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This collection of five peer-reviewed articles, a threeway discussion, a book review and an opinion piece could not be more relevant to our everyday work as Gestalt practitioners. Forged into their current form over the last few months, these contributions represent considered responses to major issues that confront us all both personally and professionally: gender, war, separation, loss, addiction, gaslighting, and shame. An examined cross section of creative adjustments to contemporary trauma. These are significant contributions to Gestalt thinking in practice. Here is a brief description of the menu.

Dora Darvasi’s beautifully written theory paper is a nuanced and detailed examination of gender identity. She offers a holistic approach integrating her personal narrative with biopsychosocial and intersectional frameworks. Implications for clinical practice are helpfully discussed.

Olena Shakhova and Anna Marinushkina are Ukrainian Gestalt therapists who discuss the challenges of working as therapists in the ongoing crisis of a wartime situation. They ask what the most appropriate model of psychological care is in such a setting and give a detailed account and analysis of a distinctive method – fairy-tale therapy – which they have adapted for a psychological support group in Kharkiv.

Another creative approach to working with trauma is presented by Aline Giordano in her paper on song parody. Describing her project as a Gestalt experiment, Giordano shares her personal narrative of the impact and legacy of cross-cultural adoption. She explains how she came to adapt the lyrics of songs from a favourite band and to use the music to grow and support her sense of self in a way she has found profoundly healing. She discusses this method through the lenses of Gestalt theory and music therapy, suggesting that it offers exciting possibilities for clinical application.

Rafael Cortina’s paper draws on his substantial experience of working with addiction. He offers a relational Gestalt approach, which focuses more on the trauma behind the pain rather than the addictive behaviour itself. Drawing on clinical examples, Cortina discusses definitions of addiction from a Gestalt understanding and illustrates how he applies these ideas in practice.

Following on from her presentation at the BGJ Seminar Day in 2022, Martina Čarija’s paper explores the meaning of the frequently heard, but not always understood term ‘gaslighting’. She examines this from a relational perspective in terms of Gestalt theory, particularly in terms of field dynamics. She argues the importance in practice of supporting the client’s own phenomenological awareness, from which they can become dissociated.

The conversation piece is a process discussion in which three women from different Eastern European countries, Mili Marjanović, Ieva Baršauskaitė and Yulia Bondar, find themselves together in a Western European Gestalt training. They agree to engage in an experimental written trialogue exploring commonalities and differences in their cultural experience and their reactions to war in Ukraine. This is a fresh and moving account of what happened as they dared to meet contactfully and truthfully, despite the emergence of fear and shame. Their experiment is inspiring and perhaps exemplary. I am particularly stuck by their assertion, ‘...we see the act of creating supportive places in order to connect, despite shame, as a political act’.

We are grateful to Helen Moss for her thoughtful review of an important new book, Queering Gestalt Therapy, and we conclude with a short Opinion Piece by Eamonn Marshall written shortly after the death of his mother.

As always, I am deeply appreciative of the combined efforts of writers, peer reviewers, the Editorial Team and you, our international community of readers and subscribers. Every issue is a sustained collaborative effort. Thank you everyone for your engagement and support.

Christine Stevens, PhD
Editor
Abstract

Like Gestalt therapy, gender is not to be explained, but to be engaged with, and to engage with anything or anyone requires curiosity. For many of us, exploring our relationship to gender is arduous, messy, non-linear, personal work with no shortcuts. It can’t be made into generalised statements that would spare the person enquiring from doing the work of their own understanding. I believe some of the curiosity regarding gender is missing in our Gestalt-therapy community and we risk oversimplifying and polarising a complex phenomenon. As a Gestalt therapist who happens to be trans, my invitation is to move away from problematising gender as if it only belonged to the trans community and begin to engage with it as something that concerns us all. Though gender is more figural for some clients than others, it is ever-present in our fields. Because it is always present, it is either organising our perceptions from the shadows, or being consciously held, named and worked with to deepen contact. I will start by describing current field conditions as I perceive them. I will share my own path to my current identity to illustrate how gender can be entangled in our hardships and growth. Using my personal narrative, I will outline implications for Gestalt therapy theory – exploring biopsychosocial and intersectional lenses to gender, differentiating self from gender identity, touching on gendered introjects and gender synthesis, and linking ontological insecurity with certain identities. Lastly, I point to more pragmatic implications for clinical practice, to support other Gestalt therapists as they will inevitably encounter clients for whom gender is figural.

Keywords

gender, Gestalt therapy, transgender, biopsychosocial, intersectional, gender identity, gendered introjects, gender synthesis, ontological insecurity

Introduction

Any seasoned writer would tell us that stories are not built around love or even truth, but conflict. Increasingly, in this country and many others, certain media outlets and governments have ensured that the public now associates trans people with terms like ‘woke’, ‘culture wars’ and ‘cancel culture’. There are important conversations to be had about generational differences, about the abrupt and violent ways in which people engage with each other on social media, and about the cultural shifts (with all their dangers) to which our increasingly interconnected lives lead, but it is now almost impossible to separate these conversations from a vulnerable group of people – trans individuals. This is the tragic result of a two-fold process manifesting itself in the left-right political spectrum.

As I see it, right-leaning politicians and commentators use this opportunity to evoke fear and anxiety in people who are not trans to deflect attention away from their agendas. We are spoken of as a trend, as an invention, as threats to children. Left-leaning people can patronisingly end up glamorising gender diversity as a sort of zeitgeist, a new generation’s game. This has created an atmosphere where our ‘collective soma is contracted around gender. It’s as if we’re all holding a collective breath and breathing as shallowly as we can because we’re afraid of what might happen if we let go and breathe freely’ (Iantaffi, 2021, p. 62).

Despite existing within and outside of ‘the English language and beyond the Western gaze’, trans people have been historically and culturally erased (Choudrey, 2023, p. 4). The current estimate is that trans people make up around 0.5% of England and Wales’ population and this includes non-binary individuals (England and
Wales. Office for National Statistics, Gender Identity Census 2021, released 2023). The same estimation goes for Scotland according to the limited data available (Scotland. Gender Recognition Reform Bill, 2019, released in 2022). This tiny percentage is made up of people of all races, sexualities, abilities, classes and ages. Because it is a small minority, the vast majority of people who argue against the rights of trans people don’t actually have trans people in their lives.

As for our Gestalt community, though I have had more nuanced conversations with colleagues, we are not exempt from the polarised and polarising field that orients itself around gender. Most therapists I meet seem to talk about gender as either solely biological (biological determinism) or as socially constructed (social constructionism). The former views gender identities, roles and behaviours of people as encoded and determined by their sexual differences without taking social and psychological factors into account while social constructionism tends to leave out biological and embodied components. Rae Johnson elaborates on the relative lack of informed dialogue on gender in the Gestalt therapy community:

‘Is it because we have failed, collectively, to problematize gender, despite ongoing (and often heated) public debate? Is it because those Gestalt therapists whose personal views on gender and sexuality are grounded in biological essentialism do not feel safe making those ideas part of a larger conversation out of concern that their observations will be considered proof of (hetero)sexist bias? Or is it because those Gestalt therapists whose views are oriented toward social constructionism or critical theory do not know how to bring those perspectives forward without appearing strident and difficult? In short, are we failing to discuss how we understand and work with gender and sexuality as Gestalt therapists because we do not know how to make those explorations truly safe for our clients?’

(Johnson, 2014, p. 207).

I will use my life’s narrative to illustrate how gendered introjects harmed me and others through me, and to demonstrate how our various intersections shape our experience of gender. As I grew to be more conscious and embodied, I have found an integrated sense of home in myself and became more available to others. Paradoxically, the more connected and safer I felt in myself, the more of a threat I began to be seen as in public. This speaks to the collective hostility and fear that is palpable around gender in current public discourse. One way to avoid replicating this hostility – that I am proposing – is to mould the contested and charged topic of gender into personal discoveries.

Use of terminology in this paper

Trans/transgender: I use this as an umbrella term for people whose gender identity isn’t aligned with their assigned sex at birth. Trans people may go through gender affirmative surgery, others only socially transition if they feel safe to do so. Some trans people accept the gender binary and align themselves within it. I, personally, find pleasure in the vastness of the word trans and I think of its destination as beautifully open. I include non-binary people here because they haven’t remained in the gender they were assigned or assumed to be at birth either. Etymologically, I take the Latin trans ‘across, over, beyond’ to mean ‘move away from’ and ‘the other side of’ and the other side is not necessarily the opposite of what was assumed. I do appreciate that non-binary people may not align themselves with the word trans and in that sense they may not see themselves reflected back in these pages.

Cis/cisgender: I use this term to refer to people who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Questioning and exploring gender can be just as relevant for cisgender people. Cis people may explore gender because they are interested in what it is for them to be a man or a woman. Gender can also be related to their struggles whether through transitions such as puberty or retirement, through the experience of menopause, surgeries, cancer treatments or eating disorders.

Throughout this paper, when I can, I will use the unfortunately long phrase, ‘clients for whom gender is figural’. Most people I refer to in this way do identify as trans, but not all. This is to say the bulk of this work is centred on people who are actively engaged in exploring their gender – trans or not. While this paper may be helpful to engage with when working with a trans person in any context, it is important to note trans people like anyone else seek out therapists for a variety of difficulties, and at times their identities are completely incidental to what they wish to get help for.
On becoming Dora

I was given the name Dávid at birth, and grew up in a deeply gendered society in Hungary as part of the first post-communism generation. I remember the distinction differences emphasised between girls and boys, as well as the subsequent punishments associated with subverting those differences. I remember experiencing myself outside of these norms. Being attracted to boys as a child only added to feeling on the periphery. I learnt early that to connect to the whole of me came with the threat of losing the attachments I was dependent on. Then a family trauma broke me at sixteen. I began to embody an older, much more stereotypically masculine self in response to the deep distress. I left day school and spent most of my time doing student jobs and going to the gym. Following several revelations about my father – having a second family, committing major fraud, being imprisoned and diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder – a strong, righteous male identity emerged as a creative response. My self had shaped itself into a project – a hardened, disconnected young man masquerading as the head of the family. It was a necessary adjustment but a costly one that led to premature physical and spiritual ageing, chronic pain, and rage turned both inwards and outwards.

Moving to the UK without speaking the language as I turned eighteen would have been terrifying if I allowed myself to feel, but I was so invested in the closeted angry man I became that I was not feeling much. I was over a thousand miles from home, leading an adult life – instead of coming into myself, I dialled up the pretence. Because now I was not just a Hungarian man, I was an Eastern European man in Britain. Dropping the accent to blend in, Dávid became David. Untrustworthy, inadequate, inferior yet simultaneously a threat – just some of the implicit and explicit prejudices I’ve heard and felt that accentuated my adjustment even more. I shaved my head and carried on with weight training. When I made it to therapy, I leaned into my pain and began to carry the particularly shocking aspects of my story as my identity. Now I was the young man with a tragic past. Less harmful but still desensitised, reducing everyone to an audience. Moving from a position of showing no wounds (creative adjustment) to look at my wounds (story), look, do you understand who I am now? Implicit demands of ‘see me’, ‘feel me’, ‘feel for me’ were projected out, each interaction a test. Discovering that no matter how hard I tried to differentiate myself from my father, I had developed my own streak of narcissism.

It was years later that I was able to let therapists and friends into my life who were real, intuitive and present enough to help me open and soften gendered introjects I have become chronically confluent with. Simultaneously, I began to lose the psychic grip of my Hungarian hometown and leant into the possibilities London offered. For the first time, I began taking ownership over the way I related to myself and others, for my body with its edges, and the words I used to describe myself. I experienced this as a process of being midwifed into existence – into something completely new. It wasn’t a romantic (and impossible) return to childhood but a combination of discovering and creating myself, as if I finally both belonged and came untethered. In that liminal space, Dora didn’t just emerge as the clearest of figures but changed the tonality of the ground.

As euphoric as I can feel embodying more of me now, Dora comes with a new set of challenges. Having changed my name, I enter into every social interaction with vigilance. Using public bathrooms have become events I need to organise my days around. I need to make quick judgement calls as to which bathroom to use – the choice often oscillating between being ridiculed (in the men’s toilet) or being perceived as a threat (in the women’s bathroom – something, which I have come to find significantly harder). I walk day to day, whenever possible, as the acute awareness of stares, whispers, and occasionally overt hostility feels more unbearable in confined spaces like public transport. I have developed a daily practice of reminding myself that the conditioned collective reaction I attract is vast and unprocessed. It does not belong to me, and it is not my burden to bear or make sense of.

Before Dora emerged, my curiosity with clients for whom gender was figural was not coming from an integrated sense of self but from a fragmented shell of a person. From the outside, I could have easily been read as practising phenomenologically but in truth I was not present or even tracking very well, I was lost. Let me reiterate, this is not a problem unique to me or a uniquely trans issue; I believe each and every one of us as therapists are required to deepen our relationship to our gender if we want to avoid working our own identities out on vulnerable clients. Our clients may have found an embodied clarity we are still searching for under the guise of openness and holism.
Implications for Gestalt therapy theory

Rae Johnson, in their article Contacting Gender, makes a clear case for how ‘the conceptual framework underpinning Gestalt therapy is particularly well-suited to working with gender issues in psychotherapy’ (Johnson, 2014, p. 207). Vikram Kolmannskog puts forward a similar notion in a paper titled Gestalt Approaches to Gender Identity Issues when he says that ‘the concepts of phenomenology, polarities and modes of contact are compatible with the ‘transgender’ model; and that Gestalt therapy can work as a transpositive psychotherapy’ (Kolmannskog, 2014, p. 249). In this paper, I will go through the sequence of theorising my personal narrative – offering companion frameworks to field theory, differentiating self from gender identity, connecting gendered introjects with creative discrimination, and draw attention to the link between ontological insecurity and certain gender identities.

Gender is biopsychosocial and intersectional

There are two frameworks I find helpful in theorising gender – biopsychosocial and intersectional. I think of them as companions to field theory in that, like field theory, these approaches can be understood as tools for analysis, but additionally, they make privileges and oppressions more explicit. Being Gestalt therapists, the most current understanding of gender is aligned with our holistic emphasis, which is that biological, psychological and social aspects of gender create a complex feedback loop (Iantaffi & Barker, 2018, p. 45). Available research on biological components of gender argues against a simple or unitary explanation. Our chromosomal make-up, the size and shape of our genitals, our secondary sex characteristics, our levels of circulating hormones and their variations and changes impact our bodies, experiences, moods and behaviours (ibid, p. 54). These biological ingredients exist in a social web that is built on both explicit and implicit assumptions about norms. Departures from those norms often come with the threat of alienation, othering and the application of vastly different standards. This can shape our lives – from the skills we pick up to the opportunities that are available to us.

Psychological aspects refer to the felt sense of our gender and how we express it. Gender expression refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice, and other forms of presentation. It also works the other way as people assign gender to others based on their appearance and mannerisms. I felt relief reading Gordon Wheeler’s point that ‘we have no reason to think that self-process is inherently gendered, except for the fact that the field we’re born into and integrate into our developing selves is itself a gendered field’ as it confirmed my genderless experience in my early years (Wheeler, 1998, p. 122). He further emphasises how inherently embedded gender is in the way we relate to each other when he says, ‘so strong and deep is this gendered field orientation that typically the first question from any new caretaker about an infant, no matter how young, is an enquiry about gender itself, as if we would not know how even to begin relating with an infant without that knowledge’ (ibid). The shame-support polarity of our identity development becomes pertinent in relation to the social aspect of our gender. We may get approval and reward for certain expressions and behaviour but be shamed and punished for others. As Wheeler puts it aptly, our gendered field is ‘activated and held in place by the threat of shame (and of course by active shaming as well!’) (ibid). Though my experience of the field was as gendered in the UK as it was in Hungary, there was less overt hostility towards subverting gender expressions and expectations. This created just enough support to at least be exposed to the idea that gender has no objective truth, but infinite subjective truths that are contaminated by seemingly objective introjects.

My gender possibilities and limitations – like everyone’s – are further complicated by the advantages and hardships I carry as my social identities overlap. The term intersectionality was coined by a Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw who in a recent interview defined it as a ‘lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects’ (Crenshaw, 2017). She wanted to highlight how the experiences of Black women were different to Black men and White women because of the intersection of race and gender. Racially motivated offences make up the largest proportion of reported hate crimes in the UK and reported crimes against trans people have doubled in recent years (Great Britain. Hate Crime Statistics, House of Commons Library, 2022). Trans women and trans-feminine people of the global majority are far more at risk of hostility and violence as gender discrimination and racism intersects. The way we experience our gender is shaped by language, our family of origin, culture, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, class, religion and by how others react to and interact with us. This model resists tribalism and reactionary simplifications. It challenges us to not reduce our clients to heroes or victims of their stories but instead engage with the complex ways in which forces are working for them and
against them in their lives. This is in alignment with Kurt Lewin's assertion that ‘predictions or advice for methods of change should be based on an analysis of the “field as a whole”, including both its psychological and non-psychological aspects’ (Lewin, 1951, p. 174).

Self and gender identity

Perls, Hefferline and Goodman make it clear that ‘the advice “Be Yourself” that is often given by therapists, is somewhat absurd; what is meant is “contact the actuality”, for the self is only that contact’ (PHG, 1951, p. 373). Self is the ‘contact-boundary at work, its activity is forming figures and grounds ... it is the integrator ... it is the artist of life’ (ibid, p. 235). Self-given gender identity is not any or the sum of these processes – it is the name of the artist. Some names are more accepted than others; some stand out, some are part of the undercurrent we don’t dare or care to name. Our experience of what and who明细s is influenced by the names available to us. The words available to me through learning to speak another language, and the experiences that emerged from doing deep therapy work – part of which was a transition from working-class ways of living in my early twenties to more middle-class conditions – a new home began to present itself for my self(ing).

There is much panic around what is termed identity politics, whilst ‘a most important case of personal confluence is unaware identification’ (ibid, p. 123). People who are not trans can fail to recognise the various identities they confluently hold in their lives; human rights confluences we may call them. Nationality, gender, sexuality to name a few – identities that afford them safety, allow them access to protected spaces and give them ability to travel without having to make special considerations. If we didn't discredit gender identities as political tools but understood them as homes people carved out for themselves, homes that can actually free them up – homes others are unaware of having or take as given – we would be less dismissive.

As Gestalt therapists, we have an intrinsically affirming way to appreciate the validity of the emergent, and to respect the ontology of the dynamic. When I write of identity as home, I refer to it as structure the way Manfred Drack translated Bertalanffy's formulation, that 'structures are prolonged and slow; functions are transitory and fast events' (Drack, 2009, p. 5). In short, ‘the old distinction between form and function can essentially be reduced to the velocity of the processes' in the organism-environment field. (ibid, p. 5). Similarly, Perls, Hefferline and Goodman make the point that ““eternal”, “real” conditions are experienced not as unchanging, but as continually renewed the same’ (PHG, 1951, p. 375). Gender identity through a Gestalt framework then is not fixed but continually renewed, and like any home, it only feels it, if it is bound in the illusion of permanence.

Paradoxically, self-given gender identities can loosen the grip gender has on us. I found that once clients were owning the particular locations they aligned themselves with, they became freer. Through reshaping and renaming the ground they operated from, their repertoire of figures widened. By illuminating a light on what previously felt factual, clients found a way to tap into their power. Or as Polster puts it, ‘to discover that “givens” are not “givens” at all is an experience, which makes real drama of the recovery of self-direction, where a person does not take his existence for granted but is constantly creating it’ (Polster, 1974, p. 78).

Gendered introjects and gender synthesis

To do meaningful work around gender, it is necessary to explore the gendered dimension of our introjects. As illustrated in my personal narrative, ‘swallowing whole creates an “as if” personality and rigid character’ (Yontef, 1993, p. 137). I did not know and could not know better when I began to take on a hypermasculine role as a teenager, or as Polster puts it, ‘since he cannot, in the beginning, know the implications of his choices, the introjector takes in his experiences with large doses of faith’ (Polster, 1974, p. 74). We also introject ‘impressions of the nature of our world’ (ibid, p. 72). These impressions can carry with them an onslaught of complex, restrictive – often contradictory – messages about gender. Andras Angyal, an early systems thinker and Gestalt theorist defined life as a ‘process of self-expansion’ in such a way that our ‘organismic total process’ can tend towards both autonomy and homonomy (Angyal, 1941, p. 29). By autonomy he meant a ‘craving’ to be ‘self-governing’ while he described homonomous expression as a person’s wish to unite with superindividual units and meaningful wholes, ‘to share and participate in the object of their longing’ (ibid, p. 175).

Our gendered introjects don’t have the power to interrupt the trends described by Angyal, but they can lead us down cravings and longings that harm ourselves and others. To increase our self-consent, a gendered introject, like any introject ‘must go through the mill of the grinding molars, if it is not to become, or remain a foreign body – a disturbing isolating factor in our system’ (Perls, 1947, p. 131). Gendered
introjects write themselves onto our mind-bodies through repetition. By ‘creatively discriminating’ what habitual words, behaviours, ideas and expressions feel our own, and what feels unaware and unquestioned, we can make space for different kinds of repetitions. (Polster, 1974, p. 74) Through being held by a caring group of therapists who did not invite but challenge my gendered introjects, I was able to – gradually – relax into contact. For the first time, since that family trauma and subsequent migration, I did not have to be anything for anyone, but a partaker. My homononomous and autonomous propensities could co-exist in consonance. I began to find what may be described as gender synthesis – a composite of increasingly free and freeing ways to move, talk and express myself as organically as a child can who feels safe enough to play. What I have come to trust most as certainties concerning my gender synthesis are rhythms and resonances within me that I did not have to work on cultivating, because they feel as natural as breathing when the conditions are right. I have never had to work on becoming Dora – she emerged with the ease of an exhale, the moment Dávid felt safe enough to stand out of the way.

Additionally, there is a barrage of misinformation and disinformation people introject around gender and certain gender identities. I see it first-hand when I teach – trainees holding charged views to begin with and as they feel me not reacting to that charge, their shoulders drop, and their experience deepens. Through allowing space for their introjects to be chewed over, they begin to find their voice rather than echo dominant rules and news bites they have absorbed developmentally and in their social worlds. By the same token, there can also be an anxious leap to get the linguistics of gender ‘right’ that can ‘make one feel in, without knowing how one’s own development is enhanced’ (Polster, 1974, p. 78). I invite trainees to find a way to feel in that includes their own narrative and immediate embodied experience.

Gender identities and ontological insecurity

R. D. Laing describes a person who has ontological security as an individual whose ‘identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness and worth’ (Laing, 1960, p. 42). A person who suffers from ontological insecurity experiences themselves as ‘precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question ... preoccupied with preserving rather than gratifying himself’ (ibid, p. 42). Though Laing writes compassionately of those experiencing ontological insecurity, he doesn’t make it clear how the locations we hold in society – our person/environment fields with all their intersections – contribute to our sense of existence (or lack thereof). This means the increase of a sense of substance I feel through being Dora is in inverse correlation with the collective scrutinising of my existence.

Certain gender identities – transgender (including non-binary) – come with a collective ontological insecurity as far as they are dissected, questioned, and ridiculed in public discourse every day. It is most challenging to not be threatened by contact when one’s identity is reduced to a talking point. Identities have words attached to them. We only call those words labels when we are concerned with a minority experience. We call those words facts when they relate to a largely held, dominant idea of what is acceptable at a particular time and particular place. This is how we end up thinking that being a man is a fact and being trans is a label. Whether men, women and trans are all labels or facts makes for an engaging on-going dialogue, but the difference between these words is arbitrary. It is not a label per se that can limit a person, reduce meaning and squander experience, but our relationship to labels.

A lack of ontological security can also impact people’s contact styles and habitual contact modifications. Clients who open themselves up to articulating the questioning of their gender identities may experience contact as confluence; a potential threat to have their gender identity invaded, imposed upon. When therapists who are not trans fail to recognise that their client’s existence is in question every day, there are two specific risks that can and do occur in the therapy room. Firstly, the risk of seeing trans people’s mistrust as personal opposition rather than self-preservation. Secondly, the danger of interpreting their emphasis on being seen for who they are as a demand rather than a person – already on the backfoot – asking to have an even footing. Perhaps the ‘safe emergency’ Perls coined is safer for some than others; perhaps, how safe someone feels in our therapy room is not for us to assume but to enquire about (Perls, 1965).

Implication for clinical practice

My starting position

In my clinical work, my relationship to the words my clients are using to describe their identities are characterised by attention as to how my clients relate to those words. If they are presenting it as fact, then I take it with as much certainty as is being conveyed.
If they sought me out to explore their gender, which also includes words to describe their gender, then my relationship to those words emerges out of a shared collaboration to be curious.

**I support my clients to register change and to seek community**

We are not working with moments but movements. I actively draw the attention of clients for whom gender is figural to not what needs to be done but what has been and is being done. To counter their lack of ontological security and (for some trans clients) a sense of being on hold as they await – most often for years – gender affirming healthcare, there can be an anxious rush without the breath, without a sense of support into an imagined future identity where there is presence, clarity and safety. While this may be true for some, for a period of time, it does little for the person in their quality of life right now. It is not difficult to understand the rush. I know for myself that for a long time I viewed gender exploration as if it existed outside of me, as if I would become someone else, someone with more possibility in their lives and less fear.

Exploring gender is here, right now, happening to this body, this self, in this relational web. It is not helpful to collude with the idea that a future identity will lead to more connection and safety, but to actively invite, point out, notice changes a person is doing and has already done towards feeling more whole. Clients may also attach hope to having a stronger community once they have settled into a gender identity. I find that support – when it is not recalled or imagined – needs to be located as current in order for it to be meaningfully felt. As therapists we are part of our clients’ support, but it is not sustainable for therapy to be the only place in which they feel seen and connected. I explore what fears and excitement clients may hold in finding people to connect to around their identities and exploration. In doing so, I invite their curiosity around both vertical (intergenerational, ancestral connections to read upon, especially for trans clients) and horizontal (peer groups) means to strengthen their identities.

**I creatively build on their positive gendered associations**

Our deeply seated gendered associations have distinct felt senses in our bodies. These associations are individual and are often expressed as intuitive reactions of feeling at peace, confident, present or uncomfortable, taken aback, detached. I ask people for whom gender is figural to notice what objects, behaviours and expressions help them feel more tethered to themselves, so as to counter frequent experiences of gender incongruence and subsequent dissociation. Rather than engaging from what my clients intuitively disassociate from, I focus on supporting them to develop positive gendered associations. A poem, a character in a book, a piece of clothing, a haircut and a new name to try out with friends all have the power to contribute to a whole that is other than the sum of their parts.

When a client was particularly gripped by fear of abuse in public spaces, I asked if there was anything they could wear discreetly that would help them connect to their gender identity. They started wearing a slip under their shirt, frequently paying attention to its fabric, how its straps feel on their skin. Like Winnicott’s transitional object, which was both created and discovered by an infant to soothe themselves, and to aid the developmental necessity of being separated from their primary caregiver (in this case from their gender identity), they, too, would reach for comfort (Winnicott, 1953, p. 89). Through finding ways to connect to their gender identity, they would bring new presence and internal space to the situation at hand. Each time, using it as a resource to return home to themselves as well as continually renewing their identity. Paradoxically, this sense of repetition has allowed them to be more available to the freshness of each moment.

I suggest to my clients for whom gender is figural to use drawing and writing to connect to their gender identities in between sessions. It is difficult to overemphasise the power of this. People can write themselves into existence – coming up with characters that can pull themselves towards possibility. In our sessions, I invite them to engage with the memory of being younger. They then begin to understand how they can pull themselves towards possibility. In our sessions, I invite them to engage with the memory of being younger. They then begin to understand how their gender experience may have shifted over time. I ask them to take note of whether the way their gender was experienced and perceived was aligned or not at different times of their lives. When clients don’t feel safe presenting the way they would want to, I encourage them to draw a version of themselves that is more aligned with how they experience themselves. That drawing can function as a needed mirror (for some clients this is their first experience of their gender identity being reflected back to them).
I engage with their pleasures as much as with their fears

Laura Perls was a pioneer in recognising the necessity for support in contacting. ‘Contact is always in the foreground and can fully become Gestalt and part of the on-going Gestalt formation only when the support is ongoingly available’ (Perls, 1988, p. 22). Using her background in dance, Perls attended to the bodies of her clients long before others did. She paid attention to their posture, their breathing and how they use support in their lives available to them. When a client’s fear response is grounded in structural injustices, there is no taking it away even if we were to try. Their fear is to be contacted, acknowledged, held. Erving Polster asks a crucial question from a client who wants to let go of her fear, ‘It’s hard to let go of the fear until you can reclaim the pleasure … you let go of the fear and you don’t have the pleasure, what’s there?’ (Polster, 1995, pp. 34-38). I find – when working with clients for whom gender is figural – that inviting them to describe their pleasures in vivid sensory detail, and how they may contact those pleasures, immensely effective. They light up describing moments of peace, beauty and presence. When I engage with their pleasures regarding their more positive gender experiences, they find their power to bear the challenges inherent in their lives. Pleasure then becomes the needed support to contact and live with the fear.

Summary

In this paper I have outlined current field conditions as I perceive them regarding gender and trans identities. I shared my personal path with gender to illustrate what hindered and what supported my sense of becoming more whole. I have offered two overlapping frameworks – biopsychosocial and intersectional – as lenses, through which we can view gender as holistically as our particular positions allow. I differentiated self and gender identity as I understand them. I described the importance of exploring the gendered dimension of our introjects and a way to experience what I call gender synthesis through creative discrimination. I drew a parallel between certain gender identities and ontological insecurity to demonstrate the inherent challenge some of our clients live with. I shared implications for clinical practice, which may be helpful to hold when working with clients for whom gender is figural – especially those who are at the beginning of articulating their gender experience. Part of my thinking in sharing as much about myself as I do in this paper is to elicit appetite for self-exploration in you reading this, however you identify. Beyond practical pointers, the single most helpful thing I have ever done for clients for whom gender is figural is to not ‘just’ cognitively educate myself but to find my own home in my body and identity, one that is built on self-consent. It informs the level of inclusion I am able to feel with people and it allows me to safely, sensitively be present as a whole person in the room. To end how every Hungarian folktale begins: once there was where there wasn’t... a force that was elusive and solid, fixed and fluid, a living, breathing contradiction called gender that was an oppressor as an ‘it’ and a mother as an ‘I’.

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Limitations of positionality

I am a white, able-bodied, university-educated trans person who lives in an affluent part of London, UK, meaning I largely have it as ‘good’ as it gets. I am painfully aware that trans people of the global majority may not see much of themselves reflected back to them on these pages. This paper, also, does not do justice to intersex people (individuals who are born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit typical binary notions of male and female categories). This is an intentional call for a more explicit acknowledgment of our positionalities as...
therapists, writers, theoreticians so as to at least draw attention to the limitations of our voice, and to avoid oppressive illusions of assumed sameness. Even though generalisability is not expected with small-scale papers like this, it is important to note that my writing should only be considered as an in-depth conceptualisation of my experiences and thinking.

Title

The title is in reference to Fritz Perls' autobiographical novel, *In and Out the Garbage Pail* as far as its opening – 'whenever anybody writes he writes about himself' (Perls, 1969, p. 1).

References


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Artistic creativity as a resource in a psychological support group of Kharkiv Institute of Gestalt and Psychodrama during wartime

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Abstract

The article describes a model of psychological help in crisis, based on the Gestalt approach. The Kharkiv Institute of Gestalt and Psychodrama (KhIGIP, Ukraine) used this model in a psychological support group during the first six months of the war, which the Russian Federation unleashed in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The main attention is paid to analysing the experience of using fairy-tale therapy (a method of artistic creation) within the framework of the work of this group. The authors highlight a number of resource possibilities of fairy-tale therapy as a tool of the Gestalt approach in group work: gaining a sense of greater control over the situation through the creation of a narrative; achieving greater integrity through awareness and integration of one’s own projections; restoring the temporal continuity of the psychological field through the creation of a story containing a beginning, middle and end; improving the psycho-emotional state through the expression of feelings, etc.

Keywords

Gestalt approach, psychological support group, crisis intervention, war, fairy-tale therapy.

Background

Currently, we observe the Gestalt approach increasingly going beyond psychotherapy to turn, in the words of Serge Ginger, into an ‘existential art of life’, which focuses a person on the awareness of their actual life experience ‘here and now’, establishing a true contact with themselves and others and developing creative adaptation to the surrounding social environment in order to create their own original way of life (Ginger, 2004, p. 12).

Wartime poses new challenges to psychotherapy in general, and Gestalt therapy in particular. Why? Because the field changes dramatically. History teaches us that a war that sweeps through the entire territory of a country results in a nation’s collective trauma. In addition, the war actualizes the transgenerational traumas of the past wars which come to the descendants’ life in the form of charged introjects and projections, are retroflexed or manifest as inadequate behavioural responses to excessive feelings experienced as ‘somebody else’s’. War destroys the lives of millions of people, undermines their life supports and prospects. It frustrates all basic human needs, resulting in such suboptimal options for creative adjustment as a ‘postponed life syndrome’, denial of joy and satisfaction, survivor’s guilt, etc.

One of the basic human needs is the need for security which is experienced at the collective level as a need for survival of an entire nation. However, during the war, the characteristics of the micro- and macro-social levels of the field are such that a person does not have the opportunity to satisfy their need for security (in this case we can only speak of the degree of satisfaction). Even being in contact with the object of need (e.g. staying in a bomb shelter or in a country that is not at war), people cannot experience a sense of security, since as long as the war continues, they are psycho-physiologically in a mode of a constant activation of the self-preservation instinct.

The war creates conditions in which the principles of the field formulated by Malcolm Parlett have their own specificity. Especially, from our point of view, the war...
affects The Principle of Contemporaneity, which states that the psychological past and the psychological future are simultaneously parts of the psychological field at a given moment in time (Parlett, 1991, pp. 70-71). The trauma of war destroys the temporal continuity of a person’s psychological field (Martz, 2010, p. 19). Many people experience their lives torn into an idealised and carefree past ‘before the war’ and a deadly and dangerous ‘here and now’. The future is seen as unattainable due to uncertainty. Many people experience war trauma as being stuck in a paradoxically endless ‘here and now’, the name of which is war.

Murthy and Lakshminarayana in a brief review of the results of research on the effects of war on the mental health of the population in different countries of the world note that war has a catastrophic impact on the health and well-being of nations (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006, p. 25). Depending on the duration and intensity of war trauma, psychosocial consequences range from 10% to 87% of the population in different countries. These include somatisation, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, clinical depression, substance abuse and functional impairment. Studies are consistent in showing the value of psychological support in minimising the effects of war-related traumas. Well-established psychosocial support allows people to maintain a sufficient level of psychosocial functioning, even in the presence of severe symptoms of trauma.

Thus, to minimise the negative effects of prolonged military stress on the mental health of Ukrainians, active psychological support is needed already during hostilities, primarily using the resources of the environment, community and group.

Is psychotherapy possible in times of war? One of the main conditions for psychotherapy is the client’s sense of security in the field of psychotherapeutic relations, which opens up the possibility of experimentation and change. At the same time, in times of war, both therapist and client are often in danger. This, as well as the factors mentioned above (frustration of basic needs, postponed life syndrome, change in the perception of time, etc.), makes it difficult to use traditional models of psychotherapy.

So what is the most appropriate model of psychological care in a wartime setting? Wheeler wrote that the modern world is a radically different field than the post-war world of the fifties when Friedrich Perls and Paul Goodman created the seminal work on Gestalt therapy (Wheeler, 2009). And, as a living system of theory and practice, Gestalt therapy must evolve, actively engaging with the pressing needs and conditions of the modern world.

Spagnuolo Lobb, characterising the society of the 2010s, wrote (and it is even more relevant now) that people are experiencing distress due to terrorism and migration flows (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2018, p. 50). The constant fear of death reinforces the need for rootedness, especially in relationships. In such circumstances, the goal of psychotherapy (and especially Gestalt therapy) is not to support ego function but to support the client’s need to create a sense of being-in-contact with the therapist. The therapeutic relationship more than before, according to Spagnuolo Lobb, should provide a sense of security in the given and other relationships.

Consonant with Spagnuolo Lobb’s views is Francesetti’s vision – the need for a change of perspective in therapy, where both therapist and client co-create and experience a co-created phenomenal field, and where the focus of the therapeutic process is on the quality of presence rather than on changing the client (Francesetti, 2019, p. 17).

To reflect on the model of psychological care in times of war, we find useful the description of crisis interventions based on Young & Lester’s Gestalt approach (2001, pp. 65-74). The authors describe the specifics of working with suicidal clients, whose existential crisis has some common features with that during the war. The counsellor is sensitive to the client’s emotional and cognitive state. His crisis interventions, based on the Gestalt approach, focus on the integration of polarities, venting and awareness of emotions, and paying attention to ambivalence, loneliness, lack of constructive intimacy and unbearable psychological suffering.

So, based on the above analysis of the literature and our own experience, let us summarise our vision of the model of psychological support for civilian citizens during the war. Taking into account that war creates a crisis situation in all spheres of human life, the most adequate model of mental-health support is crisis-psychological support, the main focus of which is to achieve a greater sense of security (primarily due to the presence in contact with the therapist), stabilisation of psycho-emotional state (by creating a balance between cognitive, affective and body spheres), development of self-regulation and search for resources for creative adaptation to a dramatically changed environment. Achieving the goals of crisis intervention provides
the basis for a gradual transition to more traditional (peaceful) models of psychotherapy.

What techniques and methods are appropriate to use within the framework of crisis psychological help based on the Gestalt approach? Perls said that almost any technique is applicable within Gestalt therapy, as long as it is existential, experiential, and experimental, and as long as it can be used to help expand awareness (Perls, 1992, p. 55). Yontef believes that techniques and methods that surface in the course of dialogue and phenomenological work and are within the ethical rules of psychotherapy are appropriate (Yontef, 1993).

Wheeler writes that we (humans) are narrative beings. We are born to plan a scenario, find a solution, and make a prediction to justify further action. The background structure, everything that supports and gives meaning to the figure-making process is the narrative. Each narrative is a completed gestalt in time – it has a beginning, a middle and an end. Perhaps this is why, as Wheeler notes, the same tales and parables are understandable to people of different cultures. Our shared social field is a source of creativity and power for change. The power of shared storytelling (narrative) has transformative potential (Wheeler, 2009).

So, we believe that co-creating a fairy tale is a method that fulfils the requirements outlined above – existential, experiential, awareness-expanding, narrative, ethical, and group. This article is devoted to describing the experience of creating a fairy tale (the method of fairy-tale therapy) in the process of work of the KhIGIP psychological support group based on the Gestalt approach.

Fairy-tale therapy as a method and a tool

Fairy-tale therapy is one of the ‘youngest’ trends in practical psychology and psychotherapy, while in human civilization it is one of the most ancient ways of healing the soul with the help of words. In every culture and on every continent, at all times, people created and used fairy tales, myths, parables, legends and stories for various purposes, which is why fairy-tale therapy is a multicultural approach that cannot be usurped. This provides a wide space for developing diverse authors’ approaches within the framework of fairy-tale therapy as a method to be used both for children and adults, individually and in a group format.

The healing effect of stories (including fairy tales) is emphasised by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, a philosopher, poet, psychoanalyst of the Jungian school and world-famous ‘cantadora’ (professional storyteller) of the Latin American tradition (Estés, 1993, p. 3).

One of the areas of her activity is ‘therapy though stories’ in special radio programmes broadcast to hot spots around the world – places where comforting and support are especially needed. Estés writes that in the folk tradition, most stories that speak to us in a universal, common-to-all-mankind language of symbols are viewed not as mere entertainment, but as medicine, a healing agent (ibid, p. 3). These healing stories have long been used to learn, correct mistakes, enlighten, bring about regeneration and redemption, restore memories, and heal wounds. The author also notes that the most potent stories emerge from the abyss of human suffering, which is perhaps the mightiest remedy against past, present, and even future anguishs and ailments. Estés also points out that when common-to-all stories are invented and told in a group, they create a special field of attraction that unites the members of that group. The plots of such stories hinge upon challenges overcome; tragedies that were prevented; inevitable deaths that were avoided; the rescue that came at the last moment, etc. Thuswise, the tales that people tell each other seem to be woven into a warm and secure blanket, able to comfort in the coldest night those only known to the heart and spirit. As time goes by, stories originating in the group memory acquire a deeply personal, though universal, character; they are retold over and over and begin to live a life of their own.

At present, a fairy tale, or fairy-tale metaphor, is also used both as an independent method of psychotherapy (in which all clients’ requests are solved through the prism of a fairy-tale metaphor) and a tool for solving specific psycho-therapeutic problems in various areas of psychotherapy (and specifically in Gestalt therapy). Creation of fairy tales contributes to: awakening of creative energy; recognition of one’s needs and ‘unfinished gestalts’; development of self-awareness, reflection and an ability to take responsibility for one’s life, and more.

Brun and co-authors (Brun et al., 1993, p. 17), discussing a variety of ways to apply fairy tales in psychotherapy, describe four main methods of fairy-tale therapy that are still being developed:

1. The naive approach.
2. The psychodynamic interpretation of fairy tales and their symbols in psychotherapy.
3. Fairy tales used as a type of play therapy.

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4. Creating an individualised fairy tale as a help in personal development.

Then, why is it useful for an adult to create their own fairy tale? According to Brown, living vicariously through characters whose lives mirror our own can be a powerful therapeutic intervention (Brown, 2008, p. 87).

Adult fairy tales contain knowledge of human developmental deficiencies and existential problems. They describe the successful process of individuation and the need for moral development, which is rewarded. Fairy tales allow the personal meaning of the story to emerge and stimulate the unconscious to find solutions to existential problems. Fairy tales provide an opportunity for safe exploration of what one considers to be dangerous material (Brown, 2023, p. 9). A fairy tale created in a group becomes a mirror that reflects the real world through the prism of group perception.

So, what is fairy-tale therapy? Given the wide diversity of approaches, it is difficult to give an unambiguous and precise definition. To put it briefly and generally, fairy-tale therapy is a method of psychological assistance to children and adults by using the metaphorical resources of a fairy tale.

Our method of co-creating a story based on the Gestalt approach can be defined by Wheeler’s point of view that the method of exteriorizing the sensitivity to the field that we are endowed with by nature is an opportunity to discover and live the relations, states, and potencies existing in the field, becoming more holistic (Wheeler, 2009).

**Characteristics of participants and working conditions of the psychological support group**

In this article, we describe the group experience of adult participants in creating their own fairy tale, as part of the long-term work of the psychological support group, which KhIGIP initiated online from the first month of the war for all interested students and graduates of the Institute (the group trainer is Anna Marinushkina, Director of KhIGIP).

During the first two months, the psychological support group met daily; during the following three months – two-three times a week; and afterwards (up to present) – two times a month. The format of the group is open, the duration of the meeting is 1.5 hours.

At the time of the creation of the fairy tale (August 2022), the full-scale war in Ukraine had been going on for more than six months, and no one knew (as it is still unknown) when and how it would end, how many more defenders and civilians would be killed by the Russians, how many settlements and critical infrastructure facilities would be destroyed, or how much property would be destroyed. But we must continue to live, pull ourselves together, take care of our children and the elderly, work, volunteer, donate to the Armed Forces of Ukraine and help those who cannot take care of themselves. You also need to constantly and continuously improve your professional skills to be effective in the new inhumane conditions of war. And you also need to take care of yourself. To survive.

So, who are the members of the KhIGIP psychological support group? They are adults, aged 24 to 65, mostly women, with higher education and different life experiences. All of them are students or graduates of KhIGIP educational programmes of various levels – from those who have just got acquainted with the basics of Gestalt therapy to certified Gestalt therapists, and participants of various specialisation programmes. The total number of group members at that time was 25, but each of them attended group meetings as needed and possible, given the open format of the group. Usually, 6-12 people attended each meeting. The vast majority of the participants were internally displaced persons, as Kharkiv and the Kharkiv region are a war zone. Most of the displaced persons were abroad at the time (Poland, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Spain, the United States, Canada, the Baltic Countries, etc.), while a smaller number were in the western regions of Ukraine, where it was and is relatively safer. Several members of the group were constantly in the war zone, never leaving their homes. The online support group meetings were a unique space where like-minded Gestaltists could meet, and for many Ukrainians scattered around the world, it was the only opportunity to be in their ‘own’ cultural, ethnic and value field.

During the group’s meetings, air raid sirens often sounded and those in Ukraine had to move to a bomb shelter or ensure their relative safety by following the ‘two walls’ rule. Every time the online connection was interrupted during a meeting with someone, anxiety arose in the field: ‘What happened?’, and everyone was anxiously waiting for the missing participant to get back in touch. Everyone had acquaintances, relatives or friends who were in migration, occupation, emigration, fighting or killed.

The group members noticed a change in values in themselves and others since the beginning of the war – the values of life, family, relationships, support and connectedness came to the fore, pushing material
values and ‘successful success’ to the background. It was clear that we were fighting not just for any life, but for a life free and independent of invaders. Based on the long history of the Ukrainian people’s struggle for independence, we can say that the war actualised this crucial meaning in the collective national field of experience – the worthy struggle for an independent, free life, even at the cost of the lives of the most loyal representatives of the nation. This is probably how joint constructionism creates us. Wheeler’s opinion is that our field (cultural environment and relations) creates us, and we jointly create new fields of meaning in a new cultural and historical situation (Wheeler, 2009). We try to find all possible resources for survival and to preserve our mental and physical health in wartime conditions of prolonged distress.

The main tasks of the group work were: to help the participants in establishing contact with the new wartime reality and with their ‘new’ self; to facilitate expressing and containing strong feelings; to search for resources for creative adaptation to a dramatically changing environment; to develop self-regulation and to find new meanings and supports. The group leader participated in the creation of a shared experience, in the words of Francescetti, ‘by modulating his presence and absence at the contact boundary’ (Francescetti, 2019).

**Procedure of fairy-tale creation**

At one of the group’s meetings, the participants’ idea of creating a therapeutic fairy tale emerged as a figure from the ground. The idea reflected a collective need to metaphorically complete the ‘gestalt of war’ in order to gain a greater sense of control over one’s life in conditions of the impossibility of real influence on the course of hostilities. Another important need was to express the anger intended for the aggressor in the form of effective action aimed at solving the situation, at least in imagination, on a symbolic level. Still another need was to feel unity in the process of searching for and devising a solution to a serious collective problem, when the efforts of many create group integrity.

The group ‘requests’ outlined above were addressed using fairy-tale therapy as a tool of the Gestalt approach, since the metaphor underlying the fairy tale reflects both the inner and outer world of a person, providing both contact with oneself and others.

Serge and Anna Ginger in their book *Gestalt Therapy: The Art of Contact* indicate an important role of creative products in the Gestalt therapy process (Ginger & Ginger, 2004, p. 33). They emphasise that most Gestalt sessions are related to imagination and creativity in one way or another, since it is on a person’s ‘inner stage’ that all their emotions, deep feelings, memories, anxious or joyful fantasies, and all their sudden insights are acted out. It is possible to illuminate this inner stage with the help of an active imagination, which is enhanced by the participation of the therapist and the feedback of the group, allowing to weave a connecting thread between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.

Our preparation for creating a fairy tale consisted in discussing the main stages of psycho-therapeutic fairy tales: getting to know the main character; description of his problem, which created a crisis situation; search for internal and external resources to solve the problem; the victory of the hero/heroes, and ‘a feast for all the world’.

We decided in advance not to limit the process of creating a fairy tale, trusting the unknown to be revealed through the creators: everyone, including the group leader, proposed their images, characters, metaphors, and plot twists, which were woven into the fairy tale thanks to the mutual consent of the group participants.

And we went on a fabulous journey to create *A Tale of Victory*. We invite you to follow us! Can you hear that tinkling? The fairy tale begins...

**A Tale of Victory**

Once upon a time, in the most beautiful part of the Universe, there lived the Flourishing Land. Hardworking and friendly people who inhabited it cultivated fertile fields, grew golden wheat, ate sweet fruits and berries and healthy vegetables, built houses, cars and airplanes, got married, gave birth to and raised their children in love, and enjoyed life.

At the same time, somewhere nearby, in a slumbering and smelly swamp forest, there lived a lonely outcast Sleazebag nicknamed Teased Dreg. This Sleazebag did not come out with either intelligence, height, or talents, and his troll brothers and sisters teased him mercilessly as a child. That’s why he ran away from them into the smelly swamp forest and lived there, rejoicing in a delusional idea of his grandiose, powerful and imperious majesty, dreaming of mirroring revenge on his cruel siblings.

Every day his ideas about greatness became more and more obsessive, however, even though Sleazebag was of
miserable mind, he still clued up that he did not have
the virtues for this. That is why he constantly felt a
hard, non-fairy-tale-ish frustration.

One day, in desperation, he dipped into the swamp,
caught the poisonous toad Pipa of Surinam by the ass
and decided to shorten his life with it. Lo and behold,
once Pipa’s last foot disappeared in Sleazebag’s belly,
he had strange sensations: he saw that the stars and
the world around him turned upside down – the top
changed places with the bottom, and the right with
the left. Sleazebag was surprised to notice that all the
inhabitants of the sleepy, smelly swamp forest suddenly
began to look at him with flattery and insane toadism.
This gave him incredible pleasure, for it was exactly
what he had so passionately fantasised about all his
miserable life.

Yet, when morning came, the last drop of Pipa’s magical
poison drained out of Sleazebag, the enchantment
dispelled and he saw his worthlessness again.
Sleazebag’s fury knew no bounds. From that moment
on, he began to look for ersatz ways to satisfy his sick
ego which had grown beyond belief. He invented a
crooked mirror in which he saw himself as grandiose
and others as pitiful, and now and then he spent hours
entertaining himself with it to a frazzle.

But in such cases, there always comes a moment when
what is, is not enough.

One day it occurred to Sleazebag that his pleasure
would be more intense, if it were not him, but other
creatures who sated his pride. He decided to search
for ways to influence others in order to change their
perception and consciousness for his own benefit. Here,
he remembered Pipa’s poison and made magical powder
from the toad. Looking around, he saw a woodpecker
on a rotten stump and threw the powder into his eyes
to test its effect. The woodpecker was astounded, his
eyes bulged, he started to see floaters and stars and
began hammering frantically at the stump, chanting:
’Sleazebag is a hegemon, Sleazebag is a hegemon!’

‘It works,’ rejoiced Sleazebag.

So, Sleazebag began to pour magic poisoned powder
into the eyes of the wood creatures, put leeches in
their ears, sprinkle swamp water on their tails, shine
a crooked mirror in their eyes, after which they fell on
their knees before him and begged to possess them as
his, the way he liked, even if with extreme cynicism.

This is how he conquered towns and cities, kingdoms
and states, trying to prove to everyone that he was not
just a wasteling, until he and his pack stuck their ugly
snouts into the beautiful Flourishing Land. Seeing its
fertile lands, clear waters, blue sky and happy, hard-
working people, Sleazebag craved so much for taking
possession of the Flourishing Land that he started
shaking with lust. But contrary to his expectations, he
encountered the fact that beyond the wide river the
borders of that country were defended by a powerful
and rightful giant – the Flying Dragon with numerous
immortal heads that spit fire, blow wind and gush
water, with claws that tear foes to pieces and wings
that fly fast and high. And in front of the border, a stone
woman stood holding a road sign in her hands, on which
it was written: ‘Mind Sleazebag: if you go straight, you
get blotted out; you go right, you get blotted out; you go
left, you get blotted out.’

Sleazebag got speechless from such audacity, and the
Flying Dragon looked at him across the state border,
squinted one eye and said: ‘Make up your mind quickly,
you pathetic scarecrow, because right here and now
you’ll get it!’

Here, Sleazebag lost it completely, called his dirty,
bitchy pack enchanted by the darkness to help him,
took the magic powder made from a poisonous toad
and threw it into the Dragon’s eyes. The Dragon closed
his eyes and blew burning fire on Sleazebag. Then
Sleazebag scratched his burnt, bald pate and splashed
swamp water on the Dragon’s tail, and then shined a
crooked mirror in his eyes.

The fierce battle continued. The evil pack, like a dirty
wave, rolled up onto the Dragon, while he worked on it
with all his mighty heads: taking clean water from the
wide river, he flushed Sleazebag’s powder from their
eyes and brains; breathing in fresh air, he blew the
leeches out of their ears, and burned all this filth with a
purifying fire. The Dragon held fast to his native land,
but new waves of orcs rolled in again and again, and it
seemed that there was no end to this plague.

Thus the scum advanced beyond the borders of the
Flourishing Land, and the brave, but exhausted Dragon
retreated. The dirty pack led by Sleazebag reached
the clean Mirror Lake. But suddenly, for the first time
since the start of Sleazebag’s rule, they saw themselves
in the clear mirror of the lake, not as pitiful bastards,
but as they are – just creatures that have their place
and function in nature. And they also saw Sleazebag
for what he is – not a great hegemon, but a narcissistic,
worthless person. They came to their senses and fell
into shock at the realisation of their crimes, and began
to suffer immeasurably and tear their hair, begging for
forgiveness and mercy. They were now able to grasp the essence of things, events and phenomena and see all the distortions. They refused to obey anyone, and decided to choose for themselves how to live and what to strive for. A woodpecker tore open a silly, little bag of the magic powder with its beak; a huge bear smashed a silly, crooked mirror against his own head; leeches, seeing that anarchy, fled over the hills and far away by themselves.

A great Council convened to decide what to do with Sleazebag and how to rebuild a peaceful life. Eventually they came up with the most humane solution possible for Sleazebag, considering his disgusting vices. The Flying Dragon took Sleazebag on his wings to a magical forest and dropped him at the intersection of seven roads, each road having a road sign with the same inscription: ‘Go fuck yourself!’ The Dragon left him there to figure out which direction was the best for him to choose. And, to top it all, he cursed Sleazebag with awareness.

And the animals went home, correcting all the distortions of the world along the way, because that became their calling and mission.

The Flourishing Land now faced the task of how to strengthen the state in order to defend it from other scum and all kinds of evil. A man decided that four Wise Witches working magic will come to the aid of the Flying Dragon – one for each side of the world. In the south, they created the power of warmth, light, love and health; in the west, sobriety of thought, analysis, logic and a clear vision of the situation; in the north, they created stability, endurance, strength, flexibility and optimism; in the east, fortitude, wisdom, intuition and an inexhaustible source of vital energy and drive.

Very quickly, with the help of the entire world, all the destroyed places of the Flourishing Land were restored, and a happy, modern country was built. The citizens of the country were proud of their Motherland, and people from all over the world came to learn what true human dignity, courage, invincibility, fortitude, love of freedom and humanity are. And we live here with you and enjoy life!

**Analysis of the fairy-tale creation process**

If you were to observe the process of creating a fairy tale, you would see by the smiles and burning eyes of the participants that they were highly interested. At the end of the meeting, many commented that they had not expected it to be so exciting that they stopped keeping track of time. The tale was put together with ease and almost everyone’s suggestions were picked up by the group participants with inspiration and laughter.

What draws attention to itself is that from the very beginning of the fairy tale creation, there appeared an unexpected group phenomenon: after the phrase ‘Once upon a time, far, far away...’ there came a life story of a negative character, a False Hero. The process captured all the participants, which was made apparent in the group’s energy rise, and it was not until some point in the middle of the meeting that the surprised participants paid attention to the fact that the lead character of the story was a villain. It seemed that it was not the members of the group who invented the fairy tale, but the fairy tale itself was being born from the field through its creators.

A similar phenomenon is found in the literature describing the process of producing a creative product. For instance, Jung and Neumann in their work *Psychoanalysis and Art* note that sometimes the author feels that he himself does not create his work, but on the contrary, the creative process makes him its tool and ‘owns the author’ (Jung & Neumann, 1996, p. 16). Jung believed that symbolic works have their source not in the personal, but in the collective unconscious – the area of unconscious mythology whose original images (archetypes) are the common heritage of humanity. The creative process, according to Jung, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image that connects the fate of the author with the fate of humanity and ‘awakens the benevolent forces that have always helped humanity to escape from any danger and survive the longest night’ (ibid, p. 21). In this way, they described the social and therapeutic significance of creativity.

Violet Oaklander, an American child Gestalt therapist, referring to the theory of Jungian psychology, writes that the use of fairy tales in Gestalt therapy deepens the therapeutic work, creating conditions for the participants to meet at the level of the collective unconscious, where the archetypal interaction of the polarities of light and darkness comes to life. This contributes to the development of greater holism of a person, which is one of Gestalt therapy goals (Oaklander, 2015, p. 98).

The phenomenon of fixing the group’s attention on the negative hero in the creation of the fairy tale and, in general, the theme of the struggle between ‘good and evil’ in the fairy tale, turns us to the question of the origin of evil and violence. What understanding
of this emerges from the field created by the group participants? What is the importance of this ‘here and now’ theme? Francesetti considers the importance of relationships in the origin of violence, born of the pain of those who hurt others (Francesetti, 2012). The pain that cannot be felt by the subject himself (due to his pathological insensitivity to pain) is transformed by violence into pain inflicted on another being. This other being has the ability to transform it. This internal perversion, the distortion of the process of experience, whereby the abuser inflicts suffering and pain on an innocent party in order to transform his pain, evokes a sense of revulsion.

Using the concepts of Francesetti’s theory, let us allow ourselves the following reasoning. Violence, as a manifestation of the psychopathological symptom of the Negative Hero, ‘the crystallized expression of its absence at the boundary of contact’ (Francesetti, 2012), is applied to the one in contact with whom the primary trauma (in this case, rejection) is reproduced. The object of violence experiences existential suffering (pain). How can this suffering be healed, how can the chain of intergenerational transmission of suffering be broken? Peacetime psychotherapy invites us to transform suffering in the psychotherapeutic relationship into awareness, creativity, and love. The fairy tale, as a war-field narrative, teaches us to transform suffering into conscious action, into the energy of a worthy struggle for freedom, independence, and for the right to live according to one’s values. We agree with Perls, who wrote that energy is too expensive to just dump, it must provide the necessary desirable change (Perls, 1992, p. 51). The task of therapy is to develop satisfactory support for reorganising and redirecting energy.

At the same time, the fairy tale shows the possibility of transforming the suffering of negative characters through their awareness of their offences and repentance, which seems to be the basic condition for forgiveness. It should also be noted that the only place in the fairy tale where its creators debated was in how to punish the False Hero. Despite the desire to destroy him as a threat, the realisation of the importance of dealing with the enemy in accordance with a moral imperative rather than barbaric savagery won out. Otherwise, what is the difference between good and evil?

The group discussion of the phenomenon of participants’ attention being ‘stuck’ on a negative character contributed to the awareness of several group needs: penetrating into the nature of the phenomenon to explain the motives of the negative character’s behaviour, making him understandable and, therefore, less dangerous; contacting with the character metaphorically to create and work out in detail his image in order to gain control over him; devaluing him through mocking, and expressing the retroflexed feelings to the ‘addressee’, which is of great importance in Gestalt therapy. However, a closer analysis may also reveal the participants’ unconscious need to explore their own ‘shadow’ personality through interaction with the negative traits of the negative character (the False Hero). This is exactly what the fairy tale invites us to do, creating a safe space for projections (Zinker, 1991, pp. 71-88). It can also be said that the readiness for such self-examination indicates a sufficiently high level of the group members’ awareness and the maturity of their ego function, which allowed them to choose to look into the ‘shadow’ and learn about their own projections.

The path of the False Hero of the fairy tale is guided by the growing desire to satisfy the dominant need of his neurotic personality – to experience his own grandeur. Taking into account the fact that in our time of narcissism, every person has a narcissistic part expressed to varying degrees, with which it is difficult to contact due to intolerance of shame and condemnation, it can be said (and some participants acknowledged this), that it is this personality aspect that the group members enthusiastically projected onto the main negative character of the story. Recognising one’s own projection and identifying oneself with the alienated fragment leads, according to the paradoxical theory of change of Beisser, to integration and the achievement of greater wholeness (Beisser, 1970, pp. 78-79).

By identifying with the negative character and his experiences, one can also gain the experience of distinguishing a neurotic narcissistic need to experience one’s magnitude from a healthy social need for recognition and respect. This can be done by answering the following questions: how do I treat the characters of the fairy tale that honour me – as objects or as subjects? Are they a figure or a ground to me? Am I in dialogue with them? Is it possible to satisfy my need for recognition?

Considering the character’s path as a cycle of contact with his need, it is possible to trace the mechanisms of contact interruption inherent in him, which also reflected the group mechanisms of interruption typical of the authors of the story. For example, introjection (the main character’s influence on the worldview of
other fairy-tale characters) and retroflexion (self-destructive behaviour of the negative character and his use of a ‘crooked mirror’). These observations make it possible to create a focus of attention for further supportive and psychotherapeutic work.

At the same time, the images of the positive characters, created by the group, are endowed with those features and properties, with which the creators of the fairy tale consciously identify, and which are necessary to achieve the craved-for Victory. It should be noted that the main positive heroes of the fairy tale, born from the group field, were not brave fellows or beautiful maidens, but a fire-breathing Dragon-Protector, and magic-working Wise Witches. This reflects the group members’ need for hard and fast means of achieving the goal, the need for metaphorical compensation for resources that are lacking in reality, for the good that ‘must come with the fists’.

Regarding the symbolism of fairy-tale images, it is worth noting that, according to Propp, the Dragon is a fantastic creature, in which a bird and a snake (two animals symbolising the soul) merge. It safeguards the borders and symbolises statehood, and, in some traditions, symbolises the male principle (Propp, 1982, pp. 146-160). While the Witch is a female archetype of a wisdom keeper and a magic hut hostess (Propp in his work analyses the related image of Yaga), also guarding the border, although the one between the material and non-material worlds. The archetype of the Witch gives access to the deepest layers of the collective female unconscious, related to the sacramental, the natural cycles, ties with ancestors, etc. It can be said that the birth of these two mythical characters – the Dragon-Protector and the Witch – from the group’s field expresses the participants’ desire for an egalitarian state that inviolably preserves its borders.

The sought-for Victory of the good over the forces of evil and the triumph of justice became the final chord that completed the gestalt of the fairy-tale story. It allowed creating an inner island of security and self-support, bridging metaphorically the gap between the warlike present and a peaceful future.

Above (in Background), we have already noted that war destroys the temporal continuity of the human psychological field. Therefore, taking into account Parlett’s Principle of Contemporaneity of the psychological field, from our point of view, the task of a psychotherapist during the war is not so much to study how past and future events are part of the reality of the client’s field, but to help the client restore the temporal continuity of his or her psychological field. This can be done by creating a fairy tale as a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

Blaize also wrote about the importance of imagining the future in the present (Blaize, 2002). He believes that the future is a way of telling ourselves a story, of imagining ourselves in a time that will be later, and the only important thing is how this idea of ‘later’ colours our way of being in the ‘now’. Lewin believed that an individual’s moral state and happiness depend more on what he expects in the future than on the pleasures and discomforts of the present situation. Expansion of psychological time – increasing the length of the ‘psychological past’ and ‘psychological future’ (parts of the lifespace existing at the moment) – is one of the directions of development of the individual’s lifespace (Lewin, 1952, pp. 53-54).

In addition to healing the psychological space of time of a war-traumatised person, creating a mental image of a desired future also helps to increase the sense of security and control. This is because in this way a person feels not a victim of circumstances, but an active creator (designer) of the mental representation of the field of his or her future life. And it is this process that takes place in the imagination that is usually the basis of artistic and scientific creativity, the products of which are then put into practice.

One of the phenomena of the process of creating this fairy tale was that the beginning of the story was invented at the end. One of the participants noticed that the more attention we pay to the False Hero, the more power we give him. She made sketches in her notebook as she was creating the story and showed everyone that the drawing of the False Hero was larger than the image of the Dragon. In addition, the False Hero was in the centre. At this point, everyone realised the imbalance of the polarities of good and evil and felt the disharmony of the story. And then the emphasis was placed on describing the flourishing pre-war Country, after which the cup of good outweighed the cup of evil. And, in addition, there was a sense of the continuity of the fabric of time: the past, present and future were united, the importance of which has already been discussed above. And everything fell into place.

The authors of the fairy tale, according to their self-reports, experienced a whole range of feelings during and after reading the finished work: fear of the threat; anger, contempt and disgust towards the enemy; sadness, pain and pride for their country and Ukrainians; respect and admiration for their
defenders; faith and hope for a speedy victory and a bright, happy future. Involvement in the joint creative process has significantly improved their psycho-emotional state, which is also evidenced by studies that analyse the effectiveness of using artistic creativity in psychotherapy (Brown, 2008, 2023; Schouten, 2015). For example, Schouten et al. report a significant decrease in psychological trauma symptoms and a significant decrease in depression in the artistic creativity treatment groups (Schouten et al., 2015). Brown reports significant relief from the following experiences in fairy-tale therapy: fear of abandonment, sibling rivalry, low self-esteem, and loss of meaning in life (Brown, 2008). In her book Creative Activities for Group Therapy, Brown highlights the positive effects of using creativity (including fairy tales) in group psychotherapy (Brown, 2023). Among which we especially want to note: distracting from unproductive worrying; expressing complicated thoughts, feelings, and ideas; clarifying perceptions of situations, people, and the like; helping to bring the obvious into focus, and highlighting important aspects; and solace when confused, upset, or indecisive; abstracting essentials from surrounding confusion, barrages; simplifying complexity; providing new ways to perceive and relate; reconnecting the parts of self to become balanced and rounded.

Conclusion

The experience of using fairy-tale therapy as a tool within the Gestalt approach in the work of the psychological support group of the KhIGIP has revealed several resource opportunities for this method of artistic creativity:

- Acquiring a sense of greater control over the situation through creation of a narrative, which is an active action and helps organise knowledge about the traumatic situation and integrate it into one’s worldview, which is a cognitive condition for coping.
- Awareness of one’s projections and identification with the fragments that are alienated, which, according to the paradoxical theory of change, leads to integration and achievement of greater integrity.
- Modelling a future happy reality helps to restore the temporal continuity of the psychological field of a war-traumatised person.
- Expression on a symbolic level of feelings towards a subject/object with whom an actual contact is not possible.
- Formation of a sense of responsibility for one’s actions and one’s life as a result of adopting the position of an author of the creative process.
- Self-examination and identification of ‘targets’ i.e. figures and needs for further psychotherapy

- Enjoyment of joint creativity, a sense of involvement in group activities, which is a source of vitality

References


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The Cure: working with separation and loss through song parody (lyric substitution)

Aline Giordano

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Abstract

This paper describes a Gestalt experiment in song parody (lyric substitution). It demonstrates through a first-person narrative the healing impact of working with song parody on a process of separation and loss. Song parody is viewed through a particular Gestalt lens including a creative, experimental and dialogic process of inquiry. By weaving in the personal, the method and the therapeutic outcome in an evocative, and often haunting way, the paper lifts the theory of middle mode from its linguistic ground into the realms of experiencing; thus, furthering our understanding of it. Lastly, the paper illuminates the creative importance and significance of working with culture, making the case that culture, as a creative and artistic process, is a sine qua non in the therapeutic process and encounter, for it argues that the artistic creation of self is above all cultural.

Keywords

Gestalt experiment, middle mode, existentialism, song parody, creative writing, popular music, culture, adoption, Korea, The Cure.

‘You are a song being sung elsewhere and resonating everywhere.’

(Cheetham, 2015, p. 33)

Introduction

My work around song parody stems from a research project I conducted as part of an MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes which I completed in 2022 at Metanoia Institute (UK). In this paper, I have purposely left behind the questions of method and methodology in order to focus on the process of writing for therapeutic purposes. This is a strategic decision of a practical nature (word count mainly), enabling me to carve out space to explore song parody as a Gestalt experiment. An experiment in Gestalt aims to support ‘awareness raising by exploring ongoing process’ and ‘anchors new learning, ways of being and change through dynamic experiencing in a safe and supportive context’ (Chidiac, 2018, p. 153).

I had read of Song Parody Technique as a music therapy intervention and was intrigued as to what would happen if I, a fan of English rock band The Cure and a Korean-born adoptee, entered the song parody process fully to explore the themes of separation and loss. I set out to give life to this experiment, through the Gestalt experimental attitude of the inquirer (me). The question ‘What would happen if?’ resided at the core of the Gestalt experimental focus: it would be the vehicle for novel experiences (Yontef & Schulz, 2016) encapsulated in the colloquial expression ‘try it out and see what happens’ of Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951, p. 262).

In the context of music therapy, a song parody intervention uses a song that clients relate to and can adapt in order to make it personally relevant in order to help client recovery (Baker, Kennelly & Tamplin, 2005). The process of re-writing lyrics for therapeutic purposes is known as song parody or lyric substitution. Wigram and Baker state that ‘the therapeutic effect [of song parody] is brought about through the client’s creation, performance and/or recording of his or her own song’ (Wigram & Baker, 2005, p. 14). Song Parody
Technique is a form of therapeutic songwriting, whereby patients re-write some, or all, the words of a song (Baker, 2005, 2015; Wigram & Baker, 2005). The practice of parodying has a long literary heritage. It permits both continuity and change: ‘Parody is both textual doubling (which unifies and reconciles) and differentiation (which foregrounds irreconcilable opposition between texts and between text and “world”)’ (Hutcheon, 2000, pp. 101-102). Literary scientist Lars Kleberg emphasises the dialogical dimension of parody, for parody is not a form but a function; i.e. a relation between texts (Kleberg, 1991).

On the backdrop of my birth trauma (i.e. separation from Korean mother at birth and subsequent cultural uprooting via transnational adoption), I immersed myself fully in what turned out to be an emergent, gruelling and fascinating process of self-discovery through my consumption of the music of The Cure, reading Korean novels and paroding lyrics of some of my favourite songs by The Cure. Then I reflected on how I had created for myself a process that was healing. Below is an example of song parody. The original lyrics are on the left and my lyric substitution on the right, in bold font.

### A strange day (original lyrics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intention</th>
<th>Taken away on a strange day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give me your eyes that I might see</td>
<td>Give me your <strong>arms</strong> that I might <strong>feel</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The blind man kissing my hands</td>
<td>The <strong>white</strong> man <strong>crushing</strong> my hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sun is humming, my head turns to dust</td>
<td><strong>My chest is burning</strong>, my head turns to <strong>words</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As he prays on his knees</td>
<td>As he prays on his knees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td><strong>Mother’s</strong> hush across the water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sudden hush across the water</td>
<td>And we’re here again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And we’re here again</td>
<td><strong>Bent over you gave me a name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And the sand</td>
<td><strong>Taken away on a strange day</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And the sea grows</td>
<td>My head falls back and the walls crash in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I close my eyes</td>
<td>And the sky and the impossible explode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move slowly through the drowning waves</td>
<td>Held for one moment <strong>it all went wrong</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going away on a strange day</td>
<td><strong>It’s life and death</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My head falls back and the walls crash in</td>
<td>And then everything is gone forever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And the sky and the impossible explode</td>
<td>A strange day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held for one moment I remember a song</td>
<td>Lyric substitution (<strong>in bold</strong>): Aline Giordano (2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An impression of sound</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And then everything is gone forever</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A strange day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Smith, Tolhurst and Gallup, 1982a)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Intention

This paper proposes theoretical reflection by first-person account, describing and discussing a Gestalt experiment which I developed into a method of work I now use in my practice as a coach. I view this experiment as a passionate illustration of a mode of dialogue which, as Gary Yontef writes, can be ‘dancing, **song**, words, or any modality that expresses and moves the energy between or among the participants’ (Yontef, 1993, p. 128) [italics my own].

I intend this paper as a vivid example and gentle exploration of the middle mode; that bit of Gestalt theory that has been remarkably left untouched in the literature. It is my wish to show the Gestalt community how I have worked in the middle mode. It is also my hope that after reading this paper, you will go back to the writings of Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951), Joel Latner (1973, 2000), Jean-Marie Robine (1998) and Sally Denham-Vaughan (2005) on the middle mode with renewed interest.

### Context

#### The Cure, Robert Smith and art

‘The Cure are one of the greatest UK bands of the last 40 years’ (Goddard, 2016, p. 6, quoting Sheehan). The music of The Cure has been described as ‘an
astonishing vision of desolation’ (Pattison, 2014, p. 24) and ‘grim lyrical content and overall atmosphere of inevitable doom’ (Watts, 2014, p. 30). However, as Robert Smith of The Cure states, ‘there’s always been an upbeat element to the group’ (Smith, no date). Songs like The Lovecats (The Cure, 1983), Just like Heaven (The Cure, 1987) and Friday I’m in Love (The Cure, 1992) masterfully encapsulate the joyful side of The Cure.

Robert Smith and Laurence Tolhurst, co-founders of The Cure, were disaffected teenagers in a backdrop of conformity which they overtly rebelled against. That was Crawley (West Sussex, UK), mid-seventies, on the cusp of the punk movement. Laurence Tolhurst describes teenager Robert Smith’s bedroom shelves as:

‘minimalist show of everyday ordinariness that spoke to the greater longing for escape from suburbia, where commonplace items could stand symbolically for our teenage angst and as an absurdist counterpoint to the innate, inexplicable violence waiting on every corner for us.’

(Tolhurst, 2016, p. 46) [italics my own]

These items were, of course, ‘next to the existential tomes of Camus and Sartre’ (ibid).

It was the novella L’Étranger (“The Stranger”) by French existential philosopher Albert Camus (1942a) that inspired Robert Smith (e.g., Smith, 2019) to write the band’s first single Killing an Arab (The Cure, 1978). It is this song that drew me into Camus’ thinking on absurdism. From then on, I came to appreciate Camus’ philosophical approach to love, révolte, art and altruism.

One of the most valuable readings I make of Robert Smith’s work and work ethics has been his embodiment of Camus’ approach to the arts. Art is political. For Camus (1913 – 1960), an artist must move and touch the heart of others; and their best creative work is their way of being in the world and portraying themselves to the world (Pourtois & Desmet, 2022). True to this existential stance, Robert Smith metamorphosed his existential wounds into art through the music and performances of The Cure.

Art and Gestalt therapy have always enjoyed a close kinship. Gestalt therapy is inscribed in an artistic perspective (e.g. Latner, 1973; Farlett, 2003; Robine, 1998; Zinker, 1977); its ‘goal is to tap into dormant or unexpected expressive possibilities of a person by engaging in the use of a wide range of methods’ (Amendt-Lyon, 2001, p. 230).

Me

In the early to mid eighties, my brothers listened to British bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, Joy Division and The Cure. I captured that era in my journal:

‘These bands connected us, my brothers and me, through music and the vinyls, stacked on top of the tower speakers; and I assumed they’d always be there, as much as our house would always be our family home in Normandy. But they disappeared. We all did. The house got sold. We moved to the city. I went to university. My parents separated. My brother killed himself. Our dog died.’

(Giordano, 2021)

The music of The Cure is linked to my brother (the one who killed himself), who (unbeknown to him) gifted me his music by playing a taped cassette of the album Seventeen Seconds (The Cure, 1980a) in Mum’s car on our way to school. It was like an invisible gift, unspoken of, an unconditional gift in lieu of love.

I quickly became enamoured of the music of The Cure, Robert Smith’s lyrics and his persona. These Cure songs have accompanied me since I was a teenager. In those days, listening to The Cure enabled me to step into a world of my own. I needed that. I needed to carve for myself a world away from the tragedy that was unfolding in my family. In the voice of Robert Smith and the music of The Cure, I heard pain, I heard sorrow, I heard violence. It felt as if Robert Smith was singing to me the-experience-of-being-me – me, born in South Korea, put in an orphanage and adopted by a French family when I was eleven months old.

I regard The Cure and Robert Smith as my most cherished cultural factor of psychological resilience. Their music and lyrics have helped me recover from adversity at pivotal points in my life since teenagerhood.

My fixation with The Cure and Robert Smith was put out there in the therapy room from the outset. The theory of resilience, e.g. that a musician might become an implicit attachment figure, as formulated by French neuro-psychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik (2014), helped me along my emotional journey before I started Gestalt
psychotherapy in 2018, and it was good to make The Cure an integral part of it. Besides, my therapist always welcomed my bringing in poems and short stories I had written between sessions.

**Process: what I did and how I did it**

Choosing which songs to parody felt effortless, and perhaps even random. The act might have felt random but, as Parlett writes, from a field theory perspective, ‘what may appear random ... is in fact organized’ (Parlett, 1991, p. 71) [italics my own]. Choosing a song felt like I engaged in a (silent) dialogue with the songs. There was an immediate closeness and a sense of a good fit, a particular energetic pull to these five songs: *At Night* (The Cure, 1980b), *The Holy Hour* (The Cure, 1981), *One Hundred Years* (The Cure, 1982), *A Strange Day* (The Cure, 2019a), and *Pictures of You* (The Cure, 2019b).

The relevance of the songs was linked to my field conditions (all the influences that shaped me then). It was determined by the memory and affect associated with these songs and crystallising in the here-and-now via particular lyrics. Indeed, the choice was influenced by what was going on for me at the time, e.g. processing a recent EMDR session, the insight of a book or the impact of a poem I had just read. It felt like the narrative of the original songs, and thus Robert Smith’s field (all the influences that shaped him then) were already engaging my own. This process is an illustration of field theory, and in particular, understanding of emerging context, whereby ‘context and self are always emerging together’ (Denham-Vaughan, 2010, p. 36).

I listened to these songs over and over, for hours, every day, for several weeks – every live or demo version I could find.

In parallel, I felt compelled to read novels by Korean authors and books with Korean protagonists. I read poetry and essays by Korean American essayists and poets like Cathy Park Hong, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and E. J. Koh. I read *Crying in H Mart*, the memoirs of American Korean Michelle Zauner (2021), founder of indie-rock band Japanese Breakfast. In most of these, I was moved by the subtext of intergenerational rupture. These authors brought to me in a vivid manner how it felt to be Korean. That newly acquired knowledge about Korea’s past, and how it affected women daily, which I read in these books completed the sparse (and very functional) story of my adoption as told to me by my French mother when I was growing up.

There was a seamless transition between my reading Korean literature and listening to The Cure songs. For example, during that period, I entered into imagined conversations with Young-sook, the female Korean protagonist in the novel *The Island of Sea Women* by Lisa See (2019). Young-sook’s losses (of her mother first, then husband and child) fused into my own lived experience as reader and orphan. Her losses resonated with mine, and in the moment, I conflated Young-sook and my birth mother in one imagined lived experience. I felt connected to my birth mother on several occasions. It reminded me of James Hillman’s writings:

> ‘To stay connected with you, I must stay imaginatively interested, not in the process of our relationship or in my feelings for you, but in my imagining of you. The connection through imagination yields an extraordinary closeness.’

(Hillman, 1999, p. 185)

By noticing my phenomenological responses to the songs via the Korean fiction stories, I was able to gain more clarity on what mattered: emotions such as anger and love were now in my awareness. I noticed that some of my feelings about my abandonment, like indignation, did not feel as intrusive. These moments felt fluid and energetic, enjoyable and painful altogether.

Song parody began as the writing of new lyrics out of the original ones. Indeed, I rewrote the lyrics; but not with pen and paper, rather by singing the songs over and over, for hours, every day, for several weeks. As I sang these songs, a new story of my birth emerged. Scraps of photographic images I had been impacted by in the past surfaced to my awareness. The story that I was bringing to life in the moment was being enriched by images I had seen during a recent EMDR session; images I had made for myself while reading these Korean (themed) writings, as well as places I had photographed when I visited South Korea with my adoptive mother in 2012, and short stories I had written as part of my therapeutic work.

But I had the feeling that the lyric writing itself was not enough. Thus, I remained open and attentive to what the situation demanded. I remained in a space of openness – being receptive, trusting that the right moment would carry enough energy to express what needed to be expressed.
One day, I decided to record my singing of the new lyrics alongside the original songs. I recorded all the songs, except for At Night. Then, I listened to, and sang along with, these song parodies over and over, every morning, for several weeks. I had made my own cure and I was giving it to myself. The experience was cathartic. I would weep, then kneel, holding onto the bed for support, rocking my upper body back and forth, and finally, drop to the floor. Unaware of time passing, I would eventually find myself on my back, arms spread or swept inward, breathing more evenly, my body yielding to the floor, the song parodies still playing through my earphones in a loop.

A few weeks later, I took these home-recorded song parodies to therapy. After listening to my version of Pictures of You – renamed Pictures of You, Mother – my Gestalt therapist said that the song had put her in touch with ‘an enormous sense of grief’ (Therapist, 2022a). Later on, she said: ‘I felt the gap into not knowing what happened to you’ (Therapist, 2022b). Her experiencing an overwhelm of grief brought my own grief into awareness. In so doing, I believe that she was showing me, unaware, how to grieve. As French philosopher Marc-Alain Ouaknin states, ‘often it is the voice of the other that energises our world and imparts emotions that we feel’ (Ouaknin, 1994, p. 16). To witness my therapist’s response was significant in that I felt there was a deep and meaningful existential encounter.

**Reflections**

Reflecting on what happened during that particular session one year on, my therapist and I discussed how the song parody Pictures of You, Mother was able to cut through the therapeutic dialoguing; as if the song required of us to use our senses differently. Indeed, the quality of contact had been tremendously profound and yet different.

I would like to suggest that the cure was so alive in me and encoded in the song parody (by the combination of my vocals and Robert Smith’s) that it moved my therapist to a point of overwhelm, perhaps emulating and channelling the felt sense of my birth mother (and her own overwhelm she felt when she had to let go of me). In other words, I had charged the ground and the song parody, and when we listened to it in my therapist’s office the field was ready to release.

Reading had a significant influence on my lyric substitution and journaling. The act of reading in parallel to the song parody experiment enabled me to feel how it must have been for my mother in early-seventies Korea. The original text was offering itself to my creative act. In the act of reading there was an effacing of the self, and as Ouaknin (1994) argues, as we read, we imagine ourselves differently.

Korea and the not-knowing the circumstances around my birth had always found their way into my writings. Indeed, I used to write short stories of resistance and victimhood. Writing about abandonment and adoption using pen and paper invariably ended up a bitter rumination of the past with the same conclusion: my cultural uprooting was a sacrificial and abject act of violence from the white supremacists who inflicted an indelible wound on me, my People and the Korean land. Writing without pen and paper, by just singing, produced a more compassionate story as can be seen in the song parody of One Hundred Years (Smith, Tolhurst and Gallup, 1982b).

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**Pictures of you (original lyrics)**

I’ve been looking so long at these pictures of you
That I almost believe that they’re real
I’ve been living so long with my pictures of you
That I almost believe that the pictures are all I can feel

... Remembering you running soft through the night
You were bigger and brighter and wider than snow
And screamed at the make-believe, screamed at the sky
And you finally found all your courage to let it all go

(Smith, 1989)

**Pictures of you, Mother**

I’ve been **aching** so long for some pictures of you
That I almost believe that you’re real
I’ve been living so long without pictures of you
That I almost believe that the **truth** is all I can feel

... Remembering you feeling sore through the night
You were bigger, and sweeter and whiter than snow
And screamed at the enemy, screamed at the sky
And you finally found all your courage to let **me** go

Lyric substitution (**in bold**): Aline Giordano (2021)
When singing alongside my song parodies, I allowed myself to stay with the experience of being emotionally impacted by my own imaginal world. I lost myself, wholly. I also felt immense sadness and distress in the moment. The shift between Robert Smith’s voice and mine, the overlap of different words and meaning from both sets of lyrics and the coexistence of both occasionally felt confusing and led me to sing the ‘wrong’ lyrics. But in the next breath, I could also feel a sense of joy brought about by a lyric, an associated image or an odd phrase borne out of the synchronous vocals. In those moments of confusion and joy, a new space opened: a space for newness, a space for awareness.

Song parodying was an act of creativity. Was it an act of survival? By immersing myself in the immediacy of the experience, and true to a Gestalt experiment, my experience came ‘to its natural resting place’ (Polster & Polster, 1974, p. 284), or indeed a moment I like to call the yielding moment of the newborn, when ‘we are giving ourselves over to the other (person or object) and simultaneously receiving support and stability and a basic sense of orientation’ (Frank & La Barre, 2011, p. 25).

**Discussion**

A song, Cyrulnik argues, ‘metamorphoses reality and makes it bearable’ (2019, p. 10). Indeed, music is ‘a device or resource to which people turn in order to regulate themselves as aesthetic agents, as feeling, thinking and acting beings in their day-to-day lives’ (DeNora, 2000, p. 62).

Listening to music can function as a reconfiguring of the self, Tia DeNora, Professor in sociology of music, argues. We tacitly know which music we need to hear, when. This is an important self-regulating function of music (ibid). ‘Music is an active ingredient in the organisation of self, the shifting of mood, energy level ... and engagement with the world’ (ibid p. 61).

Song parody was a ‘presentation of self to self’, a process of ‘memory retrieval (which is simultaneously, memory construction)’ (ibid, pp. 62-63). It was therapeutic work and, thus, a construction of self (Robine, 1998). The song parody process not only restored my ‘creative capacity’ (Robine, 1998, p. 41) but magnified it to the point where I was able to create a new relationship to my primal wound.

I traded knowledge and truth for experience, felt sense and presence. I drew on the affective power of music which comes from ‘its co-presence with other things – people, events’, co-presence that is always situated in the context in which music is heard (DeNora, 2000, p. 66). I metamorphosed my primal wound into art. I stopped being formulaic and mechanistic about my relationship to the past. I became creative about it; and repetition was a vital driving force.

Former professor in popular music Anahid Kassabian gives a moving account of listening to Armenian music to explore her ‘Diasporan Identities’.

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**One hundred years (original lyrics)**

Stroking your hair as the patriots are shot  
Fighting for freedom on the television  
Sharing the world with slaughtered pigs  
Have we got everything?  
She struggles to get away  
The pain and the creeping feeling  
A little black-haired girl  
Waiting for Saturday  
The death of her father pushing her  
Pushing her white face into the mirror  
Aching inside me and turn me round  
Just like the old days

Over and over we die one after the other  
( løsmith, Tolhurst and Gallup, 1982b)

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**One hundred years of Korean women**

Turn to myself as the soldiers are shot  
Feeling the love and all the depravation  
Seeing the world with frightening dreams  
We are human beings  
Such that we gave you away  
The pain and the creeping feeling  
A little Korean girl  
Waiting for softness  
The thought of a family crushing her  
Pushing her whiteness into the mirror  
Aching inside me as I tried to be kind  
Just like the old rage

Over and over we write about one another

Lyric substitution (**in bold**): Aline Giordano (2021)
She writes:

‘... affective listening can do its most important work, offering ways in to new experiences and perspectives and events and processes that open up a whole new world of possibilities.’

(Kassabian, 2013, p. 83) [italics in original text]

Through the repetitive listening of music I experienced myself in a ‘process that comes into being through listening’ (ibid). This also applies to the process of singing alongside my parodies.

French poet Antonin Artaud (1896 – 1948), in his work entitled Les nouvelles révélations de L’ÊTRE (1937), obsessively asks: ‘Qu’est ce que cela veut dire?’ (“What does this mean?”). The work was published without Artaud’s name; and it would be his last before enforced psychiatric internment (Ouaknin, 1994).

I remind myself of Cyrulnik’s argument that we all benefit from the artistic function of resilience and that works of art are autobiographical confessions. (Cyrulnik, 2018)

‘Qu’est ce que cela veut dire?’

‘Révolte’

French psychologist Toby Nathan writes that ‘adoption produces, as if by essence, political beings’ (Nathan, 2017, p. 156). My song parody endeavour was inscribed in a politically engaged Camusque lineage. Song parody was for me a political act, a révolte, which the Cure fan in me helped to completion. My song parody process was a transgression of the text for a transformation of the self. That is ‘what’ I did. What I didn’t do is kill myself (unlike my brother).

In his reflections on suicide, English philosopher Simon Critchley (2015) reminds us that for Camus in ‘Le mythe de Sisyphe’ (“The Myth of Sisyphus”) (1942b), artistic creation is the legitimate response to the absurd, not suicide. I argue that this ‘absurd creation’ (ibid, pp. 283-304) is what sparked Robert Smith to start The Cure. As for me, my song parody was my artistic creation in an absurd world that commodified and traded hundreds of thousands of Korean infants (like me) to white nations from the late fifties to the mid-eighties (Hübinette, 2007).

At night (original lyrics)

Sunk deep in the night
I sink in the night
Standing alone underneath the sky
I feel the chill of ice
On my face
I watch the hours go by
The hours go by

(Smith et al., 1980)

At night the horrors fight back

Sunk deep in the night
I feel it at night
Dreaming alone underneath the sky
I see the destroyed lives
On your face
I watch the horrors fight back
The horrors fight back

Lyric substitution (in bold): Aline Giordano (2021)

‘... to really integrate into a culture, I can tell you that you have to disintegrate first, at least partially, from your own. You have to separate, detach, dissociate. No one who demands that immigrants make “an effort at integration” would dare look them in the face and ask them to start by making the necessary “effort at disintegration”. They are asking people to stand atop the mountain without climbing up it first.’

(Djavadi, 2018, p. 112) [italics in original text]

L’Étranger by Camus (1942a) is an exploration of truth and difference in how one chooses to be truthful about their own experience in the face of society — to accept to die for truth and difference (Camus, 1962, pp. 215-216). Meursault, the novella’s protagonist, refuses to lie about his feelings (e.g. to feign grief following the death of his mother). In so doing, he rejects the reducing of life to a series of lies about his experience (ibid). My process of lyric substitution was to substitute the experience of not knowing with the experience of feeling. It was akin to a process of social integration, which Iranian-French novelist Négar Djavadi movingly writes about in Disoriental:
Following straight after, is Djavadi’s recollection of The Cure’s album *Disintegration* (The Cure, 1989), the lyrics of which she spent hours translating. Ouaknin writes of the therapeutic nature of literary translation and relates the case of Antonin Artaud who, while in psychiatric internment (where he was subjected to electroshock treatment), translated Lewis Carroll and, in doing so, found his literary voice again and his freedom. Translation is the paradoxical process of ‘coming back to self through the other’ (Ouaknin, 1994, p. 168, citing J-M. Rey, 1991).

I found that the process of re-working someone else’s words is a process of listening to someone else’s voice until you are open to hearing your own. This comes at a cost: I must injure, upset, take out, ravage, deface and break the original text to break through with my own voice, to pass through the not knowing, and the (futile) ‘why?’ and ‘why me?’. But the prize is putting an end to objectifying myself with my own words.

I moved the past into the present. I brought context to the event in an act of imagination. In so doing, the song parody process enabled me to step into the middle mode. I tapped into the phenomenal field, noticing it and writing it down in my journal, in the form of a monologue or dialogue, often with my birth mother.

Of course, I am condensing into few paragraphs many, many hours of singing and listening, and many, many journal pages. But I could not describe the process any better than Joel Latner does when he writes about the middle mode:

‘It is what we experience when activity and passivity are balanced, when we let go and give ourselves over to an activity we care about and are deeply involved in.’

(Latner, 2000, p. 43)

Paraphrasing Latner, I gave myself over to the experience: channelling and keeping in touch with both my id and ego functions; stepping in and out of both as well as being in both. Being in the middle mode allowed me to experience being closer to my birth mother.

I focused on the felt experience and observed the phenomenon of the experience. I was so engrossed in the music and the singing that I forgot my socially constructed reality about not-knowing. My focus shifted from what I wanted to remember (but could not) to ‘the [actual] experience and awareness of remembering’ (ibid, p. 17).

In the act of parodying songs, I transformed the painful longing to know the unknown and the equally challenging experience of not knowing into an experience of *being-with* the unknown, as I firmly resided in the middle mode. In the middle mode, I listened to songs, I read, I sang, I created new lyrics, I journaled. In other words, I constructed a new cultural field around my birth, my birth mother and birth country; I constructed a new reality for myself and contacted it – it: that ‘cultural ground’ (Wheeler, 2005, p. 110).

I felt the reparation in this newly created field, which turned out to be both a feeding of (cultural) ground and a resourcing of self. It was process, and indeed ‘process of discovery’ (Yontef, 1993, p. 89), safe container and output.

In the song parodies, I heard myself as other. In the moment of creativity, I felt more present. Then, I understood I had a choice; I could stop fixating on the unknowable details of my birth. I understood that longing for the mother is innate and that longing for truth is cultural. I cherished the former and let go of the latter, for: ‘in one moment, my own words ... seem to be the direct bequest of truth. In the next moment, they are ashes in my mouth’ (Schoen, 1994, p. 13).

The imagined past became alive to the song parody soundtrack; and true to their core function, the original songs acted as ‘mediator of future existence’ (DeNora, 2000, p. 63). I emerged a more relational being, in fuller awareness of my political being.

That was my *révolte*.

‘*Qu’est ce que cela veut dire?’*

‘*Han.*’

In the face of the intangible factors of explicit and implicit power dynamics conferred by the field (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2020), I believe that the songs were instrumental in this creative and artistic process, enabling me to represent for myself *han*, which Korean American poet E. J. Koh describes as:

‘an almost unimaginable grief ... a national characteristic of the Korean people ... it’s a pain that is generational. It’s passed down ... it’s a collective suffering ... it’s the gap in which something can never be closed, can never be resolved or repaired.’

(Koh, 2020)
The song parody process as described herein – being in the middle mode – led, on the surface, to an autobiographical story. However, I believe that the strength and therapeutic power of what I did and how I did it lies in the cultural ground that I created for myself through the song parody. I was, as Robine states when describing the middle mode: both ‘acteur’ (agent) and ‘bénéficiaire’ (recipient) (Robine, 1998, p. 44). Indeed, didn’t I write above: I had made my own cure and I was giving it to myself? I called upon culture (in the form of popular music and literature) to transform the primal wound into ‘primal creation’ (’création primale’) (ibid, p. 41).

According to Wheeler:

‘Culture is the completion of our biological development, which is left incomplete at birth to allow for that maximum adaptability to different environmental conditions — the fundamental human survival strategy of human nature itself.’

(Wheeler, 2005, p. 108)

In the middle mode, I experienced the intangibility of culture and what we take for granted: that ‘culture starts with mother’s milk’ (Chidiac, 2022).

I contend that the artistic creation of self, the sine qua non of Gestalt therapy, is necessarily, if not above all, cultural: ‘créer sa vie comme [le sujet] créerait une œuvre’ (‘to create one’s life like one would create one’s artwork’) (Robine, 1998, p. 41).

The holy hour (original lyrics)

I stand and hear my voice cry out
A wordless scream at ancient power
It breaks against stone
I softly leave you crying
I cannot hold what you devour
The sacrifice of penance
In the holy hour

(Smith, Tolhurst & Gallup, 1981)

Burning the holy hour

I stand and hear my voice cry out
A wordless scream at ancient power
It breaks all my bones
I softly shake my body
I cannot hold the orphan’s vow
The sacrifice of severance
In the holy hour

Lyric substitution (in bold): Aline Giordano (2021)

In the middle mode, I transcended my reality – that ontological uprooting; I softened the absurd, gave it flesh and breath. In the middle mode, I softened history, gave it flesh and breath.

‘Qu’est ce que cela veut dire?’

Recently, while preparing for a talk on rehumanising the racial narrative, I reminded myself of Korean American scholar Cathy Park Hong’s seminal book Minor Feelings: a reckoning on race and the Asian condition (Hong, 2020). I would find on page eighteen the gap I had sought to close for myself at the beginning of this piece of research:

‘Patiently educating a clueless white person about race is draining. It takes all your powers of persuasion. Because it’s more than a chat about race. It’s ontological. It’s like explaining to a person why you exist, or why you feel pain, or why your reality is distinct from their reality.

‘Culture is the completion of our biological development, which is left incomplete at birth to allow for that maximum adaptability to different environmental conditions — the fundamental human survival strategy of human nature itself.’

(Wheeler, 2005, p. 108)

What this means is that, in the experience of being simultaneously cultural agent and recipient, I proved to myself that I exist.

Conclusion

Engaging in song parody has the power to open up exciting possibilities for therapeutic purposes. I have positioned song parody as a Gestalt experiment. As such, its value is dependent ‘on the skills and sensitivity with which it is employed’ (Polster & Polster, 1974, p. 284).
I contend that the song parody becomes a powerful carrier of culture. But let us not forget that the song in its original form is also a powerful carrier of culture in its own right. Indeed, the ubiquitous and timeless song *Stand by Me* (King, Leiber & Stoller, 1961) performed by Ben E. King was originally inspired by a Gospel tune and passages from the Bible, and turned protest song in the sixties USA (Rodgers, no date), while *What a Wonderful World* (Weiss & Thiele, 1967) sung by Louis Armstrong was written to the backdrop of racial tensions and over the years came to be associated with ‘less-than-cheerful imagery’ around the world (BBC, 2011). Listening to a song with the *other*, in the moment, needs to be done sensitively, otherwise, this:

‘... would force one’s experience onto someone else, reduce their lived experience into a subservient narrative. And now the other would carry their experience and relationship with their song like a Sisyphean burden, condemned to hear it as a mere object, weakened by the other’s interference — simplified by cultural arrogance.’

(Giordano, 2022)

Song parody is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is the result of the interrelated cultural complexities of self and environment. In this paper, I have invited you to experience the popular music song as a cultural factor of psychological resilience. This latter point is the most enduring figure that arose from this experiment and still holds strongly in my lived experience. I now invite you to view culture (epitomised by the song) not just as context, but as a critical and often overlooked factor in the therapeutic process and encounter.

Lastly, in this paper, my writings have travelled through two layers of discourse: the personal experience manifested in the first-person narrative and the scholarly discourse anchored in Gestalt therapy, Relational Organisational Gestalt and popular music literature. Some may have found the close proximity of both discourses discordant, others harmonious. This paper was also an invitation for you to experience creative writing: song parody as creative writing fulfilling the function of awareness raising, but also creative writing as a means to anchor the new learning and ways of being (Chidiac, 2018). I have meticulously crafted this paper as a creative non-fiction therapeutic story that is neither memoir nor autobiography, but the imagined story of the felt presence of an imaginary Asian woman: my birth mother.

‘For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world.’

(King, 2003, p. 10)

At this point, you might like to take a breath.

**Secret song**

It is not unusual for artists to hide a secret song (a hidden track) at the end of their records (Golsen, 2021). I remember Nirvana’s *Endless Nameless* (Nirvana, 1991) hidden track which, once ended, left me altogether battered, provoked and curious. What follows is the equivalent of my secret song.

I agree with Wheeler in that ‘culture is never static’ and thus ‘every person belongs to many different cultural or subcultural groupings’ (Wheeler, 2005, p. 126). However, I have always found it difficult to ‘belong’: how can I hold my own cultural differences when half of them are buried in the ancestral lineage and the other half controlled by the engine of the totalising societies?

With this Gestalt experiment in song parody I have addressed the inter-cultural gap in which I had found myself. In so doing, I was able to step back into my humanness, the very place that the trauma expelled me from (Cyrulnik, 2012). Indeed, being severed from family does not just mean no-longer-belonging-to-family or cultural displacement; it means being excluded from the family of human beings or, indeed, from humanity itself. I have found that working with culture in this way – via song parody – is an unfolding process of learning about self; and as I work with clients using the song parody process, more learning about the cultural self in relation to power and structure emerges.

In a world that relentlessly seeks to de-culture and de-humanise us with consumerism, scientific dogma and technological fundamentalism (amongst other means), I proclaim that song parody, as a Gestalt experiment, and the wider creative writing process can help individuals reconnect with their humanness.

Holding true Wheeler’s assertion about culture, now more than ever, we must actively support our and our clients’ expressive, creative and artistic possibilities to help create culture in order to navigate the dominant epistemological framework whose prevailing language is that of market economy. We must do this in order to save humanity from this (not so) new form of colonisation of men.
Note

All the translations from the French language into English are the author’s and solely for the purpose of this paper.

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Towards a relational/compassionate Gestalt understanding of trauma and addiction

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Abstract

Traumatic childhood and life events shape how individuals see themselves and the world. When there is a lack of a caring, supportive other to help nurture and process the pain, the wounds of this initial trauma and the various ways of managing the aftermath can become fixed and directly impact relationships, self-perception, coping skills, self-esteem, etc. (Kepner, 2013; Maté, 2010; Taylor, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2015). Unfortunately, a common and initially effective way of managing the impact of trauma and adjusting to the world is through addictive behaviours (Brownell, 2012; Clemmens & Matzko, 2004; Maté, 2010; Matzko, 1997; Pintus, 2017). Such behaviours provide temporary relief and anaesthetise emotional and relational pain. The goal of addiction is to push us away from experiencing unpleasantness, and it briefly allows problems, challenges and discomfort to melt away. Initially, this can be a functional, creative adjustment that helps the individual survive and find a place to belong. Painful experiences can heal through a nurturing, empathetic relationship. However, without a caring other, trauma and addiction become linked and intertwined.

Keywords

trauma, relational Gestalt, compassion, addiction, creative adjustment, hope, healing

Introduction

In this article, I will share what I believe is a new paradigm for understanding addiction and trauma, resulting from the last 22 years of work as a clinician, teacher, client, and, most importantly, my human experiences as a son, husband, and father. I have had wonderful mentors/teachers on this journey who have inspired and influenced my work, teachings, and writings. Gestalt therapy found me in Tijuana, Mexico, when I was a young psychology student, first as a client, then as a student, and finally as a therapist and teacher. In Gestalt, I found resonance in my understanding of my human nature and that of others. I began my professional journey as a Gestalt psychotherapist in Tijuana, Mexico, and shortly after, in San Diego, California. In this process, I connected with the Gestalt therapy relational approach, the theoretical cornerstone of my work and the backbone of the present article.

Relational Gestalt therapy provides the ground for a fresh way to understand and treat both trauma and addiction. It takes the emphasis off the traumatic event and addictive behaviours to focus on the kinds of support – emotional, physical and relational – that were needed at the time to process the traumatic experience (Maté, 2010; Spinazzola et al., 2018; Pintus, 2017; Taylor & Duff, 2018). These understandings paint a clear picture of the importance of creating a safe, therapeutic space for relational contact with an individual who has experienced pain and has survived by avoiding and disconnecting from themselves and the world through addiction (Maté, 2010; Kepner, 2003; Van der Kolk, 2006). Initially, the addictive behaviour can serve as a functional creative adjustment, as it allows the individual to survive by preventing or dulling painful experiences; unfortunately, it eventually leads to maladaptive, destructive behaviours. For purposes of this discussion, addiction refers to any behaviour, substance, person, relationship, or emotional connection that allows the individual to interrupt connectedness and awareness (Clemmens, 2014; Matzko, 1997).

I agree with Gabor Mate’s perspective that what we need to ask is not ‘Why the addiction?’ but ‘Why
the pain?’ (Maté, 2010, p. 55). This perspective helps us understand addiction from its purpose in the individual’s story instead of focusing on the behaviours or the aftermath. It requires us therapists to co-create with our clients a relational environment that will support processing the unspoken trauma. With a focus on the pain of trauma rather than addictive behaviour, we can see how the shaping of trauma directly impacts self-perception and worldview (Maté, 2010; Spinazzola et al., 2018; Pintus, 2017; Taylor & Duff, 2018). With a Relational Gestalt approach, we address the experience behind the addiction and focus on the causative factors that made the addictive behaviours appealing.

The best way to help us understand the impact of trauma and the creative adjustment of addiction is through our clients’ experiences. Ten years ago, I began to work with Tom. When we first met, he was an angry, seventeen-year-old boy who did not believe therapy would help him. He had lost most of his family and loved ones, and trusting another adult was too risky. Tom’s biological mother had severe mental illness and drug addiction and was not involved in his life after birth. His father was murdered by a rival gang when he was four years old, and by the time he was six, his last available relative was his great-grandmother, who had severe dementia. Thus, he was placed in the foster care system, where he lived until he was eight, and a wonderful, loving woman adopted him.

Despite having the loving presence of his adoptive mother, Tom had significant academic challenges and difficulty developing social relationships. He began to smoke marijuana when he was sixteen, which became an effective way of mitigating his anger. This eventually allowed him to be more present and develop a friend group. For the first time in his life, he felt like he belonged and was not inundated by fear and anger. Unfortunately, his marijuana use triggered a psychotic episode that landed him in a psychiatric unit. Initially, our work focused on developing enough safety for him to stay in the room with me, which required long moments of silence to give him the space to make the choice to share his story. Slowly he began to reveal more of himself. In our time working together, he found a creative outlet to express what, at times, was hard to say with spoken words. Through writing raps and poems, he has been able to communicate and connect with me and, eventually, with many around the world. He asked if I could share his words with others that may benefit from understanding the experience of despair and addiction from the client’s experience. The following is one of his poems:

### Every day I wonder...

Every day I wonder,
if the demon that slumbers in me will arise,
filling my head with lies.
I have vivid thoughts as well as dreams.
Watching blood flow and hearing screams.
I try to fight this.

While I ask, ‘Why am I like this?’
I’m acting cheerful while I’m truly fearful.
In the darkness, something’s lurking, and it’s smirking.
I wonder... is my medication working?
I fill page after page with raw emotion.
Unrelenting rage as powerful as a stormy ocean.

I go to therapy, searching for answers.
I hope it’s helping me.
But my soul is infected as if it has cancer.
Is this infection simply a reflection of what I truly am?
Or another deception?
I need medication just to make it through the night.
I’m hoping I’ll see another day and be in the light.
Recurring voices.
Thankfully, they’re not evil and, at times,
help me make just choices.

However, even when medicated,
at times, I almost implode.
I take a wrong turn to the wrong road.
For years when I was dreaming,
I was seeing demons.
I would wake up sweating and screaming,
still feeling like something
was trying to drag me to hell.

So, I self-medicated with weed and liquor.
It would help for a while.
But in the end, I became bitter and sicker.

In Tom’s words, we connect with the painful reality of being in this world and trying to survive through anaesthetising with substances, even though the long-term consequences lead to turmoil and suffering. Nevertheless, he also highlights how the possibility of healing begins to emerge as we are able to create space to experience pain. Healing is allowing pain to be experienced and processed, and eventually, we realise that the pain ends (Maté, 2010). Unfortunately, when we run away from pain, we run into suffering (Nhất Hạnh, 2013).

### Towards a functional understanding of addiction

When we invite curiosity and explore our clients’ stories, we often find that addictive behaviours arise...
in early adolescence. During this crucial transitional period, belonging to a social group becomes a priority. When there is unprocessed trauma, it shapes the role the adolescent plays within the group and the kinds of adaptations the youth will make to both belong and maintain a coherent self-concept (Flores, 2011; Maté, 2010; Van der Kolk, 2015). Addiction can serve as a functional creative adjustment as individuals immerse themselves in the complicated social structures of adolescence. This critical awareness can help us understand the function of addictive behaviours. With time, these adjustments can become maladaptive. However, for a behaviour to be maladaptive, it must first be adaptive. There was a moment when it was functional; it was the best survival option (Clemmens & Matzko, 2004; Matzko, 1997; Pintus, 2017).

Understanding this allows us to see addiction from its function, to interrupt contact with emotions and sensations, Self, others, and the world.

There are multiple ways beyond substances to interrupt connectedness, for example, gambling, sex, relationships, falling in love, work, etc. However, certain addictive behaviours are socially accepted and sometimes celebrated. For example, if somebody is a ‘hard worker’, they may work extensive hours, advance in their profession, and achieve financial success and recognition. We might not name this an addiction; however, if we pay attention to the negative consequences of this unhealthy relationship with work, we may see the detrimental effect on the individual’s ability to be present with family, their physical health, emotional regulation and their relationship with themselves. Work takes over their life, and despite the negative consequences, they cannot stop.

Whether it is work success or alcohol, life becomes about getting it, hiding it, protecting it, and obsessing about the next high. It becomes a way of medicating uncomfortableness, pain, loneliness, sadness, etc. The purpose of all addictions is to change brain chemistry (Grisel, 2019; Lembke, 2021; Maté, 2010). The goal of addiction is to push us away from experiencing unpleasant emotions and to trigger dopamine production. Furthermore, at that moment, the addictive behaviour briefly allows problems, challenges, and discomfort to melt away. Because, in the end, that is the function of this creative adjustment.

**Defining addiction**

A significant challenge is finding a definition of addiction that fits into the Relational Gestalt perspective. One of the most widely accepted definitions is the disease model, which describes addiction as a biological, neurological, genetic, and environmental disease (Fisher, 2022; Maté, 2010). According to the disease model, addiction is a brain disease characterised by altered brain structure and functioning. These brain abnormalities cause individuals with this disease to become addicted to substances or activities. This model considers addiction irreversible once acquired.

The disease model has substantial limitations. I believe it is missing one of the critical components of understanding the humanity of addictive behaviours. For most of us, addiction begins as a functional way of adapting and reducing it to a simple brain disease is preposterous. As we explore addiction from its purpose, to soothe the pain of unresolved trauma, the disease model becomes less relevant, and we can begin to ascertain addiction as a developmental adaptation and a creative adjustment.

The best definition of addiction I have found is in Gabor Maté’s book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* (2010, pp. 148-160). Maté suggests three essential components that must be present to define any given behaviour as addictive: (1) relief or pleasure in the short term; (2) negative long-term consequences; and (3) unable/unwillingness to stop (Maté, 2010). While Maté’s definition is not fully relational, it provides a framework for explicating the relational approach.

(1) Relief or pleasure in the short-term, the addictive behaviour, substance, person, or relationship, in the immediacy of the moment, is pleasurable; it stimulates the reward system in the brain and the production of dopamine (Grisel, 2019; Lembke, 2021). This dopamine dump relieves pain and triggers the experience of pleasure. After doing this work for over twenty years, I still have not met anyone who has become addicted to something that does not feel ‘really good’. Therefore, for something to be addictive, it needs to bring short-term relief or pleasure. However, that is only one of the components because many pleasurable experiences feel ‘really good’. However, most do not immediately lead to unhealthy compulsive behaviour or use.

(2) Negative long-term consequences. When the need for pleasure and anaesthetising takes over, eventually, negative consequences arise, such as relationship problems, health complications, and a general inability to function; it is essential to understand that, for many individuals, the negative consequences are enough to curb the behaviour. Based on this definition, those individuals would not meet the criteria for addiction.
Nevertheless, when unhealthy patterns continue despite the negative impact, the reality of addiction begins to materialise.

(3) Inability or unwillingness to give it up. The third component of Gabor’s definition of addiction highlights the most destructive quality of addictive behaviours and is the primary reasons most people seek help. One of the most challenging aspects of working with clients in recovery is being with someone who is aware of how destructive their addiction has become, but they are unable to stop. From the outside perspective, it can appear as irrational behaviour. Nevertheless, even though it hurts the individual, their loved ones, and their ability to function, they cannot or will not stop. Our responsibility as therapists is to understand that the need to survive and maintain pseudo-control is greater than the negative impact. That brief moment of pleasure is worth the turmoil; in a way, this highlights the intensity of the pain being medicated.

The protective blanket called addiction

To comprehend the power of addiction, we need to understand that this is linked to survival (Maté, 2010). Addiction can be the warmest blanket in the world. It takes away the pain and discomfort and creates a momentary safe cocoon. Later, the negative consequences slap you in the face. Nevertheless, for a moment, it allows a blissful momentary relief from pain. It is essential for the therapist to understand, embrace, and connect with how valuable addiction has been for the client. Therefore, if we reduce addiction to bad behaviour that needs to stop, we risk doing a disservice to our clients. If negative consequences were enough of a deterrent, no one would be addicted. We begin to understand that the need for the blanket was never the problem; it was an attempt to anaesthetise the pain. The issue is that the chosen blanket eventually results in negative consequences.

The ultimate risk of reducing addiction to bad behaviour and having a rigid, punitive response can perpetuate the client’s fixed negative belief that something is ‘wrong’ with them. Therefore, we must focus our attention beyond addictive behaviour, which will allow us to explore what it is trying to solve and the pain behind it. Addiction disrupts contact, medicates, and manages life (Brownell, 2012; Clemmens, 2014; Clemmens & Matzko, 2004). Therefore, if addiction is not the problem but the attempt to solve it, the natural question is, what is the problem? To answer this question, we need to understand the impact of trauma.

Understanding trauma

We need to be mindful of our profession’s long-standing tendency to reduce complex phenomena to a single fundamental cause (Fisher, 2022). Trauma is often understood as the consequence of a system being overwhelmed by events that create significant disruption. I agree that horrific experiences such as sexual abuse, severe neglect, war, assault, etc. impact the individual’s ability to process and adapt (Jarvis, 2020; Kepner, 2013; Taylor, 2014). However, trauma is not just about events; it is about what happens inside us as a consequence of those events. Therefore, we must expand our narrow focus on understanding trauma as a cause-and-effect phenomenon. A better understanding of trauma is the reshaping of the aftermath of painful experiences. It is crucial to broaden our understanding of how the reshaping of trauma takes place in the lifespan of our clients. Besides major distressing experiences, traumatic reshaping can occur through an ongoing barrage of experiences where the individual’s needs were not satisfied and/or have been actively rejected or punished.

The best way to explain this is with an example I commonly use with clients. If I have a soda can and I strike it with a big rock, it will be severely reshaped. It is going to be different, and it is going to affect its functionality and how it looks. This is the impact of those major distressing events; the impact of the big-rock events reshape how I see myself and the world and how I relate to others. If we continue with the metaphor of the soda can, it is relatively easy to see the relationship between the rock and the dent. However, the reshaping of trauma is not exclusive to massive-rock events; if I take little pebbles and constantly hit the soda can, eventually, it will be reshaped. But finding the pebble that caused all the damage is impossible. To understand the impact, we need to account for the whole pile. The reshaping of trauma can also come through constant patterns, situations, behaviours, moments, and environments. However, the challenge is that they are less evident than the big rocks. Therefore, the awareness of the impact of these events can be less apparent to the individual.

What are those patterns? A constant experience of disconnection and aloneness, depressed or absent parent, not being held when in pain, not being seen because of disruption in the household, consistent patterns of aggression, anxious or fearful households, etc. that eventually lead to fixed beliefs as a way of creative adjustment to the family system (Kepner, 2013; Maté, 2010). However, we tend to be unfair to the
younger Self because we measure trauma from an adult perspective. We dismiss the reality of the experience of the child. The metaphor of the soda can illustrates how fragile our ability to protect ourselves is when we depend on others to protect us. Therefore, when protection or safety is unavailable, our nervous system must be on guard to keep us safe and provide a way of surviving (Porges, 2017). I adapt and reshape to endure. Ultimately, trauma is a chronic disruption of connectedness.

**Embodied impact of trauma**

The impact of trauma is not always evident; we only see people on the surface. They might appear to be successful, connected and well-adjusted. We are unable to see the pain behind the mask. Trauma is not what happens; it is not the event nor the situation. Trauma is the internal imprint of the aftermath of pain without empathic contact (Kepner, 2013; Spinazzola et al., 2018; Taylor, 2014). Therefore, it impacts function, self-perception, relationships, and the view of the Self in the world. This imprint is stored in the body; developing emotional and corporal awareness can be highly destabilising (Van der Kolk, 2015). Understanding that disconnecting is equivalent to surviving allows us to shape our clinical work with caution and timely interventions (Hycner, 1991; Kepner, 2013; Taylor, 2014). Even though we therapists hope to create a safe space for genuine contact to emerge, if the value of the protective disconnection is not acknowledged, it can lead to an overwhelming need to anaesthetise through addictive behaviours.

Thus, it is imperative to invest time in witnessing and validating our client’s story and to support the awareness of the impact of trauma before we focus on deep process work (Hycner, 1991; Kepner, 2013; Polster, 2020; Yontef, 1991). When the body holds pain, there is nothing more threatening than to connect with it (Kepner, 2013). After all, our body is where we store unprocessed emotions, and through active disconnect, we are able to contain them. With this understanding of trauma, we can formulate how addiction is a highly disruptive (Kepner, 2013). After all, our body is where we store unprocessed emotions, and through active disconnect, we are able to contain them. With this understanding of trauma, we can formulate how addiction is a highly disruptive way to disrupt contact. Now we begin to see the pain behind the mask. Trauma is not what happens; it is not the event nor the situation. Trauma is the internal imprint of the aftermath of pain without empathic contact (Kepner, 2013; Spinazzola et al., 2018; Taylor, 2014). Therefore, it impacts function, self-perception, relationships, and the view of the Self in the world. This imprint is stored in the body; developing emotional and corporal awareness can be highly destabilising (Van der Kolk, 2015). Understanding that disconnecting is equivalent to surviving allows us to shape our clinical work with caution and timely interventions (Hycner, 1991; Kepner, 2013; Taylor, 2014). Even though we therapists hope to create a safe space for genuine contact to emerge, if the value of the protective disconnection is not acknowledged, it can lead to an overwhelming need to anaesthetise through addictive behaviours.

**Surviving through disconnect**

I want to invite you to take a moment to allow yourself to be in the client’s space as you begin your journey into psychotherapy. In this reality, you are struggling with addiction and realise you need help. So here you are, sitting across the room from a stranger who invites you to let go of the behaviour or substance that has been a part of your life for years. This behaviour, relationship, and/or substance is a way of adapting to a dangerous world. Despite the pile-up of consequences, this is how you have survived. This adaptive behaviour has been your best friend and way of surviving. It has allowed you to disconnect from pain and unpleasant memories. You come to therapy, and the invitation is to stop doing that thing that has helped you and anaesthetised the pain. Your therapist suggests you make space for all the unpleasant feelings and memories that surface. It is a horrible invitation. However, this invitation is worth it because I believe in healing. I trust that if we go through this joint exploration, the client will not have to stay in a prison of addictive behaviours and constant suffering. I am convinced that the most valuable support we offer our clients is a space and a relationship where the possibility of healing can eventually emerge.

This understanding allows us to shift our focus from abstinence to recovery and reconnection with a compassionate awareness of how trauma reshaped the individual sitting across the room from us. We therapists can move beyond the confinements of reducing harmful behaviour, embracing how this adjustment has helped the individual manage pain and adjust. This awareness can help us provide a space of compassionate, relational support instead of expecting negative consequences to motivate clients.

**Trauma as an adult experience**

The consequences of trauma shape adult life; sometimes, the impact is evident, but for most of us, it has become so intertwined that we are unaware of how much we are impacted (Jarvis, 2020; Kepner, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2015). First, there is a loss of response flexibility. To some extent, the world is reduced to what is safe and what is a threat. There is no possibility of being flexible; there is no active adjustment to the world. A rigid adaptation becomes necessary to prevent painful triggers and for the fantasy of control to continue.

Another common consequence of trauma is a fundamental disconnect from the Self (Kepner, 2013; Maté, 2010; Taylor, 2014). For the individual to be aware of their authentic Self requires the ability to hold space for uncomfortable memories, experiences, emotions, and feelings. Fixed beliefs cloud the view of the authentic Self. To survive, I remain fundamentally disconnected from a part of myself because it is too close to the pain; ultimately, trauma shapes my view of the Self and the world.
These fixed beliefs efficiently provide immediate protection (Flores, 2011; Kepner, 2013). The primary responsibility of our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) is to keep us alive; it regulates involuntary physiological processes, including heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and digestion (Taylor, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2015). However, one of the essential functions of the ANS is to constantly scan for possible threats in the environment, our inner world, and the relationship in between. Steven Porges calls this neuroception: detection without awareness (Porges, 2017, pp. 11-12). We do it automatically to stay safe and react to threats without wasting time. When automatic responses are connected to our survival, there is no time to think and assess; we must react and process later or sometimes never.

The reactive non-conscious adaptation of the ANS to threats helps give context to one of the most disruptive consequences of trauma; it is impossible to be in the present moment (Taylor, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2015). Our perceptions are shaped by trauma. It is hard to see the world from our present moment; we see it from our past versions: the hurt child, the angry teen, etc. Therefore, trauma leads to the inability to be in the present. When we see the world through the lens of the past, we cannot be fully aware of our adult Self. We cannot view our power, protect ourselves and make space for the whole of human emotions. We need to be strong and suppress to survive.

**A compassionate/relational understanding of the relationship between trauma and addiction**

Integrating all of this allows us to formulate the relationship between trauma and addiction. First, however, we need to detour to deepen our undertaking. The two basic needs of every child are authenticity and attachment (Flores, 2011; Maté, 2010). A basic human need is to express emotions, sensations, ideas, thoughts and interests in a safe, loving and supportive environment. This nurturing, open space also allows the expression of sadness, anger, joy, curiosity, and creativity; in other words, it will enable one to be a child. On the other hand, attachment relates to survival; it is the drive for physical and emotional closeness with others (Flores, 2011; Maté, 2010). It ensures survival by bonding with an adult who can provide care and protection. Every child intrinsically knows they cannot take care of themselves. Therefore, children need an adult; they cannot feed, protect, clothe themselves, etc. Consequently, they must connect to an adult; hopefully, they form a loving attachment with someone who can protect them.

The challenge is that the need to attach surpasses the need for authenticity (Maté, 2010). A distorted self-view begins to take shape when the natural expression of the child's Self does not fit into the family system or the parent's cultural and/or familiar introjections (Kepner, 2013; Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951; Polster & Polster, 1973; Polster, 2023; Yontef, 1991). For example, I recently had a session with a 27-year-old woman who wanted to understand why she was unable to engage in meaningful romantic relationships. She was able to enjoy sexual pleasure with a partner until the other began to express love and care which, for her, completely ‘ruined the relationship', and her sexual drive was crushed. She had periods in her life of what she described as ‘sexual acting out' which meant going out on a nightly basis and looking for as many sexual partners as she possibly could. She expressed feeling baffled by her adult behaviour; she had no explanation for it, and she did not remember any significant traumatic or abusive experiences in her childhood.

As we explored more of her story, she shared that she grew up in a small town where her father was the pastor and, therefore, her family had to be the role models of proper moral behaviours. She described her younger self as this active and curious young girl who loved exploring the woods, playing with the boys in town, and loved animals. Basically, all activities ‘that were not proper for the preacher's daughter'. She had to behave like a lady and exemplify appropriate Christian values. She was constantly under the moral microscope of her family and the parish members. However, the most challenging part of her experience was not the high scrutiny of others. It was that her home life did not match her outer appearance. At home, her father was aloof, uninvolved and completely emotionally withdrawn. She described her mother as angry and with high expectations of how a proper woman needs to behave but incapable of expressing love or affection. Unless they were at church, where she behaved utterly differently, she learned through these experiences that to belong, she needed to act as the proper preacher’s daughter and never speak about the reality of her life. In other words, she understood that being herself was wrong. Thus, she needed to be this ‘other girl’ in order to be part of her family. Her need to attach surpassed her need to be authentic. She had to disconnect from herself in order to survive.

I am fully aware that this example oversimplifies a very complex human experience. However, it helps
us understand how humans adapt to belong to the family system and increase the possibilities of survival. Unfortunately, this initial disconnect with the natural expression of the Self creates an internal shift. The child begins to formulate an ideal self that, for most, can never be achieved (Polster & Polster, 1973; Yontef, 1991). This dissonance between the Self and ideal Self creates a devastating awareness; ‘Who I am wrong’ which is the essence of shame. Gary Yontef describes shame as a sense of defect or inferiority, being unlovable and unworthy of respect (Yontef, 1991, p. 493). Shame is a feeling of the whole self ‘not being enough’. As devastating as shame is, it allows the child to create a belief about themselves that will enable them to attach. Through this organismic self-regulation, our nervous system does whatever it needs to survive (Kepner, 2013; Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951; Polster & Polster, 1973). This adaptation through shame can lead to a fundamental disconnect from our body, emotions, others, and the world (Kepner, 2013; Taylor, 2013).

From this understanding of the shaping of trauma, we can begin to understand the role of addiction. As I mentioned, addiction can be a creative adjustment crucial to surviving and adapting (Maté, 2010). However, it can also support suppressing the authentic Self and a functioning disconnect from the world. To explain this visually, you can see the diagram below. On the white line are pleasurable experiences: substances, sex, working, eating, shopping, success, etc. Simply enjoying pleasure in whatever way is not pathological. Thus, pleasurable behaviours on their own are not a problem. The grey line represents potential trauma-shaping experiences: pain, abuse, unprocessed emotions, broken attachment, etc. Unfortunately, we all experience the reshaping of pain in the current world. However, pain, discomfort, and broken attachments are not always life-condemning. They are part of being human. Now that we have established the nature of human relational challenges and the value of pleasurable activities without pathologising either side, we can focus on what adjustments become disruptive in the individual’s life trajectory.

When no one can provide safe emphatic support in the early years, these naturally painful experiences become imprinted in the aftermath of trauma. They shape fixed beliefs about the individual and can lead to experiences of shame and fear of being seen (Kepner, 2013; Polster, 2023). Finding ways to avoid the pain becomes essential. Pleasurable experiences help manage pain; this moment of respite is a functional creative adjustment. Sometimes the benefits of this anaesthetising experience allow the individual to be a better student, less fearful, and an effective suppressor of the shameful authentic Self. It grants survival in a moment to find a place to belong or feel connected. However, if this lack of emphatic support continues to be absent beyond the functional creative adjustment period, addiction and trauma become linked and intertwined (Maté, 2010; Pintus, 2017). Reality begins to be shaped by this need to survive through anaesthetising experiences. The pain of the trauma can be so unbearable that the belief is that ‘I will not survive without the warm blanket of my addiction’.

As clinicians, we now face the challenge of what we focus on. Logically, the initial goal is to recover, but recovery is much more than abstinence. The word ‘recover’ implies getting something back that was lost. Nevertheless, the ability to connect might be the most impactful loss. Therefore, the ultimate goal is to reconnect. Even though the initial motivation is to abstain from addictive behaviours that have brought negative consequences, I believe that providing a space where the possibility of healing through relational contact emerges is one of our most important responsibilities (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2022; Hycner, 1991; Polster, 2020; Roubal & Francesetti, 2022). As therapists, we are responsible for providing the three main components of the healing therapeutic relationship: safety, contact and hope.

A space where healing can emerge

Safety is not the absence of a threat but the ability to make contact (Porges, 2017). As clinicians, we need to be mindful that providing a ‘safe space’ takes time, especially when working with someone in severe pain (Francesetti, Gecele & Roubal, 2022; Hycner, 1991). This space is co-created, but it begins with the therapist’s ability to generate a supportive environment where the client can be fully seen. The client needs to feel they are in a milieu where contact with another human is safe enough, and they can slowly begin to shed layers of protection (Hycner, 1991; Kepner, 2013). This becomes a co-created space that allows for a joint exploration
of trust and mistrust. Understanding the field as a relational space for healing trauma is important. It is in the in-between that healing happens; every relationship has a unique space that is a co-creation between client and therapist. It is in this space where the possibility of healing begins to emerge.

Contact is a concept that is dear to our hearts as Gestalt therapists and the source of constant disagreement among us. Thus, I will not try to define contact beyond your (the reader's) understanding of it; I will instead focus on its role in the healing of trauma and, more so, on our responsibility to provide a space for contact. We cannot expect our clients to have the ability to make contact. (Hycner, 1991; Kepner, 2013; Polster & Polster, 1973). Depending on the pattern developed in response to trauma, they may do their best to avoid contact. Thus, we are responsible for engaging and providing relational space for contact. There is a prerequisite for contact: vulnerability. My biggest challenge as a clinician is to allow myself to be vulnerable, which opens a space for contact, and the willingness to trust what emerges from the field.

I believe that in this moment of connectedness, we can begin to create a reparative relationship with our clients. They can experience a space where their pain can be held, but they can also choose how much they want to explore, and this is received with compassion and empathy; their pain is seen, their story is valued, and there is no urgency to make it better or hide it quickly to move towards survival.

Finally, let us address hope. I am not referring to empty optimism based on a false sense of security and statements like ‘It's going to be ok’. Hope is experienced in the moments of holding space for the other to openly express pain, sadness, anger, despair, etc. It is an embodied knowledge that healing is possible even though it is a long and painful road. Hope comes in micro-doses, small glimmers of connectedness, peace, possibilities, and being able to see beyond the shame and pain. Moreover, this narrow reality can begin to expand. Holding hope is the hardest part of our work; there are plenty of moments when I experience hopelessness. Moreover, like all humans, it is hard to look beyond the abyss of despair. However, hope is possible within us, and we can hold on to the smallest part of it to get through the storm. Despite all the ways we hurt one another, humans can heal, lovingly support each other, and hold on to the possibility of healing.

In the therapeutic relationship, we are the holders of hope. We get to hold it for both of us. Of course, there will be pain and discomfort. However, hope can emerge by creating a relational safe space for contact (Francesetti & Roubal, 2020; Hycner, 1991; Kepner, 2013). This experience allows us to embrace that embarking on this journey is worth it because the possibility of healing, despite the pain, begins to emerge. The most valuable component of the therapeutic relationship is our ability to hold hope. I want to leave you with one last verse from Tom. This poem serves as a reminder of why this work is so valuable and beautiful. Providing a compassionate space and supportive relationship where the possibility of healing is present can lead to the emergence of the essence of our loving humanity.

**Hopeful**

At times it seems there's nothing but darkness. There's no hope. So, we drink and turn to drugs. A way to cope and numb our pain. But what do we gain? We grow to be insane. But it is not too late to repair the damage, to heal our wounds. We can find the light within each of us. There is good in every one of us. It may be difficult to find that light, Especially after living in the dark for however long. I will admit I'm still trying to find peace myself. Have so much anger, and at times I resist recovery. I want to change, and I believe it's possible. It's even in range. When we find the light and embrace it, it spreads. From our souls to our hearts to our heads. It's never too late to take care to take control of our fate. My greatest enemy whispers in my ear. He's manipulative, deceiving me for years, I'm afraid, at times. But it's just a test. No different than the rest. We all have our battles, internally or otherwise. How you fight yours is up to you. I don't mean to preach. This is more of a reminder to myself. Don't give up.

In Tom's words, we can see the spark of hope that allows the possibility of making space for pain to be held. I do this work because I believe that when we engage in this journey from a compassionate relational stance, we can provide a safe space for others to explore their pain and allow for the possibility of healing to emerge.
Note

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References


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Gaslighting: how does a plant survive on fake watering?

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Abstract

Gaslighting is a covert manipulation method, which makes it inherently difficult to identify. The relational dimension of gaslighting is explored in this paper so that it might bring more clarity needed for clinical work. A definition of gaslighting and facilitating conditions in the field are also presented. This specific paper looks at gaslighting relations in more detail from the perspective of the person accepting the initiative of refocusing the figure, but the perspective of the gaslighter is considered equally important.

Keywords

gaslighting, manipulation, emotional abuse

Introduction

Gaslighting has become a buzzword – Merriam-Webster Dictionary proclaimed it as the Word of the Year for 2022. However, it’s not a new phenomenon or term. The term, like the pattern it describes, periodically comes into the focus of professionals and the general public and then recedes back into obscurity (the ground). These inconsistencies (where gaslighting has been figural in various periods) have led to inconsistencies in the use of the word in professional literature. For example, Bowlby (1988) and Miller (1979) both describe gaslighting in their work, but they don’t call it that, and it is not found in the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology (2001), although the term has existed since the forties.

Here, I examine how gaslighting can be explained relationally, attempting to open a discussion about its clinical implications. This dynamic corresponds to the metaphor of the movies (and play) for which the term was coined. In the play, Gaslight (1938, Patrick Hamilton) and movies Gaslight (1940 and 1944), gaslighting is depicted by turning a gas lamp on and off. The light illuminates the field a little and the person sees what is happening and then immediately falls into partial darkness. Things around her become blurry and clarity is lost. The initial notion that somebody else is turning the lights on and off to make her seem crazy is replaced by the person’s fear of losing her sanity. In this paper, I try to articulate what is the exact initiative of gaslighting and how gaslighting relation is co-created by both participating sides. I explore how the field enables gaslighting relations and what makes it covert and difficult to identify. In the exploration of the relational dimension, I first explore my own vulnerabilities for engaging in a gaslighting relation – it is a situation where I can best articulate the interaction between my own dissociated hopes and fears and events in the field.

Ideas put forth in this paper were first publicly presented to the international professional community during the British Gestalt Journal Seminar Day of 2022.

Can my figure be refocused?

Gaslighting is often referred to as making a person question their reality. I will look at the relational dimension of this (for me) vague definition through phenomenological exploration of my own process. I’m sitting in a coffee shop as I’m writing this text and I’m focused on clarifying gaslighting. I choose to leave stimuli irrelevant to my figure like the murmur of other people, undifferentiated. Is it possible to make me question if this is what I want to do? People who have experienced gaslighting come to therapy wondering why they did things that they consider harmful. When I listen to their stories, I also think ‘You must have known, all the signs were there.’ It is similar to the post-Second World War generations wondering how
it was possible that a skinny, sick-looking, dark-haired Hitler led an army under the idea of Aryan supremacy. My clients didn’t do such horrible things, but they did take out a loan for their partner’s business that they couldn’t afford, they left a loving husband for a person who didn’t care about them, and they did unethical things in their work. They all had free choice, yet now they feel manipulated. Before exploring my own gaslighting experience, I couldn’t see any reason for which I would willingly change my figure of exploring the topic of gaslighting. Now I can identify that, except for my wish to contribute to understanding gaslighting, I also fear that I will fail and feel unbearable shame. At the same time I hope my ideas will be recognised as special. The fear of shame and the hope I am special create a tension that is making me nervous while writing. They serve no function in achieving my goal, yet they do influence how I work on achieving it. I dissociated from them for a long time because they reminded me of the experience of my early relational trauma.

‘... we dissociate from traumatic experiences making them less personal, less real. With such divisions, it is a challenge to take on new perspectives or attitudes’ (Taylor, 2014, p. 1).

‘Such (traumatic) experiences had to be kept out of awareness and could not be used to develop a sense of agency and authenticity’ (Sapriel, 2012, Chapter 10).

Even though I dissociated from them, still they are, as Lynne Jacobs writes about ‘habits of engagement’ used in creative adjustment in the present. ‘Hopes and fears that are configured in ERT’s, comprise the background of our life choices, passions, ambitions, relationships, etc.’ (Jacobs, 2017, p. 13).

How could my hope of being special and fear of feeling shame make me vulnerable to gaslighting? Taylor says that ‘There is an overarching assumption in Gestalt therapy that the client has everything they need to grow ... when the effects of trauma become enduring, few of these assumptions can be relied upon’ (Taylor, 2014, p. 23). Some experiences lack something important relationally (mostly being seen, safe, and accepted); experiences that, if a person couldn’t cope, they avoid making figural as a rule (as I did). This means they are not allowed to emerge spontaneously as a figure, but they still influence everyday life. There is a wish to fulfil that need relationally, but it’s dissociated because of the previous painful experience that it can’t be met. It also includes the notion that somebody else takes responsibility for our being seen, accepted, and safe. The same as when we were children or in a position of overwhelming helplessness. The helplessness remains unprocessed, but the wish still drives us. In writing my article, I can express my feeling of vulnerability with the help of a quote: ‘To study the relational is like scooping up a handful of sand’ (Jacobs & Hycner, 2009, as cited in Bloom, D., 2010, p. 1). It feels easy to miss the target when I explore this field. Because I fear failure and shame, I would love a mentor who would help me turn the sand into a concrete form. At times I feel like giving up would relieve my anxiety and feeling of vulnerability. When I fear shame, my way of thinking polarises: I’m either better than others (hope) or I’m not (fear). This polarisation of oppositional hopes and fears creates an uncomfortable tension. My daughter watches a cartoon that ends with a message: ‘Cookie learned that he can be good at something, but that doesn’t mean he is better than others.’ That kind of integration falls apart in situations where I feel I could fail and this is when I start scanning the environment for ways of coping. Sometimes I search for a trustworthy person that would tell me that I am special and the opinion of others doesn’t matter. I can imagine that if a trustworthy colleague, who wanted to prevent me from my goal, said something that promised the resolution of my hopes and fears without giving up on my goal, I might refocus my figure. I would love to hear something like ‘I want to support you in developing your (special) ideas, but I can’t help you because you’re reading too much literature that it’s messing with your original thought. Just be yourself, if they can’t understand it, it’s their problem’. The figure of writing the perfect article on gaslighting in GT terms would now become that I’m too insecure and therefore sacrificing creativity. It wasn’t easy to identify with the fact that this is actually what I want to hear (because I was dissociating from it) and I couldn’t identify with the fact that this person doesn’t support my goal because that would be covert. I could identify with my initial wish that emerged spontaneously and that was to write a good article. However, the possible resolution of my hopes and fears brings a competing level of excitement. In this polarisation, I have a choice to make: my own organismic figure or the relationship that promises the resolution of my hopes and fears. The statement that he can’t help me if I continue to read relevant literature implies losing a relationship with a mentor. Gaslighters ‘may pressure you to put loyalty to the relationship above your own judgement,'
perception and needs’ (Marlow-Macoy, 2020, p. 8). A dialogue in the movie Duck Soup (1933) depicts this kind of emotional blackmail:

Teasdale: But I saw you with my own eyes.
Chicolini: Well, who ya gonna believe, me or your own eyes?

Watering plants

‘My fake plants died because I did not pretend to water them.’

(Mitch Hedberg, Comedian)

Let’s imagine a person that pretends to water her plant every day. She takes a watering can and makes circling motions with it, singing to the plant, even turning her tap on and off to give an impression of filling the watering can. But she doesn’t water the plant. The reader might think, ‘Well, I would notice that it was just a ceremony’. So how come the plants in this title die when the ‘watering’ stops? Some plants (as some people) are not sure about their identity, and this particular plant fears she is artificial, for example. At other times she hopes she is a natural plant (since she is capable of sensations, she obviously is), but there has been a lack of relational recognition of her ‘aliveness’. The fact that her dilemma is set in an ‘either one or the other’ way, makes it unresolvable because there is no room for integration of everything the plant is. She must turn to external validation of her fear or her hope. The figure of the watering ceremony by a trustworthy person gives an appearance of the relational experience that she lacked. In a gaslighting relation, this idea that our hopes and fears will be resolved by somebody else is offered to gain an advantage (control) in the relationship. The relationship is artificial, not the plant. So, the relationship becomes the realisation of the plant’s fear, but the plant can’t see that. If the fake watering stops, the plant will have a feeling she is dying because her hope is dying.

Why doesn’t the person just water the plant? Why the charade? Real watering would (metaphorically) mean contact, and for some character orientations in specific field conditions, contact is something to be avoided so they adapt through manipulation to get stimuli from other people.

I think of a client I’m working with. She is an independent and competent woman who is continuously (and covertly) treated as incompetent by her partner. He says that he appreciates her qualities and presents as being protective of her (it’s not second-guessing, he’s just making sure she doesn’t make a mistake, he says). In her life, she lacked the feeling of being protected. Her hope was that she is worthy of being protected by a man, her fear was that nobody cares about her. She dissociated from that hope and fear and lives her life by the credo of relying only upon herself. She gladly accepted a relationship in which she believes she is seen as competent, valuable, and protected. After being exposed to this kind of treatment for an extended amount of time, she recognises her partner is abusing her. Still, she can’t decide to abandon the idea of being protected by a man (her hope), so she cooperates with the idea of being incompetent.

What is gaslighting?

I propose the following explanation for the initiative of a gaslighting relation: gaslighting is the initiative of blocking contact through interference with the differentiation of what would spontaneously emerge as figural in a specific moment. The interference is a covert refocusing of attention towards an inorganismic figure. It is a figure that arouses excitement and based on which the person (re)directs behaviour, but which does not spontaneously differentiate from the most emergent need in the phenomenological field. ‘Everything experienced as figural is not necessarily a legitimate figure in the sense that it is not based upon an orgasmically or biologically based need. Some figures might actually be substitutional’ (Burley, 2012, p. 19). The new figure may be completely false or partially grounded in reality. Deflection blocks contact in a similar way, yet the main focus is turning away from contact, while in gaslighting the aim is turning away from contact and towards a specific (inorganismic) figure. So, deflection, among other strategies, is used in the initiative of gaslighting.

The organismic and inorganismic figures have a mutually exclusive relationship. They can’t be figural at the same time in the phenomenological field because they ‘latch on’ to an existing dissociation in which we ‘engage in dichotomised thinking for comfort at the expense of clarity’ (Hillman, 1996 as cited in Taylor, 2014, p. 1). When describing hopes and fears in the therapeutic relationship, Lynne Jacobs says:
‘Hopes and fears co-mingle in ever-shifting foreground/background constellations … At one moment, wishes, longings, desires … may be more figural; at another moment, the dread becomes more figural. Sometimes the foreground/background shift happens suddenly and can be disorienting.’

(Jacobs, 2017, p. 13)

While the hopes and fears remain polarised, the inorganismic and organismic figure exchange in the same manner in the phenomenology of a person. They alternate depending on the conditions in the phenomenological field. Since these two figures have a competing quality to them (because only one can be differentiated), this polarisation creates confusion and frustration, and the person becomes less efficient in trying to satisfy their own needs. Sometimes the person clearly sees that they are being manipulated (there is only a ceremony of watering), but at other times they believe that they are responsible for the confusion (e.g. maybe there is watering, but I can’t feel it). John Stevens describes his experience of disrupting his own awareness with censorship. He says that he feels disintegrated, confused, and frustrated because his energy is divided between responding to fantasy and reality which makes his functioning inefficient (Stevens, 1971). This is how people in a gaslighting relation describe their experience. The plant has sensations indicating that she is thirsty while she believes she is being watered. Spagnuolo Lobb describes the embodied experience of habitual interruption of contact that resonates with the experience of living in a gaslighting relation: ‘The anxiety … is the consequence of an excitement that has not had sufficient support on the physiological (adequate breathing) and relational level (lack of recognition of intentionality)’ (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2001, as cited in Spagnuolo Lobb & Cavaleri, 2023, p. 25).

Gaslighting in relation: mutual creative adaptation to enduring relational themes

‘Every moment is a creative adjusting to the current and coming moment’ (Jacobs, 2017). In the example of possible refocusing of my figure, my colleague creatively adapted to what I needed to hear to choose to change my course in behaviour. If I was to continue my exploration of gaslighting, maybe I would recognise that this is the strategy he usually uses in relating with me and reject that relationship. I would reject it if he were to openly ask me to stop my exploration, so he uses covert manipulation that most likely corresponds to his personality orientation. I creatively adapted by not questioning the idea that a paper should be written without thorough research of existing literature (even though I would continue to believe it should). In gaslighting, the true experience isn’t cancelled, rather it is reshaped (often with desensitisation) to be more similar to what is needed to maintain the relationship. ‘Change and growth takes place in the contact (engagement of difference) between the organism and its environment’ (Levin & Bar-Yoseph Levine, 2012). In a gaslighting relation, phenomenology that would bring an experience of difference is discouraged, and therefore there is no growth, rather a delicate maintaining of a fake relationship through mutual creative adaptation. The plant lives on a bare minimum needed to survive while the person provides a ceremony of watering. If the hope of watering stops, the plant will feel like she’s dying even though a fake plant can’t die and a natural plant has the agency to search for another source of nourishment (as people have). The gaslighter is refocusing figures towards assuming responsibility for one’s safety, acceptance, and recognition, and the other side is guaranteeing that she will not ask questions about her sensations and not direct behaviour based on what emerges spontaneously. She will not see the real relationship so that she wouldn’t have to reject it (reject the gaslighter). They both adapt so that their hopes and fears can be resolved without phenomenological exploration of their needs.

Even a slight change in the figure can bring a significant change in the field

One of the first situations that motivated me to explore gaslighting was my experience in providing support in the refugee (today referred to as migrants) crisis in 2015/2016. It was an example of gaslighting with devastating ongoing consequences.

Croatian people initially had an empathetic reaction to refugees coming through Croatia. Our own experience of war fuelled offers of support. It was a shock when, just three months after the start of the crisis, the public view of refugees and the behaviour towards them drastically changed. Suddenly, the figure of refugees who needed our support changed into migrants who were a security threat. They were perceived as terrorists who came to Europe to impose their way of living. In 2019 I wrote a chapter with Jasenka Pregrad where we explored this transformation of the figure. We described three phases: ‘empathy phase (first wave of refugees), the intrusion phase (after terrorist attacks
and over 600,000 refugees crossing over) and the illegal threat phase (when the EU closed the borders)’ (Čarija & Pregrad, 2019, p. 123-124). Our figure was to explore how the polarisation of the attitudes towards refugees happened. We did mention that ‘Several terrorist attacks in the EU (portrayed in the media as a direct consequence of Europe receiving refugees), the new, right-oriented Croatian government and a high number of refugees going through the country (compared with the total population of Croatia), strongly influenced the field.’ However, we didn’t separate what were spontaneous events in the field (e.g. a reaction of the public to a large number of people going through) and what was an intervention that had the purpose of refocusing what was figural for the public (the disinformation that the terrorists had arrived with the then current refugee wave, when in fact ‘most of the attackers were born and raised in France or Belgium’) (NPR, 2023). This distinction was important – spontaneous changes in the field leave space for contact. Covert manipulation breaks contact and enhances polarisation. The polarisation brought by the shift in figure from refugees to migrants heavily influenced political events (e.g. Brexit) and migration policies in the EU in the last few years. Violent pushbacks have led to people being injured or dying trying to cross the borders and have made international protection unavailable to refugees.

**Conditions in the field**

The change in what is figural needs to be supported by events in the field:

‘Hitler could not have accomplished what he did had he not personified tendencies in German culture exaggerated by profound economic distress, and had he not been supported by the German judiciary and the political leaders of his time who themselves reflected the underlying perceptual structures of that society.’

(Lichtenberg, 2012)

One especially important field condition is the absence of witnesses. Hanna Arendt said ‘the presence of others that see what we see and hear what we hear reassures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves’ (Arendt, 1958, cited in Spagnuolo Lobb, 2023). My former client was sexually abused by her father for years; the mother was aware of this and did nothing. In adulthood, my client continued to visit her family every Sunday for a family lunch despite everything that had been happening. She knew what had happened but would wonder ‘If I believe myself, how can I feel adjusted and normal if my whole family behaves as if it didn’t happen?’

A less differentiated field means more space for managing the figure formation. In confluence, the ‘figure/ground does not form and instead of the arising of two differentiated parts of the field, what would be figure and what would be ground simply flow together indistinguishably’ (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1972). In other words, confluence makes it easier to offer a refocusing of the figure without the person being aware of the change. This is why gaslighting is more successful when done in early stages of the cycle of organismic self-regulation, i.e. in the pre-contact phase. Confluence with dissociated hopes and fears is needed to block identification with them. Dissociated hopes and fears are windows through which a competing excitement can be activated for the refocusing to be successful.

Skill levels of both persons in either not persisting on aware orientation towards sensations and figures or in refocusing what is figural is important in a gaslighting relation. The gaslighter must be confident in presenting their reality and must be skilful in persuading the person using information they have about them. The other person/side must be skilled in giving up on their conscious orientation towards their sensations and figures. They must be skilled in dissociating from hopes and fears.

**Exploring gaslighting in relation**

When living in a gaslighting relation becomes habitual, the person becomes less efficient in satisfying their own needs. True excitement remains suppressed – there is a sense of emptiness with no contact. This could be described as a non-living polarity to living and having contact. In non-living, contact is weak or rare with oneself and with the field, therefore the experience of oneself and the field is blurred. Interestingly, there have been references to narcissism and the non-living polarity. Gecele compares narcissists to vampires that live a life of eternal youth feeding off stimuli of others, ‘Theirs is a non-life, in which death has come and gone’ (Gecele, 2020, p. 27). Shaw says that ‘The destructive narcissist state is maintained in power by keeping the libidinal infantile self in a constant dead or dying condition’ (Shaw, 2014, p. 15). This resonates with the metaphor of the gaslighting relationship as a fake plant pretending to be watered; there is no life, but there is no final death.
Here I can recommend two movies that depict the non-living polarity: *The Matrix* (1999) and *They Live* (1988). They refer to people as being alive, but not living, instead their ‘humanness’ is under the control of somebody else.

Working with people when they are in the non-living polarity, I see feelings of emptiness, boredom, blurriness, sleepiness, and confusion – this can put me in a trance state. There are moments of clarity that sometimes feel welcomed but that can change in a moment. Suddenly what was clear becomes unclear. Often I have an image of walking aimlessly through a thick, dark wood. Invitation for phenomenological exploration leads to confused looks or even frustration because the experience of self in the here and now is desensitised. It feels like the partner with whom I am working on putting together a puzzle, tends to misplace some of the puzzles we have retrieved together. So, I focus on the pieces that I have already seen. When I mention to my client going through a divorce from a narcissist, all the moments where the figure was refocused for her, she is amazed at my memory (and I am amazed at her dissociation) because she forgets things like cheating, threatening and lying that she has experienced in her marriage.

Burley talks about figure formation and says that ‘disruptions at this stage will have fairly profound and serious consequences for one’s ability to function healthily and in congruence with the rest of the field. Rather serious disorders such as severe depression and some aspects of schizophrenia exhibit major disruptions at this stage’ (Burley, 2012, p. 19). I worked with a client who was a survivor of parental gaslighting who couldn’t recognise when he was hungry or sleepy. Lack of sleep and nourishment further aggravated his depression and drug addiction. The internal support for trusting one’s own senses is weakened for gaslit clients, so it is important to slowly and patiently open the possibility of working on awareness, in a safe relationship. ‘Mindfulness and a focus on body awareness, embedded in a safe and secure therapeutic relationship, are critical tools to help such (traumatised) patients develop a sense of agency, contain previously uncontainable affect, and become capable of nourishing contact’ (Sapriel, 2012).

By supporting the client in exploring their own sensations and the changes in what is figural that happen in a relationship, the therapist becomes a ‘witness-expert’ whose importance Alice Miller mentions in trauma work (Miller, 1981). If the client is having trouble knowing what they sense, empowering is supporting articulation of the field conditions, sensations, needs, and decision-making processes that reflect in behaviour. Change from organismic to inorganismic figures can be so slight that it takes attention to detail to find the place of refocusing. Gaslighting dynamic is hidden in the field and doesn’t necessarily present as a specific set of behaviours (compared to other forms of abuse). The same action might or might not be gaslighting. These examples illustrate the difference:

1) A husband who is concealing marital assets (the business he owns, his bank accounts) from his spouse (economic abuse), and an unemployed wife because they agreed that she would stay home and take care of the children. The wife asks for money to buy shoes for their children, and he says, ‘You are always spending money. I give and give, but you just keep spending. Why do the children have to have these shoes? The ones they have are still good.’ She replies ‘But you took us to a restaurant just yesterday’. To which he responds, ‘I do one nice thing for you and the family and you throw it in my face. Why can’t you let me take care of the family?’ The organismic figure in this example is the wife’s confusion about the lack of money, the response to that is the husband blaming the wife for not appreciating his efforts as a father and husband. The answer was a shift in what is figural. The husband changed the subject to a figure that most likely activates the wife’s introjects about marriage. Blaming is one of the most frequent strategies in gaslighting because it provokes an emotional reaction, making it easy to forget the excitement about one’s own organismic figure.

2) The husband works and the wife is a stay-at-home mother. They agreed that he would handle the finances. Money is tight. The wife asks for money to buy shoes for their children, and the husband says ‘Why do the children have to have new shoes? The ones they have are still good’. She is angry because yesterday he spent money on taking the family for pizza and she feels like he sets the rules arbitrarily. She doubts that she is being manipulated. Her need is to understand the family’s budget better, but she doesn’t direct behaviour toward fulfilling her need. She doesn’t ask why he doesn’t have money because she decided not to deal with that part of family life. If she were to ask about their finances, she would find out if he was manipulating her or not.

These two examples illustrate how a careful tracking of what is figural for the client and how personal responsibility is distributed can give insight into how to proceed in phenomenological exploration. The wife...
from the first example has to decide what to do with the offered shift in the figure, and the wife from the second example has to decide if she will ask for the information she needs. Therapists can commit to exploring in detail what is figural in each specific moment and how the person recognises that what is figural is figural for her.

**Conclusion**

‘The Phenomenological field is composed of all that is available to awareness’ (Burley, 2012, p. 13). In the initiative of gaslighting, there is a part of the field that is not available for the person to identify with. When such experiences are used to refocus what is figural for a person, it is a covert epistemological injustice. When gaslighting is repeated as a way of coping with reality in the relationship, it can be recognised through sensations that indicate a habitual interruption of contact. Self-regulation based on such sensations is difficult because by then the relation solidifies into a relation where the initiative and responsibility for managing the phenomenological field of the relationship is redistributed on one side (person). Disengaging from a gaslighting relation can be a difficult choice – the hope that the gaslighting relationship provides is addictive. It provides the hope of a resolution of dissociated and mutually exclusive hopes and fears which are polarised and create tension when conditions in the field trigger them. Gaslighting is often connected to narcissistic tendencies, as a way of coping with relationships. To keep the hope the relationship provides, the person has to choose to dissociate from knowing what their sensations tell them. Empowering one to trust one’s own senses can be a way to support disengaging from such a relationship and support recovery. The bottom-up approach, meaning the phenomenological exploration of sensations and needs of persons, are first steps in the reintegration of the survivor’s field, which should be the goal of psychotherapy.

**References**

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Introduction: why are we doing this?

In today’s cross-cultural, post-colonial, and globalised society, there is a tendency to broaden our understanding of identities. We want to unite and, therefore, become more confluent; the focus shifts towards our similarities rather than differences. This sometimes can lead to the idea of a common and monotonous field in the international environment. We found ourselves being a part of such a field.

We are three women who met at a study group in the Netherlands, Gestalt-therapists-to-be, sharing Eastern European origins (Serbia, Lithuania and Ukraine). We are sailing through this journey mostly in English, which is neither our mother tongues nor the official language of this land, having docked here (for uncertain amounts of time) from various harbours.

The shared context of cross-cultural space, in-between languages and borders, yet universally situated in capitalism, the greenery of an Amsterdam park, in the second year of Gestalt therapy training with eighteen students from near and far, seems like a potentially fertile ground for a fundamental Gestalt concept: experimenting.

Therefore, we connected out of the depths of curiosity as a writing trio to explore the questions close to our souls. What is the focus of our interest?

For the last year, another phenomenon literally and figuratively invaded our field: the war in Ukraine. This experience is shared and yet very different for each of us. Although we acknowledge numerous differences between our birth countries, there is a shared historical red thread that became figural for us with this war: that we grew up in places that were either occupied by or heavily influenced by the Soviet Union.

While we slowly emerge as the new generation of Gestalt therapists, we dare to explore the field in which our contact occurs: how it is influenced by our origins, by the place we are ‘here and now’, the war, what is hidden and how all of this affects the way we connect. This exploration is grounded in one of the fundamental ideas of Gestalt therapy: that an individual and the world are necessarily ‘inseparable and interdependent parts of a dynamic whole’ (Wollants, 2012, p. 2). Therefore, the focus of our exploration is the interaction of our phenomenological realities in the present field.

By starting this trialogue journey, and being open to see where it brings us, we also want to raise and give power to our female voices.

Therefore, we’re here to experiment and see what emerges.

Process: how we started

During a Gestalt training weekend, a trainer encouraged us, students, to engage with the broader Gestalt community. Among the examples to do this, writing was mentioned. I (Mili) felt an instant surge...
of energy, looked around and locked eyes with Yulia. In the break I asked her to write something together: ‘I have no idea what, or how.’ She agreed, excitedly, having equally no clue what to write but wanting to do something together.

‘Maybe we can write something about our experiences of war and how it is to be with them in this group?’ I asked, tentatively.

‘Uhh, maybe. But our experiences are different.’

‘Indeed.’

In the following moment of synchronicity, randomness, or field forces, Ieva approached me asking about my writing this summer and sharing her desire to write more. And this was the start of our process.

From then, we met several times for dinners and shared, over nourishing food and disinhibiting wine, our experiences of coming from different places in Eastern Europe and being in the Gestalt training in Amsterdam while the invasion of Ukraine was happening. For a couple of months, we would jot some ideas down, share stories and songs that touch us in our backgrounds, until we finally decided to go ahead with the experiment of writing an open trialogue.

**Method: open trialogue, experiment**

We wanted to work together on writing a piece. How can three people exchange ideas in writing? Spontaneously we chose a form of a trialogue to experiment with: one person writes something, another follows, third follows, and so on. We continue for as long as needed. For as long as we find an ending.

It was implicitly important to give each other time. Time to write, to read what was written, time to sense what comes up as we read what was said, and time for something to form inside of us in this new situation. Almost like a small cycle of experience every time.

Looking back, before even starting, there was a knowing in our field that this structure would give the support needed for the questions we wanted to touch. Support in terms of time for more shameful and thus more difficult parts to emerge, as well as time to be more conceptual and have a broader perspective. The structure of an open trialogue also allowed for trust - that there is as much space as is needed; there is not a limit. *Take your time, the space is here for you.*

We also had a Signal group chat ‘Writing crew’. This chat functioned as a ‘third party’ (Francesetti et al., 2013): giving ground and meaning to our work. If we get lost, we can touch base in the chat: ‘Are you here?’ ‘Yes, I am here. Keep on going.’

This third presence (or rather, fourth presence) was crucial for the work as it allowed each of us to take the risk, to experiment knowing that we can fall back onto the group, to remind us of why we are doing this, to give ground for the introjections that came often.

**Open trialogue**

**Ieva:** I am in my parents’ house in Lithuania. The context of my (family’s) history and cultural background is the actual right now. Yet I keep having a thought: ‘This is not important enough to write down.’ I feel safe with you two – if I may – with a Serbian and a Ukrainian. To name this feels radical somehow. Politically incorrect? I am uncomfortable using these national identities to describe you, but they are very relevant for me. I have a bodily sense and intuition that you understand me because of the (historical) context you are coming from. Again, an introject appears: ‘This is not making any sense’. I say hello to it and continue typing thanks to feeling supported by you two silently nodding and encouraging: ‘It is important’.

I am getting nervous now. Trusting that my voice matters is a political act for me. As a woman, a Lithuanian and Eastern European. Often the ‘Western’ perspective is considered superior in Lithuania – in politics and in the social sphere; I also have this introject: ‘Let’s be and live and think like in the West.’ I have lived in the Netherlands and Belgium for ten years now, yet I do not consider myself as a Westerner. I am a (proud) Eastern European.

**Yulia:** As someone who had to re-create my own identity (coming from centuries of repression and post-colonial politics) and who considers their own national identity as one of the cores of their being, I always was interested in how global conflict (such as war in Ukraine, which Russia invaded) and the reaction to it can teach us more about the field and scale it down to the ‘between group’ interaction? I believe this is co-relating and co-existing on many levels.

**Mili:** As I read your words, I find myself nodding towards the screen, as if indeed wanting to say to you (and to my introjected silences): ‘Yes, keep going, this is important.’ And also, a sense of confusion, fogginess rises up. I notice an urge to somehow explain my Serbian identity and add to it my ex-Yugoslavian roots, Hungarian passport, a formative decade in
There seems to be a tendency towards confluence in international contexts, at least from my experience. ‘We are the same.’ What I noticed in the process of writing this piece is that naming our national identities has been actually liberating: ‘We are not the same.’ Making our differences explicit makes me see the contours of who I am and who others are more clearly – we are not a blob of ‘togetherness’, we are separate beings. And our identities are plural. And it is not dangerous to put one or the other into focus/foreground; in fact, it helps to understand it better. There is perhaps a fear, as Mili pointed out, of being objectified based on national identity (and gender identity, I might add). I wonder what made Mili feel safe that I am not objectifying her as a ‘Serbian’?

I have the urge to bring up war and Ukraine right now. I have no idea why or what I want to say. Somehow, I am thinking about your father, Yulia. Last I heard from you, he was still living in a high-risk area near the front, bombings every week, if not every day. He might be alive, he might not be. This feels very dangerous to say out loud for me: ‘Am I allowed to say this? Is this insensitive?’

An introject, ‘This is not my business to talk about’ appears. Is it not my business? I remember someone in our training group said something along the lines: ‘I do not want to bother you asking about the war. You must not want to talk about it all the time; maybe this is your safe zone from the war.’ I want to ask Yulia: do you not want to talk about the war? Is there a safe zone from the war? Can there be a ‘safe zone’?

I have created a ‘war-free zone’ by blocking all the news, Telegram channels, and Instagram accounts. I made a decision to only look for news when I want to. This is a privilege. Our training for me is also a ‘war-free zone’. I wonder what effect that has on me and the field. How is that for you, Yulia? I have a fantasy of you getting angry now.

Yulia: Reading your past two notes, I’m noticing statements about ‘not being judged’ and ‘not being defined’. I wonder, is it coming from freedom or from fear? And how is it for me, in this case? Somewhat, lately, I feel like I’m coming to terms (or want to come rationally and still on my journey, realistically) with being judged and with one identity defining me (in certain situations, and life periods) more than others. With big life upheavals (which I had this year).

I’m aware, how being Ukrainian now might be also challenging for the flexibility of my mind, and for...
As I'm there with you and the war is there too. As there is no avoidance of an elephant in the room. That we name things and address disagreements, training, for me, it's important that it's not a 'war-free zone'. That we name things and address disagreements, training, for me, it's important that it's not a 'war-free zone'.

I'm happy for you, that your life is safe, that life is really in question for my dad, and that I don't feel 'uncomfortable' for others, not being afraid to upset the group. While writing this piece I notice that I start questioning whether we are making 'too much' of a safe space for ourselves. Yes, there is no war and constant danger at the moment here in Amsterdam, in our Gestalt group room, but isn't life always connected to death? For me, naming it, making it real, somehow makes the picture full, and allows me to see the light, to see the vitality. By admitting the darkness holding its hand. By naming where we are different, to see what we have in common, and to see we are similar, in our differences too.

Mili: ‘While surviving there is no time for nuance.’ I felt expansion, liberation reading these words, Yulia. This is the flavour of freedom I am hungry for, both in the Gestalt group and in society: the freedom to move on the polarities of nuance and black-and-whiteness, in response to emerging situations. Even though I keep on grappling and finding my stance, sometimes painfully, with the inheritance of my parents’ purely pro (mainstream) Western reactions to the fall of Yugoslavia, the genocide and the bombing, I stand in solidarity and admiration of the position they took. I could not possibly imagine how it would be to raise three children in those years, and a sense of compassion for their ethics-based, non-nuanced position overwhelms me. At the same time, again from this position of not being able to fully imagine, I am touching on some tenderness mixed with a tight stomach and heavy shoulders for those who were in survival mode and chose nationalism. This is far from approval, but it has a distinct taste of compassion. This understanding comes with decades of distance, both physical and temporal, and is not universal, but applies to the specific situation I was immersed in. I write this from a somewhat nuanced position, that is a direct product of not being currently and directly in a life-threatening situation, but still through the body that grew up in a war-torn country. Although, I agree with you Yulia: life itself is a life-threatening situation.

In reading your words and writing mine, I am now experiencing that this type of freedom, at least to some extent, exists here, between these lines and between us. That both nuance and non-nuance in terms of national
identities are welcome and can co-exist, sometimes as a harmony, other times as a cacophony of tunes in response to world dynamics we are all immersed in, in different ways and to various degrees. In fact, from my position, they always exist, but by making them explicit here, somehow the co-existence becomes more apparent to me. Perhaps what I experience is more contact with you, less isolation.

I am not sure. What I am certain of, is that using the word ‘freedom’ to describe my experience of our process now feels disgusting, disrespectful and shameful, as Ukraine continues being invaded and has been for almost a year now. Even to name my need for freedom, when I am safe (from bombs), well fed and planning vacations, while people are currently living through imminent and continuous danger of death and other horrors of war. Including people you love, Yulia. Yet, it does paint my current experience well, so I wrote it, despite the shame, trusting that through this conversation, both you and I can brace it.

To me this process is different from confluence. Perhaps it is akin to what Ieva described as ‘finding togetherness in our differences’. Is this a fantasy? How is it for you both as you write now?

Ieva: I have many feelings about writing now; I feel a lot of resistance, shame and fear. I want to write something ‘intellectual’ but I know for sure that I need to tend to my feelings first. This feels shameful. I have a judgement about writing from a place of emotional intelligence: ‘It is lesser than logical knowing.’ Since all I have are my emotions now, I will be guided by them in writing this part as no other way is a possibility for me right now.

First, I noticed a lot of shame come up after reading Yulia’s piece. I felt ashamed of my actions, of my decision to distance myself from war: ‘I did something wrong.’ I also feel helpless – like I am in a bubble of shame and fear and there is nothing I can actually do (about war) as I am sitting in my apartment in Amsterdam. This creates discomfort; all I can do is to sit with my feelings. My creative adjustment to such discomfort was to distance from war, to deflect. Reading Yulia’s piece makes me face the war in the here and now.

‘Am I a bad person for “forgetting” war?’ It feels so pathetic that I have these feelings while millions of people are in actual danger. I realise I judge myself. It is hard to have self-compassion when the stakes are me vs others dying. I notice a tendency to make it me vs them; to polarise. How can I justify or make sense of my feelings then, if I compare myself to people who are dying for freedom? I cannot make sense. It is not black and white but it is also not nuanced. It just is – without sense. Just as this war – without sense.

I realise there is no hierarchy. The question of ‘What is more important – my feelings or other people’s freedom?’ is not a fair question. Yet it pops up. I have the urge to make a hierarchy, a structure on how to deal with this situation. Perhaps better questions, in a Gestalt way, could be: ‘How can I have self-compassion while holding space for others who are fighting for (my) freedom? How can both my reality and Yulia’s reality exist together? How can I make space for that?’ I am trying to do so now. It is unfamiliar. I want to try more. For our realities to co-exist, I needed to show mine and Yulia needed to show hers.

Writing this is risky. I feel the fear that I might be rejected; and I also have trust that you can hold the space for me with my emotions. One thing is very clear for me: allowing myself to feel shame and discomfort and question my own (possibly) ‘immoral’ or ‘bad’ actions is necessary for me right now. There is no other way. And here I am writing this. The act of doing it is enough. I do not know what follows. Will you hate me? Will you judge me? Will you understand me? Yet I do not feel alone, I feel your presence, the commitment to the trialogue – that is what togetherness feels like (to answer Mili’s question). Risking being rejected because of my difference yet trusting that the only way to be together is to speak my truth, even if it is shameful.

A few days after writing the above I feel excitement, expansion and freedom in me after having felt shame. Acknowledging that I also have an ‘evil’ polarity is a step towards wholeness, integration of the shadow (what both of you also talked about before). I realise how scary it is to step into my ‘evil’ polarity, how much trust in you I needed to support me in that – a leap. No wonder it is a challenge to do so in a Gestalt group, it is risky business – I may be rejected.

Yulia: Ieva, by reading your piece I want to do nothing but hug you. I recognise so well what you’re writing about. You are afraid you will be judged – I was afraid of writing my piece as I felt it was too rough and too ‘inconsiderable’. I am judging myself about my proximity to the war: ‘How can I struggle when people struggle more there? How can I want a cappuccino while holding space for others who are fighting for (my) freedom?’ is not a fair question. Yet it pops up. I have the urge to make a hierarchy, a structure on how to deal with this situation. Perhaps better questions, in a Gestalt way, could be: ‘How can I have self-compassion while holding space for others who are fighting for (my) freedom? How can both my reality and Yulia’s reality exist together? How can I make space for that?’ I am trying to do so now. It is unfamiliar. I want to try more. For our realities to co-exist, I needed to show mine and Yulia needed to show hers.
ourselves more than others. I am curious as to whether that’s something common for people in our profession; to be more considerate of other people.

**Final process**

At this point of trialogue, we reached out to each other in the group chat to share our fears, our love, our gratefulness for this process. Coming together as a trio again was needed to contain what happened and give meaning to it. We met again, drank wine, and shared. A figure of shame emerged. We separated with a plan to work towards finishing the piece, but soon after we found ourselves stuck. The flow of contact became stagnated. As we stayed with it, some doubts came up: ‘Do you want to stick with this?’ ‘Yes, I do.’ ‘OK.’ And we stuck with it.

**Conclusion**

**What emerged?**

The trialogue came to its organic end; we sat with each other and named the figure that emerged for all three through this process: shame. Robine defines it: ‘As I am, I am not worthy of belonging to the human community’ (Robine, 2013, p. 246). In line with Wollants’ (2012) observation about the interlinked nature of human beings and the world, Robine emphasises that Gestalt’s perspective does not view shame as a solipsistic phenomenon. A lack of environmental recognition comes with a break in contact.

**How shame showed up each of us**

**Mili:**

‘I am seen as not standing in solidarity with Yulia’ *(because I am staying with myself; not being confluent).*

**Yulia:**

‘I am not seeing nuances, therefore…’
‘I will be perceived as angry, inadequate, too emotional’
‘I am seen as too emotional by Ieva’
‘I am seen as generalising by Mili’ *(because I am seeing war in black and white).*

**Ieva:**

‘I am seen as not caring by Yulia’
‘I am seen as immoral, morally clumsy by Mili’ *(because I am separating from war, putting it out of my awareness for self-preservation).*

Experiencing, expressing and staying with each other through shame gave each one of us a sense of deeper, more meaningful contact (with each other and ourselves) as well as freedom.

This experience inspired us to wonder about the different functions of shame. Could supporting relating through shame be a social change catalyst? This question is especially relevant in the ‘post-truth’ field we find ourselves in, where every perspective, even the perpetrator’s one, is perceived as potentially valid. Without negating the often-devastating consequences of shame for individuals, Wheeler and Axelsson remind us that shame has a healthy function too: it allows us to function as a society (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). Shame-in-supported-contact has a potentiality of meaningful self- and field-reflection and, if allowed, aggression towards action that is needed to readjust in a new situation of contact.

**What supported shame to emerge?**

Gordon Wheeler mentions that shame, rather than being a failure of mature autonomy and a sign of excessive field dependency, emerges as the crucial affective marker of support and non-support in the social field (Wheeler, 1997). We were curious then to identify what functioned as support in our process for shame to come up. Two elements seem important: having enough shared ground and taking a risk.

Our commonalities created a shared ground that felt solid and reliable. Our ethical stance of respect for life, shared Eastern-European context, commitment to the process and maintaining a dialogical contact all contributed to a steady foundation that was needed to explore the unknown. Establishing enough shared ground then allowed for trust: ‘Given all that we share, I trust that others can hold my truth.’ From what is known, a step into the unknown was needed to explore what is appearing at the contact boundary. When sharing our emerging truths, fear becomes apparent: that what comes up may hurt the other or it may be rejected and hurtful to self. This was a critical point: staying with both trust and fear, and yet taking an action – a risk – to reveal the parts that were shameful.

**Future directions**

Honouring the activist roots of Gestalt school of therapy, as Gestalt therapists in training; Eastern-European women; Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Serbian people; Yulia, Ieva and Mili; and members of the human species, we see the act of creating supportive spaces in order to connect, despite shame, as a political act.
Having gone through this experiment, we are now curious, and invite the broader Gestalt community to join us in wondering about and experimenting with the following questions:

- What function does shame have? For an individual, for a society?
- What supports shame to emerge in training and supervision groups? In therapy contact?
- What happens to shame in the context of a military invasion?
- What happens to shame in cross-national/international care contexts?

References


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Mili Marjanović trained in integrative psychotherapy at Regent’s University London, where she fell in love with radically relational aspects of existential therapy. Having moved to Amsterdam because of Brexit, she started Gestalt training two years ago where she continues exploring relational realities of being alive, alongside eighteen people from near and far. She has a private practice now, working with people from all around the world, and dreams of being a part of a socially responsible therapist collective one day.

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Ieva Baršauskaitė is a clinical psychologist, Gestalt therapist in training, passionate dancer and a generally curious human being. Since 2019, she has been working as a psychologist at a small GP practice serving the multicultural communities of Amsterdam. Last year, she also started her private psychotherapy practice. Some themes that resonate and come up often in her life and in the therapy room are embodiment, aliveness, wholeness, neglect and ground.

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Reviews

Beyond the binary: Gestalt therapy and GSRD

Helen Moss


Having first become aware of the Queering Gestalt Therapy anthology during the UKAGP conference in 2022, I had been greatly looking forward to its publication for both personal and professional reasons. As a trainee researching essays, I had found only a handful of Gestalt-specific articles relating to gender, sex and relationship diversity (GSRD). I was therefore forced to look outside the Gestalt world at powerful authors such as Meg-John Barker and ground-breaking theorists such as Sari van Anders and apply their thinking to Gestalt theory and to my clinical work.

I started my clinical placement when I was at the beginning of my gender-questioning process, but I took the opportunity offered to work with clients who were bringing gender and sexual diversity as a theme. I knew my embodied experience of gender but I had not yet found my community and, meeting with clients, I quickly became aware of the gaps in my knowledge. While I could lean on Gestalt principles to meet each person as a human and an individual, I felt that this did not cut it; I needed more understanding in order to both explicitly and implicitly show my clients that I truly ‘got them’. Finding no Gestalt CPD on the subject, I attended a trans awareness course with MindOut in Brighton, led by a facilitator who was open, honest and impactful, navigating this fraught subject with grace, dealing expertly with misunderstandings and quelling the shame in the room. She pointed me to resources relevant to my clients and to me, as well as encouraging me to start experimenting with pronouns. Although later connections with the queer Gestalt community have provided valuable support, at most stages of my personal and training journey, resources and help from within the Gestalt world have been shockingly lacking.

This review was written at a pivotal moment in my process and its writing and sharing has had a strong relational impact, from prompting me to ‘come out’ in various ways, to provoking an intense yet enriching re-evaluation of my relationship with my life partner. I had to gather my courage to publish it, but highlighting this book is incredibly important to me, since I myself have needed such a Gestalt resource. I wanted my response to be entirely in-keeping with the phenomenological, relational approach we take as therapists, as well as echoing the vulnerability that the book’s authors demonstrate through their writing, the uncomfortable exposure that is an all-too-common experience for members of the queer community when talking on this subject. What follows is therefore a personal, experiential account of reading the book and its impact on me.

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I carve out a dedicated time to focus on the collection of essays brought together in the book Queering Gestalt Therapy. Settling down to read, I feel the bracing in my body as I hold myself in anticipation, wondering what emotions the content will surface. After leaning into the editors’ inclusive welcome (which explicitly acknowledges overlooked and minoritised groups), I dive in, and with the unfolding of each chapter I am struck by how the authors have woven their passion for their work, their care for their clients and the stories of their lives into their essays, openly laying out their own intersectionalities and experiences. As I begin to sense an intimacy with them, I’m drawn in, my protection dissolving. I open my heart and let myself feel.

To speak honestly, right from the first chapter (Understanding Gender Radical Clients) my emotions stir. This is Gender 101. The Basics. A spark of annoyance surges in my chest that this chapter is necessary. For a moment I let myself imagine what the world would be like for me if everyone I met had read this chapter: what a relief not to have to explain myself...
anymore. I also remember what it is like to be new to this topic and I feel how informative and compassionate Daniel Morrison’s voice is, coming through equally so in the companion chapter, Queering Relationships. These chapters provide an insightful introduction and overview of terminology while not shying away from the complexity of these themes. Morrison faces the subject of transphobia and the inherent injustice experienced by this community head on, as well as illuminating the barriers to therapy for those in non-traditional relationships.

As I move through the book, at times I notice the tingling sensation of goosebumps rippling from my head right down to my feet. Such as when Elsa Almås (Gender Identification) writes: ‘Individuals perceive their gender identity as an inner experience, something not chosen, but just has to be... It is a part of consciousness, like intelligence and musicality’ (p. 12). What is this reaction I’m having? I realise that through Almås’ discussion of the history of gender diversity and her challenge to the gender binary, I experience a powerful sensation of someone speaking out for me.

Moving onto Dominic Hosemans’ essay on working with gender-creative children (Holding Uncertainty So That It Can Be Thought About), I soften and feel touched by the presented case studies. I recognise that Hosemans’ ability to work without agenda in order to stay in relational contact is something I long for in my own therapy and my interest stirs. This demonstrates how Gestalt therapy is so suitable for this work: ‘the capacity to remain uncertain and to tolerate such an experience without the need to close down on a sense of certainty in order to alleviate the therapist’s anxiety of “not-knowing”’ (p. 34). Reading about uncertainty being used in this way brings to mind the contrast with current therapeutic options for trans and gender-creative children. I think of the move to limit the use of puberty-blockers, and discussions in my networks about ‘gender exploratory therapy’, which is being proposed as a middle way between gender-affirmative therapy and conversion therapy. The definition of the word ‘exploratory’ is a narrow one, discouraging gender affirmation in favour of pathologising trans identities and gender dysphoria. As I bring this to mind, I notice my embodied reaction has moved from the openness I felt at Hosemans’ compassionate approach to a feeling of closing down and shrinking inside.

The description of the violence directed towards the trans community in the introduction to Parvy Palou’s essay (The Drag and Queer Years as a Means of Developing the Therapeutic Self) brings more feelings of recoil in me. As I read on, my curiosity is piqued as Palou discusses internalised transphobia and how a person’s assigned gender may be seen as an introject. This makes a lot of sense to me, as I realise just how much I habitually fit myself into conforming as a ‘woman’.

Rebecca Waletich’s chapter (Experiment and Phenomenology in Treating Gender Dysphoria), helps me recognise how the emphasis on body awareness in my training has been complex and difficult for me, taking much practise. When Waletich strongly asserts: ‘I want to be clear that gender diversity is not trauma, dysphoria is’ (p. 47), I feel relief that my experience is recognised. Working with body sensation is a common intervention in Gestalt therapy, but can be challenging to those experiencing body dysphoria, as well as for other reasons. I recall that I have perceived this ambivalence in some of my clients too. I sense that this chapter will be among the ones I will revisit to feed into my clinical practice.

The feeling of being understood comes flooding more strongly into my system when I find myself sobbing while reading Miriam Grace’s essay on women who explore/discover their sexuality later in life (Selfish and Destructive. Where Does the Late-in-Life Lesbian Seek Therapeutic Support?). Despite not identifying with the gender norms she cites, there are parallels with the process I have experienced, and I allow Grace’s empathy to reach into the shamed, grieving parts of me: my ‘self-ish’ exploration (giving myself consideration after years of not doing so), the impact of perimenopause, difficulties with accessing support. Reading her words, I feel a loosening around my harsh internal message: ‘You’re the problem, there’s something wrong with you’, and a small flame of hope for healing is ignited.

In Sanjay Kumar’s chapter (Activism and Therapy), I feel a sense of affinity with how my self-advocacy often ends up becoming activism. Appreciating Kumar’s efforts to weave activism into his activities, I also feel sadness when reading his reflections on the implications for him in his Indian and Christian communities. As I read: ‘It is good to give voice to those parts of us that are hurting, ignored, suppressed and even persecuted’ (p. 89), I ponder that although some authors speak openly about personal experience, missing from this book might be an insight into the impact of the public discourse around gender and sexuality in the UK. Conversations about conversion therapy and the Scottish Gender Reform Bill have been particularly heated, not to mention the never-ending discussion about who can use which toilets. It is triggering to enter
into much of this conversation. However, the way that these ‘issues’ are presented publicly is very much part of the field, impacting not only the queer community, but the whole of society, challenging us all to reflect deeply. In the recently-released European ‘Rainbow Map’ (published by the ILGA to demonstrate how safe countries are for LGBTQ people), the UK’s ranking has dropped three places this year\(^2\). A United Nations Independent Expert issued a statement following a visit to the UK in April-May 2023, which makes for worrying reading from a human rights perspective for the LGBTQ community\(^3\). This book might therefore also be seen as a call to the Gestalt community for allyship activism. Kumar reminds us that ‘activism begins with the self’ (p. 88) and can be part of our work as therapists.

At this, I have a thought that there may well be parts of this book that people find shocking or challenging. As Lynne Jacobs admits in her foreword: ‘Some of the explorations have ... challenged a few of my assumptions’ (p.9). Paul Ricketts’ personal, ‘auto-phenomenological’ exploration of his relationship with his father through the lens of homophobia (A Gay Son and His Dying Straight Dad) calls for attention to the therapist’s and client’s shared phenomenological field and an awareness of internalised homophobia. I feel sadness as I consider the ways in which I too might embody and hold internalised homophobia.

I also notice some disquiet in me while reading Billy Desmond’s essay (LGBTQIA in Rural Ireland: Lives Creatively Lived), where he tells of Liam, a gay man living in Ireland. I think about how I sometimes take for granted that society now generally accepts sexual diversity, but is this really reflected in lived experience? I feel a renewed sensitivity to this as I read Desmond’s words: ‘We have an ethical responsibility and duty of care towards our clients and indeed ourselves to critically examine and explore our intersectional identities’ (p. 116). This is often painful work, but it is our work as therapists.

Challenging binary and conditioned thinking in our profession is a theme throughout the book, and Silva Neves’ essay (Compulsive Sexual Behaviours) usefully reframes sex ‘addiction’ to release it from shame, normalising human desire and pointing out the pitfalls of simplistic approaches that are based on avoiding triggers and that close down the normal connection to our erotic self, ‘a major part of our sense of aliveness, curiosity, wanting, needing, erotic hunger and desires’ (p. 92). Instead, he proposes helping clients to become more erotically aware. Neves’ Three-Phase model is in step with Gestalt: raising awareness, exploring the here-and-now needs that are arising, and meaning-making.

The importance of another Gestalt principle is highlighted in Ayhan Alman’s chapter (GSRD Sensitive Gestalt Psychotherapy): that of creative indifference. As I read the case studies set out in this chapter, I feel my embodied response to the vignettes (alternately highlighting a lack of and use of creative indifference) shift from tension to release. The model proposed by Alman – based on creative indifference combined with multilarties, a nuanced understanding of creative adjustments – depathologises GSRD, offering a compassionate and trauma-informed approach. I reflect how desperately we need therapists who are committed to providing such GSRD-sensitive and queer-affirmative therapy. This thread runs throughout the book, and the stark statistics about the current mental health situation speak for themselves: the latest Stonewall report (2018) found that 52% of LGBT people had experienced depression in the previous year, and 46% of trans people reported thinking about taking their life in the same period\(^4\). In addition, waiting times for first appointments with gender services are, at the time of writing, up to 84 months in some parts of the country\(^5\).

The emphasis on Gestalt principles throughout the book underlines what I already know: that my modality can be so relevant and helpful for those bringing gender and sexuality as a theme to therapy. So why has my gender exploration often felt so difficult to navigate? Words from Vikram Kolmannskog’s essay (Heteronormativity and Queer Experimentation in Gestalt Therapy Training) chime as I read them: ‘Gestalt students and therapists are part of the wider societal field and there will be bias – and much is ... unconscious and unintentional’ (p. 136). As I read about Kolmannskog’s experiment, carried out with trainees ‘to increase awareness of, and reflection around, heteronormativity in therapy’ (p. 138), I feel my energy rising with both excitement and nerves as I imagine myself taking part in an activity such as this where rich insights may arise. Kolmannskog demonstrates how heteronormativity is so strong in the field that it is extremely easy to get pulled into making assumptions. I feel just how passionately I believe that our training environments must offer a safe space to examine these assumptions, along with our privilege, bias and shame, and where grief about injustice and oppression should be able to be shared and received.

Thinking about training brings the feeling of bracing back to my body, and I remember a phrase from the
editors’ introduction that echoes my own experience: ‘the tension between silence and speaking up, the burden of isolation versus the risk of shaming the other’ (p. 14). This is a familiar feeling to me. On a Gestalt training course, one is asked to show up authentically, but this is a vulnerable place where I have felt fear of triggering others and no longer belonging as I step into my gender identity more fully. I recall a moment in my training when, excited about the potential in questioning my gender, I proposed an experiment with pronouns, not realising that this might provoke discomfort or shame in others. Pronouns can be a source of worry about getting it ‘wrong’. I want to say here that I also make mistakes, and a good way to handle these inevitable moments is to simply correct yourself and move on.

Coming to the end of the book, I reflect on how this publication heralds a paradigm shift that is happening, albeit not fast enough. This shift is evident in our Gestalt community, with an increasing number of events focusing on GSRD, including this year’s GPTI conference and the BGJ Seminar Day. One of the biggest challenges I have had to navigate is working out which spaces are safe to be myself in. I would encourage event organisers to pay attention to this aspect and by this I mean to explicitly agree boundaries of confidentiality and acknowledge the extremely difficult field conditions at the very least. Even better would be to ensure a basic level of education, for example, by reading Morrison’s chapters on gender and relationship diversity prior to the event.

Queering Gestalt Therapy gives a voice to those who have lived and clinical experience of GSRD, creating valuable talking points for training and ongoing diversity education. I think about hearing the book referenced in my training and realise that this will help me feel supported, as well as bringing relief that a new generation of psychotherapists will have knowledge of GSRD themes. To make the book a more user-friendly reference, it may have been helpful to include a quick reference glossary of terms, or a consolidated further reading section. Holding the book in my hands, it feels slim and I wish it presented even more voices. Nonetheless, I feel gratitude that this group of authors have provided such a thought-provoking starting point, and hope that this anthology will inspire more dialogue, engagement and future publications.

I sit with the depth of wisdom and lived experience I have read permeating my being. What is happening for me now? I still feel touched by a phrase from Alman’s essay, which seems to me to be a reformulation of Arnold Beisser’s words: ‘The more we become who we are, the more we can love who we love’ (p. 124). I let the beauty of this land within me. Surely this freedom to become more who we are for love’s sake is for us all, regardless of how we identify? I am left with the book’s powerful calling out to us as clinicians, challenging us to draw on and radically practise this ‘Paradoxical Theory of Love’, for ourselves and for our clients.

Notes


3. United Nations Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, Country visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (24 April – 5 May 2023) End of mission statement: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/sexualorientation/statements/com-statement-UK-IE-SOGI-2023-05-10.pdf, accessed 11 July 2023. The final note states: ‘… the Independent Expert stands in awe of the courage, resilience, resourcefulness and joy that he witnessed in his exchanges with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse persons, LGBT-led and LGBT-serving organizations, all of whom carry out their lives and their work in the United Kingdom under the extreme pressure and hostility of a public debate which, today, questions rights that are directly connected with their dignity and, in some cases, their very existence.’


6. The Paradoxical Theory of Change by Arnold Beisser states: ‘change occurs when one becomes what [one] is, not when [one] tries to become what [one] is not’.
Helen Moss (they/them) is a trainee on the Relational Gestalt Psychotherapy Diploma at SCPTI (Scarborough). Having given up a teenage ambition to be an art therapist, it is only later in life that they found Gestalt and decided to revisit this earlier dream. Prior to beginning psychotherapy training, they obtained a Master’s degree in History of Art and a Postgraduate Diploma in translation. They continue to work as a French-to-English translator alongside their training, clinical placement and private practice. Helen has special interests in gender, love, spirituality, and religious trauma. They co-facilitate the IAAGT ‘Trainee and Newly-Qualified’ special interest group and are a member of the SCPTI special interest group, ‘Love in Gestalt Psychotherapy’.

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Opinion

Birdsong

Eamonn Marshall

I am fortunate to work in a room that overlooks large leafy gardens in my home in south London. Plants, trees, light and sounds, human and non-human, permeate the atmosphere of each and every session conducted there. These reflections were written after being touched by a piece of work with a client not long after losing my mother (the subject of my client’s seemingly unwavering preoccupation). That morning, the song of a blackbird flooded the room, somehow enabling us to inhabit our respective losses, quietly, connecting us through its song.

My client, who I had been seeing for about four years, was looking out of my therapy room window into the garden. He was coming to see me twice a week at the time, and this was his morning appointment. It was early spring and signs of life were returning outside. We were quiet and the session had not really got going; there seemed no pressure to say anything in particular. I became aware of the song of a blackbird close by. I love that song. I found myself thinking about my mother, who also loved that song. She had died just over a year before, and I was starting to feel her absence in a less intense way, easing into a new idea of myself as a parentless man. My father had died some three years earlier; my parents had been elderly, and it had been their time.

Apropos of nothing, my client said that the view out of the window reminded him of his childhood home in the US. ‘In what way?’ I asked. He struggled to find the words, but he said it was something about the outline of the trees, and the way the light was falling. Again, we fell into an uncomplicated silence. The blackbird was still singing, and I was feeling full of the music the bird was making.

I was brought back into the room by my client’s non sequitur: ‘It would be my mother’s birthday next week,’ he said, wistfully (she had been dead nearly two decades, yet on occasion he felt her loss so keenly that his grief would rob him of his breath). He went on to rework a memory from childhood in which his mother had said something unusually harsh to him. It had been the day of her 38th birthday (my client had a fabulous memory for dates). The child that he then was had been so hurt that he went away and took an overdose of aspirin. His father found him and a doctor was called, but not before a row had ensued between his parents.

Mothers who have gone, but who are made present; my deceased mother; the impending anniversary of the birth of another mother, who is also now dead, but whom my client struggles to relinquish (he is forever losing her, but perhaps it is just as true to say that she is forever being born again in his mind). His loss, my loss, all seemingly woven into being by the song of a blackbird, the angle of the sunlight, and the outline of a stand of mature sycamore trees.

Eamonn Marshall MSc. trained as a Gestalt psychotherapist at Metanoia in London (as it was then called) in the late nineties. He has maintained a private practice in south London for nearly thirty years. His interest in working therapeutically with people was fired whilst working in voluntary sector agencies supporting people with HIV/AIDS during the early years of the pandemic. Later, working in primary care in the NHS in east London, he developed an interest in the work of GPs and their response to patients in emotional distress. Now an accredited Balint group leader, he co-leads monthly Balint groups for local GPs and for medical students at St George’s Medical School, also in south London.

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Vikram Kolmannskog is a writer and professor at the Norwegian Gestalt Institute University College. He is the author of several books including short stories and the collection ‘The Empty Chair: Tales from Gestalt Therapy.’ Vikram has also trained as a lawyer with a specialisation in human rights, and as a social scientist, holding a doctoral degree in the sociology of law. Among his several publications on the topic is the recent book ‘Queering Gestalt Therapy’ (Routledge, 2023) which he co-edited and contributed a chapter to.

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