

Notes on Gestalt Process

In Gestalt, personality is seen as a process of continuously evolving wholes--as a continuous movement of figure-ground formations. Gestalt counseling/therapy is directed toward emergence, transcendence, and movement in behavior/cognitive/affective processes. Gestalt disavows the dichotomy between behavior and experience. Rather, behavior and experience are seen as simultaneous occurrences--two sides of the same coin, so to speak.

In Gestalt the counsellor is an observer--a describer of ongoing experiences. He is not concerned with what should be happening--he is concerned with what is going on. He uses his eyes and ears to find out what is happening. By maintaining a constant awareness through looking and listening, he is able to see the movement, the emergent, the changingness of behavior/experience. Through highly developed use of his eyes and his ears he is able to advance beyond conditioning-oriented therapists or feeling-oriented therapists or diagnosis-oriented therapists, especially with clients showing compulsive/avoidance behaviors and those with "control-madness". His main gains are:

1. He works in the here and now,
2. He sees that awareness is the source of movement in learning, growth and therapy,
3. He deals with actuality, rather than theory,
4. He notices the obvious.

By practicing awareness, by investigating awareness and the avoidance of awareness in every detail of his own and his client's behavior he is able to bring into awareness those parts of his client's personality which have been overlooked, denied or alienated. Missing behaviors are discovered, more aspects of the self are owned as belonging to one's self. Often a client has the insight into his problem--he has a certain awareness of what he is doing or what he isn't. However, he then usually expends his energy into trying to find out "why" this should be. This is a foolish waste which doesn't solve the difficulty. Unfortunately, many therapeutic approaches encourage this futile search for the "whys" of behavior. Gestalt, on the other hand, intensifies awareness of the behavior itself, including its consequences and its experiential component, and moves the client forward out of his irrationality.

As a child matures into adulthood, environmental support and support by others is transformed into self-support. However, the typical adult develops only a limited range of self-support behaviors from his total potential. In many ways he simply strikes a point between frustration and self-support. This balance point (character formation) is mainly a set of behaviors for controlling or manipulating the environment and others in it. To strike a balance between frustration and self-expression, the individual learns such strategies as bullying, playing stupid, flattering, playing helpless, playing sick, etc. While such behaviors "work" at a minimal level and enable the user to combat overwhelming frustration, they are actually self-defeating for they block creative, healthy self-expression. Any counsellor or therapist who gets sucked into these manipulative traps deprives the person of an opportunity for discovering his own strengths, resources and potentials.

When a person has frozen his energies around a balance point between self-determination and coping with frustration he is, in fact, in an impasse. This shows itself in compulsive, repetitive behaviors, in panic at the thought of departing from the habitual, in physical tiredness and complaining. The client holds onto the status quo for dear life. He often seems to be possessed by a control-madness. He is obsessive about expectations and fights any deviation from his own expectations.

Supportive group therapy is incapable of growing such an individual out of his "sick point". He is too wily and skillful a manipulator and sucks "helpful" others into his games. Individual therapy is likewise frequently not successful for the client can easily disown or change therapists. Gestalt workshop therapy seems to provide a context for working with persons who show manipulative and self-defeating behaviors.

In a workshop the therapist can point out the obvious--including that it is obvious to the whole group that the client does not see the obvious. A recognition on the part of the client that "What I am doing now is what I usually do, and how I am doing it is how I usually do it" will often bring a breakthrough that has been successfully avoided for years. A skillful therapist can bring out expectations with all their power for keeping a person trapped into irrational behaviors and incapable of risking or expressing himself in other than habitual forms.

Part of the work in a Gestalt workshop is dyadic--between the therapist and another person. At these times the other group members do not participate in the exchanges. They function as an audience and are encouraged to do some silent self-therapy. By watching an intense exchange between the therapist and client, other members' own recognitions can be stimulated. This is therapy in front of a group.

At other times the therapist leads group exercises in awareness--sensory, motoric, imaginative and meditative. The counsellor/therapist is accessible, he is not pushy. In encounters with a group member he is usually highly confrontive and directive--his directiveness is derived from on-going observations, not theoretical suppositions.

The supportive element in Gestalt is low--group members are prompted to see the fallacy of "being helpful" at least with manipulative, control-mad clients. It is helpful to remember that in Gestalt such behaviors as whining, wailing, complaining, explaining, playing sick, stupid, weak, helpless or acting seductively, manly, or acting with superiority are all regarded as manipulative and self-defeating. In Gestalt groups, the therapist carries the load either in dyadic confrontation or by carrying on whole-group experiments and exercises in awareness and seldom takes a supportive stance.

Selected Readings in Gestalt

- Brown, George I. "Awareness training and creativity based on Gestalt therapy," Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1969), 25-32.
- Brown, George I. Human Teaching for Human Learning: An Introduction to Confluent Education. New York: Viking Press (An Esalen Book), 1971.
- Enright, John B. "Thou art that: Projection and play in Gestalt therapy." San Francisco: Lodestar Press, 1971. Also accepted for publication in Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 1971.
- Fagen, Joen and Shepard, Irma, eds. Gestalt Therapy Now. Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1970. Also in paperback, New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970.
- Gustaitis, Rasa. Turning On. New York: Macmillan Company, 1969.
- Kempler, Walter. "Experiential family therapy," International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, XV (1965), 57-71. Also, in Recognitions in Gestalt Therapy, ed. P. D. Pursglove. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968.
- Kempler, Walter. "The experiential therapeutic encounter," Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, IV (1967), 166-172.
- Lederman, Janet. Anger and the Rocking Chair: Gestalt Awareness with Children. New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1969.
- Miller, Richard and Bloomberg, Larry. "No therapy as a method of psychotherapy. I. Termination as treatment," Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 1969).
- Perls, Frederick S. "Gestalt therapy and human potentialities." Chapter 35 in Explorations in Human Potentialities, ed. Herbert A. Otto. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1966.
- Perls, Frederick S. Gestalt Therapy Verbatim. Lafayette, California: Real People Press, 1969.
- Perls, Frederick S. "Group vs. individual therapy," ETC: A Review of General Semantics, Vol. XXIV, No. 3 (September, 1967), 306-312.
- Perls, Frederick S. "Workshop vs. individual therapy." Paper presented at the 74th Convention of the American Psychological Association, New York, September, 1966. Also, in Journal of the Long Island Consultation Center, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall, 1967), 13-17.
- Perls, Frederick S., Hefferline, R. F., and Goodman, Paul. "Gestalt psychotherapy," in Psychotherapy and Counseling, ed. W. S. Sahakian. New York: Rand McNally, 1969.
- Perls, Frederick S., Hefferline, R. F., and Goodman, Paul. Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality. New York: Julian Press, 1951. Also, New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1965 (Delta Book).

Pursglove, P. D., ed. Recognitions in Gestalt Therapy. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968.

Rhyne, Janie and Vich, Miles A. "Psychological growth and the use of art materials: small group experiments with adults." Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Vol. VII, No. 2 (Fall, 1967), 163-170. Also, in Readings in Humanistic Psychology, eds. Anthony J. Sutich and Miles A. Vich. New York: The Free Press (Macmillan Co.,) 1969.

Rosenberg, Jack. "A Gestalt approach to thumb sucking." Arizona State Dental Journal, July 1971.

Rosenberg, Jack. "Gestalt awareness for apprehensive parents," Dental Survey, June, 1971, 48-55.

Schiffman, Muriel. Gestalt Self Therapy and further techniques for personal growth. Menlo Park, California: Self Therapy Press, 1971.

Stevens, Barry. Don't Push the River. Lafayette, California: Real People Press, 1970.

Stevens, John O. Awareness: Exploring, Experimenting, Experiencing. Lafayette, California: Real People Press, 1971.

Van Dusen, Wilson. "Invoking the actual in psychotherapy," Journal of Individual Psychology, Vol. 21 (May, 1965), 66-76.