Why Self Psychology?

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Some years ago, in New York, the American Psychoanalytic Association hosted for the first time in its history a panel on psychology of the self under the title 'The Bipolar Self' It included as panelists Heinz Kohut, along with Ernest Wolf, Michael Basch, Paul Ornstein and Robert Wallerstein. There, in the book display area, I came across a book 'Explorations in Psychoanalysis', a collection of Ralph Greenson's papers, and read an article titled "Transference: Freud or Klein" which he had presented at the 28th IPA Congress in Paris in 1973, and was subsequently published. Written in a rather personal and impressionistic style, it can be enjoyed as a light reading. In it Greenson questions the Kleinian penchant for so-called "deep and direct" interpretive thrust on issues such as suitability for analysis, the handling of the transference, dealing with the environmental influences and reality, the atmosphere of the analytic situation, etc. He concludes that the differences between the Kleinian and Freudian, in the ego-psychological and traditional sense, are unbridgeably wide and speculates and theorizes as to what attracts some analysts to become Kleinian. Let me quote a couple of paragraphs from Greenson:

"Let us try to reconstruct the atmosphere in a Kleinian analyst's office when

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the new patient lies on the couch, for him an unfamiliar posture, says a few sentences in a strange sequence of free association, and hears the almost total stranger, the analyst, make interpretations of deep material in the first hours, interpreting his dreams frequently without the patient’s associations, and doing so with an air of certainty. Apparently the Kleinian analyst requires of himself that he know everything that is going on in his patient at all times and one gets the impression he usually feels he meets the requirement. Balint has commented (The Basic Fault, 1968) on the patient’s feeling of being overwhelmed by an analyst who knows everything. The patient is never told he is right about anything or that he has made an important insight by himself. Rather he is treated like a child by an all-knowing parent. The Kleinian psychoanalyst does not admit he may have been wrong or even that he is not sure about an interpretation. Freudian analysts often qualify their interpretations by statements like: “It seems to me,” or “I have the impression”, or “I wonder if”. or even, “I do not understand”. The patient is given a chance to run if he has to, and also given a freer opportunity to express his doubt or his agreement. He is thus given the chance to become an active co-worker. I express myself with certainty only when I feel sure of my interpretations. These nuances make for a straightforward atmosphere and not for omniscience. The Kleinians’ all-knowing attitude, Balint believes, the constant preoccupation with the fantasies concerning the analyst, and the narcissism all this implies, lead the patient to submissiveness or to a merely intellectual acceptance of insights. The Kleinians do not seem to seek a growing working alliance, a slowly advancing, active, independent cooperation from the patient.” Greenson continues, “...I have the impression that the Kleinian psychoanalyst’s method of handling the patient’s transference superimposes an artificial quasi-transference neurosis upon the patient’s original neurosis. Their interpretive work seems to be so intrusive and dominating. Perhaps that is why their patients react so often by “projective identification,” which, among other things, seems to be a form of identification with the aggressor. Could this be a means of defense and retaliation against the intrusiveness of the analyst? ... The feeling of omniscience, the freedom to make early and frequent interpretations regarding the analyst, may well have an exhilarating effect on the analyst, particularly after years of self-imposed passivity, careful, slow work, beset by many uncertainties, and hours that seem incomprehensible or
unproductive. Perhaps this is another attraction the Kleinian method offers to analysts of Freudian origin who have grown tired of dealing with the intricacies in transference and nontransference developments as they occur in a well-carried out classical analysis.”

I still remember on reading the paper my own feelings of relief and even exhilaration, feeling already oppressed and chafing at the tender but jealous chaperonage of the Standard Edition, that finally I found the person of such stature as Greenson who agreed with me that in the quest for “absolute truth” some analysts become, unwittingly or willingly, a slave to a self-fulfilling construction or a constructed theory and miss the forest for the trees by putting every patient on the Procrustean couch of the analyst. Now, when I look back and reflect on the paper, it is so uncanny that the same sentiment that Greenson voiced concerning the peremptoriness and self-righteousness with which the Kleinians treated their patients could to some discernible degree apply to the so-called mainstream psychoanalysts today. The paper could have been easily retitled as “Transference: Freud or Kohut,” and I would find it as resonant as I first did when I read it some ten years ago.

No psychoanalytic school has received such intense discussion so quickly after its inception as has self psychology with the publication of Kohut’s seminal paper “Introspection, Empathy and Psychoanalysis” in 1939. What is more striking and even historical is the fact that it is the only native school of psychoanalysis in North America which has not withered away in the face of fierce opposition from the classical quarters, thus establishing itself no longer as a dissident or revisionist school but as an active body of alternative ideas which deserve serious explorations by people of varied backgrounds with different conceptions of what psychoanalysis should be. Self psychology is now considered to be one of the four most influential models of the mind in American psychoanalysis, the other three being the American ego psychology which is the most dominant model, the amalgamated model of ego psychology and Amer-
ican object relations theory represented by Kernberg and his followers and the distant but influential fourth, the Kleinian model. It is my purpose in this presentation to reflect on my own steps of growth, change, or evolution as a psychoanalyst in order to see how my own personal sense of disquiet, or dissatisfaction with the mainstream or traditional psychoanalysis was and is still being dealt with. Self psychology has been a source of intellectual stimulation and clinical encouragement in my quest for meaning and satisfaction in practising experience-near, humane and humanistic psychoanalysis. The presentation therefore has less to do with the pros and cons of self psychology or its promotion, defence, or comparison with other schools of psychanalysis; it is about how I have come to view self psychology as empirically more adaptive, clinically more useful and intellectually more persuasive and heuristic.

Before I make my points or state my reasons for finding the concepts and practice of self psychology attractive enough to shift my own stance, I would like to review very briefly the essentials of self psychology as it is constructed currently. According to Detrick ("Self psychology, psychoanalysis, and the analytic enterprise" in Self Psychology: Comparisons and Contrasts, 1989), the elements of Kohut's self psychology can be briefly stated as follows:

1. The centrality of the empathic vantage point in the psychoanalytic process.
2. The discovery of the selfobject transferences: They provide new, in-depth understanding of a variety of classes of psychological disturbance.
3. Three new developmental lines (mirroring, alter ego, idealizing) generalized from the study of the selfobject transferences.
4. Certain attributes of the mature personality (humor, creativity, wisdom) that are the end result of specific selfobject developmental lines.
5. The motivational-experiential core of the personality as a bipolar
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structure, the bipolar nuclear self.

Kohut, in the now famous 1959 paper “Introspection, Empathy and Psycholanalysis,” defined empathy as “vicarious introspection.” More recently Kohut defined psychoanalysis as a “science which explains (interprets) that which is first understood (empathically)” (The Restoration of the Self, 1977). According to Kohut, psychoanalysis is a two-step process: the first step is one of understanding in which the analyst engages in an empathic immersion in the psychological life of the patients, endeavoring to understand the patient’s experience from the patient’s point of view. As Evelyn Schwaber puts it, the analyst is more interested in “how it feels to be the subject rather than the target of a patient’s needs and demands.” The second step is the stage of explanation, which occurs only when the first stage is successfully accomplished. Only then the analyst will explain what he now understands in terms of the patient’s current and earlier life experiences and his organization of these experiences. If this stage of explanation is prematurely attempted before the stage of empathic understanding, then all explanations or interpretations, even if correct, may be rejected by the patients. In Kohut’s own words: “…even completely accurate explanations may be useless if they have not been preceded by a bond of accurate empathy between the analysand and the interpreting analyst (Kohut, H. “Reflections on Advances in Self Psychology”, 1980).

Cooper (Cooper, A., “The Place of Self Psychology in the History of Depth Psychology,” in The Future of psychoanalysis, 1983), in reviewing the place of self psychology in the history of depth psychology, points out that self psychology, no longer in its infancy, engages our “thought and passion” because it challenges established and cherished doctrines and ideas, claims to be attuned to our contemporary culture and scientific method, and takes a stance on long-standing, major scientific tensions of psychoanalysis. It is known, for instance, that self psychology has been the single most important contributor in the thriving fields of infant research and child development in America, Cooper highlights some examples:
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1. Self psychology claims to be the next logical step in the search for the basic concept or concepts that underlie secondary theoretical propositions. The large purview of self psychological theory in the broad sense allows for the structural point of view to be seen as a set of derivative rather than basic propositions.

2. Self psychology gives clear precedence to the importance of preoedipal events in determining the course of development of the patients we see.

3. In the place of the central role of the drives in determining the unfolding of human evelopment, Kohut has asserted the central role of the self in its matrix of self-objects. The real environment and the role of culture are far more determining for Kohut than for Freud, and the drives, per se, become a focus of attention only in certain forms of pathology.

4. In place of Freud’s inevitably and perpetually ambivalent and conflicted individual, Kohut has envisioned a basically unified person who is more likely to suffer deficit than conflict, whose tragic defect in pursuit of his or her guiding vision is the consequence of humanity’s puny place in the universe, rather than a guilt-engendered neurotic self-defeat.

5. Whereas Freud tried his best to maintain psychoanalysis within the framework of science and its always reductionist methodology, Kohut’s model blurs the lines between hermeneutic and scientific inquiry.

6. Whereas traditional analysis has advanced interpretation as the basic therapeutic action in psychoanalysis, Kohut emphasizes the analyst’s creation of a new kind of experience for the patient within the transference relationship, of which interpretation is only a facet.

How did Kohut come to part his way with the traditional way of doing psychoanalysis in the first place? What prompted him to free himself from the confining set of doctrines or rules of the traditional
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psychoanalysis and advance a fresh new line of thought which led to the psychoanalytic self psychology?

Psychoanalysts have always had to contend with patients who were beyond the reach of prescribed psychoanalytic technique, who required the introduction of so-called parameters in treatment, a group of patients whom we now call narcissistic personality and behaviour disorders. Freud said (Lines of advance in psychoanalytic therapy, 1919, S.E. 17).

“We cannot avoid taking some patients for treatment who are so helpless and incapable of ordinary life that for them one has to combine analytic with educative influences; and even with the majority, occasions now and then arise in which the physician is bound to take up the position of teacher and mentor. But it must always be done with great caution, and the patient should be educated to liberate and fulfill his own nature, not to resemble ourselves.”

Kohut was first alerted to the discovery of selfobject transference, a totally revolutionary if not heretical, way of looking at the manifestation of transference by such patients in his treatment of the famous case of Miss F which is reported in “The Analysis of the Self”. Miss F stubbornly refused to accept Kohut’s classical interpretation of her immature behaviour as indicative of resistance to sexual and aggressive feelings in the transference. Kohut eventually recognized that Miss F, refusing to go along with his interpretations, was not transferring to him the ambivalent love that a child mobilizes toward the parent of the opposite sex during the oedipal period. Rather, she was manifesting a much earlier attitude the need to have the parent respond not as an identifiable individual but simply as a need-satisfying extension of the child herself. Once Kohut was able to accept the patient’s need to merge with him and in doing so eliminate him as an individual with feelings and an existence of his own, he could free himself from theoretical preconceptions to let himself resonate empathically with the content and tone of what the patient was
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saying. Her associations, memories, and feelings and the reconstructions generated by them led Kohut to realize that she was expressing very different concerns from the ones he had assumed she was verbalizing. When he showed her how important and significant it was for her to have these needs from early childhood to be echoed, she felt understood. Associative clarification and further elaboration followed and her transference deepened.

Kohut’s subsequent discovery that there are aspects of the transference other than the oedipal eventually led him to a concept of development that expanded and complemented the one postulated on the basis of the analysis of the classic psychoneurotic patient. Patients were transferring to the analyst their need for a structured, cohesive, and stable sense of the self. They could not themselves fulfill this need for validation of their existence because of less than optimal response to such needs during their formative years. These patients needed to relate to the analyst in one of two ways: either they were fused with the analyst who then no longer existed independently, or they viewed that analyst as God-like personage who possessed all the virtues, knowledge, and power, in which they wished to share. If the analyst did not regard these attitudes as something to be eliminated, and avoided confronting the patients with their supposedly unrealistic nature, they developed into the narcissistic or selfobject transference on which the analysis of these so-called unanalyzable patients is based. The concept of the selfobject in this context embodies the clinical observation that during undisturbed narcissistic transferences the patients experiences the analyst in highly personal and specific ways, often as part of or an extension of himself while simultaneously acquiring functions missing or denied prior to the establishment of this stable transference relationship. It is a central concept in self psychology and it includes at least three components: 1. observations about the relationship between the self and others, 2. transference implication in which the patient’s selfobject needs are determined by developmentally caused deficits, and 3. the experience
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of psychological functions being carried out by another who is experienced as part of the self. The concept has wider implications for theory formation and technique in self psychology and is considered as one of the most important contributions of Kohut. A word of caution here, however. Bacal (Bacal, H, Theories of Object Relations: Bridges to Self Psychology, 1990), who, like Basch, prefers the term selfobject theory to self psychology, wants to balance Stolorow’s caveat that the selfobject should be conceived of as a dimension of experiencing an object and that this experience is embodied in a significant and specific object, e.g. mother, father, friend, or the analyst, by pointing out that, while self psychology is ultimately concerned with the state of the self, it also embraces and object relations perspective in which the relationship between the self and the selfobject is understood to be of central importance for the state of the self.

In the aforementioned panel discussion on the “The Bipolar self,” Ornstein remarked that the term selfobject embodies the direct observation and recognition that the patient, in his regressive transference, needed the analyst to perform those functions he could not perform for himself because his infantile and childhood environment failed him in the original, phase-appropriate performance of these functions. Once this had become an explicit, relatively experience-near central concept, Kohut was well on his way toward the formulation of the concept of the bipolar self: one pole of the self is constituted as a precipitate of mirroring selfobject experiences, the pole of ambitions, and the other pole emerging from idealizing selfobject experiences constitutes the pole of values and ideals. Kohut and Wolf define it as “A firm self, resulting from optimal interaction between a child and his selfobjects, which is made up of three major constituents: 1. one pole from which emanates the basic strivings for power and success: 2. another pole that harbours the basic idealizing goals: 3. an intermediate area of basic talents and skills which are activated by the tension arc that establishes itself between ambitions and ideals (Kohut and Wolf, Disor-
ders of the Self and Their Treatment-An Outline, IJP, 1978). Kohut considered these component structures of the bipolar self as reflecting both the origin and the seat of early psychopathology, in contrast to the drives and conflict-derived psychopathology of the tripartite structure of the mind that characterize the oedipal period.

My basic unhappiness or discontent with the traditional psychoanalysis lies in its rigid, exclusive, and unyielding adherence to what it regards as unalterable, uncompromisable and therefore unforgiving, almost xenophobic body of knowledge or theories as laid out by Freud and by Freud alone. Of course we all know that there are as many Freuds as there are to discourage some from proclaiming our allegiance to Freud in stark contradiction with each other. The basic insecurity of psychoanalysts in reflected also in their unceasing and relentless claim that they alone truly represent psychoanalysis or understand what Freud really said or meant. It is known that psychoanalysts of the persuasion or another usually translate or interpret the patient’s life to him according to their own world view or ideology or theory or even prejudice. How ironic it is to hear, and I personally consider it to be true, convinced as we are of the truth or correctness of our own theory or interpretations, that therapists of different persuasions are similarly convinced and often similarly effective. Wallerstein makes a similar statement (Wallerstein, R., “Psychoanalysis: The Common Ground,” Int. J. Psychol-Anal. 1990, 71, 65).” Yet within the widely diversified theoretical structure with has so incontrovertibly evolved so that we are now identified by ourselves and by each other as Kleinian analysts or ego-psychological analysts or object-relations analysts or whatever, with all the presumed implications that these labels carry for our clinical thehnique as well as for our explanatory frameworks, within this diversity we also live with our everyday commonplace feeling that diversity we also live with our everyday commonplace feeling that somehow all of us, adherents of whatever theoretical position within psychoanalysis, seem to do reasonably comparable clinical work and
bring about reasonably comparable changes in the comparable enough patients that we deal with.” It is therefore a folly and waste of time for analysts of different schools to listen to clinical material in order to determine who is right. Any Kleinian can hear and see depressive and paranoid positions just as easily as Kohutians can see selfobject failure and classical analysts can spot oedipal tragedies. Either we retreat to isolated islands of beliefs, or else we are forced into some sort of relativism of analyst-patient narratives which may have no basis in fact as Spence (The Narrative Truth and Historical Truth, 1982) avers. The ongoing debate on the status of psychoanalysis as a science is another testimony to the theological malady or _odium theologicum_ that psychoanalysis is forced to endure. Is psychoanalysis really scientific? Von Eckardt wonders (Eckardt, “The Scientific Status of Psychoanalysis,” in Introducing Psychoanalytic Theory, 1982). Or can it become scientific? Edelson rhetorically asks (Edelson M, Hypothesis and Evidence in Psychoanalysis, 1984). Or does it need be scientific? Barrat reassures us (Barrat B, Psychic Reality and Psychoanalytic Knowing, 1984). Why not reconcile to the impossibility of it ever becoming scientific? Popper demands (Popper K, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, 1959). As a way out of this theoretical morass, Goldberg (A Fresh Look at Psychoanalysis: A View from Self Psychology, 1988) proposes rather convincingly that psychoanalysis be regarded as an empirical science which belongs to the post-empiricist principle that all observation is theory-laden and our conceptual schemes depend on a community agreement that is capable of reevaluation and change.

What is, then, the post-empiricist principle? Goldberg relies on Mary Hesse (Revolutions and Reconstruction in the Philosophy of Science, 1980) to buttress his assertion that psychoanalysis can only be positioned scientifically 1. as belonging to the group of empirical sciences, 2. as part of historical science, or 3. as a particular from of hermeneutic discipline. Hesse lists the five post-empiricist accounts of natural science as follows:
1. Data are not detachable from theory, and facts are to be reconstructed in the light of interpretation.

2. Theories are not models externally compared to nature in a hypothetico-deductive schema but are the way the facts themselves are seen. Theories are facts themselves.

3. The law-like relations are internal because what counts as facts are constituted by what the theory says about their interrelations with one another.

4. The language of natural science is metaphorical and inexact, and formalizable only at the cost of distortion.

5. Meanings are determined by theory and are understood by theoretical coherence rather than by correspondence with facts.

Once we accept these points, an astounding fact emerges that to some extent all of our science rests on interpretation and that physics can join psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic discipline. Physicists interpret their findings according to their preconceived theoretical positions, and there is no observation in physics or in psychoanalysis that is free of theory. It is no accident, then, that Evelyn Schwaer prefaced one of her often quoted papers (Psychoanalytic Listening and Psychic Reality, Int. Rev. Psychoanal. 10, 379, 1983) with a quotation from J.A. Wheeler, physicist: “Physics shows us the illusion that lies behind reality... and reality lies behind illusion... The universe does not exist 'out there' independent of us. We are inescapably involved in bringing about that which appears to be happening. We are not only observers. We are participants. In some strange sense this is a participatory universe... We are participants, at the microscopic level, in making the past as well as the present and the future.”

It is often heard that Strachey's standard edition should be replaced with a newer edition with better translation of the German text, etc. (I have dealt with this issue in my presentation at the annual meeting in of
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the Canadian Psychoanalytic Society in Toronto in 1989 at a workshop which I organized under the theme “Traduttori, Traditori: Some Problems of Translation and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis). The problem of translation, of any language or in any dialogue as in psychoanalytic situation, is that the reader of a fixed text or the listener of a narrative, brings to it his fund of knowledge, experiences and beliefs, the totality of his own personal history, that there is never a resolution as to what the author really meant or the experiment really revealed. Rather, different readings at different times will yield different interpretations. Kanzer (Kanzer M, “Freud’s ‘Specimen Dream’ in a Widening Context,” in The Future of Psychoanalysis, 1983) makes a similar and cogent argument when, reviewing and reworking the “specimen dream,” Irma’s injection dream, he says that each generation reanalyses Freud, and Irma dream in particular, with renewed insight and enriched meaning. It takes two to tango and we psychoanalysts tend to forget that the psychoanalytical field is a bipersonal or two-person interactive field where a truth is negotiated, never acquired or given independent of the other participant. Truth, in this sense, is also hermeneutic since it is a product of our understanding and interpretation, and so is not a “given.” This is not to say, however, that psychoanalysis abandon those fundamental tenets of post-empiricist approach to casual explanation and prediction. What empiricism demands is the ability to predict and control, and no matter how theory-laden our observations may be, we still aim at these features. What is fundamentally crucial for psychoanalysis to retain the status of a science is that we accept that no concept, no idea, no truth is immune to change and that no theory is right or wrong; it is only more or less useful in accommodating and explaining what is observed. Psychoanalysis thus reevaluated is an empirical science, but one constrained by all of the revisions of postempirical philosophy of science.

A fair and just price must be paid, however, for the claim that psychoanalysis is a science: we must stop arguing about who is right or
more Freudian or truer to Mrs. Klein as the case may be. At many stages of scientific progress a multitude of theories comes and goes and we use them all in a pragmatic and utilitarian way without really and clearly knowing the truth except within the confines of the theory. For a while, everyone is right. If the day comes that a new theory supercedes the old one, it will only be on the basis of continuing dialogues and interchange of ideas which aim to promote understanding and to clear away the misunderstanding.

Self psychology began as an effort by Kohut to arrive at a new understanding of a set of phenomena which the existing theory did not allow him to comprehend; namely, the narcissistic personality disorders. As he took a new look at the world of an about these patients, in a manner different from the old ways, he began to gather different data which allowed him to see a different world. The crux of the model of self psychology is that of the selfobject, that is, another person experienced as part of oneself in a manner that travels a developmental path from archaic to mature. Selfobject transferences, in turn, are the fundamental features of the clinical self psychology. The old motto or saying applies here that you won’t see it unless you look for it and we will always be looking at the tried and true, always rediscovering “the eternal truth” if we stopped looking.

Once freed from the shackles of orthodoxy, one begins to see the hitherto unseen and understand what has eluded and resisted understanding in a fresh, new way. A totally new vista opens up to let one grasp and handle the more stickier issues in clinical psychoanalysis such as the Oedipus complex, the developmental lines of narcissism, the handling of resistance and the so-called negative therapeutic reaction, or archaic transference phenomena which impede and at times stymie even experienced therapists. The art of empathic listening and understanding and explaining are, in my view, one of the most useful acquisitions in the therapeutic arsenal in the hands of a clinical analyst. The belief that the
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self is inherently “healthy” and will realize its potential if not stunted by repeated empathic failures fosters therapeutic optimism and positive outlook in sharp contrast to Freud’s pessimistic prognostication for the future of psychoanalysis. Self psychology allows a new definition of working alliance in a more “egalitarian” or less iatrogenic therapeutic atmosphere. It forces one to examine constantly what one does in treatment as it no longer affords one the comfort and confidence of the belief that the therapist is never wrong. When one stops examining what one does, the process of ossification sets in and I fear self psychology is no exception to this way of the flesh. I found it very refreshing yet somewhat disquieting in a way to read Cooper’s recent review of Kohut’s book, “How Does Psychoanalysis Cure?” (Cooper A, the Journal of the American psychoanalytic Association, Vol 36, 1988). He now feels freer to apply, perhaps alarmed at the tide of force which Self Psychology has become awash at the foot of the establishment, to Kohut and his followers epithets such as “the grand imperialism of Kohut” in reference to “Kohut’s attempt to find the broadest implications and applications” for self psychology. Cooper has a point, a very real, cogent and timely one, in my view, when he says that Kohut abandoned the clinic language with which he started out for a new metapsychology, so to speak, of the Bipolar Self which has become “as complex and abstract and experience-distant as any other metapsychology.” Cooper concluded that review with the salutary observation, however, that among self psychologists there is continuing effort to refine and modify their theories, rather than becoming a cult movement which offers the same old dishes with different dressing.

I wish to conclude this presentation with timeless wisdom of an ancient Confucian saying which, loosely rendered, says that if a man has reached his forties, he ought to afford a few doubts about himself, about life and the universe. You may feel less certain about what you do and what you are but you are infinitely wiser for it.
REFERENCES


