

Reflections on “Dialogues on Psychotherapy in the Time of Coronavirus”, an International Webinar Hosted by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb and the Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy



Susan L. Fischer

Abstract

The two-day international webinar, “Dialogues on Psychotherapy in the Time of Coronavirus”, organized by the indefatigable Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb with the Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy of which she is founder and director, was an awesome experience, with a community of almost nine hundred participants convening globally on 15 and 16 May 2020. The webinar was both impressive and daunting: almost nine hundred people were able to feel well connected over continents, physical and virtual spaces, time zones, and multiple languages, and interacted with (through “chat” options), a cadre of stellar psychologists and Gestalt psychotherapists. These specialists talked about their experiences of the coronavirus pandemic and suggested aspects of Gestalt therapy that might help discover ways for this unprecedented event of global trauma to be an opportunity for growth. Ruella Frank’s remarks are on the mark: “Participating in the conference was a wonderful experience and much needed. I felt myself as part of this outstanding worldwide Gestalt community, sharing our suffering and with compassion. I felt myself reaching for others and could easily imagine them reaching back”.

Key words: Gestalt Therapy, pandemic, COVID-19, connection, community.

The Paradigm of Reciprocity: How to Radically Respect Spontaneity in Clinical Practice



Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

Abstract

This article explores how the concept of radical respect, crucial in Gestalt therapy, has

changed over the years. Novel contemporary social situations challenge our organism/environment balance and call for new professional values. Today, clinical sufferings (i.e., desensitization, fragile sense of self, increase in impulsive behaviors) require that Gestalt therapists focus on the support of the ground experience rather than the figure. Examples of how to work on the ground are given, along with research results. The author then proposes a switch of paradigm in psychotherapy: to support the reciprocity and its dance in meaningful contacts. The aesthetic relational knowledge of the field is described as a new tool through which the therapist may draw upon her resonance in the field.

The traumatic experiences of our time have changed our way of living, both neurologically and relationally. We are mostly unable to look into our neighbor's eyes or help our children make sense of their lives. As Gestalt therapists and practitioners, we need new tools to develop our model, while remaining faithful to our epistemology. We need to focus on the body-in-contact and on relational movements at the contact boundary, where the feeling of being seen by the other creates a feeling of existing for someone, where a unified sense of self is born.

This article approaches the following changes with respect to our values and practice as Gestalt therapists: 1)We have switched from Humanistic Values to Relational and Aesthetic Values of the field. 2)We support ever more the neurophysiological process of contact: "Breathe and feel what happens at the boundary". 3)We face new clinical sufferings by supporting the emergence of a sense of unified self-in-contact. 4)Important clinical questions are, "How can I support you? How can I see the beauty that is still in your suffering and keeps you alive? How can I provide occasions for your undeveloped intentionality of contact to unfold between you and me?". 5)We provide our presence as a sure ground. 6)We consider ourselves, the healers, as *cocreators* of the therapeutic situation. 7)We find time and space for ourselves to grow in a community: what cures is not the "right" therapeutic intervention, but our human *presence*. 8)Like researchers, we are curious, humble, and spontaneous. We are aware of our being fallible. We go on discovering always a new truth,*contextualized* in the situation.

Key words: Reciprocity, Aesthetic Relational Knowledge, polyphonic development of domains, psychotherapeutic paradigm, ground experience.

STUDIES AND APPLICATION MODELS

The Aesthetics of Language in Online Gestalt Therapy



Giuseppe Sampognaro

Abstract

The COVID-19 emergency forced us to use the online setting to continue our clinical work. The phenomenological field facilitated by technology has, among other effects, changed and adapted certain aspects of the aesthetics of language within the therapeutic relationship.

The aesthetics of language in online Gestalt therapy is necessarily focused on visual and

auditory sensory channels and requires a particular sensitivity on the part of the therapist and the patient, which create – in the reciprocity of contact – a shared vocabulary. The two innovative therapeutic tools – Dance Steps and Relational Aesthetic Knowledge – formulated by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb can also be applied to the online situation. They too, however, are affected by the difficulty given by the fragility of the therapeutic presence in this context. The choice to verbalize what the therapist feels in contact with the patient emerges from the cocreated field; a *sui generis* field, significantly influenced by the medium used, both in content and in the form (and therefore in aesthetics) of the language.

A clinical example defines the therapist's dilemma whether or not to verbalize his own experience that could be altered by the lack of reliability of the technological means. The solution proposed is to rely on the phenomenological field that, in online therapy, is *sui generis* but which in any case expresses a valid creative adaptation to each other, functional to contact.

Key words: Phenomenological field, aesthetics of language, Dance Steps, Aesthetic Relational Knowledge, co-creation.

Online Gestalt Training. Reflections of the Trainees for Trainers of the Institute of Gestalt HCC Italy – Post-Graduate School of Psychotherapy

Elisabetta Conte, Maria Carollo, Federica Falco, Luca Magani,
Giulia Milazzo, Giulia Nora Pappalardo, Luca Pino,
Alessandra Roccasalva, Elisa Spini

Abstract

In this article the authors focus their attention on benefits and limits of virtual Gestalt training, referring to what they observed and experienced attending a series of virtual seminars hosted by the Post Graduate School of Gestalt Psychotherapy, throughout the first lockdown period (March 9 2020 – May 18 2020). What has emerged is a picture in which the authors try to answer the questions: 1) is Gestalt psychotherapy able to renew itself by adapting to newly adopted methodologies? and 2) is it still possible to remain faithful to the Gestalt epistemological principles of phenomenology, aesthetics and field? The study shows that the virtual methodology still provides a valid tool to guarantee an adequate training to the students while maintaining the continuity of the group processes, an important aspect of experiential teaching method. The learning process of the Gestalt training model is seen as a phenomenon that occurs at the contact boundary between students and the training staff, that is a strictly co-created relational process. The authors highlight the importance of attending the virtual training as a support for students to provide a solid ground when many certainties (which were taken for granted before) were collapsing, and in this way contain fears and anxiety. Virtual individual work in the class group has proven to be a powerful tool for group intimacy –even in the online setting– and for encouraging the process of growth of the

group as a whole.

The limits imposed on the use of the body – for a psychotherapy where embodied presence is one of its founding principles – were penalizing. The use of senses and Aesthetic Relational Knowledge (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2017) have allowed to broaden the perceptual horizon. The description of differences with the setting in presence is also very interesting. The result is a final picture in which the training quality has been maintained at its standard, as well as fully comply with the basic epistemological principles of the Gestalt model.

Key words: Virtual Gestalt training, ground of securities and pandemic, virtual contact boundary, virtual setting, aesthetic relational knowledge.

GESTALT IN ACTION

Phenomenology and Aesthetics of Gestalt Approach in Online Psychotherapy



Angela Basile

Abstract

The author shows how the phenomenological, aesthetic and field-oriented approach of Gestalt psychotherapy can be applied in online therapies. The virtual setting is seen as a “relational field” with its own specificity, in which sight and hearing are the senses that come into play to the detriment of all others.

How does Aesthetic Relational Knowledge, the sensory intuition that the therapist has of the client and of his relational field, transfer to a virtual setting? How can the actual contact-making between client and therapist be described in cyberspace? How to grasp the client’s intentionality for contact and his *now for next*? Can there be an intercorporeal experience between fragmented digital bodies?

To answer these questions some clinical testimonies of Gestalt therapists, as well as patients who have experienced online psychotherapy, are reported.

In conclusion the author, aware of the need for further scientific studies on the efficacy of online therapy, offers some thoughts on what the future of psychotherapy could be after the pandemic, on the importance of clinical and theoretical training of therapists who work online and on their humility in recognizing where are the limits to the value of online care.

The author, referring to a growing debate both in Italy and internationally on the use of online psychotherapy which has registered a significant increase during the pandemic, reflects on the phenomenology and psychodynamics of interpersonal relationships on the internet and proposes some thoughts on how the epistemological principles of Gestalt psychotherapy (Aesthetic Relational Knowledge, embodied empathy, phenomenological field, contact, intentionality) can be declined in a virtual setting.

In this regard, there is testimony from some Gestalt therapists as well as patients who have experienced online psychotherapy.

Key words: Online Gestalt psychotherapy, virtual setting, phenomenological field, virtual body, Aesthetic Relational Knowledge.

Autism and Coronavirus (COVID-19) in a Field Perspective: Gestalt Thoughts

Antonio Narzisi

Abstract

COVID-19 period permitted us understand how important our interdependence is. The lockdown suddenly put us in touch with our embodied empathy. Our body and mind reacted better than our expectations. It is probable, although not proven, that the different perception of time and the modification of our lives in this lockdown period has enhanced our need to be in contact with each other with all our senses. Of course, this has not always been the case. Unfortunately for some patients this period complicated their already complex psychopathological condition. ASC is a severe multifactorial disorder characterized by an umbrella of specific peculiarity in the areas of the social communication and restricted interests and repetitive behaviours. The diffusion of ASC is worldwide and the recent epidemiological data showed an estimated prevalence less than 1/100. COVID-19 is now among the phases 2 and 3. The lockdown has been significantly reduced compared to phase 1. However, the centers and institutions that deal with the diagnosis and intervention of children with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) required rapid functional adaptation to respond to patients' needs. In this situation the handle of young children with ASC was challenging also for families and caregivers.

This report aims to give some advices summarized in 10 tips to help therapists, families and caregivers to handle ASC during this period. The COVID-19 is questioning the routine of our young children with ASC and we must find creative adjustments to be close to our patients and their families.

Key words: Autism, COVID-19, children, parents, Gestalt Therapy.

RESEARCHES

The Outcome Research in Gestalt Therapy: The Italian CORE-OM Research Project



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Abstract

In the last decade, there has been a growing international and national interest in the evaluation of outcomes in psychotherapy (Roubal, 2016). It is considered very important to understand how to provide services in line with the need for assistance and support and to make better use of available resources (including economic resources). In Italy the need for research is strongly felt by a growing number of psychotherapy models that have to demonstrate the validity and the effectiveness of their approach. The absence of valid and reliable tools to measure outcomes translated into Italian was a big obstacle for the study and evaluation of psychological services. The clinical validation of the Italian version of CORE-OM (Clinical Outcome Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure) represented a first step towards the diffusion among Italian psychological services of this methodology (Palmieri *et al.*, 2009).

Among psychotherapy associations and institutes, the importance of dedicating resources to research has emerged to give equal dignity to different psychotherapy modalities and to respond to the request to demonstrate the effectiveness of the model.

Research can justify and improve clinical practice, giving strength and legitimacy to therapists (La Rosa and Tosi, 2018).

This paper describes a three-year research project with CORE-OM (Clinical Outcome Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure) and illustrates the results of the evaluation of the clinical outcome of psychotherapy in clients undergoing psychotherapeutic process with the Gestalt method within the National Organisation of Gestalt Therapy (NOGT), and the Italian Society of Gestalt Psychotherapy (SIPG). The data was gathered using CORE-OM. The study is an example of a practice-oriented research in Gestalt therapy because it introduces a widely used quantitative method to evaluate the clinical outcome of psychotherapy (CORE-OM) as an integral part of clinical work in a relational approach (La Rosa and Tosi, 2019). The authors have repeated within the Italian Gestalt community a similar study conducted in the UK in 2011 (Stevence *et al.*, 2011) and compared both findings. Results indicate that Gestalt therapy has been effective in improving the condition of clients, with an effect size comparable to those that were observed in similar studies conducted in other countries and with different modalities.

Key words: Gestalt therapy, treatment effectiveness, outcome research, CORE-OM, long-term psychotherapy.