

Ego Psychology and Social Work Practice

Second Edition

EDA G. GOLDSTEIN

SECOND EDITION

EGO PSYCHOLOGY
and
SOCIAL WORK
PRACTICE

Eda G. Goldstein



THE FREE PRESS

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To Pat
With Gratitude and Appreciation

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I wrote the first edition of *Ego Psychology and Social Work Practice* over a decade ago, my professional development was at a different point than it is today. Largely because of the book's success, I have had the rewarding opportunity to meet practitioners, trainees, and supervisors in diverse agency settings in addition to students and faculty at schools of social work in many regions of the United States. I have been touched by the warm response and encouragement that I have received from this varied audience. A major impetus for this second edition comes from the questions raised and interests expressed by the many individuals whom I have met.

My early interest in ego psychology began when I was a student at the School of Social Service Administration of the University of Chicago in the mid-1960s. There I was inspired by the humanity and spirit of Helen Harris Perlman, one of the true shining lights of the social work profession. Some gifted and generous mentors have played a significant role in shaping my intellectual life and clinical pursuits since that time. When I was engaged in doctoral studies at the Columbia University School of Social Work, Carol Meyer and Carel Germain, each in her own distinctive way, helped me to broaden my thinking. I shall always be grateful to Dr. Otto Kernberg, with whom I was privileged to work at both the New York State Psychiatric Institute and the New York Hospital, Cornell Medical Center, Westchester Division, for his confidence in my abilities. During my seven-year association with him, my professional activities expanded to encompass research and teaching and I gained a deeper understanding of ego psychology and object relations theory and their application to the diagnosis and treatment of borderline and narcissistic pathology. Before and after my departure from New York Hospital in 1981, the social work department, under

the able direction of my friend, Norma Hakusa Counts, was an important support system. My later work with Dr. Marjorie Taggart White helped me to grasp the significance of self psychology and marked an important turning point in my professional interests. I shall always be grateful for her encouragement and vision and for sharing in my struggle to understand conflicting theoretical and clinical models.

As chairperson of the social work practice curriculum area at the New York University Shirley M. Ehrenkranz School of Social Work over the past decade, I have had the good fortune to work with an intellectually stimulating and talented faculty. I am appreciative of the ongoing collegiality I enjoy with Associate Dean Eleanore Korman, George Frank, Jeffrey Seinfeld, Barbara Dane, Judith Siegel, Judith Mishne, Lala Straussner, and Martha Gabriel. I could not have asked for a more congenial atmosphere. I shall always remember the personal support that I received from Dean Shirley Ehrenkranz and her passionate commitment to the School.

I am happy to have renewed my association with the Free Press and extend my thanks to Susan Arellano, senior editor, for strongly urging me to undertake the second edition of *Ego Psychology and Social Work Practice* and for expertly guiding me in the writing process. I could not have completed this task without the help of Richard Lenert, my administrative assistant at New York University. My friends and colleagues Enid Ain and Lucille Spira have been staunch supporters during the preparation of this edition, and Patricia Petrocelli deserves special appreciation for her encouragement and technical assistance. Lastly, I am indebted to my students and clients, who have taught me about the creativity, resilience, and fragility of the ego and about the environmental and therapeutic nutrients that restore, maintain, and enhance ego functioning.

INTRODUCTION

The original aims of *Ego Psychology and Social Work Practice* were to provide the social work student, practitioner, and educator with a general ego psychological framework for understanding human behavior and to demonstrate the linkages between ego psychological concepts and social work practice. When the first edition was published in 1984, it appeared to fill a gap in the social work literature. It became a widely used text in schools of social work and a popular resource for trainees, practitioners, and supervisors in the practice arena. At the present time, ego psychology still occupies a central place in social workers' knowledge base. A large representative study of practitioners found it to be the major theory guiding clinical work (Mackey, Urek, and Charkoudian, 1987). Courses in human behavior, psychopathology, social work practice, and intervention with special populations, which are offered in academic settings, training institutes, and agency staff development programs, draw on ego psychology.

While the concepts that make up the core of *Ego Psychology and Social Work Practice* are still current a decade after the book's publication, there are many factors that point to the need for a second, revised edition. First, there have been numerous developments that have enriched and modified ego psychological theory. These include new perspectives on women, gays and lesbians, and the impact of trauma; greater appreciation of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity and the effects of oppression on personality development; and increasing research on human behavior throughout the life cycle. Second, alternative formulations such as object relations theory, self psychology, and cognitive theory have linkages to, as well as important differences from, ego psychology. They offer new and often complementary dimensions to our understanding of developmental

processes and fresh approaches to intervention. Third, changes in the problems that practitioners confront have led to the application of ego psychological treatment principles to special populations. For example, AIDS, rape and other forms of violent assault, substance abuse, homelessness, sexual abuse, and domestic violence have had staggering effects and necessitate a vast array of programs and creative interventions. Further, increased understanding of women, people of color, and gays and lesbians has generated more sensitive and affirmative treatment approaches. Greater numbers of clients are presenting with severe ego deficits such as those associated with borderline disorders, and practitioners are eager to experiment with different treatment strategies in their work with such individuals. Finally, social agencies and hospitals have undergone dramatic shifts. Despite the compelling need for comprehensive and differential treatment, intervention has become increasingly short-term. Individuals trained in business and corporations are administering human service settings and large managed care organizations are determining the nature of service.

In trying to respond to these changes, I have attempted to preserve in this revised edition the core of *Ego Psychology and Social Work Practice*, while enriching it by adding material that addresses newer theoretical and practice developments. It is my hope that this expanded volume will maintain the overall appeal of the first edition and make it more relevant to today's practice needs.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EGO PSYCHOLOGY

When ego psychological concepts emerged in Europe and the United States in the late 1930s, they highlighted the importance of an individual's adaptive capacity and linked individuals to their social environment. "Here at last was the happy synthesis between the social order and the psychological depths—the ego, which bridged these two worlds" (Briar and Miller, 1971:19). Ego psychology offered social work a theoretical base that has had far-reaching practice implications to be discussed throughout

this book. Many practice models draw on ego psychological concepts to some extent (Turner, 1986).

Ego psychology embodies a more optimistic and growth-oriented view of human functioning and potential than do earlier theoretical formulations. It generated changes in the study and assessment process and led to an expansion and systematization of interventive strategies with individuals. It fostered a reconceptualization of the client-worker relationship, of change mechanisms, and of the phases of the interventive process. It helped to refocus the importance of work with the social environment. Moreover, it has important implications for work with families and groups and for the design of service delivery, large-scale social programs, and social policy.

Ego psychological concepts have been refined and extended greatly, however, since their assimilation into social work in the late 1930s, the 1940s, and the 1950s. Further, more recent theoretical and research developments within ego psychology point to new practice directions and offer additional understanding of the human growth process and the nature of maladaptation. Extensions and modifications of ego psychology have shed light on women's development, the adult life cycle, survivors of trauma, and the experiences and strengths of people of color and gays and lesbians. The application of ego psychological interventions is far-reaching and has significance for work with some of the most pressing problems and difficult populations that practitioners encounter.

WHAT IS EGO PSYCHOLOGY?

Ego psychology comprises a related set of theoretical concepts about human behavior that focus on the origins, development, structure, and functioning of the executive arm of the personality—the ego—and its relationship to other aspects of the personality and to the external environment. The ego is considered to be a mental structure of the personality that is responsible for negotiating between the internal needs of the individual and the outside world.

The following seven propositions characterize ego psychology's view of human functioning.

1. Ego psychology views people as born with an innate capacity to function adaptively. Individuals engage in a lifelong biopsychosocial developmental process in which the ego is an active, dynamic force for coping with, adapting to, and shaping the external environment.

2. The ego is part of the personality that contains the basic functions essential to the individual's successful adaptation to the environment. Ego functions are innate and develop through maturation and the interaction among biopsychosocial factors. Crucial among these are hereditary and constitutional endowment; the drives; the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly in early childhood; and the impact of immediate environment, sociocultural values and mores, socioeconomic conditions, social and cultural change, and social institutions.

3. Ego development occurs sequentially as a result of the meeting of basic needs, identification with others, learning, mastery of developmental tasks, effective problem-solving, and successful coping with internal needs and environmental conditions, expectations, stresses, and crises.

4. While the ego has the capacity for functioning autonomously, it is only one part of the personality and must be understood in relation to internal needs and drives and to the internalized characteristics, expectations, mores, and values of others.

5. The ego not only mediates between the individual and the environment but also mediates internal conflict among various aspects of the personality. It can elicit defenses that protect the individual from anxiety and conflict and that serve adaptive or maladaptive purposes.

6. The social environment shapes the personality and provides the conditions that foster or obstruct successful coping. The nature of cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity as well as differences related to gender, age, and sexual orientation must be understood in the assessment of ego functioning.

7. Problems in social functioning must be viewed in relation

to both possible deficits in coping capacity and the fit among needs, capacities, and environmental conditions and resources.

Many theorists have contributed to the development of ego psychology, and the concepts are not unified. Two major streams within the evolution of ego psychology have had an impact on social work practice. One stream flows out of classical Freudian psychoanalytic theory, with its emphasis on unconscious and instinctual forces in personality development. While embodying revisions that expanded and altered Freud's views substantially, psychoanalytic ego psychology focuses on the ego's defensive function; on its role in mediating between the inner life and external reality; on the development of autonomous ego functions and the inner world of object relations; and on the interplay of innate temperament and capacities and the caretaking environment. The concepts that have evolved permit an appreciation not only of normal development but also of the precursors to certain types of pathological conditions in children and in adults that were not well conceptualized by classical psychoanalytic theory.

Psychoanalytic ego psychology is associated with a clinical and psychotherapeutic orientation within the social work profession. The concepts are well formulated, have enormous explanatory power, and seem to bear close resemblance to many aspects of clinical reality in work with troubled individuals. A reliance on the theory as an underpinning to social work practice has been attacked vigorously by those who feel that ego psychology is too narrowly focused on individual pathology; that it does not deal sufficiently with the impact of the social environment on human behavior; that it minimizes work with the family, group, and social environment; and that it has failed to generate a social work practice model distinct from psychotherapy. Such critiques equate ego psychological theory with a monolithic and narrow practice model rather than a valid frame of reference for understanding human behavior that can lead to diverse types of intervention with the person and his or her social environment.

A second theoretical stream within ego psychology emanates from an interest in the more rational and problem-solving capacities of the ego; the individual's drives for mastery and self-

actualization; the acquisition, development, and expansion of coping capacities all through the human life cycle; and the individual's relationship to society and culture. It focuses on the ego's capacity to cope with, adapt to, and shape the environment as well as on the impact of the environment and culture on ego development and in fostering adaptive behavior. Proponents of this view often minimize the significance of the unconscious and instinctual forces in personality, the defenses, the inner life, and the childhood past. They focus more on the rational and adaptive ego as it enters into life transactions.

This theoretical stream has been associated with social work practice approaches that focus on improving the more rational, cognitive, problem-solving capacities of people; on enhancing their adaptive capacities; on modifying aspects of environment that are not conducive to effective coping; and on improving the fit between the individual and the environment. This emphasis has been criticized by those who seek more "in-depth" understanding of human behavior for ignoring the unconscious and instinctual determinants of behavior, for underrating the significance of entrenched inner pathology and ego deficits, and for its simplistic view of the interventive process. Practitioners complain that the concepts are either too general and abstract on the one hand or too concretely focused on behavior on the other. Social work theorists committed to this thrust are struggling to make the concepts operational in ways that can be used effectively by practitioners (Germain, 1979; Germain and Gitterman, 1980). Important questions have surfaced as a result of this theoretical thrust. What is effective coping? In which situations and to what degree does one need to understand the "inner man" in order to enhance social functioning in particular person-environment situations? So far these questions are answered only partially.

While these two currents within ego psychology overlap to some extent, they tend to have different proponents, and at times one view is used to negate the importance of the other. The following chapters will deal with both trends within ego psychology. Each addresses crucial although somewhat different aspects of human functioning. Each is necessary to encompass the complexity of human behavior and to guide intervention. Neverthe-

less, there is no simple theoretical integration of these views. While each has led to different emphases in practice, the concepts jointly help the practitioner to find the optimal ways of helping clients who seek social work services. Perhaps it is only in the practice arena with each individual client that the true integration of these concepts can take place.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into three parts as follows:

Part I summarizes the historical evolution of ego psychology and its extensions, as well as related theoretical developments. It also traces the introduction and assimilation of ego psychological concepts into social work practice and discusses current professional issues.

Part II describes core ego psychological concepts that provide the underpinnings for social work practice and selected newer ideas that have expanded our understanding of biopsychosocial development and maladaptive behavior.

Part III discusses the principles and techniques of ego-oriented practices generally and their specific application to work with women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and special client populations including adult survivors of incest, substance abusers, persons with AIDS, the chronically mentally ill, and individuals with severe developmental arrests.

Writing the second edition of *Ego Psychology and Social Work Practice* seems an equally if not a more compelling task today than it did when I first conceived the book in the early 1980s. There is continuing ferment within social work over the need to identify the core body of knowledge that underlies practice (Goldstein, 1980; Mishne, 1982; Simon, 1977; Strean, 1993). More than twenty years ago, Carol Meyer (1970:27) observed that "there are hardly any boundaries to the knowledge that social workers need to get through the working day." This condition has heightened as the knowledge base necessary to an informed practice has grown and become increasingly specialized. Social work's historical tendency to polarize knowledge of people and

knowledge of environments still exists. In my view, ego psychology transcends this unfortunate dichotomy. It is my hope that this book will contribute in some way to the important and challenging task of articulating the knowledge base of professional practice and helping practitioners in their quest for competence.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	ix
 PART I HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS	
Chapter 1 The Scope and Evolution of Ego Psychology	3
Chapter 2 The Emergence and Assimilation of Ego Psychology into Social Work Practice	29
 PART II THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS	
Chapter 3 The Ego and Its Functions	53
Chapter 4 The Ego and Its Defenses	72
Chapter 5 Ego Mastery and the Processes of Coping and Adaptation	86
Chapter 6 Object Relations and Ego Development	113
 PART III PRACTICE APPLICATIONS	
Chapter 7 The Nature of Ego-Oriented Assessment	143
Chapter 8 The Nature of Ego-Oriented Intervention	166
Chapter 9 The Nature of the Client–Worker Relationship	200
Chapter 10 Ego-Oriented Intervention with Diverse and Oppressed Populations	230
Chapter 11 Ego-Oriented Intervention with Special Populations	257

Chapter 12	The Diagnosis and Treatment of the Borderline Client	289
Bibliography		321
Author Index		351
Subject Index		357

PART I

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS
