

Evolutions and Developments of an institute at the source: the NYIGT

Rivista di Psicoterapia, GTK No 10, 2023

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In *Requiem for a Nun*, the American novelist wrote, “The past is not dead, it is not even past” (Faulkner, n.d.) Reflecting on the past, present and future of gestalt therapy from my perspective as a someone who has lived all of his gestalt therapy life in the New York Institute for Gestalt therapy (hereinafter NYIGT), it is easy for me to understand this. Gestalt therapy’s past is not past, it is still lived. Since I have been a member of the NYIGT since 1976, I have had a front row seat to experience this.

The NYIGT: in time, in space

The NYIGT lives across time as the founding gestalt therapy institute with its international membership that continues to reflect on theory and practice using Perls and Goodman in *Gestalt Therapy, Excitement and Growth in the Human Condition* (hereinafter, PHG), (Perls et al., 1951) as the theory of reference. The institute functions across space in a transnational archipelago, as if a cluster of interconnected islands. That is, it exists wherever its members continue to develop, research, and practice gestalt therapy.¹ Yet despite geographical distances we form one community of members.

In what follows, I will reflect on my own perspective of the stream of gestalt therapy that continues to flow from the founded headwaters of the Perls and Goodman model at the NYIGT. Since the NYIGT is not a training institute, never had a curriculum, and never certified psychotherapists, its perspective follows no doctrine but one. We encouraged creativity within an understanding of the PHG model. To some, this warranted the claim that we were doctrinaire in our orthodoxy. To others, it even proved we were uselessly dated and out of touch. Yet, our “orthodoxy” was strategic. During the decades when the PHG model of the theory of self and sequence of contacting was pushed to the margins of gestalt therapy we insisted on its centrality and protested any dilution. We taught that model through a line by line reading of the text and

¹ .¹ For example, this is memorialized in *The NYIGT in the 21st Century*. (Bloom & O’Neill, 2014) Each chapter of that book is a previously published paper by members of the NYIGT preceded by a short introduction by the author that shows how the paper is linked to PHG as a theory of reference and further developed, modified or changed by the author.

through practicums where we applied its method to one another. And simultaneously, we lived through the anarchy at the heart of gestalt therapy by refusing to structure our teaching, offer a training program, or grant certificates to trainees. That remains the hallmark of our identity insofar as we retain PHG as the theory of reference. Times have changed, as I will describe. What was once presented in terms of orthodoxy, is now a theory of reference. The PHG model is well enough understood and well enough integrated into gestalt therapy, that it no longer needs to be defended against dilution. As a theory of reference, then, it is a past upon which vital gestalt therapy is anchored – as a support and inspiration for many different developments of gestalt therapy, which are continuing as gestalt therapy points itself forward.

In these comments, I will reference a few of the dramatic shifts that occurred in my institute in the past that is not past. These are the shifts from the one person to the relational model of gestalt therapy; the shift from relational to a field focus; the shift from interruptions of contact to the aesthetic criterions of contacting. I obviously can only note these dramatic shifts in a summary way. I am giving only my brief summarized personal account of the NYIGT's responses to the shifting world, inside and outside the world of the institute

Let me be clear. The NYIGT did not originate these shifts, these turns. And even more importantly, they are not exclusive to the institute. No Archimedes' hand can shift a paradigm just as no thinker can own the contents of her thoughts. We therapists, all of us, –in our theory and praxis – are always no more than responders to the shifting world around us.

Gestalt Therapy in the “Accusative Case”: patient as direct “object”

The shift from the one person to the two person and then the relational turn in gestalt therapy has been described by many. (for example, Philippson, 2001; Lobb, 2009; Bloom, 2009; Jacobs, 2019) and is well known. Let me describe it in terms of the NYIGT. In a one-person model that addresses the psychodynamics of patient-as-other, the therapy is as if “done to” the patient – as direct object. Gestalt therapy in the “accusative” is predicated -- implicitly or explicitly -- on the one-person psychodynamic model. In 1978, the first thing Richard Kitzler, fellow of the NYIGT, said to me in my very first gestalt therapy session in 1976 was, “What are you doing with your eyes? High fevers as a child?” Observer, observed. It was not unusual for him to make similar comments – interventions—focusing on me as an object of his clinical attention, observed by him, the expert – expert that he was, and indeed brilliantly so. The gestalt experiments so central to our method were proposed by him and to be done by me. He did not include his own experience of being with me.

There was no madness to his method. If psychotherapies are answers to the calls of suffering, the social suffering to which “accusative” gestalt therapy replied was the leveling of the individual into a senseless, feelingless numb culture of discontent. This is broadly yet eloquently described in PHG. Of course gestalt therapy would pick out the individual from among the undifferentiated blur of people and focus on each person’s need to sharpen his or her particular, specific capacities to individuate, discriminate, to take ownership of experience. The precise eye of a gifted gestalt clinician could find just the right hints in a person that invited the intervention which would bring forth the kind of individual expression that could undo the numbing hold, retroreflections, introjections and so as to reawaken a person to life. The PHG model itself underscored the loss of ego functioning of self-process as the observable and experienceable manifestation of interruptions of contact. Losses of ego functioning reflected those interruptions. The gestalt therapy in the accusative engaged the ego or I functioning of the patient as a portal to the other self functions.

This was and is an effective mode of gestalt therapy. It reflected the needs of the patients -- and of the culture. It expressed the social values of Goodman and Perls. Anarchism, pragmatism, and, perhaps an existential socialism, which sought to balance a call for individual authentic ownership of experience with social consciousness.

Yet in this approach the gestalt therapist cannot avoid taking an authoritarian stance much as a stage director. The method is to uncover what is there, perhaps even seen by the therapist, but unknown by the patient. “What are you doing?” The method even insists that the person’s resistance must be overcome, the person needs to be brought to and through an impasse as if following a particular blueprint for growth. This of course does not mean that gestalt therapy in the accusative abandons the humanistic approach. It means that by structuring the relationship in terms of the doer and the done to, important aspects of the relational field are ignored. On the other hand, with a gestalt therapy in the “dative,” therapy is not directed at the patient, but, rather, the patient is the person *with whom* therapy is practiced, to whom therapy is given, the dative-subject. The tie between the therapist and the patient is figural and fundamental to the work of the therapy itself.

Reflected at the NYIGT

The history of the NYIGT reflected this change perspective in terms of institutional power dynamics. While the institute was always committed to radical democracy, social libertarianism and anarchy, the original mechanics of

the institute, its pulleys and gears, were hierarchical if not explicitly aristocratic. It was not only leader dominated, it supported a one-person model. Our leader was a “president for life” -- Laura Perls. The vice president was rotated among the Council of Fellows. This council was self-selected from among the original community of gestalt therapists who formed the institute. All decisions of the NYIGT were made by this council and ratified by the president. Membership itself was open to anyone who cared to join as an “associate member.” If an associate member came to the attention of a fellow as someone with understanding of the NYIGT-PHG model, had skill, and training in gestalt therapy, the fellow presented that person to the council as a candidate to become a “full member”. The council deliberated over this candidate in private. A full member was someone deemed competent to receive referrals and to offer his or her own trainings under the umbrella of the institute.

While the fellows led from above, the members ran the institute from below. Given the culture of decision by consensus of the members, the day-to-day business of the institute was conducted by group process. The members developed a style of group process that paid close attention to gestalt field dynamics. Leadership was understood as a function and not as a power held by any particular person. This led to a tension between vertical authority of the fellows and the horizontal authority of the members, whose ever more powerful sense of a figural “we” strained against the old structure.

The tension between the horizontal (relational or field) authority of the members and the vertical authority of the fellows eventually led to a change in the structure of the institute in which the council of fellows voluntarily dissolved and the members assumed leadership of the institute. And more radically, the leadership itself was considered a function of the membership and not of, an individual. Those chosen as officers exercised leadership functions that were shared among the membership. That is, leadership *as* leadership was an emerging figure against the ground of the institute. This became an identifiably NYIGT form of group process that was dramatically different from the leader directed hot seat method. (Frew & Feder, 2008)

Not only did this question a one-person model of gestalt therapy in the accusative, but by reaffirming contacting as emergent of the organism/environment field, in which the NYIGT itself was the field, by attending to the experiences as functions of the field and all its members were parts of one whole, this approach immediately and necessarily became relational. Further, it reaffirmed the institute’s commitment to being a living example of gestalt therapy theory and practice. We would practice what we preached. And use what we practiced with one another to be the basis of how we continued to understand and develop gestalt therapy -- and what we preached.

A more diligent phenomenological approach to gestalt therapy presented by the NYIGT's commitment to its field model necessarily entailed our close attention to the qualities of contacting itself. Actually, Laura Perls' laid the foundation for the aesthetic of gestalt therapy. She showed us the intrinsic grace, rhythm and harmony in the flow of contacting. There is ample guidance in the theory of reference to point us to the aesthetic or felt and sensed qualities of experience as experienceable and observable indicators of contact. These aesthetic qualities of contacting are the immediate sense of the situation and evidence of the fullness and clarity of contacting itself. The aesthetic of the emerging figure is a directly sensed, felt, perceived, experience of the field. These are the qualities of the forming figure. It is the autonomous criterion of contacting. The clear and distinct rational knowledge characteristic of the empirical scientific (Cartesian) approach is replaced by an aesthetic, non-rational, even indistinct knowledge of the senses. This autonomous criterion replaces the extrinsic criterion by which experience is evaluate. Clinical values become aesthetic values. This is a radical point of view. (Bloom, 2003)

Yet, from this perspective, the aesthetic of contacting is not a matter of beauty, as such. That would be judgments of beauty and the realm of art criticism. Rather it is an element of a clinical phenomenological approach within which the aesthetic is a criterion by which contacting is evaluated. The aesthetic criterion prevents gestalt therapy from assuming a psychodynamic attitude within which the therapist evaluates the inner-dynamics of the patient since it is from within the aesthetic of contacting – of the therapist/patient – that its grace, harmony and so on -- can be directly experienced. That is, they are necessarily experienced by the patient *and* the therapist both of whom are embodied presences of the organism/field of which both of them are intrinsic parts.

From authority to theory of reference

The shift in the power structure of institute from the fellows to members was reflected in a parallel shift from accepting to challenging the authority of the PHG model. It is not that the PHG had been blindly introjected, but it was taught with the assumption any questions about or difficulty with the text or difficulty arose from individuals' personalities rather than from something intrinsic in the ideas. Now questions became more substantive and challenging.²

For the most part, rather than leading to a rejection of the sequence of contact/theory of self model, the questionings emerged from within it. They

² Richard Kitzler, for example, a fellow who taught PHG for years through the line-by-line hermeneutic method, abandoned that approach entirely and sought to go behind the principles to find their sources.

were provoked by the model itself and, indeed, came from an ever more thorough excavation of the roots and branches of the model. The questions also reflected the change in the orientation of the institute from a hermetically sealed world to one open to the social, philosophical, political, psychological world around it. Consequently, we re-examined the basic assumptions of the PHG model, both to bring to the foreground what might have been under stressed and to reformulate what no longer lined up with lived-experience. For example, we added American pragmatism and phenomenology to our study groups. (Humphrey et ano, 2018; Kitzler, 2009)

The central interruptions of contact model were questioned. Is an interruption a “rupture,” a break? A rupture in what? Isn’t there a continuous flow of contact? How can we describe this in a phenomenological rather than categorical manner? A phenomenological description welcomes us, patient and therapist, into the process. Perhaps it is a modification of contacting, a re-shaping, a turning, a declension? And what of the field in which this is occurring? Is it shifting as well? Loss of ego functioning? What is “lost”? And, if lost, to what? Doesn’t that turn the sequence of contacting into an ego- or I-dominated process? There are other self functions. Have we paid enough attention to them and, consequently, have we neglected the ground in favor of the figure?

The two-person model of the relational turn is then considered in terms of the field emergent self, where self and other are functions of one emerging figure, known and experienced through the aesthetic of contacting. Further developments include the aesthetic, kinesthetic, phenomenal, pathic, and ethical fields. I could continue. I am naming just some of the ideas being developed by members of the NYIGT³.

Conclusion

An institute that dedicated itself to teaching and promoting the foundational model of PHG is now characterized by extending this model as the theory of reference or starting point to be questioned and engaged with hermeneutically. We offer this theory of reference as a living past to the living present of gestalt therapy. And the future? The future continues to unfold in the answers we find in response to our on-going questioning. Deep below the surface of the modes and turns of the NYIGT there has always been the bedrock value of radical questioning. It was in our founders’ blood. This radical questioning makes us

³ Ruella Frank, Gianni Francesetti, Elinor Greenberg Karen Humphrey, Lynne Jacobs Richard Kitzler, Perry Klepner, Joe Lay, Ken Meyer, Peter Philippon Jean-Marie Robine,, Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb, Carl Hodges, Jan Roubal, Lee Zevy and I are some of the members of the institute whose ideas are reflected here. I inevitably am leaving some people out.

as at home with the spirit of phenomenology and pragmatism as it is with any other approach.

The NYIGT, then, holds itself out as an organization with the past as theory of reference, with the present as the active exploring, challenging, practicing, developing gestalt therapy, and with the future as a sense of what is to come -- as responses to our unrelenting questioning.

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