

The Narcissistic Tightrope Walk: Using Gestalt Therapy Field Theory to Stabilize the Narcissistic Client

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A B S T R A C T

One of the difficulties of working with highly narcissistic individuals is their extreme sensitivity to even the mildest negative feedback. Helpful suggestions can be experienced as such devastating criticisms that the clients either fall into self-hating depressions or angrily defend themselves by devaluing the therapist. Greenberg attributes this sensitivity to the inherent instability of narcissistic self-esteem, one of the themes touched on by Bentley in his article, "Working with Narcissism in Organizations." Using Gestalt therapy field theory, Greenberg redefines narcissism as two alternating and mutually contradictory ways of organizing the organism/environment field that narrowly focus on self-esteem issues: The inflated organization makes figural only those cues that enhance the person's sense of being special and perfect, and the deflated organization makes figural only those cues that confirm the person's sense of being inherently worthless and inadequate. She explains three ways a therapist can use Gestalt therapy field theory to help narcissistic clients stabilize their mood and form a realistic and integrated sense of their own worth.

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A Hasidic Story

As I read Trevor Bentley's article, "Working with Narcissism in Organizations," I was reminded of a Hasidic teaching story (Buber, 1948, pp. 59-60). In the story, a king is faced with a dilemma. His two dearest childhood friends have abused the power that he bestowed on them, and have been convicted of heinous crimes. Everyone expects him to sentence them to death. Although he agrees that his friends deserve the punishment, the king cannot bring himself to execute them. He finally finds a compromise that he and his subjects can accept. The king has a very strong rope stretched across a deep ravine. He decrees that if the prisoners succeeded in safely walking across the rope to the other side, each would be pardoned. If they fall and are killed, then that would be their punishment. The first man stepped onto the rope, holding his hands out to the side for balance. Slowly and carefully he walked to the other side. The remaining man hesitated and called across to his friend, asking for advice. "How did you do it without falling?" he yelled. "It was simple," the other replied. "Whenever I felt myself tipping too much to one side, I carefully leaned a little to the other and corrected myself. In that way I kept my balance the whole way across."

This story metaphorically addresses one of the central themes that runs throughout Bentley's article: how hard it was for his highly narcissistic executive clients to maintain their emotional balance and sense of self-esteem in the face of his potentially deflating evaluations of them. Unlike the king's friends who were able to make the necessary adjustments on their own, Bentley's executive clients were unable to flexibly incorporate his feedback about their performance. Instead, they tipped over into an angry and defensive grandiosity whenever he brought something to their attention that threatened their defensive sense of being perfect. Then, everything came to a halt until Bentley could find some way of relating to them that restored their delicately balanced self-esteem.

Unlike true self-esteem which is based on a secure sense of one's realistic attainments, narcissistic self-esteem is characterized by an impossibly inflated grandiosity that is easily punctured because it covers up inner doubt about one's real worth. Because this self-doubt is so painful, narcissistic individuals fight every attempt to help them see themselves more realistically. They are convinced that the only alternative to being perfect is to accept that they are worthless.

Bentley describes himself as constantly working with his clients in the space between these two extremes of unrealistic inflation and deflation. When his clients attack and devalue him, he reports that his own narcissistic insecurities are touched off. Thus, at the same time that he is respectfully and gently helping his clients regain their self-esteem and emotional balance, he is also struggling to maintain his own.

By following Bentley's interventions for each client, one can see how there is a back-and-forth dance among establishing a working relationship through empathically attuning to the client; giving critical feedback in as neutral a manner as possible, such as with his "helpful" and "unhelpful" attitude and behavior continua; dealing with the client's resistance to the feedback; weathering the client's defensive grandiosity and devaluing of the therapist; and then finding ways to help the client again emotionally stabilize so that he or she can view the new information more objectively and make the necessary changes in attitude and behavior.

As with Bentley's executive clients, most narcissistic individuals find it hard to stabilize themselves emotionally when faced with realistic feedback suggesting that they are not perfect just the way they are. In everyday life, they tend to swing between an inflated defensive grandiosity, with its attendant feelings of elation and invulnerability, and a deflated self-devaluing state with its attendant feelings of self-hatred and depression. When they are grandiose, they expect the other person to be an uncritically admiring audience. When they feel deflated and worthless, they feel highly vulnerable to humiliation and tend to experience the other person as critical and attacking. Because they rely on other people for self-validation, they are exquisitely sensitive to others' opinions of themselves. Their mood and sense of themselves can shift rapidly in response to external feedback.

Many therapists find it difficult to work with highly narcissistic clients because it can be challenging to find interventions that move the work forward without the client becoming angry and defensive or self-critical and depressed. However, I have found that if one reframes their swings in terms of Gestalt therapy field theory, it becomes fairly easy to use the inherent rules of figure/ground formation to understand their rapid shifts in mood and self-esteem, and to know how to stabilize them.

The Interpersonal Gestalt and the Interpersonal Field

I have introduced the term "Interpersonal Gestalt" or "IG" to describe the way in which an individual is organizing his or her interpersonal field at any moment—what becomes figure and what becomes ground while relating to another person (Greenberg, 1999, 2000). The interpersonal field includes all cues relating to the self in relation to others, present and past, that potentially could become figure against an unseen background of other interpersonal cues that do not become figure. Cues that relate to a current area of interpersonal concern are easily made foreground and will tend to dominate the picture.

As an example, imagine two women having lunch together. Jane is feeling fat because she has gained a lot of weight recently. As a result, she is organizing the interpersonal field so that cues relating to food and

weight become foreground. She notices that her friend, Lisa, looks thin and is eating only a salad. She becomes self-conscious about ordering a hamburger and French fries and carefully scans her friend's face for signs of disapproval. Lisa actually is oblivious to this little silent drama because her focus is on money. She isn't sure she has enough in her wallet to cover her meal. She ordered the salad because it was the cheapest thing on the menu. When she looks at her friend Jane, her attention is drawn to the designer bag she is wearing, not her weight gain. She is wishing that she had the money to buy one like it.

Each woman is organizing the interpersonal field so that elements relating to their current personal concerns become figure, while other elements that are of less interest become part of the unseen background.

The Interpersonal Gestalt is an ongoing process, not a structure, and is made and remade at each moment at the contact boundary through figure/ground formation. As such, it is influenced by both past experiences and emerging needs. The dominant interpersonal need or fear shapes what becomes figure at any particular moment. IGs also differ with respect to how fixed or flexible they are. An IG is "healthy" to the degree that it is flexible enough to allow a person to be fully present with the other and alive to the possibilities of the moment, while also allowing each person in the interaction the freedom to pay attention to his or her own emerging needs. A healthy IG allows for spontaneity and novelty.

The particular set of self-attributions and attendant feelings that become foreground for us as we interact with others or as we remember or fantasize about an interaction can be thought of as our emerging self-image or identity. Thus, the whole concept of self-image can be reframed as process. Similarly, just as our view of ourselves emerges through the process of Gestalt formation, so does our view of others, which also is affected by present circumstances, remembered interactions, and our fantasies about them.

The Narcissistic Interpersonal Gestalt

Personality disorders can be reconceptualized as relatively inflexible and repetitious ways of organizing the interpersonal field. The different personality disorders can be distinguished from each other because they each have a characteristic way of organizing the interpersonal field. Instead of a person "having" a narcissistic personality disorder, narcissism becomes a short-hand term for a specific way of organizing the organism/environment field. There is a strong tendency for cues to become foreground that either enhance or diminish the person's sense of being special, perfect, uniquely talented, and worthy of uncritical validation and admiration, while cues that relate to other people's needs and feelings, or other ways of organizing the field, are generally overlooked and become part of the

background.

In general, the narcissistic interpersonal gestalt consists of two mutually exclusive ways of organizing the organism/environment field at the contact boundary with regard to identity, self-esteem and view of the other person. In one, the inflated grandiose organization, individuals make figural only those cues that confirm their defensive and illusory sense of being special, uniquely talented, and perfect. In this way they form figures that make them feel good about themselves. Everything else becomes background. In the other, deflated, unrealistically negative organization of the field, they make figural all the cues that confirm their low evaluation of themselves and feel the correspondingly bad feelings of shame, anger, and depression.

These two ways of organizing the field are polar opposites and equally unrealistic. As a result, the two cannot be integrated into one cohesive figure that includes both liked and disliked aspects of the self. The two figures can only alternate. Thus, when the narcissistic client is organizing the field so that his or her "perfection" is figural, any suggestions or comments from the therapist that imply that the client is not perfect can have only one of two results: Either the client will fight to maintain the inflated organization of the field to continue to feel good about himself, or he will reorganize the field in such a manner that the alternate inadequate and worthless figure is formed. To avoid the self-torture that goes with this latter organization, most clients with these issues become furiously angry with the therapist and resist all information that implies that they have flaws.

Both the inflated and deflated ways of organizing the field are inherently unstable because they are too inflexible and unrealistic. This accounts for the narcissistic client's exquisite sensitivity to slights. Almost any slight is enough to tip their precarious balance. It is as if a small needle were inserted in an inflated balloon. Any size hole will eventually cause air to seep out and the balloon will deflate. For this reason, narcissistic individuals are usually hyper-vigilant and actively resist anything that might make them question their own organization of reality.

As a result, it is very hard for many narcissists to learn anything new from someone else. First, it is hard for them to tolerate the notion that someone else knows something that they do not. This knowledge itself is a narcissistic injury and threatens the figure of perfection that they have formed. Second, if they are not immediately good at the new thing, it is hard for them to support themselves long enough to learn. Not being good at something, even at the beginning, makes most narcissists feel too exposed and vulnerable to both external criticism and self-blame.

Each of the two ways in which narcissists habitually organize the organism/environment field creates its own problems. In the inflated case, clients have to insist that they already know everything and are doing

everything perfectly right now. This forces otherwise intelligent and competent people to twist and turn the facts of the situation in a way that sometimes is openly illogical. In the deflated organization, the person is so demoralized, depressed, and afraid of humiliating himself that he finds it hard to make himself pay attention to anything but his own misery.

The narcissist's difficulties are increased by the fact that each of these two mutually exclusive organizations of the field has two equally unintegratable ways of seeing others inherent in it. In the inflated organization, only those interpersonal cues that support seeing the other person as an uncritically admiring and validating audience are made figure. In the deflated organization, only those cues that allow the other person to be seen as an attacking and devaluing enemy who wants to humiliate or destroy them are seen. All contradictory or ambiguous cues that might suggest different ways of understanding the other person's motives and intentions tend to be overlooked and become part of the unseen background of experience.

How to Use Field Theory to Help Stabilize the Narcissistic Client

This unseen background is rich with possibilities and, if used creatively, can be a source of stability for the client. Because narcissistic IGs leave out any data that do not automatically and totally support their current organization of the field, it is relatively easy for the therapist to notice other potentially more useful ways of organizing the interpersonal field. However, because the narcissistic client is easily tipped into either the grandiose organization or the deflated organization, therapists have to be very careful with respect to what they introduce as foreground and how they introduce it.

I would like to share three methods for redirecting clients' attention that I have found useful to temporarily restabilize clients' self-esteem and to help them slowly build a more realistic and cohesive sense of their self-worth. The first two direct clients' attention to past successes and positive qualities about themselves which they have been overlooking, while the third demonstrates how to use Gestalt therapy field theory to generate experiments.

Having these clients' attention directed either to overlooked past successes or undiscovered strengths and talents is flattering and novel; thus, it is usually relatively easy to shift clients' attention temporarily away from their deflated way of organizing the field to a new, more realistically positive one. These methods also work with clients who are not unusually narcissistic. Virtually everyone enjoys remembering successes and learning something new about themselves that is positive.

Method 1: Redirect their Attention to Past Successes

Because narcissistic organization of the field habitually excludes anything contradictory, when clients focus on a perceived mistake or personal flaw and start reorganizing the field in a negative way, they also leave out past successes. As a result, they feel even worse about themselves because it seems to them that they always make mistakes or fail at what they try to do. The therapist can take advantage of the inherent instability of the narcissistic IG and refocus the distressed client's attention away from the current narcissistic injury and toward a real success in the past by describing it in vivid, detailed, and glowing terms. The aim is to make the past success foreground for the client. For this to succeed, the therapist needs to focus on describing specific events in detail rather than making general statements. It is important that the facts be compelling and accurate so that the client has difficulty denying them. As the client focuses on the new, more flattering figure, the deflating and overly negative organization of the field tends to fall apart, leaving the client feeling better.

There are three basic parts to this intervention: (1) Begin with an empathic statement that recognizes the client's feelings. Try to make eye contact as you speak to refocus the client's attention on you. This interrupts the negative figure that he or she was forming. (2) Pick an overlooked past success and bring it into the present vividly, in a detailed and accurate way. (3) Pay close attention to your client's responses as you do this. If he or she leans forward, looks towards you, and appears interested in what you are saying: you are on the right track. Once you understand these general principles, you can be creative and adapt them in a way that works for you.

As an example, I might say something like the following: "I know you feel really bad now and could easily slip into beating yourself up over this mistake and begin to view yourself quite negatively, but I also remember clearly how often in the past few weeks you've done something really fine. Do you remember how good it felt when you finally finished the report you were working on? Remember how pleased you were with your work and that you got it in early?"

I pause here and wait to see if I get a nod of recognition from the client, and then I go on. "I also remember last Tuesday when you told me that you finally told your sister how you really felt about going to her party. Remember how good you felt that, after all your work in therapy on being more direct with your family, you were finally able to do it. And you did it without becoming as angry as you used to. Not only that, you made your point without belittling her." I pause again, look at the client's nonverbal behavior, and wait to see whether the client picks up on the new cues that I have offered. If the client adds details to or comments on what I've said without contradicting me, it usually signals that he or she is receptive and is beginning to reorganize the interpersonal field around this new figure.

At this point, most clients begin to feel better and become, for the moment, less self-critical without becoming grandiose.

The more absorbed the client becomes in what I am saying, the easier it is for me to successfully interrupt his or her unrealistically negative way of organizing the field, and substitute a new, more realistically positive organization. Some clients readily accept this reorganization of the field, while others require more effort on the part of the therapist to bring alive the new figure. I have found it to be hard to help those clients who rigidly resist feeling better about themselves. Usually their therapeutic progress is slower and their therapy is characterized by long periods of relative stagnation during which it is hard to do any productive work with them. However, I have found that the majority of clients do find this intervention helpful. Eventually, after repeated experiences of having their exclusively negative organizations of the field gently challenged in this way, most begin to be able to form a more realistic organization on their own. As their ability to integrate both their negative and positive experiences grows, their stability increases.

Method 2: Point Out Previously Unnoticed Strengths

As my clients speak to me, I am continually alert to evidence that suggests they are unaware of talents that they are using. As their strengths become evident to me in the session, I bring them to the client's attention. After repeated examples, clients usually begin to recognize and consciously use these talents, and they become a source of pride. As clients make cues foreground that relate to realistically positive traits (instead of grandiose illusory ones), their self-esteem becomes less easily deflated because it is based on reality.

Because the main issue here is realistic pride versus unrealistic grandiosity, it is important that the therapist take care to point to specific things that the client can see are true. Empty flattery will not work, and will make the client question the value of your opinions.

Following is a brief example of this approach based on my work with a client. Mr. M was convinced that he was stupid because as a child, he had not done well in school and had copied other children's homework. While working with him in individual and group therapy, I noticed he was particularly astute at seeing the big picture beyond the confusing details of everyday life. For instance, in group therapy, he was often the first to notice recurring patterns in other people's work that other group members had overlooked.

I brought this to his attention and commented on it positively. He was surprised, took a moment to think about it, and recognized the truth in what I was saying. As his therapy progressed, I continued to point out his successful use of this talent. Eventually, he began to recognize that he was doing this, spontaneously and on his own. As he assimilated this new

positive knowledge, he began to feel a little more secure about his mental abilities.

Because this lone success was not enough to stabilize his self-esteem, I continued to look for, and bring to Mr. M's attention, other previously overlooked positive attributes. He was one of those clients who enjoyed the sudden increase in awareness that can accompany a successful Gestalt therapy experiment. He also was able to integrate the new awareness and use it to progress further in therapy. His mood would shift rapidly from despondency to pleasure as he "got it." After a number of sessions in which he experienced positive mood shifts after a series of "aha's," I pointed out that he was really good at having "aha's" and learning from them. Mr. M recognized that this was true and enjoyed seeing himself as someone who could learn. Gradually, he began to feel less defensive about his intelligence. He became more resistant to destabilization from events that previously would have been deflating.

These two methods require a three-step process. First, the client reorganizes his self-image to include the new attribute or success, thus "owning" it. Second, the client, with the therapist's help, has to recognize it when it occurs again in various guises and different situations. The first two steps have to be repeated until the attribute or past success becomes figure easily for the client. These two steps are preparation for the most important step: clients being able to call the positive attribute or success to mind intentionally to help stabilize their own self-esteem when they feel in danger of tipping towards an overly negative assessment of their self-worth. In other words, clients start to organize the field in the old narcissistic way, then catch themselves, and finally consciously form a new gestalt that includes cues that relate to their real strengths. If this is successful, clients report that they are able to do this last step on their own outside of session, and that doing this helped them feel more adequate and less depressed. Now the client is able to call upon his or her genuine attributes and accomplishments, not just narcissistic grandiosity, as a stabilizing influence. It is at this stage that clients begin to decrease their dependency on their therapist for stabilization.

Method 3: How to Use the Interpersonal Field in Gestalt Experiments

Many common therapeutic interventions can be understood as ways of helping the client reorganize the field so that previously unseen or ignored cues become foreground. For example, when a therapist with a client who is taking a particularly narrow view of an interaction asks: "What else could be going on?" or, "What might the other person be feeling?" the therapist is asking the client to pay attention to other aspects of the field that might shed light on the situation.

Clients eventually learn to ask these questions of themselves. Opening up the organization of the field to include other possibilities generally

puts a current narcissistic injury in a different, potentially more soothing light. Asking these types of questions can become part of a Gestalt therapy experiment easily, as in the following example:

Client: “My boss snubbed me today. He passed me in the hall without saying hello. He must think I’m doing a lousy job. That makes me really angry at him. I work very hard. How dare he!” (By now the client has worked himself up and is both fearful of losing his job and angry at his boss.)

Therapist: (Begin with an empathic statement that goes back to his initial response before he leapt to conclusions): “You must have felt very disconcerted when he passed you in the hall without acknowledging your presence, especially because you did not know why he didn’t say hello to you.”

Client: “Yes. I hate not knowing why and I’m not comfortable asking him. That would make me feel stupid and just give him a chance to criticize me.”

Therapist: “Let’s try an experiment, okay?” (Look at client and wait for positive response. Continue with this intervention only if you get a “yes” or a nod.) “Imagine this is a movie you are writing, and your first draft of the scene portrayed the boss as angry at the employee. Now the director asks for a rewrite of the scene in which everything is the same, except he wants you to change the boss’s motivation for not saying ‘hello.’ What other motivation could you imagine?”

(This forces the client to reorganize the field with new possibilities in the foreground. Making it a movie, and not his life, helps the client view the scene in a less personal way.)

Client: “Well, I suppose the boss could be preoccupied and have other things on his mind. He might not even have seen his employee.”

Therapist: “Let’s take the experiment a little further if it’s okay with you. Go back to being you and imagine you’re back in the hall with your boss and he doesn’t say hello. Now give yourself the first explanation, that he’s snubbing you on purpose, and notice how that makes you feel.” (Pause and wait for an answer, then go on.) “Now imagine the second explanation, that he was preoccupied and didn’t see you, and notice whether there is a difference in how you feel.”

Client: “Yes, there’s a big difference. The first way makes me feel really lousy, like I’m a big nothing. The second way definitely feels better.”

Some highly narcissistic individuals find it difficult to be interrupted for any reason. They want to vent and are interested in having an exclusively sympathetic audience for their feelings. Any response that goes beyond validating their point of view can make them feel misunderstood and criticized. If this is the case with a client, it is best to start with empathic

statements that show that you understand how the client is feeling, and simple, neutrally phrased questions. Once the client feels more trust, and a good working relationship has been established, other interventions can be attempted.

CONCLUSION

Gestalt therapy field theory allows us to reframe narcissism as a process, not a structure. Once we redefine narcissism as a specific and habitual way of organizing the organism/environment field at the contact boundary, we are able to find ways of interrupting this organization and redirecting the client's attention to important cues that he or she has been overlooking. As clients learn that they can stabilize their own mood and self-esteem by experimenting with organizing the organism/environment field differently, they feel less helpless and depressed. Realistic self-esteem gradually replaces narcissistic grandiosity, and their sense of themselves becomes more integrated and stable. At this point they are able to tolerate more awareness of their own imperfections, and they find it easier to learn from negative feedback. Finally, like the king's friends on the tightrope, they are able to stabilize their emotions and self-esteem by making small, careful adjustments to how they see themselves, instead of wildly swinging between alternating extremes.

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