

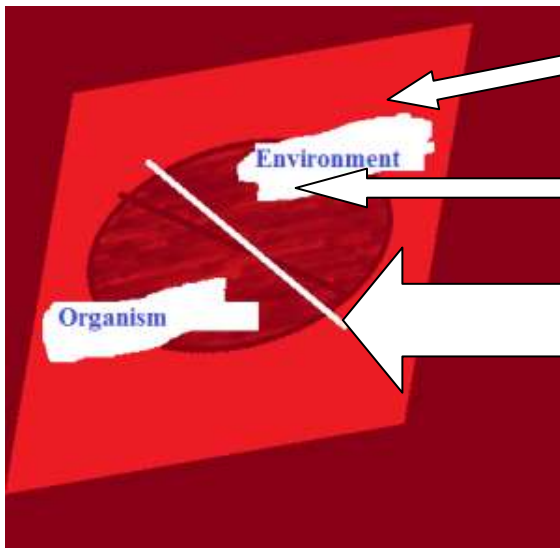
Organismic self-regulation and Field theory

As a result of the evolution of thinking in Gestalt therapy from the work of the Gestalt psychologists (Kohler, Koffka, Wertheimer) through to Lewin, Goldstein and Smuts, we have arrived at a model of that calls attention to the relationship between the "organism" and its "environment" as the focus for understanding human being.

This focus on the boundary of contact between the organism and its environment is the handiwork of field theory. The organism lives by means of its environment, and not just in an environment. The human environment includes the basics believed to be essential for organismic life (e.g. clean air, water, food, as well as cultural and social institutions, such as childrearing practices and religious institutions, educational customs, economic and political assumptions and institutions and community values).

The "location" of assimilation and accommodation, the fundamental principles of Smuts' holistic thinking, is called the contact boundary. Metaphorically, the organism, environment and contact boundary are three components of the field which are viewed as an emergent whole - interrelated and interdependent.

Legend



The circle that encompasses the contact boundary is the area of the field that is in awareness.

The white line indicates the emergence of the boundary of contact where all experiencing occurs.

The rest of the image represents the field which is out of awareness (the unknown).

In Gestalt therapy one views the experiencing that occurs at the contact boundary as the primary, first sense of reality. Experiencing defines the "location" of the contact boundary. From this experiencing arises the defining and (re-cognition) of the organism and its environment. This happens in and through the actualization of the contact boundary. In straightforward terms, this rather complex perspective states simply that I (organism) find myself in a world through my relatedness with the other (environment).

Actualization occurs through orienting and action that address the emergent needs of the organism/environment situation. In other words, the emergent dominant organismic need embodies a personalized orientation and action to identify the need and to meet the need. This process is the actualization and re-cognition of "me" in Gestalt therapy.

Adherence to a field theoretical model is one of the primary defining aspects of Gestalt therapy. The field encompasses everything that exists. The Polster's (Polster & Polster, 1974) have described this rather simply (I like simple!) in their clear manner: 1) What is, is; 2) One thing follows another. In other words: everything exists, and change happens (and is part of everything).

There are five principles that Malcolm Parlett (Parlett, 1991) has identified with field theory. These are:

The principle of organization

The principle of contemporaneity

The principle of singularity

The principle of changing process

The principle of possible relevance

I will only do a brief description of each in this blog.

Principle #1: The principle of organization. Everything is interconnected and meaning is derived from the total situation. Structure and function are not rigidly separated but are both attempts to convey qualities of the total situation; the interrelated whole.

Principle #2: The principle of contemporaneity. The constellation of influences in the present field "explains" present behavior; the past is not a "determinant" of present events but, rather, past as a construction as-remembered-now; the future (plans or fantasies) are not given a special status as "goals" or "incentives" to explain present events but, rather, future-as-anticipated-now. The psychological past and future are simultaneous parts of the field at a given moment. The concern in Gestalt therapy is with actual events which occur in the present, including past-as-remembered now and future-as-anticipated-now.

Principle # 3: The principle of singularity. Each situation and each situated event (person-situation field) is unique. We each see something different in what is interesting or relevant in the "same" situation. Generalizations are suspect.

Principle #4: The principle of changing process. The field is constantly changing. A paraphrase of Heraclites is that one never steps in the same river twice. Some people might say it is not possible to do it even once!

Principle #5: The principle of possible relevance. No part of the field can be excluded from consideration in advance as inherently irrelevant, no matter how mundane, common, or apparently irrelevant it may initially appear. Everything in the field is part of the total organization and is therefore potentially meaningful. In particular, Gestalt therapy values exploring what appear to be "obvious." What is most relevant or pressing is readily discoverable in the present since the field is organized in such a manner as to reveal it.

References

Parlett, M. (1991). Reflections on field theory. The British Gestalt Journal, 1, 69-81.

Polster, E., & Polster, M. (1974). Gestalt therapy integrated: Contours of theory and practice. New York: Vintage.