

## **An Infant's Sense of Self: Mahler's and Kohut's Approach<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

To understand an infant's sense of self, one needs to analyze an infant's world in terms of psychological positions. Talking about an infant's development of self, it is important to observe an infant's inner dynamic and struggle in terms of scientific way such as developmental process. I'm going to employ Mahler's 'separation-individuation process' and Kohut's 'selfobject' and his notion of 'transmuting internalization' to explore an infant's world.

### **• Keywords**

Infant, Sense of self, Separation-individuation process, Selfobject, Transmuting internalization.

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## I. Introduction

In this paper, I will observe infant Y to analyze Y's internal world, discussing the developmental process of an infant's sense of self. To better understand an infant's dynamics, I will employ Mahler's and Kohut's analytic approach to explore an infant's inner world.

On March 2, my wife brought her friend's family to my home at 11:00 am. I thought it was little bit early for a baby to come to somebody's home, but it was okay because we could have lunch all together after my observation of the baby. Actually, when I met with the baby and her mom, Y was still sleeping in her mom's arm. I decided to wait until she woke up. During the interval time before Y woke up, her mom talked about Y a little bit. She is 10 months old and recently (Since January) Y started to barely stand up by herself. Of course, she needs to hold onto something like a chair or a bed to stand up. At 11:20 am, Y woke up and started to move around the living room. One thing I found interesting was Y's continuous chewing on something. She was chewing her mom's string of a hairpin. Virtually, she was chewing and also sucking it little bit while drooling. Although she's in pre-verbal stage, she looked as if she was the only person who can chew her mom's hairpin. After 10 minutes, the hairpin in Y's mouth fell on the floor and she slowly started to crawl all over the floor. She kept moving to all different places such as the TV, computer desk and toy box in the living room. Since Y came with her two older sisters (9 and 7 years old each), once in a while, they held Y and put her into a toy car and let her touch the toy car's handle. To my surprise, as soon as Y was put into the toy car, she spun the handle with a smile. Although her two sisters carried her to several places such as the toy car, the

kitchen and a futon, she was adaptive in many places. She would adjust herself in the new places by touching, moving and smiling. It seemed that Y's eyes were fixed on something, but her attention was wandering from side to side. Sometimes, she watched me in the face for a second and looked at another object.

Suddenly, she put her thumb in the mouth and began to suck her thumb. She was sitting on the floor and watching her sisters' playing with my two sons (7 and 3 year old each). My sons and Y's two sisters were playing computer games and Y looked at the computer screen for a moment. A little later on, she began to make a strange sound. It sounded like uhhhhh....or ahhhhh. That was the beginning point for Y's crying. It seemed that her hunger grew. She turned her head to her mom. Mom stretched out her two arms and Y crawled promptly (at least, it was faster than her first crawling in the beginning) toward her mom. Y's mom gave her breast to the baby. I had to stop observing Y after she started suckling on her mom's breast.

## II. Exploring an infant's world

### 1. A sense of self

Although Y is one of my good neighbor's infants and I was an observer for one hour and a half, since I could never crawl inside Y's world, it might be senseless to attempt to visualize what an infant might experience. Only my imagination helps me to shape the notion of who the infant is. Obviously, this kind of experience shapes our views of human nature and destiny. During my observation, I was

thinking about the Baby's developing a sense of self. What is the meaning of 10 month old Y's having her own sense of self? I believe that the self and its boundaries are important parts of the psychological and philosophical argument in human society. Especially, the sense of self and the sense of otherness are crucial aspect for the human being's social experience. Finding the way of experiencing oneself and others. Here, I'd like to focus on a way of relation between a self and others in terms of interpersonal procedures. Since the infant may experience the external reality in terms of one's internal phenomena, the sense of self plays an important role for the baby's relating to others. I believe the sense of self as a subjective reality provides a basic organizational standpoint for all interpersonal events.<sup>2</sup> In the middle of observation, I was little bit confused by the infant's (Y) behavior because she was almost crawling all over the places with her sisters. Once in a while, she looked at her mom, but she pretty much spent most time with her two sisters. Of course, her two sisters were very active in helping Y going around the living room. Suddenly, I thought that maybe Y experiences her two sisters as kind of her moms, or the objects who provide the same level of care like her mom. Suddenly, all different kinds of questions came to my mind: How much difference does the infant experience between her mom and her two sisters? I believe a baby could have the same level of experience with anybody sometimes according to the quality of care provided by others. I think this proves that the infant's subjective reality is an essential factor to recognizing the caregiver. So the identity of mom or caregiver depends on the level of care experienced by the infant, because the baby expe-

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2 Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 6.

periences the external reality through one's subjective life. One of the changes in sense of self happens in nine months; after nine months, the infant also recognizes the others' subjective life as well as one's own.<sup>3</sup> During the observation, I was able to see Y's looking at me from time to time, this makes me a little nervous because I don't want to manipulate Y's current playing situation with her family. It seems me that she is interested in my video camera. I was shooting video to take a look at her behavior again after the observation. She (Y) sometimes crawled to me and touched my foot but she never tried to touch my camera. I think Y and I have a kind of invisible relationship already because Y and her mom used to visit my home to meet with my wife. So I have met with Y several times before the observation. At least, Y didn't suffer from stranger-anxiety due to my presence I hope. One of the concerns that I had so far was her parents' expectation and frustration. I remember when Y was born at Overlook hospital in New Jersey. His father was disappointed because Y was a girl. Y's family already had two daughters and wanted to have a boy. Y's mom was not very happy either. At that time (almost 10 months ago), I was a little bit worried about Y's destiny. What if her father is not loving or caring? What about the relationship between Y and her mom? What about the relationship between Y's mom and dad? Y's two sisters are already 9 and 7 years old each. Are they happy about the newborn sister? My wife and I had all kinds of concerns for Y's coming into being.

As time goes on, I think Y's family is adjusting well with a newborn baby. To my amazement, Y's parents are still thinking about having another baby to have a boy. In this situation, what is going to happen in Y's process for developing a sense of self was my major concern.

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3 *Ibid.*, 9.

One of the things I found during the observation is that the infant also has its own tool to stay alive. At least, I believe the infant knows how to survive and express something by his or her body and appearance. Although language and self-reflection are two of the major tools for a human being to create a sense of self as a subject life, but for the infant who is in the pre-verbal stage, it is new experiences of engaging the outer world. In a sense, even before the infant has the ability to communicate with others, the baby has an innate tool for transformation in new experiences. Whenever I see Y moving around the living room thanks to her two vigorous sisters' help, Y was adaptive to all the different places. Whenever her sister put Y in a toy car, she automatically smiled and spun the handle. It was amazing. She never resisted her sisters and just accepted her new place and smiled. In a sense, organizational change from within the infant and its interpretation by the caregivers are mutually facilitative and the net result is that the infant appears to have a new sense of who he or she is with all kinds of interaction with external reality. So the sharing of subjective experience becomes possible and her interpersonal aspect is obvious.

Here, I think Y's smile is one of the important signals in her subject reality which entails sharing of mutual experiences. Her smile suggests her feeling of safety and of being comfortable. It signifies that Y has her own process to adjust herself in a new context and to make herself feel safe and happy. She also instinctively knows how to express her feeling by her smile. So this smile is one of the crucial signals for a human to develop one's own response or expression about the relationship. So a smile can be one of the tools for seeking and creating of intersubjective union with others. This process involves learning that "one's subjective life – the contents of one's mind and the qualities

of one's feelings – can be shared with another.”<sup>4</sup> I think the learning process of sharing with another is one of the reasons for human beings spending the longest time with their caregivers than with any other animals, because they need to prepare themselves to their own process of assimilating into the external reality with interpersonal bonds. I think this baby's sharing ability and interpersonal expression is the place for an infant to develop the sense of an emergent self, which forms birth to age two months, the sense of a core self, which forms between the ages of two and six months, the sense of a subjective self, which forms between seven to fifteen months, and a sense of a verbal self, which forms after that.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Approaches to Infancy: Mahler and Kohut

During the observation, another question that came to my mind was the motivation of this baby. What makes Y keep moving around? I don't think the infant is just moving around because her two sisters keep helping and stimulating her. Maybe something's going on inside the infant. How can we understand the infant? What is the basic theory to approach an infant? Many scholars talked about the developing process of the infant. In the case of Freud, his interpretation was about the drive theory; the developmental progression from oral to anal to genital stages was seen as the sequential reorganization of drive, or the nature of the id. Erikson asserts the developmental progression from trust to autonomy to industry as the sequential reorganization of drive, or the nature of the id.<sup>6</sup> Mahler's theory is about the devel-

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

opmental progression from normal autism to normal symbiosis to separation-individuation concerning the restructuring of ego and id, but in terms of the infant's experience of self and other.<sup>7</sup> Especially, Mahler's chief contribution to psychoanalytic developmental theory is her study of what she terms the separation-individuation phase, or process, which culminates in object and self-representations and stable identity formation. To this end, Mahler conceived a research design using analytically trained observers who applied classical, analytic, genetic-dynamic insights to infant-mother interactions. She discovered what she considered to be a normal, ubiquitous process occurring in children who successfully maneuver the first three years of life. In a sense, Mahler's intent was not to add any new theory; on the contrary, she tried to find the beginning enfoldment of object relations. In addition, the separation-individuation phase, Mahler asserts, establishes a sense of separateness from and relation to reality, particularly with regard to the relationship between one's own body and the primary love object. This phase is never finished but begins typically between four months and 36 months of age. Separation, defined by Mahler as an intrapsychic achievement not to be confused with physical separation, refers to an emergence from symbiotic fusion with the caregiver.

In my observation, although the infant was spending the most time with her sisters, I was able to see the infant's still being in relation with her mom. She crawls all over the floor with confidence and smile because she feels her mom's presence. In other words, the infant is still under the influence of her mom's care regardless of the physical dis-

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6 *Ibid.*, 18.

7 Margaret Mahler, *Separation-Individuation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 1979), 36-58.



tance. The individuation process is going on in every single minute in relation with caregiver's intrapsychic organizing process. These phenomena of the separation-individuation process that pertain to the development of the sense of self during the first eighteen months of life. Mahler emphasizes on how early interaction patterns between mother and child are internalized and become part of the developing self.<sup>8</sup>

For Kohut, he says that this development begins to develop in the infant's mind as a result of repeated experiences with the caregiver who facilitates the emergence of the infant's grandiosity and exhibitionism and accepts these feelings and actions in an emphatic, (a key concept for Kohut) manner.<sup>9</sup> In Self-psychology, the key to normal development is the interaction between the child and his or her primary caretakers, in Kohutian terminology, the selfobjects. Selfobjects are those primary caretakers who interact with the child in such a positive manner that the child is able to use these interactions to form a clearly defined, comfortable sense of self that is called a cohesive self-structure.<sup>10</sup>

Mahler points to a gradually increasing independence of the primary caregiver as the important goal for the normally developing child. That is, Mahler identifies as the task of the first three years of life intrapsychic separation from the mother and the attainment of autonomy. Her formulations thus require, as indicated earlier, a separation out of a symbiotic unity. Kohut, on the other hand, conceptualizes the caregiver from the point of view of the self as supplying primitive

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8 *Ibid.*, 21-34.

9 Heinz Kohut, "Letter, July 24, 1980," *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut: 1978-1981*, Vol. 4, edited by Paul H. Ornstein (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1991), 135.

10 Calvin Colarusso, *Child and Adult Development: A Psychoanalytic Introduction for Clinicians* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 40.

selfobject functions, which, as maturation proceeds, are maintained increasingly by the self through the development of self-structure via transmuting internalization.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there is a decreasing requirement for physical proximity to the primary selfobject caregiver as self-structure is consolidated, and selfobject need becomes less pre-emptory.<sup>12</sup> But the main function of this structure building is to permit a developmental progression from primitive to more mature selfobject need and need fulfillment. The requirement for the selfobject function remains.

Thus, while there is an apparent similarity in view between Kohut's concept of improved and consolidated self-structure via transmuting internalization and Mahler's concept of increasing autonomy from caregivers via ego development, there is a difference between them; and it was this difference that was of vital importance to Kohut. Kohut viewed the goal of autonomy from supporting caregivers, so significant to Mahler and to mainstream analysis as well, as carrying with it a hidden moralistic stance, which self psychology, with its emphasis on the need for selfobject experiences throughout life, assiduously avoids. The issue of autonomy from supporting objects, recognized by mainstream analysis as a goal of normal development, versus Kohut's assertion of normal lifelong dependence on selfobjects was for Kohut one indication of an overall difference in world view between his framework and that of classical analysis in general, and Mahler in particular, that made an integration between their developmental schemas impossible.

Talking about Kohut's self psychology, Kohut also emphasizes in-

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11 *Ibid.*, 41.

12 Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), 78.

tropection and empathy. These two terms are the basic principles of therapeutic understanding in self psychology. Parents may have difficulty in understanding or an analyst may have difficulty empathizing with the patient, but if an analyst has similar experience, it would be much easier to understand one's client.<sup>13</sup> In addition, this will increase the possibility of greater empathy between an analyst and a patient. This healing process also can be accomplished between a caregiver and an infant. There are three important concepts in self psychology: mirroring, idealizing needs and twinship transference. Here, transference means the patient's unrealistic projections onto the therapist or object. This consists of feelings and attitudes that were experienced previously from other persons in one's life. All three notions came from Kohut's understanding of childhood's self development.<sup>14</sup> Kohut also explains two important notions, "optimal frustration," and "transmuting internalization" as following:

What are the wholesome self-selfobject processes that build up the healthy self? We see them as occurring in two steps. First, a basic intuneness must exist between the self and its selfobjects. Second, self-object failures (e.g. responses based on faulty empathy) of a non-traumatic degree must occur. We refer to the results of such failures on the part of the selfobjects of childhood as "optimal frustrations." This two-step sequence of psychological events in early life, occurring in

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13 Heinz Kohut, "The Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 23 (1968): 86-113.

14 Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), 121.

countless repetitions, has two important consequences: (1) it brings about structure formation. via a process to which I have given the name “transmuting internalization”<sup>15</sup>

As Kohut states above, the human intrapsychic structure can be constructed to recognize the negative portion of self where it exists and builds a healthy internal self structure through unanimity between self and self-object. Even though it may not be successful at first result (optimal failure), unanimity and choosing a healthy self-object can be obtained by countless repetitions of the therapeutic condition. Even though Kohut’s understanding about “transmuting internalization” starts from childhood’s self-object support, it shows the gradual structuring within oneself.

### III. Conclusion

Although I’m interested in self-developing in childhood, I found it so difficult to explain from my own expressions. However, I learned many things from this baby observation because I have recognized my limitation in many ways and I think I know where I’m heading, self development in relation with the journey of human development. Mahler’s ‘separation-individuation process’ and Kohut’s ‘selfobject’ and ‘transmuting internalization’ are scientific tools which need to be sharpened and developed in a more scientific way.

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15 Heinz Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 70.

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