

Gestalt Therapy Ordinary People Paper

Genesis Escalera

Alliance Graduate School of Counseling, Alliance University

GCN 502: Theories and Foundations of Counseling

Professor: Dr. George J. Ramos

March 28, 2023

The main originator and developer of Gestalt therapy was Fritz Perls, a German-born psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and psychotherapist. He developed this form of psychotherapy with his wife, Laura Perls, in the 1940s and 1950s. Gestalt therapy is an existential, phenomenological, and process-based approach developed on the idea that individuals must be understood in the context of their ongoing relationship with the environment (Corey, 2015). The cornerstones of practice for Gestalt therapy are awareness, choice, and responsibility. The initial goal is for clients to expand their awareness of what they are experiencing in the present moment. When awareness increases, a client can heal, which can be therapeutic for them. In addition, when a client becomes aware of their denied parts and work towards owning their experience, they can become integrated or whole. The Gestalt approach focuses more on process than on content. In this process, the therapist puts themselves as fully as possible into the client's experience without judgment, analyzing, or interpreting while concurrently holding a sense of one's individual, independent presence (Corey, 2015). This approach focuses on the here and now, what and how of experiencing, the authenticity of the therapist, active dialogic inquiry and exploration, and the I/Thou of relating (the use of language to change the focus on the client rather than their issues).

Gestalt's view of human nature is rooted in existential philosophy, phenomenology, and field theory. Due to this view of human nature, Fritz Perls practiced Gestalt therapy paternalistically. His techniques and style of conducting therapy were confrontational. The four principles of Gestalt therapy are holism (the full range of human functioning: thoughts, feelings, behaviors, body, language, and dreams), field theory (the client's everchanging environment), figure formation process (how an individual organizes experiences from moment to moment), and organismic self-regulation (emergence of need sensations and interest disturb an individual's

equilibrium). Gestalt therapy assumes that individuals have the capacity to self-regulate when they are aware of what is happening in and around them (Corey, 2015). When individuals develop mental health symptoms, they aren't aware of their senses, bodily sensations, and emotions and have poor awareness of their environment.

The main character Conrad in the film *Ordinary People* (1980), experienced the tragic loss of his older brother Buck in a boat accident. Unfortunately, Conrad was present when the accident happened. Since then, Conrad has been deeply wounded emotionally and mentally and scarred and traumatized to the point of attempting suicide. It was clear that Conrad was showing signs of survivor's guilt and dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to being directly exposed to the traumatic event. Conrad's symptoms in the film were recurring nightmares and flashbacks, lack of motivation, sleep, and interest in normal activities, loss of appetite, difficulty focusing in class, and feeling isolated and alone. Gestalt's approach, assumptions, and philosophy applies to Conrad in several ways. The first is Conrad's unexpressed feelings and thoughts about his traumatic past with his brother Buck. According to Gestalt, this would be known as "unfinished business." Feelings not fully experienced linger in the background and interfere with effective contact. As a result, preoccupation, compulsive behavior, wariness, oppressive energy, and self-defeating behavior are developed. Conrad's unfinished business manifested into resentment, guilt, pain, anxiety, grief, and loneliness.

In the film, we could see the effects of unfinished business and resistance to contact/boundary disturbances happening with Conrad's mother as she is struggling to be fully open, aware, transparent, and engaged in the present and her environment, as well as with Conrad. This became very problematic and detrimental to Conrad's relationship with his mother. Conrad's mother did show signs of deflection as well whenever Conrad would bring up past

memories of his brother Buck to her. As a therapist, I believe the Gestalt approach could be helpful in many ways to treat Conrad's condition and help him resolve past traumatic events. One technique that I would implement in our therapy session is the internal dialogue exercise. This technique could be implemented by using an empty chair where Conrad (the client) would imagine a person, in this case, his older brother Buck in that chair to have a conversation with his brother. This technique would allow for the outward expression of the inner conflict Conrad has been feeling since his brother's passing and express his true and authentic self.

The second technique I would use as Conrad's therapist would be staying with the feeling. This technique would help Conrad face and experience the feelings he wishes to avoid in order to endure the pain necessary for unblocking and making ways for newer levels of growth (Corey, 2015). For this technique to work, I would need to foster a relationship built on trust and nonjudgmental acceptance with Conrad so that he can stay with his unpleasant feelings. The Gestalt process will help Conrad move toward increased awareness of himself, gradually assume ownership of his experience (as opposed to making others responsible for what they are thinking, feeling, and doing), develop skills and acquire values that will allow him to satisfy his needs without violating the rights of others, become more aware of all of his senses, learn to accept responsibility for what he does, including accepting the consequences of their actions, and be able to ask for and get help from others and be able to give to others (Corey, 2015). With Gestalt therapy, I can help Conrad keep everything in the present (the here and now) when it comes to dealing with his past traumatic experience so that whatever the problem was in the past can be dealt with in the present by making it come alive in the present during our sessions.

References

Corey, Gerald. (2015) *Theory and practice of Counseling and psychotherapy, Enhanced*

10th Edition. Cengage Learning

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