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### **Abstract**

*The author develops a pragmatic perspective on the therapeutic experience, in particular from the therapist's perspective, and this is done in two essential realms. He suggests, on the one hand, that the therapist's aim with the client might be to teach "attentive gestures" that allow the progress of the process of awareness. On the other hand, by putting cooperative action in the center of the transformation process, he emphasizes that being a Gestaltist "is to constantly and patiently establish the conditions of intense cooperation and remain open to the opportunity of a joint and continual investigation on hazards inherent in this cooperation".*

## **INTRODUCTION**

During my experience as a therapist I have realized for a long time how difficult it is to formulate in a clear and simple way— for my clients as much as for myself - what Gestalt therapy really is. Every time I tried, I came back to the issue from a different angle, emphasising an aspect which - at that particular moment - seemed central, but with the feeling of not being able to find a formula that really conveyed the essence of my work, its central theme and one containing - at least in embryo – the greater part of the aspects which I felt to be important in my actual practice. This observation has been perpetuated as much by reading the definitions provided by various people such as from our professional organizations, as by meetings with students or young colleagues in my work as trainer or supervisor. Since I began working as a Gestalt therapist, therefore, I have never ceased trying to resolve this question in a satisfactory way, both at the theoretical level, where the essentials of the fundamental contribution of the book "Gestalt Therapy" (Perls et al, 1951, 1994, hereinafter PHG) would be respected, and at the level of the humanistic and existential values which I feel I have inherited.

In this article I want to focus on the therapist - rather than the client - and particularly on what he does, needs to do, or tries to do, and the manner in which he does it. The response which is often given - knowing that the tool of the therapist is the therapist himself, and that more than a knowing-how-to-do, we have need of a knowing-how-to-be - has the advantage of being very concise and evocative. But it also has the rather large flaw of avoiding reflection on this craft of ours, as if describing a craftsman were enough to describe his craft. In "being present", "open to what is", we do indeed "do" something and this way of doing is at the same time our way of being. The actions of the craftsman-therapist, what he wants to do - the pragmatic which is at the heart of our work - this is the idea that I am trying to elucidate here.

For this I distinguish three levels, or themes, for exploration. The first consists of my goal with my client: what exactly is this enterprise which is therapeutic work? What do I want to do with and for my client? The answer to this question implies both a definition of psychotherapy and, at the same time, the taking of a position in regard to its function in society.

The second theme, then, is to define the way to put this goal into action. How do I realise it so as to do what I said I wanted to do – with and for my client? What do I hear and observe, what engages my interest, how do I respond? If I am a Gestalt therapist, then responding to this question brings us back to a large extent towards proposing a definition of Gestalt therapy.

The third theme is the most difficult because, emerging from the practical, it is essentially lost to words, and operates largely by excluding verbalization: in this act, the attention is occupied with perceiving and with guiding the movement while conversely, at the moment we talk about the experience, the latter is already lost. Here we need therefore - if only in hindsight - to begin to describe with sufficient precision what I actually do with my client, and not just to say what I think I do. A real work of research should be undertaken on this issue, because we can consciously grasp the therapeutic work in its concrete reality only with an observation that is retrospective (or from outside the situation), that is, always indirect and provisional. As Merleau-Ponty put it in the preface of "Phenomenology of Perception", *"radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all"*.

Thus, even though one part of this chiaroscuro which is the actual practice may be at least partially clarified by the work of supervision, we must remember that this clarification is always dependent on the supervisor's insight and on his own beliefs regarding psychotherapy and Gestalt therapy. Supervision is an "indirect" illumination from a third party; and we cannot be satisfied with that to describe the situation brought to the session accurately (which has arisen away from the presence of the supervisor) nor the experiences of the client and therapist (which are by definition subjective). According to the view that I adopt here, supervision only gives us hints, whose relevance rests on the fact that they allow us - or not - to rediscover a clarity and a control that we lost in the flow of the therapeutic experience itself. To paraphrase the definition which Dewey gave of the experience, in bringing us out of the impasse in which we were entangled with our client, supervision has, as its major effect, "to connect a course of action to something that affects us".

These three questions are deeply related, even if the last one remains – deep down - the submerged part, little accessible to speech, on which the other two rest... However, it is reasonable to think that if our answers to the first two are clear and consistent, our actual practice will be the more likely to be congruent and effective. In this regard, let us note that the research on psychotherapy concludes that, in general, outcomes among the different approaches studied (Gestalt, TA, Systemics, Analysis ...) are quite similar; on the other hand, within each approach, it has been shown that there are significant differences in effectiveness between therapists (by around a factor of 10!). The "professionalism" of the therapist (his maturity and experience) is an element that certainly contributes to his effectiveness and could possibly be the object of some sort of measurement. But aside from the fact that a therapist may be more or less experienced, what actually produces these differences remains quite speculative. It can be supposed, however, that the theoretical and

clinical consistency of the position adopted, and the ability to draw a clear representation from it (and therefore to have something to hold on to in case of doubt or difficulty), promote the confidence of the therapist in himself and in his method, and are therefore important elements of an effective approach.

## I - FIRST THEME: WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

Do we want to bring our client fish, or to teach him how to fish? Do we want to help him solve the problem he has encountered, or to teach him how to solve the problems he encounters by himself?

By presenting the question in this way, I am well aware of being rather harsh. But let's call a spade a spade. What do we want to do with and for our clients? Does it consist simply of being present for them? But what are we doing when we are "present"? What does being "present" mean?

If we have some uncertainty, it may seem logical and respectful to ask our clients directly what they want. Generally their answer is simple: a solution. A solution to their discomfort, their suffering, their problems. But then, if we listen to them, we subscribe directly to the quest to remove their symptoms, a perspective which we, as process oriented gestalt therapists, are reluctant to embrace. It is, therefore, up to us to find our own answer to this question: "What goal for and with our client?"

What are we going to do? If our task is not (or not only) to solve the problem presented by the client, what is it that we can bring to him? And to what are we going to apply ourselves? To the symptoms which he is carrying, and with which he arrives at our appointments? Do we become interested in the fish or in the – at times awkward – manner in which he catches fish? What is taking place in his manner of coming into contact and of dealing with the raw data of the situation, of collecting them, of organizing them, of giving them meaning?

If - as Perls and Goodman assert – awareness, or, more precisely, "becoming aware", "becoming conscious", that is, the formation of a new gestalt which is sufficiently clear and illuminating, is the solution to the problem the client has encountered – to all problems, in fact – then what does our work consist of?

**My current hypothesis is the following: we do not only help our clients to become aware at the heart of the problematic situation that they bring, but more deeply and more generally, we teach them how to tread for themselves the path of "becoming aware".**

Furthermore, Perls and Goodman state this quite explicitly when they talk about Gestalt therapy as a therapy of concentration (PHG - p244-246) and when, in relation to the neurotic person, they argue that *"if he [the client] learns a technique of awareness, to follow up, to keep in contact with the shifting situation, so the interest, excitement, and growth continue, he is no longer neurotic, no matter whether his problems are inner or outer."*

## THE PROCESS OF BECOMING AWARE – A MODEL IN FOUR PHASES

Let us consider carefully the way in which becoming aware of a new solution to a given problematic situation arises. In other words, let us observe the way in which the process of awareness is activated. Becoming aware has its own logic,

barely touched on in the PHG, but described in a striking way by Depraz, Varela and Vermersch in a book originally largely written in French but first published in English in 2003 under the title "On Becoming Aware. A Pragmatics of Experiencing." This logic does not really match the sequence of contact described by the founders of Gestalt. Indeed the latter, relying primarily on the sequence of an experience of contact, deals with the relationship to the environment, but does not deepen the analysis of the very process of becoming aware by the subject. Moreover, this deepening is rather difficult because it acts so as to cause the entry of consciousness into the non-thinking substrata of lived experience. Without going into the methodology of these authors, we can say right away that "becoming aware" follows its own rules, its own "unfolding", which come for the most part from the use a person makes of his capacity for attention.

It starts with (A) a phase of suspending normal consciousness, that is, the mode in which attention is directed towards the external and problematic object given by the situation. A break, then, in the construction which the intentionality of consciousness ceaselessly carries out. This is often initiated by a shock or a surprise, but can also come from a deliberate holding back, a suspension. This is followed (B) by turning the attention to the internal sensation in the body itself, a shift that follows the initial suspension. The beginning of a return to the self, then, of a redirecting which normally leads to (C) a phase of welcoming, where consciousness lets itself be influenced by the sensory data. Let us note that during these phases, as with the following one, the suspension of the natural attitude continues to be effective, otherwise the process of becoming aware cannot be achieved. The attention is directed here – in the form of waiting, with its two aspects of activity and passivity - towards a possible revelation. This phase is often accompanied or prolonged by a feeling of emptiness: the meaning-making machine has stopped, leaving us in a no man's land, a place without form which can be very uncomfortable, a kind of temporary stupor before which the phase of forming the gestalt cannot begin.

This phase of formation (D) can also be described in phenomenological terms as the filling up of the attentional state. It often comes with it, and is sometimes linked with comings and goings between outer and inner – in a kind of oscillation of the attention between the object and its echo in us – to the rhythm of intensive work using imaginative variation. It is during this phase that different hypotheses about the pre-gestalt state can be tested, and that what appears takes shape on a pathic and aesthetic level, as intuitive evidence.

The process of becoming aware may be incomplete and slow, or strong and rapid. In most cases it will be need to be repeated - and often! - before becoming stable, owned, and assimilated.

Four verbs seem to me to summarize this sequence of becoming aware, and the use of attention as I have just described it: **to suspend, to redirect, to welcome and to imagine**. These are, it seems to me, as much paths which we can adopt to guide or support the use of attention by our client, as they are benchmarks in the conduct of our work as therapists.

## II – SECOND THEME: HOW DO WE ACHIEVE THIS?

How can we go about this? What are we going to focus on and what will be our working material? How do we help our client to "learn to learn" from the situations that life confronts him with - that is, to learn to become more aware? Again we are not interested in the fish but in the fishing. But in order to fish, it's necessary to spot the fish and to know its habits. We are going to get interested in fish with the ultimate goal of learning how to fish, but without getting infatuated by the fish themselves. What do we have in a session that really belongs to the actual situation of the encounter? It is precisely the way in which the encounter develops, that is - in orthodox gestalt language and perspective which I will return to later – all the moments of "contact" that form the material of the session. It is here that, by establishing adequate conditions of safety, we will be able to organise and deal with "in vivo" emergencies, and, through resolving them, re-teach "becoming aware" to our clients. The fish are, for us, all these small (or large) distortions of "contact" that punctuate the session. Learning to fish is therefore going to consist of heightening awareness of these impasses or deviations of contact which regularly get played out and replayed, and which come from the fact that we (client and/or therapist) "*can be 'out of contact' with, or oblivious/desensitized to, certain parts of the environment*" (Wheeler, p112).

### AN ILLUSTRATION

When, for example, I point out to my patient her looking sideways, her half-closed eyes, and the feeling that I have of sensing some anxiety in her, I am pulling up a fish. On her side, she is probably a little surprised, arrested in her posture or speaking that were not so far out of the ordinary. Her attention changes. She begins to take in the contact with the situation a little differently. I have helped to create a suspension. And when I continue by asking what, on her side, she is living and perceiving, I am supporting the redirecting of her attention towards her physical and emotional experience. It will then be necessary for me to help her stay in contact with this new and perhaps uncomfortable situation which I have brought about by my comments. I have to support my client in order for us to be able to accommodate and unpack the experience of anxiety which shows up at this very moment. And then, with the help of imaginative variation, she will probably compare this experience with others and end up by finding its meaning. In this process I could, if necessary, be active and support her by suggesting possible links from my own imagination. We could even together establish links with other shared moments, from other sessions. In this investigation into the vagaries of our cooperation (the sidelong glance, the anxiety), I supported in sequence the four phases of becoming aware: suspension of normal functioning, redirecting of attention, welcoming sensation, and imaginative variation. The filling up of the attentional state (another name for the formation of the gestalt) has either been convincing for my client or not, resulted in an insight or not, and thus in a resolution of the problem or not. In every case, we have made a step towards our goal.

At this point in my presentation, it becomes necessary to clarify further the way I have performed these actions, in particular the intention that directs me in these moments of investigation. In this fictitious (but only just) example what helps to contain the anxiety is the cooperative framework I strive to build through the very same movement of real involvement with which I myself live the situation. This framework gets built with all the clues or pledges of sincerity and of my interest in her that I produce towards my client. So we manage, in spite of (and thanks to) the anxiety or feeling of ambient suspicion, to work towards becoming aware of the way we have of being together.

Let us return to what this example contains. Our work has developed along at least three lines. (1) We have explored the sequence of "becoming aware" in relation to a concrete and shared situation, (2) we did this together, and, if we did it well, (3) we have started - or continued - to deconstruct the image of the other, the close one, as potentially dangerous.

Let us look at this in detail:

### **(1) Learning the sequence of becoming aware:**

The first point is the process of going through the sequence of becoming aware, which ended with a more or less strong and clear insight. I suggest that this process allows my client to strengthen her confidence in her ability to face the unknown in a particular situation.

### **(2) Modelling through the behaviour of the therapist:**

This process – which is what my client did - was accompanied by my own involvement, created by my curiosity and my own ability to confront the unknown. By agreeing to open up to that which can generate anxiety – for me included, and in my relationship with my client: will she respond with hostility or by closing up? - I am working with the hypothesis that I am implicitly modelling. For this, it is necessary and sufficient – it seems to me - to remain consistent, that is, to get involved, to share a still unknown aspect of a situation in order to find a meaning, this in being initially intrigued and affected by it and in going through each of the phases in my own way. And this is the second point: the therapist as an example, his own ability to face the unexpected in the relationship. In saying this I am not suggesting that we should have an explicit goal of being a model for our clients. This modelling always being in operation, and usually without our knowledge, our consistency in this case – that is, the ability to engage with the process of becoming aware – is connected rather to our ethics in relation to the client.

### **(3) Developing a sense of self through cooperative action:**

The third point - and I imagine that this is the central point of therapy - is that we worked together: there was co-operation and, through that, we overcame the anxiety. Let us remember that, for Mead first, and later for researchers in

developmental psychology and followers of social constructivism, it is basically through cooperative activities that the sense of the self is developed, particularly by incorporating the response of others. Any sufficiently strong and nourishing cooperative activity will therefore enrich the person's representation of the social world, increase his cooperative skills, and possibly restore a partly failing sense of self.

## COOPERATION - RATHER THAN CONTACT

Let us observe first of all that the therapeutic situation is right from the start placed under the auspices of cooperation. The client comes for a listening ear and for support, while, for his part, the therapist offers a welcome, and shares his expertise as observer. The form of this cooperation is of course, highly variable, as is the quality of the contact established between the two players on the therapeutic stage. And this cooperation - if it develops - will bear fruit, that is, lead to insights and to changes of which, before they occur, we have no idea of the content: we do not have a priori any specific fish in mind.

Next let us note that, in general, we are not able to control the completion of the sequence of becoming aware by the client, nor the fact that we are or are not a supportive model for him. However, what inherently belongs to us is the building of a stable attitude of cooperation. Thus, ideally, we should always be able to end up being experienced by our clients as a reliable and caring partner. This effectively means that we have, for example, to have the ability truly to acknowledge our mistakes when we make them and to remain in an attitude of friendly and non-judgmental openness.

To the question "how do we act with our clients?" I respond in this way: "by seeking to develop with each one a caring cooperation." Of course, cooperation requires two people, but it depends on us, the therapists, to position ourselves and to offer it - actively or not - to our clients. Moreover, if we accept that being together for the duration of a session is a form of more or less happy and/or fluent cooperation, it is clear that, on the practical level, we can substitute the observation of our cooperation to that of the distortions of contact... With the term "cooperation", even more than with that of "contact", it is clear that these distortions - if any - are the result of a co-construction ...

Let us return to the question that opened our reflection on the second theme, "What is it that we do to help our clients to use their awareness more skilfully?" **My current answer - and this is essentially what, for me, being a Gestalt therapist is - is constantly and patiently to establish the conditions for an intense and open cooperation on the occasion of a ceaseless and joint investigation of the very hazards of this cooperation.**

## IN CONCLUSION

This article was born out of a supervision session. During its course, questioning and sharing our perspectives, my young colleagues and I have once

again redefined what psychotherapy and Gestalt therapy are. Re-examining and restating their goal with their clients, as well as their method for doing so, helped to expose and dispel a whole range of anxieties that were causing my colleagues a lot of trouble. It also helped them, in the same movement, to regain their hold in a number of difficult therapeutic relationships. It was clear that problematic elements of their personal lives were feeding a strong sense of illegitimacy, putting them in great trouble with certain clients, sometimes to the point of making them consider stopping all or part of their professional activities. And, in fact, if we accept too quickly and too indiscriminately the assimilation of our work life with who we are as a person, or with our presence in the session, our personal problems are likely to invade the professional field in a sometimes very disabling way. For even if we can say with some justification that the tool of therapy is the person of the therapist, it remains true that the craft should not be confused with the craftsman and that the latter has a goal and an attitude which are the basic guides of his work.

Thus each of us must create these landmarks and know what he wants to achieve with and for his clients. This is all the more essential because each client affects us in unique and unexpected ways, and requires renewed and specific theoretical and clinical thinking. We cannot welcome the unknown and make ourselves available to it without compass or sextant. Seamanship is not about calming the sea or abolishing oceanic distances, nor, even less, going down with one's passengers, but to know how to keep on course, to observe the elements, and to make use of them. By emphasizing the need for landmarks by means of which we can understand what we are doing, I am not saying that we know or should always know what to do with each client. Therapy, in my view, is definitely a collaborative work, which means, for example, that when I am reluctant and restrained by fear with my client in my need to express what we are living together in the session - and this happens almost inevitably - I have to acknowledge that I have to travel my half of the road and to risk myself also - and often first - in the unknown of the relationship. It is actually these situations - these "moments of truth" - that testify to the realness of my commitment.

We are indeed doing something with our clients! Therapy is above all pragmatic. It seems to me crucial not to forget this, but rather to transmit it and continue to refine it. Let this sharing contribute to this goal!

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