Sensations and feelings

Do not look for anything behind phenomena; they themselves are the lesson.

(Goethe, 1998)

Sensations are the raw data from which awareness emerges. To allow awareness to emerge we need to allow space for the full figure of the sensation to form. In a fast-paced world in which virtual reality can be a substitute for feeling the wind against our faces, there are considerable forces in our fields to deny us such space. Technical advances can desensitize us from human contact with others and ourselves. In gestalt we fly in the face of much of our cultural way of being by inviting clients to stay with sensations and feelings. Sense experience is our communication with the world. A sensation or feeling does not exist in isolation but within a field of relations including other sensations and feelings. The relevance of the sensation or feeling for the individual experiencing it will depend upon where it surfaces in relation to their situation.

The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962) saw perception as intrinsically linked to sensate experience and invited us to consider each of our senses as constituting a small world within a larger one. If we see ourselves as functioning in several small ‘sense-worlds’, paradoxically we will create the opportunity for connectedness and integration.

We have a felt sense of the world long before we are able to describe our experience. Stern (1998) theorizes on pre-verbal development and what is lost when the child enters what he refers to as the verbal domain of relatedness. The development of language with its limited feeling and sensing vocabulary has the effect of pre-structuring feelings and sensations in that we feel or sense what we can describe rather than attempt to describe what we feel and sense. We are restricted in putting our somatic experiences into words – the language just doesn’t exist. In describing sensations and feelings we may need to step away from literal explanation,
feeling words, and towards metaphor and images. The vast majority of therapies, including gestalt, have strong verbal and cognitive biases that lead to a valuing of what can be explained. Culturally it is difficult for us just to stay with a sensation or a feeling, particularly one that does not immediately lend itself to a neat category within our inadequate verbal vocabulary. So often we move on to find a cognitive understanding prematurely for what, if we only allowed ourselves the space, may sediment down into an embodied experience.

There is a danger that theories can lead us away from our immediate experience; notions such as, ‘behind every anger is a hurt’ (Hycner, 1993) and ‘behind every depression is a rage’ (Wheeler, 1991) might generally be useful clinical wisdom, but only if we hold it lightly. In gestalt we need to hold an attitude of uncertainty – a does not always lead to b even though it often does. Working phenomenologically we need to be wary of moving into an interpretive model of psychotherapy that preconfigures the field through predicting the client’s unexpressed experience or believing that another experience lies beneath what we see on the surface. We need to accept what is.

Sensations can be the entry point with a client in gestalt therapy – to adapt Freud’s quote,\(^{15}\) they could be seen as the royal road to awareness. Gestalt therapists seek to heighten awareness of sensations trusting the client’s process to use full and vibrant contact with their senses to inform them regarding their needs. Assisting a client in increasing their awareness of the meaning of their sensations could involve experimentation, such as inviting them to give a voice to a sensation and to speak from that sensation.

We live in a culture that de-emphasizes the unitary nature of human beings. In feeling our sensations and being curious about others’ sensations, we help ensure that we practise gestalt as an embodied therapy rather than separating ourselves off into component parts.

---

\(^{15}\) In ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ Sigmund Freud (1997) referred to dreams as ‘The royal road to the unconscious’.