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Christine Stevens, PhD

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An Origin Story: Part One

Eamonn Marshall

Gestalt therapy as applied phenomenology

Mikela Gonzi and Niki Young

The term 'atmosphere' is unhelpful

Lothar Gutjhar, PhD

Contemporary spirituality: heartbreak and humility

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Editorial

We are delighted to announce that Angela Barrows has become the new Chair of the Board of Gestalt Publishing Ltd., the company responsible for publishing *British Gestalt Journal*. A warm welcome also to new Directors, Rehana Begum, Michael Ellis, Simon Jacobs and Marie Willaume who join the existing Board.

This issue opens with Dora Darvasi's moving and personal tribute to Erving Polster, whose remarkable life spans over a century, and whose influence has spread throughout the international Gestalt community.

The theme that has emerged in this issue is expressed in the four peer-reviewed articles which, from quite different places, reflect some of the range of influences on contemporary Gestalt thinking and practice.

Eamonn Marshall's paper opens with an exploration of his own relation to Fritz Perls and his identity as a Gestalt therapist, going on to tease out aspects of Perls's relationship with Freud. His article takes advantage of recent scholarship, such as Bocian's work, to examine early influences, particularly the psychoanalytic roots of Gestalt. Marshall's fascinating and detailed account is in two parts, with the second instalment in the Autumn issue this year.

In their article, Mikela Gonzi and Niki Young unpick developments over time within phenomenology as a philosophical approach. They consider the extent to which Gestalt therapy can be seen as applied phenomenology. They discuss shared theories and assumptions that are interwoven in both systems of thought and make a nuanced critique of what they describe as a 'complex and generative mix'.

Lothar Gutjahr's somewhat adversarial article continues this theme of exploring the complexity of influences and developments within Gestalt therapy. His point of view questions some contemporary thinking in Gestalt therapy, arguing against the use of the term atmosphere, which has come into circulation recently, and which originates from the 'new phenomenology' school of thought. Gutjahr's critique is based on the thesis that 'contact is a structured function of the field, not an event in the field'. He argues that the term atmosphere is too vague and that

it is unnecessary for a field-centred approach. The BGJ seeks to facilitate respectful dialogue and to hold complex and sometimes divergent ideas in tension. We hope to publish more in the way of discussion on this subject in the future to help readers explore these ideas further.

Coming in from a different tangent, Alexandra Greene's paper is a wide-ranging literature review that considers a framework for contemporary spirituality and mental health. She considers how this connects with Gestalt therapy in terms of addressing 'wounds of the soul', attending to vital dimensions of human experience.

In addition, there is a lively conversation piece in which Claire Asherson Bartram questions Perry Klepner about why he thinks it is so valuable to run groups for the study of the seventy-year-old text we know as PHG. This gives a fascinating insight into a way of passing on a lived experience of Gestalt theory by an elder to a new generation of young therapists that seems to be growing in popularity.

Joelle Gartner's book review on class goes some way to fill a gap in awareness around the impact of class in the therapy relationship. She draws our attention to three recent texts and explains what they contribute to our understanding of these issues in Gestalt therapy. Finally, Rachael Kellett's opinion piece is a personal reflection of her own journey with chronic pain and being a Gestalt therapist. She explores some of the questions and insights that have emerged from this process.

We apologise to Rafael Cortina for wrongly attributing his article 'A Gestalt understanding of trauma and addiction' on the outside front cover in the last issue. You will have received a sticker with this issue to put on your copy of 32.2 to correct this mistake.

Our thanks to all who have been involved in this issue, the authors, the Editorial Team, the peer reviewers. We hope to see many of you at the BGJ online Seminar Day on Saturday 2 November and in the meantime, we welcome any responses, articles or suggestions in writing.

Christine Stevens, PhD
Editor

In the context of a lifetime

In memoriam of Erving 'Erv' Polster (1922 – 2024)

Erving Polster died peacefully at age 101 on the 22nd of March 2024

Dora Darvasi

In 2016, when Erv was ninety-four, an enthusiastic therapist asked (or told) him how much of Gestalt therapy was about the here-and-now. He responded with his usual eloquence that the here-and-now is a 'sloganistic' sense of what is important in life, but only ever meaningful in the context of a lifetime (Tahir, 2016). And so, the aching absence I feel, the heartbreak I'm with as I'm typing these words, can only be understood and articulated in the context of my life.

I migrated from Hungary to the United Kingdom as I turned eighteen, and I was at a loss. I could no longer make any sense of who I was and where I was headed. I was grappling with a new language, longing to belong and yearning for guidance. I felt an immediate draw to Erv when we were shown a video during my training of him doing a demonstration. I saw him being sharp, to the point, direct, but not humiliating, relationally absorbed without being confluent, attuned to the heavy as well as the light. I proceeded to read his work, and spent the years that followed returning to them, always finding comfort, insight and inspiration. I took what he had to say with large doses of faith, as a child would, and adopted him as a geographically-far, experience-near mentor. I let his words, straightforward delivery and infectious laugh swim in and out of my awareness as I began working with clients.

But the loss I speak to is also a collective loss and can only be understood in the context of Erv's life. He was born in what was then Czechoslovakia on the 13th of April 1922. His family migrated to Cleveland in the US when he was two years old. He stayed connected to his childhood, which allowed him to develop the concept of primal familiarity – a resting place, a contrast and companion to novelty. He went from journalism to sociology to psychology and landed in Gestalt therapy having attended a workshop with Fritz Perls. Though he spoke of Fritz affectionately, an early encounter with him where he felt missed, influenced his emphasis on content within process in dialogue.



In an interview late in his life, he said 'therapeutic principles are paradoxically enabling, and imprisoning, and I would like to keep the enablement, and get rid of the prison.' (Mietkiewicz, 2011)

His attention to the enabling qualities of therapeutic principles assisted him in becoming a master integrator as a working therapist. He paid just as much attention to pleasure as he did to fear, to action as to awareness, to safety as to urgency, to honest expression as to the responsibility that comes with it. Beyond being an enlivening practitioner, he was also a serious theoretician, and an engaging writer. He was vocal about not being caught up in the concept of the here-and-now, and said that, instead of moments he was working with movement, function and sequences. As for sequences, amongst his seminal papers, he published one of the most popular British Gestalt Journal articles, *Tight Therapeutic Sequences* (Polster, 1991). Aligned with Kurt Lewin's assertion that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory', he wrote a paper that is both theoretically robust and refreshingly pragmatic (Lewin, 1951). I share his concept of sequentiality when

I teach now, and trainees have an immediate warmth and appreciation for it, and are left with the gift of Erv's perceptive analogy.

It is impossible to capture the whole of Erv without his late wife, Miriam Polster whom he met and married in 1949. Together they raised two children, were instrumental in establishing the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, founded and co-directed the Gestalt Training Center in San Diego. They've also co-authored *Gestalt Therapy Integrated* and *From the Radical Center: The Heart of Gestalt Therapy*, developed a new contact boundary modification, deflection, and travelled the globe, teaching. Alongside their shared career, Erv wrote several other books – *Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel*, *The Population of Selves*, *Uncommon Ground*, *Beyond Therapy* and, his final work, *Enchantment and Gestalt Therapy*. Of Miriam, Erv said that he was a 'very lucky person to have lived so much of [his] life with her' and of their relationship, he noted that a student observing the closeness of their union once commented that they might as well be called 'Merv and Iriam' (Polster, 2021).

Miriam Polster and their daughter Sarah died in the same year, in 2001. In a conversation with Lynne Jacobs some years later, Erv spoke of the faith he found through discovering that 'that which seems to be, in anticipation, so devastating that it was hard to imagine survival turns out to be a part of living' (Jacobs, 2007). In the subsequent two decades, he increasingly shifted his attention to communal belonging, and started Life Focus Groups, bringing his beloved theme of focused attention to ongoing gatherings in service of continuity, curious exploration and aesthetic concepts like illumination and enchantment. When asked what it was he wanted to be remembered for, he said that 'we [need] to find a way of being oriented toward life and guided in life together, to respect individuality while honouring community, and find some way of coordinating those, sometimes, contradictory requirements' (Tahir, 2016).

He married his second wife Rose Lee in 2006, a relationship which he described as the 'highlight of his later years' and that Rose Lee's smile warmed his heart. Once again, he could lean into the pleasure of primal familiarity (Polster, 2021).

In writing this tribute, I became acutely aware of how little there is that I resist in Erv's work and sentiments, and I know that my Erv is going to be different to yours. For better or worse, mine is a little too rounded and a little too neat. And, still, I wonder whether there are certain introjects we're not meant to work through;

whether there are certain people who we found at the right time, who touched our lives in the right way, forever imprinting on us, transcending their transience into beautifully fixed gestalts. Erv, for me, remains one such gestalt.

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An Origin Story (Part One): Fritz Perls's relationship to Freud and some implications for the Gestalt therapist's sense of identity

Eamonn Marshall

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Abstract

Fritz Perls features centre stage in any Gestalt training, yet his life and the influences working on him have, until recently, remained relatively obscure and unelaborated. His relationship to Freud and psychoanalysis was of enormous significance, a fact that is often given only cursory attention when considering the evolution of ideas which would eventually lead to the publication of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* in 1951. Following my reading of Bernd Bocian's profoundly illuminating 2010 publication, *Fritz Perls in Berlin 1893 – 1933: Expressionism - Psychoanalysis - Judaism*, I at last felt sufficiently informed to attempt to describe my own relationship to Fritz Perls and to certain puzzling aspects of his story as given in his first-person texts, and this paper is the result.

Keywords

Perls, Freud, psychoanalysis, transference, trauma, enactment

Note

This paper is published in two parts. In this first part, the author elaborates his curiosity about Fritz Perls's relationship to Freud and psychoanalysis prior to World War II. He explores Perls's actual meeting with Freud in 1936 and links this with his becoming a father to a son and his later encounter with 'the law' in California in his mature years. Part Two will be published in British Gestalt Journal 33.2.

Introduction

Over the years I have heard the question 'Am I Gestalt enough?' asked often enough to make me curious. A version of it appeared in the Letters to the Editor section of *British Gestalt Journal* in 2018 (Robinson, 2018) and was the spur to writing this paper. Interestingly, the letter itself was a response to the developing arguments for and against the adoption of a Gestalt Therapy Fidelity Scale (Fogarty et al., 2016), itself a development I find problematic, but outside the scope of this paper (theoretical 'fidelity' has always been a rather strange and provocative idea to me).

What is it that the speaker is articulating in his question? What exemplar of a Gestalt therapist does he have in mind? Against what (or whose) yardstick is he measuring himself? Would a psychoanalyst trained at the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London ask herself 'Am I psychoanalytic enough?' (I'm guessing she wouldn't, though she might well ask herself whether she was Freudian, or Kleinian, or even Independent enough, but that is another matter). What insecurity or uncertainty does the Gestalt graduate carry away with themselves after completing what is usually a demanding, intensive and lengthy training? And what is it that continues to unsettle more experienced therapists later on in their careers?

Apart from the complex question of how *any* student is taught to attend to their own and their client's awareness continuum in an ongoing therapeutic relationship, this insecurity seems to me to point to fundamental questions relating to our identity as Gestalt therapists. From where does a sense of being comfortable in our identity as Gestalt therapists originate? From whom do we gain the 'authority' to speak as Gestalt therapists?

I will declare now that my own identity as a Gestalt psychotherapist is far from straightforward. I was drawn to Gestalt following my encounter with a Gestalt-trained therapist who set up and ran a humanistic counselling training that I embarked upon in London. He was (and is) a lively man, acutely present and attentive, fun, intelligent, spontaneous and with an emotional depth that was always compelling. In a simple way, he exemplified qualities that I admired in a therapist, and I was sold enough on what I then understood to be the ‘Gestalt way’ to apply to Metanoia in west London (now Metanoia Institute) and take my interest further. I gained my Diploma and MSc in Gestalt Psychotherapy in 2001 and remain a member of Gestalt Psychotherapy Training Institute (GPTI) and registrant of United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy College).

But completing a training programme is only the start of a very long journey of finding one’s own identity as a psychotherapist. My very unassuming humanistic counselling training had exposed me to all kinds of thinking, and theorists, amongst them the psychoanalyst, Donald W. Winnicott whose work struck me at the time as patently humanistic in tone and emphasis. His profound sensitivity to the subtleties of the dynamics governing the relationships between babies, infants and their mothers (and, sometimes, fathers) had captured my attention. Later in my training at Metanoia I was chastised by a tutor for my continued interest in Winnicott, which I remember stinging somewhat. Ironically, it was the same tutor who helped me make the transition to a new therapist following the breakdown of a therapy with a senior Gestalt therapist whom I had been working with for eighteen months or so. I had anticipated completing my training with this therapist, but it was not to be.

Little did I know that this disturbing ‘breakdown’ was to sow the seeds of an ultimately creative about-turn. My new therapist turned out to be in the process of completing a second (psychoanalytic) training at a progressive psychoanalytic training institute in the UK, his first having been a body-oriented psychotherapy training (I didn’t learn this until much later in this therapy). The fact that he was German, from Berlin, was also, ultimately, of relevance and importance to me. I stayed with this therapist for seven years, most of it post-qualification, and in the latter years moved to the couch, attending twice a week. It was a profoundly healing, transformational and educational experience

In 2019, I came across Bernd Bocian’s scholarly title, *Fritz Perls in Berlin 1893–1933: Expressionism - Psychoanalysis - Judaism* (Bocian, 2010) which completely opened my eyes to the complex intellectual and sociocultural forces shaping the originators of what has become known as Gestalt therapy. Sketches of the early lives of Fritz and Laura Perls appear in various oral history chapters and in their respective autobiographical publications, but it has taken serious academic research to excavate and elaborate the details of their lives such that the influences working upon them – specifically Fritz – can be appreciated and explored further.

Bocian’s work goes back to the late nineties when he published a paper entitled, ‘Gestalt Therapy and Psychoanalysis: Towards a Better Understanding of a Figure-Ground Relationship’ in *Gestalt Review* (1998, pp. 232–252), in which he argues for a respectful appreciation of the complex forces that formed both Fritz and Laura Perls in pre-WWII Germany.

Bocian’s published work in English forms the background to this paper (his project is ongoing). His work is helping to illuminate long-held questions I have been pondering about in relation to contemporary Gestalt theory and the influences at work on its founders. Perls’s Jewish cultural context and heritage are elaborated in detail, as are the influences of the vibrant cultural *avant garde* in Berlin between the two world wars. His immersion in the febrile world of first-generation psychoanalytic training is traced with forensic detail, as are many other influences relevant to the development of Perls’s magpie-like search for a unifying, holistic understanding of human functioning (what Bocian calls ‘*a utopia of wholeness*’ (Bocian, p. 25, 2010). Bocian’s bibliographies are replete with tantalising titles not available to an English-speaking audience which clearly allude to a community of European thinkers who are still contextualising the effects of Freud’s revolution on those who came after. I am indebted to Bocian’s work in writing this paper. Without it I would have struggled to find the confidence to articulate what has been on my mind all these years.

This is the background with which I approach my subject.

In search of a lineage

For a long time, I laboured under the false impression that Gestalt therapy had not very much to do with psychoanalysis. Nothing in my training had addressed the history of ideas out of which Gestalt therapy had

developed (apart from cursory references to the Gestalt psychologists and some attention to phenomenology and existentialism as discrete domains of knowledge). There was no reference to the profound place that psychoanalysis had played in the early lives of Fritz and Laura Perls in Germany and Austria, nor (to me) the surprising level of interest that existed in Freud and Freudian psychoanalysis amongst the intelligentsia amongst whom Perls was circulating when he was trying to establish himself as the new kid on the block in New York in 1946.

During my training in London in the late nineties, English texts by American authors were readily available and the staple diet, whereas reference to our European heritage was sparse and virtually non-existent. This European/American divide is given particular emphasis by Michael Vincent Miller in his introduction to the 1992 edition of *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*. In it he makes a cogent observation about Perls's transition from the Old to the New World:

‘How did a German-Jewish refugee psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, a product of the Weimar Republic and its complex culture, end up as a presiding guru at the Esalen Institute? Perls, late in life, framed by virgin redwoods and stark cliffs that plunged without transition into the Pacific Ocean, epitomised a venerable American theme – the Self redefined, made new, responsible only to itself amid the pastoral grandeur of the American wilderness. He even came to look like the Thoreau or Whitman of psychotherapy. The evolution of Gestalt therapy cannot be understood entirely apart from the Americanisation of Frederick Perls. Both his life and his changing views could be described as a progression from European history to American innocence.’ (Perls, F., 1992b, p. 12)

It is typical of Miller that he has his eye on the complexity of Perls's evolution within two profoundly different cultural contexts (you know that anyone who can subtitle an essay with ‘What Gestalt Therapists Can Learn from Cézanne and Miles Davis’ has something interesting to say).

But I do remember learning something important about Fritz Perls's psychoanalytic heritage when, approaching my qualifying exams in the late nineties, I read the exchange with his client ‘Barbara’ in the final pages of *Eye Witness to Therapy* (Perls, F., 1973, pp. 204-206). Barbara, with whom Perls is working in a group setting, is invited to swap roles and become therapist to Perls

as client. At this moment she asks him who gave him his ‘illness’ – he replies, instantly, ‘Sigmund Freud’. Laughter ensues (ibid., p. 205). The psychoanalytic therapy that Perls received during his training in Berlin, Frankfurt and Vienna is described as ‘infecting’ him. The mood turns sober as Perls goes on to describe his ‘great sorrow’ that Freud is dead before he got the opportunity to talk to him ‘man to man’ (Freud was 37 years Perls's senior) (ibid.). He goes on to lament Freud's ‘sickness’, not allowing his patients to ‘touch him’, and his own belief that ‘in a certain way, I know more than you do. You could have solved the neurosis question’ (ibid.). It is an unusually poignant moment and in stark contrast to the more typical picture we have of him as an abrasive and rather confrontational showman. This chapter in *Eye Witness to Therapy* is a transcript of a filmed training session made in the final year of Fritz Perls's life (1969 into 1970) whilst he was in the early stages of creating a Gestalt training community in Cowichan, British Columbia. Perls died in Chicago in March 1970, aged 76.

Perls's uncharacteristic vulnerability in this account intrigued me and made me wonder what was being pointed up in this revelation. Clearly, he was referring to an intense and long-standing disappointment he felt in the father of psychoanalysis, and the lost opportunity to make a contribution to Freud's project. In his autobiography *In and Out the Garbage Pail* (originally published in 1969) Perls spells out in no uncertain terms what might be called the passionate inspiration he found in Freud:

‘Many friends criticise me for my polemic relationship to Freud. “You have so much to say; your position is securely grounded in reality. What is this continuous aggressiveness against Freud? Leave him alone and just do your thing.” I can't do this. Freud, his theories, his influence are much too important to me. My admiration, bewilderment, and vindictiveness are very strong. I am deeply moved by his suffering and courage. I am deeply awed by how much, practically all alone, he achieved with the inadequate tools of association-psychology and mechanistically-oriented philosophy. I am deeply grateful for how much I developed through standing up to him.’ (Perls, 1992a)

Fritz Perls in analysis

The following summary is gleaned from Bocian's account of Fritz Perls in analysis which extends to just over ninety pages of detailed contextual analysis (2010, pp. 157–248).

I think that it is important to emphasise that Fritz Perls did not approach psychoanalysis as a training candidate, but as a man seeking help (Bocian, 2010, p. 157). In 1925, at the age of 32, Perls became a patient of Karen Horney, a founding member of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute, at the time under the firm hand of Freud's closest disciple, Karl Abraham. Perls's anxiety about his compulsive sexual behaviour and jealousy, particularly in relation to a 'distant relative', Lucy, propelled his presentation (a sketch of the material is given in *In and Out the Garbage Pail* – I will return to this below). This treatment seems to have developed into a training analysis, required if Perls was to achieve the authorised status of 'psychoanalyst'.

In September 1926, on Horney's advice, Perls moved to Frankfurt, in part to put distance between himself and Lucy, but also to further his interest in Gestalt psychology, in particular the work of Kurt Goldstein, neurologist, psychiatrist and author of *The Organism* (1934). At the time Goldstein was director of both the Neurological Institute and Institute for Research on the Consequences of Brain Injury at the University of Frankfurt. It was at the University of Frankfurt that Fritz Perls first met Lore Posner (Laura in its Anglicised form), at a joint seminar given by Goldstein and Lore's Professor, Adhémar Gelb (Gaines, 1979, p. 7). She was just 21, Fritz was 33. Laura was studying for her doctorate at the university and by 1929 had already completed her analysis (five times a week for two and a half years) with Karl Landauer (co-founder of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute with Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, now the Sigmund Freud Institute). She spoke very highly of him:

'I was much more impressed with Landauer who was extraordinarily bright and liberal within the psychoanalytic area. He was a close friend of Ferenczi and Groddeck, who were already on the fringes. More independent, more active, actually'
(Perls, L., 1992, p. 17).

She went on to successfully defend her PhD thesis in 1931.

Perls continued his analysis in Frankfurt with Clara Happel (also a founder member of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute and pupil of Karen Horney). After just one year, Happel declared Perls's analysis complete (much to his surprise, noting that it seemed to coincide with his running out of money (Perls, 1992a). He was later to view this analysis as a failure (see below). Happel recommended he go to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute for his control analysis (seeing patients under close supervision). This was conducted by Helene Deutsch, head of the teaching institute (officially, the Training Institute of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Association) and Eduard Hirschmann, director of the outpatient clinic there. Perls was in Vienna until March 1928, during which time he threw himself into his studies to the exclusion of almost all else (Bocian, 2010, pp. 169–173).

Perls was back in Berlin by the spring of 1928. In October 1928 he resumed his training analysis with Eugen Harnick, remaining there for eighteen months, attending five times a week. It was a wholly unsatisfactory experience for Perls who found Harnick's therapeutic abstinence a torment. But Perls was keenly aware that he was being assessed as a suitable training candidate and needed to pass scrutiny:

'After a year or so I wanted to get away from him. I was too much of a moral coward to come right out with it. After my failure in analysis with Clara Happel, what would my chances be to ever become an analyst?'
(Perls, F., 1992a).

Lore Posner provided Perls with his route out of this failing analysis; against Harnick's explicit direction he married Lore in Berlin, in 1930.

In *In and Out the Garbage Pail* Perls makes out that Lore was 'pressing' him to get married, but she refutes this emphatically:

'It simply was not true. I never expected that he would marry me, nor that he would marry at all. And I didn't care. For more than three years before we were married I was his lover, and still I certainly didn't press. Actually, it was the other way round. Fritz wanted to have a child. For a long time he had the fear that he was sterile. I think he got married to a great extent to find out if he could have a child' (Gaines, 1979, p. 8).

Having broken off his analysis with Harnick, Perls turned to Karen Horney, his first analyst, for advice ('one of the few people I really trusted' (Perls, F., 1992a)). Her response: 'The only analyst that I think could get through to you would be Wilhelm Reich' (ibid.).

Perls entered a training analysis with Reich in Berlin at the end of 1930, staying with him for between two and three years, attending five times a week (L. Perls in Gaines, 1979, p. 12; Bocian, 2010, p. 210). Perls was 37 and Reich 33. Laura says that Fritz was 'absolutely fascinated' by Reich (Perls, L., 1992, p. 8) and would have continued working with him had Reich remained in the country (Reich moved to Denmark in October 1934).

Clearly, Fritz Perls was hungry for any analyst who could engage with more immediacy and energy:

'Reich was vital, alive, rebellious. He was eager to discuss any situation, especially political and sexual ones, yet of course he still analysed and played the genetic tracing games. But with him the importance of facts began to fade. The interest in attitudes moved more into the foreground. His book *Character Analysis* was a major contribution' (Perls, 1992a).

Perls would already have encountered Reich as part of the training programme at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute where Reich was director of the 'seminar for psychoanalytic therapy', a post he took up when he was just 27, and which he held for six years between 1924 and 1930. It was here that Perls would have first encountered Reich's character analysis. Perls even commissioned an English language translation of Reich's book of the same name whilst living in South Africa (Amendt-Lyon, 2016, p. 155). It was here that he founded the South African Institute for Psychoanalytic Studies (Gaines, 1979, p. 29).

Bocian's research has established that Perls's contact with Reich extended far longer than earlier believed (from the end of 1927 to the spring of 1933) and that Perls continued to view himself as a Character Analyst well into his time in South Africa (Bocian, 2010, p. 175). Laura Perls confirms this in her interview with Edward Rosenfeld in *An Oral History of Gestalt Therapy*:

'Then we were still calling it psychoanalysis (in South Africa). Even when we came to New York, I found some old stationery where we had both of our names on it as psychoanalysts. We changed it really with the publication of the book *Gestalt Therapy*, in 1950' (Wysong, J. & Rosenfeld, E. eds., 1982, p. 11).

Even as late as 1955, Jim Simkin describes Perls conducting a seemingly classical analysis with him (this was still in New York):

'The gestalt that he was doing then was quite different in the sense that the couch was used – there was no face-to-face. In those days I was on the couch and Fritz sat behind with the dark-glasses, Hollywood-style. I started therapy with him in '52 and finished in early '55' (Gaines, 1979, p. 39).

Working with Reich was the decisive turn for Fritz Perls. It is clear that his maverick nature had at last found an answering voice in Reich. His willingness to explore sex and sexuality was certainly refreshing and an area that Reich was making his own (by 1927 Reich had already published *The Function of the Orgasm*). However, unbeknownst to Perls, Reich was coming under scrutiny from Freud and his inner circle. Reich's deviations from orthodox practice, active and visible political affiliations, sexually liberal attitudes and position of authority and influence amongst his students in the Berlin Institute were felt to leave psychoanalysis open to hostile attention from the ruling fascist National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP – *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*). As early as 1931 Max Eitingon (co-founder and president of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Polyclinic) was prohibiting Reich from presenting any further 'sociological' topics at the Berlin Institute seminar (Bocian, 2010, p. 237).

In March 1933 (three months after Hitler was installed as Chancellor) Freud informed Reich that the contract to publish *Character Analysis* with the publishing arm of the International Psychoanalytical Association would be rescinded (Reich, 1967, p. 159). He was also denied new training candidates in Vienna on the suspicion of being a Marxist (Reich went on to self-publish *Character Analysis* in 1933). Reich's eventual expulsion from the German Psychoanalytical Association in 1933 is a chilling tale that still haunts many in the psychoanalytic community in Europe (see Frosch, 2003).

As was to become the case with other dissidents who fell out of favour with Freud, Reich's training candidates became subject to 'stricter control' (Reich, 1982, p. 176), which is what happened to Perls when he fled to the Netherlands in 1933 – he was obliged to enter yet another control analysis, initially with August Watermann, but then, very quickly, with Karl Landauer who had also fled Germany by this time. In the intervening years, Landauer had become a personal and influential friend to both Fritz and Laura. Tragically, he was to perish of starvation in Bergen-Belsen in 1945 (Bocian is shortly to publish a monograph of Landauer, including his personal biography and significance to the development of Gestalt psychotherapy).

These were the seven years in which Fritz Perls felt he had been 'infected' by psychoanalysis (Perls, F., 1973, p. 205). It is clear that Perls was in great need of help, and that he was suffering.

Wounding disappointments

In the Introduction to *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (first published in America in 1969) Perls attacks psychoanalysis in the crudest way (perhaps one of the worst manifestations of his 'vindictiveness' (Perls, F., 1992a)):

'It took us a long time to debunk the whole Freudian crap ... At least the damage we suffered under psychoanalysis does little to the patient except for making him deader and deader.' (ibid.)

This is typical of Perls during his Esalen years and, in my opinion, deeply damaging to those of us who came later. One of my own struggles across the years is this persistent sense of disdain, if not contempt, for thinking, characterised by Perls as 'mind fucking' or some such derogatory attribution. It is all the more difficult to understand in the light of his own remarks in the Preface to the 1945 Knox Edition of *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*:

'At present there are many "Psychologies", and every school is, at least in part, right. But, alas, every school is also righteous. The tolerant professor of psychology in most cases takes the different schools out of their respective pigeon holes, discusses them, shows his preference for one or two of them, but how little he does towards their integration.' (Perls, F., 1992c)

The mote in Perls's own eye is plain to see.

I am not the only one to object to Perls's casual dismissal of his intellectual forebears. Isadore From, pupil of Fritz and Laura Perls, founder member of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy and long-time teacher at the Cleveland Gestalt Institute clearly valued those who had come before him. In another important paper I read just before my qualifying exams, Bertram Müller acknowledges the debt owed to the unassuming figure of Isadore From, again alerting me to an intellectual heritage that I had absolutely no knowledge of at the time:

'Asked whether a room at the Cleveland Gestalt Institute could be named after him, Isadore consented on condition that portraits of Freud, Rank and Reich hang in that room. (From, 1985) In the Gestalt circles of the seventies, this was a most unusual kind of gesture.' (Müller, 1995).

What is going on here? Why is Freud so disparaged? Why was Perls, with only months to live, still so painfully aware of Freud's long shadow?

Perls met Freud only once, in Vienna, following the International Psychoanalytic Congress of 1936 in Marienbad (in what was then Czechoslovakia). Living in South Africa at the time, Perls describes how he had planned to fly the nearly 6,000 miles across Africa in his own plane, and deliver a 'Freud-transcending paper' (Perls, F., 1992a). In the end, he was outbid and unable to purchase the plane he had his eye on (that he could afford to buy a small plane is noteworthy in its own right). He went instead by ship. He accepts, later in his autobiography, that he was in his 'exhibitionistic period' (ibid.), as if this explains very much at all.

Perls was presenting a paper titled *Oral Resistances* based upon research work done by Laura Perls in Berlin following the birth of their first child, Renata (Perls, L., 1982). The paper was roundly dismissed; Laura later noted: 'Most people didn't understand it. It was more Reichian, and Reich was already suspect' (Gaines, 1979, p. 30); in fact, by 1936, Reich had already spent three years in the wilderness having been stripped of his membership of the International Psychoanalytic Association.

Perls's meeting with Freud following the conference lasted a few minutes at most. He was left feeling 'shocked and disappointed' (Perls, F., 1992a.).

In 1936, Freud was eighty years old (Perls was 43) and suffering with advanced cancer of the jawbone and watching his beloved psychoanalysis buckle under the repressions of the NSDAP (three years earlier, in May 1933, Freud's books were among the 25,000 volumes burned in Opernplatz in Berlin). Freud would have been preoccupied for other reasons too; in this Congress the American Psychoanalytic Association tabled a motion that announced their intention to '... veto any resolution that in any way addressed American issues' (Kurzweil, p. 53). This was the thin end of the wedge regarding the whole matter of whether American non-doctors could practice as psychoanalysts (*The Question of Lay Analysis* (Freud, 1926)).

In March 1938, Hitler's armies marched into Austria on the premise of bringing German-speaking peoples under his so-called 'Greater Germanic Reich' – the *Anschluss Österreichs*. Days later, Freud's apartment and publishing house were raided and his daughter Anna arrested and questioned. In June that same year, and just in time, Freud fled Vienna for London with his wife Martha and Anna. He died on the 23rd of September 1939 aged 83, a likely doctor-assisted suicide, just weeks after the declaration of war with Germany.

By this time Fritz and Laura had had a second child, Stephen, who would have been coming up to his first birthday. Laura describes Fritz's reaction to her second pregnancy as 'our first really serious disagreement' (Gaines, 1979, p. 23). He was against the burden he felt caring for a second child would bring (she had already had an abortion in the Netherlands prior to leaving for South Africa which she described as 'traumatic' and refused to have another (*ibid.*, p. 23). When Stephen was born he was initially 'reconciled to the child' (*ibid.*) but didn't have much to do with him, '...it was a woman's job' (*ibid.*).

Perls had experienced a further disappointment in Marienbad: Reich had been in attendance and '...hardly recognised me. He sat there for long intervals, staring and brooding' (Perls, F., 1992a). Perls was away from South Africa for three months. On his return Laura describes how he '... had completely lost interest in the children and was just involved in his own work' (Gaines, 1979, p. 23).

Whatever else it was, this was a crisis of fatherhood, and the particular crisis was of the relations between fathers and their sons.

Authority and the law

Perls is nothing if not candid about his early life in *In and Out the Garbage Pail*. His parents' relationship was often tempestuous and violent:

'My father and mother had many bitter fights, including physical fights, when he beat her and she grabbed his magnificent beard. He often called her a piece of furniture or a piece of shit.' (Perls, F., 1992a)

Perls was also beaten by his mother, with carpet beaters and other implements; seemingly blithe accounts of these incidents are given in *In and Out the Garbage Pail* (Perls, F., 1992a). Laura describes how Fritz would taunt his mother, driving her to distraction and provoking her hostility:

'He kept on doing that all his life in one way or another – annoying people until they went after him in some way and then he'd bang the door in their faces as if to say. "You can't do anything to me."' (Gaines, 1979, p. 11)

His resentment and disdain for his father is patent. His father was absent much of the time, off '...somewhere in Germany selling his wine and ideals, or he was out enjoying wine, women and song' (Perls, F., 1992a). His work entailed selling Palestinian wines on the road '... but of course, he was not a "travelling salesman", he was a "Chief Representative" of the Rothschild Company' (*ibid.*). Perls was keenly aware of his father's aggrandisement and 'pompous righteousness' and was offended, if not ashamed (*ibid.*).

But Perls is nevertheless curious about his father's life and work, as any son would be. He describes breaking into his father's 'secret room' (*ibid.*) as a young adolescent. He finds it in a shambles and full of books about his father's 'hobby and ambition' (*ibid.*) i.e. becoming a Grand Master of the Freemasons. He describes how, failing to make Grand Master of established lodges, his father went on to create his own: 'After a few years they usually blew up and he founded a new one as an audience for his performance and long speeches about ideals' (*ibid.*) – is this the source of his hatred of the 'wisdomshitter'? (Perls, F., 1992, p. 6).

This is exactly what Laura describes Fritz doing: 'He would start an institute somewhere with a whole group of trainees and stay there for a while and then go to

another place and start another one and another one' (Gaines, 1979, p. 10). Jim Simkin comments similarly: 'Fritz abandoned the Gestalt Institute in New York about '55 to Laura and the two Pauls, Goodman and Weisz. He got restless and went to Ohio and did something there. Then he went to Florida and started something there' (ibid., p. 40).

Others could see what Perls was oblivious of; here again, Laura Perls:

'Fritz hated his father. They were not on speaking terms when Fritz was growing up ... But when I once said, "You know, you are in many ways like your father," he got very mad. Somehow though, he mellowed. Years later he told me, "You know, I think in many ways I am like my father" – as if he had just discovered it!' (Gaines, 1979, pp. 9-10).

This is the blindness of his entirely inevitable identification with his hated father, something that he had very clear theoretical opinions about: 'We don't introject the *love* object. We take in the person who is *in control*. This often is a *hate* object' (Perls, F., 1992a).

The events surrounding Perls's relationship with his distant cousin, Lucy, the reason for his seeking psychoanalysis in the first place, are worth mentioning here (he devotes over two pages to the subject in *In and Out the Garbage Pail*).

Perls met her in hospital where she'd had surgery to remove a kidney. It is difficult to determine how old he was at the time, but I'm guessing he was somewhere in his late twenties (she is described as being married with children, so somewhat older). He had been asked to visit her by Lucy's mother who was a friend and neighbour of his own mother. He was entranced by Lucy '...a beautiful blond' and typical of women he idealised: 'One of those I liked to put on pedestals and venerate as goddesses' (Perls, F., 1992a). After just ten minutes by her bedside he describes how 'My initial awkwardness melted quickly under her passionate, operation-forgetting kisses. I was gladly hooked' (ibid.).

Some time later, Lucy told him that at the age of thirteen she had been sexually abused by Herman Staub, Perls's maternal uncle. Staub was a figure of renown, a famous jurist and legal authority whose commentary on the German commercial code is still in use today. Staub's 'façade of respectability' (ibid.) was an affront to Perls, much like his father's presumptuous

self-appointed status as 'Chief Representative of the Rothschild Company' (ibid.). In his analysis with Reich, Reich had delivered the interpretation that he was Staub's son, an idea that Perls says '...appealed to my vanity and never reached conviction' (ibid.).

Perls goes on to make a revealing comment about the significance of Lucy's disclosure and his sexually 'reckless' explorations with her:

'...the image of the secret life of Hermann Staub added a license, nearly a demand, for following his footsteps – if not in law, then in his anti-law doings, whether they were real or Lucy's imagination.' (ibid.)

What is he saying here? What does he feel authorised to emulate? At the top of the page in which this material appears he describes feeling, as he is writing, 'a confusion, similar to then' (ibid.). Perls 'tore' himself away from Lucy in 1926, aged 33, after which she 'ceased to exist' for him (ibid.). Tragically, we learn that she later died a morphine addict.

Throughout Gaines's collection of first-hand accounts there are repeated references to Perls needing to challenge male colleagues, seemingly coming to a head in his Esalen years. The men in these accounts tend to frame his aggressive competitiveness as a kind of tough love; the fact that several speak of feeling destroyed and crushed by him seems incidental. In Esalen, Perls had access to a willing procession of truth-seekers typical of the sixties counterculture scene in California, and enjoyed a level of sexual freedom which, by today's standards, would be entirely frowned upon or censured.

A detailed account given by Greg Davidson seems pertinent here. Davidson was a highly-qualified electronics engineer and, at the time, acting as Perls's assistant following a nine-month therapy programme he had attended at Esalen. He was helping Perls get his work properly video recorded 'for posterity' (Gaines, 1979, pp. 281-287). In his intimate working situation with Perls, Davidson recognised that he also wanted Perls's love – '...I wanted more. I wanted to be really loved by him' (ibid. p. 282). Perls '...talked to me as if he saw me as a son, yet I felt that he never really saw me as a person' (ibid., p. 281).

In Davidson's account, Perls reacts to his taking 'Marcia' (a Ferrari-driving, Tiger-Moth-flying 24-year-old that Perls had started a relationship with) off to Los Angeles to buy new equipment to supplement the

'Mickey Mouse' recording kit that Perls was trying to work with (ibid., p. 282). On his return from LA four days later, Perls summarily fires Davidson, and stops him retrieving his equipment which he was forced to leave behind. Davidson explicitly links this with his having taken Marcia with him, and staying a day longer than planned. He was angry about his treatment and decided to take Perls to the Monterey Small Claims Court.

Weeks later whilst sitting chatting to friends and visitors at The Lodge back in Esalen, Davidson sees Perls at his office window opening his post. Suddenly, Perls is in front of him, enraged; he 'whollops' Davidson across the face in front of the assembled crowd. 'And he didn't finish with one slap – he pummelled me' (ibid., pp. 284-285). Understandably, Davidson reacts strongly, pushing Perls up against a wall, at which point Perls threatens him: 'I'll get you, you son of a bitch' (ibid., p. 285). The penny then drops; Perls had received the court summons! A day later Davidson describes Perls racing 'his little Fiat' at him whilst he was walking along the road (ibid., p. 285). Perls's rage was evidently intense, and dangerous. Davidson decides not to return to Esalen and begins to regret having taken out the action; he becomes paranoid and fearful of what he has set in motion.

Come the court date, Davidson fully expected Perls not to attend, but attend he did:

'...the door opens and in walks Fritz. I could've died! And I'd never seen him dressed in a serge suit, shirt and tie, hair combed and neatly trimmed. Nor had anyone I know. He didn't have that wild look.' (ibid. p. 286)

During questioning by the judge, Perls 'wilts': 'He became like a church mouse, his voice got smaller and smaller. I wanted to quit right then' (ibid.). The judge eventually rules in Davidson's favour, instructing Perls to pay \$43 and \$6 costs, and to return Davidson's property. Davidson is clearly rueful seeing Perls reduced in such a fashion:

'Fritz really felt like a victim, you could see it in the way he walked out of court. I really felt shitty about it, and I didn't ever expect to see him, or any money from him' (ibid., p. 287)

However, Perls did pay up, and he did return his equipment.

Davidson invoked the law to protect himself and his interests, obliging Perls to face the music. In so doing it seems that Davidson also suffered, feeling that he too had transgressed in some way. Whether you see this as some kind of Freudian Oedipal enactment on the part of both parties, or 'just' a case of restorative justice, clearly Perls is unused to being taken to task in this way, suffering the inevitable humiliation of being held to account for his unreasonable behaviour. That it *is* an enactment seems to me undeniable. Whether the judge represents an ultimate paternal authority, or perhaps too the embodiment of a *legitimate* authority (in distinction to whatever Perls has identified with in the compromised authority of his maternal uncle, Hermann Staub), the effect for Davidson is unexpected, and for both men, an object lesson in accountability.

Somewhat predictably, it is the women in Perls's orbit who I feel have more interesting things to say about him. Laura certainly didn't hold back in her interviews with Gaines, and several others comment on his male chauvinism and domestic idleness. But it is Virginia Satir, a renowned and respected family systems therapist who articulates what I believe is more fundamental:

'I often thought that he was a great man who really never felt loved by another man. He was always harder on men than on women; he was very hard on men. He'd cut them off at the ankles, no question about it – as though to say, the things I most hate in myself, I hate in you. He longed for recognition from a man. There was no man who ever gave him anything. The thing that kept coming through was an expectation that he wouldn't be understood.'

(Gaines, 1979, p. 269)

It is entirely plausible to imagine that this is what Perls was seeking from Freud when he made the journey from South Africa to Czechoslovakia in 1936. Freud's 'suffering and courage' are what inspired Perls, and he was awed by the extent to which Freud was exploring new psychological frontiers 'practically all alone' (Perls, 1992a). He desperately wanted to talk with Freud 'man to man'. But I can't help feeling that somewhere there was also a small lonely boy who wanted to confide in his father, and talk about important things, and feel protected, and sheltered, and safe.

Note

In Part Two, the author will explore Perls's relationship to dependency and autonomy in the light of the severe traumas of his wartime experiences in the trenches during WWI, and the losses of close family members during the Nazi genocide just a few decades later. He concludes by reflecting upon Perls's need to break away from Freud and psychoanalysis, and, in the manner of his doing that, the impact on those of us who came later and who remain curious about our theoretical and intellectual heritage.

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Gestalt therapy as ‘applied phenomenology’: reflections on developments within the phenomenological tradition and how this may inform contemporary Gestalt practice

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Abstract

Gestalt therapy, defined as an ‘applied phenomenology’, requires us to acknowledge that phenomenology is complex, containing within it different starting points and perspectives that shift and change over time. One’s stance is usually influenced or informed by the philosophical view integrated or introjected through training and practise. Adopting a critical and reflexive attitude towards this, by being knowledgeable of the nuances within the development of phenomenology and, in tandem, with Gestalt therapy, opens up a possibility to position oneself as trainee, therapist, teacher or supervisor, from a place that holds a wider perspective of the whole therapy experience. This self-reflexive paper, co-authored by a Gestalt therapist and a philosopher, proposes a position that respects the whole gestalt of the therapeutic situation that therapists themselves form part of, holding too, the potential to move in and out of the therapeutic relationship, facilitating extrinsic and intrinsic ongoing assessment, for an authentic, informed, richer and meaningful experience.

Keywords

phenomenology, Gestalt therapy, Husserl, Heidegger, intersubjectivity, relational, contact, dialogue

Background

In introducing the founding book *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, From and Miller boldly state ‘Gestalt therapy is applied phenomenology’ (cited in Perls, Hefferline & Goodman [PHG], 1951/1994, p. xxii). If one pauses to stay with these words and reflect on them, the meaning of this is extensive. There is general agreement that as ‘a phenomenological-existential therapy’ (Yontef, 1979, p. 3) Gestalt therapy is a therapeutic methodology that is ‘startlingly effective’ (GTI, 2022). Greenberg and Brownell summarise that ‘its view of people working at the boundary to solve problems and satisfy needs is a unique perspective on human functioning’ and that this clearly makes it ‘a phenomenological therapy’ whereby ‘phenomenology is at its core’ (2015, p. 25). Furthermore, Bloom (2020, 2019), Frank (2016, 2003), Robine (2003), Philippson (2021, 2002) and Spagnuolo Lobb (2023), amongst others, have written about how

Gestalt theory and phenomenology relate, highlighting the relevance of this paper.

Both phenomenology and Gestalt therapy did not begin and end with their founders. Rather, even though not one and the same, both have emerged from a rich history of reflection and debate in an ongoing response to sociocultural, political and environmental shifts over the decades. They are not static or fixed in time. ‘Phenomenology’ is not one solid, clear tradition that can be copied, pasted and applied to practice. It is an interesting phenomenon in itself! Understanding this is central to how we may choose to apply the various concepts that constitute phenomenology into our practice as Gestalt therapists. It is basic to how we position ourselves as Gestalt therapists.

Trainees and supervisees often ask:

- Where does our focus lie?
- Do we zoom in on the relational part of the therapeutic process?
- Do we look at what is happening in me as therapist ‘separate’ to my client?
- Are my interventions rooted and emerging from the ‘us’, the ‘me in relation to you’, the ‘situation that we both form part of and find ourselves in’?
- Is transference happening between us, or from you to me and me to you?
- Can we even use ‘transference’ as a term in Gestalt if we are speaking of field theory, the in-between or the emerging situation?

Such questions – at times direct, other times underlying, subtle, distinct nuances in our focus, orientation, and approach – form part of the internal dialogue across training institutes, scholars, experts in the field, and literature sources. Today it has become difficult to separate or distinguish the existing fusion of ideas as belonging either to phenomenology or to Gestalt. During workshops and congresses Gestalt therapists use a *mélange* of terms that may be confusing to trainees, such as ‘staying with’, ‘being’, ‘bracketing’, ‘aesthetic of the situation’, ‘intentionality’, ‘manifestation’, ‘grace’, ‘authenticity’, ‘temporality’ and so on; words that may easily be found in core philosophy text. Indeed, Bloom invites us to reflect ‘on the thinking that is the philosophy we practice when we are psychotherapists’ (2020, p. 29).

While one may say that from the nineties onwards, it was important to move beyond the individualistic and anthropocentric paradigm towards a relational one that recognises the interconnected nature of the world (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2016; 2018), this paper emerges from concerns for the newer generation of trainees and therapists. Have we tipped the scale once again? Paul Barber very recently wrote a passionate article ‘with the intention of awakening practitioners to the forgotten treasures of Gestalt’. He writes: ‘it is a Phenomenological Research method in its own right ... it conducts Heuristic Inquiry into the nature of awareness and “being”’ (2023, p. 8).

Perhaps in our effort to advocate for a relational stance over the last two decades, this may have at times overshadowed the equal importance of the therapist’s unique subjective experience, knowledge, skills, spontaneity and creativity. Obviously, relational work cannot happen effectively unless the therapist has worked hard to attain a sense of autonomy and is able to have a subjective, clear sense of self (in the Gestalt sense) in the situation that they form part of, when this

is so required. Barber proposes that while we can still hold modern relational Gestalt as dear to us, we can still ‘retain the old school bite’ (2023, p. 15).

The present reflective-paper emerges from a dialogue between a Gestalt therapist and a philosopher, both interested in phenomenology and its application. While it is impossible to expand further on all concepts presented here, it seeks to invite trainees and therapists to reflect more on what is informing their positioning during therapy. It is based on the belief that being knowledgeable and aware of the narrative of Gestalt and phenomenology – the differences, common ground, and historical shifts in the discourse – may support informed practice in response to emerging therapeutic situations.

Orienting oneself with different phenomenological positions

Both phenomenology and Gestalt psychotherapy were ‘born’ during the first half of the twentieth century, emerging from a time that today symbolises the explosive development of science and technology blended with the effects and aftermath of war (Wulf, 1996). Gestalt during the sixties and seventies was characterised by an approach oriented towards autonomy, self-growth, individuation and self-actualisation, with interventions focusing on supporting ego function, taking risks, and moving in a way that is true to self. ‘Self’, while taken as part of the wider field, was the main point of reference, furthered and emphasised by Fritz Perls. Upon analysing phenomenology literature, it may be argued that this echoes a Husserlian positioning, whereby ‘ego’ or ‘self-consciousness’ was considered to be the starting point and ultimately the place from which meaning can be arrived at.

While foreground to Gestalt during those years, other founders including Paul Goodman, Lore Perls, Isadore From and Erv and Miriam Polster emphasised a relational and humanistic approach to therapy. Furthermore, over the last two decades Gestalt therapy authors have shifted towards emphasising over and over the importance of a relational stance, whereby *field* also defines who we are and who we become – reflecting later phenomenological literature influenced by Heidegger and by later philosophers such as Sartre, Buber, Levinas and Derrida amongst others. Authenticity, genuineness, care, being, the aesthetic, relationality and reciprocity have been brought to the

fore, whereby in contrast to a Husserlian stance, *the 'I' emerges from a background of possibilities through relating.*

So, in this light, how do we position ourselves in practice? Orienting oneself with main phenomenology arguments traced over the years will avoid the potential risk of adopting certain terminology as introjects rather than as well-digested and formulated concepts. It will also avoid the risk of over-simplifying and reducing the complexities within phenomenology and consequently adopting them as terms in Gestalt without fully comprehending their meaning. The next section offers an abbreviated understanding of some concepts that are core to phenomenology and Gestalt with the hope of providing some light in the woods.

Husserl's starting point: transcendental ego

Husserl was influenced by Descartes, Leibniz, Hume and Kant's works (Beyer, 2022; Mertens, 2019), attended Wilhelm Wundt's lectures, and was a student of Brentano (Beyer, 2022). In the original conception of phenomenology, he threw the spotlight beyond the individual subject and beyond the dualistic Cartesian mind-body discussion, introducing the idea of '*intersubjective* experience' that happens between human beings. The phenomenological movement can possibly be best understood 'as an attempt to restore the unity of subject and object' (From & Miller, 1994, p. xxi).

Husserl brought forward a curiosity about the world as experienced – grounded in the belief that experience is inherently intersubjective and thus, not limited to the cognitive or emotional self. He writes about the relationship between the '*act*' and '*object*' in an intentional experience¹. From Husserl's perspective, the 'world', 'my world' in a way, reveals itself through awareness, whereby 'I was already given, already there for myself continually ... with an open infinite horizon of still undiscovered *internal features of my own*' (Husserl, 1931, p. 101). 'World' is understood thus by Husserl as a phenomenon that designates the relations or references between them, akin to the Gestalt concept of 'field'. While 'world' is constituted through this intersubjective relating, Husserl's main concern consistently remains on the 'transcendental ego', which is the sole starting point and ground for the foundation and constitution of all meaning. From this stance, if reduced and taken to an extreme, one could claim that 'ego' (in the Husserlian sense) literally brings the 'world' into existence.

'Static analysis' in examining an experience

Husserl speaks about an unfolding that happens through this intersubjective relating whereby, as an 'object' emerges, if attended to closely, grasped and articulated, it becomes clear and defined, supporting our energy or intuition towards an intended and directed movement. Intentionality² and direction can be traced and followed until the full expression of the experience exists in and of itself. The world we experience emerges from this attending-to. Here are his words:

'If a concrete object **stands out for us in experience** ... and **our attentively grasping regard** then becomes **directed** to it ... it becomes a determined object ... in the continuation of the experience in the form of determining experience, which at first **unfolds** only what is included in the object itself: a pure explication. In its articulated synthetic course ... this pure *explication* unfolds in a concatenation [a chain] of particular intuitions ... the "internal" determinations. These present themselves originaliter as determinations *in* which **it ... is what it is** and, moreover, **exists in itself, "in and of itself"**'

[Bold added to emphasise terms and concepts also used in Gestalt therapy]
(Husserl, 1931, p. 101)

While phenomenology and Gestalt therapy are not one and the same, their shared theoretical interests and foundational assumptions makes their clear demarcation impossible to effectuate. Reading through Husserl's words and papers, such as the quotes included here, one is easily reminded of excerpts in the founding text by PHG including figure-ground, the emergence of a figure, figure formation, intentionality, directionality, mobilisation, full contact and ego function (1951, p. 403). Husserl writes: 'any existent ... is a sense in and arising from my intentional life, becoming clarified and uncovered for me in consequence of my life's constitutive synthesis' (Husserl, 1931, p. 91). In simpler words, *what we experience is constituted by consciousness*. Translated to Gestalt, we attend to and focus on *processes of awareness and contacting*, more than on the *content* within the relating experience. Husserl further elaborates on this:

'It is a matter of "*static analysis*" ... examining the experience itself and uncovering intentionally the

manner in which it bestows sense, the manner in which it can occur as experience ... with an explicable essence of *its own*"
(Husserl, 1931, p. 106)

Echoing the idea of 'static analysis' and acknowledging 'what it is' in the above quote, Gestalt therapy also holds the idea of 'staying with' and the belief that, paradoxically, by doing so through attentive awareness, something new emerges and, new meaning manifests itself (Beisser, 1970). This is explained by Erv Polster during an interview:

'One thing I got from Perls is the power of simple continuity; if we stay with somebody step-by-step, and heighten their awareness so that there is an accumulation of vitality, that leads toward very strong and revealing experiences'
(Yalom & Wyatt, 2004)

Phenomenology, in fact, holds this concept as central. One may consider Husserl's words 'static analysis' as useful in informing what Gestalt therapists understand by the terms *staying with*, *creative indifference* and *middle mode*; positions that are both active and passive at the same time. It is 'the point of indifferentiation' whereby, from this positioning 'differences dissolve' becoming a fertile void, the zero point (Stevenson, 2004) that remains open to emergence and integration of the 'entire diversity of all possible phenomena' (Frambach, 2003).

Such an examination opens one to various viewpoints within the same space and time, akin to cubist art such as Picasso's and Braque's works. Husserl emphasises that 'the appearances which I have from my standpoint (place of my physical body space), I cannot have from another standpoint' and that thus, 'two systems of appearances are not compatible with one another' unless I acknowledge or 'admit an unknown distinction between the two'. In addition to various 'appearances' from my standpoint are the complexities that emerge between more than one person. Strasser explains that for Husserl, 'your consciousness is for my consciousness absolutely external being and mine is the same for you' (1975, p. 2). In other words, as Smith explains, 'your consciousness cannot be reduced to mine, or mine to yours. Each individual consciousness, therefore, is "external" to every other' (2008, p. 317). Both are inherently distinct from each other.

What happens then, when two people meet and two worlds collide? When therapist and client sit together? How then do we understand, influence, pick up emotions, and respond to each other?

Empathy, tracking intersubjective experiences and epoché

Husserl is a complex thinker, notorious for constantly beginning phenomenology afresh throughout his career. In Husserl's later writing a shift occurs whereby he discusses something more original than each individual, each monad, that is held within temporal horizons and time modalities of past, present and future. In Gestalt therapy, Dan Bloom touches on this in his workshops bringing forth the themes of time and temporality. Husserl's idea is that we are directed to one another and 'are able to encounter one another spiritually'. Yet he retains the idea that the 'connection of independent essences' does not cancel the independence of the connection (Husserl in Strasser, 1975, p. 5)³. This leads us to empathy.

Husserl explains that one can intuit another person through 'pairing' (connecting through similarities) and 'appresentation' (I bring something into presence and make it 'co-present') that are then complemented by 'empathy', where 'I literally feel myself into the other person and ... I intuit that there is indeed a sphere of ownness there' (Lewis & Staehler, 2010, p. 52). Husserl argues that we can constitute a world that can be used and shared with others, which he calls *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) (Husserl, 1936, pp. 106-108). Lifeworld exists as the pre-reflective everyday world. It is the background of all knowledge in lived experience.

To avoid confusion, whilst 'lifeworld' has been used as a term in some Gestalt texts, it is important to distinguish between Gestalt and phenomenology on the following point. For Husserl, a person is able to understand the experiences of another by drawing on their own past experiences and using them as a point of reference. McIntyre explains this clearly: 'I cannot directly experience the sensations and feelings of the other as I experience my own; I can only *empathically* apperceive them as present in the other'. Husserl emphasises that it is this that makes 'the *other* truly "other" to me and, in recognition of it, I constitute the other as radically "other" – as another subject, whose experiences *are distinct* from my own'. Through this intersubjective relating, 'I now constitute the things that I experience as belonging to the same world that others experience, each of us from her or his own unique perspective' (2012, pp. 7-8).

Husserl's point of view proposes that there is always, one may say, a separateness between individuals, whereby I can understand the other through associations with my own experiences, and not by fully merging with the other's emotions, feelings or experiences that become the same experience for me too. Clearly, for Husserl, the constitution of the ego comes first, while connection to the other is only possible afterwards (while still remaining distinct experiences). While this is phenomenology, this part is not fully consistent with Gestalt therapy. Contemporary Gestalt psychotherapy, like contemporary phenomenology, has developed further and moved beyond Husserl's thinking.

From a purely Husserlian stance, the existence of others cannot be accessed as such, but can only be inferred through empathy. Several excerpts from his texts in fact easily remind one of classical psychology, particularly the psychodynamic concept of transference and counter-transference located in the individual, speaking of a unity of 'reciprocal affecting and being affected' (Strasser, 1975, p. 5). This was challenged over time both in phenomenology and Gestalt therapy. White points out that 'the concept of transference has its roots in a mechanistic and individualistic view of the person which is no longer sufficient, useful or necessary to the psychotherapeutic task ... conceived as a dynamic, relational and phenomenological perspective' (2008, p. 15).

Heidegger's starting point: 'Dasein' being-in-the-world

In relation to this, in a very reduced manner, one may say that the major difference between Husserl and Heidegger's later work and views, is that their starting point of phenomenological experience differs. Husserl begins with the individual's relationship with oneself and then moves from there to 'others' (Strasser, 1975, p. 1). In contrast, Heidegger's views are that the totality of surroundings constitute us as individuals. It is through 'interactions, through the encountering of others' (1927/2011, p. 154) that our perceptions, experiences and meaning derive. If we keep the whole 'constantly in view ... phenomena will be made to stand out' (1927/2011, p. 66) It is important for Gestalt therapists to be aware of this difference since many times it is the source of confusion in terms of the therapeutic stance one adopts.

Heidegger, speaks of 'thrownness' and of 'being-with'. Both of these are indicative of the fact that the disclosure of *being* is, for Heidegger, epochal or

historical, and thus also in some sense always already intersubjective. It does not emerge as a result of the encounter (or intersubjective meeting), but rather already exists *a priori* to that encounter – and is, in a way, an expression of it. According to Heidegger, we encounter Others in the world in which our daily life occurs. More precisely, 'we encounter others in a worldly situation, and our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by the situation at hand' (Gurwitsch, 1979, pp. 35-36, 95, 106). Heidegger is inclined towards an *a priori relatedness* that, through lived-experiences, defines who we are and who we become if we authentically immerse in that encounter.

With this in mind, do we therapists focus on the me and the you, the self and the other? Or do we attend to the worldly situation that already exists within that encounter – and hence our shared world (or what some Gestalt therapists call: 'the in-between')? Can we even separate the me and the you? This reminds us too of the hyphen between 'organism-environment' in Gestalt field theory, the idea that the whole is other than the sum of its parts, and that Gestalt always had an inherent relational ground to it.

Heidegger rejected the notion of the human being/subject as a spectator, emphasising that both are inseparable. 'Being' is thus, accounts of ordinary everyday existence (Heidegger, 1927, p. 38) where being-in-the-world is understood as embeddedness and inseparability from the world. Expanded upon in *Being and Time* (1927), meaning is not accessed by withdrawing from one's natural world through bracketing by reflecting *on* experiences of that world, but rather is attained through *immersion* in the world. In other words, we genuinely have to experience things to derive meaning.

This is where the point of departure lies. With this position, Heidegger rejects Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction and his view of the transcendental ego (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar & Dowling, 2016). From Heidegger's view, it is within the context of 'our being is being-in-the-world' that intersubjectivity happens, whereby 'a subject is never given without a world and without others' (Zahavi, 2001, p. 124). So, we do not study our activities by bracketing the world, rather we make sense of our activities and their meaning by looking to our contextual relations in the world.

Fully and authentically being immersed in the experience: being is world

All this led Heidegger to ‘rethink the very method of phenomenology’ where, as mentioned earlier, his most basic gesture is to ‘refuse bracketing of the world’ (Lewis & Stahler, 2010, p. 69) in an attempt to return ever more fully to the experience of *living* in our ‘everyday attitude’ (Lewis & Stahler, 2010, p. 72). This, through *authentic being-in-the-world*. Heidegger, differing from Husserl, defines ‘world’ as the context that makes it possible for an individual thing to appear as what it is. Hence, where being *is* world – and where some aspects remain hidden to us, essentially mysterious to us.

At the extreme of Heidegger’s stance is the idea ‘that I exist in the world first and foremost as a being of the world from which I cannot extricate myself very easily’ (Thompson, 2005, p. 9), resonating with the Gestalt concept of organism-environment. This pinpoints the question of whether the solution to the traditional problem of ‘other minds’ requires an emphasis on or rather an elimination of the difference between self and other (Zahavi, 2001, 2012; Zahavi & Salice, 2017).

Yet eliminating the differences suggests *confluence*. It also suggests that we have little input or influence on ‘world’. What about concepts to do with autonomy, individuation, growth? Would this mean that ‘I’ am simply an expression of ‘world’? It is more than fine to allow ourselves to get lost in the depths of our client’s seas, to immerse fully in the situational experience, yet it is also important to get back on solid land. In an interesting paper on ‘confluence’ Philippon tackles this very question. He writes:

‘The only non-confluent way to do this is by allowing a movement between Id, Ego and Personality functioning, paradoxically involving confluence at each step ... In order not to be confluent with the client, I need to be able to move between the three kinds of confluence that belong to the self functions ... Each of these is important at times in the therapy, but the most important thing is that they are all available. Otherwise, I am stuck in Id-confluence, not present as an other to the client ... It is in the meeting of these three kinds of confluence that we can be non-confluent!’
(Philippon, 2021, p. 4)

Naively adopting Heidegger’s ideas, or fully embracing a ‘being-with’ relational position and forgetting our distinct individual subjective experience and ground, risks confluence, reduces spontaneity and risks complacency. It feels incompatible with the Gestalt concept of creative adjustment. It risks a blurring of differences and reduces a sense of responsibility for one’s actions and choices. Gestalt therapy is clear that contacting the lifeworld at the boundary of self and ‘other’ provides us with infinite possibilities of changing our selves and our ‘world’. Otherwise, what would the whole aim of therapy be if not to result in some form of change or impact on the world we form part of? If not necessarily change of a situation or condition, change in one’s experience and navigation of that situation or condition?

Furthering phenomenology: body, embodiment and contact

Phenomenology did not stop with Husserl and Heidegger. Further developed by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and de Beauvoir, the role of the body in human experience was also emphasised, influenced too by emerging experimental psychology that focused on sensation. This was happening at the same time that the concept of nonverbal behaviour was emphasised by Max Reinhard, expressionists began experimenting with theatre, and psychodrama was founded by Moreno – all influential on Fritz Perls’s ideas.

During this time, philosophy, psychology and other branches of thinking and application brought forth an existential form of phenomenology that emphasised the role of attention, perception and the body in the phenomenal field. Merleau-Ponty was the person to speak about the embodied self, including the experience, spatiality and motility of the body (Smith, 2018). He writes:

‘Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because ... the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world’
(Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 408).

Thus, there is no clear separation between body and mind, but rather ‘a unity of behaviour that expresses intentionality and meaning of this conduct’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). As Gallagher and Zahavi point out in

discussing Merleau Ponty's work, the body becomes characterised 'as subject, as experiencer, as agent' while at the same time the body also 'structures our experience' (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008).

Gestalt therapy too integrates reflections on 'body', the senses, the aesthetic of the situation, and how this is integral to therapy and cannot be separated from it. The concept of 'embodiment' has been expanded upon by several, including James Kepner and Ruella Frank. We experience our world through our senses, through our body. We experience our 'edge', who we are, how we extend and approximate towards others, through our body.

Ruella Frank writes that 'the self is fluid and relational ... One adjusts *along with an other* and creates a whole experience'. She describes the *self* as not a 'thing' that exists as independent of the other nor does it exist a priori to the relationship. The self is process, coming into being through contactful experiences of creating and adjusting (2003, p. 182). Frank proposes six fundamental movements which she describes as 'the motion of self': yielding with; pushing against; reaching for; grasping onto; pulling toward; and releasing from the other. Miller, in conversation with Frank, describes these movements as 'the *force field* of contacting that shape, the background from which a kinaesthetic resonating sense-of-self emerges' (Frank, 2016).

This ties with the existentialist ideas of Gabriel Marcel that the *self* defines itself through *contact* with others and reminds one also of Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship. This furthers the 'being-with' of Heidegger towards a 'being-with' of care for others. For Buber, *being* is also fundamentally twofold: there is no I without a 'Thou' or 'It'.

'The central concept of Gestalt therapy is the self as a system of contacts. Here the self in the middle mode, both active and passive, is consistent with Buber's understanding'
(Wulf, 1996).

In practice, this means that 'in process-oriented therapy, we therapists investigate the process of adjusting and analysing how our clients experience themselves within the relational field' (Frank, 2003, p. 182).

Positioning oneself phenomenologically as a Gestalt therapist or researcher

Where does this leave us in practice? As therapists, are we inclined towards a starting point that is more interpersonal, subjective, in the sense of experiencing the lifeworld from an individual, subjective place? Or interactional; one that looks more at what already exists relationally within and emerges through that encounter? How do we inform ourselves of what needs to happen next? As we have seen, within the same generic branch of 'phenomenology' lies a polarity (or multi-polarities!) in possible positions that one may choose to attend to and intervene from.

Phenomenology 'underwent a radical transformation' after Husserl's initial writings and today we acknowledge that self-enclosed monad and purely individualistic positioning has been superseded by developments in phenomenological philosophy radically transforming the entire enterprise (Zahavi, 2019, p. 35). Remaining aware of this would prevent a loose use of specific terms in Gestalt, and ensure that they are rooted firmly in the specific philosophical arguments that they emerge from, in terms of *zeitgeist*, authorship and concept and how this relates to what is therapeutically required at that point in time.

'Attending more closely to the values underpinning psychotherapy theory and critically examining the philosophical premises on which our theory is based, we might inform and evolve our methods and practices' to take more seriously the wider field that we form part of (Evans, 2007, p. 191). Today, Gestalt holds within it this complex generative mix. The different positions that therapists may adopt go back in time and, very interestingly, can also be traced in how PHG was co-authored, possibly inadvertently also contributing to the ensuing unfolding of different stances and positioning within the global Gestalt community. It is thus in our history and crystalised in our core founding text. As Georges Wollants points out: 'Regrettably, PHG admits of a double reading, in particular an interpersonal and an interactional interpretation. Part I of Theory puts forward an interactional, relational and situational view, while Part II, especially Chapter XIV-XV, argues for an intra-psycho, monoperosonal and decontextualised approach' whereby the latter 'deviates significantly from the interactional definition of the situation' (2012, p. xii).

While Wollants sees this as 'regrettable' since at a conceptual philosophical level both are unique stances that cannot be interchangeable, this paper

invites us to remain open to potential viewpoints that can be adopted while sitting with clients. In our practical application of therapy, the rich contribution of phenomenology philosophers over time are useful to consider in our work. While philosophers engage in strong arguments positioned firmly in one unique, interchangeable stance or another, Gestalt therapists have the freedom to shift positioning and move in and out of one stance to another, in response to emerging therapeutic situations – as long as this is always guided by a well-informed, clear understanding and appreciation of the different conceptual frames offered by Husserl, Heidegger and others who followed.

The ‘double reading’ in PHG may also be a real vivid expression of the dialogue and chiasms happening during the time in which it was authored. As Dodd points out, one cannot but view phenomenology material ‘without at times seeing it through the prism of subsequent history, not only of the destiny of the world, but of the fates of those who lived through the war’ including for example Husserl from a Jewish background and Heidegger acknowledging Hitler as the ‘Dasein of Germany’ (2019). The shifts in Husserl’s later work stand witness to the socio-political realities experienced during the war and were a form of response to ideologies rooted also in Heideggerian influences. Heidegger never apologised for his support of the Nazis and his Black Notebooks point to a strong anti-semitic position, making one seriously doubt whether the ‘being-with’ has anything to do with care within our human-to-human relationships – something which Levinas and Buber also respond to through their work, with Levinas expressing regret for his enthusiasm with Heidegger in his initial years (Steinfels, 1995). The effects of war also impacted the development of Gestalt theory and, possibly also, what it integrated, assimilated, left out or rejected over the years from phenomenology.

Husserl doubtlessly provided us with a clear method of following intersubjective experiences in the form of unfolding processes, whereby the ‘reduction of these processes serves to disentangle and examine our complex intersubjective lifeworld by trying to determine what exactly the Other contributes to it’ (Lewis & Staehler, 2010, p. 53). It offers us an opportunity to distinguish from our experiences in a way, what the ‘other’ is contributing to this shared meeting, while still being a part of that experience. Husserl offered possibilities, which we use today, that support a phenomenological stance of creative indifference when engaged in processes such as

ongoing assessment and diagnoses within the relational processes experienced in therapy, that we follow and observe when working with clients at the contact boundary. In a way, providing a possibility to distance ourselves, while still being fully in, and a part of, that process and encounter.

Several Gestalt authors have written about how one may adopt a phenomenological approach to the therapeutic encounter, of ‘holding an undifferentiated attitude’, leaving space for potential figures to emerge (Mann, 2010, p. 61) and one of active curiosity, using *epoché* whereby biases and assumptions are put aside through ‘bracketing’ while still being present together (Joyce & Sills, 2001, p. 16; Clarkson, 2004, p. 15). Yet it is noticeable that Mann also presents a different positioning in a later chapter, and Joyce and Sills amend text related to the idea of bracketing in future editions of the book, to a position that is inclined more towards simply *being*, reminiscent of later phenomenological concepts. Such serve to remind us to remain aware of what is background to the emerging figures/phenomena. In other words to attend to the field from which the therapeutic encounter emerges. As Smith writes: ‘We examine our own existence *in the activity of Dasein*’ of simply *being*, through practical experiential activities in which phenomenology reveals our situation in a context and in being-with-others (Smith, 2018). It reminds us that the therapy experience is one of constant discovery of self and world.

Furthermore, another example of different stances that therapists may consider emerges when considering Levinas and Buber’s works. Even though having very important differences, both Levinas and Buber value a position of ‘standing in front of each other’, supporting an experience of *being-with* one another. Fundamentally, Levinas views this in the form of a vertical relationship, bringing with it different ethics and responsibilities, and Buber from a horizontal place that still acknowledges the self in the me and the self in the you, while being together in that encounter. In ‘being-with’, the ‘I’ and the ‘thou’ are not *lost* in that encounter. While inclined more towards adopting a Buberian positioning within Gestalt therapy, Levinas’s theory too has ideas to offer to our practice, particularly in relation to ethical responsibility. One can never ignore that at the end of the day, while we are two humans sitting in front of each other, ultimately what frames that encounter is that one meets the other as ‘client’ the other as ‘therapist’; one holds the space while the other can rest and work within it; one pays

and the other earns a living from that session – clearly putting the two in a ‘vertical’ place.

The ideas proposed by Buber and Levinas serve to support a reflexive position of evaluation, assessment and diagnosis from a relational place of I-it, which at times may be experienced as vertical and one that requires reflection on who must assume responsibility within that encounter. This ‘I-it’ positioning allows for a framing of the potential relationship, experience and therapeutic space being created. It brings forth the establishing of boundaries and it supports the emergence of personality functions required to be more foreground in the experience of client and therapist. Once the nature of this relating is clear, it also invites a stance that remains open to the field and to what becomes manifest or figural during that supported and ‘framed’ encounter, holding potential for meaningful and rich experiences of immersion, I-thou moments and contact. It also supports a stance open to both intuition and intentionality (Marion, 2002) of the therapeutic process, attentive to ongoing diagnosis of both the extrinsic and intrinsic, both the content and the process (Roubal, Francesetti & Gecele, 2017).

Clearly, our very understanding of phenomenology too has multiple viewpoints that the therapist can remain open to within the same time and space. Perhaps we could consider the *fertile void* and *zero point* in terms of how we make sense of our phenomenological experience, and thus informed understanding, freeing us to choose which various stances we could intervene from.

Moreover, this may also serve as an anchor when we open ourselves to the complex depths of each other’s souls during the therapy process, when that ‘meeting’ happens, and when experiences of mutual heightened full contact are lived. It supports us, to recognise and be aware of experiences of confluence when these occur, and to find our *self*, including our ‘therapist-self’ or ‘client-self’ once again within this meeting. As easy as it is to become lost in each other, to lose ourselves in each other’s oceans, to feel one in both pain and beauty, suffering and joy, to feel like we are mirrors of each other, we need to remember that, at the end of the day, this is ‘me’ and this is ‘you’, one is ‘therapist’ and one is ‘client’ and one is ‘giving’ and the other ‘receiving’ a service, no matter how common our grounds feel at times. As Marion Young (1997) writes, always acknowledging the particularity and alterity of the other. A similar proposition by Gilbert & Evans suggests that both the close involvement – the ‘real meeting’ and the more objective, reflective stance

are crucial components of effective therapy. It is with careful attention to both that the effectiveness of therapy is enhanced (Gilberts & Evans, 2000, p. 18).

This paper thus proposes a position that embraces the complexities of phenomenology, by using all to enrich and inform interventions (whether in therapy or in research) from moment to moment. This is deemed more holistic and more in tune with Gestalt theory and practice. Failing to do so would be like putting blinkers onto our experience as therapists and as persons. A capacity to merge with and ‘lose oneself’ in an immersed experience, together with a capacity to step back and retain a sense of individuality – including a subjective viewpoint based on thinking, assessment and rigour that is informed by a clear conceptual framework, a sense of ‘I’ – and thus an aptitude to move in and out of ‘oneness’ to ‘separateness’ is core to therapeutic work. This supports both contactful therapeutic relating, while maintaining ongoing assessment and diagnosis of the emerging field, with the potential that is informed by both positions, to arrive at the next step forward in relation to the overall ‘map’ of what is required for that particular client and situation (Roubal, Francesetti & Gecele, 2017).

These nuances, different stances and ongoing dialogue within the Gestalt community is what elicits the beauty of Gestalt. As Yontef points out: ‘a parallel reduction of Gestalt therapy occurs when it is defined in a way that equates it with a particular style ... Of course, Gestalt therapy is a general philosophy and methodology and is applied in a great variety of modalities and settings’ (1988, p. 19). He asks: ‘How could Gestalt therapy be reduced to one of its styles?’ (ibid., p. 20). Petrůska Clarkson (2004) poetically sums this up:

‘Gestalt acknowledges the need for the living being to create disequilibrium, to strive towards evolutionary or creative change as well, and recognizes the de-structuring activity as a necessary part of creative adjustment or creative transformation. And this must apply to our theory as well (Woldt and Ingersoll, 1991). Individuals, trainings and theory of Gestalt will always go through cycles. In that lies our redemption and the way to be creatively always beginning again and again and again (1996).’

Erv Polster too points out: ‘I think every generation has its own view of its own problems. If you think you passed an old one, there’s a new one, and we’re

challenged to stay up-to-date with what matters' (Yalom & Wyatt, 2004). Continuing this dialogue is important and healthy as long as the core principles of Gestalt therapy remain clear and firmly rooted in the rich complex pool of wisdom offered to us through phenomenology and through our Gestalt ancestors.

Appendix: phenomenology as intricately interwoven into the Gestalt fabric

Based on Lewis and Staehler (2010), the following list is a tentative and very simplified overview that traces various core phenomenology-related themes as they were proposed over time. Each of the themes presented are normally associated with, but are not limited to, particular philosophers and are also concepts that can be traced in Gestalt therapy literature over the decades. It is an attempt to familiarise and simplify the development of the phenomenological tradition and its application over time:

- reduction to *consciousness*; being, directedness, intentionality, actualization, lifeworld, intersubjectivity, time and temporality (Husserl – concepts introduced through lectures and publications 1900-1930s)
- dialogue, I-it and the 'horizontal' I-thou (Buber – primary work essay *I and Thou* 1923)
- reduction to *Dasein* – the experience of being; authenticity, existence, being-in-the-world and temporality (Heidegger – primary work: *Being & Time* 1927)
- phenomenology and empirical sciences, intentionality, and existentialism (Sartre – initially drawn to Bergson *Time and Free Will* (1889); core work *Being and Nothingness* (1943))
- corporeality and the lived body, social and linguistic contexts, presence, here-and-now and ambiguity (Merleau-Ponty, core texts 1940s-1950s)
- 'vertical' *self* and *other* responsibility and ethics of the Other (Levinas, core text *Totality and Infinity*, 1961)
- textuality, presence and absence, deconstructing experience, the paradox of self-presence as 'opening' and as 'unclosable' in its totality (Derrida, core texts 1960s-1990s)
- art, aesthetics, religion and revelation; grounding of intentionality in affectivity (Henry, core texts 1960-2000)
- reduction to 'givenness' – phenomena appear unconditionally and show themselves from themselves at their own initiative; rendering oneself to the 'gift', manifestation; phenomena can be 'shown' according to the proportionality between *intuition* and *intentionality* (Marion, core texts 1990s-present)

All aforementioned themes are sprinkled within Gestalt texts and discourse, at times supported by thorough explanations and at other times used loosely. The above provides a link to possible philosophers and texts that one may refer to for further information from a philosophical perspective. Several concepts are integral to the conceptual framework from which Gestalt therapists draw from today, truly reflecting that Gestalt is an application of 'phenomenology'. Gestalt is 'applied phenomenology' – alive and dynamic! Just as rich debates and critique happen within the field of philosophy over time, the same happens within Gestalt over and over.

Notes

- 1) Referred to as the 'noetic-noematic correlation' which is the suturing relationship between the act side and the object side of an intentional relation. This is introduced in his work *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (Ideas)*.
- 2) Intentionality and intentional content, are specifically developed in his works *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas*.
- 3) The 'Cartesian Meditations', particularly the Fifth, Husserl's philosophy generally looks at the ground of experience in the moment that it is transformed through 'the interhuman bond shared with others' (Thompson, 2005, p. 5).

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The term 'atmosphere' is unhelpful to understand experience, agency, and field processes

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Abstract

While Gestalt therapy has always drawn on field theory, its origins were largely based on an individualistic paradigm. Since the later relational turn, Gestalt therapy has focussed on relationships between individuals. In this article I start from a recalibrated approach based on a field-centred perspective. Starting from the dictum that contact is the first reality, this article revisits field theory and tries to broaden our understanding of a field's forces, including affordances (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). Recently, a few practitioners of Gestalt therapy have espoused the term atmosphere, originating from the so-called 'New' Phenomenology. This article discusses the shortcomings of that proposal and delineates alternatives for a field-centred approach. Drawing on a session with a client, I point out that the term atmosphere is quite unhelpful for the understanding of transgenerational trauma, or situations in general for that matter. In my view, it is also incompatible with established Gestalt thinking and practice.

Keywords

contact, field theory, atmosphere, transgenerational transmission, Gestalt therapy, New Phenomenology

The founders of Gestalt therapy focussed their theory and practice on individual needs that become gestalt (Perls, 1947, p. 150), while they insisted that the 'definition of an organism is the definition of an organism/environment field' (PHG, 1951, p. 258). Gestalt therapy's later relational turn revised pathology 'in which mental disorders are defined as behaviour and not as a defect within the person' (Wollants, 2012, p. 37). While a field orientation has always been part of Gestalt therapy, its underlying paradigm remained individualistic. Lately, colleagues have proposed to update our field-oriented perspective (Francesetti et al., 2019, pp. 15–17). While I very much agree with this idea, I would like to suggest that we should:

- a) base our approach *consistently* on a field-centred paradigm replacing the old Occidental individualism entirely (Gutjahr, 2024) and
- b) avoid the pitfalls of atmospheres that are supposed to be able to seize individuals.

Atmospheres have been neglected for a long time, as Staemmler pointed out – and for good reasons in my view (2023, p. 59). Unlike Staemmler I do not believe

that atmosphere is a helpful term, especially not when it comes to the German post-war experience. Instead, I propose that atmospheres are processes of the field consisting of tangible and intangible constellations.

Contact is the first reality

'We speak of the organism contacting the environment, but it is the contact that is the simplest and first reality' (PHG, 1951, p. 227). While this still implies an organism–world–dichotomy, it points to the key aspect of any situation: People are *of* a field, not merely *in* it (Yontef, 1993, p. 297). While Gestalt therapists have always talked about holistic fields, the constituting poles, forces, vectors, and valences that in my view constitute a field's structure, have not always been considered. Lately Francesetti et al. have summarised the differences between personal and relational Gestalt perspectives and described their idea of a field-oriented perspective (2019, pp. 12–17). I agree that we should integrate field theory more thoroughly into our Gestalt approach. However, I propose to do that thoroughly and I very much doubt that neo-phenomenological terms such as atmosphere help this endeavour.

Gestalt therapy is a phenomenological approach – but it is not only that. While Gestalt therapists have rightly focussed on the experienced contact as the essential approach to successful therapy, wider aspects of our clients' fields cannot be ignored. Prior and parallel to what an individual perceives of their life-situation, tangible (i.e. physical) forces are also present. A consistent field view should take demands, limitations and opportunities into consideration as well as intangible conditions, including values, beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies and more. I agree with Wollants when he called this the id of the situation (2012, p. 95). Others have called that 'affordances' (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). Since before birth, humans exist in situations determined by factors beyond their control and with a history of their own. A child's living conditions include, for example, the family structure (whether it is traditional or not), how many and what siblings or ancestors live with them, and the financial situation of the family. There are also demands and expectations regarding a child's behaviour (e.g. gender identification, manners, beliefs). These factors in turn connect to broader aspects of the field: societal norms, and values as well as the presence of hunger or wars, the level of industrialisation, the availability of (government) welfare schemes and much more. So, a child's forming of their first-person-singular perspective is influenced by social conditions present before there is any awareness of them. We 'can reasonably suppose that the real world in some way constrains or limits and informs our *range* of viable interpretations' (Wheeler, 2000, p. 87). In *field-centred* terms: Our first-person-singular perspective is co-created by the forces, vectors, and valences of societal, regional, cultural, familial, and individual conditions, demands, limitations and opportunities as they are present in the child's environment. They foster or limit how and what we experience. In contact with real opportunities and risks, as children and later as adults we develop our *personal* reality.

Originally, the notion of fields 'appeared in the eighteenth century as a concept to help elucidate "action at a distance"' (Parlett, 1997, p. 18). Later, similar ideas were applied to social sciences. Laura Perls and Fritz Perls referenced the field theory of Kurt Lewin. Crucially Lewin does not see fields as mere metaphors for an individual's environment. For him fields are characterised by their structure and their processes of change. His is a dynamic model for analysing individual and social behaviour based on the description of relationships: 'The structure of the living space is the spatial relationship of its parts'

(Lewin, 1951/2012, pp. 284-292). His understanding of fields encompasses poles, forces, their correlations, structures, and processes. 'A totality of simultaneously existing facts which are conceived as mutually interdependent is called a field ... In that view psychology must regard the habitat, which includes the person and his environment, as a field' (ibid., p. 226). People are the perceiving poles sensing forces, their valences, strengths, and directions. This is what some have called a person's intentionalities (cf. Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013, p. 44).

Whereas Lewin prioritised non-psychological factors, such as climate, laws, organisations, etc., Gestalt therapists have focused on perceptions. In my view it is important to see both 'sides' of fields: they are not only perceptive experiences, but they also comprise physical conditions. Circumstances are given, handed down and subjectively stumbled upon. Hence, we can approach a field phenomenologically and/or scientifically. As Gestalt therapists, we continue to approach a client-field phenomenologically. Yet, 'it is the stubborn indifference of the world to my intention, the world's reluctance to submit to my will, that rebounds in the perception of the world as real' (Baumann, 2000, p. 17). What becomes gestalt for us, what we sense, know, believe, and in turn influence, is but a fraction of what is present in any given situation. What people know about realities, how they perceive, evaluate and act upon conditions is never an isolated individual process within an individual nor is it pre-determined by circumstances. Meaning is 'consensually determined reality' by people within a situation i.e. people who in turn are influenced by situational affordances (Hycner, Jacobs, 1995, p. 149). Shared situations (including therapy sessions) are both real and perceived. It is the here-and-now-for-next in which meaning is co-created (cf. Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013).

Whatever the specific characteristics of a given field, it is the entire habitat that should be at the centre of therapeutic attention. The behaviour of an individual is the function of their present field, 'which is in constant flux and in which different forces (vectors) act on the individual. This dynamic field is not only influenced by the actual present situation' (Frey: Preface in Lewin, 1951, p. 7). This seems to suggest differences between an individual on the one hand and surrounding environmental forces. Yet, I would like to stress that in my view the field is a structured whole. Its constituting poles, forces, valences etc. are not separate entities preexisting and then meeting *in* a field. They are integral elements *of* the field. In this sense 'the self-

function is a function of the field', not the other way around (PHG, 1951, p. 388).

Restrictions and opportunities are felt by individuals which in turn inform their views about their own past and future and their actions. In this context Spagnuolo Lobb speaks of the experiential ground of the field:

'Life is made up of events that take place in certain situations, perceived by each of us in a here-and-now, grounded on previous contacts and intended into the future: thoughts; neurobiological, emotional, and behavioural reactions; and climate and social conditions form an indivisible whole: the experiential ground of the field' (2018, p. 53).

This squares with Lewin's ideas. What seems particularly important to me is that the field:

- a) is a structured whole, not an assortment of parts,
- b) is clearly larger than what can be experienced here, now-and-for-next,
- c) is wider than a current I-thou contact,
- d) comprises more than just the figures that emerge at any given moment, and
- e) is not a mere subjective construct.

(1951, p. 69).

'Lewin starts from the basic assumption that behaviour is goal-oriented, and a function of the "habitat" given to the individual at a given time. The habitat comprises both the person themselves and their environment; it is divided into individual regions, each of which has a different calling character for the person (valences), and which are delimited from each other by barriers of varying strength' (Wenninger, 2000). Contact is the first reality *for* individuals. It is also the first reality of them as no one is ever detached from other people. Individuals do not encounter their environment-field as an afterthought, nor do fields have a life of their own. While scientifically *measurable* field forces such as geographical realities, environmental conditions, bodily affordances, social opportunities, or financial limitations do exist independent of their perception, psychological fields are meaningless without a person anchored in them: 'Fields cannot be spoken of properly as existing in themselves, in nature, apart from a co-constitutive human subjectivity, and it is this philosophical tenet that justifies Gestalt

therapy's reverence for first-person human experience' (McConville, 2001, p. 201).

A person's subjective impressions are not arbitrary, nor constructs rising from interior processes, nor mere reactions to exterior forces. Consequently, in order to help our clients, we need to look at the whole field with them. We enter a client's field phenomenologically, but there is so much more than that. Based on a *field-centred* outlook I suggest approaching therapy phenomenologically as Gestalt therapists have done from the beginning. By focussing more thoroughly on the field both we and our clients get a better understanding of real-life circumstances, be they physical, familial, economic, or societal. Thus, we co-create increased agency.

Atmospheres are processes of the field and have no agency

Atmospheres have been described as an 'affective tone of the present situation' and the 'horizon of the emerging phenomena' (Francesetti, 2022, p. 7). They are seen as affective content, including emotions which are supposed to be 'challenging atmospheres' according to Schmitz, the founder of the 'New' Phenomenology (2007, p. 25). Francesetti describes them as atmospheric perceptions of the 'pathic root-ground' (2022, p. 7). Atmospheres are deemed to be not 'figures, but the sensorial horizon that tinges, tunes, and conditions all emerging experience' (*ibid.*, p. 10). An 'atmosphere can therefore, paradoxically, be everything and nothing' (Francesetti, Griffero, 2019, p. 1). Aligned with Cohen, I find it difficult to see how such a vague term can elucidate field processes (2023, p. 84).

Moreover, I doubt that the term atmosphere accords with and complements Gestalt therapeutic views. According to Schmitz, atmospheres can take hold of people from the outside (2007, p. 13). Crucially, he alleges that they are independent of a person perceiving them. While a few Gestalt therapists favour this view, most question it: 'Up to now, I did not see yet the interest of looking at "atmosphere", as well as emotions or many other experiences, as almost things ... why such a reification?' (Robine, 2016, p. 2). Why indeed when Gestalt therapists have long focussed on processes? Based on a neo-phenomenological understanding, the interplay of ground and figure turns into a chicken-and-egg problem: instead of the older Cartesian views that individual monads encounter a pre-existing world, neo-phenomenologists propose that anterior atmospheres capture people. I do not see how this reversal of agency fits with Gestalt thinking and indeed with any

phenomenal outlook: neo-phenomenologists start from individually experienced phenomena (Soentgen, 2002, p. 15). Yet, atmospheres are seen as independent agents which is quite impossible to argue phenomenologically. I agree with Orange's conclusion: 'What Schmitz has created is a caricature of phenomenology' (Orange, 2018, p. 298). The chicken-and-egg dichotomy dissolves when we look at it from a field-centred perspective: there is no dichotomy of individuals versus environment. Contact is the first reality. Figure formation and the differentiation of 'I' and 'non-I' are processes of the field; structured by forces, vectors, and valences. They are phenomenally perceived and real.

Neo-phenomenologists claim emotions are atmospheres, too, and can seize individuals. The founders of Gestalt therapy saw that differently: 'an emotion is the integrative awareness of a relation between the organism and the environment' (PHG, 1951, p. 407). Moving beyond individualistic paradigms, this becomes even clearer. Emotions and affects registered by an individual do not originate within that person, nor are they instigated by an outside force. 'V = F (P,U) behaviour is a function of the person and his environment' (Lewin, 1951, p. 271). And – not either/or. In my view the notion of feelings being able to seize a person does not fit with Gestalt therapy, nor with broader research. Damasio wrote that it is sometimes apparent to us that a particular state of feeling 'has not begun at the moment of knowing but rather sometime before', yet that does not support a field-splitting stance (1999, p. 36). Feelings and affects might appear as if out of thin air at first, but as we increase awareness the exploration goes beyond the initial moment. In therapy we necessarily explore the field beyond its nascent stages.

Analysing fields, Lewin himself mentioned a 'social atmosphere', a 'social climate' and a 'group atmosphere' (1951/2012, p. 72, p. 95, p. 226). However, that is quite different from a neo-phenomenological understanding of the term. Lewin saw atmospheres as 'general properties of the field' (ibid., p. 273), i.e. forces with valences, not entities outside individuals. Hence for him, 'psychological atmospheres are empirical realities and are scientifically describable facts' (ibid., p. 273). In a field-centred view, atmospheres are not diffuse and 'spatially unextended' as Schmitz surmises (2011, p. 7). 'All that we generally call "mood" or "atmosphere", into which we are brought by a certain sensory stimulus' are physically anchored (Goldstein, 1934, p. 210). When we define atmospheres as tangible and intangible affordances that are phenomenally perceptible and

scientifically measurable processes of the field, we view a situation in toto. I agree with Michels: 'Such an understanding of affects allows for the exploration of affects (and affective atmospheres) as neither solely located in the material environment nor solely in the human body, but as emerging from the resonances between its various components' (2015, p. 257).

Francesetti writes, 'the phenomenal field is something that arises between us and around us in the encounter' (2020, p. 44). Based on his neo-phenomenological understanding, he describes the field 'as a quasi-thing that is fleetingly present among the participants' (ibid., p. 45) This describes the initial processes of figure formation when gestalts are only dimly perceived and vaguely delineated from the ground. Francesetti has pointed out the relevance of those liminal perceptions, calling them 'Vorgestalten' (2019, p. 39). As helpful as the descriptions of Vorgestalten are for our awareness of liminal, initial contact, an expanded application of the term atmosphere obfuscates the structure of field processes. It ignores both later stages of awareness and the ids of a situation. Also, a similar phenomenon has already been described by the romantic poet Keats in the early nineteenth century: 'I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (quoted after Hebron, 2014, p. 12).

What Gestalt therapists call contact boundary is not a location nor an in-between. Contact processes do not become clearer in my view when a third instance is introduced – the in-between, the 'experiential space between the I and the you, or between the internal experience and the environmental influence' (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013, p. 98). The boundary is a term used for an array of ongoing field processes that constitute the emergence of 'I' and 'not-I': 'Contact is the recognition of "otherness", the awareness of difference. It is the boundary experience of "I and the other"' (L. Perls, 1992, p. 84). In short, the contact boundary is not *where* otherness is met, nor is it only some initial first contact. It is *how* the meeting of novelty, and the experience of dissimilarity happens. Contact is a structured function of the field, not an event *in* a field.

I suggest absorbing Löw's ideas who has developed a spatial-sociological concept (2001). She conceives of both moods and atmospheres as the perceived side of socially constituted spaces. With reference to Bourdieu, she understands atmospheres as expressions of habitual commands and prohibitions to act (Löw, 2001).

In other words, physical constellations are overlaid with and formed by societal ids – including power structures. If we understand atmospheres as *socially* constituted based on tangible and intangible constellations and felt resonances, this broadens our perspective. As contact is primary, figure formation is not the result of inner needs. Felt intentionalities are socially afforded right from their inception. Any ‘Zeitgeist’ in Germany after WWII for example was strongly influenced by a widespread self-excusatory assumption of a ‘Stunde Null’, a clean slate after 1945 (Staemmler, 2023, p. 59). As a hegemonial view this was rooted in real-life experiences, views, and interests of those buying into them: the perpetrators of Nazi crimes who did not want to take responsibility, most Germans wanting to forget about bombings, dislocation and hunger, and the surviving victims of industrialised murder, too, who were eager to not relive past horrors nor contemplate their own survivors’ guilt.

Löw emphasizes the active contribution of people in the creation of atmospheres. Individuals sense constellations as ids of a situation. They co-create meaning based on prefabricated, societal notions amongst other factors. Atmospheric constellations in turn have effects on the structures and the processes of meaning-making. What might be perceived as an atmosphere from an individualistic point of view really turns out to be field processes including

- spatial and temporal field constellations (temperature, sounds, light, and shadow, for example),
- objects with references to each other (e.g. distribution, visibility, perspective),
- socio-culturally encoded and traditional patterns of interpretation (topoi, stereotypes, beliefs etc.), and
- psycho-physical processes of perception and interpretation.

In my view, Löw’s reference to power-related imperatives and prohibitions extends and complements Wollants’ ideas about the id of a situation in an important way. There is no primacy of *either* inner moods *or* wafting atmospheres. Atmospheres are created by people influenced by constellations where power relations are pervasive. In the current form of market economies, atmospheric archetypes, clichés, myths, and topoi do not seize unsuspecting individuals. They are being fabricated for example to increase a product’s market value (see Brandmeyer et al., 2011) Discussing quasi-things overlooks societal power relations that afford behaviour.

‘Above all the field is organised (meaning it arises out of the constellation of all the energies, vectors, or influences in the field as they act together)’ (Parlett, 1997, p. 19). This refers to the totality of field structures and processes, including power relations, social norms, laws, rules, cultural beliefs, conditions of participation or change, and much more. If we were to adopt the term, atmosphere, the term would need to encompass divergent valences including:

- 1) *measurable constellations* that are created by people (e.g. in the form of the designed entrance area of a practice) or circumstances (lighting, trees, etc.) or interpreted in a culturally and socially preformed manner;
- 2) *cultural and social ideologies, introjects, stereotypes or topoi* (Miller, 2015, 5.2).

In short, I propose moving away from the term atmosphere for the following reasons:

- a) It is much too vague.
- b) It assigns agency in the wrong place.
- c) It focusses too narrowly on what is felt initially.
- d) It is quite unnecessary for a consistently field-centred Gestalt approach.

Growing up with traumatised caregivers: a clinical example of transgenerational transmission

One client in particular helped me realise the importance of liminal perceptions and the uselessness of the term atmosphere for transgenerational transmissions: when I first met Carl, he felt stuck in a ‘frozen tundra’. His manner of speaking was subdued, and his movements were forcefully unemotional, I felt. After a couple of sessions, he encountered a deep-seated anger buried underneath his glacial exterior.

Carl: I guess I am still mad at my family.

Me: What do you mean by that?

Carl: They were sooo dull. You cannot imagine how boring the atmosphere was there. As a child I did not feel it much... but later in adolescence... Oh my!

Me: Can you stay with those feelings for a moment? Can you describe them some more?

Together we explore the heaviness, the pressing-down quality of both our physical and felt bodily experiences. We stay with

the physical symptoms: he slumps down, and I allow myself to follow his expressions. After some time:

Carl: I guess I don't feel only anger or frustration. That heaviness – that's guilt. I have always felt guilty... and ashamed for some reason. Not worthy, unlovable somehow.

Me: Do you think your parents loved you?

Carl: They certainly said so! I was the apple of my mother's eye, according to her own sermons.

Me: And yet there is that heavy feeling of shame and guilt.

Carl: Yes, I still carry that deadening atmosphere with me.

Me: Do you remember a specific situation when you felt that heaviness?

Carl: Yes. Every time I visited my grandmother. She was... well, she was not a nice person.

Me: You had to be with her a lot as a child and as a teenager.

Carl: Yes... My clearest memory of her is how she reacted when she was displeased with me. She would give me a tongue lashing and call me cankered. She shamed me... She always scolded me when I was loud or too boisterous for her taste. She sure didn't like that.

Me: Didn't you say something similar about your father earlier? He didn't like it when you were 'childish' and 'wild'.

He quietly begins to cry.

Carl: Yes, both of them... they did not like me being alive!

Me: Were you a planned child?

Carl: No, I wasn't! My parents had to marry because my mother was pregnant with me. Both families disliked each other and thought the union was beneath their child's station. My existence destroyed my parents' lives. Only now I realise: that wasn't *my* fault at all!

He stops crying and looks at me wide-eyed.

Carl: I wasn't guilty of my creation! For *them* my existence was a daily reminder of *their* shame. I caught *their* guilty feelings like a bad bug. That was that 'deadenning atmosphere' – at least in parts.

Me: Any other 'parts' you sense now?

Carl: My grandmother worried incessantly about everything and anything. Oh boy, and her birthdays were the worst. There were all her sisters and their husbands. To me they were dull as dry paint! Always reiterating the same old stories about the war, the bombings, the hunger...

Me: They were reminiscing (about) past times

and danger...

Carl: But you see that was the point: they didn't really. They rehashed anecdotes. Always the same words and always stories about minor mishaps etc. No real emotion at all – ever!

Me: That sounds like automated repetitions, not like the retelling of lively experiences.

Carl: As a child I accepted it as it was. As a teenager I sensed an awful... lifelessness. In their voices and their faces there was no excitement at all, no amusement, no smirks – even when they told funny anecdotes. Just a dull repetition of [the] past.

Me: So how did *you* feel then?

Carl: I wanted to disappear... to be gone. Always after a few drinks they began talking about the war. My grandmother always said: "And then came the war!" She never once expressed any feelings about it – I mean apart from using words like awful etc. For her it was like a natural disaster - it just occurred. And she never mentioned the Holocaust. None of them ever did. It was only much later that I found out that my maternal grandparents had lived right opposite the local synagogue in 1938. They had window seats during the 'Kristallnacht' [the organised 'night of broken glass' persecuting the Jewish population]. But they never said anything about that. No feelings past or present.

Me: When you describe this, I sense that unmovable heaviness again... Like a huge stone in front of the entrance keeping something horrible out. Does that make any sense to you?

Carl: That's a good description. Their anecdotes were the heavy stones piled high to keep evil at bay.

Me: So, what was that evil, do you think?

Carl: Their experiences during the war. They lived through bombings, front-line fighting, displacement, and hunger. They wanted to forget all that, never feel that fear again, look only towards the future.

Me: And yet the slate was not clean after 1945 for them. They kept repeating old stories...

Carl: I guess it helped them to confirm that the horror was over. No need for those overwhelming feelings anymore.

Me: Only, those feelings were still in their present – and in yours.

Later I realised I could have quoted PHG (1951, p. 293): 'The neurotic compulsion to repeat is a sign that a situation unfinished in the past is still unfinished in the present.'

Carl: Even as late as the seventies, their old feelings of dread, death, and destruction were right there under the thin coating of unfunny, repetitive storytelling. That's

how they passed it on to me.

Me: How do you mean?

Carl: By shaming me for being too loud or too lively my grandmother really fought against her own feelings, those that she tried so hard to not feel. All those years they drip-fed me an ‘atmosphere’ that really was their own undigested experience. It was in how they looked at me with resentment, how they scolded me, and in every physical contact they made with me. They couldn’t help themselves... Quite literally – they couldn’t...

My conclusion

The session with Carl did not dispel any atmosphere. Instead, it widened both our awareness of the situational factors that afforded a deadening of emotional spontaneity: his birth was unplanned and even unwanted. Moreover, his spontaneity and liveliness as a child disturbed his (grand-)parents’ efforts to keep old fears in the background. His field was populated by forces that actively inhibited lively figure-formation. By focussing on the forces of my client’s field we were able to first stay with the liminal feelings of heaviness without any need to put them into words immediately. Then we explored the influences of historic and societal powers that impacted his family. The session increased my client’s ability to stay with unpleasant feelings and to contact novelty.

What my client’s experience taught me was: As any ‘client brings their fear, helplessness, disconnection and shame to the heart of the relationship’, both his father and grandmother had brought their trauma to the relationship – physically, somatically, emotionally, and cognitively (Taylor, 2014, p. 175). *Their* story had become encoded in *his* tissue, in *his* skeleton, and in *his* nervous system (ibid., p. 80). As in so many other families in Germany and those countries that were affected by WWII, generational trauma was not transmitted through some vague ‘Zeitgeist’ or hand-me-down atmosphere. For many people the Blitz, occupation, hunger, displacement, and the Holocaust had altered the id of the situation, which felt as a need to suppress liveliness. Even decades later they neither felt safe to feel, for fear of the horror returning, nor could they find any support to face past horrors as society powered on ignoring the widespread pain. Parents and grandparents retold standardised anecdotes to polish already hardened shells thus creating affordances for their children to curb their own boisterousness. Thus, I believe, my client’s experience is

much more typical than Staemmler’s description of his family of origin (2023).

Not a mere afterthought

The term ‘atmosphere’ is unhelpful to understand experience, agency and field processes. Moreover, I do not see any compelling reason to change key tenets of Gestalt therapy based on an approach that has been accused of an all too great ‘empathic and uncritical closeness to’ Nazi ideology (Landkammer, 2000). With his book about Hitler, Schmitz delivers a trivialisation of the Nazi regime (1999). Explicitly applying his ‘New’ Phenomenology, he concludes: ‘Race ideology only had a small impact on Hitler’s practical policies, with one large exception: the flagrantly derogatory, yes inhumanly vile rating and treatment of Russians’ (ibid., p. 348). Schmitz also emphatically supports the ‘eugenic endeavours’ of the Nazi regime (ibid., p. 387), i.e. the forced sterilisations of handicapped people. His ‘revisionist affirmation of National Socialism’ is not another topic additional to any critique of the term atmosphere (Heubel, 2003, p. 46). Instead, I align with Donna Orange in understanding his ‘Hitler book as integral to Schmitz’s work’ (2018, p. 293). There is no space here and now to elaborate, but the criticism of the New Phenomenology’s foundation has been widespread and sustained (Soentgen, 2002; Heubel, 2003; Gutjahr, 2016; Dreitzel, 2017; Amendt-Lyon et al., 2018). In my view it should not be a mere afterthought.

Hence, when Staemmler criticises Amendt-Lyon for the fierceness of her ‘attack on Schmitz’ (2023, p. 59), I fail to see why that should be inappropriate. Yes, some colleagues perceive Schmitz’s terminology as an inspiration. Yet, in my view its basis is tainted, ethically repulsive and phenomenologically unsound. Let me refer to another case for reference: Heidegger inspired philosophers such as Sartre, Beauvoir, and Hannah Arendt. Yet his ‘black notebooks’ reveal antisemitism at the core of his philosophy (Olterman, 2014). Even after 1945 he never uttered a word of regret or retraction (Trawny, 2015). Despite initial hesitations even Heidegger’s successor in Heidelberg, Figal, felt compelled to find words of criticism (2018). By comparison Schmitz talked about the ‘Faelic race’ (2011, p. 71). He repeatedly lauded Ludwig Klages – an ideological precursor of the Nazis – calling him his closest kindred spirit (Schmitz, 1975, 1981). In summary: ‘I assume that the ideological misuse of the term situation in the book about Hitler is not superficial, but rather points to its inherent problems, moreover to grave defects of the ‘New’ Phenomenology

in general' (Heubel, 2003, p. 48). The application of neo-phenomenological terms to the understanding of transgenerational trauma (that was produced by Nazi crimes) I find particularly irksome.

Yet, to my knowledge, none of Schmitz's Gestalt supporters have published any comments about those aspects of his oeuvre. Is his proximity to Nazi ideology not worth criticising or even mentioning? Is it irrelevant for Gestalt therapy? I believe this is 'the silence that phenomenologist Emmanuel Lévinas called "as if consenting to horror" (1989). Tolerating such talk, we become accomplices' (Orange, 2018, p. 299). It seems high time to change that, I believe. Yes, Gestalt therapy rightly is a 'broad church' encompassing a multitude of views, foci, and approaches. Yet, I see no space in it for the terminology and content of the 'New Phenomenology' which contradicts our own humanistic view of the world.

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Contemporary spirituality: an invitation to heartbreak and humility

A literature review

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Abstract

This article is a literature review which explores the spiritual landscape within Gestalt therapy and the wider field of psychotherapy, examining definitional barriers, ideas of contemporary spirituality (as distinct from religion) and the ways in which Gestalt therapy can offer a 'way out' of the restrictive binaries of traditional either/or thinking.

Keywords

Gestalt therapy, spirituality, epistemic humility, dialogue, presence, paradox, uncertainty

Introduction

The motivation behind this literature review stems from my long-standing personal interest in spirituality, its meaning, and whether it is welcome in the field of mental health, particularly Gestalt therapy. Further, it is stimulated by my desire to explore the richness of relationality, my curiosity about the relational turn and the idea that Gestalt therapy, as care for the other, can act as a catalyst for care of the world. I have described my personal way of caring for the world so far in life as my spirituality. During my time as a student at Gestalt Therapy Brisbane, I have noticed similarities between spirituality and Gestalt therapy theory and practice. Spirituality has been a core support for me since childhood and has been present since my early education within a Catholic school system. I am without doubt shaped by this experience. I am also moulded by frequent personal experiences throughout my childhood and teenage years of unexpected loss and death, giving me a sense of the big picture or what I now refer to as my spiritual umbrella. This big picture has evolved over time, breaking free from the confines of religion and dogma, into broad values and ethics of justice and fairness, framed by the larger existential question of life, death and meaning. Its influence led to my practical decision at seventeen years old (the best I could make at the time) to pursue a career in law; to promote justice, fairness and help to those who

need it. However, I found myself on the fringes of law instead of the mainstream. At 26 years old, I arrived at a job on the Australian Classification Board (ACB) in Sydney, a commonwealth government body whose role was to classify films, publications, computer games and other 'literature' (I use this term loosely as the only literature we ever reviewed was that pertaining to adult publications of an explicitly sexual nature). We gave these films, games, and magazines a rating aligned with the G, PG, M, MA15+ and R18+ classifications you see today, and this was indeed the light side of the work at the ACB. There was also a dark side; the requirement to classify police material (usually films and images) that had been seized during raids by law enforcement, usually from private homes and hard drives. Board members were considered 'experts' in determining the nature of the material and decisions on content were needed before offenders could be prosecuted through the criminal justice system. The best way to describe the nature of the material we had to view would be to give the precise legislative wording, namely:

‘[materials that] depict, express or deal with matters of sex, drug misuse, crime, cruelty, violence and revolting or abhorrent phenomena in such a way that they offend against the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults’

(National Classification Code, 2005, s.3(1)(a)).

My regular reality, over the seven years I served on the ACB, juxtaposed with this very light side of classification, was reviewing thousands upon thousands of explicit images and films of child sexual abuse (or ‘child pornography’ as it was more commonly referred to) intended for distribution amongst national and international paedophile rings. During my very first eighteen months of service we were involved in an Australian police crackdown on child pornography called Operation Auxin, a follow-up to the United States FBI investigation, Operation Falcon. This operation was of particular significance at the time, as many of the accused were people holding positions of trust in the community, including police officers, members of the military, teachers, and ministers of religion. In addition to this, we were also required to view films depicting real violence, actual cruelty (to humans and animals), footage of accidental death, suicide and, in some cases, murder. These items were deemed *refused classification* and thereby banned from distribution or sale in Australia.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the impact of this work has weighed heavily upon me and has raised basic questions about what it means to be human. It has inflicted wounds of the soul that I carry for life; wounds that I can best describe as a type of *moral injury* that rearranged the very essence of my being, breaking my ground apart. It led me to question what else there is to lean upon when faced with the realities of such horror and depravity; this resulted in consideration of my own spirituality. Over time, this journey eventually led me to Gestalt therapy, a place where my deep sensitivity to injustice in the world could be met with an ability to care for others who have similarly suffered. During my training I have come to realise that as human beings, we all bear wounds of the soul, manifesting in various ways. This extends to contemporary society where our Western culture of objectification and individualism creates an atmosphere of separateness and isolation, resulting in a field of increasing psychological distress. As we now sit with acute existential threats of nuclear war and ecological crisis, coupled with increasing relational disconnection and an upsurge in demand

on mental-health services, there is no better time as a Gestalt therapist to pay regard to the oft-neglected, but potentially rich, dimension of human experience – spirituality.

Therefore, this review seeks to investigate how definitions of spirituality have changed over time by examining evolving understandings of its meaning, holding as its focus the spiritual, rather than the religious dimension. It will also inquire into how spirituality is understood in Gestalt therapy, exploring places where spirituality and Gestalt therapy intersect, with a particular focus on dialogue and presence in the therapeutic relationship. Further, it will examine how relational Gestalt practice can answer the call of the suffering field, resourced with new understandings of contemporary spirituality, and explore the unique ways in which the Gestalt approach already supports a climate of validity where spirituality and psychotherapy can share in the space of multiple realities (Tacey, 2004).

This literature review will be divided into three sections. The first section will provide a global framework to locate mental health and spirituality in society, examine ongoing definitional problems and highlight emerging understandings of *contemporary spirituality* as a change in consciousness, yearning for wholeness and the cultivation of an inner life that inevitably leads outwards. The second section will begin with an exploration of current attitudes and approaches towards spirituality in Gestalt therapy literature, particularly the desire for definitional clarity, before moving on to the investigation of *shared characteristics* between the two. Finally, the third section will examine how Gestalt therapy can offer humanity, an alternative way of *being-in-the-world* that enhances our capacity as a species to live in paradox; holding complexity, ambiguity and difference in the context of our inherent universal interconnectedness.

The call of the suffering field

The demand for mental-health services is surging (American Psychological Association, 2021) and, despite extensive clinical advancement, there has been no significant change in the numbers of people affected by most mental disorders (Syme & Hagen, 2019). Depression is now a global phenomenon with research revealing that it leads to more death by suicide than all wars and homicides combined (Lozano et al., 2013). The World Health Organisation describes it as an epidemic (Summerfield, 2006) and despite the popularity of antidepressants, there is little to no evidence that

psychopharmaceutical treatments are effective (Syme & Hagen, 2019). Some Gestalt therapists argue that rising rates of psychological distress are a form of collective trauma linked to our loss of reciprocal relationships with the natural world (Bednarek, 2019a; O'Neill, 2012b; Parlett, 2015). In the medical arena too, new understandings of depression as a natural adaptation to adverse circumstances, rather than a purely individual disorder based on chemical imbalance, are now emerging (Syme & Hagen, 2019). These descriptions are familiar to the Gestalt therapist who already considers individual symptoms as expressions of the suffering field and a signal that a vital relational need has not been met (Roubal et al., 2017).

Faith in the medical model and trust in science is weakening (Syme & Hagen, 2019). As Marcia Angell, former editor-in-chief of *The New England Journal of Medicine* wrote, 'It is simply no longer possible to believe much of the clinical research that is published, or to rely on the judgement of trusted physicians or authoritative medical guidelines' (2009, as cited in Syme & Hagen, 2019, p. 92). This crisis of confidence is spreading to social and political institutions including religious organisations (Tacey, 2004) and is reflected statistically, with the number of people indicating that they are not religious increasing by almost 50% from 2011-2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In a world that is suffering an epidemic of meaninglessness (Eckersley, 2004), the response has been a questioning of secularism and a turn towards spirituality in the earnest search for new bearings (Tacey, 2020). Spirituality, however, is a difficult subject to research due to a knowledge gap across disciplines (Chitra et al., 2019; Hodge, 2017) and problems in reporting the silent undercurrent of such subtle changes (Frisk & Nynas, 2012). The gap is widened further by sporadic and diffuse academic interest (Bloom, 2011; Joyce & Sills, 2018) in an area considered to reside at the edges of respectable intellectual inquiry (Tacey, 2011). Consequently, to gain a broad perspective, this literature review relies on material that is sourced across a wide range of decades and disciplines.

Alongside the rise in mental-health issues are increasing incidences of substance abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). As discussed previously, these problems are viewed by some as manifestations of a spiritual disorder, stemming from a collective loss of meaning and disconnection from our ecological and ontological roots (O'Neill, 2012b; Parlett, 2015; Tacey, 2004). They are living symptoms of societal dis-ease

that are calling out for response in a world that has lost its relationship to the other: human and more-than-human (Bednarek, 2019a; Tacey, 2011). For many writers, society has forgotten its spiritual sense and replaced it with the empty worship of technology and materialism (Hycner, 1993; Lines, 2006; Santos, 2013). The relentless pursuit of wealth and personal success as a measure of self-worth contributes to a repressed sense of ontological being (May, 1983), culminating in ruthless competition and rugged individualism (Yontef, 2009) reinforced by our secular and scientific state of mind (Faiver et al., 2001). Science, and its claims on truth as unassailable fact, reinforces the illusion that the only source of knowing is that which can be observed and measured (Dowie, 2021). The desire for absolute certainty and predictability have become the 'almost unquestionable bastion of contemporary intellectual life' (Dowie, 2021, p. 20) resulting in a reticence of psychotherapists and counsellors to engage in matters of spirituality (Joyce & Sills, 2018; Lines, 2006; Mackewn, 1997).

Historically, religion and spirituality have also been linked with psychopathology (Campos & Ribeiro, 2017; Verghese, 2008) leading to the exile of both from serious academic attention (O'Neill, 2012b). The unquenchable thirst for certainty has impacted our ability to tolerate mystery (Kelliher, 2013) and traps us in reductive ideas that all knowledge must be hierarchical and non-conflictual (Fook, 2015). The spiritual has been neglected (Beaumont, 2012) for its lack of credibility and inferiority in a rational world (Tacey, 2011).

Such demands for certainty and absolutism have created longstanding definitional difficulties for spirituality (Hodge, 2017; Ingersoll, 2005; Kolodny, 2004). Capturing its meaning is an onerous task and no words exist which could adequately describe it (Solgi & Safara, 2018; Underhill, 1914). Attempts to rationalise the ineffable and force it into a logical, language-limited system in order to appease intellectual demands for simplicity are seemingly futile tasks for a concept that is heavily laden with subjective value judgements (Lines, 2006; Underhill, 1914). The only consensus is that spirituality does not neatly fit within the rational pigeon-hole of science and is unable to be precisely defined or described (Hycner, 1993; Solgi & Safara, 2018; Tacey, 2011). Nevertheless, endeavours to resolve this hermeneutic challenge and develop a universal definition continue across disciplines (Hodge, 2017).

Social work literature finds that the meaning of spirituality has significantly changed. Its previously strong associations with religion are now broken and it is currently understood as a unique and distinct concept (Hodge, 2017). It bears similarity to William James's early description of spirituality as a personal experience independent of institutions and dogma (as cited in Tacey, 2020), with postmodern and post-secular understandings of *contemporary spirituality* now defined as existential rather than religious (Sandage et al., 2020; Tacey 2020). While spirituality often begins as a personal, inner journey of discovery, the focus on the self is merely a starting point that eventually *leads out* to an awareness of interconnectedness (Svob, 2017; Tacey, 2004). Holding human responsibility, social justice, and the welfare of the world at its core, it is a quest for authentic, lived experience in the here and now, rather than New Age practices of seeking enlightened transcendence to other planes of existence (Tacey, 2004). It is therefore not a *leapfrogging* of our humanness by way of a 'spiritual bypass' (Hycner, 1993, p. 70; Welwood, 1984, p. 64) but instead aligns with Buber's (1958) idea of *living through* and *becoming more human*, rather than leaving the self behind (Hycner, 1993; Kennedy, 1998; Williams, 2006). This *living through* involves a depth of experiential self-examination that involves confronting the tragedy implicit in *being* (May, 1983; Svob, 2017) and the genuine exploration of the shadow as well as the light (Moore, 1992). The central feature of contemporary spirituality then is a *change in consciousness* with an emphasis on wholeness (Tacey, 2020), compassion and relationality (McClintock et al., 2016). It is a response to the symptoms of the suffering field (Bednarek, 2019a) and the identification of a deep relational need to restore the link with our existential and ontological foundations (Sandage et al., 2020; Tacey, 2020). It finds its expression through a yearning for connection with self and other via a post-secular movement; drawing us inwards before leading us out towards an ecological and cosmological sensibility (Bednarek, 2019a; Tacey, 2020). This journey towards wholeness is essentially an invitation to heartbreak (Bednarek, 2019a); to answer the call of the field, face uncomfortable truths and find meaning in our suffering (Frankl, 2008). With these evolved descriptions in mind, it is important to now examine how spirituality is understood within Gestalt therapy.

A rose by any other name

Gestalt therapists are similarly embroiled in definitional debates and the difficulty of arriving at a consensus is reflected in the varying approaches and attitudes to spirituality within the literature. This issue is compounded by the fact that discussion of spirituality in Gestalt-specific contexts is infrequent and irregular, making it difficult to locate a broad range of current resources. Spirituality is a controversial topic in Gestalt therapy, predominantly because it is understood differently by different people (Bloom, 2013). Discussions often centre, and stall, upon arguments of interpretation, with authors repeatedly questioning what spirituality *actually means* (Bloom, 2013; Crook, 2001; Feder, 2001). This highlights the current absence of any agreement and, in some cases, resorts to the use of dictionary definitions (from the late sixties) which focus on traditional understandings of spirituality as inseparable from religion (Bloom, 2013; Crook, 2001; Feder, 2001).

However, some authors such as Crocker (1999) and Wolfert (2015) avoid this hurdle by working from the assumption that, due to the early influences of Buddhism and Taoism on Gestalt therapy, spirituality is inherent in Gestalt practice. In contrast, writers such as Kolodny (2004) and Parlett (2000) take the view that the presence or absence of spirituality in Gestalt therapy depends entirely upon the individual perception and belief of the therapist (Freeman, 2006).

How spirituality is understood ranges widely, from deep personal experience of something mystical that occurs beyond our current ways of knowing (Crocker, 1999; Hycner, 1993; Kolodny, 2004), to the presence of a deity or higher power, including God (Brownell, 2012). Despite the breadth of approaches to the topic, the central element of contention appears to be the appropriateness of incorporating the spiritual into Gestalt therapy as an *add-on* (Bloom, 2013; Crook, 2001; Feder, 2001). This concern is grounded in traditional definitions of spirituality as religious dogma, implying its inclusion may be intended as a new therapeutic intervention that risks the integrity of Gestalt therapy (Bloom, 2011; 2013), rather than viewing it as an integral aspect of human experience (Brownell, 2012; Campos & Ribeiro, 2017; O'Neill, 2008). As a result, discussion of spirituality within Gestalt literature often has a critical undertone (Bloom, 2013) that borders on dismissiveness in some cases, particularly where it has been described as a sentimental, vague, and saccharine irritation, undeserving of any serious attention (Feder, 2001).

An alternative to the *either/or* discussion suggests that, as the holistic worldview of Gestalt theory considers the psychological process as non-dual, the argument itself, which splits the spiritual and psychotherapeutic, may be redundant (Crook, 2001). Therefore, the real issue lies with finding a way to integrate the *terms*, rather than continue to argue their semantic differences (ibid, 2001). Categorising the spiritual as separate from the psychological tends to undermine the holistic nature of being human and overlooks the fact that suffering may include overlapping aspects of life, including the biopsychosocial *and* spiritual or existential (Joyce & Sills, 2018; Uomoto, 2015).

Further, as the Buddhist roots of Gestalt do not emphasise duality or the idea that one perspective holds greater weight than another (Crook, 2001), the claim that Gestalt therapy is holistic is unsteady if it moves to exclude certain types of experience (Campos & Ribeiro, 2017; Mackewn, 1997).

The basic debate, then, appears to be grounded in the issue of *how* spirituality is intended to reside within the Gestalt sphere. The Gestalt community is not a spiritual one, and despite the *perception* of similarities between spirituality and Gestalt therapy, this does not make it a spiritual *practice* (Beaumont, 1998; Williams, 2006). Apart from the ethical problems of imposing therapist-held spiritual values upon the client, to do so would be antithetical to the centrality of the phenomenological attitude in Gestalt practice, namely the valuing of direct experience and bracketing preconceived notions (Bloom, 2011). Further, it would also be unethical and potentially harmful to dismiss or devalue the validity of the spiritual in the life of the client, particularly when research shows that approximately 70% of clients consider themselves to be spiritual or religious and want this included in the therapeutic dialogue (Campos & Ribeiro, 2017).

These divergent views leave us with a conceptual potpourri of subjective viewpoints that clarify nothing except that the spiritual ground is not shared in Gestalt therapy (Bednarek, 2019a). However, Crook's (2001) point, that Gestalt theory is predicated upon the value of multiple perspectives, leaves room to explore the possibility of shared characteristics between the two and examine the instances where Gestalt therapy has been interpreted as spiritual in nature.

The heightening of here-and-now awareness, supported by dialogue and the phenomenological process of staying experience-near (Fairfield & O'Shea, 2008), is an activity of moment-to-moment mindfulness that is

often described as the experiencing of self at a deeper and more expansive level (Bate, 2001). It involves a quality of encounter that has weight and substance (Beaumont, 1998). This existential experience of *being with* is sometimes felt as transcendent, spiritual (Campos & Ribeiro, 2017; Kennedy, 1998; Wolfert, 2000) or magical (Kolodny, 2004) and is described by Buber (1958) as the interhuman or I-Thou experience. The dialogic *attitude* of the therapist, central in creating the conditions for this possibility of profound meeting, can be experienced as a very different way of relating (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2018; Freeman, 2006).

The core element of therapeutic presence, the deep listening to and engagement with that which unfolds in the moment, represents a radical paradigm shift in a world that is saturated with 'I-It' relating (Hycner, 1995). Helping the client to tell the truth about themselves is a liberating, often painful experience and involves the therapist meeting the client where they are, in an ontological appreciation of their unique state of being and experiencing in the moment (Crocker, 1999). It is the environment that Gestalt therapy creates, the *relational experience* of presence, validation, non-judgement, attuned awareness to the now and a flow into the next, of being *seen* (Spagnuolo-Lobb, 2022), that, for some, is perceived as spiritual (Williams, 2006).

However, spirituality is not *in* Gestalt therapy theory as a specific methodology or theoretical tenet, but is a relational by-product of its elements; parts which, although acknowledged and confirmed by the experience of some, do not speak for the whole (Kolodny, 2004). The relational turn in Gestalt therapy, which is also dialogical and ethical, is critical to Gestalt practice (Bloom, 2009). However, the deep diving into the philosophy of dialogue that accompanied this turn, has potentially brought back with it a relic of Buber's theological orientation, resulting in it becoming a 'sacred turn' for some Gestalt practitioners (Bloom, 2011, p. 305). Consequently, conflation of the language of spirituality and Gestalt therapy has created confusion within the field, and it is critical that this is held in awareness when discussing the spiritual in Gestalt practice (Bloom, 2011).

Overall, exploring definitions and the ways in which they shape the discourse is important in gaining a living comprehension of how spirituality is currently understood in the world. However, in honouring subjective experience and holding the capacity to tolerate uncertainty, the Gestalt therapist values the experience of *what is*, regardless of *how* that is

expressed in language (Parlett, 2015). The dialogic approach prioritises the importance of ethically attending to the human need for connection through presence (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2018) over concern with the ability to articulate a *correct experience* definitively and conclusively. While awareness and presence in Gestalt therapy may feel spiritual to some, the weight of semantics and the idea that the spiritual is a separate entity undermines the unified field view held by Gestalt therapists (O'Neill, 2012a; Uomoto, 2015). While other disciplines may persist with the likely impossible challenge of defining spirituality, Gestalt therapy offers an alternative way of being-in-the-world that is comfortable with the paradox of *and/both* understanding (O'Neill, 2012a). A *reality fight* (Latner, 1983) over the precise interpretation of spirituality is therefore unnecessary within a Gestalt approach which values direct experience, perspectival understandings and embraces uncertainty (O'Neill, 2012a; Staemmler, 2009).

Living the paradox

The primary theme of this literature review has centred upon definitional barriers to articulating spirituality and the limitations of language in arriving at any all-encompassing meaning. The recurring need for precise definition as a mandatory precursor to discussion has figured strongly in criticism of spirituality within Gestalt literature, stalling deeper analysis. However, the weight given to definition tends to overlook the perennial problem of language being a natural obfuscation to adequately articulate experience and reinforces a secular, rationalist view that only the definable is worthy of serious attention (Dowie, 2021; O'Neill, 2012a). Although it is now agreed within social work and nursing disciplines that spirituality is a universal *phenomenon*, the persistent difficulties in defining it has led to some authors advocating for a more flexible approach to its interpretation (Bruce et al., 2010; Hodge, 2017). Acknowledging that language is just another way to simplify complexity, there are calls to recognise the restrictive *epistemic frames* that language creates and consider the benefits of living with paradox: that spirituality can include *both* understanding *and* not understanding (ibid., 2010). This inclusive approach suggests the use of metaphor or metonymic phrases (Bruce et al., 2010) that leave space for uncertainty and multiple perspectives instead of arbitrary *either/or* options which stifle the spiritual conversation (O'Neill, 2012a; Yontef, 2022).

Spirituality then, as a word, is perhaps past its expiration date in terms of usefulness due to its deeply embedded and seemingly inescapable cultural associations with religion and deity (Tacey, 2011). However, while it eludes precise definition, the experience of spiritual awareness, in line with the phenomenological method, can continue to be described. As discussed earlier, the change in consciousness associated with *contemporary spirituality* involves a different way of *being-in-the-world* that is something other than faith in a higher power or new-age practices of spiritual bypass (Hycner, 1993; Tacey, 2020). It indicates a paradigm shift, where human beings relinquish their long-held, egocentric place as the central focus of existence and transition towards an ecocentric mindset (Bednarek, 2019a; Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020; Plotkin, 2013). It is a valuing of the other, as well as the *more-than-human* world of plants, animals, rivers, and rocks, previously viewed as background and merely instrumental to human needs (Bednarek, 2019b; Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020).

Climate change, rising mental-health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, and a multitude of existential threats, have alerted us as a species to our inherent disequilibrium and a realisation that health must be global to be personal (Parlett, 2015). This awareness of inseparability, of our ecological interdependence, results in a suffering that flows from the heartbreak of our collective human actions thus far and invites us, with humility, to step into relationship, not only with the world but with ourselves (Bednarek, 2019a; Parlett, 2015; Tacey, 2011). It invites the client to courageously face themselves and their own heartbreak; an invitation that may well be declined by a grief-phobic society (Bednarek, 2019a) heavily invested in the assumptions of the medical model: that psychopathology is located solely within faulty biology and best treated through chemical restraint or technique-based suppression (Cayoun, 2011; Thompson, 2019). However, as contemporary spirituality and Gestalt therapy attest, the journey begins inwards, therefore developing a stable sense of self is the necessary starting point if the individual is to cultivate an enhanced capacity for open, receptive connection to the other (Hosemans, 2018; Tacey, 2020). It is at this juncture that Gestalt therapy can step forward and extend this invitation to heartbreak, acknowledging the integral part of the self, in relation to the suffering whole.

Honest examination of what is fragmented and disowned, described by Parlett (2015) as

self-recognising, is often the starting point for any major transformation or change that will inevitably lead outwards (May, 1983; Tacey, 2004). Gestalt therapy recognises that being in relationship with the other first requires the solid ground of relationship with the self (Parlett, 2015; Spagnuolo-Lobb & Schuthess, 2020). With its phenomenological emphasis on staying experience-near and the unified field perspective, it understands the person as part of a self-other-situation context (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2018) where the individual symptom is an expression of the entire, co-created field (Francesetti, 2015). Gestalt theory views psychopathology as a relational disturbance of ground that holds an intentionality; an unexpressed need for something new (Spagnuolo-Lobb, 2020, 2022). To access its meaning however, we must engage in Buber's *living through* (1958), a process requiring courage and the cultivation of tolerance for difficult experience (Hosemans, 2018). The liminal space between now and the developmental next is often felt as chaotic, but is a necessary corridor to ever-expanding growth and development (Buckle-Henning, 2011; Mortola, 2001; Roubal et al., 2017).

Gestalt therapists retain awareness of the atmospheric field forces that exist in society and can attend to various complexities of being when in dialogue with the client (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020; Francesetti et al., 2022; Hosemans, 2018). Coupled with the dialogic attitude, the Gestalt therapist offers attuned and focused presence that welcomes uncertainty and gives space for the sensed, yet unknown, aspects of experience to emerge (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2018). This *being with*, as a deeply existential posture (Kennedy, 1998), involves the therapist's presence to an absence, drawing out what is missing and sharpening the clarity of the burning intentionality that suffering inevitably calls out for (Francesetti et al., 2022). When a relational need for interpersonal connection has not been met en masse, clinical manifestations of global depression and anxiety are potential signs of impending development (Spagnuolo-Lobb, 2022). Responding effectively requires a deep listening to the suffering field and the suffering self, exploring different ways of understanding its message (Francesetti, 2015; Moore, 1992). However, this kind of self-reflection requires the support of an interested other to witness and facilitate the journey (Buckle-Henning, 2011; Francesetti et al., 2022; Parlett, 2015). To this end, the Gestalt therapist acts as the midwife: bringing forth that which cries out to be born (May, 1983). The holistic nature of the Gestalt approach, and its radically relational stance, prepares the ground for the client to be open,

receptive, and vulnerable to examining their own pain and suffering as a departure point for openness to the other (Hosemans, 2018). This process of integrating parts of the self is crucial in the journey towards ever-expanding psychological development and is supported by recent developments in neuroscience (Hosemans, 2018; Mortola, 2001; Siegel, 2011).

Relational Gestalt therapy creates an atmosphere that is conducive to neural integration – the very basis of creating a stable sense of self (Hosemans, 2018). Growth and change require an encounter with difference which, to the autonomic nervous system, often presents as danger (Melnick, 2017). However, the presence of the Gestalt therapist, along with practising inclusion, validation, and the honouring of direct experience through description rather than explanation, has a calming effect, inducing a neurobiological feeling of safety (Geller et al., 2012; Hosemans, 2018; Spagnuolo-Lobb, 2020). Engaging right-brain sensing with left-brain language, dialogue gives expression to inner experience and the possibility of creating a coherent narrative (Evans, 2020; Parlett, 2015; Siegel, 2011). This important process establishes an integrated, stable sense of self (Siegel, 2011) and acts as a platform for developing capacity for opening outwards towards the world (Tacey, 2004). It is a *movement towards complexity* (Siegel, 2011) that for Parlett (2015) is the 'next step in our social evolution' (p. 205). Gestalt therapy, through its method and approach, provides the solid ground needed for the *safe emergency*, recognising that we are more than the sum of our parts and permitting the client to be fully open to all dimensions of experience including the difference of the other (Parlett, 2015).

Spirituality is a strong point of difference in psychotherapy, yet difference is the lifeblood of human development (Melnick, 2017; Yontef, 2022). The dialogic approach in Gestalt therapy embodies the phenomenological reality and value of multiple perspectives (Hycner & Jacobs, 1995; Yontef, 2022), creating an openness to living the paradox of *and/both* understanding (Evans, 2020; Hycner & Jacobs, 1995). The ability to hold complexity without being crushed by the weight of uncertainty in a rational world is key to a truly holistic and relational discourse (Lines, 2006; Staemmler, 2009). It is a way of *being-in-the-world* that instils a sense of humility and wisdom in the *not knowing* (Kennedy, 1998; Moore, 1992); however, the notion of multiple perspectives is not unique to Gestalt therapy. The poet John Keats described the capacity to sit with uncertainty as *negative capability* (as cited

in Moore, 1992) while Tacey (2004) speaks of a *climate of validity* in which opposition and ambiguity interact and thrive. Similarly, A. H. Almaas, the founder of the Diamond Approach, describes the *view of totality*, a recognition of the deep value of practising *unbounded inclusiveness* through awareness of *how we exclude* (as cited in Haarburger, 2014). Further, Gestalt therapy in its use of appreciative inquiry, along with the dialogical and phenomenological attitude, co-creates a conversation that facilitates shared awareness of multiple viewpoints (Yontef, 2022). Staemmler (2009) called it the ‘willingness to be uncertain’, a stance that implies the possibility that not only might I learn something from the other, but also the possibility that I might let something pass from my own point of view; understanding is a *process* that is continual, a never-ending first draft. Carl Rogers, the father of person-centred therapy, also suggested a future society based on the *hypothesis of multiple realities*, questioning whether we can afford the luxury of having ‘a’ single reality and warning of the dangers of maintaining a view that there is a *real world* upon whose definition we all agree, powerfully reinforced by reminding us of the historic influence of Hitler (Rogers, 1980).

Taken together, these concepts engender an appreciation of the richness created by this expansive approach to knowing that challenges the dominant scientific and rationalist worldview of certainty and absolutism (Lukensmeyer, 2012; Melnick, 2017). The alternative is quite possibly a rapid descent into what Reik (cited in Staemmler, 2009) called ‘psychological cannibalism’; a term which accurately – if not also somewhat frighteningly – describes some observations of what is happening quite frequently in the world recently (especially on social media and in politics); the process of ‘claiming to know the other better than they know themselves’ (Staemmler, 2009). The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (as cited in Staemmler, 2009) described this as an act of violence; a brutality upon the other; *annihilating otherness*. As Bloom so eloquently stated:

‘To know the Other is to cloak the other in the terms of my own understanding: to tailor the other to my own fit. To be known is to be mastered by another’s conquering understanding, levelled into a certainty’ (2011, p. 308).

Spirituality sits squarely within the realm of uncertainty, particularly regarding how it is defined and manifests in practice, therefore it is crucial for

therapists of all modalities to build muscle around the capacity to sit with ambiguity and engage productively and openly with difference (Buckle-Henning, 2011), rather than to reflexively dismiss and disengage with that which is unfamiliar (Yontef, 2022).

Overall, scientific and intellectual disciplines are *cultures* which develop knowledge in order to create shared understandings in their field (MacIntyre, 1977). These structures of epistemological ground are crucial to knowledge-building but can become degenerative if their resistance to new ways of knowing falls into defensiveness and exclusion (Kingshorn, 2020). For healthy traditions such as psychotherapy to flourish, they must remain epistemologically self-conscious and open to potentially destabilising influences; to question the ground upon which they are built (Kingshorn, 2020). But what exactly is epistemology? In short, it is the theory and study of knowledge and belief. It is concerned with the justification of knowledge claims and asks the basic question: ‘How do you know?’. As a recent news article explained:

‘It is interesting that we individually tend to regard ourselves as clear thinkers and see those who disagree with us as misguided. We imagine that the impressions we have about the world come to us unsullied and unfiltered. We think we have the capacity to see things just as they really are, and that it is others who have confused perceptions. As a result, we might think our job is to simply point out where other people have gone wrong in their thinking, rather than to engage in rational dialogue allowing the possibility that we might actually be wrong ... [it is] the conviction of our own epistemic superiority’ (Ellerton, 2017).

Examining the epistemic frames that shape us (Bruce et al., 2010) echoes the *how* structure already espoused in ethical Gestalt practice; a consistent reflective questioning of *how* we are in relation to the client, an awareness of our own self at work and a recognition of the limits of our theory and ability to know (Bloom, 2011; Fook, 2015). It is a plea, as Bloom (2011) describes, to stay aware of the normative images that shape us. This trend towards transparency, living the paradox of uncertainty and epistemological self-awareness is already core to Gestalt practice, but is becoming more evident in mainstream critiques of psychiatry and the DSM (Kingshorn, 2020; Rashed, 2020). *Mad activists* are now advocating a move from the formulaic, medicalised categorisation of experience towards a

phenomenological approach which views behaviour and experience as ways of being in the world rather than pathology (Phillips, 2020; Rashed, 2020). Attending to the complexity of experience is central to this paradigm shift that welcomes, rather than defends against, new ways of knowing, and embodies a sense of epistemic humility that is the foundation of ethical practice (Kingshorn, 2020). Epistemic humility, the polarity of the previously mentioned epistemic superiority, is confidence in the fact that our knowledge is fragile, that it is conditional, complex, and contingent (Angner, 2020). This involves not only a cognitive awareness, but also calls for an act, a posture, and a practice that moves beyond simply *knowing* (Bloom, 2011). It is a *responsibility* of being constantly engaged in a reflective, recursive process of *how I am* in relation to the other – not how I *should* be – but how I am (ibid., 2011). Epistemic humility is seeing ourselves as making an offering as a contributor, rather than defining, proselytising, claiming expertise or, as the condescending trend in social media goes, advising those who disagree with us to ‘educate themselves’, ‘do better’ or, in the worsening trend, to ‘cancel’ individuals who dare to voice their difference. These values of epistemic humility, openness and a welcoming of multiple perspectives and realities facilitates a *reciprocal* process of deep listening, enhancing our ability to safely express our edges more authentically and openly while stretching our capacity for staying with the edges of others. This engenders an expansive state of being and knowing that enriches rather than reduces, constricts, degrades or silences. Gestalt therapy is already well placed to embrace this humility and extend its capacity to tolerate the unknown of spirituality by adopting a more inclusive and open attitude to that which eludes simplistic definition (Campos & Ribeiro, 2017).

Conclusion

Gestalt therapy often engages in a limited discussion of spirituality, curtailed by chronological gaps in the literature, outdated associations with religion, circular definitional debates, or narrow focus on early Buddhist influences. Spirituality is criticised, somewhat pejoratively and defensively, by powerful thinkers in the Gestalt community, an undertone which does not sit well with the Gestalt philosophy of respecting and appreciating difference and the phenomenological attitude central to Gestalt practice (Yontef, 2009, 2022). Contemporary spirituality is part of the field and cannot be excluded merely because it stretches the limits of language. Its scope is broader than religion

and signifies a distress call for reconnection with self, other and the more-than-human, as the realisation of our global interdependence emerges into awareness. It is essential that we look beyond precise definition as a precursor to discussion and consider the call of the suffering field as a manifestation of a mass intentionality that harbours an urgent developmental need. The lack of shared ground in terms of basic definition is a problem experienced across disciplines and one that, for Gestalt therapy at least, may not need resolution due to its inherent appreciation of multiple perspectives, valuing of direct experience and ability to engage in authentic dialogue which welcomes difference. Where the goal, if any, is a conversation of perspectives (Bloom, 2011) and a comfort with paradox, we are open and receptive to experience that engenders growth, rather than reductive or rigid states of being. As Gestalt therapists we need to revisit spirituality as a central dimension of human experience and welcome it back into contemporary Gestalt conversation.

The natural ending for this paper might be to neatly outline implications for practice, however I feel hesitation and, dare I say, a sense of danger, in doing so. To choose this path seems to involve suggesting a practical, hands-on ‘to do’ list which may verge on advocating for an intentional spiritual practice, coaxing the client to raise their spiritual awareness or even to recommend a particular modality that focuses upon a spiritually-integrated psychotherapy. This does not sit well with a Gestalt practice that warns us against imposing our worldview upon another or to interpret the experience of another through our personal lens. Alternatively, I invite the reader to engage in a never-ending exercise of reflective practice, one which operates, as Parlett suggests, as a ‘stimulant to thinking differently’ (2015, p. 8). It occurred to me during the process of writing that the crux of this paper is really about our attitudes and posture as therapists; towards ourselves, the world, the unknown and, ultimately, the client. Therefore, it is about invoking our own humility as we sit in consideration of our edges, of our capacity for discomfort in the face of difference and our ability to engage in perspectival conversations with each other that challenge deeply held assumptions. As the invitation to heartbreak implores us to converse with ourselves first, so does the invitation to humility challenge us to critically reflect upon how we position ourselves towards the Other and towards the practice of Gestalt therapy. It is less about a *doing to* the Other, and more a *being-with* that shies away from deliberateness or directiveness and moves towards spontaneity and fluidity. It involves, as Mary-Jayne Rust

describes, a *listening for* (Akomolafe et al., 2022) and an *opening out* to that which might tug at the edges of our knowing and understanding. Miller favours a *quest orientation*; one which ‘is characterised by a tendency to journey in life; to search for answers to meaningful personal decisions and big existential questions; to perceive doubt as positive; to perceive with fresh eyes. In quest, we open ourselves to messages from life, take seriously this discovery, and then actively use learning to shape our decisions and actions’ (2021, p. 170). It is the act, as Akomolafe et al. say, of situating oneself at the crossroads: ‘a place where self is diasporic, spread out, travelling, emerging and becoming’, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to transformation and surrendering to the incomprehensible (2022, p. 8). It is the call to engage in that recursive process of reflection upon who we are as therapists and what we allow into the room. As Yontef (2009) unambiguously states, the relational attitude is one that does not privilege our reality over that of the client. As such, we must step outside of our echo chambers and practise with a sense of humility, reservation, and uncertainty, inhabiting the posture of the perennial seeker.

Ambiguity is a resource rather than a limitation. The next step for Gestalt therapy is to actively differentiate between traditional views of spirituality and evolving understandings of contemporary spirituality. Further, quietening the demands of explanation or rationalisation upon spirituality will resource us to walk the walk of inclusivity, creating a climate of validity and an authentic living posture of capacity for difference. Gestalt therapy already plays its part in answering the call of the suffering field and resourcing humanity to re-imagine its relationship with certainty, disequilibrium and facing heartbreak. Contemporary spirituality and relational Gestalt therapy are both comfortable with the disequilibrium implicit in heartbreak and are centred on beginning with the self as the catalyst for the care of the other. These shared characteristics, attitudes, and ways of being-in-the-world call for a serious reconsideration of spirituality in Gestalt therapy that should not be stifled by the risk of adding on an outside, separate part that threatens to dilute what we already have. Instead, it is a timely reminder of the importance of epistemic humility, openness, and a welcoming of multiple perspectives. While protecting the integrity and purity of Gestalt therapy is core to its survival, it is also necessary to remember the Gestalt tradition of assimilating the new into the system (Winitsky, 2022; Yontef, 2002). The Gestalt community deeply embodies the distinction

between introjecting and assimilating and its greatest strength is grounded in its capacity to chew, swallow, and spit, with awareness. We should continue to have faith in our wisdom to know the difference.

‘Something very beautiful happens to people when their world has fallen apart: a humility, a nobility, a higher intelligence emerges at just the point when our knees hit the floor’ – Marianne Williamson.

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In conversation

PHG, aliveness, and contact: a love story

Claire Asherson Bartram in conversation with Perry Klepner

This article is based on a conversational interview with Perry Klepner. Perry is a Gestalt therapist living in New York, a member of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy and long-time organiser of conference process groups for IAAGT (International Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy). The last time I met him in person was at the gala night of the EAGT (European Association for Gestalt Therapy) conference in Madrid, in a house given over to conference delegates for the evening. On the third floor, tapas was served; in the basement, a sweaty, glittering disco was full of heaving Gestalt bodies. Perry was there, dancing late into the night. He is an excellent person to dance with: smiling, responsive, energetic and fun. The dance floor is a great leveller. Although Perry is older than me, he was still dancing when I left to walk back to my hotel.

Conference Process Groups

Process Groups are a Gestalt group experiment involving contact. They embody the organising principles of Gestalt therapy and apply its theory and practice in conferencing. Each group has ten to twelve members who meet throughout the conference and two facilitators who guide, support and participate. In this way there is an opportunity in the busy conference to meet, supported by the intimacy of a small group to share, reflect on and critically examine workshops, plenary presentations, and professional and personal experiences, to explore questions, emerging experience, thoughts, feelings and the meaning of the conference.

Process groups are not group therapy, or leader-led topic groups. The group is co-created by all participants, facilitation is seen as a function, not a position and leadership resides in everyone as members contribute reactions, concerns, knowledge, personal experience, mutual support and ideas.

For several years Perry has been facilitating groups, reading and discussing the theoretical section of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, authored by Frederick 'Fritz' Perls, Ralph Hefferline and Paul Goodman (PHG). It was first published in 1951 and in the course of our conversation Perry says that he has read it over a hundred times. I am curious to know more about this. Why is PHG so important to him and how has he managed to be keen

enough to have read it so many times? What is the interest for him and others? And what is he bringing to the Gestalt world in these groups? As we talk, the picture emerges of a man deeply engaged in a process of exploration, the experience of groups, a lover of a Gestalt spirit of aliveness and contact.

I proceed to interview Perry using Zoom. When Zoom works, it is almost as magical as the transporter in Star-Trek stories, which moves a person from one place to another in the blink of an eye ('Beam me up Scottie!'). Zoom means that Perry and I are able to converse and see each other, crossing the divide between London and New York, and it enables Perry to run his groups with members from different parts of the world. The downfall of Zoom is its reliance on technology and the variance of the internet. Contact can suddenly be lost, the image can freeze or turn dark, speech can become garbled. During my first conversation with Perry our connection crashes, and we arrange to meet a second time.

The themes of this piece have been taken from Perry's words. He talks about the value of reading and chewing over PHG. He describes how his PHG reading groups run and finally we talk together about experience and faith. Our conversation moves from description to experiencing, from confusion to clarity and contact, itself an example of the contact process elucidated in PHG.

A unitary experience

I first ask Perry why PHG is important for him now, as the texts are over seventy years old: ‘You exude enthusiasm for it. Your interest remains fresh, and you invite others to join you. You have developed a way of being involved with PHG over many years. How have you managed this?’

‘I think PHG will always be important as a historical document,’ Perry says, ‘because it is the first comprehensive statement of Gestalt therapy. I find it has exceptional qualities, providing a subtle and penetrating presentation of our experiential process with moving and inspirational themes and psychological insights. It takes a broad view of our radical approach and the psychological perspectives that organise it, explores it in various illuminating contexts of human experience, and it provokes new creative views of what psychotherapy is and how to do it. It is transformative with ideas about self, contact, field and our personal environmental field and has a unitary perspective that reformulates ideas about creativity, adjustment and the nature of human consciousness, awareness and learning. It is complex and intense, presenting a radical approach which requires active comprehending effort with a non-conceptual experience as it systematically constructs and deconstructs its psychological perspectives. I suggest the reader approach it as a contemplative meditation, to let its ideas wash over them and be digested with time.’

Perry continues, saying that our seminal Gestalt book offers a psychological examination of dichotomous human experience across commonly held perspectives that restrict our ability to achieve satisfactory living. An analysis of the book takes people on an experiential journey that includes, but is beyond, the words. In that way it differs from much theoretical writing. He says, ‘While many newer books on Gestalt therapy detail and develop its primary ideas of contact, field, phenomenal approach and philosophical ground, PHG refers to our living processes and life activity, close to Lewin’s concept of world and life space. I find [that] the experience of reading PHG is integrative and inspirational. As I continue to study it I am changed by doing so.’

Lewin’s life space

The idea of ‘life space’ or ‘psychological field’ is that an individual’s behaviour, at any time, is manifested only within the current coexisting factors. So a life space is the combination of all the factors that influences a person’s behaviour at any time ... an example of a more complex life-space concept is the idea that two people’s experience of a situation can become one when they converse together. The combined space can be ‘built up’ as the two people share more ideas and create a more complex life-space together. (Wikipedia, 2024)

I ask whether he is saying that reading PHG is a unitary activity itself?

‘You are correct,’ he says. ‘It is the same as what we do as Gestalt therapists, in that we support our clients to be aware of themselves and the world they’re in and help them to integrate that with insight and affect’. This is the case across the entire text of the theoretical section of the book ‘Reality, Human Nature, and Society’ which was mainly written by Paul Goodman. The chapters each describe contact, self and field from different perspectives. In the third chapter, ‘Mind, Body, and External World’ Goodman describes the nature of good contact, Freud and his ideas, possibilities of the contact boundary, unitary conception, and scientific adequacy. The following chapter is ‘Reality, Emergency and Evaluation’, in which he describes reality as a psychological process of organising experience. The book continues on to discuss the anthropological development of human speech, hearing and perception, and the latter chapters are on social and moral influences.

In Chapter VII ‘Verbalising and Poetry’ (Perls et al., 1951a, pp. 329-322), Goodman describes good speech as an interaction of four psychological levels of ‘speaking, thought, subvocal speech and outcries and silent awarenesses such as images and body feeling’ and that ‘in a poem ... the content, the attitude and character, and the tone and rhythm, mutually express one another, and this makes the structural unity of the poem’ (PHG, 1951, p. 322). Perry says ‘this also describes what I find reading this book, which is that the subject matter, syntax and rhythm of Goodman’s writing joins with my interests, with deeply resonant meaning and purpose.’

‘It sounds like magic when you put it that way,’ I say.

Perry responds, 'I would say that reading PHG is "magic-like" in the spontaneity and clarity with which the style and subject matter come together with insights and new awareness arising suddenly, evoking surprise and wonder with deeply felt qualities of clarity and meaning ... it is a Gestalt that comprises a new unity of experience. So, when a person says something meaningful to another person such as "I love you", the affect matters, the words matter, the whole experience is penetrating and is felt in the depths of one's being. Feelings matter, and we feel in our bodies.' He continues, 'a person can go through Gestalt therapy and integrate their experience and contact with greater acuity, feeling and insight. We know something is complete through a feeling of integrated awareness and we put that into words by saying that contact is a feeling, a thought, and a sensory, somatic experience.'

Awakening

'I think you are saying that when you read PHG, you experience something in yourself which says this feels just right,' I say.

Perry responds, 'It didn't feel "just right", it was something else. Let me explain further. When I first read PHG fifty years ago, it was saying something that I was not comprehending, but simultaneously it was touching the possibility of what could be meaningful for me. Then I studied it with Richard Kitzler and Isadore From and practised using it. I was referring to it for decades and decades.'

'I come from a background with an education that could offer limited emotional support and guidance for the complex life challenges I was encountering. At the time I knew that I was on a wrong track for myself. I was getting a divorce after being married for two years to my college sweetheart. We had been dating for five years, but it didn't take too long living together, to know that the marriage was wrong. I was working in finance on Wall Street and was depressed. I wasn't living in a manner that was interesting, exciting, or satisfying. I was in fact very unhappy.'

I ask him how he became a Gestalt therapist.

'I started investigating what the possibilities were for me to solve my difficulties,' he tells me. 'I read thirty different psychotherapy approaches looking for what might be the one for me. Then I read *Gestalt Verbatim* (Perls, 1969) and it seemed to provide important information to enable me to discern what's right for me and what's wrong for me, to learn to work with my ego

function of yes and no. I had to try seeing a therapist and I oriented myself towards one that was emphasising experience. I had previously gone to National Training Laboratories (NTL) in Bethel, Maine. They were not encounter groups, more peer support groups to help freshman students coming in. I remember the experience of those groups as being very attractive. It was then I realised that I like to work with people and that maybe psychotherapy could be something I would enjoy and find value doing.

'I saw Richard Kitzler (for therapy) and also went to meetings of the New York Institute (for Gestalt Therapy) and liked that as well. But my first orientation to Gestalt came through reading PHG, (and) wanting to learn more about Gestalt. I was not understanding it and saw that I didn't get it, but that I could go to meetings and learn through experience. Therefore, I began further study that was more meaningful. So, how I got to become a therapist was through that transition from an unhappy, young adult life to an awakening; integrating my feelings, thoughts and actions into how to live.'

National Training Laboratories

Kurt Lewin founded the National Training Laboratories Institute for Applied Behavioural Science, known as the NTL Institute, an American non-profit behavioural psychology centre, in 1947. NTL became a major influence in modern corporate training programmes, and in particular developed T-groups or training groups (also known as sensitivity training, human relations, encounter groups), which are a form of group training where participants learn about themselves through their interaction with each other. The methodology remains in place today.

Perry elaborates, 'that Gestalt therapy makes a wonderful contribution all over the world. When people encounter it, they know they're doing something that's worthwhile and pertinent to their lives. That's why it's attracted all the people it has and continues to grow and develop.'

He says that reading PHG as deeply as he does is not a prerequisite for 'doing' Gestalt therapy, that 'there are certain people who really like PHG and can grow with it ... who find it a referral resource that orientates and supports them as they work in their practices. Some of those people end up teaching PHG, but many don't.

There are many people who have found another path to Gestalt therapy which doesn't require that kind of theoretical development and who have developed their own approaches and integrations. I think this can be good Gestalt therapy if it includes the same phenomenological, experiential, experimental, field-theoretical approach that PHG develops.'

PHG and change

'Do you see quite a bit of Gestalt that looks different from that to you out there?' I ask.

'Yes,' Perry says. 'There are many different Gestalts in that every individual practitioner has their own phenomenological process and they practise the therapy differently. PHG itself presents two different approaches to Gestalt therapy in the theoretical volume and the experimental volume. The New York Institute [for Gestalt Therapy] was led by Laura Perls and Isadore From, and they always used and valued PHG. Fritz Perls practised his different version in the sixties. The Gestalt therapy field is always developing through the work of dynamic, intelligent, creative individuals.'

'It seems to me that things always have to change,' I say.

'That's right,' he says, 'change is integral to PHG, which was never meant to be the finished statement on Gestalt therapy. There's a lot that PHG does not cover at all. Goodman and Perls in their differing approaches do not discuss things we routinely consider to be necessary, such as orienting the client, couples and family work, group work and so on. People come to Gestalt therapy from different initial experiences. For example, on the West Coast Jim Simpkin was a big influence. Also, Claudio Naranjo from South America brought in a spiritual element, and he was influenced by Perls's presentations and books in the sixties.'

Perry continues, 'More recently there has been a focus on relationality. However, I would say that PHG was always relational in its emphasis on the therapist-client interactions, contact and withdrawal, with respect for the creative integrity and adjustments achieved by the client. That to me is relational; the relationship of the in-between, you and I right now. That is where meaning can be found. It is not to emphasise a prescribed relationship to achieve a cure, as some therapies do. It is the contact of the dynamic parts and wholes of the person and field, the structure of the experience of client and therapist. As the relationship between the client and therapist develops, we have understanding, we have trust, and we can risk the challenges of two

people coming together with their differing experiences of things. We can risk working on vulnerable and confused feelings, and those that are not immediately obvious. With this support, anxious fixed experiences can shift bringing new perspectives, ideas and feelings. We can examine the flow of contact and withdrawal between us and its qualities of coherence, intensity, ease, and discomforts as it happens. For example, I might say [to a client], "What's happening now? I see you are looking away and feel sad and confused as you say that".'

Incomprehensibility of PHG: confusion

'I like it when you describe coming across PHG and not understanding it. I recognise the experience of what's being said there as being hard to grasp because it's so immediate,' I say.

Perry responds, 'Not understanding PHG is a big subject. According to Isadore From, the writing was designed not to be introjected, so that you can't just read it and say, "Oh, I'm going to do Gestalt therapy!" PHG offers a challenge or a problem we cannot solve except by committing ourselves to feeling confused. If something is complicated, it involves not knowing before there can be knowing and this involves experiencing confusion. My experience of how to make sense of the book is to stay with this confusion in order for knowing to concretise and be known in our whole being; our somatic and thinking experience. What Goodman writes about in "Mind, Body and External World" is mundane, but also very complicated. Confusion and not knowing are huge areas of vulnerability and uncertainty developed in negative personal and cultural education learning experiences. People have created their own adaptational styles to manage this.'

Perry then pauses, before pointing out that 'PHG is not meant for everyone. I have had someone say to me "I've always had a pit in my stomach about PHG. I can't go near it. It nauseates me" and I say "I understand, it can make me feel that way too. Goodman and Perls are not easy people to have a conversation with besides being dead. Goodman's style can be provocative, sarcastic and difficult to comprehend." In order to understand the book, you have to have the Gestalt mentality. In order to have the Gestalt mentality you have to understand the book. These are things you have to sit with, think about and assimilate. I have found that when I read difficult passages with others, confusions transform to enlivening brightness of comprehension; as if to say "Oh, that's not so terrible".'

At this point, we lose our online connection.

Second interview

The second interview takes place a few weeks later. This time, Zoom works smoothly and our conversation deepens. By the end, it becomes an encounter between us, less of an interview, more a genuine conversation. I feel closer to Perry because of this time together.

The online reading groups, destroying the text

Perry starts the conversation by saying, ‘Part of my thought about Gestalt therapy is what Laura Perls has said; that there are as many Gestalt therapies as there are Gestalt therapists. We are talking about an experiential process where every therapist brings their phenomenology to the moment of interaction with the client, and the client brings theirs.’

I ask Perry how the online groups work.

He says, ‘There is a meeting and a developing relationship. I bring my excited, interested enthusiasm for PHG and the participants bring their interest in learning and available presence. We all bring who we’ve been, who we are, who we are becoming. Everything I do proceeds as does a process group. I have thirty years of experience organising and training people to facilitate process groups and applying what I know to studying PHG has been exciting.’

‘The groups have a structure. We start with a check-in which allows time for group participants to settle and orientate themselves to the here-and-now and coming together. In my last group for example, during check-in, people talked about how they felt in the moment and related this to whether they were completing a thesis submission, suffering because of the ravages of the Middle East war, or something to do with PHG. After the check-in, I give a review of last month’s reading. I do that spontaneously, so I might include some earlier Gestalt therapy theory material, or I might include references that relate theory and practice to the current world situation. We proceed to read PHG as a group. I’ll ask for a volunteer, and they will begin reading, and we make room for interruptions. Any feelings or thoughts that are arising for members, we take to be the background emerging so that we are processing our reading as we read. Someone might read three sentences and I’ll say, “Please let me interrupt you. I want to just elaborate on this word or this phrase.” Or someone will read ten sentences and I’ll ask, “What

are people thinking and feeling now?” Or someone else might interrupt, and say “I’m having difficulty with this sentence or this phrase, and I’m feeling distant, or interested” or “I’m confused by this”. So, we’ll discuss differences in perception and understanding.’

I ask Perry if anyone in any of his groups has critiqued PHG?

Perry says that they have discussions all the time: ‘It is strongly encouraged, and I bring my own disagreements. Things have changed. PHG was the beginning of Gestalt therapy, so it is inadequate. It provides limited or no mention of the background philosophy and the phenomenological roots upon which it was developed. Due to the challenges of explanation, language, and [it being] a new text, it can lapse into describing therapy as being done to a client rather than it being a client-therapist interaction and the description of “self” can be unclear. These instances need identification and clarification.’

I tell him that as he describes his PHG groups, I see him as someone steeped in process and the way he manages these groups is an example of that. ‘Have you ever completed the book in any of your groups?’ I ask.

Perry says that a group which began seven years ago, is now up to the second or third section of chapter fifteen and that ‘reading once a month is different from a weekly study’.

Perry continues: ‘The two volumes, “Novelty, Excitement and Growth” – principally written by Goodman – and “Mobilising the Self” – written by Perls – provide different approaches to Gestalt therapy. Perls is more experimental and self-explorative; Goodman is more theoretical and process oriented with his elaboration of a variable self and contact as a temporal sequence of contact and withdrawal.’

I share with Perry that what interests me is his description of going through the book in detail as with a fine-toothed comb, the parts-and-wholes as an experience itself. I say, ‘For example, some art aims to evoke an experience rather than be a pretty picture, like Rothko. His paintings are huge. They are coloured, fuzzy squares set in another colour. When you are up close you feel submerged in the colour, and there are no edges, you get a sense of eternity; they evoke an experience. They are not really meant to be looked at from afar.’

It seems that in your PHG groups you take people closely into the experience of the book. It's theory, but it's more than theory.'

'Can you say more about the value for contemporary practitioners in studying this book?'

Perry tells me that 'the value is that reading PHG stimulates assertive thoughtfulness in the effort of understanding its concepts, while exploring one's own feeling experience as one proceeds to read it. This approach offers conceptual as well as non-conceptual learning in an integrative and unifying experience of our phenomenological approach, of contact, feeling insight and awareness. PHG contributes to a foundation and is not independent of all the other learning we can do. Understanding PHG is not required for doing good Gestalt therapy, which is an activity of the therapist and client meeting in which, similar to an artwork, contact is created that facilitates an experiential, novel, emergent integration experience. In novel figure/background gestalt-making come things like greater elasticity of figure-ground experience and working through habituated or fixed and unaware structures, that organise experience. Assimilated theory is our knowledge and is essential, otherwise it can serve as a catch up and can be useful that way. Theory can explain what is happening but doesn't do the work. Many Gestalt therapists with an artistic and creative bent, and who struggle with theory, can do excellent Gestalt therapy.'

Perry continues, 'PHG explains that we can use theory as a guide or map. It supports a presence open to emergent feelings and thoughts, orienting towards possible inquiries and observations of what may prove meaningful. So, when you sit down with a person who is having an unclear figure/background experience and incapacitating confusion, my own phenomenal experience resonates with that person's inter-subjectivity. I have an unknowing pre-figural experience with qualities of comfort, discomfort and emerging excitements or feelings and sometimes I feel left in a dark void of confusion. Then my assimilated theory and practice training can support my available presence. In this way the theory can guide us in the contact process.'

Perry elucidates his perspective, his argument is that 'relationality was in Gestalt therapy from the beginning. Although people talk now about new ideas of being relational, somatic, or of field, these have been important to our approach from its inception. What is

wonderful is the new language and detailing of Gestalt therapy that is exciting and which enriches our work. The new directions I am referring to are the emphases on the relational field, dialogue, phenomenological inter-subjective, situational, process and somatic experiences that have flowered and been hot topics in recent decades. Perhaps the experiential emphasis of the process study-group approach I am attempting with PHG can be a contribution. In reading PHG I spend equal time on integrating what we're reading and members' here-now-next experience. I think this facilitates the learning of Gestalt therapy from PHG. This does not suit everyone's style and needs but for those who are suited to it, it can make the theory and practice comprehensible and come alive. In the groups we don't take the book as it is, we are destroying the text as we read it. As we clarify the language and contextualise the theory, we assimilate it and relate it to our therapy work. Doing this, the words and ideas feel alive and present in everyday practice. Additionally, the group provides a social learning experience that is enlivening and different from solely reading the text. I ask myself the question, how is it that I've now read this book again and again? I read it many times to begin with, before I ever studied the book with other people. Now I'm reading it line by line with different groups going through the same paragraphs and ideas over and over and I continue to find it interesting and that it excites my interest in Gestalt therapy. I don't think this is everyone's experience. If you're more cognitively involved and have a better memory than I, you might be bored with this by now. I offer this to people who find it interesting, and I don't make a negative judgement about anyone who isn't reading PHG.'

I tell Perry that I think this is possible because the book is very alive for him. I see that he has a passion and interest and loves this process and this book.

Faith in the process

I reflect that Perry is taking something that was written more than seventy years ago and rather than treating it as something to be preserved he is making the reading of it a living experience, in his groups. He sees reading PHG as worthwhile, personally gets a lot out of it and continues to be excited with it and passionate about what happens. What he is doing in his groups is what the book describes. He is facilitating a series of Process Groups through the act of reading about process as it was first conceived by Goodman. People are interested, not because he is rehashing an old theory; instead he

is bringing it alive into the present and taking it in different directions.

I proceed to ask Perry about Paul Goodman.

Perry says that he's never met Paul Goodman, but that 'he was a very smart person who could integrate and present a lot. It's strange that Perls and Goodman, who wrote the book, didn't do much more with it. They were both creative people. That's what I was saying about going over, and over, and over the book. Goodman and Perls didn't do that, they went on to do other things and Perls did his own Gestalt therapy. They didn't need to reread it.'

I tell Perry that there are phrases in PHG I find poignant that have stuck with and guided me. I share my favourite quote with him from Goodman: 'for faith is knowing, beyond awareness, that if one takes a step there will be ground underfoot: one gives oneself unhesitatingly to the act, one has faith that the background will produce the means' (Perls et al., 1951a). I tell Perry that 'I feel like this, always in at the deep end, however now I have more tools to work with than when I started as a therapist. The world is surprising, and things are new, afresh, all the time'.

I describe my own training in Gestalt to Perry, which was all about process in that most of what we did was in groups, and they were difficult groups. 'The trainers were flawed. For a while they were like gurus to us trainees. However, during that time, I watched people transform. I saw them become what we would term more authentic, more truly themselves, more vivid, passionate, and direct. This training was incredible because it was more than training to be a therapist. I find that Gestalt continues to take me towards knowing myself more and more,' I say.

Perry responds, 'I hear faith when you describe your experience in training. It sounds like it was a hard training. My interpretation is that you were in the midst of contacting, that was difficult, that could be interpreted in different ways, and you breathed, and you sat with the heat of that, you held the heat of that, you breathed and trembled. You breathed again and found you were here now and emerging to the next. That's the development of a certain kind of faith. A confidence that's existential, and experiential. It's somatic in your body. That's an important quality of our facilitating as Gestalt therapists, of our being in the process of being with the client changing, and we are changing and the client learning in that process, their own faith.'

I tell Perry of the beginning of my involvement with Process Groups, through which I came to know Perry and which I blundered into. Firstly, assisting Sean Gaffney in Amsterdam, when I was very uncertain about my ability to run groups, then being in Philadelphia being asked to facilitate one on my own. I tell him that 'my group included Karen Humphrey and Philip Lichtenberg, and I was daunted as these were people who I had heard of, famous and experienced people. Both have since died. It turned out to be a wonderful group, like that idea of faith, taking a step into the unknown, we went somewhere together, to a good place, falling in love with each other. I learned that to be a Process Group leader isn't to be a leader really, it is to hold the space for a conversation to happen, and that conversation leads to contact.'

Perry tells me that the people I named 'read PHG and grew in the crucible of the New York Institute [for Gestalt Therapy], together with Isadore From, Richard Kitzler and Laura Perls'.

I feel enlivened by our conversation, touched by Perry and happy that we are connecting in this way. The book *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* came at a time when there was change in the academic world, people wanting to break free of old traditions. The Western world was waking up after the shock of WWII. Perry Klepner keeps the flame of excitement in contact alive, through honouring this book written many years ago, carrying the inspiration it brought then, into the present. It has been a pleasure to have this conversation with him and I am touched by his dedication and passion. Our interview is an example of the process and contact he is talking about as someone deeply involved, who loves good contact, love and the process of getting there.

I tell him that I will send him what I have written. He says, 'I have faith and look forward to reading it. This has been fun'.

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Claire Asherson Bartram DPsych first came across Gestalt 1983 and qualified as a therapist in 1991. She now works in North London as therapist, supervisor and group facilitator. She has developed a strong interest in complicated family relationships, and has a doctorate focusing on mothers in stepfamilies. Claire has worked with Perry on the IAAGT Committee for Process Groups for many years and is enthusiastic about groups and their potential for deep, relational contact, learning and support.

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Reviews

Class: a thematic book review

Joelle Gartner

- Bithymitris G. (2023). *Class, Trauma, Identity: Psychosocial Encounters*, Routledge.
- Burnell Reilly, I. ed. (2022). *The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Ryan, J. (2017). *Class and Psychoanalysis: Landscapes of Inequality*, Routledge.

Introduction

In 2023, I wrote an article for *British Gestalt Journal* called ‘Social Class and Gestalt Therapy: are we blind?’ (Gartner, 2023). This review of the three books listed above aims to continue exploring class relations in the therapeutic relationship, in particular Gestalt practice.

Recent years have seen a number of memoirs of working-class experience, but little in the way of study of class in psychotherapy. In Gestalt, class relations are as yet not as figural as race or gender, despite a growing interest in the impact of class on people’s experience, and in particular the ‘classed trauma’ described in the psychosocial field (Bithymitris, 2023, pp. 2-6). The workshop I ran for the IAAGT conference in May 2022 ‘Social class and Gestalt therapy: are we blind?’ resulted in an Interest Group that still meets online every two months to read together and share experiences and reflections on that subject. Encouraged by their energy, I review these three books and hope this will spark further interest.

One comes from the psychoanalytic tradition, another from sociology of education, and the third psychosociology. The important questions here are: What contribution might these books make to raising the awareness and consciousness of class among Gestaltists? And how might they contribute to the art and craft of Gestalt therapy?

I will state that I regard class not as a static set of attributes, socio-economic or cultural, but in the Marxist sense, as a dynamic relationship of power around the ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Philip Lichtenberg discussed

this in *Community in Confluence* when speaking of ‘liberation psychology’:

‘I reject the position that the oppressed are determined [powerless, nothing but victims], while the oppressors are free to implement whatever they wish, [simply powerful, free-acting, able to choose in an uninhibited way]. We are all both influenced and influential. [Simplistic powerlessness and powerfulness] misses the psychological underpinning for the installation and maintenance of oppression’ (Lichtenberg, 1990).

The current geopolitical context is an extension of this drive for power and ownership of resources applied to peoples and countries. Today’s individualistic and consumerist culture is an extension of this exploitative drive, as it affects individuals’ livelihoods, health and well-being. My interest in the individual experience of this material reality started with my exploration of my own lifespaces, my own history embedded in History, and it continues in my therapeutic work. The labels ‘working class’, ‘middle class’, and ‘upper class’ used in these texts may be seen as shorthand to the subjective and objective experience of people in a deeply unequal world.

Class and Psychoanalysis: our analytical origins

Is there value for a Gestalt practitioner in reading a book focused on psychoanalysis? I would argue yes, for three reasons: there is not yet a thorough study of Gestalt therapy theory and practice regarding social class; psychoanalysis is one of the main roots of Gestalt therapy, and as such of interest to Gestalt practitioners; and much of what is said relative to psychoanalysis applies to Gestalt therapy also.

Among the many topics I find relevant and interesting in *Class and Psychoanalysis*, I will select four:

1. The lived experience of class:

In chapters six and seven, Joanna Ryan refers to her qualitative research with ‘thirteen experienced psychoanalytic psychotherapists’ (op. cit., p.102). Ryan writes about therapists in training, such as working-class trainee therapists feeling less confident, silencing themselves, finding no space in the training to explore their origins, experiencing the dislocation of class mobility:

‘I can move in and out of either class in different situations I suppose ... It’s always remained something I’m painfully aware of now that I’m seen as middle-class, but I don’t have that middle-class background that would give me a sort of confidence with my peer group.’ (op. cit., p. 108).

Ryan also writes about therapists and their patients¹ experiencing class difference, such as a middle-class patient saying to a working-class therapist: ‘I’m wondering if you’re going to be any good, because you sound quite working-class’ (op. cit. p. 120). ‘Class contempt as an aspect of transference exposes what is often kept politely or defensively hidden: attributions of inferiority or superiority according to class’ (op. cit., p. 121). These two chapters will undoubtedly resonate with many Gestalt practitioners.

2. How Freud dismissed and even erased the issue of class:

In his analysis of *Wolf Man*, for example, Freud barely acknowledged the central role of the old peasant woman who nursed him as a child, and the servant girl to whom he became attracted as an adolescent in his developmental process. Freud did not give any theoretical status to the patient’s meaningful relationships with these two women in the context of a distant and often absent mother, focusing instead on the primal scene of the parental coupling as central to *Wolf Man*’s later sexual interests. This and other analyses have since been widely reinterpreted in the light of class, gender and postcolonial studies.

3. The continuity of initiatives and reflections by Marxist psychoanalysts:

There is a long, left-wing tradition in psychoanalysis, despite its origins; *Class and Psychoanalysis* outlines the contribution of many authors linking the psychological,

social and political with an analytical approach, who include colonialism, imperialism, racism and feminism in their analyses. The author, Joanna Ryan, references (ibid., p. 36) Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather*. In it, McClintock writes: ‘Race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other, rather they come into existence in and through relation with each other’ (McClintock, 1995, p. 5).

The Berlin Polyklinik, Vienna’s Ambulatorium were set up between the World Wars to offer low-cost therapy to those who couldn’t afford it. People like Wilhelm Reich, Otto Fenichel and Erich Fromm, who were influential at the beginning of Gestalt therapy, were involved in these initiatives, and wrote theories to fill the gap left by Freud. Indeed, the work of the Frankfurt School of critical theory aimed to reconcile the historical materialism of Marx and the anthropology of Freud. I remember again in this context our Gestalt colleague, Philip Lichtenberg, an admirer of Fenichel, and his early contribution to this subject (Lichtenberg, 1969).

4. The class-based multi-tiered approach to psychotherapy:

In his 1918 article, Freud called for a ‘psychotherapy for the people’, and wrote that ‘any large-scale application of our therapy will compel us to alloy the pure gold of analysis freely with the copper of direct suggestion; and hypnotic influence too’ (op. cit., p. 71).

The cost, frequency and open-endedness of psychoanalytical work tends to rule out people of low income, and the delineation by Freud of a two-tier approach is mirrored in the three tiers of the profession: analysts, psychodynamic psychotherapists and psychodynamic counsellors, a distinction which often represents a class difference among therapists and their patients.

There is much more of value in *Class and Psychoanalysis*, and I believe that Gestalt practitioners would benefit from reading this book in small groups, perhaps starting with chapters six and seven as a discussion starter. This book will certainly contribute to Gestalt practitioners’ reflection on the impact of social class in their practice, their methodology and their theory.

The Lives of Working Class Academics: how we got from there to here

The next book is an autoethnographic exploration of ‘what it is like to be working class and what it is like to

be a working-class academic' by fourteen working-class academics in Britain and one in Ireland (Dublin-born, teaches in Belfast). Iona Burnell Reilly who edited this book is 'second-generation Irish'² and she contributed her own chapter. She is also a Gestalt counsellor in training. The fifteen contributors, eight women (two who co-wrote a chapter) and seven men, are all from working-class backgrounds and have journeyed to academic positions through university, an elitist institution that for all its protestations is a powerful instrument in the production and maintenance of inequality. Nine of them lecture and write on education, five on sociology and social policy, and one on Irish literature (with an interest in the cultural production of Irish working-class life). Their choice of specialism and their research publications appear motivated by their personal histories.

I read the last chapter first: *Tackling the Taboo: The Personal Is Political (and It's Scholarly Too)* by Michael Pierse, because of its Irish context. Pierse movingly illustrates the school's reinforcement of the class system through not putting words on the working-class experience, quoting the French sociologist Bourdieu: 'The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need for words, and ask no more than a complicitous silence' (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 188). The story of his friend 'Jimmy' who he invited to lunch at Trinity College Dublin, and was ejected from the university grounds because a porter thought he was 'loitering suspiciously' (p. 210) is a poignant one: why one young working-class man got into academia and the other not – even though Jimmy later spent two years in university, before dropping out. Jimmy's subsequent tragic fate shows obstacles are placed in the way of working-class people entering academia.

The first chapter of the book, *Navigating the Relational Character of Social Class for Capitalism in the Academy* by Alpesh Maisuria, does not say much about the author other than he is of Indian/African heritage, but makes a strong and welcome argument for a re-centering of social class, not as a descriptive category (a set of attributes) but explanatory, as a set of relations. He shows well the limitations of research that ignores the function of education in a capitalist society, namely to reproduce and consolidate the acceptance of inequality. One might indeed ask oneself the same question about therapist education!

The second chapter by Craig A. Hammond *Mr Airport Man and the Albatross: A Reverie of Flight, Hope and Transformation* is well titled: it must be read while listening to the adolescent yearning in Fleetwood Mac's

Albatross... with reference to Gaston Bachelard, a French postal worker who became professor of philosophy. Bachelard's philosophical writings on time would indeed be of particular interest to Gestalt therapists. After reading Chapter Seven, *Uptown Top Ranking: From a Council Estate to the Academy* written by Marcia A. Wilson, a Black working-class woman, I listened again to *Uptown Top Ranking*, the 2001 song of her title. Chapter three: *Power, Corruption and Lies: Fighting the Class War to Widen Participation in Higher Education* is a lively and emotionally rich account by Colin McCaig of his journey to academia, with a robust attack of the marketisation of education and the 'mythology of meritocracy'. 29 years as a teacher, I can only say, 'Hear hear!'

In a moving, self-reflective chapter entitled *Who Do You Think You Are? The Influence of Working-Class Experience on an Educator in a Process of Becoming*, Peter Shukie writes: 'My own story is not one of triumph, but it is one of survival. I am working class, from poverty, and surprised that I am looking at my experiences for the first time as ones of class and not of my own failings.'

Race and ethnicity are mentioned in several chapters, as is gender in chapter seven (mentioned above) and in chapter four *Friends First, Colleagues Second: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Approach to Exploring Working-Class Women's Experiences of the Neoliberal Academy* by Carli Rowell and Hannah Walters, with the 'experience of working-class women aspiring to and working in academia' who have to navigate a world largely led by white, upper-middle class men. While I may disagree with the static description of class that is implied in that chapter, I like the three recommendations at the end:

'Where comfortable and safe to do so, make visible your working-class identity when teaching or interacting with students.'

'Be mindful of spaces in academia where class is missing from the conversation.'

'Reject problematic confluences of working-class and whiteness.'

(op. cit., p. 52)

History is central to Stephen Wong's chapter *Class is a Verb: Lived Encounters of a Minority Ethnic Academic Who Self-Identifies With Aspects of Working-Class Cultures in the United Kingdom*. A number of writers' heritage

includes immigration: Indian/African, Pakistani, Jamaican, Irish, Chinese/Malaysian, yet strangely not all of them mention history and British colonisation of foreign lands as forces in the social field they were born into.

Chapter eight, *One's Place and the Right to Belong*, is written by the Editor, Iona Burnell Reilly, who reminds us that when her father arrived from Ireland, landlords had signs in windows saying 'No Irish, no Blacks, no dogs'. Her writing is influenced by Bourdieu's sociology and his work on education, social and cultural capital and symbolic violence. She looks at accent as an identifier of class in Britain, whereas in other countries it might be an indicator of region, and addresses the 'imposter' experience and the multiple identities that working-class academics navigate when entering Higher Education.

Why read this book? If you come from a working-class background and are a Gestalt practitioner, chances are these are your experiences. They will be the experiences of some of the people who will come to work with you. The autoethnographic approach is a useful tool in therapy, as people explore their lifespace, and make and remake the narrative of their life.

Class, Trauma, Identity: clinical sociology, psychosocial activism

Travelling in the opposite direction to Joanna Ryan, Giorgos Bithymitris looks at the psychological (the 'classed trauma') through a sociological lens. His extensive (I nearly wrote 'defensive!') early chapters set out the argument for his methodology. There is a small overlap between his bookshelf and mine and this allowed me into a dense and detailed book, where any familiar concept or source was a welcome footrest. His focus on the dialectic of identity/identification is an interesting angle to bridge the sociology and the psychology of class. Its sweep through the history of Greek working-class struggles and politics invites us into the recent history of a country that made the news headlines because of its economic difficulties and its rescuing of refugees from the sea. For all its arid abstraction, the book is full of emotion and heart, and of the concrete experiences of the Greek working-class.

For therapists I recommend chapter nine as the most helpful entry point. While chapter eight, *The Many*, details the research methodology, chapter nine, *The One*, focuses on individual stories. In it, Bithymitris illustrates the dialectic of identity and identification in each case, with a helpful diagram on page 181.

Gestaltists are more used to the identifications/alienations dynamic described early by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951/1996). However, working with 'who am I' (personality in Gestalt theory of self) and 'what am I, who do I belong with' is also explored in therapy. The eight people interviewed and interpreted for us using the lens of identity/identification not only give flesh and blood to the author's argument, but also might allow Gestalt practitioners to wrestle with the interpretations, perhaps even imagine what other aspects of experience they might have wanted to engage with. I personally find analytical interpretation sometimes enlightening, and other times irritatingly disembodied and reifying.

In the book's first four chapters, Bithymitris defines 'classed traumas' not as pathology but as 'traumas whose negotiation is heavily conditioned by class constraints' and follows De Gaulejac in that social conflicts patterned across the lines of gender or race may also interfere with these traumas, either augmenting or cancelling their troubled effects (op. cit., p. 3-4, p. 247). He argues that the history and context, the diachronic (over time) and synchronic (present context) 'should be examined together'. In a detailed discussion of the dialectic of 'identity' and 'identification', he goes from sociology to psychoanalysis, and refers to Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Erikson and Lacan. Chapters one and two are dense but worth spending time on, and will require examination by Gestalt practitioners whose field-theoretical approach to person/environment interaction, the dynamic of identification and alienation, and Gestalt's focus on agency and change dynamics, are not a million miles away. Some happy hours can be had bridging those gaps. Chapter three, *On class and trauma*, reviews definitions and theories, and is another great reference. Chapter four contains a worthwhile essay on 'American and British landscapes of class traumas' and a wistful look at the impact of deindustrialisation. By that stage, I was beginning to imagine that the authors of the three books in this review belonged to the same reading group!

Bithymitris's homeland, Greece, appears in that chapter, and he introduces it through social history and class dynamics. The list of eight collective traumas (Bithymitris, 2023, p. 125) from the interwar period to now, evokes for a therapist the background of inter- and trans-generational traumas in the people who come to work with them. One of these collective traumas concerns the port of Piraeus: a story of deindustrialisation, and the move from skilled

industrial work to small precarious jobs, with the destruction of the social fabric. British readers will remember the miners' strike of 1984, the pit closures that followed, and what became of the communities that had formed and lived around the mines. Another of these traumas is the Greek civil war of 1944-1949, 'Europe's bloodiest conflict between 1945 and 1991, and also a turning point of the Cold War' (op. cit., p. 132). I think of Belfast, the place where I live and work, where the ongoing dynamic of Irish reunification sits on layers of collective traumas, the Famine, military repression and armed conflict, discrimination, poverty and deindustrialisation, and where a significant proportion of people feel a kinship with the fight for Palestinian rights.

Notes

- 1) People in therapy (the term 'patient' is still used in the psychoanalytic field despite most practitioners being lay therapists).
- 2) Her parents emigrated from Ireland to Britain where she was born.

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Opinion

Embracing the pain: my experience with fibromyalgia and Gestalt

Rachael Kellett

I want to share with you my journey with fibromyalgia and how I believe my training in Gestalt both triggered it and healed me of it. Though not entirely cured, I tune into my body and urge myself to say more. My belief is that pain and fatigue are the body's way of saying 'no' to something. I intuited this, even before encountering Gabor Maté's book *When the body says no* (2003). While the book validated my beliefs, I was disappointed that it did not go far enough. My own body's silent resistance stemmed from neglecting my own needs and not daring to ask for them to be met. What unfolded next was pivotal in letting go of this chapter of my story. Throughout this narrative, I share my experiences with fibromyalgia, and the profound influence of Gestalt therapy, which began during my time as an Assistant Psychologist at The Retreat, a private psychiatric hospital in York.

Immersed in the psychiatric field

As an Assistant Psychologist at The Retreat, I lived on site and worked across two wards, an acute ward, and a ward for people who have been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and various eating disorders, as well as victims of cults. I did this under a psychologist who specialised in dissociation. Living and breathing the psychiatric field, I absorbed its emotional and physical toll. Witnessing distressing events, I believed I coped well, only to realise later that I had suppressed the trauma.

One shift remains etched in my memory. I, along with a trainee nurse, discovered a patient hanging in her room. We cut her down, and she survived. The senior nurses focused on supporting the trainee nurse; no one seemed to have imagined that I might need support. Later that same shift, there were a further two suicide attempts and, once again, I was first on the scene. My body absorbed the shock, and I suppressed my emotions.

At the end of that day, sitting in my car, I couldn't hold back the tears. I thought I was okay, but in truth, I had pushed it all down.

Discovering Gestalt therapy

A turning point in my journey arrived when I discovered the York Psychotherapy Training Institute and met its founder Christine Kennett, my trainer and initial guide through this transformative process. My Gestalt training encouraged me to tune into my body, providing moments of clarity that my body then took as permission to speak louder.

Sensing the body

Early on, during my training, an experiment on visual perception triggered an episode of complete blindness. Suddenly everything went dark. I couldn't see anything. Fear gripped me. I managed to grab the arm of the person next to me, but I can't remember what I said. Christine grabbed both of my hands and encouraged me to breathe. Not being used to this, I did not expect it to help. Although she did not say it, I instinctively sensed that Christine knew my blindness would pass. Being held by Christine and hearing her voice felt soothing. Gradually my vision returned. It couldn't have lasted for more than fifteen minutes but it left me shaken. That was the first sign that Gestalt therapy would be more impactful than I thought it would be.

Feeling the pain

In the wake of that episode, I started experiencing tingling sensations and aching heaviness in my spine and joints. Soon, intense nerve pain and clenching spasms in my thighs and calves rendered me unable to stand for long. I could no longer go to work. Fear crept in, and I began to worry that I was seriously ill.

Mobilising support

Reluctant to miss my Gestalt therapy course, I dragged myself there, feeling overwhelmed by the pain. I confided in Christine, anxious about whether I would be able to attend the next day, but she offered understanding and a safe space to be there and leave if needed. Upon arriving at the training centre, Christine surprised me with a small mattress and cushions that she had put in the corner. I felt uncomfortable about this suggestion, and a bit embarrassed. I did not want to stand out. She encouraged me to do exactly what I needed to do to feel comfortable, whether that was to sleep or move around. The idea of just doing whatever I needed to do felt alien, but I agreed to try it.

Over time, with Christine and the group's encouragement and support, I learned to notice my needs more keenly. Questions like 'Am I too hot or too cold?', 'Is my seating comfortable?', 'Do I need to move around?' became familiar. While the last query took me out of my comfort zone, feelings of embarrassment and self-consciousness emerged, accompanied by worries about disrupting the group and an underlying fear of claiming space. I was able to contact gratitude towards Christine and my fellow group members. Their unwavering encouragement of what I perceived as neediness allowed me to embrace my pain and disability, and to persist in my training. As more participants joined me on the mattress, the realisation crystallised: vulnerability and the acceptance of support are integral components of the healing journey.

Moments of insight and self-discovery

During this time, I was referred to a rheumatologist. On discovering I was a psychotherapy trainee he dismissed me and my pain with the retort 'It is just too much navel gazing'. I now know how harmful and limiting this suggestion was. My Gestalt training had not caused my pain, it had given my body the tools to shine a light on the pain that was already there.

Another turning point for me came after a personal communication with Malcolm Parlett, a visiting trainer. He spoke about a friend suffering with pain, who was exploring a link between pain and anger. He recommended John E. Sarno's book, *The Mindbody Prescription* (1998). This enhanced my understanding of retroreflection and the possible link between pain and unexpressed anger. This was brought into sharp focus a few days later during an argument with my partner. Each time I did not express my anger or silenced myself, my body screamed out in pain.

Responding to the pain

In one of my weekly therapy sessions, I shared my fantasy of wishing I could just lie on a cloud, and feel supported without discomfort. My therapist responded by suggesting we experiment with doing our best to make me as comfortable as possible. She had some very large cushions which she encouraged me to lie on, and we spent time noticing what I experienced in my body, and used smaller cushions to make tiny adjustments. To have someone taking their time to help me respond to my body's signals was initially anxiety-provoking and overwhelming. As I surrendered, and allowed myself to give in to the process and receive, it became a profoundly moving and healing experience.

Towards the end of my training, I had enough personal experience with Gestalt to recognise its potential with chronic conditions; so, for my dissertation I interviewed therapists to find out how they worked with such clients. The combination of my findings, my experiences as a client and as a therapist have informed my practice. My hope is that as a modality we can claim and be more vocal about our expertise in this area.

Owning our historical roots

Fritz Perls was writing about working with symptoms in *Ego, Hunger & Aggression* (1947). His early theory of what he called concentration therapy was about getting people to connect fully to their symptoms.

Perls states that 'psychotherapy means assisting the patient in facing those facts which he hides from himself' (1947, p. 224). He further elaborates that the 'hidden gestalt is so strong that it must show in the foreground, mostly in the shape of a symptom or other expression in disguise' (ibid.). He warns that 'we must not lose the thread leading from the symptom to the hidden gestalt' as 'by concentration on the symptom, we remain in the field (though on the periphery) of the repressed gestalt' (ibid.).

It is difficult to find Gestalt therapists writing about pain in the literature. I did come across Nemiriskiry writing about psychosomatic conditions. He states that although Perls did not come up with a comprehensive psychosomatic theory, he demonstrated an understanding of psychopathology that has been underestimated. Pain is a symptom, and he writes that a symptom is a 'contradiction, a paradox, because it is an expression of vitality and at the same time a defence against vitality; a manifestation of "a problem" and, at the same time, a means of solving it' (2013, p. 553).

In my work, I see people generally do what they can to distract themselves from pain and fatigue. Then when they can't, they seek painkillers, cures, and do anything but listen to what their body might be communicating. This can be demonstrated with the following vignette, taken from an assessment session in my clinical practice. The client is a teacher, working full time and under a lot of stress at work. She has just been telling me how she was diagnosed with chronic fatigue aged twelve and now in her mid-twenties she has been diagnosed with fibromyalgia.

Me: I am hearing that your body seems to be suffering and maybe trying to tell you something.

Client: Mm, I am exhausted and in a lot of pain.

Me: How do you respond to that?

Client: I have to just ignore it because I can't take any time off work and my grandma is sick and needs my support.

Me: What would it take for you to listen to your body?

Client: I would have to be hospitalised (laughs).

Me: I hear you laughing, and I notice that I feel both shocked and sad hearing you say that. You would have to be so sick that you need to be hospitalised before you could give yourself a rest or respond to your body.

People with chronic pain often become so used to pain that they also become used to ignoring it, making it background to everything instead of foreground. An entity they must learn to live with rather than something important to attend to (and learn from). A therapist who doesn't feel confident to work with the pain may collude with that avoidance, so that the pain remains background and is never brought to the foreground. If it is not worked with, the learning can't come, and the therapist leaves the client with no awareness and no learning. If the body is trying to communicate, you aren't going to find out what it is if you're not listening. Gestalt therapy can help sufferers to hear their pain, and translate it into something meaningful and therapeutic.

What we do

As I journeyed through this process, I came to appreciate Gestalt therapy as an effective therapy for chronic pain, because it allows you to tune into the

pain, follow it, track it, listen to it, and engage with it, and the messages it may bring. We are curious about the 'what, when, where, how and why now' of pain and the sensations they hold.

Most Gestalt therapists are familiar with concentrating on a symptom, staying with it, and encouraging clients to speak of their pain and as their pain, but I wonder if the same curiosity prevails regarding chronic conditions. My hope is that the therapist and client work together with the pain by focusing intently on it and following it around. By staying curious, they may find a way of collaboratively interpreting it, because it will be different for everybody. *What might be the meaning or message for you at this moment in time?* This can be slow and difficult work.

I was listening to Jan Roubal speak about the depressed field in 2019. He spoke of how the therapist is a 'function of the field' and may lose a part of themselves as part of the process, and may feel depressed themselves. This led me to reflect on the pain field. If a client is in pain, the therapist may pick that up and feel pain and vice versa. How do we support ourselves to be with the pain? If I am experiencing and sitting with my own pain, that influences how available I can be. This is relevant if the client is in pain, or the therapist is in pain or both. It is an important part of the field conditions.

As therapists who work intuitively with clients it may be difficult to get a sense of who the pain belongs to. So, if I suddenly experience pain in a session, it may not be obvious if it belongs to me or the client; if it is my pain, or if I am picking something up from the client, that may be useful. If I experience pain in the session, of course, I must start by bracketing. It may take a couple of sessions to check out. For example, I had one client who was always my last client of the day, and I would become aware of feeling jaw pain on my drive home. As I began to associate this with my client, I was able to hold it in mind when I was with the client. I could take it to supervision and see what might be useful to the client or I could check it out with them another time if it felt appropriate. I might check out directly with a client if a pain I am experiencing resonates in any way. Opening the pain field involves a lot of subtleties. We are human beings, and honesty, congruence and professionalism are required.

When someone presents with chronic pain and/or chronic fatigue, I am curious about when the pain or fatigue first began, what was going on in that person's life around that time or just before? What was difficult

about their life? This is to see if there are any early indications of what the body might be saying no to, e.g. stuck caring for an elderly relative and resenting the lack of help from siblings or feeling undervalued and stressed at work. Often, though, it's not obvious what the body is saying no to, but it will be there somewhere or could be a more general, 'enough is enough'. Also important is 'What was good?' or 'What might the body say yes to?' It is important to make it clear to clients that working in this way is not a quick or easy route because it requires full attention to the pain or sensations. Some key aspects of the work are increasing body awareness, examining, and staying with the obvious, working with symptoms at the contact boundary (enlivening, identifying with the projections, undoing retroreflections). Clients may be retroreflecting because they don't know enough about their anger or where it should be directed to, which means there is no satisfaction.

I am aware that none of the above will sound new to Gestalt therapists, yet little can be found in the literature, thus allowing us to be overlooked by other modalities and the general public. My feeling is that as a modality we need to own our history and expertise in working with such conditions. While other newer therapeutic modalities have gained attention, such as Pat Ogden's *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy*, Peter A. Levine's *Somatic Experiencing* and Gabor Maté's *Compassionate Inquiry*; I wonder how much they may have been influenced by Gestalt.

Ongoing evolution, my unfinished journey

Whilst writing this, I had a resurgence of symptoms. The worst in a while. I felt scared, ill at ease in my body again. I was forced to slow down and make space in my day to rest, and attend to my body. I was curious and keen to listen. Pushing wouldn't help. I had to find the patience to uncover what the communication was this time. I took it to therapy, and within two weeks it dissipated with new learning about my lifestyle.

My own journey with fibromyalgia and Gestalt therapy continues to evolve, offering moments of insight, healing, and self-discovery. While I am not entirely cured, I now recognize that my body's pain is a reminder to pay attention and make necessary changes. Each resurgence of symptoms becomes an opportunity to delve further into self-awareness and unearth the lessons my body offers. It is my hope that by sharing my experiences, others may find inspiration, and a sense of connection toward healing in their own lives, and that of their clients'.

If you work in this way or take a different approach, I would love to hear from you about your experience of working with chronic conditions such as these.

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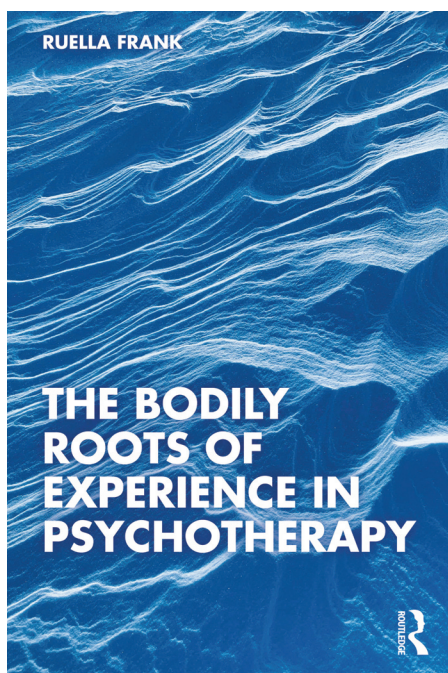
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