

Dialogue between Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb, Donna Orange and Bernd Bocian

DIALOGUE ON EXPERIENCE AND COMPREHENSION IN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND GESTALT PSYCHOTHERAPY¹

Palermo February 2nd-3rd, 2018

¹This interview was held on February 3rd, 2018 in Palermo, during the conference titled "Compassion in the psychotherapeutic relationship", organized by the Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy, where Donna Orange was the guest of honor and Bernd Bocian was one of the keynote speakers.

Summary: In this dialogue, Donna Orange, Bernd Bocian and Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb explore the meaning of concepts such as experience and comprehension for Gestalt psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Their points of view converge on the importance of the phenomenological glance, which have shortened the distances between Gestalt therapy and psychoanalysis, while maintaining substantial differences. The authors underline the influence of Gestalt psychotherapy in Donna's work, like in the session that took place during the conference. The authors also focus on how these two approaches have changed greatly to meet the needs of today's patients and society, emphasizing the need for continuous updating.

Key words: *Gestalt therapy, psychoanalysis, experience, comprehension, phenomenology*

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb: Hello! Hello Donna

Donna Orange: Hello Margherita

Margherita: And hello Bernd, so we are here to have a conversation about Gestalt therapy and psychoanalysis. Thank you very much Donna, for accepting to do this interview with me and Bernd. Thank you Bernd for being here. You define yourself as a Gestalt-analyst. Your role in many conferences, even this one we are having in Palermo about compassion in Gestalt therapy and psychoanalysis, is to be a sort of historical bridge between psychoanalysis and Gestalt therapy.

Bernd Bocian: I like being this bridge.

Margherita: Donna, you are here as our guest in this conference about compassion in psychotherapy. So I would like to focus this interview about the development of Gestalt therapy and show the dignity of this approach. Gestalt therapy has been, and sometimes it still is, like a forgotten relative of psychoanalysis. During this interview, I would like to bring to light some concepts and make them the object of dialogue. I would like to start bringing to your attention the concept of experience and comprehension. It was a clear and determined idea of the founders of Gestalt Therapy to focus this psychotherapy on the experience. When they had to give this new approach a name, the options were "therapy of the experience", "therapy of concentration", or "Gestalt therapy". The first possible name, "therapy of experience" stressed the fact that the change happens because you have a new experience, you experience aspects of yourself that are not evident at the moment. The concept of experience features also the experiment in the Gestalt therapy process: the therapist suggests the client to experiment something new together, and this can happen in many ways, not necessarily in a dramatic way, but also looking or breathing differently. In a special way can be a way of experiencing something new. Placing experience at the center of the therapeutical change is different from attributing the change to the comprehension of conflicts, of the self, of the way we work with the other.

Donna, the question is: how much do you care about comprehension and experience in your way of doing therapy?

Donna: It's a very interesting question, because I think contemporary psychoanalysis is very interested in experience and phenomenology of experience and that's a big part of what distinguishes our work from classical psychoanalysis which was very

much oriented to meaning and understanding. Now, for me I have never abandoned the search for meaning and understanding, I think that for me it is still absolutely central but it is much clear to me now that we get there by way of experience, that these two things are not in contrast with each other... neither one is dispensable. I would not be a psychoanalyst if I had not an absolute devotion to finding meaning in what seems meaningless, what seems meaningless is the craziness of my own mind, what seems meaningless is other people suffering, like the people who come to me and...but it is through experience that we find meaning and understanding together, so there are many things that I've been able to learn from Gestalt people about to bring these things together. Experiments in the sense that Gestalt people do them, I don't formally do experiments, but I consider the entire psychoanalytic process to be one big experiment. What if we put two people together, and one who has studied for many years the process of searching for emotional meaning, and one who is suffering and struggling and so on, and has not so much practice at this, how is this going to work out, how is... this is one big enormous experiment. So that might be a contrast then... what are you thinking Bernd?

Bernd: Historically, I think we need both comprehension and experience, and, considering the psychoanalytic interest in understanding, an interpretation that can only explain turns to be wrong today. That was a time when American psychology of the Ego was prevailing, and now both we and the psychoanalysts have understood that this doesn't work much. The understanding must be emotional, emotional understanding. Very early (1924), Sandor Ferenczi and Otto Rank understood that explaining to the client what happened in his childhood, why he moved in, and act in this way, would not change anything in his life. What is missing in the therapy room, in the actual therapy situation, is experience emotion; this was the first book that they wrote together in '24. From my point of view, Gestalt therapy is a development that started in this moment. As our Gestalt colleague in Philadelphia, Philip Lichtenberg wrote, Gestalt therapy is, in a way, radical psychoanalysis with some exaggeration, but it's radical psychoanalysis, and we radicalized exactly this: to bring emotion, to bring contact to the therapy room, the presence, the now-for-next, the way we can we help the client to enter some areas, some new experiences. The Gestalt therapists are very good at helping them in that but - and I am finishing - don't forget that Fritz Perls told us that we have to re-elaborate old experiences in the here-and-now. We have to do that, not in a theoretical way, but rather to close Gestalten that still hold an emotional value in the here-and-now. The past in the present is important, not just in order to explain to the patient what your father, what your mother did to you, but rather if there is an emotional charge, this is important. Perls was very good at starting from observation, from some body movements to bring the client back to old traumatic situation that was re-lifted in the therapy room. Hence for me there is no difference between past, present, future, or explanation, interpretation, experience - old and new - all this happened in a therapy process and in some sessions, in figure there is explanation, understanding, in the next session, or five minutes later, experience can be in the foreground; so this is the figure-ground mechanism, according to my point of view. So I don't see differences or dichotomies in this.

Margherita: Maybe there was not so much difference at the beginning, but then, when they developed, they became quite different: and I think we can say that for us, Gestalt therapists, the aim of the therapy is awareness, which means being fully present in a situation.

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And I ask you, for psychoanalysis or for you, what is the aim of your intervention? Is it the meaning or is the fact that the client is more present, or aware? For us, being present means to be fully present, in the fullness of senses with the therapist.

Donna: For me there is not such a big distance between these two things. We're absent when we have no interest in meaning... My dear friend Warren Poland writes that the psychoanalysis teaches us to want to know what we don't want to know about ourselves and the idea is that we become much more present to every aspect of our lives if we're not spending all our time avoiding things.

Margherita: Could we say that psychotherapy teaches us to know what we would like to know, rather than what we wouldn't like to know? It's about supporting stuck intentionality, that has been put down in those relations where we can't 'be there' spontaneously. So we support what is in-tensioned to be supported, we do not think we have to unveil what has been repressed.

Donna: Poland wouldn't say that, because the psychoanalyst is particularly attuned to what we do not want to know about ourselves, we don't want to know about the climate change, we don't want to know that our father was a nazi, we don't want to know the most painful... we don't want to know how selfish we are, there... it's the things we do not want to know that are keeping us from being liberated into a full life, so if we courageously and curiously take on the task of what psychoanalysts call self-analysis as something that is learned within the psychoanalytic process, then we can be people who live fully alive in the way that you describe, but not unless we take on all that stuff that we don't want to know.

Margherita: I think there is a big difference between the analytic mentality and the phenomenological mentality, and what I see is that contemporary psychoanalysts are more phenomenological than analytical, what I mean is what you just said: what the person doesn't want to know - the idea of resistance - implies the dichotomy between the unconscious and conscious. Instead, the phenomenological attitude implies the tendency, the intentionality, so the people who come to therapy would like to develop those parts of themselves that are causing pain, just because they can't express themselves spontaneously. For us, there is no separation between the conscious and the unconscious, it's more like a figure-ground process.

Donna: I think that the person comes to therapy with a divided intentionality: there's a part of me that wants to know, that would like to know, and a part of me that is terrified to know and that the psychoanalyst or the Gestalt therapist is always working with both and trying to encourage the part of myself that is brave enough and courageous enough to know to comfort and support the parts that are scared, and to know these things and to take them on; I recently was supervising a therapist and his patient came in and said to him... well... maybe not to him, he just said "Don't do that, that wouldn't be smart, you might get hurt doing that" and finally the therapist said "who are you talking to?" and it finally came out that the patient was talking to another part of himself. What we do with psychoanalysis is we pay attention to the different parts of ourselves that are at war with each other and so all that trouble can be liberated into that fuller life that you envision, and I think in Gestalt, you have mechanisms for bringing this out, but what we do is we pay attention to those opportunities where the patient is actually telling us that this is going on and we get to help the patient listen to their own different voices that are talking to them like that

Bernd: We Gestaltists are very very good at this...

Donna: I know you are!

Bernd: We do this and we are very good because this is another strong point of Perls: he used to ask the client to enact or dramatize the different parts of the self, the polarities, and he used to bring them in a dialogue with the idea that there is a way to integration between two parts of themselves: for example, the aggressive part, the victim part, and so on... what Perls and what we bring to this way of working - something that psychoanalysts do a very intensely - we are able to do it quicker. We Gestaltists are very quick because we are much more active, we let the client enact these things, we don't wait until this develops in a transference, it identifies together with a client different self states, we can give them a name, we take chairs, we let them dialogue. This is very powerful, it's a very quick work. I love reading the lectures of the intersubjectivists, of the relationalists, sometimes they give a vignette of a therapy and this is something completely Gestaltic to me, that's what we consider our daily work. Then I read that this happened after four or five years of a therapy of four hours per week. We have some very powerful active interventions that may shorten the therapy process. Many times we don't reflect enough about what we do. From my point of view, sometimes we have to reflect before we act, and maybe on the other hand many of the modern analysts should be more spontaneous, more courageous to follow the first impulse. Therefore we can learn much from each other, from my point of view.

Margherita: I agree with you, Bernd. We should also consider that society has changed from the time of Fritz Perls and we cannot be Gestalt therapists like they were in those days, so we need to be more cautious and to pay more attention to the effects of our work.

Bernd: We have powerful ways to intervene.

Margherita: Maybe even too powerful, especially because clients are much more fragile than 60 years ago, so we need to pay attention to the effects of what we do, I agree with that. I'm still thinking of what you (Donna) were saying before, about the opposite forces and what you (Bernd) were saying about the opposite forces of Perls. I wanted to point out that when I work with a client, I think that this client has already gone through many trials and has adjusted creatively to his difficult situation. Hence I prefer to recognize the struggle he has already faced and that has led him to come to me, to trust somebody, rather than working on divided parts. Of course, the client may experience different forces and intentionalities, there can be forces that... inside the client, but I don't think in terms of divisions, I rather think of it as a complex situations that includes many different experiences.

Donna: I think more like that there are some people that you can work more quickly with, and sometimes I have worked even in situations like today², and in one session with somebody even in public, and done some piece of work that they told me - years later - that it made an enormous difference to them. I know that Gestalt sessions lend themselves to that, they're very intense...

² She refers to a public session with a participant during the conference.

³ Taylor M (2016). *Psicoterapia del trauma e pratica clinica. Corpo, neuroscienze e Gestalt. Presentazione dell'ediz. Italiana di Luigi Janiri. Milano: FrancoAngeli (ed. or. 2014).*

Bernd: Yes

Donna: ... and they allow you to get right in there and do something, whereas psychoanalysis is more geared toward a patient and an ongoing process which is - in my mind - much better for people who are deeply traumatized; most of the people that I worked with over a long period of time had either early or late a lot of violence in their lives, and the people that I have known like that don't respond as well to this quick kind of thing that you're describing, in fact they're fragile in the way that you say, and maybe re-traumatized by some of the techniques, and so one of the things that I'm inclined to think is that the same therapy is not the right one for every patient. That's why some there are several differences between our overall philosophies and approaches, and some of them are between the different sorts of patients that were working with.

Margherita: I think differently. I think that every approach has to update, has to develop in order to be effective with any clinical suffering.

Donna: Absolutely, I agree with that.

Margherita: as I said before, the clients are very different from those of sixty years ago, so we need to reflect on the effects of our techniques and on our way of being with the client. For example, we can't use cathartic techniques with traumatized clients, because we might traumatize them again. We just can't do that. Miriam Taylor³ clearly says that in her book. So I think that every approach has to develop, to keep itself alive.

Donna: I agree completely

Margherita: Maybe even psychoanalysis is developing...

Donna: ... and for me I would say that certainly Gestalt therapy has taught me a lot, I have been hanging out with a Gestalt therapist for eight or nine years now, quite a lot of time, and it just has attuned to me to a lot of the things that it's daily bread for you, that psychoanalysts miss. I think we have so much to teach each other but if we can get rid of the attitude that you have the whole truth or that we have the whole truth, we can learn together and respectfully and very fruitfully.

Margherita: Yes, I can see how you have been contaminated. (laughs)

Donna: And you too! (laughs)

Bernd: I would like to add that we have the possibility to make very powerful and quick interventions and, of course we learned, as Margherita said. There was a big change over the last 15-20 years in the gestalt theme... We go slower, we are able to contain, we are more patient. Especially, the school run by Margherita - I am from another school - was very important to change this Gestalt practice that sometimes was very technical and caused many re-traumatizations. Her school has really changed much.

Donna: Well, thank you for doing that, because it was the earlier work of Fritz Perls and the very technique-full Gestalt that made me avoid Gestalt for so many years,

I thought it was violent and since in the last ten years I have been with you and other Gestalt therapists, I've come to appreciate it very much more and I don't see this violence anymore.

Bernd: And there are colleagues, like Lynne Jacobs, who is a Gestalt therapist and she teaches in the Gestalt Therapy Institute and she is a psychoanalyst.

Donna: Yes, she is the one who brought me into Gestalt.

Bernd: Yes.

Margherita: I just want to conclude this interview mentioning the work that you just did with a client, where I really could see how your work is full of intuitions, respect, and the magic. I saw many elements of Gestalt therapy in it. (laughs)

Bernd: (laughs) We are losing it, we are losing it!

Margherita: When I saw you smiling so beautifully to this client... that was very surprising, I mean, you are giving something very special, very personal to this client...

Donna: She needed it so much.

Margherita: Yes, but you were not neutral at all.

Donna: No, I'm not very neutral. (laughs)

Margherita: And I heard you saying "the tenderness come to my mind" apparently out of nowhere, but this is the "special magic" that we do in Gestalt therapy as well; we observe, we feel our body, we breathe, we stay in the situation, and then we come up with integrated idea.

Donna: You know, the neutrality is a nasty old word from psychoanalysis that very much had to do with two things: the Freuds, Sigmund and his daughter, said that we were supposed to maintain a neutral distance between the Ego, the Id and the Super-Ego, not to take sides in this war, but the other thing was that if the patient had choices to make we wished to be neutral, we were not to take sides; all of this made us cold and distant and far from our patients. I always say that I am not neutral, I am for the patient, I am on your side, if you are my patient, I am on your side, I have no interest in being neutral.

Margherita: This is a humanistic value of course, for sure!

Bernd: And from my point of view, the concept of neutrality that Freud introduced was a reaction to the things that happened in the therapy room, where there was not only seduction in the female client that had a transference.

Donna: Yes.

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Bernd: There was a sexual abuse of the powerful therapist, there were sexual affairs between jungian analysts... Of course, the story of Breuer⁴ : Sàndor Ferenczi had a relation with a client. Neutrality meant also - and this is correct in the Freudian way - don't eroticize, don't carry out a sexual relationship with a client, and in this way the neutrality is still correct.

Donna: Well, that's right, but it is also a scientific ideal: to be neutral means to be impartial, not to take sides, not to have a preconceived idea, so it had several meanings in psychoanalysis.

Bernd: Yes.

Donna: And we need to be really careful about words that have several meanings.

Margherita: Yes, it's an ethical stance also... Alright, I think we have to finish now. Thank you very much, Donna, I wish you a lot of luck with your new book on climate crisis.

Donna: Thank you.

Margherita: And for your five months commitment to the Vienna University, to the Austrian University.

Donna: Thank you.

Margherita: And thank you so much, thank you for your role... (laughs)

Bernd: Thank you so much to you. (laughs)

Donna: Thank you.

⁴Based on the book by Krutzenbichler HS, Essers H. (1993) *Se l'amore in sé non è peccato. Sul desiderio dell'analista*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina (ed. or. 1991)