

Gestalt Approaches to Body-Oriented Theory: An Introduction

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This paper introduces three articles on body-oriented work in Gestalt therapy. The three articles and their authors are described. Implications for strengths and weaknesses of the Gestalt approach are discussed. Weak areas include a lack of detailed understanding of embodiment, lack of developmental theory, and theoretical limits in the integration of spirituality in treatment. Strengths include the syncretic capacity of the Gestalt approach to integrate from outside of our given theory and practice.

IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE to introduce these three offerings from Gestalt practitioners, all of whom are attending to the integral nature of embodiment in human process. These offerings are diverse within the field of body-oriented work and cover a range of interests: from the integration of body work into therapy, to the nuances of developmental movement patterns in contact process, to the subtle energies of the body and their impact on perception, health, and disease. They offer us not only a view into areas where Gestalt principles can be usefully extended, but also, by implication, point out areas where there are meaningful limitations in Gestalt theory and practice. I would like to briefly introduce the papers themselves and then offer some comments that I hope will generate a wider dialogue in our reading community.

I am lucky enough to know each of these practitioners and their work. Besides being knowledgeable and gifted Gestalt therapists, each has dedicated herself to acquiring a deep knowledge and understanding within a distinct field of body-work separate from Gestalt: Ilana Rubinfeld in Feldenkrais and Alexander techniques, including hands-on practice; Ruella Frank in dance movement and the developmental

movement theory of Body Mind Centering; and Frances Baker in the hands-on energy healing arts, which address the interface of the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions where "field theory" is an actual energy field and not just a theoretical concept. Each had to go outside of Gestalt to acquire knowledge and practices from which could apply to their interests, but it is the syncretic nature of the Gestalt approach that allowed them to integrate what they learned with therapeutic principles. More on this later.>--"

Ilana Rubinfeld's "Six' Aha's:" reflect her distillation of the key elements of her work in their most essential form. While not expressed as an outline of theory, these principles are deeply rooted in Gestalt attitude and orientation: the integral nature of body, mind, and emotion; the validity of embodied modes of therapeutic contact; the importance of experience and awareness as opposed to intellectual understanding in the change process; self-regulation and self-responsibility; and so on. More than any practitioner, her use of touch to effect sensation, contact process, and emotional patterning in the body has helped create a place for truly embodied therapy in Gestalt practice.

Ruella Frank's paper on "Reaching and Being Reached" beautifully reflects not only an embodied approach to therapeutic process, but embodiment as a field phenomenon. Her understanding, through the Body Mind Centering approach, is of the developmental "structures of ground" to use Wheeler's (1991) phrase, which pre-organize our contact process in adult life. Her integration of these developmental patterns to develop resources for contact brings us well beyond the simplistic notions of the resistances (such as retroflexion and desensitization) to which the original Gestalt therapy theory had understood embodiment and contact. Early Gestalt therapy always included embodiment in its understanding of human process, while having little to say about the specifics of embodiment beyond explorations in the moment. Frank adds to a growing literature that notes that one cannot understand embodiment without learning about the body and that process work is not enough.

Frances Baker's paper emerges from two important directions in her own experience which pushed her to reach beyond Gestalt practice for resources that could truly help her patients: her original training in nursing, which supported her to serve the seriously ill in her work as a psychologist, and her spiritual interests, which prompted her long study of energy healing practices using the auric field and the consciously generated flow of the practitioner's "chi" to directly affect the client's bodily state and experience. In this paper she shows us how Gestalt understanding of the therapeutic encounter can be exquisitely used in the healing process, but she reaches beyond this to suggest that

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awareness is not always enough, that direct support and change of the client's process by the therapist can importantly serve the larger goal of healing (becoming whole from the original Greek origin "holos"). This principle, in my mind, under the circumstance of debility and lack of resource caused as illness, supercedes the ideological phobia against change without awareness that I hear expressed by many Gestalt therapists. Our strength is certainly in awareness work, but it is not a religious principle that one must only work through awareness methods when there are prerequisites to make awareness possible.

The strengths of the Gestalt approach are not our theoretical rigor or that our theory is capable of thorough explanation of all human phenomena, but rather in two areas: its broad sweep and inclusiveness and that its methodology provides the practitioner with an inherently experiential mode in which every aspect of experience is fair game. It is these two elements that give us such syncretic power, that is, the capacity to reach outside of our theoretical and methodological arena and integrate other sources of specific knowledge to us. Nonetheless, these features are also a weakness in our approach because there are many gaps and holes in our own area that can only be filled by going outside. The good noose and the bad noose, you might say, because any time we think we can explain everything within a Gestalt approach, we hang ourselves. Like all nooses, one must take them lightly. Some areas of reflection on the paper's highlights follow.

While the Gestalt approach has been one of the few therapeutic schools in which the body has always been included, practitioners have always had to reach outside the field for techniques specific enough to understand and address embodied concerns. The techniques that emerged naturally from our process approach, such as work with retro-reflection, the ridiculously limited and often erroneous notions of breathing and excitement, and body concentration (attention to sensation), are simply inadequate to do any deep work with embodiment. One must understand how body structure affects contact and emotions, have a specific understanding of the mechanics of breathing, have deep training in the use of touch intervention, and understand movement organization and patterning. It is not enough to talk about the body and support without understanding how support happens biomechanically and how this is linked to development (as Frank's paper helps us see) and character. Process work without this base is inadequate.

Another area is in our understanding of development. The original developmental theory in the Gestalt approach, the oral stage of development and oral aggression, was at best a metaphor for dilemmas in adult contact. Not only was it not based on actual observation of children (neither Freud nor Perls appeared ever to actually feed an infant),

but it stemmed from a theory that is now vastly superceded by advances in affect theory, cognitive development, and so on. Current reformulations of developmental theory in the Gestalt approach (such as McConville, 1995) use our theory more to illuminate and inform developmental theory developed from sources outside us (as Perls "reformulated" Freud's oral theory), again pointing to the integrative and syncretic nature of the Gestalt approach.

One more area I would comment on is the integration of the spiritual dimension. It is the strength of our approach that we take people's experience seriously. I have commented elsewhere that this is what allowed Gestalt practitioners to take claims of incest seriously when analysts were dismissing them as fantasy (Kepner 1-995), and this also includes mystical and spiritual experience. Additionally, our experiential and experiential approach allows us to create conditions in which such experience can be explored and developed. But the spiritual dimension of experience cannot be understood within our theory because it rests in a dimension that supercedes the box of psychological theory. The attempts I have heard to explain spiritual experience in Gestalt concepts, such as linking it to confluence for example, are ludicrous to anyone who has actually had a spiritual experience. It is only where the practitioner has actual personal access to this dimension that they can work with clients in the interface with this realm of experience, and the Gestalt approach provides a process but not an understanding at this interface. Like Frances Baker, one has to work and develop one's spiritual nature in practices outside of the Gestalt approach in order to usefully utilize our process methodology to work with clients in this way.

We must understand our strengths and sort out what is really key and essential to the Gestalt approach from what are shibboleths and outmoded concepts or notions that are specific to only one dimension of experience. What are our key strengths? They include our experiential and experiential mode of working, our interest in experience, our syncretic capacity, our holism, our field notions ("field theory" implying more than I think we actually have), and some others. We must support the "reach" into domains of specific knowledge, and we must go outside our box to create anything truly fresh, novel, and useful. We must hold the paradox of learning and practicing in ways that are at odds with our cherished principles (awareness, for example) until a new whole emerges that integrates and includes the polarities (this being different from argument and dialectic, that is, holding one "truth" against another's: we must hold both at the same time). In the area of embodiment, these papers help take us in these directions.

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Healing in Psychotherapy: Using Energy, Touch, and Imagery with Cancer Patients

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Within the past 10 years my practice has come to include a large number of patients suffering from cancer. I have found that these patients are often so debilitated by their treatments that they require support, not only mentally and emotionally, but also spiritually and physically as well. Traditional talk therapy blended with energy work, touch, and guided imagery offers the broad band of support that seriously ill patients require. In this paper I describe how I have joined principles and practices of energy healing, touch, and imagery with a Gestalt approach to psychotherapy. I explore and describe the compatibility of healing work and Gestalt practice. I discuss treatment design and include a case study and discussion.

MY INTEREST IN WRITING this article is threefold. First, I want to tell my own story of evolving from a Gestalt therapist using primarily talk therapy to a Gestalt therapist integrating energy, touch, and imagery with those patients struggling with a health crisis, most often cancer. Second, I want to discuss and define what I mean by a therapeutic relationship and how I see psychotherapy as healing. Third, I want to explore treatment design and considerations. I will include a case study and discussion. It is my hope that this article serves as a bridge from traditional therapy to nontraditional therapies and gives an enlarged view of what is possible in therapy work with seriously ill patients. It is my belief that a psychotherapy that integrates both traditional and nontraditional methods of healing is more potent and effective. It is my hope that sharing my experience will provide other practitioners another way to look at working with cancer patients.

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