Gestalt Therapy (Resistance)

Fritz Perls (1951, 1969a, 1969b), the founder of Gestalt therapy, was influenced by Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, and others. As a result, Gestalt therapy is an extension of psychoanalytic theory. However, in contrast to the analytic and psychoanalytic methods, Gestalt therapy is non-interpretive, ahistoric, and phenomenological. It focuses on present reality and interrelates mind and body ("Gestalt" being the German word for "whole"). It also has been influenced by psychodrama, general semantics, client-centred counselling, and group dynamics (Fagan & Shepherd, 1971). Characteristically, the Gestalt-oriented process includes change through activity, centrality of present experience, importance of fantasy and creative experimentation, and significance of language. The primary tool of Gestalt therapy is awareness.

Contact

The contact cycle is the key concept of Gestalt psychology. Gestalt places a great deal of emphasis on increasing both physiological and psychological awareness. Once awareness is achieved, excitement develops: that is, energy emerges from within the person. Excitement is followed by action, which produces contact.

For example, as I pass a bakery, my awareness is the smell of fresh baked goods. Excitement is created by fantasies of sweet rolls and doughnuts. Action is going into the bakery to purchase something. Finally, I make contact with the baked goods.

Contact can be made with people, animals, or inanimate objects (food, nature, music, etc.). Although contact is desirable, too much would diminish awareness. Therefore, we all have cycles of contact and withdrawal in our daily lives. Eating and interacting with others are examples of rhythms of contact and withdrawal.
Resistances

In addition to dulled awareness, which impedes the contact cycle, resistances also prevent contact. They are phenomena that occur between excitement and action in the contact cycle. For example, as I start to enter the bakery, I may tell myself, "Stop, you weigh too much; you're on a diet."

Although some resistances are counterproductive, others maybe beneficial in stopping us from contacting things we do not desire to contact. There are six key resistances.

**Introjection**

These resistances are caused by our acceptance of the values and norms imposed on us by our families, churches, political systems, and cultures. We may stop short of action because of an introjected value or belief (e.g., "thin is beautiful, baked goods will make me fat").

**Retroflection**

Retroflection involves owning-accepting responsibility for the negative happenings in our lives. To some extent, we should accept responsibility for our actions. However, when we do it excessively, we feel responsible for the problems of others and for things over which we have no control.

**Attribution**

Attribution is the opposite of retroflection. Instead of feeling responsible, a person attributes the cause of everything to someone or something else. In effect, the person gives up all power, control, and responsibility for successes as well as failures. An example is the phrase, "You made me angry." This implies that someone else had done something to me. Within the Gestalt context, however, it is impossible for someone else to make me angry. I choose whether or not to be angry. I alone am responsible for the meaning I attach to the behaviour of others, and my anger flows from that meaning.
**Confluence**

Confluence occurs when two people parallel each other without making contact. It often happens when one person agrees with everything the other says. For example:

Sue: "I'd like to go out to dinner tonight."

Howard: "I really enjoy eating out."

Sue: "I haven't had Chinese food in a long time."

Howard: "Great, I love Chinese food."

Sue: "On second thought, there's a new German restaurant in town. That sounds better to me."

Howard: "That's a good idea, too."

Sue: "Or we could stay in and order pizza."

Howard: "That's fine, too."

Such a discussion produces no true interaction or contact.

**Projection**

A person using projection says that what is true for himself or herself is true for the other person. For example, I feel tired and I say to someone else, "You look tired." In the same way, I can assume that others are bored, or happy, or frustrated. It has been suggested that all empathy is based on projection.

**Deflection**

Deflection is similar to confluence in that no true contact is made between those conversing. The best example of this is "cocktail party conversation," in which two individuals are actually conducting two separate conversations. For example:

Ed: "We used to have a handyman named Salvador. He was a really neat guy."

Lois: "I'd like to take a trip to San Salvador one of these days. There are lots of interesting places in Central America."

Ed: "I went to Europe last summer. The food there was great."

Lois: "Speaking of food, I really like to cook. I've taken several cooking courses."
Polarities

Another major concept in Gestalt therapy is polarity-the idea that there are opposite, counterbalancing poles of action. These opposites attract each other. An experiential knowledge of each pole increases the available range of behavior. The aim is to achieve a rhythmic movement from one pole to another, as in the swing of a pendulum.

For example, people who are very involved in intellectual or cognitive happenings may know little about their emotional or bodily responses. The polarity exists between the intellectual and the physical. By attempting to understand both, a person can better integrate them.

Figure/Ground

In Gestalt theory, something is figure when it is clearly and sharply focused for the individual. For example, the longing for a drink of water becomes figure when one is thirsty. When an issue is dealt with and assuaged, it moves into the background or ground. After the thirsty person drinks a glass of water, the thirst becomes ground, and a new figure emerges. Figures come into awareness, are clarified and dealt with in the here-and-now, and move into the background. Some issues can be transferred from figure to ground simply by acknowledging them. Others (e.g., feelings or physical needs) must be dealt with more specifically.

A rise in group energy typically occurs when a figure emerges into awareness. Energy is mobilized around that figure as the system moves into action, reaches a crescendo when contact is made and affirmed, gradually dissipates as integration occurs, and rises again when another figure emerges.

Experiment

The concept of experiment is uniquely Gestalt. Unlike structured experiences, the best experiments are those that are totally free of expectations about outcomes. The experiment is created by using the contact cycle as a framework. A person or group is asked to do something and to see where that action or involvement will lead.

In group therapy or training, it is important that experiments be introduced at the right times. Also, too many can disrupt the flow of the group and create an artificial rhythm. The type and frequency of experiments used should be considered carefully.

The following are brief descriptions of classic Gestalt experiments.

Dialog

In this experiment, a person converses with himself or herself in a dialog that represents different points of view. For example, the person may speak from a cognitive perspective,
then talk from the emotional point of view. In some cases, the person will move from one chair to a second while speaking, in order to distinguish the two opposing aspects. However, it is less distracting to (a) have the person use the right hand to indicate one point of view and the left hand when speaking from the other or (b) to have the person use different voices when speaking about the two aspects.

**Reversal and Exaggeration**

This technique enables people to explore polarities or understand different perspectives by having them reverse their own viewpoints and speak only from the opposite points of view. Similarly, they can be asked to exaggerate their own positions and deny that any others exist.

**Rehearsal**

This allows a person to deal with fears about the outcomes of doing something. Having identified the worst thing that could happen, the person can rehearse what he or she is afraid to say or do, either silently or in front of the group. This will often help the person to discover that the worst thing is not so bad after all or to alleviate the fear enough to allow the person to perform the activity. On another tack, the person could be asked to identify the best thing that could happen.

".f • Were King"

By imagining what they would do with unlimited power, people can become aware of both the genuine restraints on them and the restraints that they impose on themselves in their personal and work relationships.

**Making the Rounds**

A powerful intervention is for a person to go around the group, making brief statements to, or otherwise interacting with, each member of the group. For example, a person who is demeaning himself may be asked to stand in front of each member and complete the statement "You should appreciate me because .... "

**Mimicry**

This nonverbal intervention can focus on what is happening in a way that is not disruptive. A group member may be displaying some nonverbal behavior such as clenching a fist. By also clenching a fist, the facilitator or group leader can draw the participant's attention to the gesture in a subtle way.
Sentence Completion

One of the richer ways of checking out a hunch about a group member is for a facilitator or other group member to ask the individual to complete a sentence. For example, if a member seems to be masking anger, she can be asked to complete the sentence "People who get angry are .... " As she completes the sentence several times, she can become aware of some of the forces restraining her from dealing with her anger.

Try-On Sentence

In a variation of the previous technique, the leader or facilitator might say, "What I'd like you to do is try on this sentence-say it and see how it fits." As the person repeats the sentence two or three times, he or she can determine its accuracy—whether it fits, fits only partially, or does not fit at all.

Unfinished Business

This technique is helpful for tying together loose ends or unresolved issues from a session or from previous sessions. The leader can say, "Frequently when I leave groups or other people, I find myself saying things to myself that I wish I'd said to them or to the group. What I'd like you to do is imagine that you're walking away from this group. Is there anything you would regret not having said?" With that cue, things are frequently brought up and moved toward resolution.

It should be noted that not all issues need to be or can be resolved at a particular time; some need to "simmer." Group members should not be forced to work every issue through to a conclusion if it does not seem appropriate to them.

Resentment /Appreciation

If a person feels some hostility or negative emotion about another person, he or she can be asked to complete the sentence, "What I resent about you is .... " Then that person is asked to reframe the statement by substituting the word "appreciate" for the word "resent." With this method frequently comes the insight that resentments and appreciations often are closely linked.

Failure-Free Experiments

Two basic approaches can make experiments almost foolproof. The first is to try the experiment, give it full energy, and, if it does not go anywhere, feel free to give it up. If a particular set of ingredients does not make anything happen, it is important to go on with something else. The timing of an experiment cannot be "wrong." Issues that are not resolved in one way are dealt with in other ways.

Second, the facilitator must respect participants' resistances to an experiment. A reluctance to be involved or to deal with an issue is probably the most important issue to
be confronted (since it is figural). The facilitator should take care to focus on the resistance itself and not question why it is there.

**Awareness**

Awareness, which is the initial stage of the contact cycle, can be divided into two types: physiological awareness and psychological awareness. Physiological awareness of what is happening within the body can provide clues to psychological issues.

**Physiological Awareness**

Physiological awareness can be heightened with any number of variations of an experiment called body awareness. During the process, the facilitator, using a modulated voice, guides a participant through three successively deeper levels of awareness: (a) environment ("What do you hear, see, smell, taste, and touch?, What are you aware of in the room?"); (b) how the participant's body contacts with the floor; and (c) what is happening inside the participant's body. The participant then is softly guided back into the here-and-now. In guiding the participant, the facilitator should make short, precise, statements ("Say more about what is happening in your back") rather than ask questions ("Can you say more about ... ?"). Questions require the participant to respond cognitively ("Yes, I can") before focusing on the area in question, and this can distract from the individual's self-awareness.

**Psychological Awareness**

Psychological awareness can be heightened through the use of two techniques: guided imagery (or fantasy) and dreams.

- **Guided Imagery:** This basically consists of asking people to "tune in" to the inner goings-on of their minds. By guiding them toward certain kinds of images (e.g., "You see a house at the end of the path; what does it look like?")), the facilitator can help them to be aware of what their internal images are. Because each individual has control over what he or she imagines, it seems unlikely that individuals would generate images on levels that they are unwilling to confront.

- **Dreams:** The Gestalt approach to dreams differs from the Freudian approach, which focuses on interpretation. Gestalt psychologists believe that all components of a dream are within the dreamer. A person who dreams about driving fast down a mountain road may be represented at one point by the automobile, at another point by the road, and so on. All perspectives can be reached through the individual. As a variation, having other group members play the various components of one individual's dream can help that individual to gain perspective. Fleshing in the parts of the dream that are not remembered also can aid in gaining understanding.
The Gestalt Approach to Organization Development

Gestaltists approach the subject of organization development differently from many other OD professionals. Gestaltists are not concerned with the "system." They do not focus on reporting relationships or organizational climate. Instead, they focus on each individual. Gestaltists believe that changing individuals is the way to achieve systemic or organization-wide change. Gestalt facilitators also serve as models in the hope that their willingness to tell "where they are"-their openness and authenticity-will encourage others to do the same.

References


Source