

REVIEW

The Now-for-Next in Psychotherapy

Gestalt Therapy Recounted in Post-Modern Society

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

286 pages

with two prefaces by Donna Orange and Paolo Migone and discursive contributions and comments
by Philip Lichtenberg¹

in English;

Paperback; also available as e-book

Gestalt Therapy Book Series

Siracuse: Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy publ., 2013

In her book, Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb tries to follow those lines of Gestalt therapy theory which have been – and still are – vital for this approach and she attempts to put them into the context of the developments in postmodern society. She explicitly follows a relational and field-oriented understanding of Gestalt therapy. In doing so, she refers particularly to the dialogical and relational style of one of her teachers, Isadore From, who tried to take all statements of his clients as relevant for the contacting process in the respective therapy situation. Starting from the idea of the human desire for satisfying contact and the intentionality which is inherent to all processes of contacting, Spagnuolo Lobb focuses on the therapeutic relationship and on the novelty which is co-created between all partners of the therapeutic dialogue. This approach clarifies the expression “now for next” in the title which relates to the directionality of contact. This expression also points to Erving and Miriam Polster, who were also trainers of the author. The fact that this book has already been published in several languages – English, Italian, Russian, Spanish, French, Romanian (and Polish

¹ The preface by Donna Orange was not part of the first English edition of this book

and German on their way) – underpins its importance and topicality.

In the ten chapters of her book, the author goes into crucial aspects of the development of Gestalt therapy and translates the foundational theoretical concepts and principles of this modality in the sense of and with respect to postmodern viewpoints and conditions. She particularly takes into account contributions from neurobiology as well as the work of Daniel Stern, who has been a member of the scientific staff of the Gestalt Therapy Book Series in which this book has also been published.

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb is an experienced Gestalt therapist and trainer who is well known for her engagement for the international Gestalt community as well as for numerous international publications. She lives in Sicily, Italy, where she founded the Istituto di Gestalt HCC in 1979, and she still heads the institute, which now has its premises in Milan, Syracuse and Palermo. She has also been President of the Italian Association of Psychotherapists (FIAP), of the European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT), and she is a full member of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy (NYIGT). With this book, she also addresses students and trainers in order to introduce them to Gestalt therapy “*word by word*”, as well as all those who “*want to get into the heart of the spell of Gestalt, including experienced psychotherapists, to offer them grids of understanding of what they already do...*” (21).

In her introduction, the author focuses on social developments from the 1950s until today. She identifies the social developments between 1950 and 1970 – the years of the beginning of Gestalt therapy – as “narcissistic”. In doing so, on the one hand she refers to the social demands and restrictions in these decades and, on the other hand, to the individual needs which have gained meaning due to the philosophical, psychological, and social developments and the theories of Freud. As the major task of psychotherapy in the examined period she identifies the need to support humans so they see themselves as important and discover themselves.

as individuals despite the fact that they might not have been very important or deviate from social norms. From these premises she derives the Gestalt therapeutic approach to the theory of the self as the experiential process at the contact boundary. Furthermore, as one area of focus she relates to the experience which is based on sensual perception and, thus, relates to the aesthetic approach of this modality as well as to the positive view on conflicts which have to be worked through in order to gain vitality, full contact, and personal growth.

Today's predominant social experience is described by the author as "liquid" while clear points of view as well as intimate relationships are replaced by floods of information and loose and tentative relationships without commitment. The result of these facts, the author assumes, is an overwhelming amount of exciting experiences of contact with concomitant lack of social support and rootedness – this means a lack of a "social container". Previously built-up excitement in order to follow needs or intentionalities would thus result in energy without direction. This, furthermore, would result in fear and desensitisation of the body and an increase of anxiety disorders. Now she identifies as the main tasks of psychotherapy the support of clients and patients to revitalise their anaesthetised senses in order to make them available for horizontal relationships at eye level.

In the following, Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb discusses her view of the basic concepts of Gestalt therapy; as Gestalt therapy's answer to postmodern demands she recognises the focus on the intentionality of contact and on the contact boundary as a synthesis of the phenomenological and pragmatic roots. With her understanding of the phenomenological approach, she puts immediate and sensual experience and the encounter at the contact boundary at the centre of therapeutic work. Thus, the process of this encounter between client and therapist develops as a co-created experience and supports personal growth and development. As the root of the pragmatism of the method she identifies the relatedness of the approach to the social level which also could be seen as field-related.

From the Gestalt perspective of the author, psychopathological development is understood as a creative adjustment to difficult conditions and as a co-creative process in unusual and overstrained situations. She understands “neurosis” as the process of maintaining isolation in the organism/environmental field by restricting the function of awareness and the sensitivity at the contact boundary. This isolation would result from the chronic inhibition of aggression which is seen as a physiological process and not as mentalised feeling. Aggression is rather understood as the ability to “go towards” (from Latin *ad-gredere*) or to “grasp” or to follow a need. However, this need can only be satisfied with sufficient support from the environment and concomitantly with sufficient trust in this support. Without sufficient trust in the environmental support and if the fulfilment of the need is accompanied by threats or the absence of support from the field, aggression is suppressed. By examining this balancing process between “going towards” and support from the field, Spagnuolo-Lobb refers to the social dimension of this concept: creative adjustment helps the individual to differentiate him- or herself from the social context and also to be a relevant part of it (p. 39). This may be an indication of the social orientation and foundation of Gestalt therapy which compensates for a lack of the original conception of this modality, according to which the differentiation between the human and physical and non-human environment (e.g. “dental aggression”, p. 83) is neglected. A focus on the concept of the contact boundary, the “between”, the comprehension of the idea of the co-creation of contact and the involvement of mutual and benevolent human relationships would rather be facilitated than the fixation on the theory of aggression and contact which is very often understood as simplifying and reduced to biologism.

In a genuine Gestalt therapeutic sense, the author describes “defence” and “resistance” not as an impairment of the therapeutic process but as a relational ability within a process of creative adjustment. For her this enables a switch from an extrinsic model of health to an aesthetic one, which focuses on the immediate therapeutic encounter and thus on intrinsic factors of the

relationship. Consequently, the therapeutic task would be to support the patients so they recognise their own ways of creative adjustment and regain their potentials and their spontaneity. This implies the comprehension of the therapeutic relationship as a real-life experience where the client and the therapist interact. In other words: both participate equally in the co-creation of the phenomenological field in which the therapist is curious about the ground from which the figure emerges.

With the example of a therapeutic session, Spagnuolo Lobb emphasises the viewpoint that the therapeutic dialogue is based on a “*tension towards contact*” that “*mobilises the energies of the phenomenological field in which both patient and therapist are immersed*” and which “*leads to the formation of the contact boundary, the place where the self unfolds, as a movement of differentiation from – and at the same time sharing with – the other*”. (p. 49). To my comprehension, with that summary of the clinical example, the author points out the essence of her book: a plea for an explicitly relational understanding of Gestalt therapy. With this focus on the process between client and therapist, Spagnuolo Lobb relativises the technique of the “empty chair”, which has so far been looked upon as a central Gestalt therapeutic technique in order to help clients externalise “inner dialogues” and thus gain awareness. Instead of using the “empty chair” she asks the patient to address her with what she or he wants to tell to the inner or outer counterpart and, with this, to bring everything into an immediate dialogue between client and therapist. This change helps the client to return to the immediate situation and to work on the relational block within the current encounter (p. 50).

As indicated above, according to her considerations of psychopathology and the Gestalt therapeutic understanding of diagnostics, Spagnuolo Lobb assumes “symptoms” as being creative adjustments to difficult situations when the necessary excitement for full contact and spontaneity is not supported sufficiently by the field (pp. 84 – 87 and pp. 120 – 133). She refers to the modalities which help to interrupt spontaneity and to modulate contact (“contact interruptions”; “defence”;

“resistance”) as the abilities to introject, to project, to retroreflect and also refers to egotism and confluence. She identifies the boundary between healthy and pathological contacting as where habitual and chronified interruptions of contacting restrict spontaneity and lead to the accumulation of unfinished situations. Thus, ego functions as well as the ability to sufficiently satisfy needs are lost. She pays special attention to egotism which has recently lost in importance in Gestalt therapy literature or has not been used any more (e.g. Dreitzel, 2004, has replaced this term with “narcissism”). Egotism – the maintenance of control at full contacting instead of letting oneself go into the new experience which results from the contact – has been considered by Isadore From as suffering which is transmitted from psychotherapists to patients by supporting a high level of reflection but forgetting to develop the level of trust in the other and in the situation, both of which are vital for reaching full contacting (pp. 87 - 90).

Several other chapters of the book pay attention to further basic theoretical concepts of Gestalt therapy including the theory of the self as a process (pp. 75 - 81), the Gestalt therapeutic approach to diagnosis (pp. 120 - 133), the Gestalt theory of aggression (pp. 134 - 150) and a chapter about love, ethics, and the differentiation of Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex, which is based on an individualistic perspective, from the relational perspective (pp. 151 - 166). With one chapter the author addresses her approach to a developmental theory in the light of Gestalt therapy and introduces her “*Gestalt Therapy Map of Polyphonic Development of Domains*” (pp. 94 - 119). She turns away from “phase models of development” which correlate each age with defined competences. She refers to the work of Daniel Stern with a model of “domains” which develop through the entire life span with reference to the individual and temporal ability for fully contacting. With the domains she means the abilities for confluence, projection, introjection, retrofaction, and egotism. Obviously with this approach Spagnuolo Lobb points out the aesthetic quality of the process of contacting. The therapeutic benefit of this concept is not a description of a clinical state but it helps to answer the question how clients cope with the complexity of the perceptions of a

situation and the task of processing them for the actual contacting process. The domains range from spontaneous contacting to the complete block of the excitement which would be vital for full contact. With this, the desensitisation at the contact boundary – with respect to the individual domains – could result in severe suffering when chronified.

The domains are correlated to the following abilities: (a) Confluence is seen as the ability of “*being-with with no perception of boundaries*” – this ability is the basic ground for empathy which “*derives from our being radically part of our environment*”. (b) Introjection is understood as “*the ability of being-with taking the environment inside*” and includes the ability to learn. (c) The domain of projection is “*the ability of being-with by casting oneself into the world*”. This includes, for example, being able to create imaginations of the other or of the environment in order to explore the world with courage. (d) With the domain of retroflecting, she points towards the “*ability of being-with containing one's own energy*”. This is accompanied by the abilities to reflect, to be alone, to think creatively, and to tell stories. (e) Finally she describes the domain of egotism as the “*ability of being-with the other in deliberate control*”, the capacity of being autonomous and keeping a clear mind in difficult situations. All the abilities that are faced by these domains are contrasted with risks which arise by the desensitisation of the contact boundary and thus impair spontaneous and lively contacting.

The author illustrates her own approach to the practical work with domains by three vignettes of therapy situations. Surely it is worthwhile continuing to think about and develop this concept further. However, when considering this concept as the ground for a developmental theory I am sceptical about the risk of establishing – of course, unintentionally – a new “phase model” which would similarly be categorising modalities of experience as other well-established models. In this respect I share the sceptical view of L. Kröll (2014) in his review in “Gestalttherapie”.

In the last four chapters, Spagnuolo Lobb transfers her understanding of Gestalt therapy theory as

described in the first parts of the book to the concepts of couples therapy (pp. 167 - 189), family therapy (pp. 190 - 228), group therapy (pp. 229 - 251), and to the work with Gestalt training groups. Obviously, the author puts great emphasis on the last chapter about training in Gestalt therapy. She dedicates it to her students when she points out aesthetical as well as ethical principles as the guiding lines and crucial foundation of the practical work as Gestalt therapists. For her, political and social issues are considered of similar relevance as the emphasis on the therapeutic relationship. Furthermore, she underscores the importance of support for the personal development of trainees. For this development it would be necessary to aggressively deconstruct the acquired and introjected contents in order to facilitate their assimilation. The aim, consequently, would not be the (deliberate and experienced) reproduction of theoretical considerations or methodological knowledge. Her four-stage model of the development of training groups results in becoming a professional for psychotherapeutic treatment as well as in "*belonging independence*" which describes "*both the sense of solid roots and, at the same time, the permission to create new forms capable of solving concrete problems in society*". The author ends the final chapter with a statement which I understand as the summary of the whole book and, at the same time, as an aesthetic synopsis of the foundational ideas of Gestalt therapy: "*To learn psychotherapy means to learn the art of being able to see the beauty of our loving the other despite the risk of being wounded by it, and being able to see the depth of existence both in ourselves and in the people to whom our treatment is addressed.*" (p. 274).

While reading "Now-for-Next in Psychotherapy" I found numerous ideas and thoughts which inspired me to rethink some of my preconceived theoretical conceptions and to put them into a new, more vivid light and comprehend them with words which are closer to relational experience than they were before. I most appreciate the distinct emphasis on the relational quality and experience and on its meaning which Spagnuolo Lobb follows throughout her text. She consistently refers to genuine Gestalt therapeutic sources and concepts and contrasts them with psychodynamic and

psychoanalytic ones and sometimes she presents differences as well as similarities.

The book contains a long list of references and is written in a very fluid style, thus it was easy for me to follow it step by step. To my comprehension it is not a textbook in the strict sense of the word and I think it could enhance and widen the professional and personal horizons of students as well as experienced psychotherapists. The fact that some parts of the book have, at least partially, already been published elsewhere does not impair the quality of the book but rather, at the same time, reveals the scope of theoretical and practical approaches to Gestalt therapy as well as the diverse and comprehensive work of the author.

I recommend it to anyone who wants to learn about the ideas of Gestalt therapy from the perspective of the relational and aesthetic issues of this modality.

References:

Dreitzel, H. P., "Gestalt und Prozess – eine psychotherapeutische Diagnostik oder: Der gesunde Mensch hat wenig Charakter", EHP – Edition Humanistische Psychologie, Bergisch Gladbach, 2004; p. 56 et seqq.

Kröll, L.; Review in: Gestalttherapie 1/2014, p. 144 et seqq.

This article was previously published in German (OeAGG FEEDBACK 1&2/2016; 73 - 79) and translated into English (with minor changes) by the author².

Günther Kuhn-Ditzelmüller; 2018

DI Dr. Günther Kuhn-Ditzelmüller
Psychotherapeut, Integrative Gestalttherapie (ÖAGG)
M: g.ditzelmueler@praxis07.at
W: www.gestalt.co.at
T: +43 (0) 650 3500425

² I gratefully acknowledge Denis Bostock and Michael Reiterer for their help preparing the English version of this text.

A: Gyrowetzgasse 1/9; 1140 Vienna, Austria