

The three pillars of Gestalt therapy.

Some time ago, in the dim and distant past, Bob Resnick defined the practice of Gestalt therapy as resting on three fundamental ideas that worked together in an integrated fashion. These three "pillars of Gestalt therapy," as they became known, are field theory and organismic self regulation; phenomenology; and dialogue.

There is often a look of bewilderment and puzzlement on the faces of beginners who are starting out on the journey of exploring the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy when they hear this pillar proclamation. They are just so weird together. Epistemologically they seem to be as antithetical with each other as white wine with breakfast. However, for those of you who have tried a Mimosa with breakfast, you will know it can work well. So I eschew epistemological niceties in Gestalt therapy in favor of searching for its ontological implications. Spinelli makes a similar point (and much more stylishly):

To be authentic, we must concede that all our being-related knowledge is, and will remain, incomplete and uncertain; whatever meaning life may seem to have for us is our construction and that, hence, in an ultimate sense, our existence is meaningless. [Spinelli, 2005, 113]

I distinguish these three aspects of Gestalt therapy as a pyramid shape. Of course, my pyramid is in three parts.

The foundation of my pyramid is field theory and organismic self-regulation. Here the ontological commitments of Gestalt therapy have been clearly and succinctly defined by the Polster's [Polster and Polster, 1974]. Two simple statements cover our ontology:

What is, is; and,
One thing follows another.

In this parsimonious and elegant way, Gestalt therapy covered all of its ontological commitments, including the notion of change as an ontological process. Our process theory is embedded in our most basic postulation about reality. In brief, field theory and organismic self-regulation encompass the bedrock of our map of Gestalt therapy [Parlett, 1991]. But my pyramid is more than just the bottom layer.

Phenomenology lies "above" (to use a spacial metaphor) this bedrock of field theory and OSR. Phenomenology is fraught with funny stuff. Phenomenology is a method to explore that which shows itself, or displays itself, to the observer [Spinelli, 2005]. It is a method which focuses on an analysis of the obvious and, as Alfred North Whitehead, a prominent English philosopher, once said, "It takes a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious." Of course, what is apparent to one may not be evident to another. What is obvious to me, to you and to another is what is called the "phenomenological

field." So, while everything exists and everything is in a process of flux and change, not everything is obvious or shows itself in the same way to everyone. Why is that?

Gestalt field theory and OSR postulates that it is the organismic need that organizes the field. Therefore we notice different things from each other because our needs are diverse and varied and infrequently congruent with each other. Rather than this being seen as a problem, Gestalt therapy celebrates this diversity of varied possibilities that our existential differences provides.

Dialogue is represented at the top of my pyramid as the manifestation of its existential pedigree. Gestalt therapy is an existential-phenomenological psychology. Dialogue defines the relationship and the attitude of the therapist who practices gestalt therapy. It is an existential relationship with ontological implications [Buber, 1970]. Dialogue is composed of three important elements: viz. a commitment to the relational process; inclusion; and presence.

As one of the pillars on which Gestalt therapy stands, dialogue occupies the most visible and demanding position. Dialogue is the mark of authenticity that defines the therapeutic relationship and its place in the existential world of the client and the therapist. Dialogue is the expression of a contact episode that emerges in the engagement between client and therapist in the therapeutic situation. As such, the embodied experience of a dialogical encounter is the foundational touchstone of what is real and what is healing in Gestalt therapy.

While the goal of Gestalt therapy is awareness, it cannot be reached without the underpinning of an authentic and genuine dialogical relationship. The question of whether it is the relationship that heals or the awareness that heals simply fails to arise in Gestalt therapy. One cannot separate the dialogical encounter from awareness and contact – and this is what is healing in Gestalt therapy.

References

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