

Art and Creativity in Gestalt Therapy

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The development and theoretical foundation of the aesthetic and creative dimensions of Gestalt therapy are presented. Special consideration is given to the reflection of the theoretical and practical significance of art and creativity for the founders of Gestalt Therapy, in particular Laura Perls. Contributions from the “pioneers” in this field in the United States are discussed. A number of principles suited for a timely appreciation and practice of art and creative process in Gestalt therapy are suggested.

Guidelines for an Appreciation of Creativity in Gestalt Therapy

MY THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS on the use of artistic methods and materials in Gestalt therapy are based on a number of practice-related guidelines. They begin with the application of the principles of Gestalt theory, such as figure/ground, the principles of good Gestalt, Prägnanz and closure, as well as viewing perception as an active process. This implies a process-oriented approach in working with artistic methods that supports the concept of perceiving and understanding. Our focus is not merely the product of creative expression but, rather, the process through which it came to be. The realization that cognition and emotion are inextricable helps us understand the relationship between figure and ground, that is meaning. Patterns in our lives and their location within the context of our reality emerge.

Playful experiences within the therapeutic relationship enable authentic self-expression, the meaning of which is to be found in the life context of the person involved. Gestalt therapy can facilitate the ability

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of human beings to engage playfully and creatively with one another by offering potential space for impulses to unfold and develop. Productive thinking, another theoretical guideline, is analogous to creative adjustment, a process that aims for the transformation of the familiar into something novel and valuable and searches for the “good Gestalt” in the sense of an aesthetic self-expression and one’s uniquely appropriate style. Productive or “independent,” thinking implies understanding the relationship between figure and ground, giving meaning to our experiences and gaining insight into the implications of our actions. The reorganization of familiar, chronically poorly configured elements into something new and valuable and therefore beautiful reflects the embeddedness of Gestalt therapy in field theory. The forces of the elements in the field that, when reconfigured, suddenly make sense and seem to “fit” and the impact of an insightful “aha” experience are examples of this embeddedness.

Being able to appreciate personal meaning and achieving individual style may be considered developmental goals in a culture of rapidly changing mass fads and fashions. Furthermore, the concept of isomorphism, or structural relatedness between experience and expression, has gained in significance for the relationship between psychotherapeutic practice and theoretical knowledge of Gestalt therapy. Experiencing the authentic expression of inner experiences with artistic materials during therapeutic interaction enhances that which exists “between” therapist and patient. Being part of this process makes it something beyond mere self-expression. It is a phase in a process taking place between two human beings.

The same phase applies to the application of processual diagnosis and dialogic relationship during all phases of the therapeutic process. The description of interpersonal behavior patterns; modes of sensing, thinking, and feeling; symptoms; and disturbances are our working hypotheses. A processual diagnosis can be compared to the number of temporary stops that one makes during a journey. Diagnosis can be seen as relatively constant ways of being in the world with others. The life context and interpersonal patterns of the therapist are an integral part of this diagnostic process. Another guideline involves being personally familiar with the materials and methods one uses. This familiarity has become a prerequisite to appreciating the possible attractiveness and effects they can have on others. Experience with the repercussions and risks of materials is an essential part of teaching their use.

Creativity in psychotherapy is more than being creative as a therapist or being in contact with a patient who shows creative qualities. It is the daring, creative interaction within the therapeutic relationship.

It is that which happens in the no man's land between patient and therapist, through them. Creativity in Gestalt therapy means venturing beyond self-expression and entering the dynamics of the productive interchange within the therapeutic relationship. The creative expression and interchange can best be encouraged in Gestalt therapy when the therapeutic process is "creative" in the just-mentioned way and the participants in this process have attained optimal results with the givens of the situations. To this end, precisely those individually created experiments are suitable that, in contrast to stereotyped exercises, take the uniqueness of the patient into account and also require the therapist to act creatively. Only the continuous production of custom-made interventions, whether in individual, couples, or group therapy, stimulates the liveliness, innovation and meaningfulness that are necessary if those interventions are to be called creative in the Gestalt therapy sense of the word.

Recent research has confirmed that neither the minds nor the bodies of two persons work the exact same way. Since no two brains function identically, we as therapists have to explore the sensory strengths of our patients. Some patients orient themselves well visually to images, shapes, colors, and designs. Others attend readily to auditory signals, while others are particularly receptive to spatial modes of communication and need interaction involving direction, movement, and space. Still others find it easy to communicate in metaphoric terms or enjoy playing with figures of speech. Such verbal interventions as metaphor and verbal imagery may not have the intended effect on a person, but gestures, facial expressions, and group "sculptures" may. When a therapist realizes in which sensory mode his or her patient's strength lies, then it is advisable to direct the therapeutic interventions to the patient's preferred way of experiencing. Successfully addressing the particular sensory strength of our patients and matching it with an appropriate therapeutic intervention is a prerequisite for what I colloquially call "picking up the patient where he or she is." This additionally requires the diagnostic knowledge necessary to assess the patient's developmental level, major conflicts, and ways of dealing with interpersonal problems. If our patients are not reacting favorably to our interventions, then we may be addressing them in a sensory mode to which they are slow to react or with which they cannot deal properly (Burley, 1998, p. 133). Assuming that cognition and feeling are inseparable processes, I agree with Burley's statement that creativity is a phenomenon relying on the entire human brain, with differing emphasis, depending on whether the activity involved is one of composing music, writing, or painting.

The Development of the Aesthetic and Creative Dimension in Gestalt Therapy

How the Founders of Gestalt Therapy Treated Art and Creativity

The initial phase of Gestalt therapy is indicative of its withdrawal from classical psychoanalysis and the development of an approach that can appreciate the comprehensive expression of a human being on different levels of experience. In an early article, Fritz Perls (1948) describes working with a sculptor who sought him out because of two crucial disturbances. Perls left the medium of spoken language temporarily and suggested that the artist express his problems by sculpting them. This means of expression on the nonverbal level enabled him to enter domains that were closed off from the exclusively verbal level.

Considering the cultural interests of Fritz and Laura Perls, it is not surprising that the founders of Gestalt therapy stimulated and inspired creative expression through an abundance of media and materials. Fritz Perls loved the theater, had worked in plays directed by Max Reinhardt, and took over elements of Moreno's Psychodrama in his new psychotherapeutic approach. Both Fritz and Laura were strongly influenced by German Expressionism and modern literature. Laura Perls emphasized that she considered herself to be a musician and writer before she became a psychologist and a psychotherapist (Kitzler, Perls, and Stern 1982). Long into her late years Laura played the piano and held an active interest in modern dance. Perls (1989) described her lifelong interest in world literature in the following manner: "I acquired more insight and richness of thoughts out of it, a better feeling for values and greater awareness of the possibilities of dealing with them than from reading psychological textbooks and journals or even from my own psychoanalysis" (p. 121f.). Under the prerequisite that a psychotherapist's work is existential-phenomenological, experiential and experimental, Laura Perls encouraged the application of the most diverse techniques, depending, of course, on the personal and professional experiential background of the therapist.

Paul Goodman yearned for acknowledgment as a man of letters. He expressed his creativity not only as a writer of poems, short stories, plays, and novels, but also as a philosopher and social critic, in which fields he was more widely acclaimed. His literary style is obviously reflected in the theoretical part of Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951). Goodman introduced Fritz and Laura Perls to the founders of the legendary "Living Theatre" in New York, Judith Malina and Julian Beck (see Sreckovic, 1999, p. 123). His involvement in the "Living Theatre" included writing plays and the "communitas" aspect of the project, viewing art as a means of creating community value (Humphrey, 1999, p. 173).

Psychotherapy as an Art and a Science

The new approach received the name Gestalt therapy, although Laura Perls considered the name *Gestaltung Therapie* more appropriate, because the term *Gestaltung* describes a process, not something that is static, such as a fixed gestalt. She depicts *Gestalt* as a philosophic and aesthetic concept (Kitzler et al., 1982, p. 13).

Moreover, she deplored the narrow backgrounds of some psychotherapists that limited their practice of therapy. "Psychotherapy is as much an art as it is a science. The intuition and immediacy of the artist are as necessary for the good therapist as a scientific education" (Perls and Rosenfeld, 1982, p. 27). She praised the artistic talents of early psychotherapists and psychologists of the 1920s and 1930s, especially their insight and intuition. In her opinion, having a broader humanistic and artistic background would allow psychotherapists a better approach to a wider spectrum of people. Much of what we designate as pathological or psychotic is, according to Laura Perls, often something that is not understood or, owing to its limitations, cannot be accessed by certain psychotherapists (cited in Kurdika, 1982, p. 32).

She goes on to describe an appropriate example of this broader background knowledge from her own practice: her knowledge of poetry, modern poetry in particular, enabled her to treat a schizophrenic young woman who was silent during the first few sessions, then began to communicate through her own poems. Laura Perls went as far as saying that good therapists are also good artists, even though they are not known as artists or considered to be artistic. In this vein, a background and continuing experience in the arts as an influence on a psychotherapist broadens his or her communicative abilities and deepens his or her understanding of many aspects of personalities. This influence of the arts is reflected in Gestalt therapy's emphasis on intuitively comprehending essentials and enhances the therapist's insight into human nature (e.g., Kelley, 1982)

Creative Expression and the Concept of Health in Gestalt Therapy

Developing awareness of one's own processes as well as one's own creative possibilities is essential to the health of a human being. When one is working through conflicts and interpersonal problems within the Gestalt therapeutic approach, a colorful palette of creative means of expression may be implemented to promote productive solutions.

By emphasizing the analogies between the creative processes in art and in psychotherapy, various artistic media are made available to facilitate creative expression. The application of such art forms as painting and drawing, modelling and sculpting, collages, pantomime and

dance, musical instruments, and voice enables the integration of awareness, movement, and emotion into a present-centered contact process that requires the use of all our senses. The state of concentrated perception and spontaneity that usually accompanies this process is indicative of the middle mode and spontaneous self (e.g., Leitner, 1982; Aissen-Crewett, 1986; Perls et al., 1997).

“Creativity and adjustment are polar; they are mutually necessary” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 231). In their description of creative adjustment and progressive integration, Perls et al. compare creative artists to children by calling special attention to the structure of art-working and children’s play (p. 245). This theoretical assumption, that spontaneity can be considered to be evidence of curative insight, is in accordance with modern psychoanalytic theory (see e.g., 1971, Winnicott). Perls et al. attempt to bridge the artificial divide between the spontaneity of creative artists and children, on one hand, and general creative adjustment on the other hand:

The important part of the psychology of art is not in the dream or in the critical consciousness; it is (where the psychoanalysts do not look for it) in the concentrated sensation and in the playful manipulation of the material medium. . . . His [the artist’s] awareness is in a kind of middle mode, neither active nor passive, but accepting the conditions, attending to the job, and *growing* toward the solution. And just so with children: it is their bright sensation and free, apparently aimless, play that allows the energy to flow spontaneously and come to such charming inventions. . . . Can the same middle mode of acceptance and growth operate in adult life in more “serious” concerns? We believe so [Perls et al., 1951, pp. 245–246].

In this vein, they “insist on the unitary thesis, on the creativity of structured wholes” (p. 239) and propose the following approach: “The method of treatment is to come into closer and closer contact with the present crisis, until one identifies, risking the leap into the unknown, with the coming creative integration of the split (p. 240).

Working therapeutically with artistic media proceeds principally the way other experiments in Gestalt therapy do: the continuing process is emphasized; increased awareness and allowing oneself to be involved in new experiences are aimed for as well. The goal is to tap into dormant or unexpected expressive possibilities of a person by engaging in the use of a wide range of methods. As practiced in the Gestalt therapeutic experiment, this is a diagnostic-therapeutic process (e.g., Suess and Martin, 1978, p. 2738).

Pioneers in the United States

“The Gestalt Art Experience”—*Janie Rhyne*

As Gestalt therapy began to establish itself in the United States, Janie Rhyne was one of the pioneers in this domain who combined her background as an artist, anthropologist, and psychologist to create the “Gestalt art experience,” the term she coined to describe her method of working (Vich and Rhyne, 1967 and Rhyne, 1971, 1973a, b). Rhyne’s approach gives us guidelines for the use of art materials to find and explore one’s own (and others’) individually unique qualities, stimulates expanding one’s range of perception through the creation of forms with art materials, and helps us learn to understand the visual messages these forms convey. In contrast to early writings on Gestalt art therapy, which reflected a product-oriented focus, Rhyne’s 1996 revised edition of her book, originally published in 1973, depicts the development in this field: the emphasis is on the process. Artistic media serve as a bridge between the internal and external worlds, and the forms that evolve are messages that support human beings’ expressive possibilities, contact functions, and problem-solving strategies.

Principles of Gestalt Psychological Theories of Perception:

It becomes apparent that the laws of Gestalt psychological theories of perception guide this approach:

- Perception is an active process.
- We create figures and background spontaneously and naturally (figure/ground).
- We show a natural tendency to complete wholes and effect the closure of “open” or unfinished parts of wholes (closure).
- There is a tendency to be aware of certain patterns (laws of similarity and proximity)
- There is a further tendency to reduce configurations to simple forms (“good” forms, the law of *Prägnanz*).
- Our perception is influenced by actual needs, experiences, and individual personalities.
- Actively organizing forces are present in meaningful wholes (Rhyne, 1973b, p. 8ff.).

The crucial aspect of the therapist’s task in the Gestalt art experience is his or her skill in transferring the insights and realizations of the entire process onto the way one structures and experiences one’s life and relationships. Rhyne is convinced that *sensory memories* can more

effectively be activated by nonverbal, sensory experiences, such as movement and body awareness as well as working with art materials, than by remaining on a purely verbal level.

Gestalt Therapy as Creative Therapy—Joseph Zinker

In a stimulating and playful manner, Zinker (1971, 1974, 1977) warns psychotherapists time and again about the pitfalls of using stereotyped, repetitive exercises with their patients. He considers Gestalt therapy itself to be a creative process. Zinker (1974) sums up his position with the basic tenet that Gestalt therapy is “permission to be creative” (p. 75), and he suggests that therapists experiment creatively as a means of coming closer to the unknown territories of the personality. Zinker is well-known for his dreamwork as theater and for his Gestalt art workshops with music and artistic materials. He stresses that therapeutic and creative processes are connected on the levels of transformation, metamorphosis and change.

The goal that Zinker (1977) proposes is the concretization and symbolization of one’s inner life, expressing aspects of it with a broad spectrum of media and exploring it fully: “For me, doing therapy is like making art. The medium is a human life. Whether admitted or not, the effective therapist shapes lives. Too often the therapist is not honest about his powerful influence on others and unwilling to take responsibility for his behavior” (p. 37). In doing this, the creative therapist treats the person facing him in his complex entirety, just as a choreographer, playwright, or a visionary would. “The creative therapist provides the milieu, the thick, rich atmosphere within which a person’s integrity can become more fully realized” (p. 38). Although I am convinced from his writing that Zinker treats patients with respect and integrity, I do not share his opinion that patients are the artistic medium for creative therapists. It appears to me that creative process is not a one-way course of action but, rather, is the result of interdependencies and mutual influences within the therapist–patient interaction.

*Art and Creative Expression in Children
and Adolescents—Violet Oaklander*

Oaklander’s (1979, 1992) contributions to the Gestalt therapeutic approach to working with children and adolescents through the use of art materials deserve special attention. She employs creative means of expression in her Gestalt therapeutic practice to facilitate her patients’ achieving better awareness of self and having a fuller experience of the here-and-now of their existence and experience. The focus of her work lies on *what* someone does in his or her life, *how* he or she does it, and

the *consequences* of this behavior. Oaklander's concept is based on the theoretical assumption that imaginative children have higher I.Q.s and are better equipped to solve and overcome problems. She encourages imagination as a means of improving a child's ability to learn and resolve the problems with which he or she is faced.

A second assumption of Oaklander's is the parallelism of imaginative and life processes. An important part of her therapeutic work is the reflection of the process of artistic creation as well as projected personality aspects and identifications with the product of the artistic endeavor. One of the essential goals is naturally to locate the artistic expression within the context of the person's own life outside of therapy. When one is considering indications and counterindications of certain techniques for different forms of problematic behavior, Oaklander's (1978) *facit* is refreshing: "I can't think of one across-the-board generality that fits all children" (p. 62).

Of crucial importance is the phenomenological principle to which Oaklander's approach adheres: the psychotherapist should begin with the child wherever he or she is at the present moment, should respect the child's needs and defenses, enter his or her world gently, and should address the presenting problems. Characteristic of Oaklander's work is the deep respect for the various forms of resistance that her patients present when she engages them. She considers each of the various techniques she applies to be a catalyst, not a means to an end, within the context of the creative, therapeutic process. Since each child and each situation is different, every session will have a different and unpredictable outcome if the therapist can stay with the process that is evolving with the patient and allow the creative process to unfold. In this way, unique means of creative expression are constantly arising from the ongoing, dynamic therapeutic process if the therapeutic interaction permits it. Thus, Oaklander advocates the development of one's own personal therapeutic style, including one's own preferences for materials, which should be an integration of their scientific and artistic abilities. As she sees psychotherapy to be an art, she feels that every psychotherapist must find his or her own path to follow by connecting his or her techniques, knowledge, and experience with intuitive feelings and creative impulses. Otherwise, it is unlikely that anything productive will happen (Oaklander, 1992, p. 243).

Gestalt Art Therapy—Elaine Rapp

Rapp clearly focuses on the search for self in the group participants. Achievement, talent, and artistic productivity are irrelevant to this process. The existential perspective, which requires that the participants take responsibility for themselves and remain present centered, explores

the relationship between a person and his or her environment (material) through a broad spectrum of experiments with formable materials (clay, plasticine, wire, stone, etc.). Rapp encourages dialogues with the polarities emerging out of the artistic products, promotes the exploration of unknown aspects of the self, and considers the message of the creation—as in Gestalt dreamwork—to be an existential one. Rapp (1980) views the basic philosophical assumptions, goals, and results of other forms of gestalt therapeutic work and those of the creative processes of gestalt art therapy to be analogous to each other, despite the fact that the techniques are not identical: “Creative process often evokes fears, such as those of not knowing, of risking, of the taking of new spaces, of the unexpected accident—in short, all the introjects that prevent us from further growth and from contacting our excitement” (p. 92). The uniqueness of each individual is underlined; the artistic creation is regarded as a symbol with personal meaning and as a means of communication. Accordingly, creative growth, that is, health, can occur when this communication with one’s environment is meaningfully processed. This phenomenological approach refers to the tangible or visual contents that confirm a persons’ subjective experience.

The transposition of creative energy from one art form to another was a concern of Leedy and Rapp (1973), who encouraged the cooperation of therapists from various expressive disciplines working together with one patient or in a coordinated therapy program:

There is a link within each of us between the various manifestations of our natural creativeness in writing, art, music and dance. When expressiveness in any one area surfaces, due to contact with a supportive non-threatening therapist, the likelihood of other forms of creative self-expression emerging is enhanced [p. 145].

Toward a Theoretical Integration of Art and Creativity in Gestalt Therapy

“Gestalt” as an Aesthetic Concept—Michael V. Miller

Michael V. Miller (1980) eloquently highlights the fact that Gestalt therapy theory reflects concepts we are familiar with in the field of art. This connection between Gestalt therapy and the arts is not surprising when we remember that the founders of Gestalt therapy were active in creative fields. Whereas drama influenced Fritz Perls’s style of using the hot seat and enactment of dreams and polarities, his theoretical contribution to the aesthetic orientation in Gestalt therapy was negligible. Miller reminds us of the close cooperation between Laura Perls

and Paul Goodman, who both saw in art a vision for ideal functioning. This vision, when applied to all human behavior, guided their gauging of health and pathology in the practice of psychotherapy (Miller, 1980, p. 87). The synthesis of Laura Perls's European Gestalt psychological training and the Gestalt therapeutic concept of the creative autonomy of healthy functioning, together with Goodman's American tradition of radical social criticism, proved fruitful. Their joint theoretical efforts show how the arts can provide the most useful model for theoretical concepts in Gestalt therapy.

Goodman's view also reflected an ideal of art as polar to the evils of society. Concurring with experimental Gestalt psychologists, Laura Perls and Goodman assumed that aesthetic qualities are inherent to human experience. The human tendency to perceive one's experience in meaningful, structured, and organized wholes was applied by the founders of Gestalt therapy to the creative activity of healthy functioning.

Style: In Search of Good Form

Contact has been described as "a person's ability to meet and interpenetrate his or her surrounding world and to gain something new from it" (Miller, 1980, p. 89). If we follow this train of thought, good contact can be seen as an aesthetic activity. Miller upholds the Gestalt therapeutic conviction: "When people move or talk in the ways that are right for each of them, their activities exhibit those qualities by which we judge art—economy and gracefulness, necessity and flexibility. In other words, contact obeys the dictum 'truth is beauty'" (p. 89). I agree with Miller that these activities demonstrate "good form" and are therefore "beautiful" in the sense of being "meaningfully organized" and "integrated." Of importance here is the integration of form and content, as well as of experience and medium. The aesthetic aspects of human activity contribute essentially to therapeutic insight and effectiveness (p. 95). Tophoff (1994) also described an aesthetic paradigm as a guideline for clinical practice that is founded on Gestalt theoretical laws of perception.

Transforming the Familiar and Presenting New Information

The goal of both art and psychotherapy is to bring something novel into the foreground so that a new configuration can emerge out of the transformation or reorganization of the old elements and new, unfamiliar views can develop. Arnheim (quoted in Miller, 1980) reminds us that "the word 'information,' taken literally, means to give form; and form needs structure (p. 88). Both art and psychotherapy thus reflect the human tendency to form and transform familiar elements and thus

bring about new information, to transform one's own experiences in the world in a way that allows for integration. By creating something unique and meaningful, form is given to human experience.

If this transformation of the familiar into something new and meaningful succeeds, the new form allows for a connection of the neglected, forgotten, or avoided elements of the past with present awareness. This integration makes new attitudes, behaviors, and emotional approaches possible. Implications for future activities are discovered. This approach attempts to recognize the creative power that is invested in the formation of symptoms and other dysfunctions while also trying to redirect the investment of these resources into creative solutions for the growing self.

*The Promotion of Creativity
and Psychotherapeutic Interventions*

Psychotherapists in the United States and Europe use a wide range of artistic materials in their awareness training and promotion of creativity based on Gestalt therapy theory (Sagan, 1965; Brown, 1969, 1970; Martin, 1973; Kogen and Cadenhead, 1981; Rosenblatt, 1981). As early as 1965 Sagan suggested alternating between verbal and nonverbal expressive forms, as is usually done in the field of synesthesia, in which an individual is required to describe a particular sense medium in terms of another. This transfer, or transposition, of an experience from one sense or medium to another is an example of how Christian von Ehrenfels's (1890) concept of transposition can be applied (Meier, 1990).

Brown (1969, p. 27) emphasized the necessity of integrating cognitive and emotional dimensions of the self for the creative act. Moreover, healthy, lively, and creative human beings also draw from both these domains for good functioning: their thinking coincides with what they feel. He describes how training in awareness can improve creative functioning at each stage of the conventional four-stage structure of the creative act: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification or elaboration. Of great importance to Brown is the concept of synchronicity, which can be defined as meaningful chance or coincidence. When synchronicity takes place, things seem to fit together or fall into place. This "good fit" or "just right feeling" appears to be what I have been referring to as good form.

Among the stimulating methods that Brown (1970) described is one taken over from Stewart Shapiro in which the past and the future of a person are connected with his or her present situation, so that the unfinished past and the anticipated future can be creatively worked

through in the here-and-now. A road map of one's life is drawn or painted, from birth to the present, or beginning in the here-and-now and continuing into the future as is anticipated. The individual accounts of the streets of the resulting road maps enhance awareness of the now effectively and in a nonthreatening manner.

Kogen and Cadenhead (1981) and Rosenblatt (1981) describe methods of intervention in Gestalt therapy that have been successfully adapted from the realm of drama. Similarly, S. J. Miller's (1973) field observations of a group of dramatic artists reveals parallel processes in personal growth and creative processes. These parallels were related to the following three factors: I-Thou relationships, mobilization of aggression, and integration of the resentment-appreciation polarity.

In an attempt to assist helping professionals to achieve a better balance between analytical, cognitive styles of processing data and experiential, humanistic processes of direct perception, McClure, Merrill, and Russo (1994) draw from the perceptual strategies elucidated by Edwards (1986, 1989), which correspond to Gestalt therapy techniques. McClure intends to complement the linear-causal reasoning skills of counsellors with visual thinking processes and intuitive, metaphoric strategies so that the counselors gain fresh perspectives on and insights into their clients. He stresses the concomitant use of verbal rationality and nonverbal intuition in expanding the helping professions' comprehension of their clients' concerns.

Within the framework of her student counseling practice, Robinson (1991), trained in both Gestalt therapy and psychoanalysis, attempts to integrate Gestalt concepts and methods into a psychodynamic approach. Using case studies from her student counseling practice, she describes which approaches she uses in which combination, depending on the presenting problem and diagnosis. Robinson refers mainly to Winnicott, whose theory stresses the significance of playing and creativity in the therapeutic situation, and considers him to be a possible bridge between the two methods. I agree that the commonalities and differing concepts in these two schools must be carefully explored and that Winnicott's concepts can be integrated into a theory of art and creative process in Gestalt therapy.

Potocky (1993) used weekly art therapy projects, combined with a Gestalt therapy approach, as part of a comprehensive social work treatment for patients diagnosed with chronic schizophrenia in an inpatient setting. She describes the benefits for the patients in this residential facility in enhancing their self-expression, facilitating social interaction, and increasing social skills.

Toward a Process-Oriented and Dialogic Concept of Art and Creativity in Gestalt Therapy

Exploring the development of the aesthetic and creative dimensions of Gestalt therapy leads me to a number of relevant and interrelated themes. In discussing the Gestalt therapeutic substantiation of these themes, as well as authors from other therapeutic orientations whose theories are not contradictory to Gestalt philosophy in these topics and who complement the Gestalt approach with essential aspects, I aim to present a basic outline for a Gestalt therapeutic concept for promoting creative expression and process. This concept is incompatible with technique-oriented perspectives of working with artistic materials which ignore the subjectivity of the process. Additionally, I distinguish this concept from those therapeutic approaches which merely use artistic media as a means of livening up stagnant, stale therapeutic interactions without reflecting them within the framework of Gestalt therapy theory; or, worse, which use methods of creative expression without the theoretical basis in order to loosen up or satisfy the supposed needs of patients or clients so that the method appears more attractive than the rather ascetic demands of more verbally oriented therapeutic methods.

Playing and Self-Expression

Playful experiences allow the anticipation of the realities of life and the demands on a person within the context of his or her life. Such creative and practicing methods in therapeutic work offer an important approach to children, adolescents, and adults. Winnicott's (1971) perspective of the goal of therapy is reminiscent of what we know from Perls.

Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible, then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play (p. 38) . . . It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self [p. 54]

In Perls's (1977) formulation of the goal of treatment, self-expression and awareness on the nonverbal level also play an important role:

The treatment is finished when the patient has achieved the basic requirements: change in outlook, a technique of adequate self-

expression and assimilation, and the ability to extend awareness to the nonverbal level. He has then reached that state of integration which facilitates its own development, and he can now be safely left to himself [p. 68].

The interested reader is referred to Dreitzel's (1992) discussion of Clyne's work on the appropriate expression of emotions and seven "basic biological design properties that appear to govern dynamic communication of emotions" (p. 114ff.). Two of these properties are of special importance to our present topic: equivalence and coherence. The term equivalence, according to Clynes, describes how an emotional state can be expressed by various *output modalities* such as facial expression, bodily stance, voice, and gestures. Coherence reflects the way in which internal experience and its respective expression correspond, regardless of the output modality selected. A coherently expressed feeling produces the impression of authenticity.

Winnicott's (1971) concern with transitional objects and transitional phenomena, which establish a connection between inner psychic reality and the external reality of an infant, led to his hypothesis of an intermediate zone: "The intermediate area to which I am referring is the area that is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality-testing" (p. 11).

Characteristic of activities in this intermediate area is the way that infants become engrossed in what they are doing, similar to the deep concentration of older children and adults. Infants virtually "lose themselves" when they become absorbed in playing. In this state, the experience of being close to another person and being withdrawn are simultaneously present and the boundaries between internal and external reality are permeable. Winnicott sees a logical connection between transitional objects and transitional phenomena, playing, creativity and the creative, cultural experience of human beings in society:

"The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play [p. 100].

Winnicott refers to creativity not in terms of acclaimed success or prize-winning creations, but as a coloring of one's attitude to the outside world. He feels that creative apperception is the most essential factor contributing to a person's feeling that life is worth living. In contrast, he posits a compliant manner of relating to external reality, one in which the outer world and all its facets are seen merely as things to be fitted

in with or that demand adaptation from oneself. This attitude of necessary compliance is accompanied by a sense of futility and the feeling that nothing matters and life just isn't worth living. He goes as far as stating, "In some way or another our theory includes a belief that living creatively is a healthy state, and that compliance is a sick basis for life" (p. 65).

It seems appropriate to mention here that the ability to have I-Thou relationships (Buber, 1970), which require that one experience oneself as a separate being in contact with a subjective other, has an influence on one's ability to play and act creatively. Creative people appear to tend to treat objects and materials like subjective others.

Productive Thinking and Creative Adjustment

Laura Perls (1978) stated emphatically how essential Gestalt psychology was for the development of Gestalt therapy.

Anyone who wants fully to understand Gestalt therapy would do well to study Wertheimer on productive thinking, Lewin on the incomplete gestalt and the crucial importance of interest for gestalt formation, and Kurt Goldstein on the organism as an indivisible totality [p. 33].

Portele (1996) sees a close relationship between Wertheimer's concept of productive thinking and what F. Perls and Goodman termed creative adjustment. In contrast to traditional logic and the classical theory of associationism, whose approved solution strategies run along the lines of stating, classifying, and rote learning, productive thinking aims for a kind of intellectual independence that emphasizes holistic thinking and the bestowal of meaning.

Of crucial importance to this process are the principle of *Prägnanz*, which holds that percepts take the best form possible under the given circumstances; the tendency toward making good Gestalten, as exemplified by the organization of the field pressing for the greatest clarity and simplicity possible under the given conditions; and other Gestalt principles of perceptual organization. Blocks to the productive thinking process include structurally blind activities, lack of perspicuity, panic reactions resulting from impatience, or confusion as a result of obtrusive and incomplete ways of thinking and functional fixedness (Wertheimer, 1964, pp. 226ff.). The process of productive thinking, which adheres to the structurally determined demand characteristics of the situation, is analogous to the process of creative adjustment between a person and his or her environment. In the latter we find a person in the

middle mode, in which he or she is both active and passive. This person is holistically involved in the process in a sensory, motoric, emotional, and intellectual manner. And the release from chronically fixated behavioral patterns and attitudes precedes the novel configuration of the elements of the environmental field and the aha experience.

Within the principle of the "good Gestalt," creative adjustment reflects this kind of reconfiguration and the new bestowal of meaning resulting from the interaction of the perceptual functions and available resources of a person and his or her given circumstances at a certain time in life.

Reorganization of the Field in Search of Good Form

Another author who stressed the importance of the theory of Gestalt psychology for the Gestalt approach was Wallen (1970). When asked what guides the interventions of Gestalt therapists in their work, he suggested three basic tasks:

First, to break up the patient's chronically poorly organized field. The patient has certain standard ways of perceiving or acting in relationship to a need. The Gestalt therapist isolates portions of this field so that the self-regulating tendency of the neurotic can be broken up into smaller subunits. This eventually will permit the reorganization of both the motor field and the perceptual field. Also the Gestalt therapist works to heighten each emerging figure. . . . The therapist works to unblock the impulse so that it can organize the field [pp. 12-13].

These activities are aimed at making the patient's ability to control himself a matter of intentional choice.

The reorganization of familiar elements results in a new, meaningful configuration that allows for new and different mutual influences between the parts and the whole. The aesthetic dimension of the concept "Gestalt" becomes increasingly evident. The search for good form and the transformation of the familiar, while at the same time considering present awareness, are aspects of the process of creative adjustment.

Perceiving and Understanding

The use of methods and media taken from expressive arts promotes the process of interaction between perception and comprehension. The therapeutic task comprises perceiving and understanding the figure and ground, the directed tensions and the interplay of forces that a person presents, and locating them within the life context of this person.

Recent psychological thinking, then, encourages us to call vision a creative activity of the human mind. Perceiving accomplishes at the sensory level what in the realm of reasoning is known as understanding. Every man's eyesight anticipates in a modest way the justly admired capacity of the artist to produce patterns that validly interpret experience by means of organized form. Eyesight is insight [Arnheim, 1954, p. 46].

Isomorphism

Moreover, Arnheim assumes that the expression of a creation lies in the perceptual qualities of its stimulus pattern, and that there is a structural kinship (isomorphism) between this stimulus pattern and the expression it conveys (p. 450). He states that a perceptual expression is inherent in every clearly formed object or process. The connection between internal experience and external expression may be presented in the form of a metaphor, symbol, or tangible creation. Arnheim offers us examples with which every Gestalt therapist should be familiar, such as a person who cannot swallow, because there once was something in his or her life which could not be "swallowed whole." In accordance with both Arnheim and Rhyne, I have found evidence for isomorphism between patients' creations and their present emotional state. The therapeutic task would then involve bringing about the perception and awareness of the phenomena which these creations express. This situation between therapist and patient forms the context in which a figure can emerge from a background. Now it is time to consolidate our work and react to the creative expression in its entirety, to the forms and directions, to that which has become figure and ground, to the interactions of forms, to the groupings and movement, to the relations and isolations, to the colors and their significance. The personal experience during the creative process must be reflected by the therapist and patient together. Personal meanings and implications within the patient's life context are sought. Gestalt therapy and Gestalt psychology focus on the person's awareness of personal constructs that originate during the pattern-forming process of perceiving reality.

The Ability to Bring Forth Something New and Valuable

Laura Perls's statement that good psychotherapists are scientists *and* artists still holds true. I have benefited tremendously from reading Rothenberg (1988), who examined the creative operations of successful psychotherapeutic practice. Over and above the usual definition of creativity as "the capacity or state of bringing something into being," Rothenberg defines creative process and creativity as "the state, capaci-

ties, and conditions of bringing forth entities or events that are *both new and valuable*" (p. xiii).

The focus of Rothenberg's study was not only creative processes in patients, but also the creative ways in which psychotherapists work. Therapists should not merely stimulate creative activities in their patients; rather, their own creative doing and daring should function as a model for their patients. The creative operations that Rothenberg describes in detail—the homospatial and the Janusian processes—relate to all sensory modalities and operate with the productive integration of two different or even antithetical objects or ideas. The homospatial process "consists of actively conceiving two or more discrete entities occupying the same space, a conception leading to the articulation of new identities" (p. 7), whereas the "Janusian process consists of actively conceiving two or more opposites or antitheses simultaneously" (p. 11).

These methods are reminiscent of the processes of inclusion, the therapeutic task of attempting to be simultaneously aware of oneself and of another person (Yontef, 1993) and our well-known method of working with polarities. Rothenberg shows us how the effects of metaphor, humor (paradox and irony), and parapraxes demonstrate the psychotherapeutic art of connecting the concrete with the abstract, stimulate the imagination, enhance appreciation, and reveal the readiness of the therapist to be a role model by trusting his own intuition and willingly taking the risk of articulating his realizations in a novel way. The effects are both cognitive and emotional. New meanings for the conflicts and disorders of the patient arise spontaneously, accompanied by the feeling of surprise and sudden realization. Rothenberg's account of the interdependencies between the creative psychotherapeutic process and the interventions that arise out of empathic understanding is very moving. The act of giving to others as a characteristic of creative activities reminds us of the essence of the helping professions (p. 185).

Processual Diagnosis and Indication

Rigid rules for the indication and counterindication of specific materials and methods for particular disorders and disturbances are more a hindrance than helpful support when a therapist is attempting to promote creative expression and exchange. The concepts of diagnosis as the search for meaning in the patient's unique interpersonal patterns and dialogic relationship (e.g., Yontef, 1993; Staemmler, 1999) in Gestalt therapy are practical guidelines when one is using artistic materials. The patient's as well as the therapist's personality structure, his or her interpersonal relationship patterns, and unresolved conflicts are taken into consideration. This includes the dynamics of the therapeutic

interaction as well. The chosen medium depends on a number of factors, such as the current, pressing problems with which a patient is struggling, the problem-solving strategies of the therapist, the amount of time available, the attractiveness of certain materials, and the specific phase of the therapeutic process in which the therapeutic dyad can be located.

Franzke (1977, pp. 221ff.) offers useful considerations for the individually appropriate application of artistic materials and methods. Among them are: the situations and phases in treatment which are particularly conducive to using artistic materials; the personality structure and talents of the patient; the personality structure of the therapist, whereby the mutual effects with the patient's personality structure must be taken into account; the influence of such external factors as inpatient or outpatient treatment, availability of time and room, and costs; and the risk factors that emerge when these media are being used.

The application of Franzke's guidelines for the indication of artistic methods and materials is also productive in practicing processual diagnosis. No single method represents a cure-all, and there is no such thing as the one and only technique to remedy certain difficulties. Different materials have very diverse degrees of attractiveness to and effects on different persons. The therapist must learn the art and science of offering means for creative expression by "picking the patient up" at his or her present cognitive and emotional whereabouts.

Familiarity with the Method

Another aspect essential to applying artistic methods is that the therapist have sufficient experience him- or herself with the materials and methods offered. The therapist's familiarity with the methods he or she uses not only enables better appreciation for the ways in which the patients may experience and react to them, but also sensitizes the therapist to the dangers of overstimulation and insufficient processing of what has been experienced. Drawing from his or her own experience, a therapist can realize that the same material can have varying degrees of attraction for one and the same person during different phases of therapy; just as the same material, such as clay, can produce in different individuals either the desire to knead it energetically as proof of one's own vitality or trigger off repulsive reactions in those who fear getting dirty and losing control.

Conclusion

In facilitating novel, valuable configurations of elements which are familiar to patients, it is important to provide something unexpected and surprising in our therapeutic interventions. The element of surprise,

the unexpected viewpoint or feedback can effect more change by promoting awareness in our patients than reiterating what they expect to perceive. Unfortunately, in many instances, methods taken from expressive arts have been used in Gestalt therapy without theoretical reflection, either as art for art's sake, as a way to loosen up the therapeutic process when things are dragging on, as a means of allowing Gestalt therapy appear to be "nourishing" in comparison with more ascetic methods, or even as an adventure-promising and practical "auxiliary technique." This implementation of artistic materials or Gestalt therapeutic interventions appears to me to be the kind of misconception that Laura Perls (1989) and Isadore From (1987) pointed out. Applying certain types of interventions without basing them in the theory to which they belong sorely lacks the seriousness necessary for our profession. Thus, in the training of Gestalt therapists, it is important to convey the theoretical foundations of working with creative processes and artistic materials. Understanding and appreciating the relationship between theory and practice will inspire upcoming therapists with respect to their own creative processes as well as their interchanges with prospective patients. In summary, I agree with those authors who consider creatively practiced psychotherapy to be a science as well as an art.

The main concern of the artist is surely not the "aesthetic transformation" of truth to beauty, but rather the organization of a multitude of various incomparable, incompatible experiences—which threaten the individual or society with disintegration and therefore are experienced as being ugly—into a meaningful, integrated whole, to unity, within which it is significant and thus beautiful or is at least able to be experienced as beautiful. . . . Artistic creation is precisely the process of overcoming multiple identifications and their integration (for the artist himself and his audience) in a new self-awareness. [Perls, 1989, p. 34]

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