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Remaking Ourselves

“Lose your mind and come to your senses.” [64]

Fritz Perls

Another western school of psychology founded in the 20th century, Gestalt Therapy is an approach created by Fritz Perls and others and has several foundations including existentialist philosophy and Zen Buddhism. Its techniques echo the wisdom of right understanding by encouraging mindfulness and the attention on the immediate, personal experience of the here and now, in all three realms – the physical, emotional and mental. Gestalt is a German word that designates form and configuration and implies wholeness. Gestalt Therapy is a form of personal exploration and integration. Gestalt practice is an ongoing program of the development of integration of one's awareness across a broad spectrum of consciousness.

Gestalt therapy has numerous objectives that usefully supplement the techniques of training of the original Eightfold Path. The practice focus is to become more fully aware of the process of living within a unified field of body, mind, relationship, and environment. It uses the method in which perceiving, feeling, and acting are differentiated from abstracting, interpreting, and rationalizing, since the latter are considered a disengagement from what is directly experienced. One learns better discrimination between experience and abstracting.

Gestalt therapy focuses more on process than content and emphasizes awareness of action, thought, and feeling in the present moment rather than interpreting the past or predicting the future. The client learns the difference between 'talking about' and 'experiencing'. The Gestalt view also holds that people are endlessly remaking or creating themselves. There is no essence of human nature to be discovered 'once and for all', instead, there are always new horizons. Gestalt therapy has a goal for people to become more aware of what they are experiencing to regain a smooth self-regulation of their organism within its environment. In doing that, one achieves the experience of 'emptying the mind' and directly experiencing the world without subject/object separation.

The dualities are consistent aspects of the human experience, structuring most of the cognitive and affective processes. However, when dualities are relaxed rather than fortified, an entirely different way of experiencing is available. It depends on being aware, within one's consciousness, of the background non-dual awareness that precedes conceptualization and intention and, without fragmenting the field of experience into habitual dualities, can contextualize various perceptual, affective, or cognitive contents. In the next sections, we will explore some of the key concepts and methods of Gestalt Therapy.

Moving schemata to the foreground

Figure/ground is one of the core concepts of perception in Gestalt theory. The “figure” is the concept, and the “ground” is the background upon which the concept exists. The interplay between figure and ground is dynamic and ongoing. Figure represents the focus of awareness and interest on an object or pattern that enters the foreground. Here it becomes fully experienced and managed so it can then later recede into the background – to be forgotten or assimilated – thereby freeing one’s foreground attention for the next meaningful event. One can see the similarity with Kegan’s term of subjective with background and objective with foreground. Our attention shifts from one figure/object of interest to another, and when we are no longer interested in one figure/object, it recedes into the ground and is replaced by another [65](Polster & Polster, 1973, p. 31).

Most transactions, however, are managed by automatic, habitual modes, with minimal awareness and they remain in habitual mode of adjustment until prompted to come into the objectivity of full awareness. If the source of one’s desires or dislikes is habitually inhibited from emerging into foreground from the schemata, one remains unaware and repressed. Only when what was formerly background and unaware (subject) moves into the foreground (object) is an aware response possible. While the background does not provide impetus towards meaning-making and figure formation, it provides the *“context that affords depth for the perception of the figure, giving it perspective but commanding little independent interest”* [65] (Polster & Polster, p. 30). Ground develops from our past experiences, from our unfinished business, and with the flow of the present experience. *‘In a sense, one’s entire life forms the ground for the present moment’* (p. 32).

An important characteristic of perception is the tendency towards meaning making, therefore, when we are provided with data, we instinctively make meaning of it to create some sense of understanding or familiarity. The past and the habitual present establish our experiences. Since we can never perceive the external world completely, our cognitive apparatus fills in the missing elements with information created subjectively in our minds. In fact, based on the principles of perceptual organization, what we often cognitively create and pay attention to, is based more on our utilization of prior experiences and biases and not on the information directly available to us. We interpret everything. Instead, through objectified awareness we are better able to self-regulate in the environment with a clearer vision based on equanimity.

To promote the objectification of our self-awareness, first we must accept responsibility for choosing our present responses. Self-responsibility fosters responsiveness, not the reactivity coming from habitual identifications, including thoughts, beliefs, emotions, stories, and roles. Transpersonal psychologists Roger Walsh and Shauna L. Shapiro see “dis-identification” as *“the process by which awareness (mindfulness) precisely observes, and therefore ceases to identify with, mental content such as thoughts, feelings and images.”* [66] Through dis-identification, a person’s awareness is clarified regarding how they perform in their environment and regarding their own identity. Clients become aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they can change themselves, and at the same time, learn to accept and value themselves. Individuals, according to this approach, define, develop, and learn that they are constantly in flux.

According to Richard S. Sharf, gestalt therapists expect that clients will improve in the following

ways: increased self-awareness; better awareness of all their five senses; they assume ownership of their experience instead of giving others responsibility for what they are thinking, feeling, or doing;; they accept responsibility for their actions and the consequences; they develop skills and acquire values that will allow them to satisfy their needs without violating the rights of others; they develop better internal self-support; they develop the ability to ask for and get help from others as well as to give help to others. [67]

Recognizing and objectifying presumptions

Gestalt methods also recognize and increase our awareness that our conceptual abstractions like thoughts, images, and daydreams are at root ‘a fantasy’ or a network of views and beliefs. These subjectively based presumptions, viewpoints, or abstractions entice and can ultimately obsess and overwhelm the thinker. To counteract this tendency and bring it into awareness and better objective control, gestalt uses awareness exercises for people to differentiate the outside and inside world and fantasy activity.

- Activities for more objective connecting with the outside world consist in applying the five senses to increase awareness of senses, objects and events in the present.
- Regarding awareness of our inside world, we mentally ‘scan’ the body to increase our sensory contact with inner physical sensations including muscle tension, aches, etc.
- The external/internal modes of direct awareness are the objective reality or foundation of my lived experience.
- Finally, awareness of fantasy activity, which includes all my cognitive representations and conceptualizations, is different from my ongoing awareness of sense-based experiences. Fantasy activity includes explaining, imagining, interpreting, assuming, guessing, thinking, comparing, planning, remembering, anticipating, etc.

To help understand how easily we enter the fantasy realm of abstraction we can use an example based on our sense of sight: quietly look around you and label the objects you see: picture, chair, light, bottle, book, window, etc. Then look at the same objects without the label. Only see the object ‘as it is’. Now reflect on how we cognitively construct abstractions for everything we experience and how that subject/object splitting creates a static world instead of a more sensitive, dynamic world presented intimately through direct experience with our senses.

A goal of Gestalt psychotherapy to help the person into a higher level of awareness or Contact of self, environment, & relationship with others. The Contact Cycle involves increasing awareness which leads to interest which leads to contact & action: Increase awareness > interest > contact > action. Instead of experiencing the world through a veil of illusion or fantasy, the Gestalt method

emphasizes 'good' contact or 'as it is'. Contact is defined as interacting with nature and with other people without losing/expanding one's character. However, through one's ego tricks as psychological defenses and ignorance, we prevent ourselves from experiencing the present openly and fully.

Gesalt theory cites five major styles of resisting contact:

- Introjection - passively incorporating what the environment provides & do not know what we want or need.
- Projection – a disowning certain aspects of ourselves by assigning them to the environment; we identify them on others; e.g., see quality in others, we avoid responsibility for who we are.
- Confluence -a blurring of the differentiation between the self and the environment; e.g., high need to be accepted & liked.
- Retroflection - turning back onto ourselves impulses/energy opposite of what we really want to do; e.g., lash out & injure self because fearful of directing toward others. Retroflection includes passive aggressive behavior that manifests itself in less obvious ways like getting sick all the time, constantly hurting oneself in accidents, or doing poorly in school or at work.
- Deflection -distraction so it is difficult to maintain a sustained sense of contact.

These five hinderances can significantly obstruct one's cultivation of the Path.

The therapeutic goals include helping a person move towards increased awareness and objectivity of themselves. To do this they are helped to gradually assume ownership of their experience; develop skills and acquire ethical values that will allow them to satisfy their needs without violating the rights of others; become more mindful of all of their six senses; learn to accept responsibility for what they do, including accepting the consequences or fruit of their kamma of their actions; move from dependency/autonomy toward increasing interdependency and be able to ask for and get help from others and to give to others.

Language reconfiguration

Gestalt therapists Fritz Perls et al., recognizing the importance of taking self-responsibility of one's experience, emphasized using a language that gives priority to 'owning' or accepting the present experience [64] (Perls et al., 1951). Increased personal responsibility creates an oversight and more objective perspective about our inner processes. We do this by using the following methods:

- Preferring the use of the present tense to focus our awareness on the present.
By staying more focused on the present, rather than the past or future, we are better able to be mindful and take responsibility of our thoughts and actions enabling and empowering ourselves with a pro-active lifestyle in the constantly transforming environment.
- Through our use of "I", we place personal responsibility and objectivity on our feelings or thoughts, instead of avoiding self-responsibility by using general

pronouns such as "it" and "you". For example, by saying 'you make me angry' instead of 'I feel angry about that', one displaces the feeling of anger away from the source which is 'I'. When using 'you' there is a blaming effect instead of taking self-responsibility and being more objective for the reaction of the feeling of anger.

- Making direct statements instead of asking questions helps to assume personal responsibility, i.e. 'I want to go' instead of 'do you want to go?'
- Substituting "I won't" for "I can't" is encouraged because often "can't" creates the feeling of helplessness, whereas, in fact, it is often more accurate to say, "I won't" meaning "I choose not to do this for any of various reasons."
- Using the word "want" to indicate a desire instead of the exaggerated "need" which indicates urgency, duty, obligation and stress.
- Substituting "I choose to" or "I want to", indicating desire and personal choice, from "should" and "ought", which often indicate an obligation, thus again, increasing the sense of objectification, hence, personal control and responsibility of our lives.
- Importantly, avoiding absolutizing, which is speaking or thinking in a conceited and unskillful way, for example, 'you are beautiful', which is based on a certain degree of arrogance, instead using 'I think you look beautiful'. Absolutizing is a distortion by representing an opinion as a fact, as a truth, even though it is a subjective, relative statement.

We have seen how the use of cognitive objective and analytical 'distancing' is a useful method to dis-identify from our subjective self both during internal 'self-talk' and in our conversation with other people. Another example is when I am aware of my anger and think "I am angry" or I can observe and with equanimity objectify anger as a physical phenomenon arising within my body and think "anger is arising within".

We practice distancing by changing our perspective from being to having; that is, to change from "I am" to "I have." When thinking, "I am" something, it reinforces the sense of a permanent and absolute characteristic of me; when "I have" something, it is more temporal and limited, it has a "not me" quality to it which helps me transcend any attachment to an experience. For example, "I am nervous" versus "I have nervous feelings"; "I feel..." versus "I have a feeling" or "I am aware of a feeling". Practicing dis-identification through our language use, expands our awareness of the fact that our constantly evolving thoughts, feelings, and actions are based on much more complex and profound cognitive and physical processes than what we are consciously aware. In fact, thoughts, feelings, reactions, judgments are all transient experiences.

These modifications of language reduce, through increased objectification and responsibility, the creation and proliferation, or papanca, of a static absolutizing mode in the subjective mental realm of concepts. Papanca is a term explaining how one's subjective opinion can attain the status of absolute truth as different from the more correct and restrained objective expression of one's opinion or observation as a limited and subjective point of view.

General Semantics

Another scholar who understood the importance of language in the creation of our cognitive worlds was Alfred Korzybski, who developed a discipline called General Semantics [68](Korzybski, 1941). He asserted that much of spoken and written language not only leaves out much detail, but also has multiple distortions and is influenced more by emotional bias than rational perception. In fact, when using language, we are dealing with generalizations and abstractions. Therefore, a word does not represent all the 'facts' or nuances that are associated with it in everyday life. Korzybski thought that certain uses of the verb "to be" (called the "is of identity" and the "is of predication") easily activates generalizations and proliferations in the mind. For example, an assessment such as, "Beth is a fool" (said of a person named Beth who has done something regarded as foolish) is a generalization and an abstraction about her. In this example, Korzybski's remedy to make a less subjective statement was to deny the identity (fool) and instead to be mindful that the whole person, Beth, was not used to describe her. In fact, in the world of words, we cannot 'know' Beth by a verbal description. Therefore, to explain best Beth's behavior (an event), we need to objectively describe only the direct experience, and be aware and cautious of the habitual automatic representations and generalizations, which easily create our thoughts and words.

Korzybski stated that the basis of our normal use of language is over-generalized, unconscious biases and assumptions. As has been described in the earlier chapter describing the effect of either/or and dualism thinking, often with a sense of subjective entitlement or obligation, we easily make a proposition superior to any other propositions and steadfastly use and believe in such habitual over-generalizations. This creates the transformation of a specific here and now experience (just 'as it is') into generalizations (fantasy) based on our biased schemata that sustain our desires and aversions. To develop more appropriate and objectively accurate evaluations, Korzybski used empirically effective techniques taken from modern physio-mathematical methods, called extensional devices. As described in General Semantics, extensional devices are linguistic elements used to assist taking uncertainty and emotional aspects out of a statement and create a more objective and mature description.

The five extensional devices are:

- *Indexing* – to add specific details, such as people's names, locations, and so on.
- *Dating* – to add the dates when events occurred (indexing with time reference).
- *'Etc'* – indicating that the whole story is not being told.
- *Quotation marks* – used to separate something out, showing it is based on speculations, not 'real'.
- *Hyphens* – to remind us of the complexities of interrelatedness in this world.

Again, the tactic here is to acquire more objectivity and to transcend the influences of the highly subjective schematic 'lens' by creating psychological distance from automatic, reactive conceptualization. Through objectification, we learn to observe and analyze how we think, what we feel, how we react, and understand better how our biases and egotistical conceit influence everything we believe, say or do. In addition, since we understand better how our thoughts and feelings are fluid and relative, they lose their autocratic importance that they once had when we were subjectively absorbed in them. We learn there is not a substantial 'me,' but only my ongoing

experience of life that I interpret and narrate, in which all experiences pass, no matter how painful or how wonderful. We come to understand that with the subject/object dichotomy, if we attach and cling to the egotistical and static 'I', the correspondingly 'me', 'mine' objects must be created and craved for. Through right understanding, we more surely and easily accept the process of dis-identification and transcending the 'I/me'.