A Quest for Gestalt Therapy Group Process

Group Process as Self Process\[1\]

Introduction. My Quest

I have been on a quest. I have been searching for gestalt therapy’s theory of group process. This might seem like a simple task. For one thing, there are ample, adequate theories of group process and many of them are congenial to gestalt therapy.

My quest has me looking for a statement of group therapy process that emerges seamlessly from gestalt therapy theory as first articulated in *Gestalt Therapy* by Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) and further developed by contemporary gestalt therapists. I have been searching for a model that does not borrow from other modalities for its understanding of group process, but which, by drawing on gestalt therapy’s developing foundational theory itself (Bloom, 2004), actually clarifies gestalt therapy by examining group experience from within this phenomenological gestalt therapy paradigm. This is not to contradict

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other group theoretical models, but to present a distinct gestalt therapy model to consider in its own right.

My quest has led to this conclusion: Gestalt therapy group process deploys the sequence of contacting (Perls et al., 1951, p. 418.) of the field-emergent self (Philipson, 2001), which is implicitly and explicitly social and relational (Jacobs, 2005). “I” and “we” are embedded within its phenomenal field, and alternate experientially as figure/ground. This perspective collapses the individual and collective approaches into a direct as possible phenomenological description of group process as self process.

What Is a Group?

Obviously not every social experience is a “group” experience, insofar as we psychotherapists understand “group.” Every group experience is, however, a social experience. All experience is social. A single person does not make a group, although, as I propose, even a single person’s “solitary” experience has a social dimension. Two people might be a dyad, perhaps a couple; three and more, perhaps a group. So far these are differences in quantity, not of kind. Not any congregation of people is a “group.”

What turns a collection of people into a group? There are different answers. (For example, see Gaffney (2006, pp. 205–218), and Hodges (2006, pp. 229–230). Here is mine: As self emerges through the sequence of contacting (Perls et al., p. 403), “group” is the experienced structure of the social field in which one person is ongoingly and reciprocally in contact with others. An experience of group forms out of mutual contacting that includes a shared social background. “Group work” is the attention to the phenomenal relationship of one person to another as a process — the dynamic, changing relationship of “I” and “we.” In other words, group process is that which facilitates the emergence of the social manifestations (Wilson, 2004) of individual experiences. A group is a conceptual abstraction based on the actual experience of people being in a group.

I will describe this in more detail and offer clinical examples to clarify my perspective. To achieve this, I will summarize relevant gestalt therapy theory from the point of view of gestalt therapy
group process. This summary will focus on the sequence of contacting and the theory of self (Perls et al. 1951).

Clinical Example

A group of eight adults has been meeting for weeks in the same room. This is a mature group; the initial awkwardness of self-revelation to strangers has been replaced with a sense of bonhomie, trust, and cooperation. Today, after a beginning introduction in which each person states what is his or her foreground concern in the moment, an extended quiet emerges. Then “John” says, “There is not enough air in this room today. Boy, is it stuffy!” He looks around at the others. Some agree. I feel as comfortable as usual. I ask John to describe his experience, and he describes tightness in his chest as if he had to suck hard to get air. All at once, people become conscious of their own breathing and how they may be inhibiting themselves. “Max” now looks uncomfortable, then says, “I wasn’t going to mention this yet, but I left my wife last week...” his voice trails off to a soft sob. “Now I can breathe,” says John, looking over to Max.

Discussion

Let me describe the above from the perspective I am developing: John’s projecting (the room was airless) of his retroreflecting (his breath constriction) was immediately connected with Max’s inhibitions, of which John was not conscious, yet somatically aware. “Individual” experiences such as John’s are interlaced with others’, as each group member’s self process is emergent of each other’s. Group process is the consequence of the developing self processes of the members of the group, “overlapping” and emerging of the contact-boundary. Each “person’s” sense of the group is a manifestation of his/her implicit social “foundation,” a common social world. Gestalt therapy’s theory of self can be a theory of the person in all possible social configurations, from “solitary” individual to group. Let me amplify these central ideas by clarifying some of the gestalt therapy concepts on which they are based.
Self

There is no self that is not also essentially social.

Two core concepts come together in the theory of self: field[3] and contact. Contact is the experience of the meeting of the human organism with its environment at the contact-boundary (Perls et al., 1951). Contact is likewise the teleological end of self (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2005), its consummation. A further distinction, however, may be that contact is the meeting of person, not organism, and environment (Staemmler, 2006).

The “field” that organizes as self is a social, phenomenal, field. Each adjective is critical, and again, is the basis for understanding group process. Since gestalt therapy is concerned with the experienced and with that which can be experienced, self is of the phenomenal field (Fairfield, 2004; Yontef, 1993; Staemmler, 2006). The phenomenal field is social — that is, not of a solitary or monadic individual but of a person synchronically and diachronically related to others, that is, in and through time. In each moment, self is a relation to other people, other selves, and through personal history self carries its history of social relations through time.[4]

Every self emerges within a social field; developmentally, an infant’s experience is a function of the infant–caregiver field (Tronick, 2007). Patterns of that early relationship continue functioning in adult self structures and can be identified as styles of contacting (Frank, 2001). An isolated self is impossible, although the experience of being isolated is common. A solitary self is a paradox, although existential solitude is universal. There is no sense of “I” that does not have “we” as background; there is no “we” that is independent of a background “I.”

Self is embodied, and simultaneously embedded in its social surround; one’s body is as inextricable a constituent of self as is one’s sense of others. An individual can no more be disconnected from her body as she can be from others in her world. Even a hermit meditating on his mountaintop ascends to enlightenment only by methodically and temporarily detaching himself from the social world.
Self, as contacting, is the synthesizing process of experience, contacting, which itself is the “simplest and first reality” (Perls et al., 1951, p. 227). Exteroception, interoception, proprioception, apperception (Lichtenberg, 2006), cognitions, and memories are within the concept “self.” Another perspective on self emergence restates this meeting as between self and other (Philippson, 2001), but the essential point remains: experience emerges at the contact-boundary, and is further organized by and as self. Early gestalt therapy practitioners may have emphasized individual autonomy to the neglect of social relatedness in their reaction to the social conformity of the 1950s and 1960s. This has since been corrected (Hycner & Jacobs, 1995; Yontef, 1993) and re-corrected (Wheeler, 2000) to the point that relational gestalt therapy from a relational perspective characterizes contemporary gestalt therapy practice.

There is nothing in the theory of self, then, that makes self the equivalent of a solitary individual; gestalt therapy’s self is Whitmanesque, embracing the multiverse of William James’ pluralistic universe (James, 1987). Thus, while self may take singular pronouns and verbs, it is nearly grammatically correct to use plural. We commonly think of ourselves as independent, autonomous or discrete agents in the world, yet the social phenomenal self of gestalt therapy is a permeable, liquid, changing process of “I’s” and “we’s” configuring and reconfiguring one another. This has direct implications on how gestalt therapy considers group process.

**Here, Now, Next: Self Process**

Experience is an “onflow” (Pred, 2005), a temporal passage. The specious present (James, 1890/1983) is comprised of the previous instant, which is appropriated to this instant, which then, in turn, supports a sense of the coming moment. The passage is the processive nature of experience — of individual and group process.

Consider a rainbow. We see it as an arc of color spanning the sky in the wake of a storm, or hanging in the midst of a rushing stream of water caught in sunlight. Yet we know that a rainbow is in constant motion — it is an interplay of water droplets and
light. And so is self as it emerges from the social phenomenal field. It emerges yet remains of the field, from which it is inseparable. Emergence is a way to describe this dynamic organizing of the field into phenomenologically recognizable forms, each emergent form not only temporally distinct from that from which it emerged, but distinct with its own qualities: distinct yet utterly of the streaming process of experience.

One can no more separate self from the social field, or a person from the social surround, than one can extract a colored water droplet from the rainbow. The rainbow, then, is emergent of the water droplets in the manner that a group is an emergent experience of its individual group members. The rainbow is contingent on a certain play of light on those water droplets. Its existence is an expression of inherent aspects of light and water, made manifest by certain necessary and contingent conditions. Group experience is likewise implicit in individual experience and made manifest through interpersonal contacting.

**Self Structures/Functions**

Gestalt therapy has names for aspects of self that reflect its process, all of which I will describe in “individual” and “group” terms: id function, ego function, and personality function (Perls et al., 1951; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2005; Bloom, 2003). These functions emerge variously — but not independently — within the temporal sequence of contacting: fore-contact, contacting, final contact, post-contact (Perls et al., 1951, p. 403). These structures are interlacing yet experienceable aspects of the flow of experience; they do not exist as things or entities, but as functional components in contacting. No matter how much the following discussion implies a description of self as a thing, this is merely a byproduct of the concrete nature of the English language and must not be mistaken otherwise.

Id\[^{[8]}\] functioning is the immediate felt sense of the *situation* (Robine, 2003); ego functioning is the active functioning of the “I,” actively engaged as an experiencing subject; and personality functioning is the social/historical framework of the person. With id functioning, one is directly aware of the *immediate* field, with all its felt somatic urgencies. Recent neuroscientific discoveries
of so-called “mirror neurons” (Rizzolatti, 2004) suggest that we are neuronally alive “in” one another. Even while outside focal consciousness, others are always in our awareness (Staemmler, 2006). Empathy begins with id functioning. An individual’s sense of others is the activity of id functioning and, consequently, is the feeling of being with another person (Staemmler, 2007). It is the “other” in “us.” Personality functioning is the activity of culture and society, which is achieved, integrated, remembered; it frames the essential social relatedness of self as interpersonal history and group culture. Personality function is further the ground or scaffolding which enables the contacting sequence. Ego functioning describes the experience of the “I,” the subject of the first person perspective. None of these self functions structures is experienceable as separate from the others.

A Metaphor as an Example

Perhaps an image conveys this. Let us imagine selves as geometric shapes, triangles. Imagine this field of triangles to be people in a group. Place ego functioning at the apex — our “I” with its active first person perspective at the top, seemingly independent. It is from this perch that each of us looks towards the world and achieves a first person perspective. Imagine the rest of the triangles with sloping sides that increasingly cross and intersect one another. This is the “social world of triangles.”

The further down each triangle, the more each overlaps with the other so that at the bottom they share a common foundation. The further down the triangle, each “person in a group” the more an “I” becomes a “we.”

Personality functioning is this foundation. The higher it is in the form, the more independent from others it seems; the more it seems to be “my” personality functioning — the lower, the more it becomes “our” personality functioning. Let us now add id functioning to this picture. This triangle has colors throughout its forms, with brightness, hue and intensity. This is id functioning, dispersed and interlaced variously and inseparably all through the form. Without id functioning, self process would be colorless. Without personality functioning, it would be without foundation. Without ego functioning, it would be without orientation.
Self in Group

Being with other people is different from being by oneself (even though any personal self contains its own social world). Obviously, the presence of other people changes one’s personal experience — depending on the quality of the various relationships. The actual difference in these experiences is the crux of group experience, or more precisely, self in group.

Self in group is the experience of the convergence of an individual’s “world of experience” (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002) with those of others. The quantity and quality of a simple one-to-one dialogical “I–You” contactful encounter of two people is extended to a social experience. A casual chatting among friends is transformed into group experience when the chat becomes contactful dialogue. Thus, simply “being among” others is insufficient for group experiences to emerge. Contactful experiences among people give rise to group experiences. I–You relationships are therefore the foundation for the I-We relationship (Buber, 1947/2007, p. 208) — the experience of being a person in a group. Interruptions to contact, therefore, become interruptions to the emergence of group experience. Interventions that heighten the quality of contact facilitate the emergence of group experiences.

As I have been stressing, every individual is a self process which is at core a social organization, roughly understood as ego functioning, id functioning, and personality function dynamically alive in the stream of experiencing. During a meeting, each person’s self “includes” the other: Empathy links id functioning, shared history links personality functioning. Group experience is manifest when this implicit inclusion is made explicit through contacting. The less a person is contacting another person, the more the person experiences separateness.

Group Development, Self Development

Self proceeds in contacting with a temporal sequence of forecontacting, contacting, final contacting, post contacting (Perls
et al., 1951, p. 403). This is often understood as the awareness continuum (Perls, L., 1992, p. 13) of a single person. Self is a phenomenal structure of experience. The same template can be applied to group development. In each group session, individuals proceed with the sequence as each makes contact with the others. Over time, the configurations formed by individual interactions likewise develop so that during early group meetings, more time is spent in fore-contact, and in mid-group development, the process moves more easily to contact since the group members have a common experienced history of achieved contacting that is now the personality function of this group. In other words, contacting proceeds in multi-levels: within individual interactions during specific group meetings (synchronic or instantaneous contacting) and within group culture over successive group meetings (diachronic or historical contacting). What carries over from one meeting to the next becomes part of the scaffolding for contacting in each session — or if unaware, may contribute to interruptions in contacting itself. Group culture may be understood as personality functioning held in common by the group members. Each individual group member has an experienced memory of the group’s history, its group culture, which is the basis for its ongoing norms. As such, group culture is always contingent on individual experiences in the group and can have no independent “life” or existence. There is no “self of group” except perhaps as a metaphor for individuals’ capacities in a group (Wilson, 2004, p. 284).

A Second Clinical Example

They have been meeting for about an hour. Each of the six of them has spoken and told the others what is of immediate concern. “I had a terrible day at work and I’d like to talk about it.” “I really was looking forward to seeing you all again,” and so on. Each person spoke in a more-or-less conversational manner so that this gathering was indistinguishable from any other social meeting.

I, the group leader — and thus also a member of the group, since I am of this social field — am beginning to feel disconnected, alone. So I offer: “Marion, when you were speaking
about your day just now, I didn’t get a sense that you were saying this to any of us. My mind started to wander. Would you continue talking, but this time notice to whom you are speaking?”

Now looking at Harry, directly across from her, Marion sighs and says, “I am so tired of working!”

“Marion, you really seem tired to me now when you say that,” offers Harry.

“Yeah, I get a sense of that, too, when I say this to you.”

“All of a sudden I feel like I know you better, Marion,” says Thomas.

“I am not sure I like this,” Marion says, “How come I feel so exposed?”

Jack offers, “I am touched and feel open to you, Marion. I see you. I guess that’s how you feel exposed.”

Now John, smiling, “This is what I was looking forward to. I feel so connected to you all when we do this.”

And I, the leader, “John, is there something that you want to tell us now?”

From here on, the quality of conversation changes as people speak directly and contactfully to one another. It is now a group.

Discussion

The above clinical fragment shows how contacting transforms a gathering into a group experience.

The meeting begins in fore-contacting, with no clear figure of interest emerging. Each group member more or less has in common a reluctance to engage with one another directly, yet from their opening statements, each makes tentative, general statements of interest. Each person’s id functioning is this interest. From these statements, it is easy also to see that each person has some sense of how the group has been and how she wants it to be today. This expresses personality functioning — the framework from which each person experiences the current meeting.

My simple intervention to bring into focus a single person’s contact interruption (Marion’s retroflecting style of speaking
which maintained her interpersonal disconnection) not only enhanced that person’s quality of contacting, but affected all the other people in the group, facilitating each of them to engage more contactfully with one another.

*Initially, each group member was not in contact with one another, but in different ways and degrees, still engaged by their ideas, fantasies, memories, and expectations about this group. It is only through contacting that the individual in the group can become an individual in this group, that the implicit social dimension of self becomes explicit. Then this group gains the weight, heft, and significance of contactful interpersonal encounters.*

As group leader, I am also a group member: my function is set by this role, yet as a group member I have the same access to the common social experiences as all the other members (Kitzler, 1980).

In self process, each person includes the other, with experience which is simultaneously first person and experienced-in-common.

**Conclusion**

My search for a theory of group process that utilizes the basic concepts of gestalt therapy brought me to an understanding of field emergent self as being an implicitly social process. When one makes contact with others, this implicit social sense becomes explicit — one has group experience. Group experience and individual experience are aspects of self process; gestalt therapy praxis — its theory and technique — is as applicable to a person’s sense of “individual” experience as well as a sense of shared, social experience. With this perspective, no individual is an “island entire of itself” but is a dynamic relationship of “I” and “we,” ever configuring and reconfiguring in the social phenomenal field from which no individual can ever disconnect.
Notes

[1] An earlier version of this appears in Beyond the Hotseat Revisited (Feder & Frew, 2008, pp. 53-66). The author has made numerous changes.


[3] There is no universally agreed upon understanding of the usage of “field” in gestalt therapy. Frank-M. Staemmler refers to this as a “Babylonian confusion” (Staemmler, 2006).

[4] I have developed this distinction further elsewhere (Bloom, in press). Gestalt therapy lacks a developed theory of the person. While the organism/environment field provides an adequate understanding of the contact-boundary of the organism and the environment, it falls short as a basis for further description of human beings within a phenomenal field. I suggest an amendment to the organism/environment field: the “self/world field.” Self is the immediately emergent phenomenal organization at the contact-boundary. “World” is the totality of that of which self is emergent. Person is the result of social contacting as the personality functioning of self over time consolidates “personality” or personal identity. It is not within the scope of this paper to elaborate any further. My present discussion of gestalt therapy group process, then, does not include this elaboration of the phenomenal field, but is consistent with it.

[5] The equating of self with individual takes ego functioning to stand for all of self functioning, which is an egological fallacy. Some argue with some persuasiveness that agency must be located within the individual (Crocker, personal communication). I suggest otherwise: Agency is a field function co-emergent of organism (or person) and environment.

[6] “For pluralism, all that we are required to admit as the constitution of reality is what we ourselves find empirically realized in every minimum of finite life. Briefly it is this, that nothing real is absolutely simple, that every smallest bit of experience is a multum in parvo pluraly related, that each relation is one aspect, character, or function, way of its being taken, or way of its taking something else; and that a bit of reality when actively engaged in one of these relations when actively engaged in one of these relations is not by that very fact engaged in all the other relations simultaneously. The relations are not all what the French call solidaires with one another. Without losing its identity a thing can either take up or drop another thing, like the log I spoke of, which by taking up new carriers and dropping old ones can travel anywhere with a light escort.” (James, 1987, pp. 776-777.)

[7] I can make the opposite distinction about groups: while a group may seem to have an independent identity, it remains a composite. A group is self-like; self is group-like.

[8] The terms “id” and “ego” are our unhappy legacy from the first English translation of Freud’s concepts of das Es and das Ich, the id and the ego. How much clearer and experience-nearer would be an alternate translation to “it functioning” and “I functioning.”

[9] “You” is an alternate translation of Martin Buber’s “Thou.”

References


