

POLITICAL IMAGE, THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY

ASPECTS OF GESTALT THERAPY IN REHABILITATION

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Abstract. *The present study approaches Gestalt Therapy as a “Field Theory” emerging the entire social dialogue as a field. The Gestalt therapy focuses on the multiple interacting forces. The study accepts Gestalt Therapy as a holistic therapy, taking the total organism into account, not just the voice, the verbal, the acting out and whatever. Gestalt Therapy is a sensory, experiential and social process in which the therapist acts as a facilitator but also as part of the whole.*

Keywords: *Gestalt, Social History, Comorbidity, Field Theory, Shape/Configuration/Structure.*

Erich Fromm in his book *The Fear of Freedom* says: “The social history of man (sic) started with his emerging from a state of oneness with the natural world to an awareness of himself as an separate entity from surrounding nature and men (sic).¹

The Western Philosophical idea of the separateness of the individual is contradicted by our very phenomenological being which relies on an integration of systems physical, psychological, sensory and imaginary and its engagement with other social systems in order to live.

The *Gestalt* Therapeutic view of life is that there is a distinct unity of everything and that human beings cannot be understood or experienced other than through a state of oneness. The womb and the umbilicus representing the psychological state of the individual bear the deep connectedness of each person. The breast, the holding of the caregiver, followed by the holding of the womb of relationships. Human beings are a *Gestalt*, a meeting of *Gestalts*, a conglomeration of *Gestalts*.²

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¹ Fromm, E., *The Fear of Freedom*, <http://books.google.co.za/books?id=HSXWMgEACAAJ>. 2001, Routledge Classics. p 19.

² There are no human events that are not of an organismic environment field. People are always of a field and are interdependent. The people of this field are all part of the force that determines what occurs, hence responsible. All events in the human field are a function of all of the participants and the interactions between

Gestalt is a German word difficult to translate, but it means wholeness, form or shape. The Oxford dictionary defines it as follows: “A ‘shape’, ‘configuration’, or ‘structure’ which as an object of perception forms a specific whole or unity incapable of expression simply in terms of its parts (e.g. a melody in distinction from the notes that make it up)”³.

The idea of wholeness seems to contradict the psychological truth of individuation. The idea of becoming an individual which Fromm alludes to. The Oxford Dictionary refers to individuation as: the action or process of individuating or rendering individual; that of distinguishing as an individual; spec. in Scholastic Philosophy, the process leading to individual existence, as distinct from that of the species; principle of individuation (= med. L. *principium individuationis*): the principle through which the individual is constituted or comes into being. In Scholastic Philosophy this was variously held to be Form (by most Realists); Matter (by the Nominalists); and Matter as limited in the individual (by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas).⁴

These two seemingly mutually exclusive processes are both affected in addiction. In addition the individuation, as well as, the social and dialoguing aspects of life are often static. *Gestalt* Therapy seeks to tie these together in its approach to working with the problem of addiction.

Stiegler, summarizing his approach to individuation, acknowledges the social composite of the individual and of the individuation process, he says the I is constituted in adopting a collective tradition, the I is essentially a process, the I is always inscribed in that of the *we*.⁵ This resonates with the *Gestalt* Therapeutic approach.

Gestalt therapy according to Yontef, one of the major proponents and theorists of *Gestalt* Therapy, is a phenomenological-existential therapy that teaches people awareness and “in which perceiving, feeling, and acting are distinguished from interpreting and reshuffling pre-existing attitudes.”⁶

In the addiction field, *Gestalt* is a facilitator for the engagement of organismic self-regulation and the creation of a true dialogue between *Gestalts*.

them. The rugged individualism ideal, the ideal of self-sufficiency, is not consistent with a field way of thinking. *International Gestalt Journal* 2002, 25/1, 15-34, Gary Yontef, *The Relational Attitude in Gestalt Therapy Theory and Practice*.

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition on CD-ROM (v. 4.0.0.2)© Oxford University Press 2009.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Stiegler, Bernard, *Desire and Knowledge: The Dead Seize the Living*, translated by George Collins and Daniel Ross, Ars Industrialis, 2009.

⁶ Gestalt therapy is a phenomenological-existential therapy founded by Frederick (Fritz) and Laura Perls in the 1940s. It teaches therapists and patients the phenomenological method of awareness, in which perceiving, feeling, and acting are distinguished from interpreting and reshuffling pre-existing attitudes. Explanations and interpretations are considered less reliable than what is directly perceived and felt. Patients and therapists in Gestalt therapy dialogue, that is, communicate their phenomenological perspectives. Differences in perspectives become the focus of experimentation and continued dialogue. The goal is for clients to become aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they can change themselves, and at the same time, to learn to accept and value them. Gary Yontef. *Awareness, Dialogue, and Process*, The Gestalt Journal Press, 1993.

Gestalt Therapy as a Social Concept

Gestalt as a psychological tool gained impetus in the 20th century, with Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Kohler, when *Gestalt* psychology focused on perception as a whole. Kurt Koffka professes the interlinking nature of perception, “It has been said: The whole is more than the sum of its parts. It is more correct to say that the whole is something else than the sum of its parts, because summing up is a meaningless procedure, whereas the whole-part relationship is meaningful.”⁷

The influence of early *Gestalt* Psychology theory on *Gestalt* Therapy concerns its approach. *Gestalt* theory arising from the 20th century movement founded by Carl Stumpf⁸ who focused on phenomenology. Stumpf used the concept of fusion and related it to music and pointed to the interlinking fusion between sensory and phenomenological processes.⁹ “The notion of fusion designates one of the forms of relations that structure the sensory material. It defines itself as the relation between two phenomena (or contents of sensation) by virtue of which they do not merely form a sum, but a whole.”

As a social and therapeutic tool *Gestalt* Therapy was popularized by Fritz and Laura Perls who looked for a syncretistic approach to therapy. *Gestalt* Therapy it has at its core group work.

*Gestalt therapy is a holistic therapy. This means that it takes the total organism into account, not just the voice, the verbal, the acting out and whatever.*¹⁰

The misnomer about *Gestalt* therapy has been that it is about techniques to assist in therapy but the *Gestalt* view is an approach to the entire human organism integrating emotional, psychological and cognitive approaches. The unspoken aspect of *Gestalt* work is its focus on the organism as a social being. The organism self-regulation within the organism is made whole by means of contact and dialogue and this contact process in *Gestalt* Therapy always has a social dimension, whether it takes place in individual therapy or in group process.

Using Aristotle’s original focus on the whole as being more than the sum of its parts from his *Metaphysics*¹¹, Laura and Fritz Perls looked to a therapeutic process which would take into account the entire being in process.

⁷ Kurt Koffka, 1935: *Principles of Gestalt psychology*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, New York, p 176.

⁸ Fisette, Denis, “Carl Stumpf”, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/stumpf/>>.

⁹ The notion of fusion designates one of the forms of relations that structure the sensory material. It defines itself as the relation between two phenomena (or contents of sensation) by virtue of which they do not merely form a sum, but a whole. Stumpf argues that those elements which fuse into a whole, for example the quality and intensity of sounds in a melody, are not changed, but that this relation of fusion establishes a narrower unity between these contents that is perceptible as a gestalt. To use the well-known case of the melody, moments of quality and of intensity form in that case a unitary whole which is perceptible as a “quality of form”, and it is precisely the unitary character of this perception, the fact that it is perceptible in one stroke and immediately as unitary form, that Stumpf tries to account for through his notion of a relation of fusion.

Fisette, Denis, “Carl Stumpf”, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/stumpf/>>.

¹⁰ <http://fritzperls.com/publications/an-oral-history-of-gestalt-therapy/> *An Oral History of Gestalt Therapy – An Interview with Laura Perls Part One: A conversation with Laura Perls.*

¹¹ [http://www.digital.library.strathmore.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1273/Aristotle – Metaphysics.pdf?sequence=1](http://www.digital.library.strathmore.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1273/Aristotle-Metaphysics.pdf?sequence=1)

Gestalt Therapy and Therapeutic Groups

Gestalt Therapy in practice is a sensory, experiential and social process in which the therapist acts as a facilitator but also as part of the whole. The therapist encourages different *Gestalts* towards their completion and the functionality of the whole. This acknowledges the presence of many *Gestalts* at the same time. There is the individual *Gestalt* of the here and now in the individual members of the group; the individual *Gestalt* of the therapist themselves, and the *Gestalt* of the group as a whole. The complexity of the group cannot be underestimated and therefore the therapist is aware that she is not in control of the process but merely an active component of the whole.

The disparity of organismic needs and their specific expression and search for fulfilment reveals the presence of differing and often contradicting social explorations. It is the task of the therapist to encourage contact in its many forms which *Gestalt* therapy theory sees as the means by which the *Gestalt* finds wholeness or fulfilment. The needs sensory, imaginary, psychic are processed and realized by means of contact. It is the task of the therapist to help reduce contact boundary disturbances, *Gestalt* Therapy's version of defence mechanisms, and those aspects which act as defences within the organism and sometimes prevent organismic self-regulation.

In practice, within a Rehabilitation programme for addicts, *Gestalt* therapy does what social theory cannot, it engages in social dialogue in an experiential way with the understanding that appropriate contact in the form of dialogue and sensory contact will enable healing and the movement towards organismic self-regulation or balance within the addicted person's framework.

In Rehabilitation programmes there has always been a strong impetus to help control the processes of the so called addict and to reframe their own inner world in order to control their addiction. For this purpose the 12 step programme amongst many other approaches has been touted as a way of fixing the addiction, or the addict in particular. The *Gestalt* approach however is not interested in focusing on the illness but rather on the individual in their processes, their own *Gestalts*. The social *Gestalt* approach looks at the group contact processes and insists that if these processes are allowed in an experiential way without too many contact boundary disturbances the person affected by the addiction can better regulate themselves and their lives. This means that emotional processes need to be facilitated in order to bring about greater awareness and in this process complete *Gestalts* that seek satiation or wholeness. This mitigates against any absolutizing of technique as well as an approach which is too directive in its cognitive framing.

The Social Impact of Gestalt Therapy

In small groups no larger than 8 to 10 people the *Gestalt* process takes place. The *Gestalt* therapeutic approach does not absolutize any technique or way or presume that its peculiar process is the sine qua non of the client's life. Instead the approach seeks to connect with already existing processes within the individual

by means of social and cognitive and internal psychological processes. A group will be encouraged to begin with a few moments of sensory awareness by means of contact with one of their senses. The interlinking of the senses, according to *Gestalt*, creates a greater overall awareness no matter what aspect of the senses is stimulated. The process of awareness begins with dialogue and the members of the group can bring anything into the process that arises from their foreground. The awareness process of the organism, if not defended by contact boundary disturbances, brings what is necessary to be regulated, into the awareness of the individual and of course in a social group such as a therapy group in a rehabilitation programme the group itself acts as an organism seeking self-regulation and the groups awareness and foreground needs to be trusted and accommodated.

Conclusion

I work in a Rehabilitation Clinic in Somerset West, South Africa where we deal with addictions to alcohol, various substances, gambling, sexual and love addictions. The process is focused on a holistic approach and the groups are structured in a *Gestalt* way with the emphasis being process rather than behaviour. The *Gestalt* approach assists the person who is addicted to perceive their problem as part of the whole, to see addiction as part of the entire process of healing or self-regulation. The practice of sensory awareness and dialogue are emphasized as well as emotional catharsis and the groups function in an experimental way on their journey to awareness.

Gestalt Therapy uses “Field Theory” as its overall approach, approaching the entire social dialogue as a field. Field theory is the perception of “all events as a function of the relationship of multiple interacting forces. Interacting forces form a field in which every part of the field effects the whole and the whole effects all parts of the field. No event occurs in isolation. The whole field determines all events in the field, with some forces being in figural awareness and some operating in the background.” The *Gestalt* therapy approach focuses on the relational aspects of therapy and any therapeutic intent has to take into account this conglomeration of interacting relational elements. This means that the therapist seeks an authentic relationship with herself as well as with the group concerned and experiments with the *multiple interacting forces*.¹²

The addiction field is an important milieu for *Gestalt* Therapy because of the comorbidity of the disease, the person addicted is a product of their social cosmos and the addiction itself affects their social cosmos in every respect. The addiction functions as an agent of comorbidity. The *Gestalt* approach is no cure all. In truth it purports only to facilitate a relationship of change with people. Yontef pointing at the contribution of Max Wertheimer says: “Problems are problems of a field and the solutions are solutions of that field. Any process, problem, creative

¹² *International Gestalt Journal* 2002, 25/1, 15-34, Gary Yontef, *The Relational Attitude in Gestalt Therapy Theory and Practice*.

advancement, solution to a problem is a function of the relationship between the people “of the field” and the field as a whole.”¹³

*In answer to the question of whether a person should be defined in terms of their addiction I quote Aristotle arguing about matter and form in his Metaphysics, “For they cannot even exist if severed from the whole; for it is not a finger in any and every state that is the finger of a living thing, but a dead finger is a finger only in name.”*¹⁴

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¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ [http://www.digital.library.strathmore.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1273/Aristotle – Metaphysics.pdf?sequence=1](http://www.digital.library.strathmore.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1273/Aristotle%20-%20Metaphysics.pdf?sequence=1)