

GESTALT THERAPY

**Psychology 460
Counseling and
Interviewing
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Quotation

- "I am not in this world to live up to other people's expectations, nor do I feel that the world must live up to mine."

--Fritz Perls

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Theory of Personality

- A person exists by differentiating self from other & by connecting self & other
- These are the two functions of a boundary
- The boundary between self & environment must be permeable to allow for exchanges, yet firm enough to enable autonomous action
- When the boundary becomes unclear, lost, or impermeable, mental & emotional disturbance results

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Gestalt

- A *gestalt*, or whole, both includes & transcends the sum of its parts
- It cannot be understood simply as a sum of smaller, independent events
- It is chiefly that distinctive emphasis on looking to the whole for the meaning of the parts that unites a group of theorists into what is called the Gestalt school of psychology

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Gestalt Therapy

- **Fritz Perls (1893-1970) / wife Laura Perls (1905-1990)**
 - Main originator & developer of Gestalt Therapy
- Gestalt therapy
 - an existential/phenomenological approach
- Therapists try to **increase clients' awareness**
- Clients are expected to do their own seeing, feeling, sensing, & interpreting

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Gestalt Therapy

- *Existential & Phenomenological* – it is grounded in the client's "**here and now**"
- *Initial goal* is for clients to gain awareness of what they are experiencing & doing *now*
 - Promotes direct experiencing rather than the abstractness of talking about situations
 - Rather than talk about a childhood trauma the client is encouraged to become the hurt child

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Gestalt Therapy - An Overview

- Gestalt Therapy is another type of counseling that is based upon the existential framework. Key elements include:
 - 1. A **Phenomenological Basis**—You are seeking to focus on the client’s perception of reality
 - 2. **Experiential**—The client is being asked to come to understand about what and how they are thinking, feeling, and doing as they interact with the therapist and the other people in the world

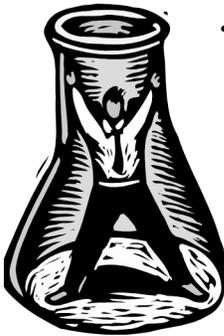
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Gestalt Therapy - An Overview

- 3. **Existential**—The person is to take responsibility for their destiny and identity
 - The client is also encouraged to work in the “here and now,” not in the “there and then”
- 4. **Awareness**—A key element in this theory is helping the client come to an awareness of what he or she is doing and experiencing
 - This involves dropping those behaviors and barriers that would stop someone from experience one’s self

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Gestalt Therapy - An Overview



- Experiments—The therapist designs experiments to increase the client’s awareness of what he or she is doing, experiencing, and how he or she is doing it.

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A Gestalt View of Human Nature

- Gestalt’s basic understanding of the human being is that **people can deal with their problems, especially if they become fully aware** of what is happening within oneself and outside of oneself
- **Change happens** in a person’s life when he or she **can reintegrate a disowned part of the self back into the mix of identity**
 - A disowned part of the self is something that may conflict with how one perceives the self ¹⁰

A Gestalt View of Human Nature

- Problems begin when a person tries to be who or what he or she isn’t
 - Living with “masks” and being inauthentic does not promote change
 - In fact it promotes stagnation of the personality
- According to Gestalt, the **more a person tries to be who they are not, the more they stay the same**

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A Gestalt View of Human Nature

- Gestalt is a process of “reowning” parts of the self that have been disowned
 - This unification process leads to the **goal of becoming strong enough to proceed with one’s own personal growth**
- Client needs to be in their current position and be aware of what they are, as opposed to trying to become what they are not
- **Change takes place when a person is more aware of who and what he or she is**
 - Once that is accepted, change towards a goal can take place ¹²

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The Now

- Our “power is in the present”
- The only moment that is significant is the present
 - Nothing exists except the “now”
 - The past is gone and the future has not yet arrived
- To be fully aware is to live in the here & now
 - By reliving the past or worrying about the future, a person cannot be authentic and cannot come to terms with who one is
- For many people the power of the present is lost
 - They may focus on their **past mistakes** or engage in endless resolutions and **plans for the future**

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The Now

- Therapist will focus on the “what” & “how” of a person **without asking the “why”** questions
 - This is to **promote an awareness of the moment**
 - Questions such as “What is happening now?” or “What are you feeling in this moment?” are used to intensify the experience of the present & create awareness
- “Why” questions lead only toward rationalizations and “self-deceptions” away from the immediacy of the moment

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The Now

- Therapist encourages the present time by asking the client to:
 - **Bring the past into the present by re-enacting it in the present**
 - e.g., imagine your father across from you in chair and tell him how you feel when he ignores you?

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The Now

- Therapist is seeking to **help a person live their feelings** rather than talk about them
- To live the **moment** rather than describe it in a detached way



The Now

- The past is recognized as having an important influence on a person’s present attitudes and behavior
 - **But what is in the past is either brought into the here and now** (“As you talk about this issue, what are your feeling now?”) so that a client can experience the feelings.....
 - OR

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Unfinished Business

- **Feelings about the past are unexpressed**
 - e.g., resentment, rage, hatred, pain, anxiety, grief, guilt, abandonment
 - These feelings are associated with distinct memories & fantasies
 - **Feelings not fully experienced linger in the background & interfere with effective contact**
- **Result:**
 - Preoccupation, compulsive behavior, wariness
 - oppressive energy & self-defeating behavior
 - Unexpressed feelings can result in physical symptoms
 - So Gestalt therapists emphasize paying attention to the bodily experience

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Process of Psychotherapy

- **Goal of Gestalt psychotherapy is awareness**
- **Gestalt therapists do whatever is necessary to jolt the person into a higher level of awareness** of self, environment, & relationship with others
- Contact Cycle involves increasing awareness which leads to excitement which leads to contact & action
 - Increase awareness-->excitement-->contact-->action

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Contact and Resistances to Contact

- **CONTACT** – interacting with nature and with other people without losing one's individuality
- **RESISTANCE TO CONTACT** – the defenses we develop to prevent us from experiencing the present fully
- Five major channels of resistance (i.e., styles of resisting contact):
 - **Introjection** (we passively incorporate what the environment provides & do not know what we want or need)
 - **Projection** (we disown certain aspects of ourselves by assigning them to the environment; so we put them on others; e.g., see quality in others, we avoid responsibility for who we are)
 - **Confluence** (a blurring of the differentiation between the self and the environment; e.g., high need to be accepted & liked)
 - **Retroflection** (is turning back to ourselves what we would like someone else do to us; e.g., lash out & injure self because fearful of directing toward others)
 - **Deflection** (distracting so that it is difficult to maintain a sustained sense of contact)

Layers of Neurosis

- The phony:
 - reacting to others in stereotypical and inauthentic ways
- Phobic layer:
 - avoid the emotional pain that we would prefer to deny
- The impasse:
 - the point where we are stuck in our own maturation; w
 - we think we will not be able to survive
- The implosive level:
 - fully experience our deadness instead of denying it.
- The explosive layer:
 - letting go of our phony roles & pretenses which release much energy that we have been holding in

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Energy & Blocks to Energy

- Special attention is given to
 - where energy is located,
 - how it is used,
 - how it can be blocked
- Clients & therapist want to be aware of the resistance which is being expressed in their body

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Therapeutic Process

- **Therapeutic Goals**
 - Move towards increased awareness of themselves
 - Gradually assume ownership of their experience
 - Develop skills and acquire values that will allow them to satisfy their needs without violating the rights of others
 - Become more aware of all of their senses
 - Learn to accept responsibility for what they do, including accepting the consequences of their actions
 - Move from outside support toward increasing internal support
 - Be able to ask for and get help from others and to give to others

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Therapeutic Process

- **Therapist's Function and Role**
 - Therapists notice what is in the foreground and the background.
 - Pay attention to the client's body language.
 - Focus on the language
 - "it" talk - client says it instead of I
 - "you" talk - client is asked to use I to make it more specific to the client
 - questions - this can hide the client
 - language that denies power - by adding qualifiers or disclaimers (i.e. "but", "I guess")
 - listening to a client's metaphors - can clue into the client's internal struggle
 - listening for language that uncovers a story - because you can get an idea of their struggles

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Therapeutic Process

- **Client's Experience in Therapy**
 - They are active participants who make their own interpretations & meaning
 - **Discovery:** new view of old situation
 - **Accommodation:** clients recognizing that they have a choice
 - **Assimilation:** clients learning how to influence their environment

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Therapeutic Process

- **Relationship Between Therapist and Client**
 - Therapists need to allow themselves to be affected by their clients
 - Therapists share experiences in the here and now
 - Therapists do not manipulate clients
 - Therapists give feedback
 - The I/thou relationship, a dialog relationship

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Therapeutic Techniques

- The Experiment in Gestalt Therapy
- Preparing Clients for Experiments
- Role of Confrontation
- Specific Techniques:
 - Internal dialogue exercise
 - Making the rounds
 - "I take responsibility for"
 - Playing the projection
 - Rehearsal exercise
 - Reversal technique
 - Exaggeration exercise
 - Staying with feeling
 - Guided fantasy
 - Empty Chair
 - Gestalt Approach to Dream Work

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Therapeutic Techniques

- **The experiment in Gestalt Therapy**
 - Contact with an authentic therapist is needed
 - Experiments grow out of the interaction between client & therapist
 - Experiments can take many forms, i.e.,
 - Dramatizing the memory of a painful event
 - Setting up a dialogue between client & some significant person in their life
 - Can be considered the cornerstone of experiential learning
 - Therapy sessions = a series of experiments which are avenues for clients to learn experientially
 - Experiments are spontaneous one of a kind & relevant to a particular moment

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Therapeutic Techniques

- **The experiment in Gestalt Therapy**
 - Is fundamental to contemporary Gestalt therapy
 - Gestalt therapists invite clients to engage in experiments that lead to fresh emotional experiencing and new insights
 - Bring struggles to life by inviting clients to enact them in the present
 - Crucial that experiments be tailored to each individual & used in timely manner
 - Also must be carried out in a context that offers a balance between support and risk

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Therapeutic Techniques

- **Preparing clients for experiments**
 - Counselors need to know when to leave client alone
 - Counselor needs to know when to introduce experiments
 - Experiments depend on persons problems, what the person is experiencing
 - Clients active role in self-exploration
 - Respectful of the client's cultural background
 - Counselor needs to be flexible
- **Role of Confrontation**
 - It is important to be direct and confrontational
 - It can be done in an inviting manner and not harshly

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Specific Techniques

- **Internal dialogue exercise**
 - the "top dog" and the "under dog"
- **Making the rounds**
 - go to each person in the group and talk to them
- **"I take responsibility for"**
 - can be added to one of the client's statements
- **Rehearsal exercise**
 - to rehearse with the therapist out loud.
- **Reversal technique**
 - asking the client to do the opposite of their behaviors
- **Staying with feeling**
 - so that you can work through the fears

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Specific Techniques

- **Empty-Chair Technique:**
 - When client speaks to an empty chair as if it were another person or another part of the client
 - Used to help the client get in touch with other views or other aspects of self
- **Exaggeration Exercise:**
 - Counselor exaggerates mannerism of client or asks client to exaggerate mannerism in order to make client aware of true feelings
- **Guided Fantasy:**
 - Client is encouraged to visualize here & now experiences
- **Playing the Projection:**
 - Client is asked to play the role of the person who they are not connecting with

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Specific Techniques

- **Gestalt Approach to Dream Work**
- **Does not interpret & analyze dreams**
- **Instead intent is to bring back to life & relive them as though they were happening now**
- **Dream is acted out in the present & dreamer becomes a part of his or her dream**
- **Suggested format:**
 - Making a list of all the details of dream
 - Remembering each person, event, & mood in it
 - Then becoming each of these parts by transforming oneself, acting as fully as possible & inventing dialogue

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Specific Techniques

- **Gestalt Approach to Dream Work**
- **Each part of dream assumed to be a projection of the self & the client creates scripts for encounters between the various characters or parts**
- **All of the different parts of a dream are expressions of client's own contradictory & inconsistent sides**
- **By engaging in a dialogue between these opposing sides, the client gradually becomes more aware of the range of his or her own feelings**
- **According to Perls, the dream is the most spontaneous expression of the existence of the human being**
 - Dream represents an unfinished situation
 - Also contains an existential message regarding oneself & one's current struggle

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Current Status

- Perls still has his followers & there are numerous Gestalt training institutes & societies (e.g., Dr. David Gorton's Gestalt Therapy & Training Center who visit's our class)
- Interestingly, some of Perls techniques have gained favor among brief therapist & family therapists because they are
 - designed for quick results &
 - focus on the here and now
- In turn, other therapies (e.g., dance, body work, & Reichian techniques) have been combined with Gestalt techniques

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Gestalt Prescription

- The Gestalt prescription, according to Naranjo, include the following:
 - Live now. Live here.
 - Stop imaging and needless thinking. Express, rather than manipulate, justify, and judge.
 - Do not restrict awareness.
 - Accept only your own "shoulds."
 - Take responsibility for your own feelings, thoughts, and actions and, finally, surrender to being what you are.

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