Co-creation, temporality and horizontalism

From a phenomenological and field perspective, my very existence depends upon my being in contact with the world and my world being in contact with me. I touch the world and the world touches me in a dialogue that changes both my world and me.

We are all situated in the world and, in being situated, things, events and people press in upon us. The way in which I perceive my world will differ from the way any other being perceives the world; hence, we refer to my perception of my world as my *phenomenal world* or my *phenomenal field*. It is a given that we are in contact with the world, but the level of that contact will depend upon a plethora of field conditions that will directly affect our individual perception of our respective worlds. Kennedy (1998: 89) discusses three basic movements that mark being situated. These three ‘movements’ are: co-creation, temporality and horizontalism.

Co-creation

Our lives are a prolonged dialogue with those around us and with our phenomenal world. We need the existence of others to define ourselves. In the language of phenomenology the ‘I’ requires the existence of the other to enable the ‘I’ to have a phenomenal reality, in other words reality is co-created. ‘I’ needs ‘other’ to exist. We do not live in a void.

... man is in the world and only in the world does he know himself.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: xi)

Temporality

My experience is not something that I live through and discard, although we may often hear clients express wishes to do so
through a desire to ‘move on’ from painful or difficult situations. I am my experience, I carry my experience in my body, and my past experience directly affects my current experience. In every moment in my life I bring the totality of my past.

Gestalt therapy’s emphasis upon present experience can be misunderstood. The here and now does not stand in isolation, there is a story behind every current experience and that story, extending back to the beginning of life, shapes and moulds every current experience from the unremarkable to the bizarre. Our histories shape our expectations in the present and our dreams for the future.

The lived present holds a past and a future within its thickness.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 275)

**Horizontalism**

In gestalt we aim to maintain a horizontal relationship with our clients rather than promote vertical relating. We acknowledge that there are real differences in the client–therapist relationship but we do not constellate the relationship as teacher–pupil or doctor–patient. We enter the relationship in the service of the between of that relationship. The therapy relationship is not equal; the client is the focus of our attention and they seek help from us for which we may get paid – there is a power imbalance. However, we have a shared humanity and in our humanity we are equals, we are all beings-in-the-world. If we use techniques to move our client towards our goal for the client, we are not practising gestalt and we are promoting vertical relating. If we act in this way we reduce the responsibility and support of the client (L. Perls, 1978), thereby diminishing the client and elevating ourselves. In a vertical relationship the therapist’s reaction may remain hidden, alternatively they may self-disclose indiscriminately or with prejudice. In the horizontal relationship the therapist is willing to show herself and to be fully present with the client in the service of the dialogue.

The principles of co-creation, temporality and horizontalism need to be fully embraced in order to practise gestalt therapy.
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