

Ordinary People Application Paper: Gestalt Therapy

Wendy Hou

Alliance University Graduate School of Counseling

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Professor George Ramos

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Gestalt therapy is an experiential counseling approach founded by Frederick Solomon “Fritz” Perls and grounded in the existential/humanistic perspective with some psychoanalytic concepts (Corey, 2017; Tan, 2011). It focuses on helping clients subjectively experience their present moment and increasing their *contact* with both the external and internal worlds. This is based on the following understanding of human nature and dysfunctions in living: First, Gestalt therapists believe that the whole person is more important than its parts (*holism*). Individuals should be considered and understood as an integration of all their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, bodily sensations, dreams, and other experiences. Second, a person’s environment (*field*) greatly influences their experiences; connection or relationship (*contact*) with nature and with others is crucial for their well-being (Tan, 2011). Third, the Gestalt approach with its existential/humanistic perspective asserts that humans are inherently growth-oriented and have the capacity for *awareness*- of knowing and accepting themselves, and of knowing their environment and interacting with it (Corey, 2017). Such awareness coupled with the human capacity to *self-regulate* (working toward an equilibrium) can lead to self-actualization and change, from environment-dependency to self-sufficiency and self-support (Tan, 2011). In contrast, lack of awareness or inability to experience the present fully results in lack of growth, psychological immaturity, and dysfunctional living.

According to Gestalt theory, problematic contact with self and the environment is what hinders present awareness (Tan, 2011). One reason for ineffective contact or resistances to contact is when appropriate contact boundaries are not maintained but broken. Five types of these *contact boundary disturbances* are described by Polster and Polster (1973, as cited in Tan, 2011) as *introjection*, *projection*, *retroreflection*, *deflection*, and *confluence*. Another source of

interference of authentic contact in the present is *unfinished business*. This refers to the unexpressed feelings of which people are not fully aware and unresolved issues from the past that lurk in the background and clutter the awareness of the here and now. In other words, they are the denied parts of who we are that need to be integrated or dealt with or else they would become a personal impasse that manifests as “preoccupation, compulsive behavior, wariness, oppressive energy and much self-defeating behavior” (Polster & Polster, 1973, as cited in Corey, 2017, p. 205). Perls (1969, 1970, as cited in Tan, 2011) also describes people having to experience and shed five layers of neuroses (phony, phobic, impasse, implosive, and explosive) in order to move toward a level of more authentic contact.

In the eyes of a Gestalt therapist, Conrad from the movie “Ordinary People” is a young man who lacks awareness, struggling with ineffective contact with himself and the environment and inability to fully experience life in the present. In the beginning of the movie, he often keeps to himself, feels nervous and awkward when interacting with Mom and friends, denies having feelings, and doesn’t seem to know what he wants and needs (Redford, 1980). To cope with life situations, Conrad has adopted the contact boundary disturbances of introjection (i.e., uncritically accepting Mom’s belief and standard of hiding one’s feelings as to not show one’s vulnerabilities), projection (his inability to forgive himself and lack of self-acceptance are disowned and assigned to his mom), and even retroflexion (directing aggression and punishment unto himself through cutting his wrist). These resistances to contact are meant to protect him from dealing with the unfinished business of his past (unexpressed feelings of anger, resentment, and abandonment from his relationship with Mom and feelings of guilt and grief over the loss of his brother) and the pain that would come with it. However, with the unfinished business unresolved, Conrad lives life stuck at an impasse, oppressed and self-defeating, as expressed

through the nonverbal cues of his stiff posture, hunched back, and flat facies. As the movie progresses, he slowly strips away the first 3 layers of neuroses (phony, phobic, and impasse layers) and begins to experience the implosive layer by getting in touch with his feelings and being more aware of his real self.

I believe the Gestalt approach would be beneficial for Conrad. As someone who is stuck in the past with its pains and regrets, he needs an active and experiential therapy that will help him to confront his unfinished business and to experience all the hidden feelings while directing his focus on the here and now. He would also benefit from exploring and becoming aware of his contact boundary disturbances so he can learn to have more authentic contact with others. Furthermore, it is good for Conrad, who has been conditioned to be passive, to take ownership of the therapeutic experience as clients of Gestalt therapy are expected to do their own sensing, feeling, and interpreting (Corey, 2017).

As a Gestalt therapist, I can use many creative techniques and experiments to help Conrad gain deeper awareness, bringing to life his feelings, thinking, and struggles. But since the intensity of these experiences may greatly unsettle an emotionally reserved Conrad, I need to first establish a genuine therapist-client relationship so he would trust me enough to participate in the active interventions. One of the Gestalt techniques I would then use is the empty-chair, asking Conrad to role-play his conflict with his mother while assuming both roles (Tan, 2011). By fully experiencing his own hurt feelings as well as empathizing with his mom's feelings, he would hopefully begin to resolve the unfinished business of their strained relationship. Another intervention I would engage him in is the experiential dream work. I would encourage Conrad to act out every detail of the recurring dream of his brother's boating accident. He would hopefully process and come to accept this painful memory and the range of feelings involved.

References

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Tan, S.Y. (2011). *Counseling and psychotherapy: A Christian perspective*. Baker Academic.