

3rd Level Gestalt Therapy Training

Assignment 1 – Field Theory Essay

Discuss Field Theory with reference to field sensitive practice as a respectful and empathetic approach to entering a person's world and exploring their phenomenological and dialogical field. Use your clinical experience and references to literature examined to support your expressed viewpoint. Please read all material on 'Field Theory' in First, Second and Third Year Readers.

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In this assignment I will attempt to do a number of things. First, I will explore Field Theory, by discussing what it is, what it is attempting to do, and why it is an essential element of Gestalt theory and practice. Then I will discuss its relevance to an empathic and respectful approach to entering a person's world and exploring their phenomenological and dialogical field and, in doing so, will include relevant aspects of my personal experience of Gestalt therapy. Finally, I will explore why adopting a field approach can be difficult and why this is so.

Field theory is one of the three pillars upon which Gestalt therapy stands. Central to the practice of Gestalt therapy is the interdependent interaction of field theory, the dialogic approach and phenomenology (Parlett 1997 p18). Gestalt grew out of the post-Modern movement which sought, among other things, to restore the split between subject and object, between consciousness and its environment, between "man" and nature (Wilber 2007).

Field theory "re-introduces the sense of a unified whole in which subject and object cease to be in opposition", where the self is experienced in some essential ways as being created at the boundary of the self and its environment, "the system of contacts at any moment ... the contact boundary at work" (Parlett 1991 p74-75).

As such, field theory has been described as a new way of thinking where in therapy "the overall picture or total situation is appreciated as a whole", where there is an active appreciation of "the organised, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of complex human phenomena" (Parlett 1993 p116).

In contrast to the Modernist scientific paradigm, ushered in by Galileo, Newton, Descartes and Kant, which seeks to identify, analyse and explain apparently objective, observable phenomena by identifying the underlying causes and reducing cause into its constituent parts; the Gestalt field theory approach seeks not to identify single individual causes, but rather to apprehend how human experience is a function of the organisation of the field as a whole, is a function of contact and, indeed, is a consequence of *how* the self organises such contact (Parlett 1991 and 1993).

As such, the field is not passive, nor given, nor something only to be observed. The field is organised by me as I give emphasis to different aspects of it that have meaning for me; and, I am acted on by the field, affected by the field, changed by the field. This is the great Post Modern discovery that reality, the great “out there” is not a given only to be objectively observed, it is *interactive*.

Wilber (2007 p88-89) notes that “neither the self nor the world is simply pre-given, but rather they exist in contexts and backgrounds that have a history, a development. ... The subject is not some detached, isolated, pre-given, and fully formed little entity that simply parachutes to earth Rather, the subject is *situated* in contexts and in currents of its own development, its own history, its own evolution, and the “pictures” it makes of “the world” depend in large measure not so much on the “world” as on this history” (emphasis in original).

Against this background I will consider various definitions of the field and of field theory, and some of the practical implications in adopting or acting from such a perspective.

Field theory has been variously described as a “set of principles, an outlook, a method and a whole way of thinking which relates to the intimate inter-connectedness between events and the settings ... (within) which these events take place” (Parlett 1991 p70). Mackewen (1997 p48) defines the field as the individual-environment entity, “where the field consists of all the complex interactive phenomena of individuals and their environment”.

Lewin (in Parlett 1991, p70) notes that the hallmark of field theory is “looking at the total situation”, not the parts, bit by bit. By not reducing complex interdependent phenomena into separate components, by perceiving the situation as a whole, by appreciating the whole picture “there is a willingness (by the therapist in relationship with the client) to address and investigate the organised, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of complex human phenomena” (Parlett 1991 p70).

Field sensitive practice therefore requires me, as the therapist, to be sensitively aware of myself as a whole person, respectfully and empathically in relationship with the client paying attention to all of my reactions and responses as I tune into the client’s inner life. My growing awareness of what is happening for them helps to facilitate a similar growth in awareness in them (Mackewen 1997 p47-48).

Joyce and Sills (2001 p24) note that a field theoretical perspective underpins Gestalt therapy and encompasses: the internal world of the client (their phenomenology); the external world or environment (including the therapist); and the ever-changing relationships between them. The internal world of the client is their reality, their phenomenology; and the external world is the larger field, or environment, within which they exist. Field sensitive therapy is thus the process by which the therapist helps the client to become aware of how they organise or interpret their field, of how they create meaning, of how they interact with the field. Ultimately, with the right support, the client becomes aware of how they might organise or interpret the field differently.

Mackewen seeks to elucidate the main principles underlying a field theoretic approach (1997 p49). These are principles are:

1. People cannot be understood in isolation, but only as integral and interactive wholes with their environment.
2. The field consists of all the interactive phenomena of individuals and their environment, with all aspects of the field being potentially significant and interconnected.
3. Human behaviour cannot be attributed to any single cause, but arises from the interlocking forces of the field.
4. The field and the forces operating in the field are in continual flux.

5. People actively organise their field and reorganise their perception of their circumstances (or field) by continually making some aspects of the field figural, while others become background, due to their need or interest.
6. People, thus, endow the events they experience with meaning.
7. In these ways people co-create their experience of the field and have existential responsibility for their experience of the field or, at least, the meaning that they give to such events.
8. Human behaviour and experience happen in the present and a person's behaviour can only be explained in terms of the present field.
9. As all aspects of the field are interconnected, change in any one part of the field is likely to affect the whole field.

Importantly, Mackewen notes that the value of any therapeutic intervention is field dependent and that to avoid being reductionist, in your understanding of field theory, therapists need to take into account all nine aspects, not just the first one (1997 p52). Now, I don't know about you, but I find such a list pretty intimidating and for me to consciously keep track of such a list would make it all but impossible to stay in relational field sensitive contact with the client.

Moreover, the apparent complexity of the situation is for me further compounded by the attempt by Parlett (1991) to recast the field approach to therapy by identifying the five aspects of field into the principles of organisation, contemporaneity, singularity, changing process, and possible relevance (Sills, Fish & Lapworth 1995).

Parlett (1991 p71) in recasting field theory thus sought to identify the five principles or propositions which characterise the Gestalt "way of perceiving and thinking about context, holism and process, and which lie at the very centre of our outlook and work as Gestalt therapists".

This for me highlights the fundamental challenge of the field theory therapeutic approach: How do I as a person borne in the twentieth century inculcated, imbued and trained in the scientific-materialist logical positivist worldview (headset) manage to consciously transcend this heritage and engage in the unified field in practice.

In effect I am being asked to perceive differently, to think differently. Indeed, perhaps to transcend the thinking mind and to act from a more integrative level of consciousness. The concern for me is that I become too “heady” trying to keep track of all the apparent variables. Which, if I am not careful, makes it very difficult for me to stay in relationship with the client.

Parlett (1997) to his credit seeks to address this concern, in his *The Unified Field in Practice*, though I’m not sure how well he does so. Parlett (1997 p17) notes that the unified field is above all an integrating concept and a *mode of experiencing* (my emphasis). Where such an approach is “not about enumerating causes individually (or *en masse*). It is about acknowledging the individual’s *undivided essence*, that is, the unified field, which is organised” (Parlett 1997 p22, his emphasis). In acknowledging this undivided essence Parlett notes that Gestaltists seek to stay close to the client’s experienced reality. Parlett goes on to note that “once the unified field is appreciated as a phenomenon and a concept, the work of the Gestalt practitioner is clear” (Parlett 1997 p23). Though how exactly I do this is not so clear to me.

Though I think Parlett got it right with the words “mode of experiencing”. For in these words is an important clue for me in how to conduct myself respectfully and empathically, in a field sensitive way, in the therapy session.

To me Mackewen (1997 p43) more usefully addresses this concern when she notes that working in such a “profoundly holistic way can feel almost more like a form of meditation in which you allow yourself to be fully receptive to client’s and how they impact on you”. This to me gets closer to the nub of it. *Beingness*, for me, is an essential component to being a Gestalt therapist.

My experience in conducting a therapy session is that the session goes best when I am in a rested, present, non-intellectual state. Where I have empathic feeling sensitivity for the client, employing directed awareness to the client’s total state as I am experiencing it. Respectfully and empathically exploring what is figural in my relationship with the client, allowing me to notice and work with

themes and contexts, while maintaining awareness of the client's constantly changing figure and ground.

In this state there is no sense of time, just presence and a feeling sensitivity through which I am able to perceive holistically. In Gestalt terms this unified field way of perceiving also seems to encompass a dialogic way of being, of relating. Where I am fully present, available to the client, able to explore the experience of the client. In effect to somehow gain an appreciation for their experience of the field and to confirm their experience of it (Hycner 1991).

Hycner (1991 p122) notes that in order to be able to enter the world of the client, "the therapist must be fully 'present' to the client". However, my experience is that this can be a difficult state to be in. I have found in therapy that it is not easily attained, nor once attained easily maintained. Hycner (1991, p50) notes that "given the strong analytical zeitgeist of modern society there is a compelling temptation to for a therapist to analyse the client's experience into psychological "causes" and to diagnose and treat accordingly".

Mackewen (1997 p43) confirms the inherent paradox of this approach in noting that "although it sounds simple, developing this sought of openness to the other person as a whole is not easy because most of us are trained to make suppositions and classifications, using our knowledge that we have acquired over many years".

This for me highlights the real challenge of the Gestalt unified field approach and my ability to practice it. How do I overcome my training, my worldview, my cultural way of viewing? How do I avoid bringing a Modernist perspective (way of thinking – of being) to a Post Modern existential Gestalt way of being? This for me is the real issue. Because the risk is that I will bring a rational, reductive, logical approach (indeed, way of being) to a transrational, existential, experiential Gestalt way of being that includes the former, but that the former has no conception of.

Parlett (1997 p18) notes that field theory “invites the Gestalt practitioner into nonlinear thinking (undermining simplistic notions of cause and effect)”. For Parlett this way of thinking honours the specific nature of situations and people, it is relativistic and non-dichotomous, it underlines present-centeredness and the uniqueness of moments, and it recognises that the field is organised (Parlett 1997 p19).

However, I am wondering if it is more than just a way of thinking, for me it seems it is more a way of *Being*, a state or level of consciousness that is required. Thinking is a part of it, but it is not the whole of it. Indeed, perhaps thinking itself is the problem!? At this point Wilber I believe provides a very useful perspective.

Wilber (2007 p218) notes 9 levels of consciousness, which encompass the progression of consciousness from the physical (sensoriphysical), the emotional, through the various levels of mind-based egoic consciousness (rep-mind, rule/role mind, formal reflexive mind), to the existential (or vision/network logic), to the transpersonal psychic, subtle and causal levels of consciousness.

Importantly, the vision-logic or network-logic level of consciousness is a type of synthesising and integrating non-thinking level of awareness. Wilber (2007 p286) notes that formal-reflexive thinking awareness, which precedes vision-logic awareness,

is synthesising and integrating in many important and impressive ways, but it still tends to possess a kind of dichotomising logic, a logic of either/or, rather like Aristotelian logic. But vision-logic adds up the parts and sees networks or interactions. ... When the self's centre-of-gravity identifies with vision-logic, when the person lives from that level, then we tend to get a very highly integrated personality ... which (is not an) ... isolated self or atomistic self or egocentric self, but rather a self integrated in its networks.

This self is able to perceive, to appreciate wholes.

Rowan (2006) believes that Gestalt therapy operates mainly in and from the vision-logic level of awareness. “Where in ‘I –Thou’ moments the ‘real-self’ is known and is made known to the ‘real self’ in another. Where the ‘rational mental ego’ is transcended by the *knowing* of the ‘real self’” (my emphasis).

So where does this leave us with our exploration of field sensitive practice as a respectful and empathetic approach to entering a client's world and exploring their phenomenological and dialogical field?

Mackewen (1997 p45) provides a useful insight for me in how to relate in a holistic way, without getting too caught up in the detail of therapy. She notes that

Holism proposes that all parts of a person function in a coordinated fashion in the interests of the whole, and that all the different parts are interrelated so that a change in any one part will affect the whole of that person. Change in one part creates change in the whole ..."

I have had my own experience of this in conducting a therapy session with a fellow student during the first Saturday morning clinic. Where both, the 'client' and the 'therapist', in a rested state were allowing each other to be felt and perceived as they were in the moment. The client relating how he was finding it difficult to get the "space" he needed by himself, whilst still being in relationship with his partner. In talking about his experience the client was felt by me to be moving out of his body into his head as he tried to "figure it out". I, as the therapist, could feel this movement and gently enquired where he was now, as I could feel a movement in me up into my head. He related that he was moving thus and I enjoined him to be aware of this movement and to allow himself to feel himself. This simple change in awareness allowed a change in his being back into a more felt state of being, rested in himself. Somehow, enjoying and experiencing the "space" that was important to him, even though he was in a small room filled with four people.

So I suppose to finish. Though there is much more that could be said.

For me to be a Gestalt therapist capable of engaging in field sensitive practice, able to respectfully and empathetically enter a client's world and able to co-explore their phenomenological and dialogical field, requires presence, humility and sensitive relationship.

It requires me to build a bridge to where the client is, using my self as instrument, as I come to understand and realise what it is that the client experiences and how they experience it. All aspects of the field are important here, where the person's context is as important as the person themselves, in understanding the person themself.

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