Inclusion – a cautionary note regarding empathy

Inclusion is when the therapist honours the phenomenological experience of the client without letting go of his own phenomenological experience. We need to respectfully enter the world of the client to experience, as far as possible, their perception within their lifespaces without judging, analysing or interpreting whilst retaining a sense of our own separate, autonomous existence. The gestalt therapist does not impose their beliefs on the client’s experience of their situation; the starting point is always to listen to the client’s story whilst noting how they and the client are impacted. In inclusion we are seeking the meaning for the client whilst noting the information present in our reactions. To do so we need to shuttle between the experienced world of the client and the experienced world of the therapist. In empathy the latter is subsumed whereas in inclusion we experience the other and distance from the other. However, empathy can be seen as a starting point for the practice of inclusion as Jacobs considers that ‘without empathic underpinnings, no true dialogue can take place’ (1995: 153).

The literal meaning of empathy is to feel into the other, and can be colloquially described as putting yourself in another's shoes. Although the term is often used more loosely, it means journeying over to the other and leaving your side. Inclusion on the other hand is ‘a bold swinging – demanding the most intensive stirring of one's own being – into the life of the other’ (Buber, 1965a: 81).

Perls wrote ‘If a therapist withholds himself in empathy, he deprives the field of its main instrument’. He goes on to say that a gestalt therapist ‘must have a relational awareness of the whole situation’ (1973: 105); central to the ‘whole situation’ is the therapist's perceptions and reactions. Buber saw empathy as an important feeling but that by its very nature this feeling ignored one existential pole of the dialogue. He saw inclusion as an existential movement towards attempting to experience both sides
of the dialogue. Inclusion involves the embodiment of the other’s experience whilst not losing a sense of one’s own embodied experience. I use the term ‘embodied’ here to emphasize that inclusion is more than a cognitive or psychological process — when we are inclusive of the other we soften our contact boundary and allow the other to stir our whole being.

‘The therapist must feel the other side, the patient’s side of the relationship, as a bodily touch to know how the patient feels it’ (Buber, 1967: 173). This statement could describe empathy with the emphasis placed on the client and we can find many similar statements in gestalt as empathy describes part of the process of inclusion. I do not agree with Buber’s belief that we can ‘know how the patient feels’ as I do not believe that we can ever fully know another’s experience — we can only gain an as if quality of their experience and existence. Even if I’m mistaken I believe that to hold an element of doubt about my capacity to know another is a healthy relational stance that safeguards the client and the therapeutic relationship from non-inclusive narcissistically oriented relating.

If the therapy relationship were mutually fully inclusive, Buber would say that it was not therapy. This would tally with the over-simplistic notion that when a client begins to consistently genuinely inquire about the therapist then therapy is over. Although some clients are probably well capable of practising inclusion with the therapist, they would not be serving their best interests to do so (Jacobs, 1995). Hence, Buber describes the therapeutic relationship as a one-sided inclusion in which the therapist strives to practise the art and the client receives.

Presence

I sat with a colleague today an asked, ‘Pat, if you were a psych want to know about presenc replied, ‘I’d want to know w but as our conversation unfok definition of this aspect of of the struggle in stating that all and describe it, giving a clear seem an ‘ethereal notion’ w thought then occurred to me: that I am dependent upon oth my world. Their presence helps me make sense of my e

Of course, we will always be aspects of our being we can s inauthentically (Heidegger, 19 one reaction but present anot. The therapist shows caring thr softness. A real meeting of p that the other does not want to may be misheard as rejectio selves judiciously and with gr expresses feelings, observation and thoughts and thereby mc. However, we will meet with differing relational needs durit will call for us to calibrate our i is part of the gestalt therapis moment to what degree to s subsume it and to continually presence too far upwards, som