

Interview
By Tatiana Chicu

On living in groups and organisations, Gestalt values

an interview with
Margherita Spagnuolo-Lobb

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb is a psychologist, psychotherapist and has been a Gestalt Therapy trainer since 1979. At the same time, she has always been involved in organisations and has been active in Europe in the recognition of the profession of psychotherapist and of the Gestalt Therapy method. She is current President of the Italian Federation of Recognized Gestalt Training Institutes (FISIG), Past-President and first Honorary Member of the European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT), Founder and Honorary President of the Italian Association for Gestalt Psychotherapy (SIPG), Past President of the Italian Federation of Psychotherapy Methods (FIAP).

Our meetings and interview took place with the occasion of the 2017 summer camp in Siracusa: “A space and time for yourself and an update on new clinical issues”. In the beautiful island of Ortigia we sit near the sea, surrounded by the many voices of passengers and the constant sound of the waves. A bright sun in the sky. Excitement. The buzzing of life around us, a solid ground supporting a good talk about Gestalt values and our life together with others in groups and organisations.

TC: Margherita, thank you for taking the time to talk. It is great to meet you here in your hometown. I love how vibrant it is, full of people and life. It makes it easy to start our discussion with the idea of being connected to each other on a social level.

In your book (Now-for-next in psychotherapy) you talk about the development of the society and the needs of the individual in our times. You mention resensitising the body and horizontal relational supports and I start thinking about life in groups and organisations, about our need of belonging. Thought we could start by asking you to say more about the development of our feeling of being connected to each other on this social level.

MSL: *I think that a big shift happened after the second world war about what is a good point of reference, you know, like the hero. The figure of the hero is a person you can rely on to know what to do, like a strong person. And after the second world war there were many cultural movements and the society understood how people who are not heroes are important. Gestalt therapy is completely a part of this movement which in psychotherapy has brought forth the humanistic movement of “the third force”, the movement for the development of the human potential. So the idea was: if you have in a society one hero as a figure and every other people are in the ground, this is very dangerous, see Hitler. And so all the society moved to support the human potential: “let’s have the normal people become heroes!” or “let’s see how we can support people who don’t show up so much”. This brought to the fall of Gods, the fall of the points of reference. It was a very good thing on one side. On the other side, the globalisation brought freedom from values of commercials, so people would buy anything in order to get money and to produce.*

There are no other values for the organisations than to produce and get money. This was in the 70's. The years of the machine, the machine was more important than the human values. That, together with the idea that all the people can develop their own independency brought to a loneliness. So, from one side, people have to develop their own potential and from the other side the world goes towards a lack of values, of human values. Around the 90's all this brought to a loneliness and also a lack of relational competence. And the lack of the relational competence has now brought to a lot of anxiety disorders and identity disorders. So what is the role of the psychotherapy now since the society has changed a lot? Gestalt therapy was born with a double identity: from a hero, Fritz Perls, who wanted to support the human potential against imposed social rules, and from a group (the founder group of the New York Institute), who supported the value of co-creation of a group of peers. Now the society has changed a lot. Our clients are very different from Fritz' clients. So what we need now is to recover the spontaneity, especially in the body feeling, because you cannot become autonomous if you are not recognised inside the primary relationships. So that's the novelty: that the autonomy is not possible if you are not recognised inside a relationship. This is the precious value of our time.

TC: And I wonder, how can we give this recognition to people inside a professional group or organisation? This is a different topic that recognition inside the primary relationships.

MSL: *And when you speak of organisations you mean a factory, or a profit organisation?*

TC: My interest is more in the professional organisations like institutes, associations. Psychotherapy organisations, Gestalt therapy organisations.

MSL: *That question is interesting. I think there is something in common also with other organisations, like profit organisations, because what people need now is to be recognised in their intentionality to give something good. So their intention is to give something good to the organisation and when this is not recognised it's a problem because they feel put aside. So what is needed are not the heroes, not a main authority, not a father, but the capacity to interrelate considering where the people want to go, the wish people have to give a contribution to that organisation. So, it is not about: "You can be free. Be free, I support your freedom!", not so much that, because people don't need freedom. It's more about: "I see how you breath, I see that you are excited about being here and that you want to bring your contribution here". So it's different, it's more intimate, more radical, more basic, to see the beauty in the intention of the other to be there, to be useful, to give a contribution... and to see that in the body, first of all. Because what happens usually is that young people who want to cooperate in the association they are like this, like frozen, desensitized.*

They are there and they want to do something and we cannot command because we would become fundamentalists. This is also something that is very spread today, isn't it? Because when you command something to a person, it's easy to obey, but we don't want that, so the work is more difficult today.

TC: This is beautiful: appreciating the other person's wish to have a contribution and the excitement it brings forth. You are talking about new values in organisations.

MSL: *The values are changed. We need to change our values. Before, our value was independency, freedom from social rules, and support the autonomy, because the problem was that there was someone who pushed the people down, who wanted people to follow the rules. Now the problem is completely different, it is quite the opposite, and the value has to be to see the beauty in the intentionality of people. To be able to look at the movement, the implied movement in the presence of the people. So more attention to the hidden movement in the body.*

TC: Now I am thinking of the practical things in which we could translate what you said and what comes to my mind is the focus on relationships. And maybe other things we as gestalt therapists bring to the society that helps people to get recognised in all sorts of professional groups?

MSL: *Yes, this change of values implies to be more relational. If we think of Perls, for example, and of many gestalt therapists, they are still like that, saying: "What do you want to do?"*

TC: You mean challenging, confronting?

MSL: *Yes, but also supporting the freedom, let's say. So, "What do you want to do?" And the client says: "I want to know how you feel when I say that". And the therapist replies: "But what do you want?" So, somehow, we, as gestalt therapists are sick of independency, we have a compulsive thought: the client has to be independent. But when the client, as cooperator, is there, we need to work on our relationship and our mind has to go to the between - client and therapist cooperate. So when the client says something I am focused on what I feel when he/she says something, and we know that what we feel is meaningful, relevant to what we are building together. And if I feel at ease is different than if I feel tense, and this is part of the experience of the client. Experience is always in the middle, is always above client and therapist. So we have completely switched the attention from the individual to the relationship, and to the field.*

TC: So the challenge would be to bring ourselves more into the relationship and let our thoughts and feelings be known by the other.

MSL: *Yes. To focus on the relationship and on the responsibility that we have when we engage in a contact with someone else. We are part of that contact.*

TC: Now that you mention responsibility I am reminded that an organisation is focused on a purpose, on what we set up to do together and sometimes, especially in profit organisations, they are difficult to be brought together: being focused on a purpose and being efficient, on one side, and being relational and bringing yourself more, on the other side.

MSL: *It's difficult if you split the two things. But they are not splitted. If you are part of an organisation your intention is to be meaningful for the others. So the product is not splitted from the presence of the person. The product is what we create together, is part of our personality. So we need to switch from a narcissistic idea of being meaningful (I'm in charge, I'm better than the others) to a relational idea to be meaningful (to reach - and be reached by - the other).*

TC: That is a good point. Thank you for reminding me that.
And now, since we're talking about bringing ourselves more into contact in professional groups, why don't we go deeper into the experience? Your personal experience with organisations, because you are the president of your organisation, your institute; a former President of EAGT and other organisations involved with psychology and psychotherapy, not only Gestalt organisations. Your private practice developed at the same time you were very much involved socially in professional organisations.

MSL: *Yes, that's true. The first experience was very meaningful to me. It was to lead the EAGT. That came when I was around 40, so I was quite young, and it came soon after my therapist had died, Isadore From. It was a way to grow both as a caring person and as a daring leader.*

TC: When was that?

MSL: *in 1996. Isadore had died in 1994 and they called me to be the president of this association in 1996. At that time the association was very small and there were lots of institutes, small institutes. There wasn't any law about psychotherapy and the institutes were somehow mixed, like "Body Therapy and Gestalt Therapy" or "Gestalt Therapy and Transactional Analysis". So what I brought there was my love to Gestalt therapy, supported by the love of my therapist. He was very clear in appreciating the beauty of Gestalt therapy in itself. He said Gestalt therapy doesn't need to be combined with something else.*

TC: ...it can stand by itself.

MSL: *Yes. And at that time the theory of Gestalt therapy was not so well known, so people needed to attach Gestalt therapy (the beauty of Gestalt therapy was perceived in its techniques), to attach it to a theory, to give a frame. And I brought this passion in the EAGT. And I did it with an „ecumenic” spirit like I appreciated and recognised all the efforts that all these little centers had done. So I considered them a precious resource of the European Gestalt therapy. And what I did was to create a network among the institutes, to connect them, let them know each other and then have a theoretical dialogue on who we are. So I did the first conference in 1998 in Palermo, Italy: “Gestalt therapy: hermeneutics and clinical”. And I remember many people asking me what is hermeneutics. So we had a dialogue on what does it mean for us to be Gestalt therapists, in which way we identify ourselves with being Gestalt therapists. I remember the opening lecture I gave that was full of passion for the epistemology of GT, for how we are. We have a precious theory. I had a standing ovation at that conference. It was incredibly moving to me.*

So that created a good movement, a good connection and what I did was to support what the institutes had already done and also support the love for Gestalt therapy, the theoretical, the ground. I also supported the writing: together with Malcom Parlett I founded the Gestalt Therapy Conference of Writers, where a little group of colleagues brought drafts of their paper, and we all as a group worked on it. We gathered in different cities, the first one was in Siracuse, then in France, in Spain and we always dialogued about our writings. Such things were good to recognise the work of the institutes, and also to support the work of the masters, the European masters of Gestalt therapy, the old ones who had created the basis for Gestalt therapy.

TC: So, at that time the mission of the EAGT was to spread Gestalt therapy and also build this common ground for all the institutes and gestalt therapists.

MSL: *Yes. The two things are connected because when you want to spread our approach we need to spread it in a serious way, like a solid theory.*

TC: And differentiated by others.

MSL: *Yes. There was also a parallel process in the EAP, the associations of all methods were involved in the recognition of various methods, so we had to produce papers. How to write and to describe what our approach was about, this was also important.*

TC: It sounds like the beginning of regulations.

MSL: *Yes, it was the beginning of regulations in Europe, which did not happen in the US. The regulations, the birth of laws about psychotherapy in Europe and the need to regulate ourselves in an European association. The regulation of the profession of psychotherapist also goes with the regulation of the training standards.*

So, in the EAGT when I was a president I started the process of regulation, we built the first drafts of the training standards: Daan van Praag, from Amsterdam, did an excellent work. Then a committee was created, which till now (with Nurith Levi) continues to develop this important topic.

TC: The next president after you was Ken Evans.

MSL: *Yes, Ken Evans. He gave a good British touch to the administration of the EAGT.*

TC: Yes, good structure. I remember him telling us about him being structured and wanted to build a solid frame/ground.

MSL: *Yes, I think that after my Italian ecumenic spirit he was the right person to be the president of EAGT. He gave a lot of structure.*

TC: And what would you say is the mission of EAGT now?

MSL: *To develop our approach of course, and to foster dialogue among institutes and associations. The focus on research is important today: it seems that, more or less, we know who we are now, we know what it means to be a gestalt therapist, what it means to train gestalt therapists. Research is what we need now to be recognised in the wider world of psychotherapists.*

TC: Coming back to your experience with bringing people together in organisations, there is another level of going deeper into our discussion: your experience with your institute. I am curious about its life until now, its development, how it grew up and how it goes on.

MSL: *It was the first Italian school of Gestalt therapy, founded in 1979 and it's still alive! This is interesting. It is connected with the Italian culture somehow because for us hermeneutics and epistemology was always important, so we tried to describe Gestalt therapy principles considering the *sitz im leben* of Gestalt therapy founders, so the thoughts of the time when it was founded and how it can dialogue with nowadays, with our clinical problems, so this hermeneutical dialogue between now and then. It has always characterised our theory and problems. This is one thing, the development in the hermeneutical terms of Gestalt therapy theory. And the other aspect is the connection with both international gestalt therapists and also with other approaches. We have always been connected to other main representatives of psychotherapy and research. For example, Daniel Stern was our scientific friend for nine years. He came to teach and have dialogues with us for nine years. Donna Orange comes to teach in my Institute and we have a fruitful exchange with her. Another one is Vittorio Galese, from the group of Parma who discovered the mirror neurons. And we just had a conference with Nancy McWilliams with exchange of practice and theory: very inspiring. We have always kept this dialogical spirit with other contemporary approaches.*

That has been very good for us, to look ourselves in the mirror. So when you talk with a person who is not a gestalt therapist, who is of another approach, you can mirror yourself in the difference of the other and this is very important in order to grow. It is not a mixing of principles, it's about acquiring something to grow and also feeling better defined.

TC: And what about the organisation of life inside the institute? Have you been president of the institute ever since?

MSL: *Yes, since it has been founded in 1979. I co-led the Institute together with a colleague for 25 years, then in 2008 we splitted and since then I've been the director, supported by many wonderful colleagues. They are very important and dear to me. We are a teaching/learning community. My institute has three offices in Italy: Milan, Palermo and Siracuse. Now we have a lot of trainers you know, for being an old institute. We are about 80 people between trainers and cooperators and student who want to become trainers.*

80 people involved in the cooperation with the institute somehow, inner cooperation. So we have an annual meeting every year, where we talk about developments in theory and practice, and we have live sessions, and we comment on our work. There are three levels of this cooperation. There are senior trainers who work with the postgraduates of psychotherapy and other trainers who work for other programs, for counselling, for psychodiagnostic or psychology of justice, autism and other clinical situations. And then we have trainees for trainers, so Gestalt psychotherapists who study to become trainers. We all gather together every year for one week, in July, we combine the exchange between these three levels and inside these three levels. We also decide what to publish, what kind of programs to run and we update the normatives for the school. It is very important for us. The Institute runs also 4 clinical centers, in Milan, Vicenza, Palermo and Siracuse, where students can practice soon after their graduation, with supervision of senior trainers. We have the school and we have the clinical centers for practice, so when we gather we also deal with the clinical issues in these meetings. Then we have many other meetings, more local, during the year. We also have meetings with a supervisor, who takes care of us as a group. She is Carmen Vasquez Bandin at the moment. First it was Joseph Zinker. We are in a pretty good mode lastly: so many years of being together as an original historic group has created a solid ground, able to welcome and take care of the newcomers.

TC: You work on the group dynamics.

MSL: *Yes. This is also important. And then we have gatherings for local offices. We have meetings in Milan, in Palermo and Siracuse, to deal with the local organisation. We organise one big conference in each office. In Siracuse is in June, in Palermo in February and in Milan in November.*

We have the organisation of each office and we have other wider activities of the whole Institute, like the journal Quaderni di Gestalt, the Italian book series and the international book series (GTIBS), and the international trainings on psychopathology, development, for supervisors. So many things.

TC: I can imagine that as director...

MSL: *Yes, I don't have one minute free.*

TC: I just remembered I wanted to ask you about NYIGT and forgot. You're also part of the NYIGT and I was curious about your experience with these two different organisations, the NYIGT and the EAGT?

MSL: *They are very different because EAGT is a structured organisation. In both there are members who pay, but in the EAGT they have to demonstrate that they are gestalt therapists. In the case of NYIGT there is a different policy, they don't want to put standards upon membership. They trust that whoever identifies with GT can be a member. They don't ask for documents, they don't deal with standards and regulations. Being part of the NYIGT means to continuously elaborate on a basic principle of social activism outside and inside the group of members, and on developing in a mostly shared way from the PHG theory. This Institute doesn't accredit other Institutes, nor deals with training standards, everybody who wants to dialogue on GT theory and practice is welcome. Strangely enough, it's exciting to not have a structure. So the challenge is to be together, without a structure.*

I remember in 2001 our institute had a meeting with the NY institute. We have been very connected with this institute since my connection with Isadore From. So we had a meeting in Lipari Island and it was an experiment, a beautiful experiment. Richard Kitzler was still alive. So we were about 14 people from my institute and 14 people from the NY institute. Many of the Italians did not know English and none from NY could speak Italian. There were moments when we were just lost, and no structure. We were all together in a circle and we had to deal with this sense of uncertainty, the lack of structure. And it was really, really a challenge. We felt bad but then all of a sudden something changed, we felt individuals in a group. It was a beautiful experience because everybody could feel oneself in the group. Richard Kitzler asked me to write something about that experience and I'm feeling guilty because I never did it. It would be nice to have interviews with people participating in that because it was a really special experience: an organisation that self-regulates. We wanted an exchange with the NYIGT, we didn't know how to do it and we wanted to do this experiment and it was a big exchange. We didn't speak much about the theory but we practiced it.

TC: Oh, I imagine something very intense going on at the boundary in such an experiment group. How exciting! It takes courage and commitment to be there! It would be very interesting to do the interviews and see how this experiment impacted the organisational life.

What comes to my mind now is something of a word association: experiment – something new, out of the ordinary. It is a more familiar experience nowadays: not organisations that self-regulate, but people that self-regulate, usually by stepping out of the organisation. We strive to get there together but in the end it all comes down to the individual.

For example, there are many Gestalt therapy institutes here in Italy, as well as in other countries. People separating from an organisation and creating another one that better suits their vision, but in the end they are all similar in their purpose of developing and promoting Gestalt therapy. What does this say about the process of accommodating differences and growing and self-regulating while together in an organisation?

MSL: *I think the future directors, the leaders of the institutes, the trainers, they want to have their own space. It's a challenge to deal with differences inside one institute. At a certain point you think that you don't want to be in an institute that is not your own and you want to create another one. It's a good and a bad thing at the same time. I appreciate that you bring our attention to this kind of processes inside GT Institutes.*

TC: People, the individual... It seems we have been narrowing things down, talking about organisations and society, about your experience with international groups/organisations and then with your institute, and now we could end with this something about yourself as a leader of your institute. You've done it for so long and I easily imagine a process of change in your style.

MSL: *It changed a lot. I didn't want to be a leader, it's not so much interesting for me to be a leader. You know, what interests me is to develop ideas, to experiment and to know what others do, I'm curious. After the separation inside my Institute, I found myself to be a leader, the only leader of a big institute, which then became even bigger. When I became a leader it was a challenge to me, and I learned a lot about taking care of the others, especially of colleagues. So I learned a lot and I changed a lot. I learned about other colleagues' need to be supported, their need to find the space inside the institute, their need to be spontaneous in the institute. So I have to thank life for that: thanks to these strange events in my life, which I did not look for, I became a better person – to see the others and to take care of the others, colleagues beyond clients.*