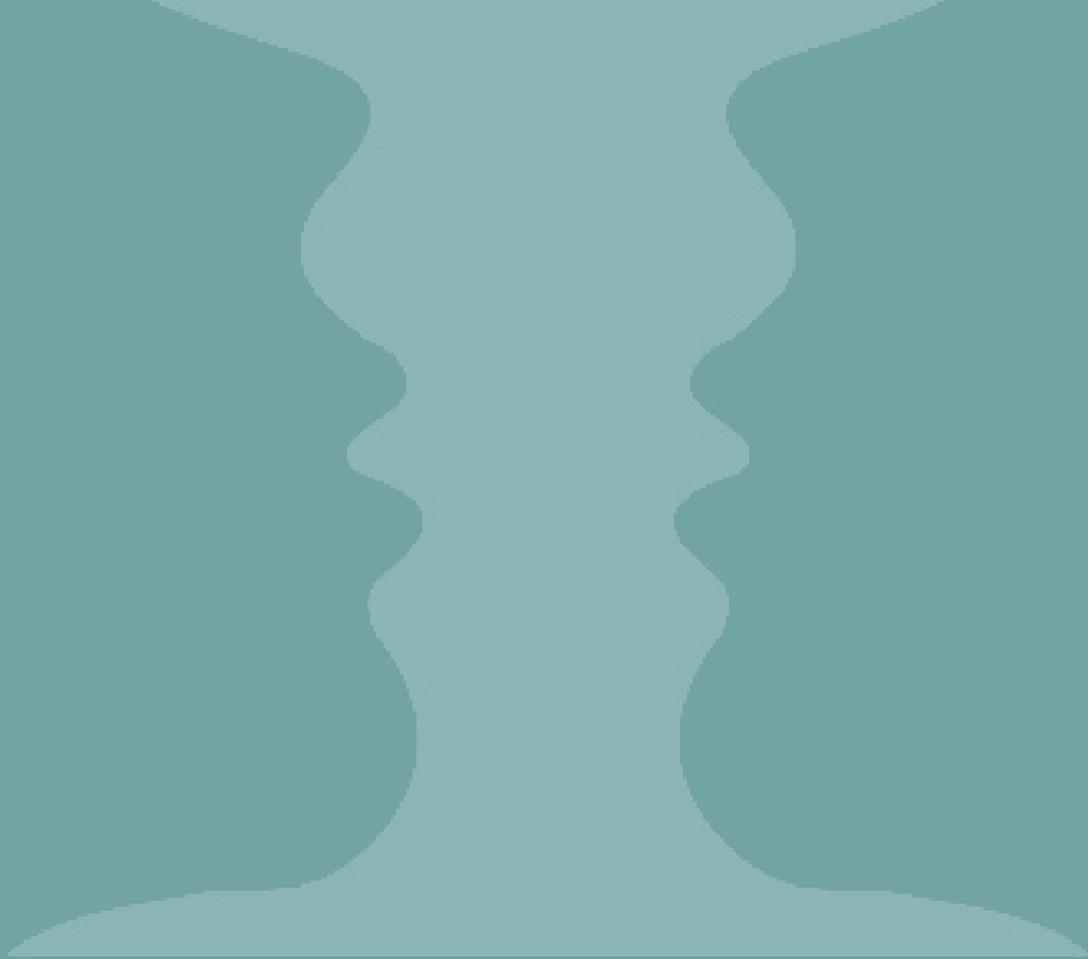


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**PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION
OF THE GESTALT THERAPIST THROUGH
EXPERIENCE OF CONTACT WITH ONE'S
INSIDE AND OUTSIDE WORLD**

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION OF THE GESTALT THERAPIST: V. VAN VLIET

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author explores complex processes of professional identity formation – that condition the journey towards becoming a gestalt psychotherapist through contact with one’s inside and outside world. The individual experience of five gestalt psychotherapists in Malta is shared and described here, using gestalt theory and methodology. The focus of this paper is on individual processes of “healing and becoming” gestalt therapists, in addition to integration of these processes. I argue that human nature and our identity as gestalt psychotherapists unfolds continuously as we become more aware and present to ourselves, others and to the surrounding world.

Keywords: awareness, contact, process, formation, identity, gestalt psychotherapist

INTRODUCTION

The formation of professional identity of the gestalt psychotherapist develops over the course of one’s life and the development of this identity depends upon professional as well as personal knowledge and experience. In gestalt therapy contact is understood as a healing process: change, assimilation and becoming (identity-personality). This paper presents and describes the complex process of professional identity formation through experience of contact with one’s inside and outside world. The goal in gestalt therapy is healing and growth, hence the focus of this research regards the experience of ‘healing and becoming’, shared by experienced

gestalt psychotherapists in Malta. The process of becoming a gestalt psychotherapist is always individual and unique, where “one thing flows from another” (Polster & Polster, 1973). In gestalt therapy, each person is viewed as born with an inherent drive and potential to develop her/his personal nature and talents. The meaning of the word healing refers to wholeness, going against impairment, functionality, restoration and is viewed as the continuous process of the integration of problematic experiences that can lead to unfolding of the human being towards wholeness - self-actualization. The interplay between two aspects of contact: with one’s inside and outside world varies from person to person and depends on individual characteristics as well as outside factors: culture and tradition.

Essence and human nature is a process of developmental value – as Zinker writes: “we are in a constant state of becoming, our nature is potentiality” (1994).

> What supports the integration of missing or detached parts of experience?

>What supports the natural tendency towards assimilation and growth?

This paper presents accounts of the participants’ journeys where personal experiences are shared and described through gestalt theory and methodology. In gestalt therapy, creativity is seen as the main human capacity of integration as well as the main human potential to grow. This paper presents narratives describing how creativity, nature, arts, meditation and spirituality have supported the formation of gestalt psychotherapists’ identities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

Through this paper, I explore the process of healing and becoming a gestalt psychotherapist, where my own process/experience of “healing and becoming” is present in the background and gestalt theory and methodology constitutes the ground. In order to conduct this research, I have used a phenomenological method of inquiry and semi-structured interviews. Throughout this study, I have met with five gestalt psychotherapists and the interviews have been recorded and transcribed by me. Following these interviews (which had a duration of approximately 50-60 minutes), I have used thematic analyses to elicit, describe and synthesize themes. This research is rooted in a humanistic existential paradigm, integral to gestalt psychotherapy, and central to my positioning as gestalt practitioner and novice researcher.

The process of becoming a gestalt psychotherapist is personal and unique to each individual. Healing and formation of professional identity is complex and multilayered, where internal and environmental supports co-create and influence each other (Perls, 1992). These processes indicate continuity, growth and change. Clarkson writes that qualitative research such as gestalt is concerned with subjects, subjective experiences, and the phenomenological quality of experience – unique and inimitable as it is, and as such should be viewed as a “hermeneutics of complexity – an engagement with the multi-layeredness of life” (2004).

This research has two interlinked research

questions:

1. How contact with one’s inside and/or contact with one’s outside supports the process of gestalt psychotherapist identity formation?
2. To what extent - and how these processes intertwine and support “healing and becoming” of the gestalt psychotherapist.

To answer these questions I have carried out semi-structured interviews, based on open-ended questions: ‘what’ and ‘how’ which first identify a process and then explore the process (Brownell, 2010).

Ethical considerations and the integrity of the participants have been the underlying principle of this research. All the participants (4 women and 1 man) gave informed consent to this study. There is an emphasis in gestalt literature on the importance that the gestalt qualitative researcher reflects on the impact that their chosen methods have on the interaction between researcher and respondents. The need to consider ethical issues throughout the entire duration of a research process/project is assumed as important, as well as considering the impact of the process of research on the researcher and on participant/s (Barber, 2013; Finlay & Evans, 2009; Willig, 2013).

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

It starts with – awareness of one’s inside: “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom” - Aristotle

During the research, all five participants pointed to the beginnings of their journey as learning how to be ‘in touch’ with one’s self – with emerging

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thoughts, feelings, body sensations, memories, images etc.. This process was the starting point towards understanding one's experience of the inside world, finding the right words to express it and making meaning of one's experience(s). During this process of learning: "What are you aware of?" theoretical knowledge, practice and experience in personal/group therapy was recognized as crucial in self-understanding/self-discovery. "Identification with one's state is a self-supportive whole process that leads to growth; alienation or disowning of the emerging experience creates psychological conflicts – which means the individual is divided and not whole" (Yontef, 2005). The aim of gestalt therapy is to increase awareness, and increased awareness invariably leads to an expansion of one's professional and personal identity. As one of the participants said: "When I have learned how to be aware of myself I can teach my clients to do the same".

EXISTENTIAL REALITY – "WHAT IS, IS"

"Awareness is a form of experience which can be loosely defined as being in touch with one's own existence, with what is...the person who is aware knows what he does, how he does it, that he has alternatives and that he chooses to be as he is" (Yontef, 1993).

Becoming aware of the reality of living in the world as well as self-realization of personal issues and one's own creative adjustments has been a complex and painful process for all the participants. Throughout the research, participants shared how accepting the uncertainty, sickness, loss, and one's own responsibility towards his/her own life has been part of their personal journey in

becoming gestalt psychotherapist.

During our professional training as trainees - we are taught to 'trust the process'. As Joyce & Sills write "It is trust in the healthiness of organismic self – regulation and in the deeper wisdom that lies within us all" (Joyce & Sills, 2006 p. 38).

LIVING FULLY IN THE PRESENT

In gestalt therapy, living fully in the present includes remembering and anticipation - remembering the lessons we learned in the past, recognizing the relevance of these lessons in the present moment "here & now" as well as adjusting our behavior within the actual/context (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951). All four participants shared similar reflections that to develop this ability/capacity requires regular practice of conscious awareness and reflexivity. Participants shared some of their personal themes such as: the movement from denying to accepting reality - "what is, is" : body symptoms – working on body process; working on personal issues through the concepts of mother/father/good enough; strengthening the cognitive aspect of themselves as opposite to overwhelming experiencing of feelings and emotions. They all acknowledged how working through their individual themes over the years of being in training facilitated their professional and personal growth and fostered the formation of their professional identity as gestalt psychotherapist. The actuality and potentiality of the ever-changing reality from moment to moment demands from us conscious awareness (Dan Bloom, 2012). The awareness, consciousness, reflective awareness has been described in gestalt literature as the means of healing, restoring

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and becoming (Dan Bloom, 2012; Muller, 2016; Pecotic, 2018). The theme of responsibility has its roots in existentialism. As Joyce & Sills write: we choose our experience – “how we feel about it, the meaning we assign to it, and how we manage it” (2010). As Yontef (1998) points out: “Awareness is a gestalt property that is a creative integration of the problem. Only an aware gestalt (awareness) leads to change”.

IDENTIFY WITH YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE - WORKING THROUGH ‘UNFINISHED BUSINESS’

The process of becoming aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, body sensations unfolds over the time and leads to recognition of one’s modifications to contact, mechanisms of resistance or creative adjustments / self-regulations (Polster & Polster, 1973). One of the participants of this study shared personal experience of how drawing/painting classes helped her in her grieving process – that of accepting loss and moving on. She recalled how during the art and creativity classes, she was encouraged to draw/ paint freely what she was experiencing. During this process she realized how her disowned, painful thoughts and feelings were ‘hidden away’, and how through art making and artistic expression she found a way to ‘tell her story’ and acknowledge her loss.

Another participant shared her process around working through shame. She said that it had taken her years of personal and group psychotherapy to become aware of this, working through it until she had finally become able to tolerate and accept it. Polster & Polster write: “All experience hangs around until a person is finished with it” (1973). In

gestalt therapy, the unfinished experience out-of-awareness seeks completion, and the unfinished experience manifests itself through various symptoms for example compulsive behavior, weariness, self – defeating activity (Polster & Polster, 1973; Joyce & Sills, 2010).

In gestalt therapy the cycle of awareness is described by contact, sensing, excitement, and gestalt formation (Perls et al., 1951, 1954). The internal cycle of experience was conceptualized by Zinker (1978) and this reformulation of figure/ground formation supported understanding of the internal process happening within the organism at any moment. Further, it created a vehicle to comprehend how the organism could interrupt his/her own process, understood as creative adjustments/fixed gestalten (Polster & Polster, 1973; Perls 1992) – in situations where there is not enough support, internal and/or external (Perls, 1992). “To experience is to go through something”- to learn and to come to know (Brownell, 2010).

BECOMING A GESTALT PSYCHOTHERAPIST: CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS ONE’S SELF AND CLIENTS.

All participants stated that they saw personal responsibility towards self-development/growth as a hallmark of our profession. Change in personal values was reported also: from unreal to authentic, from unconscious to knowing, from un nourishing to nurturing. During the interviews a few participants stated that being authentic - being real to yourself and others has been an unfolding process during their professional as well as personal journeys of becoming a gestalt

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FROM NEGATIVE SELF-NARRATIVE TO SELF-ACCEPTANCE

psychotherapist. In gestalt therapy, awareness is the dynamic force behind change. The theory of the “paradoxical theory of change” implies that change emerges when one focuses on the present figure/ground formation with awareness (Muller, 2005).

CONTACT WITH OUTSIDE WORLD- ENVIRONMENT

“The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action” – John Dewey

The founders of gestalt therapy developed the theory that the organism is not sufficient but needs the world for gratification of its needs. The meeting of needs nourishes life and promotes health, growth and wellbeing (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951).

The second part of the interview explored participants’ processes/experiences of being in contact with the outside world. All five participants acknowledged that – knowing yourself is understanding human nature and expressed how much an understanding of “who they are” helped them in changing their ways of being in the world. The unfolding processes: from anger to acceptance, from illusion to reality, from shame to self-acceptance, were mentioned by four participants during the interviews. In other words, a better relationship with one’s self has been found to increase their capacity for understanding and being compassionate towards others (empathy).

Some of the participants of this research acknowledged personal ‘healing’ through psychotherapy sessions and through their individual/group psychotherapy. What has been defined as ‘healing’ has been described in words such as ‘non-judged’, ‘supported’, ‘cared’, ‘held’ and ‘contained’. Other ‘healing’ experiences that were pointed to by a few participants included empathy, warmth and support from fellow trainees. Two participants recalled the personal experience of learning positive narrative/dialogue during their therapy sessions and putting it into practice in their lives and work. “Self-support must include both self – knowing and self – accepting” (Yontef, 1998, p. 26).

The founders of gestalt therapy originally proposed that contact is a function of the organism/environment field and the self – “the capacity of the organism to make contact with its environment – spontaneously, deliberately, and creatively” (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2005). In gestalt therapy, contact with the outside world refers to contact with others as well as inanimate objects (Polster & Polster, 1973; Clarkson, 2004). Perls, Hefferline and Goodman described contact as: “...fundamentally, an organism lives in its environment by maintaining its differences; and more importantly by assimilating the environment to its differences; and it is at (the) boundary that dangers are rejected, obstacles are overcome and the assimilable is selected and appropriated” (1951). The founders of Gestalt therapy write that given the proper environment and opportunities, individuals tend to realize their potential, attain self-fulfillment and

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authentic existence, where they become more 'whole' (integrated), in contact with themselves as well as with the outside world.

Gestalt therapy defines self as "the system of contacts at any time" (Perls et al, 1951). Yontef writes that: "The self is a process, it is as real as any tangible existent, and it is constructed in the current organism/environment field (1988).

RESEARCH FINDINGS: CREATIVITY, ARTS, NATURE, MEDITATION AND SPIRITUALITY HAVE SUPPORTED THE INDIVIDUAL PROCESSES OF PERSON- AL AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

During the part of this research interview regarding the role of our senses or 'contact functions' in the personal journey/experience of becoming a gestalt therapist, individual themes emerged. The 'combined effect' of the intertwined process of being in touch with one's inside and outside world emerged as an experience unique to each participant. What was shared by all participants was how their personal experiences/engagement in arts, contemplation of nature and regular practice of meditation and spirituality supported their processes of becoming a gestalt psychotherapist. All participants stated that these personal experiences facilitated their perception and understanding of their process of healing and becoming. They also supported the integration of disowned and/or missing parts into a new self-awareness: integrated 'whole' – unity. These internal activities/experiences varied from music/dance therapy, martial arts, writing a personal

journal, contemplation of nature and regular practice of meditation and spirituality.

Gestalt therapy focuses on what and how – not on content, As Zinker writes: "Gestalt therapy is permission to be creative" (1973). In gestalt therapy, creativity is an indispensable element for growth of the 'incomplete'; it is the ability to make something new and real through individual will power (Perls et al, 1951; Muller, 2005). Contact occurs at a boundary and our sensory and motor functions are the functions through which contact is made (Polster & Polster, 1978). All the participants expressed in their own words how these experiences gained 'outside' gestalt training, influenced and enriched them as individuals and professionals, during their personal journey of becoming a gestalt psychotherapist.

Two participants shared similar experiences where a course of mindfulness led them to meditation and then to spirituality. Others shared that life has become richer as they have learned how to use their senses more in appreciating simple things in life such as sunsets, music, gardening, their pets etc.. As Self is a process, our human nature and our identity as gestalt psychotherapists is unfolding continuously. As such we become more aware and present to ourselves, others and the surrounding world. When we become present, we bring our senses and conscious awareness to the immediacy of the moment and we can enjoy the beauty of being who we are, sensing and knowing.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION AND SELF ACTUALIZATION

Perls believed that the ultimate goal of psychotherapy was to obtain “that amount of integration which facilitates its own development” (Yontef, 1998, p. 147). The organism grows through assimilating new material and draws new sources of energy from it. Contact is actualization – when Self contacts actuality ‘existence and reality’ Self contacts potentiality: possibilities and qualities (Perls et al, 1951). Our self-awareness: recognition and comprehending supports our process of identification and alienation which leads to growth through overcoming obstacles, rejecting the dangers and assimilating new – ideally nourishing material. Yontef posits that the gestalt therapy motto is: “contact the actual. Contact the actual other person and also what is true for you as a person” (1998).

FINAL REMARKS AND CONCLUSIONS

Since the last question of this research interview analyses how our post-modern reality, the times in which we all live, supports or/and hinders us from being in contact with one’s inside and outside world, I have included some of the comments from gestalt psychotherapists – participants of this research. All participants expressed their concern that living in virtual and electronic reality can hinder us from self-awareness and real contact with others. A few participants also mentioned that virtual and electronic worlds give just an impression of contact and togetherness whereas we humans need ‘person to person’ contact. One of my final observations, after the process of transcription and describing the

emerging themes, is that the first part of the research interview, referring to contact with one’s inside world, occupied 2/3 of the interview time duration (approximately, an average of 30 – 40 minutes of each participants’ interview) despite an equal amount of research questions having been constructed to consider both aspects of contact.

As the process of formation and development of the professional identity of the gestalt psychotherapist has been unfolding gradually and continues throughout our life, we continue to learn more about ourselves and others, through our experience and knowledge; awareness and contact with one’s inside and outside world. The aim of gestalt therapy is the Awareness Continuum; the freely ongoing gestalt formation, where what is of greatest concern and interest to the organism, the relationship, the group or society or ‘others’ comes into the foreground where it can be fully experienced and coped with... so that then it can melt into the background... and leave the foreground free for the next relevant gestalt. (L. Perls, 1992: 2).

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