Editorial

Relational Attitudes in Gestalt Theory and Practice

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“Gestalt therapy is systematically relational in its underlying, theory and methodology. A relational perspective is so central to the theory of gestalt therapy that without it there is no coherent core of gestalt therapy theory or practice.” Thus spake Gary Yontef in a seminal article of 2002, “The Relational Attitude in Gestalt Therapy Theory and Practice.” And Yontef goes on:

Relational therapy is an approach within gestalt therapy that is strongly centered on existential phenomenology, dialogic existentialism, and cognitive grounding in field theory. It is not a whole, new system or approach. Rather it is steeped in what is central to gestalt therapy and has sometimes gotten lost or neglected (15). . . . It is a form of
gestalt therapy that emphasizes respect, compassion, the fullest experience and respect by the therapist of patients' experience in accordance with the paradoxical theory of change and manifesting maximum trust in the process of contact with awareness and without aiming. This emphasis in gestalt therapy has sometimes been mischaracterized as being restricted to empathic listening, being nice, and eliminating experimentation. This is not true. The relational emphasis is on honesty, which is more than being nice, but in a process that is attentive to shame-triggering. We are not interested in being empathic and / or sympathetic at the cost of honesty. (31)

And we have only to think, too, of the influential work that followed: for example, Lynne Jacobs and Richard Hycner's edited volume, *Relational Approaches in Gestalt Therapy* (2010), abstracted in this way:

The first section speculates on the history and development of relationality in terms of Gestalt therapy. Chapters that discuss the patient-therapist relationship comprise the second section, and include explorations into uncertainty in interpretation and understanding, attunement and optimal responsiveness, working with shame, and negotiating individuality and “betweenness.” The last section opens up to groups and organizations, applying relational approaches to Gestalt therapeutic encounters with more than one patient.

Recent work on the “relational” notwithstanding, the approach to the concept as espoused and practiced by the Gestalt International Study Center dates back to the early 1960s at Esalen, when Sonia March Nevis was teaching the first month-long course on working with couples. Back then, as we were trying to separate from our intrapsychic orientation to the more relational, we sometimes had the notion that the resistances of retroflection, confluence, projection, desensitization, and deflection were more like traits, as part of the individuals’ somewhat fixed ways of being in the world. Nevis realized that “You can only project onto me if I don’t say ‘Why are you not asking me?’ or ‘Would you like to hear whether I agree with your guess about me, and if not, why?’” She began to apply to the Gestalt perspective knowledge derived from her experience as a family therapist, helping to develop GISC ultimately into a Gestalt Institute that views all interactions from a relational perspective (see Melnick and Nevis).

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Why this brief foray into different ways of understanding the notion of “relational” in Gestalt theory and practice? The overall connecting concept that became figural in my reading of the articles and reviews in this issue of Gestalt Review has to do with matters “relational.” In “(Gestalt) Paths of Dissemination, Part I: Origins”—the first of a series of three articles (the others will appear in two subsequent numbers of this volume), Michael Fisher traces “some of the early history of the human potential movement to follow its trajectory from the margins to mainstream controversy.” His (re)telling is relational in that seeks to connect the myriad threads in the process, for example, of discussing the legacy of Paul Goodman and Fritz Perls: “Yet, as ultimately opposing cultural figures who each inherited the Reichian lineage from distinct vantage points, their essential teachings were much the same; and it was their collaborative project in the early fifties that powered many future cultural developments.” Fisher’s essay, in fact, can profitably be read in relation to Charles Bowman’s review of Jack Aylward’s book, Gestalt Therapy and the American Experience, with which this issue closes. The title Bowman gives to his piece—“Where Is Paul Goodman When You Need Him?”—is certainly apposite to the discussion.

In “Men Making Meaning of Eating Disorders: A Qualitative Study,” Robin Leichtman and Sarah Toman recount the results of a phenomenological study intended to “give voice to and provide insight into the male participants’ experiences by sharing the stories of the six men who took part.” The authors indicate that the “qualitative research methodology, which coincides with Gestalt therapy theory, provided the necessary theoretical support and relational procedures” for carrying out the study (emphasis added). They add that “it is the first in a line of research that could eventually identify best practices for addressing the concerns of men with eating disorders.”

In “Beyond the Miniatures: Using Gestalt Theory in Sandtray Processing,” Naomi Timm and Yvonne Garza stress above all that “process and honest involvement are more valuable than the specific miniature or story” created by the adult client and attended to by the therapist as a phenomenological experience. It is crucial that, as the client talks about the miniature(s) and story evoked, the therapist reflect on the “felt sense of the relationship, using Gestalt technique and the experiential nature of the sandtray work.” The authors caution against the practice of some sandtray counselors-in-training “who value the choice of tray miniatures and content of the story over the relationship.” The moment-to-moment process over outcome—“the between”—is what is most relevant to this type of work.

As Malcolm Parlett underscores in a detailed review essay, the—relational—purpose of Yes We Care!: Social, Political, and Cultural Relationship as Therapy’s Ground, A Gestalt Perspective (edited by Guus Klaren, Nurith Levi,
and Ivana Vidaković with an introduction by Joseph Melnick) is to encourage Gestalt practitioners to face what the compilers regard as obvious fact: “that social and political issues of contemporary society massively impact human lives, and therefore affect, what needs to happen in therapy.” And Parlett goes on: “Economic conditions, violent conflicts, cultural changes, and ideological trends in society have dramatic effects on clients and practitioners alike—their sense of wellbeing, their identity, and their realisable choices in the world”; the stated aim of the book is to “explore the interface between Gestalt Psychotherapy and the socio-political context, with special reference to the advancement of human rights” (p. 212), which are the aspirations of the “Human Rights (HR) and Social Responsibility (SR) Committee of the European Association of Gestalt Therapy” that has published it. In exploring “the interface between Gestalt Psychotherapy and the socio-political context,” Parlett (2010) offers up the term “Gestalt social ecology” to designate this field of work.

Alan Meara’s thorough review of The New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy in the 21st Century: An Anthology of Published Writings since 2000, edited by Dan Bloom and Brian O’Neill, indicates that the stated purpose of the book is “to underscore the global mission of NYIGT in promoting Gestalt practice, maintain a sense of history, and mark the place of NYIGT in contemporary Gestalt therapy.” Meara, however, finds “a smorgasbord” of twenty-five offerings, previously published elsewhere and presented “in no particular thematic order.” Therefore, he seeks to make a connection amongst them by naming three general groupings: one around papers that “re-examine the philosophical and historical bases of Gestalt therapy in order to challenge or clarify contemporary understandings”; another “more focussed on particular aspects of theory, with some referring to historical influences”; and a third “centered on particular application areas, most with associated case studies.” At the end Meara notes that, however much the authors of the anthology “[mark] the place of NYIGT” and “value their connection to the Institute,” and however well supported the expression of needs for future development of theory and practice (often entailing foundational concepts such as contact, awareness, “interruptions,” and the organism/environment field), such forward-looking calls can stand separately, making it difficult (according to the reviewer) “to get a sense of engagement with an interactive collective.” Meara is left with a wish for the NYIGT to “find ways to draw some of the disparate threads together and contribute to a wider dialogue, one that will create a more coherent ground for Gestalt therapy.”

Susan Roos, in her review of Absence is the Bridge between Us: Gestalt Therapy Perspective and Depressive Experiences, edited by Gianni Francescetti with a preface by Lynne Jacobs, finds her attention drawn to the “radically
relational perspective” that can allow us to develop “a key to understanding even the most severe depressive experience” (p. 27). Reflected in the work of contributors to the volume, according to Roos, is the editor’s explanation that “the book title comes from a Turkish poet, Nazim Hikmet, who characterizes the ‘absence’ which can become a bridge that makes an absent loved-one present.”

Finally, we turn to Brian O’Neill’s review of Erving Polster’s book, Beyond Therapy: Igniting Life Focus Community Movements, in which the author explores the role of “focus” in three well-recognized life activities: ordinary conversation, the arts, and religion. According to O’Neill, Polster argues that, “having developed the healing aspect of psychotherapy, it is now time to attend to the wider social development of groups so that people can share their story.” It seems fitting that we give Polster the last word here, on the need for us to reflect on a so-called “paradigmatic shift”: “the remarkable ascendance of the psychotherapist as the cultural agent for a new dimension of life focus . . . grounded in an innately human need to pay attention to one’s life, an indispensable complement to just living it in a world that is, as William Wordsworth once put it, “too much with us” (emphasis in original). Polster’s invitation for us to chew on that poetic message (cited in his book) provides food for thought in this overwhelming Information Age and arguably post-truth society, with its all too frequent tweets of fake news and alternative facts.

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REFERENCES