

Gestalt Theory applied to Conrad in Ordinary People

Lucy Bartnick

Mental Health Counseling, AGSC

GCN 502 Theories and Foundations

Professor George Ramos

March 7, 2023

-

Gestalt Therapy Overview

Gestalt therapy is considered an existential practice as it is built upon a productive relationship between therapist and client. Whereas therapists are responsible for knowing themselves and for remaining open to their clients, “clients are expected to do their own seeing, feeling, sensing, and interpreting, as opposed to waiting passively for the therapist to provide them with insights and answers” (Corey, 2020).

Gestalt therapy is a holistic approach in which the main goal is to increase the client’s awareness of their present reality. Instead of trying to make something happen, the therapist’s role is to assist the client to increase awareness that will eventually allow reintegration with all aspects of themselves.

Therapists may have to help their clients overcome defense mechanisms that are blocking them from full awareness of their behaviors. These defense mechanisms are called “contact boundary phenomena” and are often known by the characteristic style people try to resist awareness, e.g., introjection, projection, retroflection, deflection, and confluence.

To help clients grow in therapy, Miriam Polster (1987) described a three-stage sequence that serves as a framework for a successful process. The first phase consists of self-discovery; the second stage is accommodation, wherein clients begin by trying out new behaviors, and the third phase is assimilation, which involves clients learning how to influence their environment.

Application

In the case of Conrad, we can see that he seems to be employing a few of the aforementioned contact boundary phenomena. One, considering Conrad has recently tried to commit suicide, we can see that he may be retroreflecting, as he has internalized the message that he should have died in the accident, instead of his brother. Also, Conrad seems to be introjecting in terms of swallowing the point of view of his mother, who thought the world of her older son, yet is critical of her surviving son.

As a Gestalt therapist, I would invite Conrad to examine his beliefs about his mother's opinions and have him look at many incongruities. Further, along the lines of the three-stage integration sequence that Miriam Polster laid out, I would help Conrad on his journey of self-discovery, and help him realize his own preferences, such as does he want to stay on the swim team, etc.

Techniques

Although techniques are not a necessary part of Gestalt practice, there are some interventions that fit the therapeutic situation and serve to make the client aware of what they are experiencing.

Some techniques used by Gestalt therapists are exercises, which can be used to make something happen in a therapy session or to achieve a goal. In contrast, experiments can be tailor-designed for the client to heighten the client's awareness by bringing out an internal conflict and making the struggle an actual process. Experiments are designed by the therapist based on the client's report of needs, dreams, and body awareness. It is a collaborative process with the full participation of the client.

In Conrad's case, such techniques as "the empty chair" could be useful to understand what his mother is thinking or feeling vis a vis role reversal. It would be good to have Conrad safely retell his very vivid dreams of the accident, as we see in the movie. The therapist even takes the role of the brother and answers Conrad's question, "Why did you let go".

Conrad's dreams could also be discussed as a way to get him to consider his own contradictory and inconsistent sides. By considering opposing sides, the client gradually becomes more aware of the range of his or her own feelings, with the aim of not ridding oneself of certain traits. but learning to accept and live with them (Corey, 2020).

Benefits

An expected outcome of Gestalt therapy is for a client to move toward increased awareness of themselves, and ultimately assume ownership of their experience. It is also expected that a client develops skills and acquires values that will allow them to satisfy them without violating the rights of others, as well as to be able to ask for and get help from others.

It is good to see that recent studies have shown that Gestalt therapy has a beneficial impact on people with personality disturbances, psychosomatic problems, and substance addictions.

In terms of contributions, through the skillful and sensitive use of Gestalt interventions, practitioners can assist clients in heightening their present-centered awareness of what they are thinking and feeling as well as consider if there are any behaviors they want to change.

References

Redford, R. (1980), *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprises Inc.

Corey G., (2020). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (10th ed.). Cengage Learning