The Contributions of Paul Goodman to the Clinical, Social, and Political Implications of Boundary Disturbances

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In this article the author looks at and goes beyond the clinical implications of contact boundary disturbances by examining the influence of Paul Goodman's social criticism and political thinking. Viewing the therapist as a revolutionary, Goodman saw therapeutic interventions as political acts, a view informed by his communitarian and anarchistic philosophies. In view of more modern developments in ecopsychology, the arena of contact boundary disturbances is expanded to include the organism's inherent connection to nature.

The 1951 publication of Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman's Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality (hereafter referred to as PHG) marked a revolutionary turning point for humanistically oriented therapists in dealing with problems of the human condition through a radically new conceptualization of self-functioning. The work presented a rich tapestry of possibilities constructed synergistically through the revisionist Freudian theories of Fritz Perls, the pragmatic philosophy of Paul Goodman, and the experiments involving focusing, concentration, and awareness done by Ralph Hefferline at Columbia University. It was, and remains today, a blueprint of operational existentialism with implications that both inform and go well beyond the clinical transactions of the consultation room. These possibilities include the treatment of human dysfunction at psychological, social, and political levels. They take account not only of the integrity of the individual organism, but also the environment, together comprising the field from which the functions develop.

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This paper will focus on Gestalt therapy's theory of self and self-functioning, the processes that are reflected in contact boundary negotiations and disturbances, and the social and political issues that influence the self-regulation of the individual within the organism/environment field. For such focus, we must first address the definition of self and self-functioning as developed by Paul Goodman and apply it to his social and political philosophy. Then, we will examine how the formation of the self and its functions may or may not be supported by the contact boundary functions that connect the organism and the environment. Given certain political and social shifts that have occurred in the 47 years since the publication of PHG, it seems even more essential for the Gestalt community to become reacquainted with its essential philosophical and clinical contributions to the field of psychotherapy.

As we approach the millennium, we continue to grapple with increasingly toxic threats such as environmental pollution, political tyranny, and corporate domination of the human spirit. Currently, we are witnessing the development of a health-care delivery system that not only threatens our professional identities, but ultimately could create a repressive definition of mental health that replicates the one against which Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman originally rebelled. Gestalt therapy theory places importance on creativity, novelty, spontaneity, and risk in a society that is moving ever closer to repetition, obedience, and the illusion of security. To meet the challenges, we need not say or do anything new but simply restate (perhaps more loudly) what is already present in our literature. To do so, it is imperative that we once again apply our theoretical model to sociopolitical issues and realities that contribute to the individual boundary disturbances we deal with in our psychotherapeutic practices. In this spirit we will sequentially review: (1) the theoretical and clinical definitions of contact boundary phenomena, (2) the social nature of self-functioning, and (3) the political implications in the writings of Paul Goodman.

Clinical Applications

Gestalt therapists have given contact boundary functioning and disturbances the bulk of attention in clinical presentations, training emphasis, and supervisory practice. To a large extent this is understandable given the dramatic shifts in awareness that can occur when dealing with contact boundary interferences. Unfortunately, and as is true of so many of Gestalt therapy's creative innovations, awareness shifts are rarely given their proper grounding in Gestalt therapy theory. This lack of connection between practice and theory can be attributed to what I refer to as the "Perlsian Paradox." He projected a model of a highly individu-
alized, autonomous, well-bounded sense of self, epitomized in the first two lines of the Gestalt prayer, “I do my thing, you do your thing.” Perls’s personal behavior and clinical demonstrations fostered a conceptualization of self-functioning more in line with the Cartesian concept of “cogito” or Kant’s transcendental ego, each of which regards the self as a single substance or a permanent, self-sufficient entity that requires nothing other than itself to exist. In contrast, Goodman would view me doing my thing and you doing your thing as constituting a socially connected, interdependent action. Self is not a substance but, rather, the result of a series of experiences in the stream of thought. The self of immediate experience is not something already made, but in the making. Each momentary self is replaced by a new self with every passing moment, formed through actions that are faithful to, not separate from, interpersonal relationships. The self cannot be cultivated in isolation from or in opposition to the purposes and needs of others. Furthermore, such an understanding of self formation and functioning is necessary in appreciating the commerce of contact boundary functioning and its interruptions.

_Ego Hunger and Aggression_ (1969) constituted Perls’s revisionist theory of Freudian topology. In it he stressed the importance of the hunger instinct and the structural similarities between food consumption and the organism’s mental absorption of the world, a process he referred to as “mental metabolism.” He viewed the boundary disturbances of introjection, retroflection, and projection as paralleling his theory of eating and appetite. Later, in PHG, the authors defined neurosis as a loss of ego function, that is, the organism’s inability to discriminatively exercise the capacity for identification and alienation. Emotion occurs when excitation and novelty are accepted and the environment confronted. When this excitement is interrupted, anxiety occurs. Inflexibly fixed neurotic mechanisms are also formed at the stage of creative adjustment where excitement is interrupted. In this spirit, and for the sake of consistency, the disturbances of contact discussed here all share the common factor of ego function loss.

Certain assumptions concerning contact boundary functioning seem essential in conceptualizing health and neurosis. In this regard Latner (1973) reminds us that a primary tenet of Gestalt therapy is the belief in the organism’s innate capacity for self-regulation. This capacity is especially evident when it is supported by the person’s uninterrupted spontaneity and skillful creative adjustment in its ongoing interactions. Organismic equilibrium is actively sought, disrupted and maintained through the processes of identification and alienation. In this sense the person is active and innovative, initiating and responding in his/her contacts with various environmental contingencies as he/she seeks satisfaction and balance through Gestalt formation and destruction.
Beginning at a resting place or "just being" state, which Latner (1973) defines as a place where "experience is of loose, undifferentiated contact with the field" (p. 71), an organismic deficit or surplus may arise, leading to a tension that produces an awareness that excites and activates the organism towards contact. Freely ranging contact allows for experimentation and choice, thereby setting the stage for definitive action. This may lead to satisfaction as the intakes from the environment are chewed, tasted, destructured, and assimilated, thereby returning the organism to a place of rest (Hall, 1976, p. 56). This process, if uninterrupted, supports the growth of the organism.

Social Implications

Goodman's philosophical roots can be traced from Aristotle through American pragmatism to Gestalt therapy theory. Rejecting Plato's view of the universality of human behaviors, Goodman believed instead that Aristotle's experience-oriented philosophy provided a more active vocabulary for understanding concepts such as "awareness," "contact," "organism," and "object." Aristotle's conception of the unmoved mover specified a unique and dynamic relationship between the organism and the environment. The potential for action or movement within the object joined the subject's potential for sensing such action (Randall, 1960). Goodman saw this union as the basis for "contact." Activity of the "unmoved mover," united with sensing, is the basic element leading to movement. Therefore, all motions and emotions are seen to be interactive social acts. As the organism develops memory, it forms patterns of potential, resulting in what Gestalt theory describes as "personality." Additionally, there can be no movement without resistance, not in the clinical sense, but rather from environmental forces, which impact the organism and form the boundary of contact between the organism and its surroundings.

Developmentally, all behavior is social. This process begins in the infant who internalizes nonverbal social movement. Later on, language builds on gesture, expanding the means for communicating to others. Subsequently, through the capacity for reflection, the self becomes perceived as object and others are internalized, offering social potential. Self is thus composed of both structure and process. All actions between the organism and the environment fall into stages of potential, manipulation, and consummation similar to the phases posited in PHG as fore-contact, contacting, final contact, and postcontact.

Goodman later expanded the concept of contact disturbances beyond the individual to include social processes. Strongly influenced by the philosophical tenets of American pragmatism, he believed that people are intersubjectively constituted. Through their relationships with others
in the community, they become grounded in an organic evolution advancing into novelty. Self is not only social but also "temporal" and "multiple" as it becomes composed by a series of emergent events that arise and perish in creative advance (Odin, 1996, p. 139). To Goodman all meaning, sensory experiences, and contact functioning of the organism become forged in the crucible of human social experience. Goodman, like Charles Sanders Peirce, believed that "the solitary self is the illusionary self, a being who has its basis in selfishness; the communicative self is the authentic self, a being who has its roots in agape" (Colapietro, 1989, p. 79).

Of all American pragmatist philosophers, Goodman was most theoretically congruent with George Herbert Mead. Mead proposed an emergent and innovative evolutionary developmental model of self, saying:

It is this pragmatic understanding of the person as a creative actor which underlies his aesthetic view of self. In his aesthetics the self is depicted as a series of artistic, creative and novel events wherein each event is a "social act" of communicative interaction which arises through the four stages of impulse, perception, manipulation and consummation [Odin, 1996, p. 16].

Here we see the social verification for self as process, a continuum of experience emphasizing engagement with the environment to support and foster organismic growth. In addition, Mead proposed a bipolar model of self-functioning, taking into account both the linear, historical, and deterministic aspects of human functioning and the nonlinear, ahistorical possibilities of the person within the timeframe of the here-and-now. As seen by Odin (1996):

Although the self is conditional by its social relations inherited from the past or at the "Me" pole, it must still unify them all with a free creative act if emergent synthesis in the present at the "I" pole. For Mead it is this bipolar nature of selfhood wherein the emergent "I" in the present always responds to the socialized "Me" from the past which constitutes the asymmetrical, irreversible, and cumulative nature of time's arrow as a creative advance into novelty [p. 4].

These historical viewpoints converge into what Gestalt therapists currently conceptualize as "self." Self is not within the organism or in the environment. Rather, it is both at the contact boundary and of it. It is social in nature and therefore cannot be understood outside of that context. Its major function is the dynamic organization of experiences in the organism/environment field—a dynamic that involves the dual aspects of structure and process. Self, in essence, is contact and is created
and destructured through a holistic dynamic in which body, mind, and world are inseparable. McLeod's (1993) observation helps us appreciate Gestalt therapy theory's conceptualization of self and its social and political realities. He says about the self, "It is the foundation of a psychology without a psyche, the corollary in psychotherapeutic terms of Sartre's existence precedes essence; sharing with existentialism the radical subversion of Western philosophical dualism which his dictum implies" (p. 26).

**Political Implication**

Given a psychological model that views the individual as innately healthy and capable, with pathology as a secondary disruption of an otherwise natural homeostatic equilibrium, Goodman's anarchistic philosophy is especially resonant with Gestalt therapy theory. This connection between philosophy and therapy is not unlike Erich Fromm's belief in Marxist socialism. For him this philosophy "meant a society which provides the material basis for the full development of the individual, for the unfolding of all his human powers, for his full independence" (Fromm, 1956, p. xiv). In both Fromm and Goodman we see the belief that society should provide the support for an individual who is and can be much, rather than one who has much. Optimally, Goodman envisioned a dynamic unity of human need and social support, implying as McLeod (1993) does that "the natural hierarchy of needs arising to seek their fulfillment in the contact that is our very self means Gestalt is a profoundly social therapy, envisioning and declaring the naturalness of social and environmental harmony" (p. 28).

In subsequent essays and articles, Goodman focused on political realities and how such phenomena affected contact boundary functioning. Far from a utopian view Goodman's view of formal governmental bureaucracy was that less was more with respect to social and political structure and its impact on the quality of individual life. Susan Sontag (1988) described Goodman's social outlook as "a form of conservative humanistic thinking—doggedly sensitive to everything repressive and mean while remaining loyal to the limits that protect human growth and pleasure" (p. xvii). In this sense, Goodman saw that contact boundary disturbances emanating from repressive and overly developed social organizations have the potential to sap the spontaneity from human functioning. Goodman (1994) stated that "society with a big S can do very little for people except to be tolerable, so they can go on about the more important business of life" (p. 53). Given that human selfhood was primarily a social process supported by communication within a community, political structures were realities needing to be reckoned with.
Mead's conceptualization of self-functioning parallels Goodman's thinking in this area:

the "I" requires that we protect the rights and freedoms of individuals as extolled by liberalism, while the "ME" imposes those moral duties, commitments, and obligations advocated by communitarianism [Odin, 1996, p. 37].

Much of Goodman's thinking was influenced by his association with communitarian philosophers such as Randolph Bourne, Van Wyk Brooks, and Lewis Mumford. Along with these dissenters within the progressive intelligentsia of the time who were disappointed in contemporary liberalism, Goodman was wary of the alienation resulting from the bureaucracies of advanced industrialism. He, along with Dwight Macdonald, Dorothy Dey, and C. Wright Mills, supported Brooks's ideal of "the crafted or interactive self, which found its autonomy by participating in a public world of culture and experience" (Blake, 1990, p. 141). Consistent with the process functioning of self-formation in Gestalt therapy theory, Brooks saw the "crafted self" as a kind of conversation with the social and natural environments. Social and political realities provided an ongoing ground for the alienation/identification processes of contact functioning. In Confusion and Disorder" (1977b) Goodman outlined the potential impact that social structure can have on human distress.

But if advanced peoples have indeed been colonized by their own advances, they are confused and have lost their ability to pick and choose what they can assimilate. We certainly manifest a remarkable rigidity in our social institutions, an inability to make inventive pragmatic adjustment. And perhaps worse, the sociology and politics that we do think up have the same technological, centralizing, and urban style that is causing our derangement [p. 235].

The importance Goodman placed on organismic self-regulation and social functioning also reflected the political thinking of such anarchists as Mikhail Bakunin and Prince Peter Kropotkin. To Goodman, anarchy epitomized the absence of authority, not the absence of order. In his introduction to Kropotkin's Memoirs of a Revolutionist Goodman (1968) points out the potential for disruptive contact functioning that can result from an overly organized and impersonal political structure:

The real enemies have proved to be the State (whose health is war), over-centralized organization, the authoritarian personality of
people. The call is for grass-roots social structures, spontaneity and mutual aid, direct action and doing it yourself, education for self-reliance and agitation for freedom [p. xxi].

Goodman was sensitive to the dehumanization of the industrial revolution, to the accompanying division of labor and, to anything that smacked of tyranny over someone else’s body. Like other anarchist thinkers, Goodman was fanatic in his defense of the untrammeled person whom he felt to be best nurtured by an innovative way of life and a nonrepressive political doctrine.

In Anarchism and Revolution (1977) he wrote:

In anarchist theory, the word revolution means the process by which the grip of authority is loosed, so that the functions of life can regulate themselves without top-down direction or external hindrance. The idea is that except for emergencies and a few special cases, free functioning will find its own right structures and coordination [p. 215].

**Goodman’s Living Legacy**

Goodman’s tenacious belief in the importance of social dialogue and grass-roots political activism remains his most lucid legacy. Despite consistent setbacks from expected sources of political support for moral/political integration, Goodman never dropped his communitarian gauntlet. One disappointment came in June of 1965. Goodman and several members of the war resisters’ movement met with Adlai Stevenson, then the United States ambassador to the United Nations. They were protesting our country’s intervention in the Dominican Republic and our involvement in the Vietnam War. Despite being temporarily stunned at the collapse of Stevenson’s principled liberalism, Goodman persevered. After that meeting, writer and columnist Nat Hentoff (1997) described Goodman as someone “whose intellectual curiosity was boundless, and who often created solutions to various social problems that were so lucid and logical that politicians considered them impractical” (p. 30).

Most recently, the concept of ecopsychology has been developed to address the impact of the environment on the human condition. Its basic proposition is that people can’t function in a healthy manner when surrounded by an environmentally “sick” world. In *The Voice of the Earth* (1992) Theodore Roszak cites Gestalt therapy as an ideal approach in healing this schism because of its emphasis on field theory. In discussing “boundaries of the self,” Roszak’s formulations concerning mental health
are congruent with boundary disturbance phenomena familiar to Gestalt therapists. Tracing the history of psychological thought in the preecological science of Freud’s day, Roszak (1995) points out its emphasis on “hard edges, clear boundaries, and atomistic particularity.” He says that “the normally functioning ego was an isolated atom of self-regarding consciousness that had no relational continuity with the physical world around it” (p. 10). The Freudian model of health and neurosis in effect short circuited the natural and self-regulating functions that connect the organism to a significant portion of its environment. This unnecessarily restricted our vision of the field and thereby limited our understanding of human functioning. The proposition of atomistic isolation, if left unchallenged, could pose potentially fatal ecological consequences for humankind. Roszak emphasized the similarities between Goodman and Kropotkin’s view of the creative potential in the native innocence of the human condition. He saw Gestalt therapy to be sensitive to the contact boundary disturbances that can occur when political domination and bureaucratic control teach people that the body, the psyche, and the community are inherently flawed. To be ecologically viable, therapy must address these issues, or it fosters adaptation to an unhealthy society. The early Gestaltists Kohler and Koffka viewed the mind as active, conceptualizing, and capable of creating order out of chaos. Roszak proposes that we extend this theory to our relationships with other people and to nature as a whole. Roszak (1992) is optimistic about Gestalt therapy’s role, saying:

The first therapy to use the word “ecology” to describe the spontaneous adjustive power of the organism within its environment, gestalt assumed innate healthy functioning. Where there was neurosis then, the therapeutically pertinent question became: What is getting in the way? [p. 230].

By expanding toward a more inclusive understanding of the types of environmental contingencies that directly affect contact boundary functioning, our theoretical ground becomes richer and our potential to make a difference greater. Gestalt therapy theory is congruent with the tenets of ecopsychology, espousing a harmonious connection between self and world. This connection is not only the outcome of rational choice but is the inherent possession of everyone—latent in the organism, in the interaction of the genome, and in early experiences (Shepard, 1995, p. 39). Swanson (1995) reminds us that

Health is not a thing. It requires ongoing cultivation in the present moments of our lives. If we are to be healthy then our health will be
maintained by living in accord with the natural laws of our interacting physical, chemical, biological, psychological, social, ecological and spiritual systems [p. 69].

Malcolm Parlett (1997) also seeks to “sensitize practitioners to political questions,” to expand beyond a focus on the individual traumas addressed in therapeutic relationships (p. 26). With this point of view, we may open our minds to the issues and concerns of wider scope and remodel our psychotherapy procedures to reflect larger communal issues in our work with clients. While Wheeler (1991) attempts to deal with this issue through his concept of a “structured ground,” his formulations seemed too static and bounded to be consistent with the underlying process dynamics of Gestalt therapy theory. Andras Angyal’s (1941) use of Husserl’s term *Einklammerung* seems more in the spirit of our theory. Translated, it means “placing in parentheses” our biological, somatic, interpersonal, social, or cultural realities that are of interest to the organism and that require attention, contact, and assimilation. Continuing to expand our awareness of field dynamics by including the impact of sociopolitical and environmental issues can only foster and support our approach to the human condition.

One formidable challenge to our way of viewing contact functions is the managed health-care industry. Adaptation and adjustment are placed on work standards developed by bureaucratic managers, whose interests lie in worker conformity to company policy: the ultimate measure of business-determined mental health. Behavioral measures dominate psychotherapeutic outcome data, the independent variable being maximum conformity for minimum cost. At a recent managed health-care meeting, Ian Shaffer, chief medical officer of managed care company Value Behavioral Health, supported this market-driven goal. He stated that “behavioral health for many is a commodity. And in a commodity market, if everything is the same, the cheapest price deserves the market. … The industry needs to measure what’s important to employers (absenteeism, relapse rates, etc.) and proactively demonstrate the value of mental health services in addressing those concerns” (Psychotherapy Finances, 1997, p. 5). These statistical formulations are passed down to the individual practitioner by giving him/her bottom-line data demonstrating how well or how poorly he/she is doing. A colleague of mine was recently informed by a managed care company that, in comparison to a national average of 5.65 sessions, his average was 6.84, with a standard deviation of 1.87! The message is clear: keep the number of sessions down to stay in the company referral system. Given Gestalt therapy’s social and political viewpoints, we as practitioners have the theoretical ground to combat the dehumanizing, data-based managed care that masquerades as psychotherapy.
Such a call satisfies Paul Goodman’s mandate that to be an authentic professional requires one to be a revolutionary. This perspective can encourage clinicians to view boundary disturbances through a wider social and political lens, building on our clinical understanding of fixed Gestalten and present functioning. As revolutionaries, we are obliged to integrate our understanding of boundary disturbance dynamics with present-centered social interactions, political realities, and environmental concerns. As Taylor Stoehr (1994) reminds us:

Goodman did not view psychotherapy as a discipline closed off from the rest of life, just one more personalized service industry in the planned society. Goodman’s experience as an artist gave him his model for the therapist. . . . For the therapist living in the age of the organized system this meant attempting to revivify face-to-face community and to reclaim traditional values, endeavors that were moral and political as much as they were physicianly or pastoral. Goodman’s conception of therapy began with the awareness that healing could not occur in isolation from culture and, further, that in our times culture itself was in need of healing. . . . Neurosis could no longer be viewed as a weed patch to be rooted out or treated with chemicals; it too had its ecological meaning and uses in the patient’s life [p. 16-17].

The cutting edge of Gestalt therapy’s power for change within such a complex arena is its orientation toward process over content. Gestalt’s holistic/holographic theoretical paradigm not only views the whole as being greater than the sum of its individual parts, but also views each part as a symbolic vision of the whole. That is, the working through of contact disturbances on an intrapersonal level automatically implies interpersonal and social dynamics. Therefore, it is a political act. Goodman made it clear that functions of self were essentially sociopolitical in nature. He viewed undisturbed, nurturing contact functioning within the organism/environmental field as sociocultural, a perspective that infused his social philosophy and political criticism. Only with clear and unencumbered contact functioning could Goodman see the ideal society, one in which “the children have bright eyes, the river be clear, food and sex available and nobody be pushed around” (Stoehr, 1994, p. 262).

References


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