Resistances, interruptions, moderations to contact

Different ways of diminishing or adjusting contact with our environment have been identified by Perls (1947) and PHG (1951) and expanded upon by, amongst others, Polster and Polster (1973), Zinker (1977) and Clarkson (1989). Originally described as resistances by Perls and PHG, these processes, which occur at the contact boundary, have subsequently journeyed through many different collective terms including: resistances, moderations, modifications, interruptions and disturbances. This can lead to confusion for those new to gestalt. In essence, they are creative adjustments that originally formed in relation to our situation at the time as the best possible way of managing that situation at that time. They are neither unilaterally positive nor negative but always need to be viewed in the context of the individual’s current situation. We also need to be mindful that none of these processes function in isolation, all interrelate. One way of adjusting contact with our environment will affect all other ways of adjusting contact and our environment will adjust to us. For example, if I have a hostile way of addressing others I will influence the ways others address me.

Most gestalt therapists will describe seven inter-relating processes that we employ to calibrate our level of contact with our environment. This process of calibration in relation to the way we perceive our environment often occurs out of awareness, but can be performed consciously. I use the word ‘calibration’ here to illustrate that there are different gradations of moderating contact with our environment. Contact is not a black and white process, it has many shades of grey.

I will devote Points 16 to 19 to the resistances to contact that the founders of gestalt discussed at length and that I see as the core creative adjustment styles we employ in moderating contact with our environment. By way of an introduction to these four processes – known as introjection, projection, retroflection and confluence – I offer the following quote:
You might experience something is inside which belongs on the outside. This means introjection. Or, you experience something which is outside and it belongs to your organism. This is projection. Or again, you might experience no boundaries between your organism and your environment. That’s confluence. Or you might experience a fixed boundary with no fluid change. This means retrofection.

(From and Muller, 1977: 83)

Having paid attention to the above I do not wish to diminish the importance of the following three creative adjustments discussed below. All have the capacity to be fine abilities as well as harmful rigid ways of being.

**Desensitization (Anaesthetizing the sensing self)**

The person numbs himself as in the acute phase of a grief reaction. In an emergency situation such as a car crash we may not be touched by the horror of the situation. Such deadening of our emotional selves assists us in moving into action, in the given examples to maybe arrange the funeral or call the emergency services and administer first aid – we act on ‘auto-pilot’. Alternatively, this process could manifest in the psychological detachment from physical pain; for example, a hiker gets blisters but desensitizes to his pain until he reaches his destination. A more disturbing example might be seen in someone who employs a similar creative adjustment to survive abuse.

A degree of desensitization will be present in any addictive behaviour whether this is compulsive eating, sexual addiction or substance abuse. In our fast moving lives we can often desensitize to some degree as the pressures we encounter lead to us allowing insufficient time to linger over experiences and fully sense.

**Experiential exercise**

*Take longer over your next meal. Pay attention to the smells, the textures, let the food and drink linger a little longer on your palate. Allow yourself to linger over the food, paying attention to your sensations.*

**Deflection (knocking a statement off)**

As the word suggests thinking away from direct contact with the statement. Changing manoeuvre can be subtle which she receives the ‘I love’. Deflection will often rather than ‘I’ statement language, discussing the vance, by diminishing the dismissing it or laughing e.g. ‘I was irritated’ when will be accompanied by with the other – shallow movements, shrugging receiving compliments I be bounced back, for elements a client has made have done it without you direct contact, and we can this is achieved. As a the process of deflection if y

**Egotism (standing out)**

The term ego is Latin for and I watch myself. I am the observing myself be the when there is a need learning a new skill s. Most of us can probably criticizing ourselves, the destructive depending on blocks spontaneity thrac tion rather than is in re as long as I am watchin
Deflection (knocking away direct contact)

As the word suggests this process describes sidestepping or turning away from direct contact. Use of ‘the royal we’ is a classic example in which the use of a generalization lessens the impact of the statement. Changing the subject is another example and this manoeuvre can be subtle: a partner asks, ‘Do you love me?’ to which she receives the reply, ‘That depends what you mean by love’. Deflection will often present in language; the use of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ statements, the use of generalizations, stereotyped language, discussing the past when the present is of greater relevance, by diminishing the impact of what one has just said by dismissing it or laughing it off, by diluting emotional responses, e.g. ‘I was irritated’ when really I am furious. Deflective language will be accompanied by a bodily reaction to avoid full contact with the other – shallow breathing, lack of eye contact, distractive movements, shrugging off. Many of us behave this way when receiving compliments. Expressions of love, care or criticism may be bounced back, for example, when appreciating the achievements a client has made the therapist receives the reply, ‘I couldn’t have done it without you’. Energy is invested in turning away from direct contact, and we can all be very creative and subtle in the way this is achieved. As a therapist you may be alerted to a possible process of deflection if you hear the words but not the music.

Egotism (standing outside myself and observing myself)

The term ego is Latin for ‘I’ and in egotism I step outside myself and I watch myself. I am not fully in relation with the other, but am observing myself being in relation. This can be a useful process when there is a need to assess one’s ability, for example when learning a new skill such as working as a therapist or driving. Most of us can probably relate to congratulating or constructively criticizing ourselves, this can be relationally constructive or destructive depending upon the situation. The process of egotism blocks spontaneity through control, as one appears to be in relation rather than is in relation. I can watch myself meditating but as long as I am watching myself I am not in the experience.