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## Gestalt therapy recontextualised

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A review of **The Now-for-Next in Psychotherapy: Gestalt Therapy Recounted in Post-Modern Society** by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb. Published by Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy srl, Siracusa, Italy, 2010, 305 pages. Price: £31.00 (pbk).

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb is well known in the Gestalt therapy community for her many contributions to Gestalt therapy in Italy and internationally (O'Leary, 2013). Since 1979 she has served as Director of the Istituto di Gestalt HCC, Italy's oldest and largest Gestalt institute. She has authored and edited numerous books, founded journals and has served in many significant organisational roles. *The Now-For-Next in Psychotherapy: Gestalt Therapy Recounted in Post-Modern Society* is, as its title states, Spagnuolo Lobb's broad ranging restatement of Gestalt therapy for our current era. It is an important and ambitious offering.

In her introduction, Spagnuolo Lobb shares that she has written this book 'for all those who want to get into the heart of the spell of Gestalt ... I have expressed my love for Gestalt therapy in various ways' (p. 27). Spagnuolo Lobb frames the presentation of her clinical model in the context of her lifelong passion for Gestalt therapy. And true to the intersubjective spirit of her theoretical approach, she reveals herself through the sharing of her clinical work. In many cases she does this verbatim and at length – providing the reader with numerous rich clinical vignettes that take us deeply into the intimate and vulnerable territory of the clinical relationship. Spagnuolo Lobb's work strongly fleshes out the idea, so essential in modern Gestalt therapy, that the self of the therapist is found in the creative flow of the contact between therapist and client. That creative flow of contact is shaped by Gestalt therapy's theory and methodology, and Spagnuolo Lobb does a superb job of mapping a modern Gestalt therapy approach.

Spagnuolo Lobb's clinical writing is accessible, human and savvy. Her theoretical writing is grounded in a great depth of knowledge not only of Gestalt

therapy, but also of many fields of knowledge within clinical psychology, counselling psychology, family therapy, group therapy, and philosophy. Her writing about the training of Gestalt therapists is also deeply grounded in theory and years of commitment to and the practice of Gestalt therapy training.

This is a book that can be read and re-read in order to assimilate the bounty of its offerings. Spagnuolo Lobb's first chapter – Gestalt Clinical Practice in Post-Modern Society – prepares the ground for the chapters to come with the observation that when Gestalt therapy was first developed in the 1950s, typical client presenting problems related to a need for greater freedom, choice, and dignity. In the current postmodern world, our clients' presenting problems tend more to issues of rootlessness and desensitisation. In our current situation, Spagnuolo Lobb observes, 'the social experience of young people is "liquid", incapable of containing the excitement of the encounter with the other' (p. 31). She goes on to say, 'I believe that today psychotherapy has a twofold task: to *resensitize the body*, and to give tools of *horizontal relational support*, that can make people feel recognized by the equal other' (pp. 32–33, original italics).

Chapter two of the book is an excellent presentation of classical Gestalt therapy theory – a revision of her chapter in Woldt and Toman (2005). This chapter anchors her recounting of Gestalt therapy on a solid theoretical foundation, and the author is careful throughout the book to stay grounded with frequent references to Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951/1994). She does an admirable job of integrating current research (particularly the work of the late Daniel Stern with whom she was personally connected) while remaining true to Gestalt therapy's original theory. It is as if the figure of Gestalt therapy theory and practice is illuminated very differently in the light of modern social conditions, while its essence remains. Like Monet's vision of Rouen Cathedral cast in varying shades of light, Spagnuolo Lobb's vision of the figure of the entire field of Gestalt therapy shifts in the light of the challenges facing our clients in the current era.

The subtitle of the book, 'Gestalt Therapy Recounted in Post-Modern Society', speaks to the scope of this text. In her chapters on somatic experience, the client's narrative, aggression and conflict, love in psychotherapy, couples therapy, family therapy, group therapy, and the training of Gestalt therapists, the author broadly re-imagines the practice of Gestalt therapy for the current era. In so doing, she brings to the foreground many aspects of clinical work that have, up to this point, received less attention in the Gestalt literature than they have deserved.

A significant example of this shift in foreground focus is Spagnuolo Lobb's discussion of the importance

of *relational containment* in fostering embodiment and contact. Containment is a process that has hitherto found little exploration in the Gestalt literature. A lack of attention to emotional and relational containment in the Gestalt literature makes sense in the context of Gestalt therapy's original focus on the individual's freedom of choice in a conventional society, where the therapist's use of emotional containment can bring to mind the therapist acting as an agent of society's demand for conformity, constriction and control. But, as Spagnuolo Lobb astutely identifies, the client typical of today's society suffers less from societal over-control than from rootlessness and lack of connection with others. From the ground of rootlessness, the figure of relational containment is reframed as a vital therapeutic element in supporting the emergence of embodiment and relationality:

What is missing in our society is the ability to be in a relationship starting from the containment of the initial chaos, which would allow individuals to experience that sense of taken for granted security that comes from the 'obvious' presence of the significant other and from which the differentiation of the self may emerge. (p. 152)

In this review, I cannot begin to discuss all that Spagnuolo Lobb covers in this book; instead I will reflect on a number of concepts that I found particularly stimulating and that have had an impact on my practice. I will focus on: The Therapeutic Relationship as Real Fact; The Intentionality of Contact; The Now For Next; and Polyphonic Development of Domains.

Spagnuolo Lobb conceives of the therapy relationship as a *real* relationship:

Gestalt therapy ... attributes to the therapeutic relationship the character of a *real experience*, which is born and has its own history in the space that lies 'between' patient and therapist ... Between patient and therapist there comes into being a unique, unrepeatable relationship in which reciprocal perceptions are modified, in which the patterns of the past are developed with a view to improving *this* relationship (p. 41, original italics).

Perhaps this framing of the therapy relationship will not be news to BGJ readers, and I suppose it is not exactly new to me, but I have found the idea exhilarating and it has enlivened my clinical work since I have read her discussion of the real relationship that we Gestalt therapists form with our clients. Her focus on the real relationship emphasises the co-created nature of Gestalt therapy, and it shines a light on the importance of the contact and intersubjectivity in psychotherapy that is the primary source of healing and change.

Spagnuolo Lobb works fruitfully with the concept of *The Now-for-Next in Psychotherapy*. In one aspect, the Now-for-Next captures the relational flow from

what is happening in this moment of psychotherapy with all of its difficulties and resistances in a co-created movement toward greater contact and intersubjectivity. In another aspect, the Now-for-Next refers to the therapist's recognition of the client's strengths and potential. In her lovely foreword to the book, Donna Orange puts it this way: 'For the first time, someone has been interested enough to imagine what this patient could become, or to believe there was more to him or her than pathology' (p. 16). Again we see the centrality of the *intersubjective* in Spagnuolo Lobb's work. The Now-for-Next can be viewed as a particular form of intersubjectivity – a form in which the therapist provides a sense of hopefulness in relation to the client's future. In my clinical work, I sometimes experience a new way of seeing the client; it feels almost as if I am literally seeing a different version of the client, one that lives more fully in his or her potential. Perhaps this is an aspect of my experience of the Now-for-Next with my clients. When I feel the timing is right, I will frequently share this vision of the client with him or her. I agree with Spagnuolo Lobb, that reflecting a hopeful vision of the client back to them is an important form of intersubjective meeting and a vital aspect of contemporary Gestalt therapy.

The *Intentionality of Contact* refers to the client and therapist's motivation to connect. The skilful Gestalt therapist sees and responds to the client's contact-making intent. 'The co-creation of the therapeutic experience is motivated – supported and directed – by an intentionality, which for the Gestalt approach is always an intentionality of contact with the other' (p. 33). Underlying Spagnuolo Lobb's concept of Intentionality of Contact is the understanding that experiences of contact-making and intersubjectivity are not simply positive experiences; they represent fundamental motivational systems, and essential experiences that can have a powerful healing effect on the client when experienced in the safety of the therapeutic relationship. I think that Spagnuolo Lobb would agree with psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's assertion that 'the need(s) for intersubjective orientation and relatedness ... are necessary for their own sake. Knowing and being known from the 'inside' can ... be seen as an essential motivation separate from the basic need for attachment, which is associated with safety' (Benjamin, 2018, p. 9; Stern, 2004). In highlighting the client's *Intentionality of Contact* as well as the *reality of the therapy relationship* and the *Now-for-Next*, Spagnuolo Lobb confirms that experiencing intersubjectivity is central to Gestalt therapy theory and methodology in this age of desensitisation and alienation. The experience of intersubjectivity allows the client to feel recognised, held, contained, and can ultimately help the client to better orient him or herself

to the field in navigating a life in which there is freedom to choose and empowerment.

The best thing about *The Now-for-Next in Psychotherapy* for me is the author's voice as a Gestalt therapy writer. She is unafraid to show her motherly and nurturing side. She has a feel for human development that I find very refreshing. She is comfortable with her feminine and parental aspects, and I found myself resonating with her work from my own feminine and parental aspects. She recounts a lovely piece of work with a young wife and mother in which she has the young woman talk to her, the therapist, as if she the therapist were the young mother's own mother. Apart from the innovation of replacing the empty chair with the person of the therapist (which I have experimented with in my own work with very positive results), this verbatim vignette shows Spagnuolo Lobb's large capacity for nurturing, parenting and guiding her clients. Spagnuolo Lobb's parental stance may strike some Gestalt therapists as hierarchical, but before readers jump to this conclusion, it is important to remember Spagnuolo Lobb's analysis that the typical client in today's alienated world may well suffer from a lack of feeling held and contained. For such clients, experiencing, in the therapeutic relationship, a clinician who is comfortable with nurturing, setting limits, and working with domains of development that have hitherto been underdeveloped, may be both needed and welcome.

One final innovative concept I would like to comment on is Spagnuolo Lobb's *Polyphonic Development of Domains*. This concept is strongly influenced by her connection with Daniel Stern, to whom she gives credit. She reframes each of Gestalt therapy's contact modalities as 'domains of development' that do not build sequentially as developmental tasks that become increasingly complex (e.g. first the baby experiences confluence with the mother, and then moves up the developmental ladder to take on the task of introjection of the mother's attitudes and ways of being, etc.). Instead, she integrates Stern's concept of the Polyphonic Development of Domains in which:

development comes about like the composition of a melody which, acquiring new themes (in gestalt language we might call them acquired modalities of contact) and instruments (in other words, abilities to be-with transferred to various relational modalities, just as when the same music is played by a new instrument coming into the orchestra) is transformed into a new, ever more articulated and complex harmony. (p. 110)

The Gestalt modalities of contact (confluence, introjection, projection, retroreflection) are each

integrated throughout development in no particular order as domains of development that gradually become expressed and integrated, giving the individual growing capacity to experience self and world with increasing complexity. Putting the emphasis on the Polyphonic Development of Domains allows Gestalt therapy to appreciate the role of integrating our various modes of being as essential to our clients' maturation and development.

In closing, I encourage BGJ readers to grapple with this formidable and sometimes challenging text. It may challenge some of the reader's assumptions in its recontextualising of familiar concepts and its introduction of new ideas and methods. In parts it is an easy read (particularly the verbatim case studies). In other parts readers will find themselves wrestling with new concepts and methodologies and may feel the need to read certain sections numerous times in order to more fully grasp the author's meaning. This is not a book for beginners (although beginners may get much out of it). Instead it is a book for experienced and serious minded Gestalt therapists. It is a major book from a major figure in Gestalt therapy. I recommend it highly.

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