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Kurt Goldstein and Holism

(Lecture held at the GTILA-Summer-Residential-Program BARCELONA, 1996)

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This lecture is an advanced theory lecture in the sense that it deals with some shortcomings of our theory. During the time when PHG wrote *Gestalt Therapy* frequently patient problems had to do with a rigid ‘personality function’. Actually the attitude was that the less personality a person had, the healthier h/she was. I recently talked with Erv Polster about these things and we agreed that Gestalt therapy is process-biased. The historical reaction of a process-orientation to the overly structured Psychoanalysis made a lot of sense in the beginning of the development of Gestalt Therapy - now we see that it is not sufficient. Part of that is that we have to deal in our practices with a growing number of patients who suffer less from a rigid, fixed personality but from the lack of structure, from increasing confusion and disintegration of their lives and their sense of self. When I started working with people like borderline-patients and others with so-called *early developmental disorders*, so-called “fragile self-processes” or so-called “structural vulnerabilities” - to mention some of the related clinical terminology - Gestalt therapy didn’t feel supportive at all to work with these people. Instead of colleagues saying they can’t do Gestalt therapy with these people and moving to psychoanalysis or other approaches, I tried to adapt some of the theory to these new clinical challenges. Today I do Gestalt therapy with these patients, grounded on our theory and actually see our approach as the most efficient treatment approach for helping these people to live a better life.

I think I am addressing similar shortcomings as Iris in her lecture and it is very important to look for compatible concepts (like schemas) in the whole psychotherapeutic field that can serve for meaningful assimilation. Equally important is to go back to our roots and to see what is there that is meaningful but poorly integrated (in this cas the work of Kurt Goldstein) or poorly explicated (like for example L. Perls’ powerful concept of self-support). This is what I advocate for and is the context of my lecture.

The most important concept permeating all of Gestalt therapy is the notion of the „whole“. As a matter of fact, the word „gestalt“ means a whole itself and cannot be broken without destroying it’s nature: the whole is always more than and different from the sum of its parts. (vgl Clarkson, 1993, 33).

Theoretically this aspect of Gestalt therapy is inherited from Gestalt psychology. The Gestalt psychologists however dealt mainly with perceptual issues, Kurt Goldstein extended some of their principles for the personality as a whole.

An interesting footnote to this is that Gestalt therapists have been criticized for using Gestalt psychological terminology incorrectly or contradictory. Instead of trying hard to be more precise here, Sherrill in 1986 questioned whether it even was desirable to have a close connection with Gestalt psychology. He pointed out that in fact the theory of Gestalt therapy is much closer to the theories of Lewin and Goldstein than to the Gestalt psychologists and could be grounded here much more consistently.

Kurt Goldstein never saw himself as a Gestalt psychologist, although he used some of their concepts like the figure-ground principle, he called his theory „Organismic theory“. Laura Perls, in an interview denotes the „Organismic theory“ as the base of Gestalt therapy. This connection actually is not much appreciated in the GT literature. If this connection would be appreciated more, our theory would be different in some ways (“theory” as our set of lenses that influence, which data we are looking for, which certain relationships are emphasized).

Back to holism: In the broadest sense, the notion of holism in GT is covered by field theory. In the relationship between therapist and client dialogue, the „between“ is a wholistic principle too. Goldstein himself dealt with the organism or the person as a whole (= my focus here)- in coming to terms with the world, with the environment. From the field perspective he took a certain perspective a focus, seeing the person as a subset, a system within a system within a system.

One sort of concept:

Some specifics of our approach: to see the person as a whole, h/her action in context, to focus the awareness on various modalities of experiences for the sake of a unified experience, to address holes in the phenomenological field of the client, the general direction of our work towards „integration“ - all these things stem from Goldsteins wholistic approach in the way it was integrated into GT by Fritz and Laura Perls as his students. So practically this is integrated in many ways. What I want to highlight is the necessity of an appropriate theory of personality for that.

Effects of a limited, reductionistic theory:

A different sort of concept was established, too:

Another personal footnote by myself here is that - in some respect - unfortunately Fritz Perls mixed Goldsteins approach with other approaches like Reich´s ‘self-regulation’ and thereby in my opinion missed the power of Goldsteins’ approach. (nicht leicht, zu integrieren, Zitat) Reich also dealt with wholism, at that time the so-called body-soul-problem. He postulated the functional identity of mental and physiological processes and Perls took this into his theory. Physiological processes are organized by homeostatic principles (off balance > rebalancing = a dynamic equilibrium).

(Nowadays cybernetic theories distinguish different orders of cybernetics, homeostatic functioning oriented towards equilibrium being the first order, second order functioning however including the maintenance of a so-called dynamic disequilibrium, which is integral in living systems as evolving systems.)

The limited understanding of the functioning of living systems in the early days of Gestalt therapy supported the overestimation of ‘organismic self-regulation’ aiming at tension reduction (reminiscent of Psychoanalysis), resulting in the application of Gestalt therapy techniques for evoking emotions and to release them as the bridging of contact disturbances or the hedonistic stance of the 60th and 70th.

This is an example of a function of a lens (that you bring as background to the situation) that determines which data you are looking for, which decisions you take as therapist and which interventions you choose.

Ironically this was not in Fritz Perls' interest (excrement theory of emotions, quick breakthroughs) but it was misapplied by others - finally (and this is my point) because of a lack in theory. You cannot do some things so easily when you are violating the written theory by doing it.

Today, what does that mean for us? Both exist, one is not sufficient.

Anyway, nowadays we know that living organisms are multilevel units, functioning as a whole, although including different modes of regulation. I want to give an example comparing 'organismic self-regulation' and the 'regulation of the I-boundary': Organismic self-regulation e.g. tends towards tension reduction to maintain a dynamic equilibrium (like in physiological processes).

The regulation of the I-boundary via contact-regulation (self-defining, acting adequately etc.) and the so-called contact-interruptions (like introjection, projection, confluence etc.) tends towards maintaining a dynamic disequilibrium, in maintaining ones specific identity and individuality. This specific identity is neither balanced or not balanced; it's not a need that could be fulfilled or not fulfilled, etc..

The motivation of human beings towards development, change and renewal cannot be understood by a concept of organismic self-regulation as striving for an equilibrium. However it can be understood as striving for a sort of medium tension determined exclusively by the particular nature of the individual. (Zitat zu Freud: delight of tension vs. delight of relaxation)

So, how do we put this together in one theory about the person?

An appropriate theory for this in Gestalt Therapy terms is provided by Kurt Goldstein. His notion of self-realisation describes the basic motive of any activity of the organism. It is the tendency to realise one's particular nature (one's capacities, one's potentialities) as optimal as possible in coming to terms with the world.

This motivation is different from a motivation for fulfilling one's desires, needs and interests as best as possible. Instead - in modern words - it is the motivation to realize ones identity and individuality, in short: one's sense of oneself - in coming to terms with the world. In other words, instead of the perspective of satisfying needs like hunger, thirst, sexuality and according to this also psychological needs for love, for friendship, for stimulation etc. Goldstein points to the overarching need of the person to realize it's capacities. The satisfaction of needs can only be a sub-set, a sub-concept, you cannot build a personality theory on this and putting the concept of organismic self-regulation at its core (this is my opinion). Edward Smith once set the adequate relation saying: „The satisfaction of any specific need becomes figure when it is the temporally immediate prerequisite for the self-realization of the total organism“.

In a way all this sounds simple and true but nothing spectacular. However this perspective has distinct consequences. It shifts the focus in adding a different question: Sometimes it can be useful to ask, how is someone interrupting contact and organismic self-regulation?

However it is a different focus to ask how someone is interrupting one's realization of one's particular nature, of one's identity, of one's sense of self - in coming to terms with the world?

- this question points into a different direction, although the first question can be a part of the second. Interrupting one's sense of self has to do with how someone organizes or integrates one's experience (is a self-function) (*make meaning*). Some people with so-called developmental deficiencies even don't have available, lose their organizing capacities at all (or are severely impaired in this) - we cannot take for granted that everybody always has these capacities available. So what I want to advocate for is not always to see patterns of organization or structure as character, as fixed gestalten but as necessary for adequate, flexible responding to the situation at hand.

Practically Gestalt therapy is dealing with this question of identity or one's sense of self as I will show for 3 aspects. The problem is a lack of theory about it and one possible resolution is to explicate the origin of these aspects based on Goldstein's Organismic theory.

The first wholistic aspect is the meaning of a symptom for the person as a whole. Goldstein viewed symptoms as answers of the organism as a whole to particular questions (e.g. depression as an answer to the loss of a loved other). He further asked how the symptom served the preservation of the organism and a best possible realization of the person's individual nature. These questions highlight the adaptive function of e.g. anxiety or depression and makes possible a deeper understanding.

But not only symptoms - even any phenomenon as e.g. resistance can be viewed in this way. So resistance then is a mechanism to protect oneself from anxiety and hurt and thereby from a loss of identity and integrity. So resistance serves the preservation of the ego-boundary, defined by Polster as the domain of possible contact-interactions without losing one's ego-identity. Laura Perls pointed out that attempts to make contact with something you lack essential self-support for result in anxiety and catastrophic reactions and by this endanger the ego-boundary. These are the conditions that lead to contact-interruptions and it's obvious that you cannot treat these interruptions without treating the support issues. (This is what Bob Resnick also often points out). Theoretically this point however derives from Laura Perls' position (Goldstein's ideas found their way into GT through the line of Laura Perls' in a much more consistent way than through Fritz Perls).

The second wholistic aspect I choose is the issue of isolation. Gestalt therapy sees the splits within a person as a major disturbance to be resolved. We ask ourselves, which parts of the organism are isolated from the rest? The more isolation there is, the more fragile the sense of identity is.

(Goldstein did a great deal of research in this area, investigating the effects of isolation of brain functions from the rest of it on the appearance of the organism as a whole. He also criticized the scientific methods based on isolation of phenomena as never being able to come to a conceptualization of the nature of an organism as a whole.)

In Gestalt therapy this resulted in the work with polarities aiming at the integration of the personality by facilitating that all aspects of an organism are interacting again as a whole.

The third wholistic aspect I choose deals with a related aspect of disintegration, that is with foreground functions isolated from the organismic background. Goldstein here applied the

figure-ground-principle of gestalt psychology to the whole organism or personality. The figure-ground principle - as all you know is integral in gestalt therapy. The contact-support-concept by Laura Perls is entirely based on this principle: „Contact is always in the foreground and can fully become gestalt and part of the ongoing gestalt formation only when the support is ongoingly available“. The gestalt formation in the foreground becomes meaningful by the organismic background. Working on the integration of personality to facilitate functioning as a whole is working on the disruption of the relationship between foreground and background functions.

Laura Perls and others explicated the contact-support-concept as quite a broad concept. A lot needs to be done to elaborate on it in a more detailed way. Here the cognitive, integrative processing of experiences is of importance, the meaning-making processes, the abstract attitude Goldstein talks about and so on. A lot of psychological research can be used here for specification of what support is and for focussing the therapists' attention. It is my opinion that this research and further explication could provide a gestalt therapy oriented link to general psychotherapeutic concepts as e.g. Kernbergs' structural-level-concept (high, medium, low and disorganized). For example by this concept it is possible and helpful to describe, on which level a patient is psychologically functioning. Accordingly you need a different therapeutic approach with particular targets and foci.

Generally Goldsteins' work in this sense could become a link, a connection or an opener for a meaningful assimilation of general psychological theories and concepts like schema theory, social cognition theory or others that deal with internalized meaning structures and their impact on the wellbeing or disturbances of whole persons.

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