keiley, 2011). However, it is important not to confuse correlation with causation or

to conflate variables related to secure attachment and differentiation of self, which do not always wholly overlap in personality development (Davis & Jones, 1992).

Of course, there are many other family systems theorists besides Bowen. As part of the general shift in the field of family therapy toward attending to systems perspectives (Magnavita, 2012), a growing number of scholars have attempted to integrate aspects of Bowlby's attachment theory with aspects of other non-Bowenian systems theory approaches. In fact, most of these attempts at integration either do not mention Bowen at all (Caffery & Erdman, 2000, 2003; O'Gorman, 2012; Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002), or only make brief reference to some of his concepts (Crittenden & Dallos, 2009; Hooper, 2007; Kozlowska & Hanney, 2002; Ng & Smith, 2006). Nevertheless, such attempts are important for our purposes because of the way in which they highlight some of the structural similarities between what some other family systems theorists call the adaptive, disengaged, and enmeshed patterns of family structure and what Bowlby calls secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment styles (Byng-Hall, 1995; Marvin, 2003; Stevenson-Hinde, 1990). Our integrative attempts are more explicitly focused on linking Bowen's conception of differentiation of self to Bowlby's conception of secure attachment and on linking both to Kohut's conception of a maturely narcissistic relation to selfobject needs.

Although less common in the literature, there have also been attempts to show connections between Kohut's self psychology and the theories of Bowlby or Bowen. Sometimes this takes the form of expanding attachment theory, for example, to incorporate psychoanalytic and Kohutian insights about narcissism (Pistole, 1995), while other times it takes the form of expanding Kohut's self psychology to account for some of Bowlby's insights on attachment relationships (Shane, Shane, & Gales, 1997). Attempts at integrating Kohut's work with that of either Bowen or Bowlby are often motivated by specific pragmatic concerns such as the treatment of struggling couples (Belsey, 1990) or the use of animal-assisted interventions in therapy (Roccaforte, 2019). However, a few scholars have attempted more explicitly theoretically oriented integration between aspects of self psychology and aspects of attachment theory or family systems theory. Brown (2010), for example, in reaction to 'eclectic' approaches to teaching therapy, has articulated a 'meta-theory' that links self psychology and systems theory within a framework that focuses on the concepts of self, affect, beliefs, meaning, and behaviour. The most comprehensive attempt to identify structural similarities between Kohut's approach and attachment theory involved seven empirical studies carried out by Banai et al. (2005). These authors operationalised some of Kohut's key concepts and developed the Selfobject Needs Inventory (SONI), which enabled them to discover significant relationships between denial of selfobject needs and avoidant attachment style, on the one hand, and selfobject hunger and anxious (or ambivalent) attachment style, on the other.

It is relatively rare to find scholars utilising insights from all three thinkers in family therapy literature. Such attempts are typically focused on a particular therapeutic challenge and mention our theorists only in passing (Hill, 1996). However, at least two examples of more robust attempts at integration have appeared in the pages of *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*. Already in the late 1980s, Quadrio and Levy (1988) called for a reformulation of Bowlby's attachment theory that encompassed the systems theory perspective as well as aspects of psychoanalytic thinking. More recently, Wright (2009) utilises insights from all three schools of thought in her analysis of the importance of 'self-soothing' in both intrapsychic and

relational processes. One also occasionally finds Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen simultaneously engaged, albeit briefly, in literature dealing with theoretical issues and intervention practices in clinical social work (e.g., Freed, 1985; McMillen, 1992; McMillen & Rideout, 1996). This makes sense because social workers are often trained (and confronted in their daily work) in ways that encourage them to attend to broader intergenerational and social systemic issues as well as the psychological issues influencing those with whom they work.

As far as we know, however, no one has attempted to interlink aspects of all three approaches to understanding the shaping (and facilitating the reshaping) of the self into a single model that highlights the isomorphic formative patterns and transformative pathways that overlap within the theoretical and therapeutic efforts of Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen.

Patterns in the Formation of the Self: Theoretical Reflections

Table 1 portrays our proposed heuristic framework for linking some key aspects of attachment theory, self psychology, and family systems theory. The first three columns should be familiar from our brief introduction to these theories above. The final column identifies three distinct and dynamic structural patterns into which the self can be 'shaped' as it emerges through interactions within familial and societal systems in childhood and is maintained (or altered) in adulthood. This section briefly traces these patterns in Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen in a way that reveals the isomorphism that extends transversally across their theoretical approaches.

First, some qualifications. We do not mean to imply that we have identified 'natural kinds' of psychological structures whose construction or conservation follow determined rules. Rather, we think of this model of somewhat isomorphic dynamic patterns as a framework for fostering discovery, both at the level of theoretical insight and therapeutic innovation. As noted in the previous sections, each of these theories individually has strong empirical warrant, and statistical analysis (as well as psychological observation) suggests that there are strong correlations between and among variables that appear within and across all three. We also do not mean to imply that these are the only similarities between Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen, nor that their theories can be so neatly reduced to the three patterns we attribute to each. For example, as attachment theory was increasingly applied to research on adults, many scholars came to prefer a four-fold schema of attachment styles (Rholes & Simpson, 2004). For the sake of simplicity, we have intentionally limited ourselves to the classical expressions of the original theorists. Finally, we are not implying that a resilient self is

TABLE 1
Patterns in the Formation of the Self

Bowlby Attachment Style	Kohut Selfobject Needs	Bowen Emotional Systems	The Shape of the Self
Securely Attached	Healthy Narcissism	Well Differentiated	Resilient
Ambivalently Attached	Selfobject Hunger	Fused "Trading" Self	Compliant
Avoidantly Attached	Selfobject Denial	Fused "Cutoff" Self	Defiant

immune to pathological reactivity, nor that a compliant self always complies with others and a defiant self always defies others. Rather, each of these terms points to a set of underlying capacities and (sometimes unmanifested) tendencies that characterise three different general ways of being a self in the world. In each case, context will always play an important role in shaping the exercise of the capacities and the manifestation of the varying tendencies.

The *resilient* self has a higher capacity for flexibly maintaining the coherence of its own boundaries in close relationship with emotionally relevant others under anxiogenic conditions and greater tendency to actively bounce back into equilibrium after experiencing frustration or stress (rather than reactively imploding or exploding). Such selves are shaped by the intrapsychic processes and interpersonal interactions that engender secure attachment styles, healthy narcissism, and high levels of differentiation of self (see Table 1). All three of the latter exhibit a similar underlying isomorphic pattern characterised by capacities and tendencies of the sort just mentioned. A more resilient person is likely to have a working model with an internalised sense of secure attachment to its caregivers, a mature psychic structure that is healthily relating to its selfobject needs, and a stronger ability to differentiate a self in emotionally intense and anxiety-producing situations. These are three different ways of expressing the dynamic structure of a self that is generally resilient as it engages with significant others, sets and pursues goals, and regulates its own feelings and thoughts.

Both compliant and defiant selves have less capacity to maintain coherent boundaries and self-regulation in close emotional relationships or to integrate their intellectual and emotional functioning, but their general adaptive tendencies are divergent. Under pressure the *compliant* self will tend to grasp anxiously for connection with significant others, enfolding (com-plying) itself into another self or enfolding the other into itself. This pattern is shared by each of the constructs listed in the relevant row in Table 1. An ambivalently attached person will tend to hyperactivate the attachment behavioural system when anxious, clinging desperately for closeness but unable to receive the anxiolytic benefits of proximity because their internal working model has been shaped by experiences of inconsistent or unreliable caregiving. An immaturely narcissistic person with selfobject hunger will tend to strive constantly for affirmation from idealised others, with whom they more or less unconsciously desire to merge through mirroring and twinship, guided by a psychic structure with little toleration for frustration and contradiction. A poorly differentiated person who responds to togetherness forces by frenetically 'trading' the self by over-functioning (lending a self) or under-functioning (borrowing a self) will tend toward a dissolution of the self in facile acquiescence to the shared beliefs and norms of the group to which they (long to) belong. These are three different ways of describing an underlying structure shared by selves that have been shaped into patterns of compliance that weaken their capacity for resilience in emotionally intense encounters or intimate relationships.

The *defiant* self is also characterised by a relative incapacity to maintain healthy boundaries and self-regulate in close relationships, but in this case the general tendency is toward mis-trust (de-fiance) of and distancing from emotionally relevant others. The bottom row in Table 1 portrays the constructs from our three theorists that denote this isomorphic pattern in the formation of selves. Avoidantly attached individuals have a tendency to deactivate or freeze the attachment behavioural system even (or especially) under stressful conditions, sometimes because they learned as children to distrust the availability of safety and attunement from caregivers. Immaturely

narcissistic individuals who are characterised by selfobject denial tend to project a 'false self' (as opposed to the 'no self' of those who selfobject hunger), which can serve as a façade of strength and self-reliance, constructed in response to early experiences of severe frustration of their selfobject needs. Poorly differentiated individuals who cut off from their families of origin (and other emotional systems) are just as fused as compliant selves but have a tendency to seek emotional and physical distance when confronted with anxiety and emotional imbalance in relationships, often because they were locked into dysfunctional projective triangulation in childhood. Here we have three distinct ways of describing overlapping psychodynamic processes that work together to surreptitiously shape selves in ways that block their capacity to pursue intimate connection through empathic engagement.

This initial attempt at a partial integration of some of the key components of the theories of Bowlby, Kohut, and Bowen is motivated first of all by our desire to provide family therapists and other counselling psychology professionals with a conceptual model that enhances their ability to identify and trace the complex dynamics that have shaped the formation of their clients. However, we also believe that this heuristic model offers a multi-faceted matrix that can provide a wider perspective as therapists map out pathways toward resilience and facilitate the reshaping of healthier selves.

Pathways in the Transformation of the Self: Practical Applications

In other words, by attending to the interrelationships among and isomorphism across these three influential psychological theories of personality development, we hope to render the challenges of facilitating the transformation of selves more tractable for family therapists. This assemblage of aspects of all three theories into a single (albeit simplistic) model is meant to enhance the therapeutic conceptual toolkit. Each approach has individually demonstrated its pragmatic value for psychotherapy (e.g., Titelman, 2014a; Wallin, 2007; Wolf, 2002), but linking them in this way can lead to additional insights and intervention strategies. Our focus in the remaining limited space will be on the therapeutic trajectories that are more likely to characterise the treatment of compliant and defiant selves, as they move toward resilience. We do not mean to imply that these are monolithic groups or to ignore the uniqueness of every individual's transformative journey. However, we would like to point out some of the structurally similar pathways revealed by the multi-dimensional model outlined briefly above.

Let's begin with the compliant self. If we accept the correlations between the relevant variables in attachment theory, self psychology, and family systems theory that have been disclosed through empirical analysis and conceptual reflection, then one might see the integrative heuristic framework as inviting certain inferences from whatever point one enters the matrix. For example, if an individual presents with features that indicate an ambivalent attachment style, one might begin to explore whether they also display evidence of selfobject hunger or emotional fusion as a trading self in relation to their partner or wider family system. Other points of entry could be equally illuminative. If a person appears prone to idealising others and is inappropriately dependent on experiences of twinship or mirroring, one might investigate the extent to which they tend to hyperactivate the attachment behavioural system or attempt to borrow (or lend) a self in relation to the therapist or others. Finally, detecting that a client is operating as a trading self within a fused emotional system could prompt one

to look for signs that they have experienced the traumatic frustration of selfobject needs or the failure to internalise a secure base in relation to primary caregivers.

A similar process applies to the assessment and treatment of individuals whose selves have been shaped into what we are calling a defiant structural pattern. Here too reflecting on the various dimensions of the model could lead to new insights into the complexity of factors potentially shaping the transformation of the self. For example, when considering an individual whose attitudes and behaviours suggest an avoidant attachment style, one might explore the extent to which they also exhibit cutoff from the family of origin or selfobject denial in intimate and other relationships. If a person presents in ways that indicate they are denying selfobject needs (such as mirroring or twinship), one might look for evidence of attachment avoidance or fusion within emotional systems expressed as emotional or physical distancing. Finally, when confronted with a client that is emotionally cut off from their family of origin, one could investigate whether they might be helped by intervention strategies designed for avoidantly attached individuals or those suffering from selfobject denial. In each case, such reflections could lead to ideas for exploring healing pathways that might otherwise have been missed.

Despite the differences between the roads most travelled by compliant and defiant (not to mention resilient) selves on their varying pathways of transformation, the patterns that underlie the shaping of all three share several features that are therapeutically relevant. As therapists well know, such patterns are invisible or at least partially hidden. The fact that internal working models (or psychic structures, or togetherness forces) function under the client's radar (and under the radar of those within their familial and social systems) is part of the reason they 'work' so well. This hinders their capacity for integration and self-regulation of emotional and intellectual functioning. Moreover, this hiddenness is reinforced by layers of (equally invisible) defence mechanisms, such as self-judgement and projection, which help people stay disconnected from those aspects of themselves that they are disavowing.

It takes a lot of energy and courage to challenge these defence mechanisms, and all too often the pain of repression feels more 'comfortable' than the pain of acknowledging and challenging lifelong habits of thought and behaviour. All of this is exacerbated by the fact that most of the selves with whom we engage in daily life are equally unaware of the underlying patterns and defence mechanisms that are shaping family and social interactions, creating a vicious cycle of further judgement and repression. This is why the clinician's role is so important; by meeting an individual empathically, they can facilitate the reshaping of their internalised relationship to their attachment figures, selfobject needs, and emotional systems.

Another practical application of this framework has to do with the promotion of self-reflection and self-understanding within the therapist, which is crucial for facilitating healthy transference and for avoiding unhealthy counter-transference. Here we only have space for a brief vignette, which is intended to illustrate the potential heuristic power of interlinking these three perspectives.

Practice vignette

Diane[1], a counsellor whose primary experience has been within an educational context, first encountered Bowlby's attachment theory in an undergraduate course. The concept of attachment styles made immediate sense to her, and she quickly realised that she was ambivalently attached. This was clear not only from reflection on her

early relationship with her primary caregiver (her mother), which was expressed or reinforced through a difficult weaning experience, but also from reflection on her experience in adult and especially romantic relationships, in which she usually found it difficult to fully receive the benefits of the proximity she so desperately needed. Diane was also able to trace the effects of her attachment style on those she counselled and others in her network of family and friends. This self-awareness later enabled her to recognise more quickly the way in which her attachment issues shaped her sense of self (and sensing of other selves) in ways that unconsciously led to her anxiously grasping for connection (or what we have been calling 'compliance') in relation to others, including those whom she was responsible to counsel.

In her continuing education, Diane took a course in which she encountered the work of Kohut and became fascinated with the concept of selfobject needs. In dialogue with one of the authors of the current article, she came to see a certain resemblance between the structure of her ambivalent attachment style and her tendency toward selfobject hunger. In Diane's case, this took the form of an unhealthily narcissistic longing for twinship in particular. This psychic structure underlying her sense of self had been manifested in her adolescence and early adulthood as a painful longing to 'comply' alongside an equally painful inability to fit in. Here too she was able to apply this self-understanding to her counselling work, acknowledging and attending to her own tendency to allow her selfobject hunger to surreptitiously shape her encounters with others – both professionally and personally. While Bowlby's theory, grounded in evolutionary biology, provided her with insights into ways in which her formal early attachment experiences shaped her sense of self, Kohut's more psychoanalytically oriented theory helped her unveil some of the material ways in which particular selfobject needs had been driving her compulsion (and incapacity) to conform.

Later in her career, through further dialogue with peers, Diane integrated insights from Bowen theory into her self-analysis, which added a new dimension to her self-understanding. In response to the togetherness forces of her family of origin, she had taken on the role of an over-functioning self. Fused within the emotional system of the family, she unconsciously 'traded' her (pseudo)self, which in Diane's case meant 'loaning' her selfhood to others. Failing to acknowledge her own thoughts and feelings, she would immediately accept almost any task and work without reprieve in order to accomplish it, all in order to hold up (what she thought was) the emotional well-being of family members and friends. This over-functioning all too often led to exhaustion and anger, especially when she was unable (for subjective or objective reasons) to complete tasks quickly or competently enough to bind the anxiety of the familiar structure of the emotional system within which she was embedded. Diane came to see that she was unconsciously transferring these compliant patterns into her counselling and other professional relationships.

Each of these three theoretical perspectives was extremely helpful for Diane in her self-reflection, but linking all of them together provided her with an even deeper sense of self-awareness that enhanced her ability to differentiate and see others more clearly in her practice as a counsellor. As Diane put it: 'Seeing myself in light of all three of these theories has helped me become less judgemental of myself and given me more objectivity about my own reactivity. This transformational journey has also made me less judgemental in my response to clients, as well as family and friends, freeing up mental resources to see them more clearly and to respond more patiently.'

Recommendations for practitioners

Here we offer three suggestions derived from this heuristic framework that could be of use for marriage and family therapists and other counselling psychologists. First, we recommend following the (theoretical) road less travelled. Practitioners who are most familiar or strongly attracted to one of the main theorists described above might consider making an extra effort to explore the other two more carefully even if – or precisely because – they feel foreign. At the very least, such exploration will clarify the distinctiveness and value of one's preferred theory. At best, it will lead to new therapeutic insights, as well as intervention strategies for engaging couples and families, that one might never have discovered otherwise.

Second, it is important not to allow the differences between individuals whose selves are shaped primarily by patterns of defiance or compliance to obscure the underlying similarities they share in contrast to resilient selves. For example, it may appear that compliant selves need to set stronger boundaries and defiant selves need to relax their boundaries. This may be the case superficially, but at a deeper level what they both really need is to establish a stable sense of self and a capacity for self-direction so that they can become flexible and resilient rather than automatically hyperactivating or deactivating in relation to situations or others whom they perceive as threatening – especially others within their family who have served as primary caregivers, as mediators of their selfobjects, or with whom they are highly fused.

Our third recommendation is indirectly linked to the practice vignette above. Marriage and family therapists are trained to pay attention not only to the attitudes and behaviours exhibited by their clients but also to the ways in which their own hermeneutical habits have been formed and transformed by their own past experiences. Failure to attend to the latter can block insights into clients' patterns or in some cases even trigger those patterns, further intensifying the attitudes and behaviours that are driving marital or familial conflict. The integrative matrix outlined above might serve therapists as a practical tool for guiding self-reflection as well as reflection on potential therapeutic interventions for the individuals and families with whom they work.

Conclusion

In this article we have proposed a heuristic framework that links several key aspects of the psychological models of John Bowlby, Heinz Kohut, and Murray Bowen, and demonstrated some of the ways in which this conceptual matrix might yield insight into an underlying set of isomorphic patterns and pathways in the shaping and reshaping of the self. Although tentative and partial, we hope that this integrative attempt at interlinking some of the core ideas within these influential theories (without confusing them with, or reducing them to, one another) can serve as a theoretical and therapeutic tool for understanding the formation – and promoting the transformation – of selves as they engage within their familial and social worlds.

Note

[1]The name in the practice vignette has been changed with details altered to protect privacy, and 'Diane' has granted permission for her story and quotation to be part of this publication.

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