Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to give readers an overview of Gestalt Therapy and explore the origin, key concepts, goals, therapist-client relationship, principles and limitations used in theory and practice. Theories of counseling have, for the most part, been derived from principles of psychotherapy and this also holds true for Gestalt therapy as well. Gestalt has evolved into a mixture of existential philosophy, phenomenology, holism, and interpersonal psychoanalysis. Gestalt is perhaps summed up best by Max Wertheimers’s quote that the fundamental “formula” of Gestalt theory might be expressed in this way: “There are wholes, the behavior of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole. It is the hope of gestalt theory to determine the nature of such wholes” (1924).

Keywords: Phenomenological, Existential, Awareness, Holistic, Here and Now, Experience, Environment


**Origin**

‘Gestalt’ is a German word loosely defined as configuration or of whole form. The Gestalt approach in therapy is one that embraces a person's physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional, interpersonal and spiritual experience. Gestalt therapy represented an essential departure from the traditional psychoanalytic model developed by Sigmund Freud. There were many influences on his development from those who were diverging from Freud, including Reich, Ferenczi, and Rank (Edwards, 2007). Gestalt therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach co-founded by Fritz Perls, Laura Perls and Paul Goodman in the 1940s and 1950s.

Fritz Perls, a German-born psychiatrist, was the principal originator of Gestalt therapy. He rebelled against psychoanalysis which he saw as intellectualizing and limiting the potential of the client. Where Freud sought to interpret the client’s unconscious mind, Perls’ interest was to assist the client to discover personal understanding and meaning by extracting the client’s experiential awareness. This startling new approach which became known for being more so phenomenological rather than interpretive, empowered clients by engaging them much more actively in their own healing and growth. In doing so, Gestalt therapy created a more equal and collaborative relationship between therapist and client.

**Basic Principles**

One of the unique characteristics of Gestalt therapy is how "unpredictable" this theory can be portrayed. The therapist and client follow moment-to-moment experiences and neither knows exactly where this will take them. Gestalt therapy is complex and intuitive, but is based on the following principles: (1) Holism (2) Field Theory (3) Figure formation Process and (4) Organismic self-regulation.
Holism takes into account the whole person including thoughts, feelings, behavior, body sensations, and dreams. The focus is on the integration of how the many parts of the person fit together and how the client interact with their family, friends, classmates, co-workers, etc – also referred to as their environment.

Field theory the therapist focuses on how the client makes contact with their environment. The field theory of Lewin is the basis for Gestalt therapists' theory of context. In general terms within Gestalt therapy, a field is defined as "a totality of mutually influencing forces that together form a unified interactive whole", though other Gestaltists recognize that the particular field being discussed must be defined and redefined based on context and purpose (Reck, 2006).

The figure-formation process describes how individuals organize or manipulate their environment from moment to moment. Organismic self-regulation is the creative adjustment that the organism or person makes in relation to the environment. The person's stability with his or her environment is "disturbed" by the emergence of a client need, sensation, or interest and is related to the figure-formation process in that the need of the person organizes the field.

**Counseling Process**

The objective of Gestalt therapy is to enhance the person's awareness of the here and now and integrate behaving, feelings, and thinking into the counseling process. The therapist must therefore be able to enter into the person's now and react to it by sharing his or her observations and experience of the present. In Gestalt, the important element is an experience of the emotions associated with a particular event or phase in life as opposed to a rational “working through” of an experience or trauma. (Roodts, 2006). Gestalt therapy incorporates the body and mind
factors, by stressing awareness and integration. Client's are viewed as having the ability to recognize how earlier life influences may have changed their lives.

The therapeutic relationship of the counselor does not attempt to solve the individual's problems, but rather to help re-establish the conditions under which the individual can best use their own problem solving abilities. It is important to point out how, in a Gestalt therapy process – which plays out on the basis of an I-Thou relationship – the therapist remains in confluence with the client, i.e. the therapist respects the clients process and way of being in the world which manifests itself in the therapeutic context yet the therapist provides structure to the therapeutic process by employing certain techniques or exercises to facilitate the process (Roodts, 2006).

Gestalt theory holds that the client’s perception is blocked. Gestalt therapy aims to free the client by assisting the client to find his or her own motives, activities, and unconscious to achieve self-control (Reilly & Jacobus, 2009). To accomplish this goal the client must frankly process their relationships and their world, see situations from a new perspective, and realize how the present condition and its preferred substitute may be connected (Reilly & Jacobus, 2009).

A Gestalt therapist attempts to have the client comprehend his or her situation in a safe environment. The therapist provides no analysis of the problems at hand however extremely encourages client responsibility. Responsibility focuses on one’s ‘self-as-source’ (Reilly & Jacobus, 2009). The client is made aware of personal responsibility, how to avoid problems, to finish unfinished matters, to experience things in a positive light, and in the awareness of now. It is up to the therapist to help lead the client to awareness of moment by moment experiencing of life. The next step is to then challenge the client to accept the responsibility of taking care of
themselves rather than accepting others to do it. The therapist may use confrontation, dream analysis, dialogue with polarities, or role playing to reach their goals.

The counseling process of Gestalt therapy can be represented by the Gestalt Cycle of Experience (Pryor, 2009). This cycle is a basic map for how a person becomes aware of a need, mobilizes to meet that need, and achieves satisfaction. It integrates the behavioral aspects of sensation, awareness, energy mobilization, contact, and resolution or closure into a complete unit of human experience (Pryor, 2009). The role of the therapist is to help the client become more effective in performing this behavioral sequence.

**Techniques**

Gestalt techniques focus on current experiencing so awareness is of the present moment (Reilly & Jacobus, 2009). Gestalt therapists use in-session experiments to facilitate the two general goals of Gestalt therapy: heightening the client's awareness of self and allowing the client to have an expanded experience of self and environment. Gestalt experiments are not systematic techniques, but rather rely on the therapist's creative use of behavioral observations in the session (Reck, 2006). Even if a client is reluctant or resistant to engage in an experiment as articulated by the therapist, important work can be done surrounding the client's experience regarding his or her reluctance or refusal (Reck, 2006).

It has been argued that despite the focus on "behavior" in session, Gestalt therapy is distinct from traditional forms of behavior therapies because Gestalt therapists include subjective experience as a behavior (Reck, 2006). The use of experiments also shifts Gestalt therapy from traditional "talk" therapy about hypothetical situations to more action-based therapy couched in present experience (Reck, 2006). The soil that makes restoration of learning-by-living possible in the gestalt model is composed of: (1) phenomenological focusing and experimentation to
increase awareness, and: (2) a relationship based on dialogic contact. This combination fosters self-recognition skills, self respect, the patient’s experience of being guided by working with a person who understands him/her and treats him/her her with love and kindness, and the use of active techniques (Yontef, 2007).

The "Empty Chair" technique is one of the various ways in which Gestalt Therapy can be applied during the therapeutic process. When the client expresses a conflict with another person, through this technique, the client is directed to talk to that another person who is imagined to be sitting in an empty chair beside or across the client. This helps the client to experience and understand the feeling more fully. Thus, it stimulates your thinking, highlighting your emotions and attitudes (Ramya, 2007).

Although the Gestalt two-chair exercise was not explicitly designed to increase self-compassion, the goals of the intervention are highly relevant to the task. The intervention was created to assist clients in challenging maladaptive, self-critical beliefs, allowing them to become more empathic towards themselves (Neff, Kirkpatrick, Rude; 2007). In this approach, two convicting aspects of the self are given voice—a self-critical voice and an “experiencing” voice that feels criticized, so that each is allowed to express its own values, wants, and needs. The goal of the exercise is to arrive at a point where the part of the self that feels judged and unworthy “comes to know and appreciate itself so that one feels compassion for the newly discovered vulnerable self” (Neff, Kirkpatrick, Rude; 2007).

**Therapist-Client Relationship**

The relationship between the therapist and the client is the most important aspect of psychotherapy in Gestalt therapy. The goal in this therapeutic framework is enacting rather than narrating (Reilly & Jacobus, 2009). The interaction between therapist and client is an ever
changing dialogue marked by straightforward caring, warmth, acceptance, and self-responsibility. There are four characteristics of dialogue: Inclusion, Presence, Commitment to dialogue and dialogue lived.

Inclusion takes place when the therapist puts themselves into the experience of the client. The therapist does not judge, analyze, or interpret what he or she observes. Presence refers to the therapist expressing his or her observations, preferences, feelings, personal experience, and thoughts to the client. Commitment to dialogue allows a feeling of connection between the therapist and the client. Dialogue lived is active and can be nonverbal as well as verbal. It can be in the form of dance, song, words, or any modality that expresses and moves the energy between the therapist and the client. Gestalt therapy holds the view that people are endlessly remaking or rediscovering themselves, therefore, individuals are always in constant transformation. A requirement of dialogic contact is the therapist’s willingness to be “genuine and unreserved” by honestly revealing anything that the therapist believes will enable the ongoing dialogue (Yontef, 2007).

The key principle in Gestalt therapy is bringing the experience into the “here and now” through the use of conscious awareness. This applies whether the client’s concern is in the past, present or future. So talking about personal matters, without awareness, is unlikely to result in significant change. It’s important to remember that choice and self-responsibility exist only in the present. With this in mind, the Gestalt therapist will attempt to invite the client to be more present in the therapy session, through creative experimentation. In a dialogic relationship the therapist “meets” or contacts the patient rather than aiming to get the patient to be different. The therapist wants to experience what the patient experiences; the therapist is authentically present and willing to be emotionally affected by the patient (Yontef, 2007).
Within a context of safety, the client is encouraged to take risks or try something new so that awareness is heightened. The risk could be something as subtle as taking a breath at the moment of avoiding feeling or saying a word that describes what is being avoided. Of utmost concern to the Gestalt therapist is the development within the client of self-support which will facilitate healthy risk-taking.

Gestalt therapy focuses more so on the process of what is happening rather than the content of what is being discussed (Corey, 2009). The emphasis is on what is being done, thought and felt at the moment rather than on what was, might be, could be, or should be. Through the facilitation of process work in Gestalt therapy, the client is empowered to release old blocks, to discover lost parts of the self, and to find new solutions to old dilemmas. Gestalt is not primarily about technique. Rather its focus is a relational one. Authentic, meaningful, emerging contact between therapist and client is paramount.

Limitations

In his later years Perls would give workshop demonstrations with individuals who would work intensively with him (the “hot seat”) while other participants observed. However, many professionals (including Gestalt therapists themselves) were critical that the work was not systematically followed through as would be expected in a therapy process (Edwards, 2007). For Gestalt therapy to be effective, the therapist must have a high level of personal development. There is a danger that therapists who are inadequately trained will be primarily concerned with impressing clients (Corey, 2009). Challenges to employing Gestalt principles in psychiatric practice exist, such as focus on diagnosis to guide treatment planning, key elements of psychiatric training, primacy of medication management in psychiatric practice, and financial pressures (Clegg, 2010).
Conclusion

Gestalt therapy is an approach that emphasizes the integration and wholeness of the individual, both behaviorally and spiritually. It has provided a therapy that is exclusively orientated to the “here and now” behavior without excluding awareness variables and without conditioning that behavior. Gestalt therapy focuses on the awareness of present experience, and its faith and commitment to the self-healing and regenerating forces of the human being which make it compatible with other humanistic approaches. Gestalt is therefore seen as able to bring immediacy, relationship, and experimentation to the counseling process. Gestalt is commonly used during healthcare decision-making, namely because this method allows a quick global interpretation within seconds of data collection. This process is considered “top down”; i.e., clinicians organize data in a manner that creates the most coherent, seamless, perception possible (Cook, 2008).

Any counseling approach is dependent on whom the counselor is - as the counselor forms the essential instrument of his or her own work. Subsequently, it may be argued that the values, needs, and other personal characteristics of counselors filter through everything they do. I believe it is an adequate theory of psychotherapy and a good introduction to psychotherapy and how it can help you. Thus, it can be understood that Gestalt is significantly embedded in psychoanalysis although, in many instances, Perls’ theory can be regarded as a reaction to certain psychoanalytic constructs (Roodts, 2006). Instead of thinking what a counselor ought to be, a more constructive approach is for the counselor to become aware of whom they are. In this way, the counselor becomes aware of how they can use themselves to help others. In Gestalt therapy, a focus on self-awareness forms one of the important cornerstones of the approach.
References


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