

Assignment 2: Special Project.

Shame and Support

(How the condition of the field influences the experiencing of self)

Introduction: The aim of this project is to help assess my ability to integrate the philosophy, personality theory and principles of the Gestalt approach while providing an opportunity to innovatively express an aspect of this approach which is of particular interest to me. At the end of this exercise I will have demonstrated my experience of a range of writers and perspectives on my chosen topic and shown a capacity to evaluate theoretical concepts and an ability to critically analyze the theoretical assertions of others. This is also about increasing my capacity to conceptualize about the Gestalt approach to life and therapy and is something of my own unique contribution to the field.

Firstly, I will describe the traditional Gestalt view of the self using my own as an example, while introducing various terms and concepts which underpin the theory. I will then talk about field theory and its influence on Gestalt psychology. Following this I will reflect upon the phenomenon of shame, discussing how it acts as the moderator of contact in the relational field. I will talk about internal and external support and how they influence every encounter with another. Finally I will discuss the therapeutic meeting showing how noticing and minimizing the experience of shame for the client while maximizing the support available is what underpins my therapeutic approach, and gives me a valuable lens with which to see and appreciate my own and another's journey. I will conclude with a synopsis of salient points and refer to the literature throughout.

The Self, Gestalt style:

The Self in Gestalt terms is more about the *process* of an organism interacting with its environment than it is about the more fixed structure Freud imagined.

When I interact with my environment I become aware of sensation, which may include what I am doing, feeling and planning. According to Rosner (1988), there are three zones of awareness: outer (physical sensation), middle (emotional sensation) and inner (thoughts and ideas); and organisms like me become adept at developing ways to avoid being *painfully* aware. These are called *creative adjustments* and will be discussed in more detail later.

As I am only capable of processing a small amount of sensory data from the environment at any one moment, that which I choose to attend to becomes the *figure*, while everything else merges into the back-*Ground*. This figure-ground formation also applies to thoughts and memories. I construct my reality based on past experience (conscious and unconscious memories), and I "fill" in the gaps to make my experience of reality fit my preconceived ideas. Dowd elaborates on this when he says "The self is a fiction-we say 'I' often enough to deeply embed 'I' as a concept..." He goes on to say "What has happened over our lives is that thoughts have interacted with memory (older thoughts)

and have formed comparison thoughts (discriminations). Our identity is formed through this ability of thoughts to compare old and new thoughts, at ever more complex levels, until there is an illusional certainty of a basis to it all” (2006).

This ‘I’ in my experience comes into being when I become aware that ‘I’ am different from (as opposed to one with) my environment. This, according to Rosner is *Contact*. Furthermore, although I can have no awareness without contact, I may have contact without awareness. The Gestalt way facilitates increased contact between me and my environment. My avoidance of contact (painful awareness) is called *resistance*, and it is endlessly interesting to me that greater intimacy, paradoxically, is possible when the boundary between me and another is more sharply defined.

According to Gestalt theory I cannot be separated from my environment. I am seen as creative and self-responsible and like every organism I seek the means to attain a state of balance Gestalt calls homeostasis. I spontaneously regulate myself until I attain this balance and this process is called *Organismic self-regulation*. I move through my environment, having sensations, becoming more or less aware, making or avoiding contact and spontaneously regulating myself. This process has been known as *The Cycle of Gestalt Formation*. Ideally it involves movement through sensation, awareness, energy, mobilization, excitement, contact and withdrawal. An unfinished Gestalt, according to Rosner, ties up energy and attention. Creative adjustments through organismic self-regulation direct this energy elsewhere and may ultimately be useful or not. As mentioned above, avoidance of contact is called *resistance* of which there are four main types: Introjection, Projection, Retroflexion and Confluence.

Introjection, is when I have “swallowed whole” someone else’s belief system, theory or idea. Indicators of my introjects include sentences or thoughts beginning with “I must”, “I should” and “I ought”. Interestingly, an introject which says I should or should not do something, gives me a message about what I am if I go against it. For me, one of the messages was ‘I should care for others rather than myself.’ I may feel good and acceptable when I look after others and shameful and unworthy when I take care of myself. This sometimes results in my trying to get my needs taken care of by others by being nice to them, rather than declaring my need (and facing my shame) yet feeling shameful when they are met and resentful when they are not! My process around such introjects involves becoming aware of what aspects are my own and what have been swallowed whole. This is tricky and discomfiting for me, as it means being in relationship in ways which are often counter to my intuition and ‘natural’ (conditioned) way of being in the world. Furthermore everything is experiment, therefore uncertain in outcome or value.

Projections are the things I notice about others and am unaware of in myself. When I cannot accept something about myself I project it onto others. The way for me to integrate projections is to realize that some of what I find “out there” actually belongs to me. I often project my introjected shameful beliefs about myself onto others in the form of their imagined judgement about me.

Retroflection is doing to myself what I want to do to others or doing to myself what I want others to do to (or for) me. The way to undo a retroflection is to reverse the direction of the retroflected action. As mentioned previously, I sometimes look after others and take care of them when I really want them to take care of me.

Confluence is when contact is totally avoided and boundaries are fluid and ill defined. i.e. when I do not speak my truth for fear of being rejected, or agreeing with someone when actually the opposite is true. None of the above is inherently unhealthy, but if I am “stuck” I need the help of my therapist to create greater choice for myself.

With its roots in existentialism, Gestalt emphasizes personal *Responsibility* or ‘the ability to respond’. I sometimes avoid being responsible by avoiding contact. One way for me to take responsibility is through the use of the *Language of Responsibility*. E.g.: *I* statements, *You* statements, *I will* and *I won't*, *Yes or No* instead of “maybe” or “I’ll try” and avoiding the use of “Buts”. Other ways are to cease avoiding silence, refraining from asking questions when a statement is required, and not using expressions like *thinking, feeling and interesting* to conceal a statement. One of my creative adjustments in response to a crazy mother and angry father was to develop ways that got my needs met by minimizing the possibility of rupture in relationship. I am able to relate in ways that can appear confluent, minimize and even disarm conflict and invite people into dialogue. Together with a talent for optimum timing, I can be very useful as a therapist, but sometimes (I believe) I create distrust and fear in other people, i.e. my Gestalt group who perhaps sense my ‘will’ at work but who may have difficulty finding a tangible force to oppose in a healthy and active manner.

According to Gestalt, everybody is made up of polarities. The top dog /underdog split is the most common of these. My top dog is the master or driver who ‘decides’ what I will do, while my underdog is the slave/victim who ultimately does whatever he wants to do. Both of these need to be acknowledged, given a voice and ultimately integrated for my continuing growth. This is often the work of therapy, and has contributed to much of my Gestalt experience.

This traditional and useful view of self pays scant attention to the notion of field. Ideas around ground and environment in and against which the organism interacts and makes figures lend a sense of a broader container for human experience, but fail to offer (at least to me) the essence of what the theory brings to Gestalt. I believe that not only is a field sensitive approach a respectful and empathetic method of entering and exploring a client’s experience of self, but also fundamentally alters how we view relationship and brings the notions of shame and support to the fore of any discussion of human experience.

According to Phillippon, ‘the Contact Boundary is a negotiation between organism and environment’ (pp 73). (Environment here is synonymous with field) He quotes Perls, Hefferline and Goodman when he says ‘There is no single function of any animal that completes itself without objects and environment ...’ and again ‘Experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment. ...’ (pp. 274, 273). This is in effect

saying that I experience myself as distinct from my environment as I make contact with it.

When working as a Gestalt therapist, I undertake to negotiate through dialogue with my environment (my own contact boundary), which now includes the client, in order to help him or her gain a richer and clearer awareness of self and environment (their contact boundary). This richer, clearer awareness is by nature more authentic, more honoring of the other and generally more rewarding. In order to do this, I need to be sensitive to the field we share, focus on the phenomena I become aware of in the here and now, and be willing to support the client in trying on new ways of being.

The Field: It may be helpful to my argument to first define field theory more fully, describing its birth in post-modernism and the field theoretical notions of Process and Meaning. At the same time I will consider field theory in the light of Psychotherapy both classical and Gestalt.

I am only dimly aware of this field I am a part of; which includes every sensation, every meeting, every thought and feeling, every person, object and energy including ideas I have ever had or been touched by in any way. This probably describes (I realize as I write) the totality of everything from the beginning of time....(just wrapping my head around that...). Furthermore, I am creating moment by moment my environment and moment by moment my environment creates me. We are 'not one and not two' as a Zen master might say, we are like the musician and his music: there is not one without the other.

Speaking of Zen, much of eastern philosophical thought, particularly that rooted in Taoism considers field, which is still very much an abstract concept in our western society and as noted above, barely mentioned in the literature of Gestalt theory which it underpins.

This is an unfortunate situation because as Yontef puts it in his essay, 'Gestalt Therapy theory is *based* on field theory' (My italics). 'Moreover', he goes on to say quoting Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 'field theory is the theoretical approach that can best encompass the broad intellectual, social, cultural, political and psychological issues that Gestalt therapy theory addresses' (1991).

So why is it so inaccessible? I believe that a major problem in addressing field theory is that it articulates what is essentially a different paradigm for human experience. It requires a shift in thinking that for most of us (especially in the West) is simply too contrary to our usual way of interpreting our experience.

The problem with (and the definition of) field theory begins for me when I compare my experience as seen through the lens of Classical Newtonian Physics and that of a more Post-modern/chaos theoretical point of view.

In classical physics, phenomena may be understood by reducing them to their component parts; for example, I may understand how a clock works by taking it apart. In reverse order I will see how it was 'put-together' and therefore understand what made it tick.

This way of thinking works well in everyday life and the proof is all around us. In fact our culture depends almost entirely upon this way of thinking. We predict events and are able to describe things with an amazing degree of accuracy, from rail-roads to relationships, and global warming to globalization. It is a mechanistic view of a universe that is potentially as predictable as the movement of balls upon a pool-table.

Furthermore, this paradigm leaves us (the observers) out of the equation. We are not *of* the event, we simply are witnesses to it, and the importance of this will hopefully become apparent as we go along.

With the advent of the new-physics and post-modernist thought, the predictability and order inherent in the above paradigm went out the window. The new physics as articulated by Einstein, Schroedinger and Planck et al, (and made almost available to the lay-person by amongst others, Fritjof Capra (1972)) described a universe that was *relative*. They said that beyond a certain level of scrutiny nothing was certain, everything depended upon everything else and even the act of observing influenced that which was observed. Essentially they described a universe (particularly at the sub-atomic and astronomic levels) in which we could predict events with a high degree of accuracy but could no longer do so with certainty. Most astonishingly, they also said that the simple act of observing an event influenced the outcome.

The implication of these discoveries was and is enormous, particularly concerning human relationship. According to the new physics, nothing is absolute, everything is relative. There is no such thing as 'objective' truth or as Yontef declares "*Perceived reality is configured by the relationship between observer and observed*" (1991). This means amongst other things, that no-one and no-thing is free from influence or from influencing. If we consider the therapeutic relationship, both the therapist and the client function (influences and is influenced) within their own web of relationships, or field. To regard the behaviour of either myself or my client without regard to our fields is, in the light of field theory, to miss us completely. This point is made by McConville when he quotes Lewin (the Father of field theory): "Behaviour is a function of the field of which it is a part; a field analysis begins with situations as a whole." He goes on to say, "Experiencing is also a function of the field of which it is a part; an experiential field analysis emphasizes the situation as a whole" (2003). This means everybody, clients and therapists, you and me behave as we do and experience ourselves as who we are as a direct result of the relationships we are and have been a part of. (This will be important to bear in mind when we consider the figural roles shame and support play in those relationships against the ground we are preparing).

Furthermore, as a therapist, I am a co-creating with my client the 'realities' experienced by both of us in the therapy room. Rather than it being 'my' client upon whom I 'do' therapy, it is 'us' creating the client-therapist encounter in this moment. This very Gestalt way of viewing therapy is at odds with the classical Freudian view, which tends to consider clients more objectively and seeks to moderate the 'relatedness' between therapist and client.

The 'new' physicists also spoke about *contemporaneity*, i.e. the idea that the timing of an event is only a fact relative to ones position regarding it. We witness an event by receiving and interpreting the light waves emitted by it. Should we be further from the event than another, we will necessarily experience the event at a different time from the other. An event therefore, does not have a discrete place in time, but rather it happens at a range of times depending upon those observing!

Essentially, post-modern thought in general and field theory in particular have profoundly changed how I understand my experience. According to field theory, process is paramount. Everything is becoming. Just as everything is related to everything else, so too is everything in flux. Nothing is standing still, everything is moving sequentially

through time and space, constantly changing as it responds to its environment. The classical mode of thinking however, takes a snapshot of a thing, an organization or a person and describes it using a point of view that *necessarily confuses the static nature of the snapshot with the dynamic nature of the real phenomena*. This stance is reflected in classical psychoanalysis, which tends to view clients as fixed in their personality structures with their attendant neuroses and pathologies. The task of the therapist then, is to de-construct the internal world of the client making it available for scrutiny and interpretation. In doing so she helps the client to change his behaviour through helping him understand the forces at work within him.

Field theory however, describes phenomena in terms of its movement and propensity to change. As Yontef says 'In the lens of field theory, movement replaces static, events replace things, continuity replaces discontinuity' (1991). The emphasis when applied to therapy therefore is upon what is *emerging* rather than on moderating responses to the unchanging past or static personality structures. As I am part of what is emerging I am influencing (and being influenced) (facilitating change) just by being in the room with a client.

Another aspect of field theory that appeals to me is that of Meaning. Meaning according to the theory is found in the context of the whole 'The meaning of anger', according to Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 'involves a frustrating obstacle' (p274). Seen alone it is simply an emotion, seen in the light of the obstacle it becomes meaningful and understandable.

In more classical modalities, the meaning of a client's 'problem' or 'difficulty' often remains unseen and possibly unwelcome. The client 'presents' with a pathology or symptom and the clinician attempts to expunge or alleviate it. In Gestalt therapy, by being field sensitive, my client and I may find the symptoms hidden meaning/value. i.e. how the behaviour 'works' by moderating and minimizing painful awareness associated with the experience of self (shame) in the client's life. Wheeler quotes Kaufman in 'The Voice of Shame' when he names shame itself as 'an entrance to the self'. It is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, of inferiority, and of alienation. **No other affect is closer to the experienced self. None is more central for a source of identity** (my emphasis). Shame is felt as inner torment, as sickness of the soul. It is the most poignant experience of the self by the self, whether felt in the humiliation of cowardice, or in the sense of failure to cope successfully with challenge. Shame is the wound felt from the inside, dividing us both from ourselves and from one another. Shame is the affect which is the source of many complex and disturbing states: depression, alienation, self-doubt, isolating loneliness, paranoid and schizoid phenomena, compulsive disorders, splitting of the self, perfectionism, a deep sense of inferiority, inadequacy or failure, the so-called borderline conditions and disorders of narcissism. These are the phenomena that are rooted in shame...each is rooted in **significant interpersonal failure** (my emphasis) (1980).

Rather than adopting an 'expert' stance and interpreting the *information* the client does or doesn't offer, I endeavour to go on a journey of discovery *with* the client, exploring the actual *phenomena* of our meeting and bringing into the here and now that which was previously out of awareness. As we relate and behaviours and responses begin to come

into awareness for the client, so too will shame, that which I believe is associated with every disowned aspect of ourselves. By definition it is to be avoided at all costs. Huckaby in Lee's 'The Voice of Shame' quotes Karen; "It is the self regarding the self with a withering and unforgiving eye of contempt."

I believe that a client's unhealthy behaviour probably indicates a lack of support (shame) in certain areas of the field. I also understand that change depends upon engendering enough support in the field to counter that shame in order to facilitate new ways of being. Consider what Parlett says: 'As in life generally, changes in habitual patterns of behaviour occur only if there is enough accompanying support in the field, linked to a compelling invitation to "risk doing something differently"'(pp.25) The 'risk' is about the receptivity of the field. Will I be acceptable if I do it differently?

As a therapist I know that I am also *of* the field and the one most likely in that moment to provide that support. 'Doing something differently' may take the form of an experiment, which Parlett thinks of as a change in life-circumstances. Parlett also says that experiments '...involve manipulating field conditions with individuals facing a challenge to respond other than in usual ways' (pp.25). For me, this means maximizing both the support available in the field and the client's ability to avail of it.

When I invite my client to be more fully himself, he risks, amongst other things, judgment, ridicule, and rejection, this feeling of being less than, inadequate, inferior, or simply wrong. It is only his trust in the ***non-judgemental nature*** (support) of the therapeutic relationship (together with his innate desire to be seen by another) that allows him to risk at all. If the ground of this trust is unformed, it is unlikely for relationship to unfold and for therapy to happen.

Robert Lee talks about this in his book 'The Values of Connection' (2004). Lee posits the notion of a Field Model of human relating, bringing together elements of Gestalt theory from Perls, Lewin, Kofka et al. In this paradigm, he talks about how the sense people have of themselves is co-constructed with others as they interact: "Self" and "Other" he says, "are simultaneously defined by the way connection is made or not made in progressive sequences of response following response" (pp6). This means *I only come into being in relation to others*, I am not an isolated human being, I am connected to others (my environment) and depend upon them for my very existence. Furthermore, my sense of myself or my self-process is dependent upon how I *connect* and *disconnect* from my environment. How I *connect* or *disconnect* with the environment is a function of the *support or lack of support* I perceive to be available to me, in other words how acceptable I perceive myself to be in this environment.

This process informs the formation of figures I will make against the ground of my broader field.

Lee underlines this when he talks about the polar experiences of support and shame being a 'meter' to determine the condition of connectedness/disconnectedness in the field. It is this meter that informs us of the degree of safety for us in the environment, how likely we are to be received by others.

As children we survived by learning very quickly which parts of us were acceptable to our caregivers. We became experts at this, our very lives depended, (and still do) on finding what will maximize our chances of survival in the world. As social animals our

survival depends on an ability to read the environment and give or withhold (creatively adjust) that which will give us the greatest ability to avoid rejection, isolation and death. Shame, therefore is that which pulls us back from doing that which would make us unacceptable to a certain social group. It does this by moderating or attenuating our “interest/ excitement” in a given situation. Every human being benefits from this social restraint and we could not function without it. The problem is that often, we are encouraged by this process to disown parts of ourselves which may be unacceptable in our early social groupings but are actually necessary for healthy functioning as adults. These disowned parts of ourselves become locked away through the introjection of other people’s beliefs about their acceptability, and often manifest themselves as disruptions at the contact boundary. This, for me at least, led to often unsatisfactory contact with self and other and an inability to withdraw from certain contact cycles, i.e. the fixed gestalt of ‘being valuable by being a good listener’ to the point of becoming a therapist! (sacrificing my need to be heard for another’s, so as to win value while moderating my shame around being needful *and* undeserving of having those needs met).

The antidote to this shame and the concomitant feeling states and behaviours is support i.e. That which says *I am okay as I am*.

It is my hope that as a therapist with an understanding of field, of the role of shame and support in governing connections in the field and my knowledge of contact and disruptions to contact at the boundary, I might be able to moderate the shame a client feels, and by maximizing the support available in the environment help the client have a burgeoning experience of self that says *I am okay as I am*.

I do this by attempting to offer a relationship based on mutuality, on disclosure and dialogue - by celebrating Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ I hope to invite my client in out of the cold lonely place of his individualistically conditioned life-space and meet him in the moment, offering him a relationship where he can find healing in the reintegration of those parts of himself that were previously unacceptable.

I define mental health “as a fluid and appropriate response to the environment.” Given this, mental disease can be seen as the result of ‘fixed gestalts’ mentioned above, formed in earlier unreceptive environments through introjects. These fixed gestalts resulting from introjected beliefs about oneself create a sense of being ‘wrong’ or ‘unacceptable’ to others. This condition interrupts appropriate contact with ourselves and the environment. In other words an experience of ‘shame’, or more accurately ‘ground-shame’ a term Wheeler (1992) uses to distinguish this pervasive sense of personal unacceptable-ness from the fluid behaviour-moderating shame that enhances appropriate relating (and maximum satisfaction) in a given environment.

Examples of each would be my lifelong caretaking of others as a way of not experiencing my ground-shame around being dependent on others. In the field of my family, as mentioned before, my dependability was valued and my neediness was not received. On the other hand, an example of the appropriate effect of shame would be telling my clients I am “feeling disconnected” rather than “bored shitless” when I am bored shitless.

Like me, my clients bring every relationship they have had into the room. They have internalized the experience of support from people that accepted and valued them for something of who they are. This retained experience acts as 'self-support', which allows them to function more or less (depending on the condition of ourselves and the field) independent of or counter to the perceived condition of the field. i.e. martyrdom at the hands of the inquisition.

I believe the very process of therapy is often about the internalization of enough support to make the possibility of shame safe enough to risk. Should new support be found in the field during the risk-taking it will become available as more self-support and provide more ground for further exploration into disowned parts of self (and the concomitant experience of shame). Only yesterday a new client disclosed to me in an apparently off-hand manner her previous sex-work. Her disclosure was accompanied by a glance that gauged (with the accuracy of a precision instrument) how her risk was received. Shame or support? Her self support allowed her to risk enough (given the condition of our field) the payoff was greater awareness of her acceptability (self support) and presumably greater freedom to be more fully herself.

I have had lots of experience lately around this. I have found my self-support, once abundant enough to stand being unacceptable to a great degree in my training group, become depleted through months of perceived unacceptability in that group. My self support was augmented by supportive relationships in other training years, my workplace, another therapy group I attend, virtual strangers and of course my home life. However, in the end I moved to confluence rather than suffer the distress of unacceptability/disconnection/shame any longer. Oddly enough, this too brought shame and discomfort because it was counter to my sense of my broader field which supports more contact, and energized something of a recant. The effect on me of being re-connected with the group also contributed, and maybe I am compelled to be unacceptable in some way.... This question of how and why I risk making myself unacceptable in the first place is the present chapter in my therapeutic journey...

I am of the opinion, like Lee, that in relationship, my self-process is influenced by another's and vice versa. We literally co-create each other. This means that if I am able to track and perhaps articulate the connections and disconnections (the interruptions to contact at the boundary) with a client, I may help to bring something of her ground-shame into awareness while helping to create the conditions for a different experience of self/environment for the client. This is experiment, the greatest being the therapeutic relationship itself, according to Gremmler-Fuhr (2001). 'A different experience' in this case is essentially that of finding support for that part of self which was previously unacceptable.

Conclusion:

As a Gestalt therapist, my responsibility is to enter into relationship with my client as fully and authentically as possible and offer support for parts of her that have been previously unacceptable. The success of that encounter depends very much on how we negotiate the shame/support continuum in our relationship. Traditionally, Gestalt therapy

has shied away from the field theory which underpins it. When we become field sensitive, the painful awareness that is shame, the moderator of interest excitement in relationship becomes figural, the antidote to which is support. This support once internalized, becomes self-support which the client may use in his broader world to risk new more life-giving ways of being and perhaps emerge from the various 'pathologies' which have been so useful in negotiating the lack of support in the field to date.

Capra, F. (1975) “*The Tao of Physics*” Flamingo Press, London.

Dowd, R. (2006) *Reflections on Self and Field in Gestalt and Elsewhere*. Gestalt Journal, Aus and NZ (2006) Vol. 2.

Gremmler-Fuhr, M. (2001) *Ethic Dimensions*. Gestalt Review volume 5

Lee, R.G. (2004) *The Values of Connection*. Cambridge, Mass: Gestalt Press.

Melnick, J. Nevis, S.M. Melnick, G.N. (1994) *Therapeutic Ethics: A Gestalt Perspective*. The Gestalt Journal.

McConville, M. (2003) “*Lewinian Field Theory, Adolescent Development and Psychotherapy*” Gestalt Review, USA.

Parlett, M. (1997) “*The Unified Field in Practice*” Gestalt Review, USA.

Phillipson, P. (199?) “*Awareness, The Contact Boundary And The Field*”, The Gestalt Journal, Vol. XIII, No. 2. USA.

Rosner, J (1988) *Peeling the Onion* Jossey Bass, San Francisco.

Wheeler, G. (1992). Gestalt Ethics. In E.C. Nevis (Ed.), *Gestalt Therapy: Perspectives and Applications* (pp. 112-128). New York: Gardner Press.

Yontef, G. (1991) Essay: “*Introduction To Field Theory*”.