

"I despise everything which merely instructs me without immediately increasing or immediately enlivening my activity."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Nietzsche

(date)

Gestalt Therapy and Phenomenology: The Intersecting of Parallel Lines¹

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George: is lonely and chronically sad. He lives with a close friend. He is in his late 60's. George is always somewhat fearful. He sings in a famous chorus and gets anxious when he sings solo, although he has a beautiful voice. He says he is afraid of change.

Introduction:

Gestalt therapy is a psychotherapy that attends to the whole, embodied, experiences of suffering patients. Our clinical work is oriented toward a person's distress understood in terms of field-emergence, gestalt process, contacting, creativity, relationality, aesthetic criterion and so on. (Perls et al. 1951, Francesetti, D, Gecele, G, Roubal, J., 2013) We attend to contacting, emergent at the contact-boundary of the organism / environment field, which is neither empirically measurable, map-able, nor quantifiable. (Perls et al., 1951) In other words, we pay attention to the *phenomenon* of being human, "that which appears or is seen," (Webster Online Dictionary). Put in terms of psychotherapy, we pay attention to what develops and appears from within the therapy process and, indeed our attention is itself intrinsic in the process itself. Our approach to psychotherapy is phenomenological, the inquiry into phenomena in our own particular way.

Whether we know it or not, we gestalt therapists who focus on contacting and the structure of experience of the figure / ground

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process practice a form of clinical phenomenology. This chapter begins by laying out the parallel and crossing lines of gestalt therapy and phenomenological philosophy in some detail, then turns to actual clinical cases to show how this is relevant to our work

Of course, crossing of parallel lines violates basic rules of Euclidian geometry.² This paradox is actually a metaphor that shapes this chapter. Various parallels between gestalt therapy and phenomenology such as bracketing and intentionality have inspired our theory / practice (Mann, McC (Yontef, Crocker, Brownell, Bloom, McC, MSL) The limitations of phenomenology has also been noted (Mann, C

I will take this inspiration from these parallels further and by drawing on different concepts from phenomenology, I will coax parallel lines to cross. Gestalt therapy and phenomenology can overlap in terms of the “attitudes,” “reductions,” and the “lived-world” or “lifeworld,” specialized terms which I will explain. I will hone in on critical aspects of gestalt therapy theory and practice in order to sharpen their effectiveness in terms of those areas where the lines of gestalt therapy and phenomenology are parallel – and intersect. These intersections allow me to reformulate the organism / environment field in a more phenomenological way, which more fully accounts for our actual clinical practice. From this new perspective, our attention to what is emergent of the contact-boundary sharpens and widens. Contacting itself within the clinical situation – the therapist-patient relationship—appears in a new light.

By “linking” these parallel lines, gestalt therapy and phenomenology will as if breathe the same air. In this shared atmosphere, new and useful ways to apply our theory to our clinical practice become apparent. I will show this with the concrete clinical example of George, who made his appearance above.

For the most part, Edmund Husserl (1859 - 1938) structures my discussion since much of what followed in phenomenology developed from his work and many of the parallels noted by gestalt therapists have been with his ideas. Husserl is universally acknowledged as the philosopher responsible for the phenomenological movement even though his own work began as a continuation of his Franz Brentano’s (1838 - 1917). Husserl was a

²Parallel lines do cross in hyperbolic geometry, but for the purposes of this paper, such a detail need not be considered.

systematic thinker, like Aristotle, but³ like the latter, he was not a system builder. That is, he was a systematically open-ended thinker. He constantly rethought his ideas. It is important to remember that he was first a mathematician and continued to think along the lines of a mathematician who repeatedly reviewed difficult problems. Some of his work contains inconsistencies. "Philosophers are always beginners." (Hu) He developed not one, but several "phenomenologies" – such as static (i.e.. descriptive or constitutive, concerning consciousness) and genetic (concerning the experience of time). (Hu) His philosophy appears in works published during his life, those published posthumously, and in the few remaining to be published but still studied by scholars. Some inconsistencies or differences within his ideas opened gaps in his philosophy that provided opportunities for creative Husserl scholarship. Every emphatic claim about him, even those perhaps made below, ought to be held as lightly as possible as we consider them within the totality of this chapter. To write of Husserl, then, is to write of a particular and not of a definitive Husserl or, indeed, of phenomenology as if it were a fixed philosophical discipline. This is an important caveat.

What goes without saying must be said. We are psychotherapists, not philosophers. This distinction matters. The philosophical project of phenomenology is to use its method in order to describe *and* study (-ology) first person experience as such *in a particular way*. (Husserl, Carman, Zahavi). As gestalt therapists, we approach the phenomena of each clinical situation not by studying or analyzing them, but by paying attention to them *in our own* particular way. That is, we actively engage with the experience as concrete and current actualities of a suffering person. We never step away from our living practical engagement with the world. (Crocker). (Carman, Gurwitsch, etc) Yet both phenomenology as a philosophy and gestalt therapy as a psychotherapy have one essential common denominator. They both are concerned with first person experience – the very process of personal experiencing itself. This is not a trivial commonality.

Of course, philosophy is not imposed as an extrinsic doctrine to the therapy itself, but it may be an aspect of the support each of us needs to maintain our equilibrium during the therapy itself. As

³ Unlike such philosophers as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831)

⁴ To this extent, our phenomenological approach engages problems of human existence and therefore is an existential phenomenology

presented here, phenomenological philosophy is part of the scaffolding of our clinical method. What follows, then, is a discussion of gestalt psychotherapy, informed by insights from a companion discipline, phenomenological philosophy.

Part One: *Two beginnings: The “here and the now.”*

Gestalt therapy has always been closely identified with the words “here and now.” With them Fritz Perls introduced what he called the “Gestalt outlook --- the original, undistorted natural approach to life, to thinking, acting, feeling.” (Perls et al, 1951) In *Gestalt Therapy, Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, by Fritz Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, (hereinafter referred to as PHG, the book that introduced gestalt therapy itself in 1951, the reader is directed to enter this particular attitude toward the world:

Try for a few minutes to make up a sentence stating what you are at this moment aware of. Begin each sentence with the words ‘now’ or ‘at this moment’ or ‘here and now.’ PHG, p. 31

This leads to a way of being open to experience itself now free of what Fritz Perls referred to as “about-isms,” “should-isms” and other opinions that obscure a clear and direct experience of “what is.” (PHG, p.)

This outlook, or approach, (Perls, F. 1973,) changes the simple commonplace chit-chat of everyday encounters in which the therapist and the patient negotiate the mundane mechanics of the start of the hour into a different kind of experience, which is the gestalt therapy experience proper itself. A gestalt therapy session, then, is within this changed “outlook” or “attitude” on experience changed from its original perspective, now cleared of pre-conceptions, or, at least with those pre-conceptions identified and consequently altered.

With that nearly trivial yet deceptively radical phrase⁵, “here and now,” Perls flips from a chit-chat attitude to a different way in which a person now views the immediate world of the therapy milieu itself. In an instant, assumptions and expectations about “here” are changed; notions of what is “now” are changed. The room

⁵ That is, if it is taken seriously and not as a cliché. When the phrase became gestalt therapy’s calling card, it lost the power of its original intention.

defined by 4 walls, a ceiling and a floor becomes an as if new “place.” A person is no longer at *this* street address and no longer in an hour measured by *that* clock. This “now” of the gestalt attitude is an “experiential now.” It is a “passage,” not the “now” of colloquial language. This “here” is what is presented in a flowing now, transformed into a stream of experience along the “awareness-consciousness continuum.” (Bloom, 2017) The office is no longer a Cartesian box, the therapy hour no longer the time ticked-off in minutes by the hands of a Cartesian clock. This now-and-here, this now-and-here-with-the-therapist, is the situation of therapy set off from the ordinary or mundane and which has its own kind of sounds and light and sense –its own aesthetic of contacting. (Bloom, Spagnuolo-Lobb, Francesetti) This is the aesthetic of the sensed, felt, relational atmosphere as the very plenum, the space of all space, of a gestalt psychotherapy session.

Yet, the actual or natural world in which the patient lives, breathes, functions, loves, and suffers has not been left behind. But the commonplace notions of that world are set aside, parenthesized, bracketed – not excluded -- but importantly engaged within this new gestalt attitude. This new attitude is a modification of phenomenology’s “natural attitude,” as I will describe, below.

It is actually a misinterpretation of how gestalt therapy employs bracketing to assume that the bracket keeps the everyday world out of the therapy process and its appearance an “intrusion” on the work. (e.g., Mann, 2010) The organism/environment field, central to gestalt therapy, is indivisible. The very assumptions that are bracketed – or marked -- are included in the contacting process, but pay attention to within this new, *gestalt attitude*. This has implications I will address below.

Gestalt therapy begins simply, as simply as the gesture of taking a moment to catch one’s breath. A person crosses from one plane to another, from that of everyday natural life to that of special orientation of the therapy session and in that second plane of the *gestalt therapy attitude*, a person and the therapist meet at the contact-boundary. The ordinary and commonplace become a field of possibilities in which therapist and patient are co-engaged at the contact-boundary in the process of contacting. This world seen within a gestalt therapy attitude is one ripe with the potential clarity of extending moments of novelty and discovery – and for the surprise and wonder implicit in the process of contacting.

In this sense, whether they know it or not, all gestalt therapists practice some form of phenomenological psychotherapy. One way or

another, it starts this way by entering of the *gestalt attitude* through the *gestalt therapy epoché*, a parallel, different, approach to Husserl's. I will explain.

Husserl's Phenomenology: epoché, bracketing, reduction

If gestalt therapy proper begins at this moment attention is directed away from the commonplace and to the experience of the phenomenal "here and now," then very simply and even more roughly, this also the beginning of another parallel discipline.

Consider if following Fritz Perls's instruction to attend to the here and now, we

.. begin our considerations with how human beings naturally live... in a *natural^b attitude*. I am conscious of a world spread out in space, endlessly becoming in time. [In]every moment of waking consciousness, I find myself in relation to one and the same world though it is constantly changing... It is continuously on hand for me." *Ideas I* (Husserl, 1913, p. *emphasis added*)

This is the starting point of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which he begins with his famous *epoché*. It is crucial to note that Husserl also begins with what he calls the "world" or "natural world." (Hu, 1913)

The epoché is an act that initiates bracketing and the *reduction* of this natural attitude to the *phenomenological attitude*. Each reduction is a turn away experience and then a return to it with a new point of view or attitude. "Reduction" is derived from the Latin, "*reducere*, to return."

The entire world posited in the *natural attitude*, the world actually found from the outset in experience, taken up perfectly in a "theory-free" way as it is actually experienced and clearly manifests itself in an experiential context, counts for us now is nothing. It is to be bracketed, untested but also uncontested.⁷ Husserl, 1913 *Ideas I* p. 56 (*emphasis added*)

⁷⁷ It is misunderstanding to think that Husserl's method ever splits the phenomenal from the material or physical world. To be conscious is to be conscious of some *thing*. To perceive is to perceive some *thing*.

The beliefs laden contents of *natural attitude*, then, of bracketed, “put out of action.” (Hua) We are now in what Husserl refers to as the “phenomenological attitude” within which we have adopted a phenomenological point of view. By bracketing, the natural attitude has been stripped off or “cleansed” (HU) of opinions, theories, assumptions and beliefs about the world. Likewise, perceptions and somatic experiences are consequently stripped off of judgments and beliefs about them. The embodied world of the senses and perception, kinesthetic and kinetic resonances are here, of course, but importantly separated from presumptions about them. The body-as-object is now the body-as-lived. The phenomenological attitude “is kept pure of all interest in the “objective world...” Ph Psy.(HUA, p.146) Yet it remains in the world. This latter point is important since many mistakenly think that Husserl’s method annihilates the concrete actual natural world.

There now follow two moves. The first is characteristic of “descriptive phenomenology.” Free from interest in the objective world, the “ego” or “I” can reflectively observe and describe what remains as concrete contents of consciousness. From within this *phenomenological attitude*, the phenomenologist makes an additional move and turns away from the particulars of what is observed and by the technique of “imaginative variation,” (Husserl, 1913) contemplates ideal or pure forms derived from what had been described. This is the *eidetic attitude*. The phenomenologist freely contemplates various pure “possible matters of givenness” in order for their essential *universal* structures to emerge. Pure consciousness is thus explored and analyzed -- yet, importantly -- in the manner it is correlated to its objects. Within this attitude, the phenomenologist studies the transcendental ego, intentionalities, essences and so on. These are his reductions, his reflections back to bracketed experience from within different attitudes. This is obviously a compression of one version of Husserl’s approach.

Gestalt therapy and Husserl’s Phenomenology: reduction and induction

There are parallels here with the “gestalt approach”; obviously, these parallel lines do not touch. Yet, they are so close they could be said to brush against each other. Psychology, a *science*, studied human behavior and the particular human psyche in the objective world. Time and again, Husserl underscored that as a *philosophy*, phenomenology was concerned with pure and universal forms of consciousness. Importantly, for Husserl these forms of pure

consciousness were not disconnected from objective world. Nevertheless, we gestalt therapists clearly have an importantly different focus. We practice psychotherapy. We deal with contacting - concrete actualities of our patients as experienced activities in the world, and not at all the ideal forms of pure consciousness.

Let me take this even further. By entering our *gestalt attitude*, we do not actually suspend the everyday world or even the bracketed commonplace aspects of that world itself, containing our beliefs, assumptions and pre-judgments, but *include* them within our “new way” of seeing. While we enter the temporal passage of contacting as the phenomenal time of the therapy session, we are still within the concrete actuality of the therapy hour⁸.

The *gestalt therapy attitude* parenthesizes, brackets, but does not, cannot, ignore or exclude everyday life. Instead of pure exploring experience “cleansed” of the assumptions that are part of the ordinary world while bracketed in our particular way, these assumptions are present, within the gestalt attitude, which is a “modified natural attitude.” (Bloom) These assumptions are sometimes implicated in a person’s suffering. Within the gestalt attitude, they become part of the contacting process and experienced differently. These are not only assumptions, or understandings or fixed patterns or gestalts. They are embodied or postural habits. They are styles of movement. The brackets of the *gestalt epoché* are like the parentheses in a mathematical equation that do not take that which they bracket out of play, but organize them for new functions within equation itself. Our clinical method, then, creates an opening to the structure of a person’s embodied actual, engaged, and practical experiences in such a particular way that fixed gestalts disrupting the flow of experience and causing a person’s distress may emerge or become apparent – and resolved.

In short, by bracketing the everyday and commonplace, we as if mark them for consideration in a new way. The mundane and fixed attitudes are not left behind and then returned to as in the phenomenological reduction, but are included as part of the emerging figure. Rather, by what is better called the *gestalt therapy induction*⁹, not reduction, a “leading *into*” rather than a “returning to,”

⁸ A clear sense that the session will begin and end at a time-certain is part of the concrete structure that supports the therapy itself.

⁹ Martin Heidegger was Husserl’s most important student. In an early criticism of his mentor, he argued that since it is impossible to separate oneself from the word, bracketing actually bracketed nothing at all. The reduction as a “return” to

our attention opens to the contact-boundary of the wide horizon of the organism/environment field and the possibilities of the emerging figures of contacting. New figures can then emerge with renewed clarity and fluidity as possibilities spread out and draw forward from a past to a future. Dramatically, the gestalt therapy epoché excludes nothing from the gestalt attitude. Patient and therapist are co-participants, as well. Fritz Perl's famous instruction to turn attention to the "here and now" as if conjures up the gestalt attitude as a different orientation to what is --- was, and will be. In this way, gestalt therapy is a therapy of the ordinary (From, personal communication) transformed into the extraordinary. This ordinary is turned extraordinary by a process that *leads to* the structure of experience in contacting, the gestalt therapy induction.¹⁰

Husserl's Phenomenology: the lifeworld:

Although not generally paid attention to by gestalt therapy, Husserl was also concerned with embodiment, empathy, intersubjectivity, time, and history. He took up and developed a concept from the German *life-philosophy* of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 -- 1911), the *Lebenswelt*, the lifeworld. I will draw into this into my discussion of intersecting parallel lines.

As Husserl describes it¹¹,

The lifeworld is the natural world – in the attitude of natural life we are living functioning subjects together in an open circle of other functioning subjects. Everything Objective about the lifeworld is subjective givenness, our possession, mine, the

what remains after bracketing is meaningless since one cannot return to what one never left. In his unpublished draft for Husserl's 1927 *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry, he proposed that rather than a "reduction," the phenomenologist exercises an "in-duction." Then the phenomenologist remains close to experience and in-the-world. The "induction" is a radical opening to what already is and, further to "immanent possibilities." (Sheehan p,1,)

¹⁰ Whereas, at least insofar as Husserlian phenomenology is concerned, in phenomenology is *selbstverständlich* (self-understandable) is rendered *verständlich* (understandable). Gestalt therapy's understanding is emergent of contacting and, as such, implicitly has the halo of the extraordinary surrounding it.

other's, and everyone's together. ... [W]hat is lived is lived experience of the surrounding world, and that hold also for what is seen and thought, etc. (Husserl 1913 Ideas IIp. P.385

The lifeworld is the actuality of life, the "world in which we are already living." (Hu in Companion, p. 95.) It is the "founding" pre-given and given world, which constitutes the absolute horizon or background of a person's lived-experience. Sometimes he refers to it as the world that is left behind after *epoché*. His student Aron Gurwitsch (1901 – 1973) writes that it is

the universal scene of our life. The soil, so to speak, upon which all human activities, productions and creations take place, the world of common experience., G 35... our cultural world, which is our lifeworld, a world apperceived, [perceived and assimilated] apprehended, and interpreted in a specific way. G 52

It consists of history, culture, society and so on -- and all the concrete -- including natural -- things upon which life depends and which structure our sociality, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. (HUA, Steinbock, etc)

Husserl refers to the lifeworld as the totality of our subjective world and the all-encompassing we-world, stretching backwards in time to our shared culture and history, laterally as our societies, and forward in our experiences of the future. It includes the natural world as well. It is the sphere of humanness.

Lifeworld and attitude

As seen above, the natural and phenomenological attitudes are important to the gestalt and phenomenological approaches. There are other important attitudes, which, I propose, may illuminate the theory / practice of gestalt therapy.

"Attitudes" are ways our interests are organized in our particular approaches to the lifeworld. (Luft,, HUA Ideas II. Luft)

We constantly find ourselves as persons living in the personal world, [of the lifeworld] and so do the natural scientists, even in the very activity of natural science" it is just that their focus is directed exclusively to physical or zoological nature.

Hu I II 301 n 1

The sciences, including empirical psychology and non-experiential psychotherapy are of the lifeworld, yet their interests have a particular organization. They are aspects of the “naturalistic attitude.” (Hu, 2000, 190 (*emphasis added*)) and this actually is a limited point of view.

Even the most subtle theory in natural science does not touch the lifeworld because the scientist follows a theoretical path *away from the actuality of life*, leaving it behind right at the beginning, and only reverting back to it in the form of technology. (Husserl, 2000, p.384 *emphasis added*)

This is the attitude within which the lifeworld is “measured” “mathematized” and “thematized.” This is also known as the “scientific attitude.”

Husserl proposed other attitudes from which we “see” or organize our interest in the world. They are “vocational attitudes.” For example, accountants view the lifeworld from with the “accountant attitude”, carpenters view the lifeworld in the carpenter’s attitude Psychologists have the “psychological attitude.” (HUA Ideas II, PsyPh Crisis, Luft). Neuroscientists would have the neuroscientific attitude. Writers of chapters for books have a writer attitude and so on.

These are all “paths away from the actuality of life” to study them in particular ways. This is necessary. Their danger is in losing that very actuality of the lifeworld. Husserl proposed another attitude, the “personalistic attitude” as the approach that remains close to this actuality. In this attitude, we view the lifeworld from *within it*, from within our very own subjectivity. This is “the attitude we are always in when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with one another.” (Hu, 2000, 192) We are persons who see others as persons and our self as a person among persons, selves among selves.

The gestalt therapy attitude is a personalistic attitude par excellence.¹² It is within the gestalt attitude as a personalistic attitude that we, *therapist and patient*, organize our interests as persons with heightened attention to the contact-boundary – a phenomenal

¹² It is by no means the only psychotherapy within the personalistic attitude. Gestalt therapy exceptionalism is loathsome.

location impossible to measure. This contact-boundary is where we are open to the developing figure/ground process, experienceable as emergent of the otherwise unnoticed “actuality of life.” This is a process of the organism/environment field

Expanding gestalt therapy at the crossing Environment as lifeworld

Yet is “environment” of the organism/environment field sufficient home this actuality of life, of what is to be a whole person oriented within the personalistic?? Or is it a better descriptor for the naturalistic attitude?

Each of us is a biological organism sustained by the resources of our environment. Air, food, shelter. The hard, actual ground supports our stride from here to there and allows us to maintain our balance against gravity. It is the climate – hot, cold, dry, wet. It is the natural surround that sustains all living species. The environment in this regard is inextricably linked to the survival of organisms. While this is an environment common to human others, it is nevertheless uniquely each of ours. We cannot taste the food in another’s mouth or nourished by what another eat or rested by another’s sleep. We bite and chew.(Perls, 194) We aggress the environment and destroy in order order to meet our particular biological and material needs¹³.As Perls and Goodman put it, we are animals “freely roaming in the environment” (PHG)

Obviously, this is not all we are. We human beings are affected by gravity and immutable hard facts of the material world. There is more. There is the human other: we love and are loved, touch and are touched, hate and are hated. We are warmed by the sun and also weep at the beauty of a sunset. We are born into families and live in societies. We are organisms and also human persons in communities, sharing histories, cultures, memories, dreams, hopes, and plans for the future. Insofar as gestalt therapy has been concerned, the term “environment” has been sufficient to describe thisworld But does the term that describes the milieu of the hungry animal satisfying individual needs the same as persons-in-relationship or, contacting itself in its most enchanting and fulfilling sense? By crossing another line of phenomenology with gestalt therapy, I will suggest an alternative – the environment as lifeworld.

¹³ We also cooperate in finding food, shelter and so on for one another.

The lifeworld is subjective and at the same time is the objective, actual world of living where persons know persons, empathically, relationally, and within communities. We approach each person from a felt sense of presence as co-dwellers of the same human world, not only as animals sharing a physical environment.

We are organisms functioning within the environmental conditions that shapes and sustain life. We are *living beings* among *material things*. Contacting is of the organism / environment field. Yet human beings are more than this. We are sensing animals-thinking persons. (Bloom) Human beings as persons live and experience one another in the lifeworld, organized and co-constructed in contacting, which has an historical, social, and inter-personal fabric. The lifeworld includes whatever else is meant by "environment." The environment as lifeworld¹⁴ is where we dwell as persons, not only survive as organisms. Gestalt therapy, then, is a psychotherapy of the *organism/environment-lifeworld field*. By transposing the organism / environment field into a phenomenological key, as we practice within the personalistic gestalt attitude gestalt therapy is vaccinated against any possibility of biological or physicalist reductionism.

But this does not mean that as clinical phenomenologists we are at sea in an ocean of untethered phenomena. The phenomenal figures emerging forth from the contact-boundary of the lifeworld are those of actual living (Hu). Contacting is engaging with the world. Contacting is contacting some -thing. As animal organisms we contact that with supports our life – the air we breathe, the nutrients that nourish us. Sentient and awareness, we contact our surroundings; we are sensorically and kinesthetically alert to our situation. (Robine) And as sapient, knowing persons, we are present as the whole contacting process. (Bloom)

Yet each of us is an experiencing "subject" in a phenomenal world that cannot be simply organized as "subject" and "object. (eg Merleau-Ponty) And we implicated in the experience of the other. These phenomenal qualities of the contact-boundary. All of this has implications for gestalt therapy and phenomenological research, addressed elsewhere in this volume.

Staying within the Husserlian frame of this chapter, the observers' or researchers' need to be sensitive to the difference between "nature," which is customarily ensnared by the themes and presumptions of the scientists' "naturalistic attitude," and the life-world where life is actually lived. That is, scientists need to recognize that their work in their "scientific attitude" is itself founded on the lifeworld (Hu). Their interest, their attitude, needs to be organized in such a way as to gain ever more precise understanding of life as it is actually lived rather than continuing the development of their experience-distant abstractions. (Hu, Crisis, Ideas II, Ph of Psychology) To the extent that modern science embraces "falsification," (Popper) and even declares itself "post-positivist," (x) it already shows evidence of this. Husserl's repeated support for the development of phenomenological psychology supports the serious scientific study of human experience. This chapter's focus is on gestalt therapy as a phenomenological psychotherapy practice that attends to emerging figures of contact and their qualities in the material, actual, world.

At the intersections with phenomenology I described, gestalt therapy's lens has a new optics.

The phenomenological world is ...the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those others...

Merleau-Ponty, (1908 –1961)PoP xxxiv

Part II: Clinical Application and Discussion

Let me briefly summarize the gestalt phenomenological approach presented above.

A clinical hour begins as the therapist and patient greet one another, perhaps comment about the day, or address practical concerns relating to the session. This is average everydayness of ordinary life, unavoidable, inevitable, and necessary.

The gestalt therapy session proper begins:

1. The *gestalt epoché*: bracketing

The everyday world is bracketed whether introduced by glance, silence, or the therapist's comment/question, these everyday interactions stop and their attention turns to the moment.

This is the *gestalt attitude*, a personalistic attitude
 The office as everyday place becomes the phenomenal
 open experiential "terrain" of the lifeworld.

2. *Gestalt epoché*: gestalt induction

By experiment, suggestion, dialogue and so on attention is directed to lived-experience --the contact-boundary and therefore the "extraordinary" process of the sequence of contacting of the organism/environment-lifeworld field. This is the core of gestalt therapy.

George, the muffled song of terror

A friend of his with whom I had been working referred George to me. He is in his late 60's. George was lonely and chronically sad. He lives with a friend who once was a romantic partner many years ago. George is always somewhat fearful. He is a classical singer in a famous chorus. He gets frightened when he sings solo or notes at the top of his range. He says he is frightened of change or of doing anything different

He is usually dressed for colder weather than it is, wears a scarf with every jacket, carries an umbrella whenever it was cloudy. I've worked with him for 2 years

He is always early. Sometimes he buzzes to let himself in some 20 minutes before the last session has ended. He says he likes to be early to sit in my waiting room.

When he comes into my office proper, he asks me, "Are you ok?" as always and smiles when I say "yes," as always.

He sits down, adjust himself on the couch, looks around as I make sure my phone is on mute. These are the ordinary tasks of everydayness that are the start of an office visit.

"Go to any operas?" He knows I go to the opera. He asks because he sings in the opera chorus. This is part of our greeting, part of the ritual everydayness.

Gestalt epoché: bracketing and the gestalt attitude:

I take a breath. He notices and takes a breath. Silence and time.

"How are you, George?" He recognizes this as my punctuation that separates the everyday greeting from the deeper how of this moment.

"I don't know. I feel kind of sad now."

In the sequence of contacting model, this is, roughly, fore contacting as the felt sense of the situation comes into awareness. This experience is only apparent in the gestalt attitude.

Gestalt epoché: induction and lifeworld

"What is it like for you to be sad, George? Can you pay attention to just how and where you experience that feeling? What you are sensing?"

He is quiet. I see his eyes twitch.

"Can you pay some attention to your eyes...?"

"Um... " He moves in the chair.

"I am getting scared."

"Let's take a moment and sense if your feet are on the floor? Now if your butt is on the chair. How your weight is supported. And now, let's both look around the room and get a sense of this place."

"Okay, now I feel less scared, but I am still uneasy."

"Would you be willing try something out?"

"Maybe, what is it?"

"If you're ok with it, I'd like you to close your eyes and pay close attention you what you might be sensing.... feeling. And if you notice that fear, allow yourself to pay more attention to it."

"Ok....."

The soft sound of breathing and then shorter breaths.

"I feel really scared, Dan,"

"Can you let your fear talk? What would it say, out loud?"

"BE CAREFUL, GEORGE, IT'S DANGEROUS....."

I feel like a little boy now." He opens his eyes.

"That's what mama always said to me. She said it was dangerous. She always double locked the door. She was scared. I remember her crying...."

"She grew up in Poland. She said the women could be raped. She heard of it. She said we lived in a dangerous neighborhood and I could get hurt. They all hated Jews. I don't even think she left the house much after papa died."

He has tears in his eyes.

"She was always scared... Could she have made me scared?"

Silence.

He catches his breath.

"So I am scared and she is terrified....."

"You live in New York and she lives as if she is still in Poland?"

George shudders.

“Poor mama,” he says sadly. “But she is gone now.”

In the gestalt induction George and my attention were directed to what emerged within the gestalt attitude. I immediately directed his attention to what he called “sadness,” which in this attitude we no longer take for granted. Sadness develops into fear.

When I ask George to experience his weight on the floor and chair, to look around the room now, within the gestalt attitude, I am proposing he experience the *lifeworld*, the world of his lived experience. His experienced body and the lifeworld are the very framework of support for contacting that might enable him to tolerate this fear.

It is easy to track the developing sequence of contacting in the session from fore contacting to contacting to final contact. It is straightforward to observe self process, as well, as self develops the “id” or it of the situation (JMR) through the agency of “ego” or “I functioning” in which George identifies, chooses, rejects, understands, comes clearer and clearer into awareness-consciousness, and personality functioning as the larger personal sense of who he is and what things mean to him contextualize his experience, and relational function as he further organizes towards and with the other. (PHG, MSL, Bloom) These are traditionally understood in terms of the organism/environment field.

George’s mother could be understood to be part of this field – the social field, part of the environment. Or George’s mother could be understood phenomenologically as being of the lifeworld, the very experiential surround that sustains George and is the domain for the actuality of life. As I described above, the lifeworld is peopled by our past, filled with culture and history, wound together in a fabric of (inter)personhood. In our clinical work, we gain access to the lifeworld in the gestalt attitude and explore its landscape through the induction. George lives in New York City. Yet his lifeworld includes the time-distant Poland of his mother. He lives in the safety of a modern urban environment, but also in the lifeworld endangered by murderous anti-Semites. He is able to contact this within the gestalt therapy attitude.

In a more widely followed gestalt therapy understanding, George might be understood to have introjected his mother’s terror or some aspects of her. His contacting would be from within the shadow of the introjecting, with a repeating fixed gestalt preserving his unaware relationship to his childhood mother. Further, his habit of asking me if I am ok suggests the wide expanse of confluence

which gathers into his frightened orbit everything around him. Or it may suggest a projection onto me of his own fragile-boyhood, which then brings forth his maternal caretaking of me.¹⁵ After all, he and I are co-domiciled of the lifeworld. He asks and then is comforted that I am ok. Yet I experience his question as genuine; his eyes are warm, the smile on his face gentle, as our gazes touch. This leads me to wonder if the confluence/introjection model in this instance is incomplete.

To think of George's fear as an introjection of his mother's terror is to extract George and his mother from the lifeworld. George and his mother, New York of today, New York of his childhood, Poland of his mother's childhood are overlapping temporal dimensions of the lifeworld. George dwells in this lifeworld insofar as it sustains his personhood, much as the physical environment maintains his life. The structure of the lifeworld becomes clear in the gestalt attitude.

The example above is an extended moment of one session. The themes that emergent returned over a number of sessions. George's fears diminished. Eventually, his mother's terror receded from his experience and he could sing the fullest extension of his range, hitting the highest note he cared to make. That is, he could take a stand on the terrain of the lifeworld unshadowed by terrors not his own. His highest notes broke through the low roofs of the village where his mother once lived and that he carried along with him, unaware, wherever he travelled.

Conclusion:

Gestalt approach, epoché, bracketing, induction, organism/environment-lifeworld are new ways to look at our work. Yet it is work we already do. When all is said and done, we gestalt therapists gather to ourselves the best of our training, best of our clinical wisdom, the best of our thoughtful understanding, and fold these into our sense of ourselves –our values, knowledge, personhood – and engage our patients with us in a therapy process that we have confidence will do good. That said, there are differences in our approaches, differences in how and what we see when we meet our patients. Bundled together, our approaches constitute the diverse practices of gestalt therapy. Whether we know it or not, to the extent we are concerned with contacting and,

¹⁵ Or it may suggest a reaction formation of his rage at being infantilized by his mother now turned into an excess of caring. There are many possibilities.

accordingly, with the structure and process of experience, each of us practices a phenomenological psychotherapy; whether we know it or not, our work parallels and crosses parallels with some useful concepts from phenomenology.

I hope by making some of this explicit, I have brought our own particular phenomenological approach to the foreground. How we remain committed to contacting and, as such, to disclosing the structure of experience, in all its creative-adjustings, aesthetic qualities and wonder, are the measure of how we maintain our identity – and effectiveness – as a psychotherapy. This chapter emerged from this commitment.

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