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Marie-Anne Chidiac

Social class and Gestalt therapy

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Becoming research practitioners

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The ecological self

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Editorial

Such was the quality and quantity of articles submitted for this issue that we couldn't fit in everything we wanted to. Rather than waiting for the next issue, we have published Claire Asherson Bartram's excellent Opinion Piece, *Gestalt for Future: Creating a Research Network at the Gestalt Research Conference, Hamburg 2022* on britishgestaltjournal.com

Marie-Anne Chidiac's article is adapted from her 2022 Marianne Fry lecture in which she thoughtfully opens up a dialogue between Gestalt therapy and contemporary aspects of power. She discusses adding Bourdieu's thinking to Lewin's field theory, helping us to understand the idea of fields as social spaces which include the struggle for power. Unrecognised privilege and unrecognised power are discussed as two key moderations affecting our behaviour and relationships with others. This paper provides important theoretical underpinning for engaging in the current debates on difference and diversity in our practices, workplaces and society as a whole.

Joelle Gartner's article also addresses the issue of power by taking a deep dive into what she identifies as an underdeveloped area in Gestalt therapy – social class and socio-economic inequality. She gives vivid examples of the impact of this through case vignettes and by the social impacts on her own life through family origins, culture and ideology. She examines the attention paid to these issues in the policies and content of some Gestalt training institutes and makes some suggestions for how the field of social class could be further incorporated into therapist training.

My article in this issue is developed from my keynote address at the Gestalt Research Conference in Hamburg in 2022. It is a call to action with a proposal for an accessible, collaborative international approach to systematic case study research that all qualified Gestalt therapists can participate in. Participants meet in small monthly groups and belong to a network of support and research mentoring. The aim is to contribute towards a published database of evidence of Gestalt

therapy practice. Training institutes can contribute by teaching systematic case study methods and simple measurements to students for their final presentations. The project is currently being developed in discussions with interested parties, including IAAGT, EAGT and several training institutes.

Picking up on the climate change theme from the last issue, Miriam Taylor's article explores the implications for us to see ourselves ecologically as part of a greater whole. She argues that this needs an enlarged capacity to think beyond our present lifetime and illustrates this vividly with the description of a Deep Time Walk. She presents the sheer scale of the climate problem as a new order of trauma and acknowledges the difficulties people have in attempting to respond to this. She suggests that we need a radical re-imagining to enable us to tell new stories about our relationships with the other-than-human world, to think and dream outside of the familiar and to be open to new possibilities. The conversation between Vienna Duff and Kristine Steenan touches on many of the themes of Taylor's article. Based in two different geographical locations, they discuss working as therapists in nature in relation to their own personal and professional experiences.

Finally, we were able to include a couple of Letters to the Editor in this issue. Frank Staemmler's letter refers to Gianni Francesetti's article on atmospheres in issue 31.1. Oksana Kovalova's letter is a moving personal reflection on her life as a trainee Gestalt therapist in Ukraine.

Our deep appreciation to the contributors, reviewers and all who have been involved in putting this issue together. Our warm thanks and best wishes to Hilary Holford, Beth Newton and Dr Di Hodgson as they leave the Editorial Team, for their generous contribution of time and expertise over a number of years.

Christine Stevens, PhD
Editor

Appreciations

Neil Harris

Neil Harris has recently stood down as Chair of the Board of Gestalt Publishing Ltd. An early student with Gestalt South West, Neil has been connected with Gestalt and the BGJ for over 25 years, first listed as an Associate Editor in 1997, and joining the Board as Business Manager in 2003. He succeeded Gaie Houston as Chair and, for many years, has steered the Board of the publishing company responsible for the BGJ with skill and vision. He oversaw the first editorial succession and supported new developments in printing technology, digitisation and equipment upgrades. As a Gestalt practitioner and published author, Neil has always been available for consultation and advice. Neil has retired from his profession as a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist and now continues to work as a Gestalt psychotherapist and supervisor, having recently certified as a facilitator of Holotropic Breathwork. We are pleased to take this opportunity to thank Neil for his loyal and stalwart support for the BGJ and to wish him all the best going forward.

Sally Croft

Over the past year the BGJ has reluctantly said goodbye to Sally Croft who has been looking after the financial wellbeing of the Journal almost since it started in Malcolm Parlett's office in Bristol in the nineties. From the early hand-to-mouth days, Sally, with her Chartered Accountant training and experience, took it on and helped to put it on a regular business footing. Much more than a bookkeeper, she understood what was involved, overseeing the switch from a share-owned to a company limited by guarantee and giving advice and guidance as financial director. Over her long, professional career, her tools have evolved from large mechanical calculators and manual typewriters in the back of her Morris Traveller to computers, smartphones and online accounting packages. Although Sally's work will have been virtually invisible to our readers, the Board of Gestalt Publishing Ltd. has always valued her gentle wisdom and sound guidance at AGMs and behind the scenes. Her efficiency, dedication and enormous care have enabled the BGJ to survive and thrive and she has been a vital part of our history. We are very grateful for all she has done and wish her well in the future.

In memoriam

Robert William Resnick, PhD: 1938-2022

Helen Kennedy

Robert Resnick, known to his family as Robbie and colleagues as Bob, died on Tuesday 11 October 2022, from lung cancer. He was 85. It was an enormous shock to his family, friends, colleagues and students. We all thought he would go on forever; he was that kind of man, a pillar around which much revolved. He was big in stature and big in personality, charismatic, generous, warm and with a great sense of humour. He was committed to his family and his role as paterfamilias of his large family in Gestalt. He was a distinguished Gestalt psychotherapist and an inspiration to his many clients, students and colleagues.

Bob married twice; first to Liv Estrup, with whom he had one son, Erik. He adopted Chris, Liv's son from her previous marriage. Even though the marriage did not last, his commitment to his children was continuous and constant through their childhood and adult years. At Bob's Los Angeles memorial, Erik spoke movingly



about his experience of having a father for whom support was a given, whose appetite was enormous and whose humour was often expressed through mutual teasing. Liv remained a close family member and colleague.

After their divorce, Bob met Rita, his lifelong love and soul mate with whom he lived, travelled and worked for the rest of his life. For years they lived in Topanga Canyon, California, until they moved to their condominium in Santa Monica, Los Angeles. In addition to their private practices with offices in Santa Monica, then West Los Angeles, their working partnership included co-ordinating the Los Angeles Gestalt training and the European summer residential. In the last twenty years, they developed a programme for working with couples using Gestalt therapy methods – ‘A Couple of Individuals’.

Bob was brought up in Brooklyn, New York, with his two siblings, an older sister, Edy, and Norman, a younger brother affectionately known as Blitz in the family. His mother was a musician, early in her career playing piano as an accompaniment to silent movies, later teaching music and playing in gay bars in lower Manhattan. She was a major force in Bob’s life while his father was barely present. Bob remained close to his siblings, their children and grandchildren throughout his life.

Bob’s involvement with therapy began with attending a camp as a counsellor that his mother’s therapist ran in the Catskill Mountains. Later, when having some difficulty in school, he saw another of his mother’s therapists, Dr Francis DeBilio, who trained at the William Alanson White Institute. Harry Stack Sullivan was a major force in that neo-Freudian group; he understood that the person could never be separated from the complex interpersonal relationships of his life.

Bob studied psychology in the sixties, first graduating with a BA from City College of New York, then famously gaining his MA at night school from Columbia University while working for the NY State Employment Office and driving a New York City cab in the daytime to fund his studies. He claimed that driving a New York taxi was the best possible psychotherapy training. He went on to earn his PhD at the University of Florida.

While a psychology intern at UCLA Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital, a presentation by Jim Simkin fired his interest in Gestalt therapy and he immediately joined Jim’s training group. Fritz, who was living at Esalen at the time, was a regular visitor, and Bob took every

opportunity for training in Big Sur. Bob was certified by both Fritz and Jim in 1969, one of the first-generation Gestalt therapists.

Bob was among the therapists who set up GTILA (Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles) in the late sixties. In 1969 when Fritz asked him to take Gestalt therapy to Europe, Bob and others organised their first European Summer Residential in Yugoslavia. 29 therapists from the USA flew to Europe and were joined by three Yugoslav psychologists. Since then, he with others has organised and attended summer residentials each year in different European countries (except one in Buffalo, New York) until the COVID-19 epidemic in 2019. At first, venues were mainly in Western Europe, as were the participants. The residential had a big impact on Gestalt in Europe and further afield in the Antipodes. Many attendees returned to their own countries and set up training programs. As Eastern Europe opened, many students from former Soviet countries came for Gestalt training. Bob Resnick’s influence has been enormous with many trainees returning for years. Bob and Rita have provided parent figures for a larger international community as well as the LA and Seattle training programmes. In 2019 Bob was given the Distinguished Award for the International Advancement of Psychotherapy by the American Psychological Association.

The politics of the US West Coast training were not always easy. The original European Summer Residentials were part of the GTILA program and included a group of senior LA trainers, but in 1996, Bob, Rita and Todd Burley formed a separate organisation, GATLA (Gestalt Associates Training Los Angeles). Sadly, Todd Burley died in 2014 leaving Bob and Rita to carry on with a staff of trainers. It is a great disappointment to us that Bob has not lived to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary Residential with us in July 2023.

Bob was part of the ongoing Gestalt training programme in Los Angeles and Seattle as well as many training events in Europe, Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, China, Japan and Australia. He and Rita loved travelling and connecting with so many colleagues and friends throughout the world.

I first met Bob in 1991 at the GTILA summer residential in Yenne, France. The whole event was a revelation for me: Gestalt theory teaching was an integral part of the programme. The trainers managed the boundaries while maintaining informal relationships with the students. We worked hard, starting at 9am and finishing

at 6.30pm with optional evening programmes. There was a clear structure within which the teaching and learning took place. My previous experience of Gestalt training had been based on 'lose your head and come to your senses' with boundaries being very flexible, catharsis and confrontation highly valued and learning done through 'sitting next to Nellie'. I loved the theory, the practice and this large international community with Bob as the leading trainer and figurehead. He was a great trainer, managing to combine a capacity for warm contact with real clarity of theoretical teaching. He was able to identify the issues arising in the work, maintaining a clear focus within a loving dialogic relationship. Over the years that I worked with him as a student and then later as a colleague, I was frequently in awe of his capacity for combining a tender heart, a sharp mind and a great deal of humour. He was not infallible, of course, and was sometimes stubborn. It has to be said that he did not suffer fools gladly, but he had a great way of expressing his difference. He would listen and be responsive but could conclude making his disagreement absolutely clear, with a resounding and incontrovertible 'That's your narrative.'

Bob's presentation of Gestalt theory was clear, concise and stunningly simple. He considered Gestalt therapy to be a large tent which included many styles and theoretical emphases. However, the work had to adhere to three fundamental principles to be considered Gestalt therapy: Field Theory, Phenomenology and Dialogue. He was also clear that GT had at one time acquired a rather negative reputation largely due to practitioners with little training using poorly considered techniques with a confrontational style. Nevertheless, he believed that right from the start the work was strongly relational, phenomenological and field-orientated. He fairly recently completed his teaching videos (New Contemporary Gestalt Therapy Films) which demonstrate his work and theoretical style. He always wanted to write a book, but sadly he died before he got around to it. It was a great regret to him.

As a colleague and friend, Bob was fun, frequently joking and teasing. He loved to cook and eat, but was not keen on exercise, which did no good for his waistline. In Bob and Rita's shared love for travel, they maintained friendships throughout the world, often in restaurants which he had researched for quality of the food and reasonableness of the bills. He loved the songs from musicals and could at times be persuaded to play the accompaniment. He was a good jazz pianist although often reluctant.

I feel enormously grateful to him for his kindness and welcome to me, for including me in his Gestalt 'family' and for his willingness to meet me in our differences without rancour.

Bob leaves behind many who will miss him, particularly his family – Rita, Edy, Norman, Liv, Chris, Erik, Martine, Grayson and Lola, his nephews and niece and their families – and also his friends, clients and trainees throughout the world. He also leaves a great legacy through his work and his relationships. He is missed. As a New Zealand colleague reflected, using a Māori saying, 'A great tree has fallen in the forest.'

Helen Kennedy is a GPTI training and supervising member with a psychotherapy practice based in Edinburgh and North Berwick. She originally trained with Gestalt Training Services Scotland and then with GATLA (Gestalt Associates Los Angeles). She is one of the co-founders of the Edinburgh Gestalt Institute where she worked for twenty years and is a staff member of GATLA. She now works mainly internationally teaching and supervising Gestalt therapy. She is particularly interested in working with groups, working with dreams and the integration of Gestalt and spiritual practice.

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Fields of power: the moderation of relational moments¹

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Abstract

This article addresses the concept of power in Gestalt therapy. It builds particularly on the work of two field theorists: Kurt Lewin and Pierre Bourdieu, and proposes a view of power as moderating the field and impacting the relational moment. Moving beyond the notion of power as visible coercion, the article explores the more implicit power that lies in our everyday privilege and our ground. It outlines two key moderations of power that play out at both the individual and systemic levels. Highlighting contextual power in such a way also leads to a re-evaluation of Gestalt's change theory as being driven by contextual supports as well as organismic needs. Finally, the article concludes with reflections on the implications for practice.

Keywords

power, field theory, relational, theory of change, privilege, Kurt Lewin, Pierre Bourdieu, Habitus

The field of power is a field of latent, potential forces,
which play upon any particle which may venture into it,
but it is also a battlefield

(Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 149-150)

Can we speak of fields of power in Gestalt? In an epistemology so focused on the here-and-now moment, can power be conceived of in a form that transcends its visible immediacy? Can it be understood as a latent aspect of the field which lends more weight to certain figures than others?

The notion of power in Gestalt is mostly unexplored in the sense that it doesn't slot into our theory base in a way that we can understand or make sense of. It therefore leaves us (as Gestalt practitioners), vulnerable to the whims of power and its undercurrents, as they present unexpected and mostly unwanted in our clinical and organisational practices. Attempting to articulate or conceptualise a process or idea is one route to awareness. Power today is writ large in politics, societal battles as well as very real wars for control, for power over land and ideas. And so, more than ever, awareness of power in ourselves, in others, in our

communities and societies feels essential to an ethical presence.

In this paper I begin with curiosity; with a wondering at how the notion of power has been put forward in our Gestalt theory so far. I then propose that power in all its forms is both relational and contextual. The relational component is more familiar and immediately noticeable to us whilst the contextual component often lies in ground, mysterious and inconspicuous in layers of culture, history and context. It is this less obvious aspect of power which this article aims to address. An aspect which Lukes (2021) and Hauggaard (2020) call the third dimension of power and which lies beyond the interpersonal or agenda-setting aspects of power.

When looking at context, we naturally in Gestalt turn to Field Theory. This article therefore explores how power links to our understanding of Field Theory in Gestalt through the work of Kurt Lewin (1951) of course, but also through the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu (a French field theorist) who has, in particular, written extensively about power and culture (Bourdieu 1987, 1993). In doing so, Field Theory is re-considered and expanded through the work of Bourdieu.

The paper will then outline two key ways in which power moderates the relational moment both at the personal and systemic levels. It will then conclude with some implications for our practice as clinicians and organisational practitioners.

Power just is!

Power takes many forms and definitions. A large array of philosophers and writers, such as Aristotle (1941), Weber (1978), Arendt (1970, 1998) and Searle (1996), to name a few, have tried to capture the essence of power and have primarily described power in two essentially contrasting ways: power as domination (also called *power over*) or, in terms of power as empowerment (or *power to*) (Allen, 1999). Lukes, however, argues that power is ‘an essentially contested concept’ (2021), in the sense that there is no singular correct definition of power. He goes further and writes that there is a negative normative evaluation of the word power (*ibid*); in other words, people will view power as negatively impacting themselves or others.

Although mostly perceived as only negative, power is neither good nor bad in absolute terms, it just is! Of course, it can be violent, coercive and even toxic but it is important to recognise that power can also be expansive to both parties involved in an exchange. Some power constraints, for instance, that we apply as therapists in our practice, are not unfriendly to our clients but can be safe and holding. Setting a firm boundary to our therapeutic session is such an example, or asking for an end to sessions rather than an abrupt stop to the work is another example of supportive power. In French, the word for power is ‘*pouvoir*’ which also translates as ‘to be able to’ and so, power is also an enabler, a way of impacting and influencing the world around us rather than only used in an authoritarian or violent way over another. Another example of such legitimate power-over is the power of a supervisor to strongly direct a practitioner towards a certain action to ensure the safeguarding of vulnerable clients. In such a case, power-over also leads to more power-to.

Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher and Holocaust survivor writes that ‘violence appears when power is in jeopardy’ (1970, p. 56) by which, I believe, she means that the exercise of power and influence more often happens with no visible violence at all, and that physical violence is usually a sign of a loss of power (in political and social arenas). And so, power often is invisible, in ground or at least not always discernible or in conscious awareness. We might at times be completely oblivious to it (as in the case of the power of data analytics to

influence our behaviour), and habitually this power is only evident or noticeable through feelings of powerlessness, shame and disconnect which it leaves in its wake. It is more of this type of invisible, in ground, and less obvious power that this article aims to address. When power takes this more imperceptible, stealth-like form, how can we better attune to its impact and call it out in our work and practice?

Power in Gestalt

Alongside enchantment (Polster, 2021), Gestalt practice is also an invitation to discover the individual’s creative power and re-own disowned parts (Perls et al., 1951/1994, p. 13). Indeed, they write that ‘If a man identifies with his forming self, does not inhibit his own creative excitement ... then he is psychologically healthy, for he is exercising his best power and will do the best he can in the difficult circumstances of the world’ (*ibid*, p. 11).

In its focus on the moment-by-moment unfolding of experience, Gestalt is a practice which invites us into a dance to follow our self-regulating impulse and trust in organismic health. Because ‘self-regulating action is brighter, stronger and shrewder [and] any other line of action ... must proceed with diminished power, less motivation, and more confused awareness’ (Perls et al., 1951/1994, p. 52). This reification of, and trust in, the self-regulating instinct is what often is seen as powerful in Gestalt. It is recognised as the ability to show up fully with all our creativity, and not hold back or disown any aspect of our experience. To be fully in the moment is the way to get our needs met. And of course, this applies to the client but also the practitioner who is also invited to follow the ‘dominance’ of their spontaneous ‘judgements of what is important’ (*ibid*). They further ask, ‘What is the reality of an interview in which one of the partners, the therapist, inhibits his best power, what he knows and thereby evaluates?’ (Perls et al., 1951/1994, p. 63).

And so facilitating individual power is something our forbearers in Gestalt did well. They emphasised personal power and charismatic presence as can be seen in the early ‘Gloria videos’ (Shostrom, 1965) which reveal Fritz Perls, the showman, challenging and even aggressive at times. They showed an older, more expert man confronting a younger woman. Today we may cringe watching these exchanges, and of course, Perls was a product of his time and culture. It is interesting, however, that comparatively little has been written about power in Gestalt since then.

Power as a relational and contextual process

Thankfully, Gestalt theory has moved on since Perls' time, and contemporary Gestalt is acknowledged as a relational practice (Jacobs, 1989/1995; Yontef, 2002; Lee, 2004; Jacobs & Hycner, 2009) where all behaviour is recognised as situated. Our theory base tells us that being powerful (or powerless) is always a function of the field, and so any behaviour or feeling emerges from a given context and a set of relationships in the moment.

A way of capturing the relational and contextual dimensions of power can be best viewed through the Relational Change SOS (Self-Other-Situation) framework (Denham-Vaughan & Chidiac, 2013) depicted in Figure 1. It highlights the notion that power isn't just an attribute of the individual *self* alone, but happens in relationship with *other* and in the moment of a given *situation*. We can probably all recall instances of feeling powerful and how that feeling might have been a function of all those three lenses. It might, for example, have been linked to our sense of confidence following a good night's sleep, or to a specific relationship with another which was supportive, or indeed to the particular situation we were in, such as presenting or teaching, which may be comfortable or familiar to us. But is an awareness of these three lenses always enough to avoid the charismatic over-extension which was part of Gestalt history? Building on previous writing, the question of an ethical stance and presence (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020) in our relational Gestalt praxis poses itself again: how to recognise when my feeling powerful, potent and present as a Gestalt practitioner is experienced as coercive by the other?

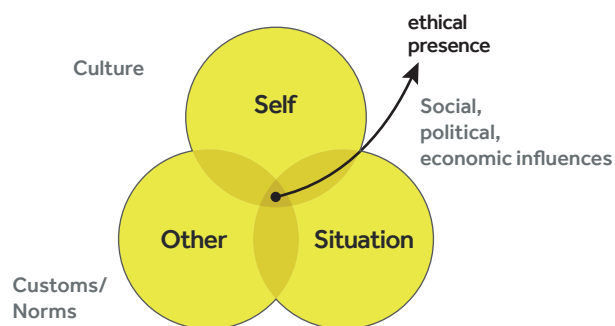


Figure 1- The SOS Framework

The SOS lenses emphasise the relational nature of power which emerges from the interlinking of the three lenses. As therapists or coaches, we would naturally explore these dimensions when, for instance, our

client presents with feeling powerless. We might, for instance, focus on how their own personal experience of powerlessness is being retriggered in the moment (*self* lens) or, on how much support they seek or have through others (*other*). This is because, as Gestalt practitioners, we know that being in connection with others is the most healing aspect of shame and disconnect. Or we may also wonder, what it is about this particular *situation* that invited powerlessness?

But is exploring the sense of self, relationship with other and immediate situation always enough to fully understand the power dynamics being enacted? I would suggest not, as power is also *contextual* in the sense that (as shown in Figure 1) it lies within culture, norms and customs as well as a multitude of social, political and economic influences. It is important here to differentiate between the present here-and-now immediate situation and the wider context. Both, of course, are part of our phenomenal field and yet, they are differentiated in their specific focus in the time/space continuum. The situation could be understood as our present moment awareness of a possible event site (Badiou, 2005). Daniel Stern (2004) defines the 'present moment' as a lived story that has not just a beginning and an end, but also a plot, intentional characters and a 'temporal contour along which the experience forms' (p. 219). This forming is constantly moulded by the wider context as a ground for the unfolding experience of self-other, other-situation and self-situation. The here-and-now is a rapidly shifting fractal containing the trace of the whole. Gestalt however, as Polster (2021) writes, has reified the attention to the here-and-now experience (ibid, p. 45) and this, often even to the detriment of the ground from which this immediate experience arises.

As therapists, coaches and supervisors, we may, in the moment, feel supremely confident, at ease and comfortable in a here-and-now situation. We may even be in good working alliance with the other person(s) in the room. The present-moment situation is supportive and containing. Yet when sitting with a particular client or chewing over a specific topic with a supervisee, dimensions of power and privilege may become figural and interrupt the relational moment. Let me illustrate this through a small vignette:

I used to supervise a practitioner I was very fond of. She would travel to me from her small town in the North of England as she couldn't find a supervisor she wanted to work with closer to home. She would stay in London

with a friend overnight and take the train down to meet me the next morning. After a few months, she brought up her annoyance, feeling she didn't have the time to even visit the toilet when she arrived to me without it eating into the allocated time we had together. She was feeling resentful of this, as well as not valued and less important in our relationship. My initial response was to feel defensive, 'Why would she be different to any other supervisee?' And why should I extend the time we had contracted for, especially on days which for me happened to be very full?

The layer of self-protective arguments gradually dissipated as we started exploring what was happening for us both. Realising that what we both had initially missed was the wider field of privilege in which we sat. We missed that she felt she needed to travel to London to have supervision that wasn't so available to her where she lived. That London and the 'South' was where people with more privilege would have access to more supervisors and more choice.

In this example, a focus on self, connection with others and the immediate situation was not enough to understand or uncover power dynamics. Power in this case inhabited structures of ground, historical and social layers and ingrained ways of being. It lingered in the 'normality' of the way we are in our customs and culture. The disturbance is only sensed through our bodies and emotions, through feelings of shame, withdrawal and powerlessness; emotions that are often left unspoken or falsely attributed to some personal failing. In this example, the fields of power that my supervisee and I were embedded in, had moderated the relational moment and interrupted the self-other-situation dynamics between us. Moderations to contact are familiar concepts in Gestalt and imply (usually) unaware interruptions to the contact cycle. Similarly, I would like to suggest that contextual power moderates the cycle of contact but that these interruptions are not arising from habitual patterns in self or other, but in patterns within the wider context and field we are immersed in.

As depicted in the above vignette, most often this contextual power is not in conscious awareness. It is not explicit, or even particularly noticed as it is often part of what is habitual or normalised. This type of power which is omnipresent and largely invisible is similar to the way the French philosopher Michel Foucault describes power (Foucault & Faubion, 2000). Naming it a moderator of the relational moment

begs the question, however, of how it moderates and interrupts the moment. Before outlining two key ways in which fields of power moderate the relational moment, I would like first to build on the understanding of power in the work of two field theorists: Kurt Lewin and Pierre Bourdieu.

A field of forces: Kurt Lewin

The main explanation of what shapes behaviour in Gestalt comes to us through the work of Kurt Lewin (1936, 1948, 1951). His famous formula, *Behaviour = f (Person, Environment)*, seems to neatly divide the world up into individual and environment, but we know from his writing on the social space (Lewin, 1948; Friedman, 2011), as well as the incorporation of his work into Gestalt theory (Parlett 1991, 1997), that there are no such distinct 'things' as individual and environment. Lewin's formula and work on field theory invite us to consider that what shapes behaviour is a multitude of forces both stemming from our intra-personal needs as well as the impact on our psychological environment (Staemmler, 2006) of the variety of life spaces (specific situations and contexts we are or have been in). Although he doesn't name it as a particular aspect of power, Lewin's force field analysis (Lewin, 1951) presupposes constant influences and power being enacted on a person's psychological life-space, or what he calls field. In other words, we all are constantly subjected to forces in our phenomenal field which shape our moment-to-moment behaviour.

In particular, Lewin recognised the psychological boundaries of the life space of an individual or group. Indeed an important feature of this life space is what Lewin called the 'space of free movement', a notion not often quoted in our Gestalt literature and which he defines as the 'totality of regions to which the person in question has access from his present position' (1936, p. 100). And this space of free movement for an individual or a group is determined by ability, what is allowed and other factors such as social position and the character of social relationships (ibid, 1936, pp. 44-45, 96).

What is interesting in this definition is that Lewin articulates the limitations to behaviour, or the constraining forces on the individual, as determined by the boundaries set to the life space. What he draws our attention to is that which might limit or constrain us in our freedom, in our movement, in our power, has to do with *ability, relationships and social positioning*. All aspects which we could link to the three lenses of SOS framework, as shown in Figure 2. We could also

ponder on what Lewin means in his definition of ‘what is allowed’. I believe that he was referring here to the contextual ground in the sense of what is allowed by the culture and norms within the field.

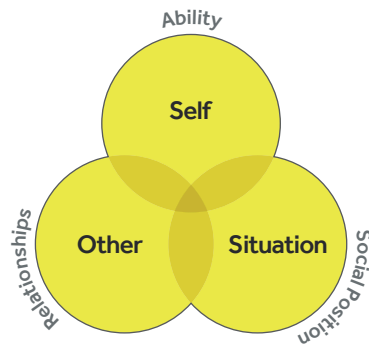


Figure 2

Organismic need vs power of context

It is indeed challenging to consider that what limits our power and movement are those aspects of our self, relationships, social positioning and context. Challenging because traditionally our Gestalt theory tells us that movement or mobilisation is mostly dependent on the intensity or brightness of the figure emerging into awareness. Indeed, Gestalt holds that the strength of the figure will carry the energy and allow movement around the cycle of experience. This is a key part of the Cycle of Experience (Zinker, 1977) as we go from sensation of need, to awareness, mobilisation and so on in an uninterrupted flow around the cycle. This primacy of ‘needs’ stems from the writing of Perls who granted organismic need a major role in the formation of figures. Taking, for instance, his famous example (1969b) of a man walking through the desert and being thirsty, he writes that what stands out for the man above all is what will quench his need or thirst. ‘Suddenly in this undifferentiated general world something emerges as a Gestalt, as a foreground, namely, let’s say, a well with water’ (ibid, 1969b, p. 14).

Traditionally, Gestalt focuses on need satisfaction, with moderation to contact stemming from the individual’s personal limitations. What is less attended to, however, is how the thirsty man’s freedom of movement is limited by other aspects of ability, relationship, positioning and context. In considering the thirsty man, we could ask: is the water in the well difficult to access, can he climb down the well to get it? Is he nimble and strong enough? Is he able-bodied enough? (an aspect of the individual’s ability). Or we could wonder if there is a friendly person he can ask help from (his relationships

and network), or even whether the culture of the land is such that he will be perceived as deserving of the water. Is he from a tribe in the desert allowed access to that particular well? (an aspect of social positioning and context).

Being powerful through ability, connection and status or position are therefore also important enablers to having our needs met. This highlights a needed re-evaluation of Gestalt’s change theory. Paraphrasing Beisser (1972), change occurs because of a re-configuration of the field and it is the alteration in available supports that often allows for a different resolution of the need and figure of interest. And so, as well as being driven by organismic need, figure formation and movement are also enabled by our sense of feeling and being powerful in those ways.

And so we may ask ourselves which abilities, what connections and what type of positioning provide us power?

Every field is a field of struggle:

Pierre Bourdieu

This question can best be answered through the work of another field theorist, Pierre Bourdieu. Like Lewin, Bourdieu was also influenced by the work of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 228; Lewin, 1948), a twentieth-century German philosopher most well-known for his work on culture and symbolism (Cassirer, 1944).

Although Bourdieu did not use the term ‘life space,’ he described a field in ways that are similar to Lewin. Rather than a phenomenal first-person perspective, Bourdieu views fields also as social spaces. In an interview discussing the intellectual field, Bourdieu stated:

When I talk of intellectual field, I know very well that in this field I will find ‘particles’ (let me pretend for a moment that we are dealing with a physical field) that are under the sway of forces of attraction, of repulsion, and so on, as in a magnetic field. Having said this, as soon as I speak of a field, my attention fastens on the primacy of this system of objective relations over the particles themselves. And we could say, following the formula of a famous German physicist, that the individual, like the electron, is an *Ausgeburts des Felds*: he or she is in a sense an emanation of the field.

(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 106).

In that same interview, he also insists that those ‘particles’ are not just subjected to the field but are themselves ‘potential and active forces’ and therefore the field is also ‘a field of struggle’ aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces’ (ibid, p. 101).

Understanding the field as including power struggles is illuminating. It recognises that in each social space, field forces act to preserve the continuity of the status quo whilst, simultaneously, acknowledging that individuals in that social space have a fundamental need for a certain ‘freedom of movement’ which motivates change.

Bourdieu (1986, 1987, 1990, 1993) introduced many concepts to explain power struggles in the field. I will next outline two of his key concepts which I believe usefully add to the Gestalt view of field: the notions of *Habitus* and *Capital*.

Habitus is the logic that governs a particular field. Habitus refers to the behaviours, dispositions and habits that a person embodies as their internalised norm (Bourdieu, 1990). Akin to the personality function of the self in Gestalt (Perls et al., 1951/1994), the habitus is so internalised over time as to become nature. Therefore habitus is both an epistemological and ontological phenomenon. It is the way we understand or conceive of the world but also our way of being in the world. Within each field that a person occupies, their internalised habitus subconsciously guides their behaviours and interactions as to what is appropriate and normal for each given field. Habitus therefore also holds a dominant discourse about what is acceptable and valued in a given field. Indeed, Bourdieu (1977) describes discourse as a ‘structured structuring structure’ (Bourdieu, 1977: cited Swartz, 1998) through which social actors use language to construct a social reality harmonious with the shared social, historical, and cultural structures that embody the habitus.

Whilst habitus is the way we conceive, shape and get shaped by the world we inhabit, the second concept of ‘capital’ relates more to what Lewin referred to in terms of the abilities and relationships that each person may have in a particular field. In his concept of ‘capital’, Bourdieu extends beyond the notion of material or economic assets to capital that may be social (social relationships and networks), or cultural (knowledge, education, artefacts) (Bourdieu, 1986).

For Bourdieu, power is signalled through these forms of capital as a way of influencing what is happening

in the moment. And social position in the field is determined by the type and volume of capital a person possesses and the value and distribution of these forms of capital (whether economic, cultural, social etc.) establishes a kind of unequal order between actors within a field. However, he argues that in addition to accumulating forms of capital, actors deploy strategies to improve their position in the field. The formation and meaning of these ‘position-takings’ are fundamentally relational (Bourdieu, 1992/1996, p. 233) in that each position derives its meaning, value and effects from its relation to other position-takings in the field. And so, positioning in a given situation configures the situation into an ‘us vs them’. Although Bourdieu didn’t expand on aspects of belonging beyond the social class system, it seems logical in today’s world to also recognise that signalling through position-taking is also about belonging and identity.

Overlapping these types of capital onto the SOS model (see Figure 3), we can see how personal capital, social capital as well as position-takings can signal power. An example of this arose when researching this lecture and speaking to the CEO of a public sector organisation who also happened to be a black woman. She reflected that individuals who wanted to influence her decision would tend to do so in three main ways. They would either attempt to demonstrate their competence and expertise (personal capital), or call upon the intimacy of their connection to her or other influential people (social capital) or, they might also attempt to name a commonality in their positioning and belonging; such as both belonging to the black community or to a certain professional group (position-taking/belonging).

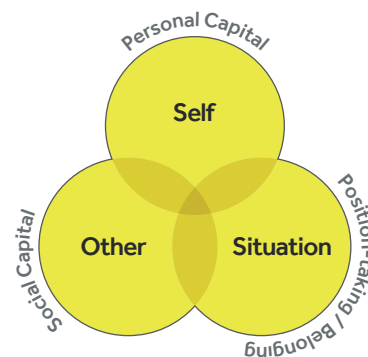


Figure 3

So, what Bourdieu tells us is that in every field, what gets emphasised in service of gaining power or influence are aspects that are valued, recognised and appreciated in that particular field. Emphasising, for example, my knowledge of Gestalt with my teenage children holds little power, and I would likely gain more

influence by noting my appreciation of some trendy singing artist. Similarly, as many of us have shifted in varying degrees to online working in this post-pandemic era, we might reflect on what is emphasised (in awareness or not) through our online background. Be it a virtual background, books, plants or a carefully constructed would-be ‘neutral’ image, what might it be signalling in terms of power and positioning?

The power signalling which re-enforces dominant views or discourses is often done unconsciously. This is because the habitus itself is the familiar status quo of the field we inhabit. Bourdieu writes that encountering a world which matches your own habitus is like ‘being a fish in water, it does not feel the weight of water and takes the world about itself for granted’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Becoming aware of a habitus which is different from our own (when for instance, we visit a new country or enter a new organisation), we are more conscious of what is valued (or not) in that field and will naturally try in various ways to gain power and achieve greater freedom of movement. Ghassan Hage (2021), a Lebanese-Australian Professor of Anthropology at the University of Melbourne wrote in researching Lebanese immigrants in Australia that those who were Christians would make a point of wearing a cross on a necklace around their necks to signal their Christian faith and thus their belonging to the dominant group of the country (ibid). It is also important to recognise we are in the midst of an important worldwide struggle over ecological and climate change-related issues, and that ‘environmental capital’ is still seriously undervalued in most habitus.

Two key moderations of the Relational Moment

Figural happenings are always contained within a background of total life experience, and they derive meaningfulness through the reverberations between them and the context of a total existence.

(Polster, 2021, p. 35)

So how can we be attentive to these fields of power and to the power signalling that can be so invisible, so ingrained that they become the normal way of being in the world? And mostly how can we catch ourselves in those moments and become aware of how power has interrupted the relational moment? With this in mind, I

would like to propose two key moderations which I refer to as Unrecognised Privilege and Unrecognised Ground.

Unrecognised Privilege: the misrecognition of personal capital

This power moderation happens when personal capital suddenly becomes figural as privileged or valued in the moment within the field.

This is a familiar occurrence for most people, and an example of this unrecognised privilege is being an English speaker at an international conference where the language is English. Having this privilege of language, this personal capital in this situation, provides the individual with a certain power. It is however normative power where there is no oppressor or oppressed, it is just the way the world is. Another example of this unrecognised privilege is being able-bodied; a state of privilege and power in many situations as the world provides obstacles to various kinds of disabilities. Bourdieu, in his book *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1987) writes about ‘having taste’ as a personal capital that is taken for granted, assuming that everyone can recognise good taste. It is seen as a taken-for-granted aspect of personal capital not acknowledging the privilege of education, exposure and economic possibilities that enable the development of taste.

Most of the time, this power imbalance isn’t even in our awareness because, as human beings, we are often blind to the inconsistency of privilege when it comes to ourselves. We want to disown our privileges and instead, we often get preoccupied with our disadvantages. It is a phenomenon that Malin Fors calls ‘privilege blackout’ (Fors, 2018).

We can all probably agree, for example, that the therapeutic or coaching context favours recognising the skill (and power) of the practitioner. This can lead some clients to feel subordinated or powerless in this context and so attempt to defend against this power differential through a variety of ways. They might, for instance, dismiss the therapist’s input, or find means of highlighting their own ability (by talking about their experience or job expertise). Or even, by making more light-hearted jokes, as one of my clients asked as we walked up my garden towards my office, ‘So, who exactly is leading who down the garden path?’ Bourdieu’s thinking encourages us in these situations, to name and recognise the power differential, and

confirm our clients in their power as well as recognise their vulnerability.

So when this aspect of self and personal capital – be it ability, skill, knowledge, education, able-bodiedness, accent, taste etc. – is made figural and is privileged by the habitus of the field, it creates a recognisable power differential. And Bourdieu writes that when this power differential is not acknowledged, when it is dismissed as ‘normal’ and legitimised, then it is exactly this ‘misrecognition’ (Bourdieu, 1977) that creates symbolic power (ibid).

Going back to the conference example, it is when the majority of participants are not native English speakers and yet, it doesn’t occur to the mostly British or American keynote speakers to slow down their speech or simplify their language. Symbolic power is manifest mostly in that this is experienced as a taken-for-granted, inevitable state of affairs even to the non-English speakers and participants who accept this as given. As Bourdieu (1977) writes, ‘symbolic violence is a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims’ (ibid, p. 192).

Unrecognised Ground: the misrecognition of belonging

The second way in which power moderates the relational moment is when power is not necessarily attached to an aspect of the individual or ‘personal capital’ but instead configures the situation. What stands out as figural in a given moment or situation, is the person’s social position as valued (or not) in the field. Bourdieu, as a twentieth-century thinker, didn’t write extensively about how social position and the broader politics of belonging intersected (e.g. engaging with feminist theories), it is clear however that social positioning today is very linked to the politics of identity and belonging.

Here is a vignette representing how Unrecognised Ground can moderate the relational moment.

It is the middle of a work meeting with clients, there is a good discussion going on between participants (who all happen to be men with the exception of one woman). As the meeting breaks for coffee, the male colleagues and clients carry on with the discussion as they head to the men’s toilets. The moment is brief, the woman’s sense of exclusion is real and, when they resume their meeting, she feels she needs to work harder to make clever points,

and not disappear. Her contribution to the meeting was valued, her skill or ability not in question, but yet an aspect of feeling ‘less than’ crept in. The wider field of gendered privilege has impacted the present moment.

Some therapists might argue that her feeling has to do with intra-personal issues, which she should work harder to overcome. Or perhaps this loss of confidence stems from prior experiences and she should take responsibility for it. Some of that might be worth exploring of course, but it doesn’t explain the full response to the very real wider field of struggle. The present moment situation was polarised in this case along very subjective lines of belonging, with clear position-takings along the gender divide and what is most valued or privileged in that workspace field. Again, in this situation, we can’t speak of oppressed or oppressor, it is the misrecognition of the ground of belonging and its historical norms that moderated the moment. It is not that long ago that women in the workplace were whistled at or even pinched when walking down the corridor at work. No one would have thought of putting in a complaint, it was just the way the world was.

As therapists and coaches, it is vital to understand and acknowledge the powerlessness of our clients when faced with symbolic power arising from a misrecognised ground and belonging. It might be easy, in such cases, to think the client is being over-sensitive or not behaving well enough according to the standards of the dominant normativity. For example, I coached an Asian man who was brilliant and very capable but excluded from the all-white, British senior group in his organisation, despite bringing a large share of the profit to the organisation. We could discuss his reluctance to act bolder or more macho; his quieter disposition that made him stand out in that culture. But that alone doesn’t explain or excuse his exclusion. It is important to recognise the subtle, even unconscious, othering that took place. I believe that we often find reluctance in our clients or coachees themselves, to discuss or accept the reality of unconscious prejudice. They often hold a belief that if they kept working on themselves, that if they tried harder, then the ‘us vs them’ divide won’t matter so much. Or is it perhaps easier to work on oneself and adapt, than change a dominant cultural positioning?

Politics of belonging

Of course, belonging isn't only about identity politics, it is also about ethical and political values (e.g. leave vs remain; Republican vs Democrat) as well as belonging to places, countries and regions. We all have many identities and many aspects of belonging, and this polarisation may emerge suddenly, even unexpectedly. It also may become exacerbated when we feel threatened or less secure in any one aspect of our belonging or when we find ourselves, in some way, part of the minority group.

This polarisation of the situation along lines of belonging and privilege speaks of course to the idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In coining this term, Kimberley Crenshaw was pointing out that we all have many identities and that our experience as human beings is more than just the sum of these identities. For example, being a black woman in America isn't just about being black, American and female, but there are unique obstacles and indignities that affect African-American women. It is about recognising that the world isn't equal and fair across all groupings and that power (and usually wealth) has been on the side historically of some groupings more than others.

We have probably all sat with our clients in awareness of our privilege or theirs. As a therapist, when working with refugees or people from war-torn countries, I am acutely aware of my privilege to pass as a white European and to hold a Western passport and therefore not have to queue at border control checkpoints. Equally, I can sit with the privilege of my white, British client born and raised in Surrey and who never had to even consider such issues, or worry about what their passport says about where they were born.

It is important however not to associate power with positioning on the map of intersectionality. It isn't about using intersectionality as a morality map where white, heterosexual, western men are the oppressors and coloured, gay, migrant women the victims. What Bourdieu's thinking shows us is that the moderation of relational dynamics happens in the 'mis-recognition' and legitimisation of privilege and oppression as it plays out in the moment, in the particular situation. It is a dynamic, relational dance where symbolic power shapes the relational moment. There is no oppressor or oppressed, and it is important to recognise that we are seldom either completely innocent or completely guilty. We are rarely in either complete powerlessness or total omnipotence. Being human means bearing the

complexity of privilege and subordination as they play out in the moment – however difficult that may be.

The power dynamics between my client and me are therefore not static, nor are they determined by our identity alone. Fields of power emerge in the moment as features of our ground and context are highlighted, our habitus made explicit, as our contextual power is made figural through an aspect of our self or situation, an aspect of our personal capital or our positioning/belonging.

A systemic enactment

Having covered in the sections above two key moderations of fields of power, it is interesting to also see them enacted at a systemic level.

The tyranny of individualism

The first systemic power moderation happens when people, organisations or even whole countries seem to prioritise the 'Self' lens. In so doing, they are more blind to 'Situation' and 'Other' and tend to reify and value aspects of ability and personal capital over anything else.

An example of this stance is what Michael Sandel, the American political philosopher, called the 'Tyranny of Merit' (Sandel, 2020). Sandel argues that meritocracy, a very prevalent and liberal notion in the West, tells us that those who are successful and are at the top are there because they deserve it and it is only due to their ability. And for those who are not successful, it is their fault for not earning it or working hard enough for it (ibid). This view, which makes us buy into the myth of the self-made and self-sufficient individual, is also deeply unjust because it pretends that people succeed just because of their own ability. Unjust as it ignores everything and everyone that has helped or enabled these individuals: whether rich parents, connected teachers, systems or institutions they are part of. The misrecognition of privilege and symbolic power is very large indeed.

The symbolic aspect of this systemic moderation is most striking as it celebrates individual achievement and ability whilst keeping the inclusion/exclusion practices that have led to these achievements very much in ground. So much in ground, that the individual's accomplishments and successes appear as the natural order of things rather than a biased or uneven form of distribution of power. Bourdieu's work here is useful as he reminds us that most situations include a bias

towards the more powerful already (1977) and this bias stems precisely from the normalising effect of symbolic power.

The ossified situation

The second systemic moderation happens when wider fields of struggle get either dismissed (unrecognised) or overemphasised (reified) in the service of maintaining or gaining power in any given situation. This dismissal (or overstating) of wider field struggles can lead to the ossification of the situation in the moment. This ossification can happen at the level of a whole organisation, community or even country.

When considering the fight for emancipation across the history of many minority groups (women's liberation, gay rights, etc.) wishing to be heard, listened to, and given equal rights, we can see how whole systems might dismiss and downplay the struggle of non-dominant groups in order to maintain the status quo of power. In the initial stages of most social movements, it is usually only a handful of activists that hold the non-dominant perspective and keep challenging the field's habitus. Haugaard (2008) argues that typically about twenty years is needed for a habitus to change. He goes on to say that the 'habitus is a gestalt ordering of the external world, which can be consciously changed through being made discursive' (Hauggard, 2008. p. 193) And that takes time and a certain amount of awareness raising and articulation of the power-differential.

Paradoxically, once recognised and articulated, power struggles can also be over-emphasised and so focused upon in a given situation as to exclude the Self and Other lenses. When this happens, the tensions and polarisations of the given situation are focused upon to the exclusion of all else. This leads to a different type of ossification where each situation is only viewed as a battleground between 'us' vs 'them', between the dominant and dominated groups, whilst both the individual (Self) experience and the sense of the Other are lost. The battle around identity politics today seems to be such an example and the phenomenon of cancel culture on university campuses also takes this power struggle to extremes.

What gets focused upon at a systemic level is where the individual belongs, and which grouping he/she identifies with, whilst their phenomenological experience remains unexplored or, at worst, dismissed. Only focusing on a person's identity as part of a minority/majority group robs them of the possibility to be different in some situations. Indeed, not all black people

feel or think the same and not all women or gay people have the same experience.

The power of the situation can become such that nothing else matters. We have seen this in many polarised positions in our world today: leave vs remain, black vs white, Palestinian vs Jew, Republican vs Democrat; every interaction is seen as a power play between these polarised groupings. Every interaction becomes a battleground over either who is better, who is in the right, or even who has suffered more, is more oppressed and, therefore, is entitled to more. Losing sight of the phenomenological intent and sense of connection opens the door for a type of social activism for the oppressed which makes a mockery of the much-needed activism for situations that require it most.

Robert Greene in his book *The 48 Laws of Power* (Greene, 1998) writes that individuals don't emphasise their weakness without self-interest or a power move and that 'true powerlessness, without any motive of self-interest, would not publicise its weakness to gain sympathy or respect. Making a show of one's weakness is actually a very effective strategy, subtle and deceptive, in the game of power.' This is not to say that there are not very many social, political and economic issues that need us to fight and keep fighting for and to keep highlighting. The need for equity, not just equality, is a constant battle about which we all need to stay aware and vigilant.

Implications for us and our practice

And so what? What lessons do we need to take away from recognising the way power moderates our behaviour and contact with ourselves and others in an insidious and often implicit way. What does it mean in practice for us as Gestaltists and relational practitioners?

First, we must, as practitioners immersed in fields of power (be they social, political or economic), keep informed and aware. We must stay curious about how changing cultures and customs may be shaping fields of power (be they supportive or not). Only in doing so may we avoid placing the burden or responsibility for shame and powerlessness at the individual level, and have a better chance of recognising the fields of power we are immersed in. Paul Goodman sought, in his contribution to Gestalt, to free 'the individual from the oppression of the state' (Stoehr, 1994) and in his time, the sequels of the Second World War, the Holocaust and Hiroshima all pointed to the failures of the state and governments – those legitimate authorities who held

power. Today, however, in our contemporary world, the legitimate authority has largely been supplanted and powers have become more diffuse, decentred and de-subjectified (Yval-Davis, 2011). We are therefore more likely to speak of the power of Silicon Valley and the influence of social media on our culture and youth. We must stay aware and bring the social and political struggles to our work openly (to our therapy, coaching, organisational work and supervision) and dare to speak them not just when we are of the same opinion or side as our client, but mostly when we differ. Speak them, even when we feel the ossification of situations through the overstating of polarised struggles. This in particular is a point needing urgent attention and exploration in both organisational and educational settings.

With power more diffuse, we can no longer point the finger at the leader or politician and blame him or her. Today, more than ever, the future of a better and less divided world lies with each of us. It lies in our capacity to use power wisely to contain, support and collaborate rather than dominate. Yasha Mounk in his book *The Great Experiment* (Mounk, 2022), writes how democratic stability varies in different societies. He points out that ethnic diversity is not destabilising by itself, but that diversity challenges democracy when it hardens into a winner-takes-all struggle for power between two sides (i.e. a dominant vs an oppressed side). Rather than succumb to the ease of polarising into us-vs-them, we could usefully remain open to multilarities (Zinker, 1977) as the possibility of a multitude of differences and, that several opposites may exist to any one polarity. Mounk (2022) reminds us that ensuring all groups have some power, some ‘freedom of movement’, is the best way to ensure a stable society. There needs of course to be a balance between power-sharing (that can when taken to extreme deprive elections of meaning) and the us-vs-them divide that is, for example, so threatening in the USA today.

As we fully recognise our interrelatedness, each one of us needs to take responsibility within the fields of power we inhabit. An essential component of this is a reflexive stance towards ourselves. How can we get in touch with our own internalised privilege and subordination? How can we each sit with the knowledge that none of us is entirely innocent or entirely guilty? In the two moderations outlined in this paper, symbolic power arises from either the *self* or *situation* lenses, and ultimately the answer to both these polarised positions lies in reaching to the *other*. Not reaching just through understanding, which we may not always be able to do as we each inhabit our own habitus, but

reaching out with compassion. As Gestalt practitioners who work with embodiment, we need to be attentive to the shifts in ourselves and others that signal shame and powerlessness. And this is because cognitive understanding often, like the cavalry, arrives too late. Let us listen to the wisdom of our bodies and open ourselves to sense the power shifts in the field, those early signals that will allow us to slow down and reach the other.

Conclusion

This article, and the lecture on which it is based, arose from a very real need to make sense of a changing world in which power, whether social, political or economic, seemed increasingly confusing. Holding an ethical presence (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020) and stance in such a world requires us as practitioners to understand how this power manifests and how we may be more aware of the fields of power in which we are immersed.

I hope this article will mark the beginning of an ongoing dialogue between Gestalt theory and contemporary concepts of power. Through Lewin’s field theory, Gestalt has already a view of how the phenomenal field shapes behaviour. The contribution of Bourdieu’s thinking adds the systemic social space as a dimension through which power can also manifest.

With a better understanding of power comes a greater ability to be ethically present and responsive to the way it moderates the moment. Today the ossification of situations is presenting a great challenge to us, whether in education, politics or organisational settings. More is needed to not just recognise the power struggle, but also explore how to work with it ethically. I write this as an invitation to other Gestalt and relational practitioners to attend with me to this urgent point.

I would like to conclude by returning to Michel Foucault who in his last talk in English in 1983 (Foucault, 2001), spoke of the subject of parrhesia which he defined as ‘a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)’ (ibid, pp. 19–20). So, when we are immersed in fields of power, we can either succumb to them or choose to speak truth to power. I hope this article has contributed somewhat to support and enable this truth-telling.

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Notes

¹ This article is based on a lecture I gave at the 2022 Marianne Fry Lecture in September 2022. It captures my early thoughts on a topic which I hope will keep evolving within Gestalt field and beyond. An audio copy of the lecture is available via the Marianne Fry website.

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Social class and Gestalt therapy: are we blind?

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Abstract

Social class and social inequality in the context of Gestalt therapy are boundary events, forces in the Person/Other field, one of several power relations that play out in our interactions. They are also forces that shape our profession. Yet, unlike sexism, homophobia and racism, they are rarely discussed in Gestalt writing. I explore some ways a 'working class' background, and a class difference between us as individuals and the people we work with, impact our clients, our trainees and ourselves. I will address the questions: How does class manifest as a force in the client-therapist field? Are we 'class blind' in our therapeutic or supervision work and training curricula? I will offer some examples from therapy and supervision, suggest some reasons for the absence of this topic from Gestalt teaching and outline possible methodological tools to explore this.

Keywords

social class, Gestalt therapy, therapy training, power relationships, inequality, field theory, ideology, identity politics, capitalism

Defining the terms

Social class and socio-economic inequality in the context of Gestalt therapy are contact boundary experiences, forces in the Person/Other field, one of several power relations in our moment-to-moment interactions. Yet, unlike racism, sexism and homophobia, they are rarely mentioned in Gestalt writing. Class tends to be seen as a socio-economic and cultural construct with subjective and objective aspects. There can be more than one definition of the term. Firstly, there is the Weberian concept of class as 'market-determined life chances' – 'working class' as a shorthand for low income, poor educational access, low-paid and insecure employment, poor access to health and housing as well as restricted choices. Then there is my preference: the emancipatory view of class from Marx (1845, 1848), looking at how classes emerged historically from wealth accumulation and exploitation by the few who owned the means of production and accumulated the resources of the many that had only their work to sell. This view focuses on what needs to change in existing capitalist societies to end the economic exploitation of the many by the few, and for wealth to be equally shared for the good of all, including their good mental health (Wright, 2004; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2020; Ferguson, 2017). Having stated

my preference, it is as a Gestalt practitioner that I will open the following questions: How does class impact us in our work with our clients, our supervisees and our trainees? How can our theory support us in this work? How can we incorporate this into Gestalt training programmes, and hopefully as a result develop a praxis of social justice?

When I decided to offer a workshop on this theme – and this title – at the last IAAGT conference in Ennystimon, Ireland, in May 2022, I was focusing on a concern of many years: the silence of clients regarding their class journey, and the silence from younger supervisees who presented their work as if it happened in some smoothed out environment, where only nuclear family links were open to exploration and the repercussions of class and inequality were absent. I knew that our social, economic and political history, our class journey, forms an essential part of how we make meaning out of our situation, to the point that seeing ourselves in that broader context may impact positively on our mental well-being. Or, to put it differently, we can approach health in three ways: material (poverty and ill-health are strongly correlated), historical (our personal history, including our trauma history, against the backdrop of that of our forebearers and our social group), and dialectical (or, in Gestalt terms,

field-theoretical) (Ferguson, 2017). I decided therefore to ask workshop participants to begin to chart their own class journey together and situate themselves, and their history, in the flow of History (with a capital H). I did this exercise beforehand. Below I share two examples drawn from therapeutic and supervision work and my own class journey.

1. Meeting the Other in the social-class field

One of many events that spurred me to consider how class impacted my therapy and supervision work happened over ten years ago. Aidan is in therapy with me, a person whom most in the North of Ireland would perceive as a successful member of the upper middle-class.

Aidan is a lawyer in his forties, born to a poor Belfast family in a community that has known high unemployment and discrimination by a repressive and sectarian government since the foundation of the 'Northern Ireland' state in 1921. We have explored his history together, from birth and childhood in the midst of conflict, to a variety of jobs and finally the study of law, and how the class system works against lawyers of working-class origin. He describes his emotions when he faced a judge in court as he defended clients who lost their tenancy because they could not afford the charges imposed by the housing association. 'I didn't have a tenner left at the end of the month,' the client says, timidly. 'What is a tenner?' a plummy voice utters from the bench. The lawyer cannot hold back: 'It's two fivers, Your Honour!'

Aidan: I know I shouldn't have, I was furious! I felt as small as my client in front of him, I couldn't help myself!

J: I feel small in my chair, too. How about we both stand up?

Now we both stand. I invite Aidan to feel his feet, his back, his spine, his neck, to notice any difference. I feel the anger in my eyes. Aidan tramples a little on the floor, hesitating at first, and finds a stance with feet slightly apart, his back upright.

Aidan: That b**** has no idea what people's lives are like!

J: Can you picture him somewhere here, as near or far as you want.

Aidan looks out of the window.

Aidan: I will put him ... across the road.

J: Where he cannot hurt?

Aidan: Where I can see him coming, and I have time to think what I want to say.

J: And you want to say?

Aidan: I want to say what a calm and collected lawyer should say at that point.

J: Is there any sensation or feeling that goes with this?

Aidan stands even straighter, yet relaxed.

Aidan: A warm feeling going down my throat, like a good wine.

As I write this, I can still feel the emotion, and remember the sense I had after Aidan had left, that we had touched into something powerful and hot, stronger and hotter than both of us could fully comprehend at the time. I remember the sensations, very familiar, of feeling small, my eyes narrowing, my gaze becoming harder, a hot chokey hollowness filling my chest and throat, the impulse to stiffen my neck, some glimpses of remembered encounters in school, on the playground: 'Who do you think you are?' My learned defences – arrogance, defiance – my regret not to have found 'the right words' at the time, and how Aidan's response, and Aidan's story, so different from mine, seemed to touch into this same force: the embodied social inequality, the power imbalance that gives a person with self-identified lower status the only choices of fight, flight or some version of shame-collapse or freeze.

As I look back at that shared moment when Aidan and I were each and both with our own experience of social inequality, I think that it mattered little who led and who followed, only that I let myself attune to the field of us (Gaffney, 2013).

2. Meeting the Other in the social-class field

With me is Brenda, my clinical supervisee. Also present, although 'at one remove' is Ciaran, Brenda's client (Gaffney, 2011b). Brenda, in her late thirties, works as a counsellor for children and young people in a local counselling agency offering very short interventions. Her working-class accent and speech are that of West Belfast where I live, an area impoverished and disadvantaged by decades of government repression. It is a familiar accent to my ears; it is the accent I became fluent in when I learned English as a second language. It also reminds me of my years teaching in a local secondary school, which at the time had a Free School

Meal Entitlement rate of 48%; an indicator of what is called ‘disadvantaged’ (a polite word for poverty!).

Brenda’s client Ciaran is a seventeen-year-old Sixth Form student who has been referred for ‘low moods and anxiety’ – the current ‘ticket’ into school counselling. He is considering leaving school to get a job. Ciaran lives in another of Belfast’s impoverished nationalist areas, a small working-class enclave suffering from chronic unemployment and regular attacks from neighbouring ‘loyalist’ (pro-British) areas. I use the terms ‘nationalist’ and ‘loyalist’ where some in the mainstream media would use ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’, or others referring to the colonial history of Ireland might use ‘native’ and ‘settler’.

Brenda reports that Ciaran feels unsupported at home, his parents do not engage with his studies and seem indifferent to his leaving school or staying on. Ciaran fears the prospect of university and has not chosen yet what course he might follow there. Brenda herself has studied at university to Master level and is an experienced and skilled counsellor, but has occasionally expressed doubts as to her own ability to conceptualise her work.

J: Are you the first in your family to go to university?

Brenda: No, my mum was the first.

J: Ah! My mother was the first of her siblings to study past fourteen. It was tough for her, and she felt the need to prove her ability throughout her working life. She broke the ground. I benefited from her experience. Did you?

Brenda: Yes. University was something I could reach for. Because my mum had done it she could tell me what it would be like.

J: So Ciaran is like your mum, the first explorer to university, with nobody in his family to advise him. I wonder if he might consider ‘It will be so much easier for my kids’, just like it was easier for you?

Both Brenda and I were moved by this turn of conversation. Our two mothers were in the room with us, as if encouraging Ciaran. Brenda went back to her young client and shared this conversation. Their relationship became more trusting. Ciaran has since resumed his studies and started university. The conversations Brenda and I now have in supervision often include some reference to class as a force in her work with young clients.

This example highlights the arduous journey of those who make their way towards and through higher education without the benefit of parents or family who took that road before them. This is one of the ways inequality is reproduced and the working classes’ access to the academic world is made difficult, to the extent that many working-class people will refrain from pursuing such studies as ‘not for the likes of them’, to quote a participant in my workshop. (Bourdieu, 1979; De Gaulejac, 2016; Burnell Reilly et al., 2022).

My class journey

This and many other moments have led me to return to my own class journey, which inevitably started further back than my birth.

My mother, the fourth of five children, born in the French Jura, won a scholarship to study beyond primary school and became a primary school teacher in a secular one-classroom village school. Meanwhile her mother, my grandmother, widowed before her husband, a communist and trade unionist train worker, could leave her his pension, was cleaning and helping in another village primary school, and taking in ironing. Then World War Two intervened, with the line between Vichy France and German-occupied France running through the woods between the two villages – a line my mother crossed twice a week with her *Ausweis*¹. I never met my maternal grandfather. My grandmother helped raise me as both my parents were working. She died when I was nine.

My mother was the first of her family to move socially from the rural working class to the higher status of a primary school teacher, the lowest rung of France’s rigidly hierarchical education system. She never lost a sense of her origins and could smell privilege a mile away, in how people spoke, how they dressed, or behaved as if they ‘owned the place’. I absorbed her diffidence – I still feel it, this hollow feeling in the throat – when she met people ‘above her’. I remember her tears as she recounted her exam triumph in 1949 when she completed post-qualification training to work with special-needs children: she came first, ahead of a group of university trained (understand: middle-class) candidates.

My father was the fourth of six children, born to a German-speaking Jewish family in northern Bukovina, in the east of the then Austrian-Hungarian Empire, in a town which became Romanian seven years after his birth, then part of the USSR after World War Two, then Ukrainian since 1991. He was the only child who was

sent to university (in France) in the early thirties. His dream was to become a doctor, but he dropped out after a year, just as Hitler was coming to power. He had hated the well-heeled doctors' sons attending Paris' Faculty of Medicine. He returned home to Bukovina to work, save money and choose shorter studies, still in France, as an engineer. His luck was to pick Grenoble's Polytechnic Institute. Firstly Grenoble escaped German occupation in 1943, initially as part of Vichy France until 1942, then occupied by the Italians who did not at that time have a policy of deportation of Jewish populations. Secondly, because the resistance was well organised in Grenoble, my father was given forged ID papers by colleagues in case he came up against a roadblock. Thankfully he never had to use them.

After 1940 my father lost all contact with his family until 1946. His father had been a government employee until the Romanian government dismissed all Jewish staff. His mother raised the children and managed the household. In 1941 his parents, my grandparents, were evicted from their house and sent on 'Death Marches', then to a labour camp in Transnistria. The Soviet Army liberated the camp in 1944 before the remaining survivors could be shipped to Auschwitz. I never met my paternal grandfather, he died in Palestine in 1954. I met my grandmother once when I was four. They remain shrouded in the historical storm that swept through Europe, and the vanished world of Eastern European Jews.

As my parent's daughter, I inherited their hard-won cultural capital. I lived in the midst of books. The language of education was spoken at home, it wasn't a set of codes I had to learn from scratch (Bourdieu, 1970). Yet I also inherited their sense of the chasm that separated the world they came from, from the world of some of their colleagues and neighbours, their sense of foreboding and of the fragility of one's current position (De Gaulejac, 2016). I inherited also, significantly, their optimism which came from their Marxist view of history and the possibility of social change through collective action, be it trade union or organised politics.

As I meet the people who come to work with me for therapy or supervision, this is my frame of reference, this embodied There and Then which belongs to my Here, Now and Next, my own hermeneutic and semantic Now (Staemmler, 2011). As I meet them, it is their history and mine, as part of History, that unfold, and enfold us both.

Social class and power relations: in their own words

What are Gestalt training organisations saying about the issue of class, poverty, inequality and social justice? I decided to look at a small sample of organisations' public statements which are available online.

I was searching for explicit mentions of 'poverty', 'power relations', 'class' or 'social class', and 'social justice', particularly in the curriculum or in the ethos and values of the organisation. The following table is far from exhaustive. In particular, research into Gestalt training outside the English-speaking sphere remains to be done. This is a first glance. It merely examines the public statements made by some organisations. I did not include organisations that made no mention on their website of such issues. In no way does it imply that they ignore them in practice. Further research on the subject would be useful.

What is emerging from this superficial glance is a stated intention to prevent discrimination against, encourage respect of, and appreciate the diversity of listed categories of people. 'Race', 'gender' and 'sexual orientation' have made it into several lists.

Those lists are largely derived from the equality legislation in operation in various countries. For example, in the North of Ireland, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 lists the categories: religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation, men and women generally, disability and family status. And in the South of Ireland, the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 ('the Acts') prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education. They cover nine grounds where discrimination is prohibited: gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership of the Traveller community. Similar Equality legislation has been passed in EU countries, as well as in Britain and the US over the past few decades, and training organisations have adapted their language accordingly.

None of the legal texts named above refers to 'socio-economic status' as a possible area of discrimination. All the more remarkable therefore that some Gestalt organisations explicitly mention 'class', 'inequality', 'poverty', 'power relations' and 'social justice'.

This very partial observation of Gestalt organisations' public statements poses the question of the possible influence of 'identity politics' in their thinking – a type of politics that aims to secure rights, recognition

and respect for certain groups that have experienced discrimination and marginalisation, but which often fails to challenge the economic inequality that lies beneath, and thus fails to find the common ground all these groups can access beyond competing perspectives (Das, 2020).

Phrases commonly used both in legal texts and Gestalt organisations' policies, such as 'difference and diversity' or 'inclusion', are in my view dangerously unspecific as they fail to mention the power differentials that may hinder people of various groups from accessing training in the first place.

The listing of specific areas for anti-discrimination practice is not the same as addressing the underlying exploitation which results in unequal distribution of wealth and the reproduction of an unequal system through its apparently benign institutions, such

as education and health. In Britain and the 'West'² generally, these two government instruments, far from being designed to be 'redistributive' and mitigating inequality, had been intended to enforce dominant ideology, using education to teach compliance and unquestioning absorption of knowledge, and using public health to ensure a more productive working class – and in the last century, healthier army recruits (Lynch, 1998, pp. 114-115).

I have presented this sample in table form, not to give an impression of exhaustivity but to facilitate access and let readers draw their own conclusions.

Training organisation	Document	Language used	URL ³
Gestalt Institute of Ireland	'Our Approach'	'respect for individuals and groups irrespective of ethnic origins, cultural background, status, age, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, or disability'	https://gestaltinstitute.ie/about-us/our-approach/
Gestalt Psychotherapy & Training Institute (GPTI)	Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy	'No person will be discriminated against or denied access to services or positions within the Institute on the basis of their disability, HIV/AIDS status, race, ethnic or national origin, religion, gender (including gender identity), sexual orientation, marital status, social class, age (subject to a minimum age requirement set by UKCP), political affiliation or non-relevant criminal conviction.'	https://gpti.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GPTI-Equal-Opportunities-and-Diversity-Policy-2022.pdf
GPTI	Core Curriculum	Core Curriculum item 15: "Difference and Diversity"	https://gpti.org.uk/core-curriculum/
The Gestalt Centre (London)	PG Dip programme	'We consider the issues of difference and diversity in the context of the practice of the psychotherapy.'	https://gestaltcentre.org.uk/course/psychotherapy-programme/postgraduate-diploma-in-gestalt-therapy/

Training organisation	Document	Language used	URL ³
Metanoia	Equality and Diversity Manual	The curriculum will ‘expose students to cases and methodologies that incorporate variations by gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and religion.’	https://www.metanoia.ac.uk/media/2242/2-equality-and-diversity-manual-updated-1.pdf
Metanoia	MSc in Gestalt	‘a respectful stance to individual learning needs and styles, as well as insight to appreciate diversity, for example of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation and class.’	https://www.metanoia.ac.uk/programmes/psychotherapy/msc-in-gestalt-psychotherapy/
Gestalt Centre Belfast (GCB) – my organisation	Ethos	‘GCB maintains that affordable, accessible and needs-based psychotherapy is rooted in social justice. GCB is committed to good practice in regards to equality and inclusion. In the context of Belfast, the north of Ireland and Ireland as a whole, GCB aims to develop an understanding of the relationships of oppression – including inequality, emigration, poverty, the absence of social justice and issues of cultural identity.’	https://www.gestaltbelfast.org/about-us
Gestalt Centre Belfast (as above)	Module 5 Year 2 of the Gestalt Practitioner Diploma’s curriculum	‘Working with difference and power relations in groups.’	https://www.gestaltbelfast.org/project/gestalt-practitioners-diploma
Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia	Mission statement (Our Mission)	‘GTIP is aware that, regardless of our social location, we all live with the legacy of oppression across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, ability and other social identities. We aspire to train, collaborate and learn with those who have been historically marginalized.’	https://www.gtipp.org/our-community/mission/
Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia	Three-Year Training Program Curriculum	In their three-year training programme, in Year 2, ‘Encountering Bigotry: Socially Constructed Identities in the Field’ and in Year 3, ‘Identification with the Aggressor and the Primed Vulnerable Other’ ⁴ .	https://www.gtipp.org/train-with-us/3-year-training-program/curriculum/

Training organisation	Document	Language used	URL ³
Gestalt Institute of Cleveland	Statement of Diversity and Inclusion	'GIC works to foster an inclusive environment that recognizes the contributions and supports the advancement of all, regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, religion, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, veteran status, or disability because an inclusive environment can support quality relationships, improve community relations, and positively affect the well-being of society.'	https://www.gestaltcleveland.org/diversity-inclusion
Pacific Gestalt Institute	Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy	'No person will be discriminated against or denied access to services or positions within the Institute on the basis of their disability, HIV/AIDS status, race, ethnic or national origin, religion, gender (including gender identity), sexual orientation, marital status, social class, age (subject to a minimum age requirement set by UKCP), political affiliation or non-relevant criminal conviction.'	https://gpti.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GPTI-Equal-Opportunities-and-Diversity-Policy-2022.pdf
European Association for Gestalt Therapy	Core Curriculum	Core Curriculum item 15: 'Difference and Diversity'	https://gpti.org.uk/core-curriculum/

What should Gestalt training providers do? Offer scholarships or free places to low-income students? Encourage trainees to offer free therapy sessions? All these initiatives are worthy of consideration, but they must go along with a thorough examination of motives:

Even counsellors who are committed to addressing poverty can benefit from introspectively critiquing their own motivations to 'help the needy.' At best, such attitudes can result in a helping posture that is patronising and dehumanising for poor clients. At worst, they can represent a form of helping that derives primarily from one's own need to feel beneficent even as one participates in perpetuating an unjust status quo (Freire, 1970).

(Smith et al., 2008)

Perhaps training organisations should also include class as a force in the therapeutic relationship, and all

relationships. They could ask their trainees to explore their own class background and invite them to reflect on the social, economic and ideological forces which explicitly or implicitly shape the 'psy' professions. In particular, the 'individualised and therapeutic culture of rights' well analysed by Madsen (2014).

Some tools for exploring the social-class field

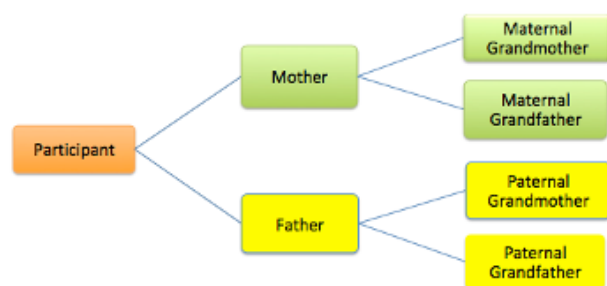
In introducing the subject of class to a group of Gestalt trainees, it is important to acknowledge that the prevailing thrust of dominant ideology since the second half of the last century, the 'common sense' we have all introjected in countries commonly labelled as 'the West', has been to erase the notion of class from everyday discourse, while the inequality gap increased dramatically (Das, 2020; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Margaret Thatcher said 'Class is a communist concept. It groups people as bundles and sets them against one another' (1992). In 1997, John Prescott, deputy PM in Tony Blair's Labour government, said 'We are all middle class now'. The class difference has increasingly become

a taboo subject. While the ‘welfare state’ and public services were being defunded and gradually privatised, the political debate slipped to one of ‘identity’ – the left calls this ‘rights’, and the right calls it ‘culture wars’. All the while, the right engages in dominant identity politics of its own (white supremacy or anti-abortion law, for instance). However we should not forget, in the words of a member of the capitalist class, Warren Buffet (interview with *New York Times*, 2006): ‘There’s class warfare all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making the war, and we’re winning.’

In planning the workshop for IAAGT 2022, I wanted to invite participants to begin to think about, and share, their socio-economic background, to situate themselves at the crossroad where genealogy meets History. This is the world we are born into, are influenced by, and on which we can also exert influence. It is my belief that we need to become consciously aware and make sense of this unique world in order to change it. This is not just an individual pursuit but rather an embodied inquiry, and a collective process – one which Gestalt is well equipped to facilitate.

The participants in Ennistymon were invited to spend a moment completing (or thinking about) the family tree below, then in pairs share what that experience had been like, and finally return to the large group to share their learning from this exercise. As it happened, this experiential exercise absorbed the group for most of the two-hour workshop. The interest, the memories and the emotions in the room were palpable. I had done this exercise for myself before the workshop. I have shared it as my ‘class journey’ above.

Year of birth, education, socio-economic status* as child, as adult, L1, exile or emigration, employment**



*Upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class, working class, ...
** first language

To set the scene for such training, I would choose a short comedy sketch. In 1966, the BBC’s *Frost Report* produced a very astute sketch. Originally entitled *The Class Sketch*, it contrasts three classes: upper class, middle class and working class, represented in descending order of heights by comedians John

Cleese, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett. A later and very funny variation, *Three Therapists*, contrasts the psychiatrist, the psychotherapist and the counsellor – a great introduction to the internal stratification of the therapeutic profession along class lines.

Another experiential exercise might be to invite participants to go to someone in the room who they imagine might have access to some necessities of life that they don’t, to share their projection and hear the response of the person they chose in this way. This touches on a complex set of subjective and objective aspects of class and opens a discussion on how we as Gestalt therapists might meet class differences in our work with clients. With a client such as Aidan in the first vignette, I might have wrongly assumed from an initial meeting with this professional man that his perception of himself in the world was assured, even entitled. Social mobility can be a traumatic experience of never quite fitting in, constantly fearing being found out and expelled from a club – the rules and codes of which are like a foreign language (Henley, 2016; Bourdieu, 2004; De Gaulejac, 2016).

An exercise in mini-memoir writing might also be used, to encourage trainees to understand how their socio-economic and cultural background has shaped their perception of themselves and others. Indeed, memoirs have often offered unique access into the experience of the working class where actual research is scarce (Bageant, 2008, 2010; Henley, 2016.) To those who object that such a psychotherapeutic training session is turning into a sociology class, I say: How is that a problem? When a Gestalt practitioner meets people who come to work with her^s, she becomes part of their lifespaces as they become part of hers, and the field includes not only the psychological but also the anthropological, sociological, political and historical.

Preparing for the workshop, I listed all my current and some past clients and supervisees. I noticed that for all of them, I held a ‘class journey’, pieced together from their account and the history of our relationship. I have learned how useful it is in my therapeutic work to have some idea of the specific history of the place where they and I meet. I remembered the first meeting with a working-class client who froze in fear that they would appear impolite if they looked around my practice room (at my invitation). I remembered a conversation with a supervisee when I had made the wrong assumption – they appeared more middle-class than their origins! I remembered the surprise of another client when I quickly ‘got where they were coming from’, their delight that I had ‘read up’ about the history of Ireland.

Looking at my list, I realise how I know their class background, just as they know mine (in its most succinct form). We have discussed how we perceived one another initially, and experienced how this unveiling of our respective origins deepens the encounter and enables each of us to change and to emerge to ourselves more fully 'on the occasion of an Other', in Jean-Marie Robine's beautiful phrase (Robine, 2011).

I would invite trainee supervisees to explore their list of clients. What do they know of their class journey? How difficult is it to bring the subject up? What forces in the field push for silence? In meeting the Other, we project our best and worst as we begin the dance of approach and avoidance in the service of safety and connection. In the North of Ireland emerging from armed conflict, silence and equivocation has been the safe response in ordinary conversations (Gartner, 2013). 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' was the rule to survive by, the very title of one of Seamus Heaney's poems (Heaney, 1975):

*The famous
Northern⁶ reticence, the tight gag of place
And times*

The class question is also silenced here, and in the 'West'⁷ generally, through decades of new 'neoliberal' policies starting in the last quarter of the twentieth century and which attacked the post-World War Two social consensus by underfunding, criticising and gradually privatising public services. Public and collective resources are being undervalued, and individualism, 'self-help', and toxic positivity are exalted (Cabannas & Illouz, 2019). Class struggle has been replaced by the so-called 'culture wars' and the emergence of right-wing populism.

Mental illness or psycho-social illness? Therapist or psychosocial activist?

Can one be a Gestalt therapist and not be a socialist? There is a question to open a discussion! As a therapist, I cannot ignore the fact that the concepts of 'healing', 'mental health' and 'mental illness', are defined today within the world of capitalist power relations, and that psychotherapy as practised today has developed in a capitalist social system which favours a shift away from the collective towards the individual, and defines the 'self' as located in the individual where change and growth must be helped to occur (Madsen, 2014;

Cabannas & Illouz, 2019; Moncrieff, 2022). But as a Gestaltist, I am invited to work with a different notion of the self as the 'system of contacts at any moment' (PHG, op.cit.). And this implies that we are both in this organism-environment field, and of it, and must explore it with as many lenses as exist to grasp this dynamic situation we evolve in. To confine this exploration to the purely psychological is to abandon a field-theoretical stance.

I would argue that Gestalt therapists insist on a term which acknowledges the person-environment field, perhaps 'psychosocial illness'? The title of 'psychotherapist' may also need to change. 'Psychosocial activist' is Jack Aylward's suggestion (op. cit.). The idea is not so much to psychologise history or sociology, but to 'historicise' and 'sociologise' psychology. De Gaulejac, for example, describes his work as 'clinical sociology'.

I also contemplate what is becoming of psychotherapy where I live: a grossly underfunded mental-health provision, the practically non-existent health service provision of free psychotherapy at the point of need, voluntary counselling agencies competing for meagre funding and offering poorly paid work to counsellors, many of them recently qualified, mostly non-unionised, mostly female, and who work for a finite, one-size-fits-all, usually small number of sessions with those who cannot afford private therapy. The profession has become pauperised, like the majority of the people they work with, and we have yet to raise our collective voice in protest.

I have included in my reference list some influential readings which have helped me structure my thinking, and which I often share with supervisees and trainees. As for Gestalt writing on the subject, there is remarkably little given the extent of poverty-related distress and ill-health in the world today. There are some case studies of social action or community interventions (Melnick et al., 2009). A Gestaltist writes about working-class artists (Gregory, 2012). But the direct exploration of class and socio-economic power from a Gestalt perspective largely remains to be written, with the notable exception of Philip Lichtenberg (1990, 2003, 2013). To return to our classics, Perls, Hefferline and Goodman clearly set the work of Gestalt therapy within an understanding of one's context (PHG, p. 144). And in understanding 'class neurosis' studied in particular by De Gaulejac (op. cit, 2016), we could revisit PHG's Chapter 9: *Conflict and Self-Conquest* – a poignant and exciting read,

some of which prefigures Lichtenberg's *Community and Confluence*.

It is my hope that this text will serve its purpose as a discussion starter to encourage in Gestalt practitioners an exploration of this underdeveloped subject of enquiry and push for more class consciousness in our Gestalt practice, including supervision and training.

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Video Resources

- The Class Sketch (<https://youtu.be/UDIHrX-Jp2E>, retrieved on 11 December 2022)
- Three Therapists (<https://youtu.be/fUkXD7K3dis>, retrieved from YouTube's Counselling Channel on 11 December 2022).

Notes

- ¹ German ID papers required for travel in Occupied France.
- ² I use this term to denote those countries in Western Europe and the United States which built their empires on the exploitation of slaves and workers, and the theft of resources, and are driving wages down by using cheaper labour in (or from) poorer countries.
- ³ All websites retrieved on 23 March 2023.
- ⁴ An examination of power relations, direct reference to Lichtenberg's *Community and Confluence*.
- ⁵ Please use whatever pronoun you prefer.
- ⁶ North of Ireland
- ⁷ See footnote 2.

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Becoming research practitioners: developing our research capacity as a Gestalt community

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Abstract

This paper outlines a proposal for an inclusive practitioner case study research project in the international Gestalt community that addresses the questions ‘What is Gestalt therapy?’ and ‘How can I be a better therapist?’ The aim is to contribute to the advancement and future of Gestalt therapy by building up a database of case study evidence of Gestalt therapy practice. A rigorous pragmatic model of case study development is outlined and a plan for forming case-study groups which any Gestalt therapist could be part of.

Keywords

case study, research, pragmatic approach, practice-based, Gestalt Research Network

Introduction

This paper is developed from a keynote speech at the Gestalt Research Conference in Hamburg, September 2022.¹ It is a proposal that addresses a current problem for Gestalt therapy around the world. With the increasing recognition of the importance of mental health and well-being, there has been a burgeoning of approaches to address this. With so much on offer, the funders and commissioners of statutory services are naturally demanding accountability and proof of efficacy. Gestalt therapy has found itself at a disadvantage as it has mostly flourished in private training institutes rather than in university departments. The leading proponents of Gestalt therapy are skilled practitioners rather than academics. This has resulted in the development of well-trained, highly skilled, sensitively nuanced practitioners, and a dearth of published data which can be drawn on to evidence the efficacy of Gestalt therapy. This puts Gestalt-trained therapists at a disadvantage compared to some other modalities when they apply for work in publicly funded or insurance-based mental-health services.

Within the international Gestalt community, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of research of all kinds and at all levels as a means of legitimisation of our work. Increasing numbers of Gestalt therapists

are accessing doctoral-level programmes and engaging in the rigours of academic scrutiny. This is significant and will bring a cross-fertilisation of ideas and new challenges to bear on established traditions. However, this is not a route open to everyone and it leaves untapped the enormous resource of expertise and skilled knowledge built up at the grassroots level by the day-to-day work of Gestalt therapists. Is there a way we can draw on this practice-based knowledge in a way that would support, inform and develop Gestalt therapy by making it visible and contribute to the wider field?

There are many ways of doing research, depending on what it is we want to find out, and the kind of information available to be investigated. What I am focussing on here is not the kind of research that is best done under controlled conditions in a laboratory, but the research that we can do in real-world situations as Gestalt therapists in routine clinical practice.

There have been some examples of this. In 2011 a group of UK Gestalt therapists published the results of a three-year outcome study using the CORE measurement (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation), which enabled the work of Gestalt therapists to be compared with data collected from other modalities. (Stevens et al., 2011). A similar study has also been carried out in Italy (La Rosa et al., 2019). In Santiago, Chile, Herrera and colleagues used a

single-case time-series design to show that Gestalt therapy can be a useful treatment for people with an anxiety disorder (Herrara et al., 2018). These published studies demonstrate what can be done. What these studies have in common is that they are efficacy based, designed to investigate the question, ‘Does Gestalt therapy work?’ Clearly, this is an important question, and it is good news that these outcome studies demonstrate positive results. They are a valuable contribution to discussions with political stakeholders. For most Gestalt therapists, however, this is not such a compelling question, as they have invested their personal resources in training and working within a modality that they love and are deeply committed to. They are convinced that their therapy approach is often effective and are therefore unlikely to conduct unbiased and genuine inquiries into this question. Of course, within the wider political and economic situation, this question may have significance, but then we are in the realm of research as a political tool.

My bias is that I am interested in practitioner research; that is ordinary therapists like us, doing research, arising from our daily experience, and this is the focus of this paper. For many years in my work on the psychotherapy doctoral programmes at the Metanoia Institute, London, I taught and personally supported dozens of mid-career practitioners, including several Gestalt therapists, to engage in practice-based research that made a difference to the profession. From this experience, and in response to the current situation, the questions I find compelling are ‘What is Gestalt therapy?’ and ‘How can I be a better therapist?’ To quote from the title of our foundation textbook: ‘in what ways does my daily work support excitement and growth in the human personality?’ (Perls et al., 1957). The first question of what goes on in the sessions with our clients has political implications for the psychotherapy profession as a whole; the second is of vital interest in our own professional development and for the well-being of those who trust us to work with them. Those of us who work as jobbing Gestalt therapists are a huge untapped multi-generational, international resource of specialist knowledge and expertise. How can we as practitioners be involved in grassroots, rigorous research that makes a difference?

I have a simple plan which I am going to unpack, and I will conclude with a proposal and an invitation to action. These are the principles on which it is based:

- Be who you are.
- Write what you do.
- Do it with others.
- Let people know.

Be who you are

As trained Gestalt psychotherapists, we work phenomenologically with what is happening between us and our clients as much as possible in the present moment. We draw on a body of knowledge informed by field theory, self as process, figure and ground, the paradoxical theory of change, contact and awareness, and the dialogical relationship. Many of us integrate into this frame more recent scholarship on attachment theory, insights from neuroscience about understanding complex trauma, and other research that seems clinically useful. Gestalt is a process-oriented therapy, experiential and experimental in method. When we research our work, we do not attempt to squeeze into another paradigm for the sake of expediency. We are not solution-focused or agenda-based. We do not see ourselves as experts administering treatment. We do not rely on interpretation for meaning-making. There are research methods compatible with the way that we do therapy which do not require us to work from manuals or to standardise our interventions for them to be measured. If we go down this positivist route, we run the risk of becoming a different kind of therapist, and of spending a lot of time researching something that is no longer recognisably Gestalt therapy.

As Gestalt therapists waking up rather late to the importance of research if we want a place at the commissioning table, we have the advantage of not needing to get bogged down in the research culture wars raging in the psychological sciences in recent decades. We do not need to engage with the positivist paradigm of lab-based theory-testing research methods, seeking the discovery of general laws that can be deductively applied to solve some specific social problem. This approach to research tries to define the underlying laws of human nature, then apply these to psychological research using technologies like manualised cognitive behaviour therapy for panic attacks, or specific protocols for treating trauma, which can be applied to clients by technicians using highly operationalised procedures. We neither need to engage with positivist reductionism of this kind nor do we need to get stuck in the opposite nihilistic polarity of sceptically critical radical post-modernism. There are no answers there.

Dan Fishman helpfully suggests a middle way for the practitioner who wants their work to be useful. In his words:

The pragmatic paradigm argues that actual cases – with all their multi-systemic complexity and contextual embeddedness – should be the starting and ending points of psychological research that purports to be effective in contributing to the solution of real-life problems. (1999, p.2)

Pragmatism, in this way, combines the epistemological awareness and insights of critical postmodernism from a hermeneutical perspective, with the methodological and conceptual achievements of modernism. So, we use the methodologies of natural science, not to discover general laws, but to understand the contextual embeddedness of human behaviour. Our studies can be rigorous but socially situated, arising from a particular time and place, historically nuanced and field-emergent from the relational matrix of the figure/ground.

This paradigm is compatible with Gestalt theory and practice and provides a sound rationale for an inclusive, practice-based Gestalt approach to research that would be practically useful.

Write what you do

What we do as Gestalt therapists is casework. We have in-depth relational engagements with our clients over time, mediated through regular bounded meetings. We build up our experience and develop our expertise case by case. The case is our fundamental unit of analysis.

Case studies are compelling and many of us may have been influenced in our own practice by them. For example, we may have studied *Dibs in Search of Self* by Virginia Axline, (1964/1990) an account of a play therapist's work over the course of a year with a child whom we would probably now recognise as autistic, whose parents thought he was mentally impaired. Or *I never promised you a Rose Garden*, a semi-autobiographical account of living with an eating disorder by Joanne Greenberg (1964); and many of us will have read *Love's Executioner and other tales of psychotherapy* by Irvin Yalom (1989/2013) or watched the *In Treatment* HBO film series (Garcia, 2008-21). Bob and Rita Resnick's videos of contemporary Gestalt practice are a valuable resource of case study material (Resnick, 2019).

Case studies are part of the deep ground of the history and development of psychotherapy, from Freud's interpretive accounts onwards. They tend to be based on the therapist's recall, written by a single researcher who is also a participant. They are often written in a compelling, literary, detective style. It is easy to criticise case studies as subject to narrative smoothing and for juxtaposing narrative truth with historical truth. However, as John McLeod points out, case studies have produced a 'highly generative and resilient form of knowledge for practice' (2010, p. 13). In fact, as Flyvbjerg comments, 'social science has not succeeded in producing general, context-independent theory and therefore has nothing else to offer than concrete, context-dependent knowledge' (2006, p. 223). Case studies are a particularly good way of producing this knowledge.

McLeod identifies four genres of systematic case study research (2010). These are:

- **Pragmatic** – in-depth rigorous accounts of actual practice. This most closely reflects our daily work as Gestalt therapists.
- **Efficacy-orientated** – this includes the n=1 time series study, which measures certain criteria and asks how well Gestalt therapy works for these issues.
- **Theory-building** – developing theory out of the detailed study of a chosen phenomenon.
- **Narrative or qualitative** – this is telling the story of the work through the voices of the participants.

Thomas Kuhn has asserted:

... a scientific discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one. Social science [here we can insert Gestalt therapy] may be strengthened by the execution of a greater number of good case studies. (In Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242).

Case study research has traditionally been viewed as a poor relation in the hierarchy of research methods, but this should be challenged. Flyvbjerg argues that context-dependent knowledge is at the heart of expert activity. It is what enables a beginner who has been taught the rules of practice to become a proficient expert practitioner. Case knowledge is central to human learning. It is not about proving, but learning. A number of well-known researchers have changed their minds about the value of case studies.

Donald Campbell, the expert methodologist, for example, wrote latterly:

After all, man is, in his ordinary way, a very competent knower, and qualitative common-sense knowing is not replaced by quantitative knowing ... This is not to say that such common-sense naturalistic observation is objective, dependable, or unbiased. But it is all we have. It is the only route to knowledge, noisy, fallible and biased though it be. (In Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 224).

It is often asserted that we cannot generalise from case studies, but this is not necessarily true. An example is given of Galileo who rejected Aristotle's law of gravity, which had been accepted for nearly 2000 years. Galileo said that objects with different masses would fall at the same acceleration, whereas Aristotle thought that objects fell at a speed proportional to their mass. Galileo's idea was later demonstrated to be true when the air pump was invented, and it could be shown that a coin and a feather both fall at the same rate in a vacuum. The point about this case example is that random controlled trials and large samples were not needed to establish this key understanding of physics.

In fact, more discoveries have arisen from creative thinking and intense observation than from large-scale statistical analysis. Another way of saying this is that formal generalisation is over-valued as a source of scientific development, while the force of example is underestimated. There is an important role for the descriptive, phenomenological case study as part of the process of knowledge accumulation in a given field.

Case studies have been criticised as biased towards verifying the researcher's preconceived ideas. However, this is no truer of case studies than of any method of inquiry. In fact, it is a feature of case study research that assumptions often need to be revised in the face of evidence from the field. The dense, detailed case study is more useful to the practitioner than factual findings or high-level generalisation of theory.

I want to make it clear at this point that I am not claiming that case study is the only form of research we need; there are many other qualitative methods we can use, such as action research and autoethnography. Large samples and quantitative methods provide information about breadth and trends over large populations. Good research often needs a combination of methods. What I am asserting, however, is the importance and value of case study as 'a necessary and

sufficient method for certain important research tasks ... and a method that holds up well when compared to other methods.' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 241). I am also suggesting that this is a valid and practice-compatible research method which is accessible to all of us Gestalt therapists who are actively working with clients.

Do it with others

If you have been following me so far, I hope that you will understand my excitement about the potential of case studies for Gestalt therapy. In terms of the value of our collective knowledge and expertise, we are sitting on a goldmine of potential data. I suspect that practically all of us will have had to write a case study as part of our transition from trainee to fully qualified therapist. This is something we all know how to do. We and our clients create this data between us every day in our therapy rooms all around the world. This is a grassroots, inclusive project we could all be involved in. This is a call to action.

I hope that by now I have established sufficient ground for us to move on to the nitty-gritty of a concrete proposal. As we have discussed, there are many ways of doing case studies. My idea is that we keep this grassroots project as practice-near as possible, which suggests some pragmatic form of design. Rich, thick, in-depth accounts of the work over time with the added rigour of some empirical measurements which are compatible with and not disruptive to the therapy. This could include some kind of measurement of change over time, and perhaps a client follow-up interview after the therapy has ended by someone not involved in the work, in order to include the client's voice. An article by Roubal and colleagues, for example, discusses the use of the Client Change Interview and the Change After Psychotherapy methods of retrospective client interviewing. (Roubal et al., 2019).

Dan Fishman, who publishes an online Journal, *Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy*, gives the following sub-headings for a case study article: (McLeod, 2010, p. 95)

- 1. Case Context
- 2. The Client
- 3. The guiding conceptual frame with support from research and clinical experience
- 4. Assessment of the client's problems, goals, strengths and history
- 5. Formulation and treatment plan
- 6. Course of therapy

- 7. Therapy monitoring and use of feedback form
- 8. Concluding evaluation of the process and outcome of the therapy
- 9. References
- 10. Tables (optional)
- 11. Figures (optional)

I don't see any heading here that we could not write under as Gestalt therapists. In fact, I suspect that this list is very similar to what most Gestalt training institutes require from their trainees for their case studies, perhaps apart from the therapy monitoring measures, which I will come to later.

So here is the idea. We are all bound to undertake continuing professional development as a requirement of our accreditation or licensing conditions. Wouldn't it be constructive, even fun, as part of this requirement, to create a quality learning environment, where we meet up with our Gestalt friends and colleagues to form Case Study Support Groups? As we have discovered through the recent COVID-19 pandemic, we could readily do this face-to-face, online or a mix of both. The groups could have the added interest of being an international collaboration. Each group would have about six members and meet once a month or so. The purpose of the group would be to produce rigorous written-up case studies, suitable for publication. Not everyone in the group would need to write a case study – not all members might have a suitable client with informed consent; some members may be retired or only work very short term. There would need to be at least one or two members actively working in a case study at any one time. The work of the group would be to give supervision, feedback, mentoring, supporting the development of the case study process. It could be that producing the case study would be incorporated into a supervision or mentoring group. In this way, developing the written-up case study becomes a collaborative team effort with multiple authors, and appropriate acknowledgement of help, as is usual practice in research publications. The added advantage of working in a group is that the case study is subjected to the rigours of scrutiny and evaluation and not just the narrative description of a single therapist.

Each group would be self-organising and autonomous but together they would form links of a Practice Research Network, linking into a hub via the new online resource, the Gestalt Therapy Research Network². If sufficient numbers of us sign up and use it, this will become a powerful way for Gestalt therapists involved in research projects to connect with each other, keep

in touch, cross-fertilise ideas and get information and updates. There is a group already gathering there for people interested in this Practitioner Case Study Project³ as well as other research groups. Through this connection, each group would be able to access resources about writing case studies, ethical guidelines, and protocols including guidance for writing up; a protocol for informed consent, and the anonymising of data released for publication. I envisage the planned EAGT ethics committee and other similar regional bodies would be approached as relevant for advice and guidance on this process. Although self-organising, these groups will benefit from ongoing support and encouragement. International conferences would also provide opportunities for workshops, training and collaborative meetings. I am excited by the response from some senior Gestalt therapists who are willing to offer their services as Mentors or Grandparents to groups as required; to advise and encourage on theory, method and practice issues. These Mentors might attend every fourth meeting or so. On a practical level, there would need to be a small steering group with an overall vision and practical oversight for this project, and I am hoping that some readers would be interested in joining me in this and will get in touch.

A word about the use of measurements. I will not go into detail here about them, as this would be best addressed separately. However, the use of some standard validated measurements is important and will make the difference between a descriptive narrative case study, and one that is rigorous and more useful for building up a body of evidence into a database for Gestalt therapy practice. Many suitable measurement tools are freely available, which do not require the user to be a registered psychologist or to pay for a licence to access them, and some of these are listed in Table 1. In common with other Gestalt therapists, I have had the experience of using the CORE outcome measure before the beginning and after the end of therapy and I did not find this intrusive to the therapy relationship. With the generous support of Robert Elliott, who has made a study of measurements suitable for practitioner research, these measures will be made available for anyone to access on the Gestalt Research Database⁴. Advice, training, information and guidelines about using them will be made available through the Gestalt Research Network and other online platforms as well as via workshops at conferences and other events. Practitioners will be able to make an informed choice about which measures to use for their particular circumstances. It is not necessary for every case study to use the same measurement tools.

Table 1. Examples of suitable measurements for use in case-study research.

- CORE-OM (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure)
- OQ-45 (Outcome Questionnaire 45)
- WHO-5 (World Health Organisation Wellbeing Index)
- PHQ-9 (Patient Health Questionnaire)
- GAD-7 (Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7)
- SCL-90 (Symptom Checklist-90)
- PQ (Personal Questionnaire)
- CCI (Client Change Interview)
- CHAP (Change after Psychotherapy)

Key players in this project are the Gestalt training institutes, where students can be introduced to research principles during their training. This is a requirement of Gestalt training in the UK and the EAGT Research Committee is currently working to introduce levels of research competency into the curriculum of accredited training institutes in Europe. Currently, many institutes use a case study format as part of their final assessment. It would be helpful if these institutes were to teach and adopt this more rigorous protocol for students' graduating case study work. Then, post-qualification, successful students and maybe their tutors could join a practitioner case study research group with others in collaboration to develop the case study for publication. An important reason for this more rigorous approach to be integrated as part of the training curriculum is that informed consent needs to be in place at the beginning and throughout case study research. It is very important to get the ethics right in any research endeavour. John McLeod gives detailed guidance on the moral and ethical issues involved in therapy case-study research. (McLeod, 2010, pp. 54-77)

The strength of this model is that it is an inclusive, democratic network model that any Gestalt therapist who is interested could join. It is not an exclusive club. Rather than a bureaucratic system, it is organised more like that of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome model (1987), where the grassroots are our common practice as therapists and the case study groups are the nodes that pop up above ground and flourish where the conditions are suitable and supportive. This project is open to Gestalt therapists at every stage of professional development. New graduates are nurtured; seasoned therapists can share their expertise and senior practitioners are particularly treasured for their wisdom and experience. It's good for our clients

who receive the benefits of well-scrutinised work. It's good for us as therapists because we learn together in a supportive environment with constructively critical friends. It's good for Gestalt therapy – we produce a body of practice-based evidence of the work we do with a whole range of different clients. At the risk of hubris, I would hope that this would be of benefit to the world of psychotherapy at large.

Let people know

The aim of producing well-written, rigorous case studies is to be able to publish them, to inform readers about the work we do. There are many ways of doing this, in print, online, in books and journals, in the Gestalt press, but also and importantly in other places in the psychotherapy world, in subject-specialist and research journals.

In terms of publication, we need to be prepared to submit our work to peer review and to editorial scrutiny. Not every finished case study will find a home in a major publication, even with the support and encouragement of our study buddies. However, every piece of work will help to build the evidence base of our practice and each one is valuable. We need to collect them all together in a special section of the new Gestalt Therapy Research Database so that, eventually, when there are enough, we can explore them with important questions like 'What is Gestalt therapy particularly good at?', 'Or less good at?'; 'How do Gestalt therapists work with anxiety or depression, or loss, or trans issues, or addiction?' Piece by piece we will build up a unique body of practice experience which will be a treasure for current trainees and practitioners, and provide a legacy for those to come in the future.

Conclusion

This paper sets out a proposal for building a research base for Gestalt therapy that every Gestalt therapist could participate in. With the active engagement of training institutes to give basic training in practitioner-compatible research methods, with support from therapists of all ages and stages of career development, and with appropriate resources and encouragement, we can do this. We can grow a body of practice-based evidence that addresses the basic but vital questions, 'What is Gestalt therapy?' and 'How can I be a better therapist?' I hope that young therapists who experience the satisfaction of having their first research paper published through this project may feel inspired to go on to develop more projects in the future.

However, we need to start somewhere, and this is the plan: be who you are; write what you do; do it with others and let people know.

If you would like to find out more about participating in this project, please join the interest group on the Gestalt Research Network and get in touch with me by emailing christine@mappmed.co.uk

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Notes

¹ 5th International Conference on Research in Gestalt Therapy organised by DVG, EAGT and IAAGT, 2-4 September 2022, 'Gestalt for Future – creating a network for research'. The conference keynote addresses, including this one, will be available here: gestaltresearch.org/conferences

² Gestalt Research Network: gestaltresearchnetwork.org

³ gestaltresearchnetwork.org/group/7/stream

⁴ Gestalt Research Database: gestaltresearch.org

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The ecological self: narratives for changing times

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Abstract

The challenge of climate change requires that people in developed countries redefine themselves in relation to others, and reappraise how the environment, in turn, shapes us and our expectations for the future. In seeking to understand the complexity of the situation we come up against questions of scale, experience and imagination which undermine our familiar ways of thinking theoretically and phenomenologically. This paper considers some of the inevitable reasons why this psychological undertaking is resisted by many, and provides some cultural context for the individual dilemmas and choices that face us. Drawing on the work of Joanna Macy, a three-part developmental model is presented. Clinical examples, personal narrative and dream illustrate the work.

Keywords

climate change, ecology, self, culture, cosmology, catastrophe, time, story, other-than-human.

Introduction

At an ecotherapy conference in 2018, a presenter observed how difficult it is for us as humans to see ourselves as part of an ecosystem. This comment stayed with me in the form of a question: ‘What is it that makes it so difficult for us to see ourselves as parts of a greater whole?’ This question forms the central concern of this paper, predicated on the assumption that there is value in being more ecological, and that this in turn has bearing on the climate crisis. This key question leads to consideration of belonging and identity in a changing and threatened world, of the psychological processes that underpin human relationships to the other-than-human world, and how we might reimagine an evolving ‘ecological self’.

To frame the discussion, I refer to Macy and Johnstone’s concepts of ‘business as usual’, ‘the great unravelling’ of the 21st century, including economic decline, resource depletion, mass extinction of species and climate change, and lastly the ‘great turning’ which involves slowing down damage, increasing sustainability and shifts in consciousness (2012, p. 14). These are stories of a lived reality; signs of our times. There is an implicit psychological dimension to them, a process of selfing, with developmental implications.

The term ‘ecological self’ is attributed to Arne Naess, Norwegian philosopher and father of the deep ecology movement. The grounding of our sense of self in place is the first premise in understanding his concept: ‘Home was where one belonged. Being “part of myself” the idea of home delimited an ecological self, rich in internal relations to what is now called environment’ (2008, p. 45). Naess continues thus: ‘We tend to confuse our “self” with the narrow ego. Human nature is such that, with sufficient comprehensive maturity, we cannot help but identify ourselves with all living beings, beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not’ (2008, p. 81). While honouring Naess’s contribution, an updated understanding can widen the concept. Matthews suggests that the deep ecology movement’s identification with the universe is assumed ([1991] 2021, p. 181). Paradoxically, I suggest that the idea that ‘we’ identify with all living beings still represents a narrow view of self, an us-and-them dichotomy. I stumble too over Naess’s meaning of ‘sufficient comprehensive maturity’ which might be taken as a functional outcome of good therapy but does not necessarily imply identification with the other-than-human.

In line with contemporary critiques of the individualistic paradigm, including those in Gestalt, Bateson emphasises that the ‘false reification of the self is basic to the planetary ecological crisis in which

we find ourselves' (quoted in Macy, 2009, p. 243). Macy loosens this construct beautifully: 'The ecological self, like any notion of selfhood ... is a metaphoric construct, useful for what it allows us to perceive and how it helps behave. It is dynamic and situational, a perspective we can choose to adopt according to context and need' (2009, p. 244). Both context and need press upon us. Central to the problem in question, I think, is a difficulty with identification with all living beings. I propose that the ecological self can embrace something more expansive. Kohn argues that the self is not localised, and extends beyond a 'particular embodied locus' (2013, p. 105). In locating the self *outside* the skin, he invites taking on other perspectives, other forms of consciousness involving the imaginal, as symbolic representations of the world. This requires a creative approach to the total situation, endorsed by Manley: 'Humankind's global struggle with its relationship to climate change can and should be approached creatively, associatively and abductively rather than logically' (2021). This, Manley goes on to suggest, facilitates 'the removal of binary thinking: an embodied reconceptualisation of self, achieved through creativity' (ibid). I will illustrate below some other perspectives through the use of narrative, dream and the imagined. The notion of the ecological self supports humans to consider our existence as part of the whole network of interconnected relationships; as Rust says, it is 'embedded in the land and interwoven with the web of life' (2020, p. 112). Seeking to clarify the parameters, Bednarek questions the extent to which existing field theory in Gestalt is sufficient to account for this whole network as it presses on our current reality, and extends into the future (2018). It is equally valid to ponder whether our existing constructs of the self adequately fit our purpose. If we adjust one theory to fit our times, we have to adjust the others.

Psychological theories, among others, are being stretched beyond their useful limits, and need to be. They were not made for these times; Gestalt therapy emerged in times of growth, individualism and abundance. Chalquist notes that '[Lewin's] disciplines were not designed to explore the subsurface connections' (2007, p. 119). Kassouf's reframing that we need to begin to think catastrophically (2022) is deeply unsettling yet compelling in its reading of contemporary times. We are entering the territory of the unthinkable. Woodbury, framing climate change as a trauma in the making, claims that we are being forced to 'rethink all that we have learned about trauma in the past century' (2019, p. 3). As Abram suggests, 'we need to release ourselves from the tyranny of outmoded

concepts' (2021, p. 53). Since the old paradigms don't necessarily serve us so well, I have chosen to largely move outside established Gestalt texts, whilst our core theories are deeply embedded in my thinking. My approach is cross-disciplinary, drawing on fields such as social anthropology, environmental philosophy, and human ecology.

To infinity or beyond? A question of scale

To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime's experience ... a gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of a woody meadow, the stream at the junction of four small fields – these are as much as a man can fully experience.

(Kavanagh, UD)

The idea that we can scale up aspects of human experience to reveal larger wholes works in principle but is less satisfactory in its application to the enormity of climate change. Morton claims that we have 'entered the time of hyperobjects' (2013, p. 1) meaning 'something far bigger and more threatening' (2013, p. 2), through which 'we can see the effects of climate change ... but you can't see or smell climate' (2013, p. 4).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, 'It's too big!' is a common refrain among people grappling with climate issues. This is a part-failure of imagination, the impossibility of direct experience and psychological defence. Abstract imagination on a grand scale defeats us. Perhaps we can begin to imagine the lives of our great-grandparents whose stories may have lived into our own generation. We might also extend our imagination forward to our great-grandchildren. This provides a span of a relatable time of around 250 years only (Magnason, 2021, p. 245)¹. We cannot conceive of ourselves at the end of time, it is not yet real.

I recall Pyle's framing of the 'extinction of experience', an increasing alienation from the natural world (1993). This loss of phenomenology dulls and diminishes the experience of self. We no longer navigate by the stars or arrange to meet 'by the tree at the bend in the river'. The French concept of '*terroir*' – literally the taste of a place – is deeply embedded in their national identity associated with food. A local smallholder tells of 'a farmer who has no legs', meaning that he doesn't leave his Land Rover as he surveys his fields. 'When we consider the palpable earth around us as though it were an object ... we tacitly remove ourselves from the

world we inhabit' (Abram, 2021, p. 50). This extinction of experience makes us exiles in our own lands. Salmón reminds us that we experience place – and thus our sense of belonging – through our pores (2021, p. 17). The soulful Welsh word '*hiraeth*' is regarded as a keystone ecological concept, 'an intellectual and moral home ... an unattainable longing for a place, person, a figure, even a national history that may never have existed. To feel *hiraeth* is to feel a deep incompleteness and recognise it as familiar' (Chester, 2021, p. 86). Whether we look backwards or forwards, we run into an experiential wilderness.

Linking imagination to phenomenology allows the possibility of identifying with the other-than-human grounded in experience. Being ecologically minded, I appreciate that my morning coffee has come to me through the combined efforts of many people and earth elements. It is far harder to identify with something we cannot feel a connection to. Of course, I am not suggesting that we can fully experience the dizzying extent and variety of the natural world and still stay sane – it is too big! – but that within our capacity we might choose not to stay so small.

An emphasis on the here and now equally distracts us from past and future. It is difficult to situate the impact of human endeavour through the lens of geological time (Hoggett, 2013, p. 85). The temporal aspect of climate change calls for attention: 'The ecological self also widens our window on time. It enlarges our temporal context, freeing us from identifying our goals and rewards solely in terms of our present lifetime' (Macy, 2009, p. 244). I suggest that this allows a less linear experience of time.

Deep time perspectives

The scale of climate emergency is challenging conceptually, especially when we cannot access a felt sense of the scale of threat. 'Ecological awareness means thinking and acting ethically and politically on a lot of scales, not just one' (Morton, 2021/2018, p. 33). We may narrate the sequence of geological events, but 'few of us are able to imagine the right *durations* of geological time without special training. And being able to understand durations is particularly important for us right now, because global warming's effects may last up to 100,000 years' (Morton, 2021/2018, p. 34, italics original).

The decisions we make today will leave their mark on the planet extending beyond the future of our immediate descendants. Pollution and waste created

in our lifetimes will affect the state of the planet over thousands of years; the half-life of plutonium is over 24,000 years (Morton, 2013). Of more visible concern, Farrier considers the future impact of rubble from demolition sites, saying '[It has been] estimated ... [that] the mass of human-made materials exceed[s] that of all living things on the planet ... By mass, there are now more buildings and infrastructure ... than there are trees and shrubs ... more plastic ... than land and marine animals' (2021).

I need to go back and understand the past before I can move forwards. I prepare for a Deep Time Walk², during which experiencing a simulation of deep time might change my perspective. Deep Time Walk is an app which can be installed on a mobile phone and narrates the history of the planet through a walk of 4.6 kilometres, each metre representing a million years. It can be used seated for those unable to undertake the walk. The walk is entertaining and instructive, a 'conversation' between a scientist and a fool, with long silences between aeons, allowing the walker to journey through the creation of the planet that represents time and space.

And so I plug in my earphones, open the app and set off. My path is more or less straight, on which I can only get lost in time. Starting 4.6 billion years ago, the first instruction is 'Just walk'. I walk towards the present day, and find my sense of location is quickly disrupted, and as I listen to the narrative of geological time my attention is drawn inwards, not out. I start as a witness to events I cannot comprehend. The formation of the earth from gases and the 'great bombardment'. This is a slow and violent series of unravellings, destructive and creative in equal measure. At 4.3 billion years ago, after I have walked roughly one-third of a kilometre, water appears on the planet. My fluid body connects. Bacteria arrive after almost two kilometres of walking, ancient fossils appear and as tectonic plates shift, continents take shape. I have no personal reference points for any of this. Knowing that the ground beneath me – peaty soils and bedrock of chalk and clay – holds memory of these transformations, helps. I connect that idea with the sense of memory percolating upwards into the minerals of my bones and flesh. After two billion years, Gaia, with its self-regulating tendencies comes into being. At around 3.4 billion years ago I witness the emergence of photosynthesis. I might be breathing as I walk, but there isn't enough oxygen on the planet to sustain life. I walk towards the Ice Age, I continue walking for two billion years, beyond the halfway mark on my journey. The

numbers on the screen as I walk are getting smaller, but time is measured here in millions of years. Every single step, another million years. Following the development of sexual reproduction, multicellular life takes form around 1.8 billion years ago. I walk on through the Cambrian explosion of 542 million years ago to the emergence of varied life forms. Some trees, insects and butterflies familiar today preceded the dinosaurs. At last, something I can relate to; I remember now, I remember with my dinosaur brain. I begin to picture the huge creatures roaming this wide, marshy terrain, and from this vantage point I can look back and make some sense of what has gone before. It slowly dawns on me that I really have emerged from stardust. I have a new knowing that human life is a critical mass event produced by every evolutionary turn on my walk. Now I take on board, in a more felt and imagined way than before, where I fit in this journey. I can sense the homeopathic trace of memory in my own gaseous nature – oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen. Journeying through time, it is only at around 100 million years ago – just a few more steps – that the life story of the planet can be measured in relatable human terms. Shockingly, it is a scant arm's length that brings me close to now. Have I come to the end of time?

The walk has unravelled something in me, decentring my worldview. I have walked through a new birth story, thicker than any personal narrative. Even though this is a simulated experiment, it gives me enough of a new sense of how I came into the world. I cannot return to my everyday life in quite the same shape as before, and I circle backwards and forward through different temporal dimensions for some time after.

Culture and cosmology

The Deep Time Walk is one way of telling a story about self in the world. At a time of great unravelling where meaning is hard to fathom, we need narratives to make sense of experience. 'I can't say "Things are enormous to the twelfth degree." I can't scale up my language like you can do with numbers. The only way to scale up language is by using poetry, grandmother's mythology, and all sorts of storytelling that humans have used since stories were told for the first time' (Magnason, 2021, p. 245). Many societies are founded on their stories, accounting for the beginning of time and their relationship with the other-than-human world. A Western Judeo-Christian cosmology promotes a deep disconnection from the natural world, of paradise lost. This story shows humankind in the world of matter

as atomistic individuals, connections extinguished, as the scientific views of Newton and Descartes propose. This cosmology instils in us the belief that by explaining everything in the cosmos we can have control over it; this position underpins the persistence of the individualist paradigm. Madera writes of the disfigured and alienated mythology of modern times which 'justifies the predatory elite's abuse of power over other people, other creatures, and the extended natural world' (2021, p. 26). There is a blank in the narrative. 'What, then, are the consequences of knowing little to nothing of your ancestors? Or your ancestral lands?' asks Hecht (2021, p. 81). Indigenous Australian cosmology is founded in stories of the dreamtime, weaving connections intrinsic to the animal, matter and human life.

My own dreamworld is a threshold into the great unravelling, dreaming as I do of family, death, impossible tasks, bells tolling, the end of the world. Dreams are in the now, and of the past and the future; I wonder how my dreams are expressions of the collective implicit world. Entering dreamtime evokes the potent stories of the beginning of time which are carried across generations by indigenous peoples throughout the world, becoming an integral part of their cultures (e.g. Wall Kimmerer, 2013, 2020). "Dreaming" or "dreamtime" refers to a time of fluidity, shapeshifting, interspecies conversations and intersexuality, radically creative moves, whole landscapes being altered. It is often referred to as a "mythical past", but it is not really in *any* time. We might as well say it is *right now*' (Snyder, 1990, p. 91, italics original). Embedded in indigenous cultures is reference to the wisdom of ancestors: 'I might call into the past, far back to the beginning of time, and beg [my ancestors] to come and help me at the judgement. I will reach back and draw them into me. And they must come, for at this moment, I am the whole reason they have existed at all' (in Hecht, 2021, p. 82). Time, for many indigenous peoples, is circular.

A recurring theme in ecological literature is about the loss of 'indigenous knowledge embedded in place' and the paradigm shift by which we might 'begin to see the world as indigenous people see it' (Susuki quoted in Williams, 2021, p. 65). In the developed world, knowledge about the medicinal properties of plants, the diversity of agriculture or protection against wildfires has been lost. Blackie tells the story of the Cailleach, the Old Woman of the World of Gaelic mythology, and the Trickster Crow, who repeatedly unravels the

tapestry she is weaving (2018, p. 127ff). The story stands as a lesson about change.

A storied representation of self serves to orient any community to its world (Matthews, 1991/2021, p. 7), a symbolic worldview which many societies have been disposed towards (ibid, p. 52). Matthews considers the ecological self not in isolation but in the context of their culture, sensible to the paradox that ‘ecosystems consist of individuals and their interactions’ (p. 164). She resolves this not by setting the individual and their culture in opposition to one another, but by considering culture as ‘a direct expression of human nature or instinct’ (p. 165). Kohn confirms that self is a representation of, and adaptation to, environment (2013, p. 76), thus is deeply embodied in culture. A key point made by Matthews is that when a culture malfunctions, disconnection from nature follows (p. 170).

The necessity of ‘rapacious extractivism’ remains culturally a given; business-as-usual. ‘We could not change our modern economy and hence the course of civilisation, without at the same time changing the hidden confirmation of the modern self’ (Matthews, 1991/2021, p. 95). So much is true also for personal identity in which ‘individual concerns are overridden by societal and contextual factors’ (Crompton, 2013, p. 221). Addressing climate change can no longer be seen solely as a matter of individual change. ‘The social construction of climate change as a collective concern challenges the underlying narratives of collective identity and invokes a symbolic process of meaning construction based on a new narrative of the social order’ (Brulle & Noorgard, 2019, p. 3). I offer a story here about encountering the other-than-human as a result of a dream.

Dreaming with the land: the climate refugee³

This was less a dream than a lingering fragment as I awoke – an image of a landscape near my home accompanied by the words ‘360 vision’. The following morning I walk to the place in my dream. There is a muscular, southerly wind pressing into me. ‘I come from the deep south’ it seems to say. ‘It’s unbearably hot there, the land is desiccated, the soil eroded, the rivers have run dry. The crops are failing year after year and my blood was boiling inside my skin, I had to flee. Survival there is impossible’. I ask: ‘So where are you heading?’ The reply comes: ‘I must go north to cool down in the ice sheets and the glaciers of the Arctic’. I insist that it is no good, that the wind must stop now because its heat will melt

the ice. ‘I don’t care, I must do what I have to do or I will die’. I find a place to stop, look around and breathe in the 360 vision. Velvet, dark, peaty fields, freshly ploughed for industrial scale seeding; lines of poplars grown as windbreaks many years ago. Soil erosion has been a problem for centuries on flatlands, the phenomenon known as ‘Fen Blow’ scuttering seeds, soil and crops in local flurries. The cathedral sitting on the solitary hill seems less fragile than the surrounding landscape; it has remained unchanged for almost a millennium, while the ground I stand on has been drained and intensively farmed for centuries. Nothing before me is really natural: it is a landscape shaped through extractivism, and the convenience of humankind. The wind has blown my thoughts away, but a word arises in me – ‘Death’. I drop into an unfathomable heaviness, summoned by a voice unspoken. Cracked open by grief, as Joanna Macy puts it (2009, p. 241). The grief swallows me, and there is a rightness in it. I want to feel it, to acknowledge this moment. As the wave passes I begin to retrace my steps, I notice a stencil on the path ‘COVID-19: Keep Social Distance’. It is part of the whole. About to cross over a railway, my route is blocked by a freight train that comes to a halt in front of the gate. It bears containers that arrived through east coast ports from other lands, connecting other peoples and the global economy, 360 vision.

Business as usual

It was the day of brutal winds,
all of them ganging up to blow injustice down.
They sang the changing weather.
I was going nowhere.

(From *Somewhere* by Joy Harjo, 2020)

Someone I worked with during lockdown would drive to a nearby beauty spot and join the session from her car. She worried greatly about her children, fearful for their futures. She stayed in her car, describing sometimes the birds and trees around her, yet unable to move outside her capsule. She told me that to do so would mean having to feel all the unbearable anxieties that disturbed her sleep. It seemed to me that her fear of unravelling was appropriate, given the impending catastrophe of climate change.

While the impossibility of direct experience and imagining such an uncertain future are real obstacles in the formation of an ecological self, the psychological

reasons for climate inaction are also many and complex. ‘Cultural trauma ... undermines an individual’s sense of security and leads to a destabilization of the self’ (Sztompka, 2004, p. 166). Complex emotions may create a perceived gap between our feelings, knowledge and behaviour, another stick with which to beat ourselves. Here lies a difficulty, for this apparent gap presumes a unitary self, ‘not one that is torn, ambivalent ... nor one whose sense of self, other, environment and so on is governed by powerful narratives, meanings and imaginings; nor one that is besieged by potentially overwhelming emotions such as fear, despair, anxiety, guilt, love or hope’ (Hoggett, 2013, p. 57).

Often out of awareness, outer representations of our inner psychological landscape may have their roots in our physical world (Weintrobe, 2013a, p. 203). We use imagery, perhaps, of being ungrounded, of dark clouds looming, of hitting white water, or of a breath of fresh air, feeling as light as a feather.

Features of the landscape cross through the frontiers of consciousness to image themselves as psychic beings, but without relinquishing their environmental qualities ... Repress the manifestations of this lively interactivity and they return with symptomatic force, over and over, until they receive a place in a more extended, more ecological, sense of self.

(Chalquist, 2007, italics original)

This imaging of psychic beings points towards a conceptualisation of alternative identities existing within the beyond-human world.

It is in human nature to build strong defences against the intrusion of strong feelings into consciousness, including anxiety. ‘Anxiety is most often a vital signal that alerts us to real threats and dangers to survival. It is when these anxieties become too much to bear that we can apply irrational “quick fixes to try to reduce them”’ (Weintrobe, 2013b, p. 36). Common among these may be strategies of disengagement from reality, forms of denial or disavowal (Weintrobe, 2013b, pp. 36–38). Even if we are doomed, we don’t want to know, or we know and push it down. As Cohen remarks, ‘Labelling a state or process as “denial” implies that something special is going on ... [and] indicates a state of knowing and not knowing at the same time’ (2013, p. 73).

A common trope about climate inaction revolves around apathy. Lertzman considers ‘It is possible to

rethink conceptions of apathy, not as a clear lack of concern but, rather, as a complicated expression of difficult and conflicting affective state’ especially melancholy (2013, p. 130). The ecological self is inevitably highly conflicted; relating to the natural world means accepting that it both ‘gives us life but also brings death’ (Weintrobe, 2013a, p. 201). We inevitably adapt by splitting. It is beyond the capacity of most Westerners to hold so many facets of experience in awareness.

I consider inter-relatedness and inter-dependence to be mutually inclusive. Some of our climate anxieties may relate to the other-than-human world as the giver of life. Perhaps our failure to see ourselves as part of an ecosystem is connected in part to our dependence for survival upon it; an uncomfortable relationship with dependence is common among humans. Therapists tend to use the mother/infant relationship as a template for adult psychotherapy. Arguably stretching a point, Maus-Hanke extends this thinking to the ‘situation between us and “Mother Earth”’ (2013, p. 52). While this thinking somewhat tangentially evokes disturbances of parental dependency and attachment issues, it seems to me that inevitably a primary relationship is threatened by climate change.

One unpalatable reality that the climate movement may suffer from is to oversimplify human nature and eschew our destructiveness (Hoggett, 2013, p. 85). The splitting I refer to here may be to see the ecological self as caring, responsive and good. It is eminently possible to destroy the one we love. Unable to bear the end of her marriage and estrangement from her adult children, one woman destroyed all photos and mementoes associated with them, as if they had never existed. It was the end of her world. The other-than-human world equally evokes such primitive forces and holds a mirror to our internal experience.

Unusually violent acts of nature are neither punitive nor random, vengeful or meaningless ... they conform to predictable patterns, one of which ... is: *nature turns towards us, the face, we collectively turn toward it*

(Chalquist, 2007, p. 104, italics original)

While it is necessary to examine briefly some of the psychological processes that get in the way of humankind seeing itself as part of a great ecosystem, I experience some of the ideas outlined in this section as alien in their framing. Some of these writers draw

on psychoanalytical frameworks for their theories, which I find a little over-certain and interpretive. They do, however, open a window into aspects of inner experience; I appreciate the different voices and added complexity to otherwise impenetrable positions. My personal preference is to stay with the messiness of the conflicted states that are revealed rather than try to predict or explain.

The scale of these existential threats is every bit as hard to comprehend as it is to act upon. Who, after all, does not have to engage in serious emotional work to face our own death, never mind the death of the known world and all those we love? It is the work of a lifetime. There are no real words to describe the impact of a future that Woodbury predicts ‘will end up causing the deaths of many more humans than were lost in the Holocaust. We are likely talking hundreds of holocausts here, and likely within the span of a single lifetime’ (2016, p. 10). People enter therapy with past traumas they need to resolve, accompanied by fears of reliving the breakdown that has already happened. Woodbury (2019) treats climate change as a new order of trauma, one that we can see coming, which makes me wonder about corresponding fears of the breakdown that is yet to come.

Reflections on the future

We do not know the future. We do not know when the West Antarctic Ice Sheet will collapse. We do not know when the global economy will collapse. We do not know when our cities will collapse. We do not know how quickly seas will rise ... We do not know how to act rationally as a species.

(Scranton, 2021, p. 166)

The self that can bear this situation is hard to imagine. The implications for future generations are dire. A 2021 global survey of 10,000 young people found that 45% notice a negative daily impact on their lives (Hickman et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, young people in the Global South are suffering a greater immediate impact than those in the developed West. Although the Western worldview might see it otherwise, climate change is happening now, not at some unknown time in the future. A generation is being shaped by fear, their elders powerless, urgency and privilege both unacknowledged.

Multiple socio-political concerns serve to distract us from the larger issues at hand; it can seem as though

the world is unravelling rapidly. Mass migration is attributed to political and economic forces but, underlying these drivers, climate change hides in plain sight. As the number of climate refugees increases, we cannot be sure that there will be safe places for them to flee to. Business-as-usual underpins the prevailing set of assumptions, while the liberal-minded among us read the signs of unravelling. The humanitarian in me is challenged, I do not know how to respond.

It is easy therefore to fall into the trap of fatalism. ‘The very *scale* of the problem makes people not want to do anything about it ... the bigger the problem the less fixable it seems’ (Ray, 2021, p. 75, italics original). It’s easier to see that dumping sewage into rivers kills fish than my choices about consumption being destructive. We make an impact whatever we do, and it serves no one to give ourselves a hard time for being human. In times of mass extinctions, we become passive, these extinctions are happening around me, to me, within me, even. How would it be to use in its place the word ‘exterminations’? On the one hand, the word is even more alarmist – this is indeed catastrophic thinking – and on the other it carries a kernel of agency; if I am active I can make choices. According to Macy and Johnstone, we are left with questions about what helps us find strength, what deepens our resilience (2012, p. 237).

We need ‘the imagination needed to dream beyond fear’ (Ray, 2020, p. 10). Macy sees signs of unravelling as markers of the ecological self: ‘The sorrow, grief, and rage you feel are a measure of your humanity and your evolutionary maturity. As your heart breaks open, you create room for the world to heal’ (2009, p. 214). Two things follow from this: the importance of understanding those who disengage from the reality of climate change without pathologising them, and for those who do engage, keeping things in proportion without becoming overwhelmed. Fear and hope must become companions.

How does this help provide an answer to my original question about understanding ourselves as part of an ecosystem? Stopford moves between the small-self of business-as-usual and the self of the great turning: ‘The Ecological-Self ... is an expanded self, far greater than the one we currently know’ (2021, p. 8). Naess also suggests that ‘the self to be realized extends further and further beyond the separate ego and includes more and more of phenomenal world’ (quoted by Macy, 2009, p. 244). Here I want to consider the extent of the expansion Naess describes. Firstly, I think this expansion includes perceptions of space and time. If we

expand our perspective to include identification with all other-than-human beings, we might secondly expand also to *think how they think* (see for example Kohn, 2013; Salazar et al., 2022). Such a multiplicity of perspectives leads to a decentring of ego and a step towards Kohn's concept of 'ecological selves' (2013, p. 78). Kohn's proposition is that as symbolic representatives of the environment which we inhabit, we are in continual adaptation and response to that environment, a web of living thoughts. His account of his life with the Runa Puma peoples in the Amazonian forests of Ecuador illustrates how their worldview is shaped by their imaginal (or projected) thoughts, dreams and perceptions of dogs, jaguars, anteaters and others that are part of their forest. Although Kohn's definition of ecological selves is context specific, I find the concept of taking on multiple perspectives to be consistent with the imaginal worldview I have proposed. It opens the possibility of understanding the place of humankind in a wider paradigm of interconnected perceptions.

Through this shift, we can be curious not only about how we represent ourselves to the world, but how it represents itself to us. As Krzywoszynska puts it, 'For a human being already situated in the world, the task is not to build an image of that world as if they were external to it and looking from afar. Rather, the task is to build a view in it, as part of the world' (2022, p. 95). One further step is to allow that the world is already within me, through mineral, fluid, bacterial, and other non-me elements, as my Deep Time Walk highlighted. How do I simultaneously give voice to the not-me already within me, and the not-me that is outside my skin? Latour expresses 'the need for a new language where becoming-earth is not the same as saying "We are humans in nature"' (2018, p. 86, cited in Manley, 2012). What might we learn from peoples like the Runa Puma about the possibilities of expanding perceptions of the other-than-human? These shifts in perception are the shifts of consciousness advocated earlier.

Importantly, Matthews considers that 'self-increase proceeds ... in phenomenological terms, as the deepening of self-meaning' (1991/2021: xvi). Such phenomenologically embodied relatedness provides a way forward through a subjectivity of multiple meanings, which encapsulates the entire existence and cosmology of peoples like the Runa Puma. Further, Matthews suggests that the ecological self requires self-love, 'an intense emotional investment in everything that we see as falling within the circle of our being' (1991/2021, p. 189). An ecological self which is rooted in such an emotional investment is predicated upon

our worldview and alignment with a set of values. We value ourselves above others in the developed West at the cost of our humanity. Woodbury questions whether we will 'still be "human" in the wake of all these wild animals disappearing?' (2016, p. 33). At what point in the future will we no longer be human? According to Matthews (1990/2021, p. 143) 'ecocentrism rests on a fundamental moral principle', recognising the intrinsic value of every being within the entire cosmos, consistent with the view of the deep ecology movement.

I propose that the ecological self requires a degree of elasticity in our responsiveness and capacity to adapt moment by moment, such that we may stretch boundaries while holding enough of the already known and familiar at the centre, and still allow ourselves to dream beyond the confines of our skin. Narratives, imaginings and dreams of our times are an integral part of human development, and each needs to find its potential within us. This demands decentring from hub to node in the web of life. Letting go of our structures, assumptions and certainties, re-imagining and telling new stories about the species, rivers, rocks and air we can call kin becomes a radical act of self-preservation. Such radical acts can become foundations for a reimagined relationship with the other-than-human. In 2008 the constitution of Ecuador was changed to honour 'Pacha Mama' or Nature, respecting its inherent right to existence (Madera, 2021, p. 25). Similarly, in 2017 the Whanganui river in New Zealand was granted the same legal rights as a person⁴ (see Guardian, 2017). It seems that we must always return to the past to create the future. How could we rewrite the human species into the story of the world? 'The great turning is a progressive narrative that insists on the power of story to direct our actions and our affects' (Ray, 2021, p. 95). While I welcome the progressive, paradoxically I cannot help but question what Guattari calls the need for 'a new art of living in society' (1995, p. 20, cited in Manley, 2021); rather, I suggest, we need to turn towards an ancient art of living.

I see my initial question about the ecological self as a problem of the postcolonial world. It would make no sense to indigenous people like the Runa Puma who already live by the premise described by Merlin Sheldrake: when we trace the links from a single node to the chain of connected and interdependent matter, we discover that 'To talk about individuals [makes] no sense anymore ... "We" are ecosystems that span boundaries and transgress categories' (2021, p. 39). The global threat is the product of the Western mind.

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Notes

¹ I am grateful to Emergence Magazine for permission to include several quotes. The essays I refer to are also accessible online: www.emergencemagazine.com

² www.deeptimewalk.org/app, accessed 12th December 2021

³ My thanks to Steffi Bednarek and Vienna Duff for their support in making sense of the dream I describe.

⁴ Aruna Patel Cornish kindly drew my attention to this example

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In conversation

The practice of Gestalt: moving outside the therapy room

Vienna Duff and Kristine Steensen

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Abstract

Vienna Duff and Kristine Steensen met in Herefordshire, England, in June 2021. Vienna co-facilitated a residential workshop called *The Well-Grounded Therapist* with Miriam Taylor, and Kristine was a participant. Here, they explore their interests in nature-connected practice: for Vienna on the North-East Coast of England, and for Kristine, the peninsula of Nesodden in Norway. This conversation captures their current reflections on whether and how the practice of Gestalt psychotherapy includes a relationship with nature, and how it might be taken outside of the therapy room. Their dialogue, which is necessarily situated within the context of the wider field of our contemporary world, including the global COVID-19 pandemic, war and conflict and climate crisis, raises a range of questions without expecting firm or quick answers.

Keywords

climate, contact, Gestalt theory, Gestalt, nature, nature-connected, outdoors, place, pandemic, re-generation, relational, support, war, wider field.

Kristine: I'm excited to explore this with you, Vienna. Why don't we begin by sharing our reasons for connecting our practices to nature in the first place? Would you start?

Vienna: Sure. Reflecting on this, my roots are in my own early experiences of growing up in an agricultural and coastal location where my relationships with landscape, sea and the elements co-existed as field conditions and interacted with human relationships. In my personal work through therapy, academic and family history research, and by taking action through travelling, I've become aware that these roots go back further than my childhood. I now appreciate the multi-generational impact of huge trauma and ruptures in the field of my family: the Holocaust. I have found ways to integrate these losses, discovering support in a series of experiences (Amendt-Lyon, 2016), and finding healing and reconciliation for the generations that followed by intentionally connecting with the environments in

which they lived and the people who were lost. I have stood in places, in several countries, from which they were displaced and in which they died. In one instance, in Austria, actually walking through the gas chamber in which my Großmama was murdered as part of the Third Reich's euthanasia programme. From this chamber, I emerged through a massive iron door into the dazzling light and heat of an August day. I experienced an intense, embodied moment as I stepped outside from the 'here and then' (Yontef, 1993, p. 259) of the dark and chilling chamber. So, my awareness of the width of the field is that my 'there and then' informs my 'here and now' (ibid, pp. 258–259), and who I am as a Gestalt therapist. I am completely embedded in, responsive to, and feel respect and responsibility towards the wider field past and present. All is part of me, just as I am part of the field.

Can I tell you a story about another journey, one I made some years ago to Belarus, as it captures the

significance and power for me of being connected to nature? My learning from this experience continues to inform my psychotherapy practice.

Kristine: Please do.

Vienna: I made a memorial journey to represent and remember the 10,000 Jews who were deported from Austria and shot or gassed by the orders of the Third Reich in a forest just outside Minsk, in Belarus. I had already discovered through research that this was the place where my Großtante was transported and murdered as part of The Final Solution in 1942.

An informal memorial site for the Jews deported from Austria to Belarus was deep within maturing woodland. The afternoon I went there is etched in my memory as being simultaneously stunningly beautiful, light and alive, as well as profoundly dark, disturbing and heavy. I can virtually hear birdsong right now and feel the warm spring sun that was on my skin as I celebrated life, acknowledged death and stayed present with both. I recall touching the bark of the young trees as I walked amongst them, connecting with the enormous tragedies that the land had witnessed.

The impacts of trauma on the skin of the earth had been immediately obvious in the city at sites of a mass grave where a massacre of Belarussians had taken place. The earth, *this very place*, the spot where I stood, had been disrupted, damaged and dishonoured by the executions that took place and the losses and terror experienced by so many people. I felt the land, the soil too, had been traumatised, and I also sensed its resistance and recovery. Just as people had created a resistance movement during the occupation, the land was regenerating, ‘pushing back’ through the regrowth of grass or the presence of stones, trees and soil, or through the human intervention of redevelopment. Intuitively, I shuffled attention from figure to ground and back to figure, and supported myself to stay present to the traumas of the past and the ongoing regeneration of land that had been devastated by war atrocities. In the more remote woodlands at Maly Trostenets, I felt this even more intensely and also supported myself by connecting to my environment. As I opened myself to awareness of the thousands of murders, trauma and losses that took place amongst the trees, I simultaneously connected to the sounds, sights and smells of a beautiful, late spring afternoon. I felt energy throughout my body and experienced the aliveness and resurgence of the woodland and everything in and around them.

Kristine: I don’t know what to say, actually. I stopped breathing there for a while. Your story touches on something that feels important for me to recognise: being one small but present human in the history of time and place.

Vienna: Yes. I felt very, very small and totally present. Inspired by Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ (1996) story *The Faithful Gardener*, the word I choose to describe this process is *regeneration*. A regenerative process happens in the present. For me, it offered a completion and created the potential for everything yet to come. This holds true for the land and its inhabitants, human and otherwise. Whilst not idealising the earth and nature, I feel huge respect for its power to resist and survive damage as well as my own enormous responsibility not to cause, and to cease contributing to harm. I take up the responsibility to be active in the context of healing family trauma and within the current climate trauma. In my various travels, this dual figure has sharpened for me as I open myself to connection with the field in the widest sense. Something settled for me and for my own family after the journey to Belarus. With sufficient support and resourcing, I had been able to open my heart to the horrors of the past in that place, the political tension and terror of the present for the Belarussian peoples, and I experienced strong compassion. I shuffled attention from figure to its interconnected ground, and ground to figure to regulate during this experience. Drawing on the words of Laura Perls, this process sustained my ‘rootedness’ (Serlin & Shane, 1999, p. 383).

Kristine: And how do you integrate your experiences into your practice?

Vienna: In the more recent past, by developing *The Well-Grounded Therapist* workshops with Miriam (Taylor & Duff, 2018). These emerged from both of our experiences of working with people to develop their resources as part of trauma therapy, i.e. to create ground, and from our own interests in doing this in conjunction with the wider field, including working outdoors. In my day-to-day practice, I notice clients experience different kinds of disconnections or ‘stuckness’ in relation to contact, presence and vitality. Disconnection can be from their selves, their relationships with others, and the world around them. Many people I have met do not have an embodied sense of safety and I’ve found that many people can experience and express feeling safer when they connect with something to do with nature. Experiencing even the possibility of feeling greater safety (in ways that are not harmful or restrictive) can gradually

come alongside previous creative adjustments of disconnection. In my experience, this has supported clients to discover that (re)-building trust (reconnecting with that which has been lost or never found) is possible. I have observed and experienced that this process is supported by connecting with the natural world and that this can be less challenging than connecting directly with their own body or with me. I make sense of this also as a process of regeneration.

‘The outdoors’ is integrated into various ways with clients as we are both situated as part of a wider field. This happens through phenomenological enquiry, exploring different types of physical and imaginal connections as the therapy process with a client invites. The shrubs that grow up against the window of my room, the sky, weather changes and changing light that we are able to observe, the plants or images within the room as well as what my clients share, can all be drawn on as support for contact.

If I feel called to, I might offer a metaphor or invite experiments about accessing support and I include nature or the world outside the therapy room in this. Support may arrive in the form of a story or an image, an animal/pet, a plant, an object or a particular place, activity or time. So, bringing attention to nature can help many clients notice the potential for increasing safety rather than danger and they do this through their senses. This isn’t the only thing happening in the therapy process but building support/stability is often the most urgent figure in therapy addressing the fragmenting impact of trauma.

And you Kristine, how else and why do you connect your practice to the outdoors?

Kristine: I discovered the connection between therapy and nature when I understood that, for me, having a close relationship with my natural surroundings helps me to connect my senses and my body. You’ve probably heard the Gestalt catchphrase ‘lose your mind and come to your senses’. It’s a funny phrase, and I have to admit that I honestly don’t understand what is meant by losing the mind in relation to Gestalt therapy. I need my mind and don’t actually think it will do any good to lose it, but my mind needs to be connected to my body in order to be able to make choices in my best interest. So I do need to work on the balance between the two. I need to connect with my senses in relation to my mind. After spending a night between two pine trees in my hammock, going for a walk in the nearby forest or having a swim in the cold sea, the balance between my sensed body and my thoughts changes. I often

experience that my hearing gets tuned to a finer level, I notice smells and shifting in the light to a much higher degree and I can feel my heartbeat and my breath from the inside of my body, often, but not always, at a slower pace. It can feel almost childlike and novel. And as these bodily senses become figure to my awareness, and part of my phenomenological field, my experience of the total field is affected (Skottun, 2008). I can’t predict how nature moves me; it triggers whatever is there and then, and I can’t predict how humans move me either. But issues I have in my mind actually often deepen, clarify or change for me after letting my bodily senses come up front and in relation to my natural surroundings.

My personal relationship with nature is essential to why and how I relate my practice to nature. During the pandemic I’ve looked to nature for support and grounding. When a lot of the things I relied on, and have taken for granted – like my workplace, my children’s school, my friends and family – suddenly are out of reach, and I am made aware of the air I breathe and things I touch might make me sick, I need to find groundedness elsewhere. For me, ground was found in the earth holding me. Experiencing the heaviness of my body towards the ground, feeling the earth meeting the soles of my feet, and establishing bodily trust to the earth holding me. Being at *The Well Grounded Therapist* workshop was an amazing experience of experimenting on grounding in nature together with other therapists that orient themselves in a similar direction (Steensen, 2021). My interest in bringing my practice outdoors was initiated by my process of discovering who I want to be as a therapist, and that includes how I can use my resources in staying with the difficult figures that come up with clients. To initially find my own ground before supporting the client.

Vienna: Yes, we explored our embodied relationship to both internal and external environments. Please go on, I’m curious to hear more.

Kristine: Yes, and I have integrated these experiences in my work with clients too. I’ve developed something I call ‘Vandretelefon’. It is based on this grounding in the contact-boundary – for instance, between me and the earth – and also the relational support; realising that we are all parts of the same whole by connecting to this the same source. The client and I are walking together, but in different, and our own preselected, safe places. Initially we are only connected by the sounds coming through our phones, but I am aware of our connection through and with the air we breathe, and the earth that meets our feet, and the possibilities for relational

support it offers to the therapeutic field. For the last couple of years I've let myself be supported, calmed and embraced by thoughts on deep ecology from the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss' (in Haukeland, 2008) and the Danish philosopher and spiritual leader Jes Bertelsen's books on empathy, love and connectedness (2010, 2017). As I read them, I believe their thoughts work very well in relation together with what we in Gestalt rest on as field theory, especially in terms of understanding organism and environment are indivisible. We humans are in fact made by the same particles as air and soil, we are not that different from our natural environment.

Vienna: Also water.

Kristine: Yes, indeed. I'm also inspired by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb's (2019, 2020) term 'dance of reciprocity' and experience that the therapeutic process of reciprocity works in many cases more freely and spontaneously outside. I'd like to share one example with you from my practice to illustrate this. In this situation, I was located in a park in Frederiksberg in Denmark and my client was in the woods of Nordmarka in Norway. We were connected through our phones by earplugs, and it was at the end of a session where we had been working on grounding as we struggled to stay with the present figures. I stood in the middle of the park, raising my arms out in the open air in front of me, listening to her breath in my ear, saying 'I am raising my arms towards you now.' And she immediately started to cry really hard, and she answered: 'Yes, I can feel that.' I believe she did feel that, and we returned to that moment many times after. I believe the experience deepened our sense of being connected to each other and the here and now. By grounding with the air and earth, we can work on issues like attachment, connectivity and intimacy in ways that I believe are beneficial for the therapeutic process.

Vienna: Responding to what you have just described, my understanding of field theory underpins all these aspects of practice and has been greatly supported by Malcolm Parlett's writings and teaching (1997, 2015). I believe that my clients and myself, or participants in a workshop, will be able to explore and make sense of 'the in-between', co-creating contact and withdrawal through experiencing and becoming aware of their dance and processes of self-organisation. How can creating a therapy space outside the tradition of the therapy room expand awareness and create a process that honours 'a relationship with' rather than solely 'projection onto or about' the natural world? Can this approach mirror the formation of 'healthy'

relationships, whether with humans or something else? So, as I talk to you, I want to say that relationships between humans co-exist and can be co-created with relationships with the rest of nature.

Co-existence happens within one world with which we as humans are totally interconnected rather than there being an inner and outer world. Working in any client setting, sometimes 'the outside' is made more present within the therapy room ('the inside'). Sometimes a client begins to notice sensate experiences 'outside' the therapy room, between sessions, and sometimes the client brings the wider environment into therapy through their stories. Figures are supported to emerge from the ground that we build together, and then experiences of sensation and immediacy can be explored. However, I don't subscribe to inside and outside being separate. I'm most interested in the in-between, 'the dance', the formation, rhythm and experience of the relationship *with* another. Whether this is with their therapist, an evergreen shrub visible at the window, a person's contact with their disowned/numbed body, or the total and complex interconnection of 'external' and 'internal' environments.

Frank Staemmler (2021) raised some interesting questions about the Gestalt concept of the contact boundary as the organism's body/skin boundary with the environment. Reflecting on his experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, he suggests that this accepted application of the concept is clearly not able to make sufficient sense of the 'entanglement of world and person' in light of the experience of the virus (ibid, p. 12). He also refers to the range of creative adjustments therapists have made to their therapy practice during the pandemic. Some have responded by offering therapy outdoors, so perhaps this conversation is particularly timely.

Kristine: Yes, I believe so.

I am curious though, and I would like to discuss with you how bringing therapeutic practice outdoors fits with the way Gestalt was intended to be practiced by the first generation. I mean, they all had walls, doors, and chairs, as far as I know. And in relation to support, as we are discussing this, ever since I was a student I've been told that 'the mother of Gestalt practice', Laura Perls, used to teach her students to 'feel their ass in the chair' before bringing the clients in. If we consider moving the therapy room outdoors we lose contact with our therapist chair. The question then becomes: how do we find our ass in the chair outdoors? And what is lost when we lose the chair?

Vienna: Two things pop up for me. We don't lose our ass! It isn't necessary to have a therapist's chair to be in our body.

Kristine: Heh, heh. Right, right.

Vienna: My other response to your question about Laura's comment is, 'And what holds the chair?' Who or what has been holding the therapist's chair all this time, long before psychotherapy emerged as an individual human-to-human practice? If connection and support can be invited through the experience of sitting on a chair or planting your feet firmly on the floor then why not on the grass, the soil, or the leaves shed by the trees in your garden, Kristine?

We all receive support from the air with every breath that we take. We don't attribute this only to the air in the therapy room. Moving and moving outdoors offer potential for sensate contact and immediacy with/within our wider environment as we open up connections with our bodies and grounding in a different space. This is how I make sense of 'feel [your] ass in the chair'.

Kristine: Yes! Laura's popular 'quote' has become another catchphrase of Gestalt I believe, taken out of context, and the chair, poor thing, has been given a huge responsibility. So, what did she actually think about support in this sense?

Vienna: I understand Laura to have said that support can be anything or any experience that helps a person digest a new experience and includes tacit and latent aspects of life (Amendt-Lyon, 2016; Perls, 1992; Serlin, 1992; Wollants, 2012). So, it can be part of the wider world around the therapy room as well as the therapist's chair.

Perhaps it is important to question what magical qualities the psychotherapy profession has projected onto the therapist's chair/therapy room or, in the origins of psychoanalysis, the client's couch. We can be curious about how else a containing space can be created.

Kristine: It might be fair to say that the 'chair' did not literally refer to a chair to the first generation of Gestalt psychotherapists either, at least not to Laura. So attachment to the chair needn't keep us from taking therapy outdoors.

Vienna: I think not.

Kristine: But what holds the field when we take therapy outdoors? For instance, therapists traditionally invite

their clients into *their* offices to enable themselves to hold the therapeutic field. It's rarely the other way around. When moving the therapy room outdoors, therapists need to think about how we can hold the field outside our four walls.

Vienna: Without overlooking the containment that the therapeutic relationship can and needs to offer, there are various ways of 'holding' the boundaries of a session that eco-psychotherapeutic writers and practitioners have identified; for instance, as part of the process of contracting and working with clients. In my experience, these can include holding the time frame and agreeing on a spatial threshold for the beginning and end of a session or where to meet if this is different. Other aspects of practice can be identifying physical boundaries within which the session takes place, contracting whether 'being outside' means a whole session, being seated in the outdoor space or walking together. Contracting how to manage chance meetings with other human beings could also help to hold the space. These aspects of offering therapy can be negotiated and will in part be shaped by the location, choices provided by the outdoor space, and the client's way of approaching therapy.

I imagine that in many countries some therapists have responded to the coronavirus lockdown by adapting therapy to a virtual space, and some have experimented by meeting outdoors when this has been a possibility. Whichever might be offered, the pandemic has encouraged me to contemplate more carefully, who chooses the space? Connecting beyond Gestalt colleagues to eco-psychotherapists and other modalities, I have heard of many offering a particular location, 'an outdoor office' if you like, as a place where they work. It could be a powerful process to invite clients to help shape the therapy space outdoors in a way that is perhaps less possible when a client comes to the therapist's room and sits in one of the chairs that are provided; powerful, too, for the therapist. Outside the therapy room perhaps therapists can choose to, or necessarily must, relinquish some of the power that they do have. In some forms of eco-practices, 'the outdoors' might even be seen as a co-therapist? I wonder if these are contentious ideas.

I really want to respond to your question by asking, can we 'hold' the field? As a psychotherapist, I want clients to be able to access support in the form of containment for their processing/emotional regulation when this meets their needs. And of course, some clients' processes mean that they regulate in a different way and their response to different kinds of boundaries

might support a ‘loosening’ that we can be curious about together. You asked a really important question, what creates the contact-boundary and how are necessary boundaries held?

Kristine: Thank you for challenging my take on ‘holding the field’ here, I like that. First of all, I have to say that I love what you say about shaping the therapy room together with the client. It certainly opens up new possibilities for meeting outdoors. When I refer to the therapist ‘holding the field’ here I’m referring to the therapeutic field, and us as therapists being the responsible part of the relationship. We cannot ‘hold the field’ as such, no one can; ‘the field’ is unholdable as it is metaphorical in my understanding. Trusting you can hold the field as a therapist is a false safety net. So, my take on ‘holding the field’ is about support and boundaries, as you suggest, and I will add responsibility. I experience that my need for support and boundaries vary from client to client and situation to situation, but the responsibility is always mine.

Vienna: I agree, responsibility is key in Gestalt and the co-creation of different ways of holding the therapeutic space.

Kristine: Nature-connected Gestalt psychotherapy is not yet that common in Norway, even though many therapists have moved parts of their practice outdoors during the pandemic. Even though several therapists are meeting with clients outdoors there is not much written about how to do this ethically with support, boundaries and responsibility in Norway. That said, I’ve been drawn to eco-therapy and eco-psychotherapy for guidance. I am especially fond of the work of Martin Jordan and Mary-Jane Rust from the UK in that regard (see Jordan, 2014; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; Rust 2009, 2020). In addition to the practical and physical boundaries you mentioned, it’s been important for me to make sure my insurance covers therapy outdoors, that I have a supervisor that supports it, and that I’m making risk assessments in advance in reference to the chosen place. These are important and necessary preparations to support me in being a responsible therapist outdoors.

But beyond that, as I believe my body is my most important tool, I have to figure out for myself what support I need, being the therapist I am. I find great liberation and support in Laura Perls stressing that the therapist needs to use her own experiences and find her own style as a therapist (Serlin & Shane, 1999). What I need to feel supported in the outdoor therapeutic space might be different from others.

Vienna: Yes, indeed.

Kristine: So, for me, I take an interest in how places have become what they are, and what stories they hold. I was deeply moved by your stories of connecting time, place, generation and war trauma in Austria and Belarus earlier. I also just realised that you even carry the name of one of the places where you have your roots – Vienna. In addition to being a Gestalt therapist, I am also a cultural historian. I take a particular interest in how our material world shapes, and is being shaped by, life lived in particular places through time, and how that shapes our phenomenological perspective. One way of enabling myself ‘to hold the field’, to feel like a responsible and secure therapist, is actually to get to know the cultural history of the outdoor place I have chosen for my sessions. I believe the stories nature holds from ‘there and then’ are connected to the ‘here and now’ (Yontef, 1993, pp. 258–259). They do not disappear just because time passes. I include them as part of the field, and as ground to figures in the now. To me, it is important to establish my personal relationship with the ‘here’ in the ‘here and now’, in order to ‘hold’ the therapeutic field. Does this make sense to you, or not?

Vienna: It does. Space and place are important to me too and what you describe as your ‘cultural historian’ self really resonates. I feel excited as we speak. Just as I am curious and interested in people, I also want to get to know a place. The ‘here and then’ is always part of the ‘here and now’ as are all other life spaces, and in exploring these roots, or threads as I like to think of them, we might encounter a client’s story, a tree’s, or a place’s, which stimulates and supports the therapeutic process.

Kristine: Exactly. Threads, I like that image. This refers in its deepest sense to how we see ourselves in relation to/with nature. Are we seeing ourselves as ‘a part of’, ‘being in relation with’ and/or ‘projecting onto’ nature? And how are the different takes applicable to Gestalt thinking? I remember you read Martin Buber’s passage about the tree for us at the workshop.

Vienna: I did. This passage inspires me and illuminates being in relationship *with* the field in its widest sense (see Buber, 1996, pp. 57–59). I-Thou as a concept clearly informs dialogic relating with people. This passage about the total tree, the tree being seen as a subject – rather than being objectified by omitting part of the tree’s identity – touches me deeply. It impacts as strongly now as it did early in my psychotherapy training. How do I differentiate *and* see all of the tree,

or all of nature, or all of the person before me?

Kristine: This is about mutuality and reciprocity in the human-nature relationship too, isn't it? When we are in a relationship with something we consider ourselves being part of it, and therefore might be able to empathise. I believe this kind of relationship with nature may be therapeutic in itself. William Cahalan wrote an excellent article about human-nature relationships in 1996, and the title makes a clear point: *The Earth is our real body*. Yes, the earth is our real body, we depend on it to stay alive and healthy. Tuning into nature is an empathetic highway into sensing, experiencing, and understanding our individual bodies.

At the same time we have the ability as humans to distance ourselves from both the earth and our actual bodies, which may create the illusion of us humans being something else than, and above, nature/body. I think Malcolm Parlett (1997), inspired by Paul Goodman, describes very well how that way of viewing our surroundings might have a worrying impact on both the individual and the society as such.

Vienna: Yes, and I think Steffi Bednarek (2018) expresses the question about the width of the field beautifully by articulating the living, breathing qualities of the earth, including that human beings can and do cause damage. In this argument and her later article *This is an emergency* (Bednarek, 2019), she calls for responsibility to be taken and for Western cultures which do not have an indigenous relationship to nature to act with greater respect, to cease causing harm and fundamentally to become aware that we are a part of one world, a world that includes the more-than-human. Specifically, she invites psychotherapeutic communities to raise their awareness and create ways to take responsibility for the consequences of cultural toxicity. Her analysis of climate change as an emergency reveals how, in contrast to indigenous cultures, the values and behaviours embedded in Western societies create trauma, impacting all. If willing and with support, collective trauma can be faced. Enmeshed as we are, it is hard not to desensitise, to freeze, to deny. Miriam Taylor (2021) offers a deep understanding of this perspective and makes a profound contribution to understanding the multiple and complex situational contexts of trauma and illustrates how psychotherapists are positioned within them. She names a range of collective traumas, including ecocide, and stresses the need for radical ethics and an ecological approach.

Kristine: Bednarek's calls for awareness of this topic remind me of something short but beautiful that Laura

Perls wrote in 1939, in the early stage of the Second World War, called *How to Educate Children for Peace*. It is not our place as psychotherapists to moralise, but to see things as they are. We are to direct consciousness and awareness to the conditions of the field that create suffering – to lay the ground for healing and change.

One reason why people who have experienced relational trauma may experience a sense of safety being with nature could be that grounding in nature is deeply and profoundly nurturing in itself. As you also mentioned earlier, nature may even be seen as a co-therapist for some. When viewing the earth as our body, mother and basis of life, that idea is really not that far-fetched.

The fact that the earth is also suffering severe traumas, I'd say, calls for our attention and might be another important conversation within Gestalt practice.

Vienna: Yes, it definitely is and this conversation has begun in Gestalt communities in the UK and elsewhere and is established in eco-therapeutic practice and climate action. And in Norway?

Kristine: In Norway, too. We are even exploring how to address and include the eco-crisis as part of the therapist education at the Norwegian Gestalt education program (Kolmannskog, 2019). Unfortunately, it lost its momentum when the pandemic got our full attention, but I hope and believe we are to return to this conversation in the Gestalt environment in Norway.

Vienna: That is really encouraging. Right now, I feel hopeful. Other people's reflections on how Gestalt therapy communities respond to the situation of the global pandemic, and people's awareness and responses to the climate emergency, will contribute to understanding collective trauma, and responses to and by the wider field.

Our dialogue has covered a lot of rich and complex issues Kristine, thank you so much.

Kristine: And I agree, it has been a great process having this conversation with you about such an important topic for our practice.

Vienna: The stand-out point for me in terms of therapeutic practice is the theoretical ground for nature-connected contact.

I want to acknowledge that there are many more stories and responses to be heard to the range of questions we have asked each other and I am curious about other Gestaltists' responses to the practice and the ethical topics we have named. Others will choose differently;

however, for me, to be authentic in my practice and identity, a clear configuration of the ways I am in constant relationship with the wider field is vital, and this includes moving outside the therapy room and working with nature.

Kristine: I'm glad you brought this up before we ended our conversation. You and I obviously both feel at home in a nature-connected practice and others do not, we both acknowledge this. In addition to it being a personal choice though, I would also argue that the need for nature-connected Gestalt practice has also grown out of various needs situated in the present time; for instance, the pandemic inviting therapists to think 'outside of the room' and the current and growing eco and climate crises. That said, we have also identified that practising Gestalt outdoors is deeply rooted in intentional theoretical thinking.

Vienna: We have. Therapists back to Freud (Sigmund Freud Museum, 2014) and Jung (Sabini, 2003) have connected with place and nature in different ways; Laura Perls, for example, loved walking in the alpine countryside (Amendt-Lyon, 2016). However, actually offering nature-connected therapy and taking sessions with clients outdoors as part of Gestalt therapy practice may only have begun relatively recently. Right now, it is definitely amongst the creative adjustments being made by Gestalt practitioners as part of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ecological crisis we face. You and I have noted that moving a practice outside the therapy room is consistent with Gestalt's core concepts, theory and philosophy, and the original ideas expressed by Laura Perls. Her contribution underpins the varied and changing landscape of practice and action that Gestalt embraces today, providing ground for developments such as the examples we have discussed.

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Letters to the Editor

In response to Gianni Francesetti's Atmospheres as media of transgenerational phenomena

Frank-M. Staemmler

Dear Editor,

First, I would like to express my appreciation for Gianni Francesetti's writings which I generally find very appealing both with respect to form and content. They are well reasoned, clearly formulated and, to a large extent, in accordance with my own views. The same has been the case with his recent paper in *British Gestalt Journal*, to which I will respond in what follows. Accordingly, my subsequent comments are rarely critical but aimed at underlining and clarifying further what he has already said, in part by hinting at the mistakable meaning of some terms, since the search for proper words is of great significance for phenomenological descriptions (see Ihde, 1979, p. 34).

Let me start with a personal remark: I was born in Germany in 1951. When I grew up the cities were still branded by the destructions of the war. I remember playing in ruins, which was strictly forbidden because of the danger of collapsing walls and of unexploded bombs that might blow up at any time. However, the war that had ended only a few years ago would not be a topic in everyday conversations. Those who had survived were busy building up a new future for themselves and their children. Maybe they avoided the remembrance of the terrible times that lay behind them, maybe the urge to live, and to establish new and safer life conditions was so predominant, that there was no space for thinking about the past too much. Maybe their silence was also an attempt to protect their children. And certainly, for those who had actively participated in the Nazi terror, their feelings of guilt and shame stopped them from talking about the times of the 'Third Reich'.

My parents had not been directly traumatized during the war but, of course, they suffered numerous vicarious traumatisations as they – directly or indirectly – witnessed all kinds of atrocities that happened to other people in Germany as well as abroad, not to speak of the Holocaust. My mother, who was

raised as the daughter of a Protestant pastor in the Christian spirit of mercy and hope, and my father, who was the son of a surgeon and was raised with the medical ethics of care for human lives, were rather atypical. What in my description may seem as an idealization, was exceptional, indeed.

Part of my parents' special features consisted in the fact that they were always ready to respond to their children's questions, including those about the years from 1933 to 1945. I remember asking my father if during his time as a soldier in the war he had killed anybody. He responded thoughtfully and explained to me that the position that he had as a radio operator on a freight plane saved him from having to shoot at anybody, but he added: 'Nevertheless, I have been part of a warfare system that killed thousands of Russians.'¹

What I am aiming at with this biographical note is the fact that, in spite of the responsiveness and openness of my parents, as a child, I have always felt reluctance to address these precarious issues with my parents (and others). So, I rarely did. When I look back from today's point of view, it occurs to me that the general atmosphere of silence that existed in post-war Germany (see Heimannsberg & Schmidt, 1993) had a *stronger* impact on me than my palpable experience with my parents. I say this to agree with and underline Francesetti's emphasis on the importance of atmospheres and their strong cultural influence. However, because of my personal experience with my parents, I would like to add to his correct observation of their *transgenerational* effect that atmospheres can be even *more* than transgenerational, they can be *cultural*. (Francesetti uses this word himself at the beginning of his conclusion, p. 16)

Let me explain what I want to say: thinking in terms of generations still implies, for me, thinking of groups of *persons*, but atmospheres are transpersonal, if I may use this term in a non-spiritual sense. Moreover, thinking

of generations also implies thinking of subsequent points in time. This is not to deny that atmospheres can be handed down from one generation to the next. However, this *diachronic* dissemination does not exclude the possibility of a *synchronic* diffusion, usually called *Zeitgeist*, as my personal example demonstrates. In other words: transgenerational phenomena are only *one* section of atmospheric phenomena.

Be that as it may, I am grateful that in his writings Francesetti addresses the phenomenon of atmospheres repeatedly. In my view, the importance of atmospheres has been neglected by Gestalt therapists for far too long. In her fierce attack on Hermann Schmitz, Nancy Amendt-Lyon even explicitly ‘negates the usefulness of ... the term “atmosphere” for Gestalt therapy’ (2017, p. 99). She, as well as many others, apparently has not taken seriously that Kurt Lewin explicitly alerted us to the importance of atmospheres a long time ago. For some arcane reason his following remark is rarely cited in our literature:

To characterize properly the psychological field, one has to take into account such *specific* items as particular goals, stimuli, needs, relations, as well as such more *general* characteristics of the field as the *atmosphere* (for instance, the friendly, tense, or hostile atmosphere) or the amount of freedom. These characteristics of the *field as a whole* are as important in psychology as, for instance, the field of gravity for the explanation of events in classical physics. Psychological atmospheres are empirical realities and are scientifically describable facts.

(1951, p. 241, italics original)

I can only speculate why Lewin’s admonishment has been received by Gestalt therapists to such a small degree. My best guess is that many Gestalt therapists are still blinded by the *Law of Prägnanz*, an observation about which Gordon Wheeler once wrote: ‘The model of contact handed down to us by Goodman and Perls, and elaborated by many subsequent authors, is *figure-bound* in a theoretical sense’ (1998, p. 3, italics original). This way of looking at things narrows one’s perspective and excludes many aspects that may already be or may soon become important, although they are not yet clearly recognisable. That is why William James demanded ‘the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life’ (1890, p. 254) – to which Michael Polanyi later added that ‘an unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters’ (1966, p. 18).²

Atmospheres are, as Francesetti correctly says, the medium by which transgenerational phenomena are usually ‘transmitted’. I also agree with his hesitation of using the word ‘transmission’ in this context. Atmospheres are not only much vaguer than messages that can be explicitly communicated; atmospheres are also phenomena that have a completely different spatial quality than messages because they *surround* us and also *infiltrate* us.³ They are aspects of situations, and that means that we are not confronted with them (in the literary sense of us being here and them being there); they do not originate from a definable source. As Hans-Georg Gadamer put it (partly in contrast to Lewin, when it comes to the question of ‘objective’ scientific method):

the very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished.

(1989, p. 301)

This infinity includes the historical facts that exerted their influences on the emergence of atmospheres in the first place, i. e. these facts can never be entirely reconstructed. I find this important to mention, since Francesetti’s lovely transcript might lead some (naïve) readers to the conclusion that the historical implications of atmospheres could be retrospectively and/or logically *deduced* from them. Rather, in my view his impressive transcript demonstrates a process I would describe – with intent, a little soberly⁴ – as follows:

Dwelling in⁵ an atmosphere – the subjective aspect of which we call a ‘mood’⁶ – can elicit (via ‘state-dependent memories’ – see Bower, 1981) the retrieval (and/or creation) of *narrative* – not historical (see Spence, 1982) – facts that help the client make sense of her or his situation. Of course, these narrative facts are offered by the respective culture and its *Zeitgeist*. Frequently, this process has therapeutically helpful effects, as it leads to a more consistent narrative of the client’s life and contributes to her or his sense of being understood (by both her or himself and others).

In Eugene Gendlin’s (1997) words, which I think are very illuminating but too little known in the Gestalt therapy community, the ‘felt sense’ that is implied in the atmosphere is being ‘carried forward’ and

partly symbolized and explicated in order to create meaning. This is often necessary, as atmospheres are at first ‘suffered’, as Francesetti points out correctly. Nevertheless, as far as I understand the connotations of this English word, it is only partly useful in this context, since it puts the emphasis on the possible *negative* valence, i.e. the *painful* aspect of what ‘pathos’ in the (more general) Greek sense of the word means: something you undergo or something to which you are exposed, that happens to you, of which you are *not* the originator and which you did not choose.

Obviously, one can also be impacted by a *pleasant* atmosphere, about which one would never say that one ‘suffers’ from it. (Therefore, Francesetti apparently felt the need of supplementing his translation of the word ‘pathos’ into ‘suffering’ by explaining it as meaning being a ‘subject-to’, p. 10) When he writes that atmospheres are like ‘the air the child breathes’ (p. 11), the surrounding and permeating character of atmospheres is indicated well; but there is another problem with this metaphor, because breathing is usually conceived as an *activity* and hence this metaphor obscures the *pathos* Francesetti appropriately wants to highlight. In breathing, we inhale and exhale the air (in terms of grammar, this is *active* and *transitive*). Atmospheres, however, impinge on us; we do not take them in or push them out willingly.

In this context I would like to make another comment on words: Francesetti speaks of atmospheric impressions as ‘the ground or, more precisely, *they are the ground*’ (p. 10, italics original) of experience. As I already indicated in footnote 3, this word (and, in a similar fashion, the word ‘background’, too) carries connotations that do not do justice to the fact that atmospheres are never experienced as something situated *beneath* or *behind* the person. Rather, phenomenologically speaking, atmospheres *surround* and *permeate* us, sometimes they press down on us or invigorate us. Using words like the latter ones makes it even clearer that essentially we can neither escape the atmospheres in which we *find* ourselves nor the moods that accompany them. As Heidegger says, these ‘states-of-mind’ . . . *disclose Dasein in its thrownness*’ (1962, p. 175, italics original) and constitute its ‘openness to the world’ (ibid, p. 176).

To conclude, I hope that my remarks will be understood as an attempt to support Francesetti’s concerns. Although my arguments may seem a little pedantic and petty-minded at times, my intention is to contribute to his ideas by adding to their conclusiveness and verbal clarity.

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Notes

¹ He referred to Russia because that had been the part of Europe to which his aircraft was ordered to transport ammunition and other material and from where it transported wounded soldiers back home.

² By the way, for me the notorious, at times stereotypical and indiscriminate invocation of our ominous Gestalt therapy metaphor of the ‘boundary’ should also be scrutinized from this viewpoint.

³ This is why I do not find it adequate to locate atmospheres at a ‘root level’, since this metaphor refers to a vertical and material notion. Maybe we should call them ‘all-embracing’ instead.

⁴ Since the recent pandemic I am even more wary than before of people's tendencies to mystify things in 'esoteric' ways, if they cannot quickly understand them. The vagueness of atmospheres can readily invite such irrational interpretations. Therefore, sobriety may be helpful.

⁵ 'Exploring' is the term usually applied in psychotherapy contexts, but I think it is too suggestive of an external point of view, even if it comes in introspective disguise. 'Dwelling in' may be closer to the truth, since 'it is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand' (Polanyi, 1966, p. 18).

⁶ Thomas Fuchs speaks of a 'field of terms, within which different terms compete with each other or merge in their meanings ... This arrangement leads from surrounding or overarching phenomena, which rather belong to the surrounding space or the situation as a whole (atmosphere ...) to more subject-centered phenomena, which are close to the body (... Befinden). Moods seem to occupy a middle position in this arrangement' (2013, p. 17).

⁷ In the original German text Heidegger speaks of 'Befindlichkeit'; 'states-of-mind' is a misleading English translation. As Francesetti indicates by referring to Gendlin's paper on Befindlichkeit, he knows about the dual meaning of that German word, which Gendlin explicates very well: (1) finding oneself in a given situation and (2) being in a certain mood. Heidegger introduced the term in order to overcome the Cartesian split between 'outside' and 'inside'. Obviously, the translation of 'Befindlichkeit' into 'states-of-mind' captures only the 'internal' part of that meaning (for a useful overview on Heidegger's terms see Elpidorou & Freeman, 2015). In the BGJ Heidegger's term is spelled incorrectly as 'Befindlishkeit' (with an s instead of a c).

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War as a figure and ground: confessions of a Ukrainian Gestalt therapist in training

Oksana Kovalova

Dear Editor,

In the middle of February 2022, my whole, big family gathered in my new house in Irpin, near Kyiv, to congratulate me on my birthday. I was satisfied with the point in my life where I was at that time: I finally had my own house, the crisis of the ‘abandoned nest’ was behind me, and a balance was established between my old business – the theatre-musical studio, where I was the manager and director, and my new one – psychology and Gestalt therapy. It was a long way – I finished my Master’s degree at university, completed an almost four-year course of Gestalt training, and started my practice. There were still a few supervision meetings and certification in June. I took stock and finally felt a certain stability and time to ‘collect stones’.

I was happy.

That’s the last thing I remember before full-scale war broke out.

I did not believe in the possibility of war until the morning of February 24. The shock was strong. It seemed that everything was about to end. Now the whole world will come to our defence. Now in Russia, people are rebelling against the killing of their neighbours. I was waiting for a clear and decisive reaction, but nothing happened. The world was silent, and explosions could be heard outside the window.

The suburbs of Irpen were in hot battles from the first days of the war, so the city was under siege. My husband and I were confused – it was scary and we did not understand what was better: to go with the risk of being shot, or to stay, with approximately the same risks. In one moment, all my attainment lost its meaning. Almost everything had lost its meaning, except the will to survive.

To somehow cope, I began to recall self-help tools from the psychology course: grounding, breathing, warm drinks, rituals, and psycho-hygiene. But contact with people turned out to be the main help. Thanks to the internet, support came both from friends from Kyiv and from those who lived on the other side of the world. The children wrote every hour, and I was happy that they were far abroad. Little by little, the neighbours

began to come in contact, and this reduced the level of anxiety and despair. The Gestalt Academy kept silent, my therapist was out of reach. But I remember what support my supervisory group became for me, which did not stop its existence. Our coach was stubbornly trying to get us online. It was hard to force myself to join the group. But each time my fear and anxiety levels decreased after our meetings. Of course, we did not disassemble the sessions but supported each other. And in these meetings, a feeling of sharing in one’s pain and confusion was born.

The battles were getting closer and closer, and it became more and more obvious that Irpin would soon be occupied. We decided to get out. We were able to leave only the third time because fighting was going on all around. We also took a woman with a child and five cats. The second car was given to complete strangers so that they could leave Irpin. I could not imagine such a thing before, but war changes priorities.

My heart was torn apart – we were kicked out of the house.

We found shelter in a friend’s house near Lviv. Their house resembled a dormitory where almost every day someone came or left. People ran from all corners of Ukraine: Kharkiv, Sumy, and Kyiv. Someone waited, and someone went further abroad.

For the second time, the war dealt me a personal blow in mid-March. While I was taking our cats to my son in Poland, my husband was called up for military service. It was a big blow for me. Connection with my husband was the last piece of my world. I experienced his mobilisation very painfully. When I returned to Lviv, I suddenly felt that the world in which I lived just a month ago had finally been destroyed. I am without a family, a home, and my business. I remember despair and grief, confusion, and the feeling of losing not only my past life but also a little bit of a clear future.

Again, people around me saved me. It was difficult for everyone, but finding ‘ours’ and being together was salvation. I started going to volunteer work – I helped provide refugees with everything they needed, and it gave meaning to my life. I met with friends from Kyiv,

who also found their refuge in Lviv. Little by little, I came to my senses and began to remember that I was a Gestalt therapist: I looked for my clients, and offered to meet, if only to be together, for free. I didn't feel very secure yet, but I didn't want to leave them alone. Then the requests from clients were: help to pull yourself together, what to do with anxiety, to go or not to go abroad, how not to think about the future, how to endure being a refugee, how to forget the horror of the beginning of the war. As much as I could, I tried to share their lives with them. I also organised a support group for relocated people and conducted workshops for teenagers. This activity gradually brought me back to life. My therapist was also found – she managed to go abroad – and we resumed our meetings. There I could cry out my longing.

Another support for me was courses on working with trauma. At that time, many psychotherapists from different parts of the world held free meetings on this topic. I understood that I needed new knowledge. The work with clients will not be about expansion and change, but about mental survival, finding support, and at least some kind of stability. Rockets would fly into Lviv, albeit rarely, and we had to hide because we lived near the airport. I enjoyed listening to these courses during the air raids. We all went down to the shelter, and I turned on the next lecturer. So I could not hear the frightening lashing of air-raid alarms and the frightening conversations of those who were with me in the vault. Sometimes the whole night passed like this. It was like running away from reality to education.

After some time, the question arose – where to live next. At that time, Irpin had already been released, but I could not bring myself to return. A bomb flew into the neighbour's house, and the blast wave destroyed the windows and doors in our house. In addition, during the occupation, Russian soldiers lived in our house. It disgusted me. So when my sister-in-law suggested that I go to England under the Homes for Ukraine program, I agreed after a week of hesitation. On the same day, through the program, Tony and Jane Fraser called me. It looked like a miracle. Tony is acting Chair of Gestalt Publishing Ltd and a Gestalt organisational consultant, and Jane teaches yoga (I've been practising yoga for about thirty years). Very quickly, I found myself in Brighton.

I was warmly welcomed. I received so much care and support that sometimes I cried from the number of feelings. Tony and Jane made everything possible to make me feel at home – safe and comfortable. And I began to 'come to my senses.' Although adapting to a

new country is also a great stress, I very quickly felt calm and began to sleep better, little by little I stopped being afraid of the sounds of the ambulance and the clamour of seagulls. At that point, I had to finish my previous therapy and Tony told me that his colleague, Jane Paddy, was offering me therapy. Free. I really needed it – every bad news from Ukraine quickly sent me into despair and anxiety. I always felt the longing for Motherland, my friends, and my husband. New rules, new people – I wasn't sure how to behave correctly, what to say. In addition, my level of English was quite weak and I sometimes felt completely helpless and excluded from communication. I was very worried – would I be able to explain to the English-speaking therapist what was wrong with me? How can I repay Jane for her time and concern? Why does she do this? But over time I learned to accept this help as well. Jane gave me stability. Clear setting, resilience, support, always put together and looking good, a little humour, a lot of wisdom, and eyes full of compassion. How grateful I am to her for our hours together!

Meanwhile, I decided to return to my studies. And immediately, the very first conference of my academy caused me pain. The management decided to keep the students from Russia. I was worried. And when I got into the same threesome with a woman from Russia, I felt shocked. I just froze. I immediately remembered the first days of the war. The Russians came to kill me, kicked me out of my home, and now I have to talk about my feelings with a stranger who still lives in Moscow. How to open my soul to her? How to explain the whole gamut of feelings from fear to hatred?

That's how trauma works, that's how a trigger works. I just left the conference. There was a intensive psychotherapy event ahead of me, which I also refused. But, according to my colleagues' reviews, everything was even worse there. The groups turned out to be mixed, and many people found themselves in a similar situation. Disputes reached the point that the head of the academy allowed himself to use insulting words about Ukrainian national identity. After that, I decided not to continue my studies. The lack of certification seemed like such a minor loss compared to the disappointment and hurt. Yes, we are Gestalt therapists and we should look at the person, not the nationality. But you can't ignore the background, you can't pretend that nothing happened. A therapist is, first of all, a living person. I simply could not continue studying there.

Meanwhile, little by little, I began to realise myself as a psychologist and Gestalt therapist in Brighton. I had

a strong desire to help Ukrainians. I saw how difficult it was for some to flee. Every Saturday Ukrainian refugees gathered in the church, where I offered my help. Sometimes I met with clients just in the park on a bench. These were, rather, crisis consultations. The problems were mainly related to adaptation, there were a lot of inquiries about the condition of the children. Twice I encountered psychiatric problems with clients. Unfortunately, stress aggravates diseases. And above all, psychiatric. My advice to consult a psychiatrist caused a smile – in England, it is a very long way to a narrow specialist. And help was needed right now.

Tony and Jane then offered to use my room in their house for consultations. I tried to control the number of volunteer consultations to avoid burnout. In the meantime, Tony arranged at the Phoenix Psychological Practice that I would have up to four hours a week of office space for my volunteer consultations. There I organised a support group and accepted individual clients. I am very grateful to Eva, the director of the Practice, for believing in me. I did not expect my own keys to the office and my name on the board of therapists. I was impressed, touched, and grateful for such a reception.

Now I understand how sincerely and openly I was received by the British professional space. There were still support groups in Eastbourne, paying clients began to appear in Brighton, and I started registering as self-employed. But the feeling that I was getting further and further away from my homeland, from my husband, did not allow me to breathe easily. And I also began to ‘sprout’ in British space, as it were. I found my people not only among Ukrainians but also among local people. I took part in the organisation of cultural events, and started a choir ‘Ukrainian voices’. Almost six months have passed. I did not expect this, I was only thinking of waiting a couple of months. So I made a difficult decision to return to Ukraine. The hardest part was leaving Tony and Jane. They gave me so much warmth, care, and acceptance. With them, I experienced very difficult and very happy moments in life. With them, I could be myself – sincere. Because they are like that.

I have been living in Lviv for three months now, near the place where my husband serves. Adapting to a new place for me, living and working without electricity and the internet, and getting used to air alarms are behind me. My practice has shrunk a lot. I notice that the number of clients directly depends on my stability and amount of energy. At first, when the lights were suddenly turned off and the internet disappeared, I got

into the car and drove around the city in search of a place with a mobile connection.

Sometimes I conducted sessions directly from the car. Sometimes clients interrupted or cancelled sessions at the last moment due to similar problems. It is very exhausting. It probably sounds wild to British Gestalt therapists, but this is the Ukrainian wartime reality now. With the introduction of the lights-off schedule, it has become easier, I can plan my meetings. I worry a lot about my sleep, rest, and mental stability because I have to give energy to my clients. I resumed my studies at another Ukrainian Gestalt institute, have supervision and interview groups, and am again preparing for certification in June.

It’s my birthday this week. A year has passed since the family gathering in my honour. We are all scattered around the world now. My past life seems very far away, and the future is hard to imagine. I am once again a Gestalt therapist in training, building my practice. But there is no feeling that this is the time to ‘collect stones’. My trauma is not over – the war in Ukraine is still ongoing.

However, this long year brought me not only pain and horror but also many discoveries and new experiences. I learned to trust the world and people more, I learned to live alone, I learned how strong and adaptable I am, and that the most important thing in life is people. I have become a much more mature person and definitely a more effective and experienced therapist.

Because a Gestalt therapist, in my opinion, is, first of all, a person.

Oksana Kovalova is a qualified psychologist (Masters in Psychology) and Gestalt therapist in training from Irpin, Ukraine. With over thirty years’ professional experience, her background is in teaching music and drama; in 2007, she founded a private musical theatre. By actively participating in interventional and supervisory groups, conferences, and psychotherapy intensives, she has built her psychotherapy practice and skills that have become even more relevant now under the war conditions. Oksana offers online and in-person group and individual psychotherapy. She is married with two adult children.

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Christine Stevens PhD is Editor of the British Gestalt Journal. She is a Gestalt therapist, supervisor, international trainer and writer. She is Research Liaison officer for the IAAGT and a member of the EAGT Research Committee. She worked for many years on the faculty of the Doctorates in Psychotherapy programmes at Metanoia Institute, London, specialising in research methods. She is Director of Clay Studio, Nottingham and involved in trans-disciplinary practice and research.

Toni Gilligan is a UKCP registered Gestalt psychotherapist and supervisor. She offers both individual and group psychotherapy and supervision, as well as training, and consultancy. Toni is of mixed Indian and Scottish heritage and inherited from both her parents a commitment to social justice. Gestalt therapy is about social activism as well as psychotherapy and she seeks to apply this in the fields of equality, diversity and inclusion. Toni is a past president of the IAAGT, and the former Director of Psychotherapy Training at the Gestalt Centre, London.

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Based around the ideas presented in his new book *The Psychology of Supremacy*, Dr Turner's talk will look at just how and why racial adaptations exist and occur, and what it means for the racialised other to exist within white environments. This talk will also survey the means, both creative and otherwise, that can be used for exploration and to reinvigorate and individuate those practitioners, students and clients of colour so that the adaptations that they have become embedded within cause less psychological distress.

In the afternoon, Dwight will facilitate an experiential exploration of issues raised in the lecture.

For full details and to book a place, visit the MFL website:

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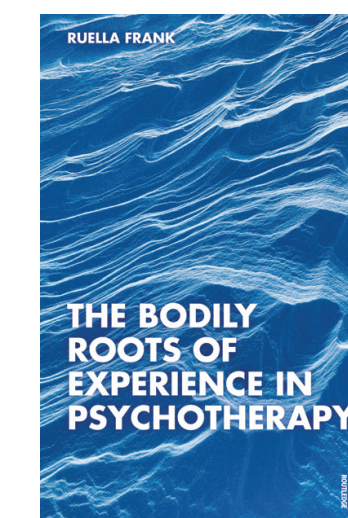
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