Embodied Contexts:

The Forms We Create, The Forms that Create Us

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“Self may be regarded as at the boundary of the organism, but the boundary is not itself isolated from the environment; it belongs to both, environment and organism. Contact is touch touching something. The self is not to be thought of as a fixed institution; it exists wherever and whenever there is in fact a boundary interaction. “(Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951, p435)

Our sense of self and others, and of world emerges through our somatic relationship within a larger context or field. This field in the present moment is occurring not only in our consciousness, our somatic experience or the “environment” but as the interplay of all of these. We co-constitute ourselves through the dance of our bodies and the world in which we dance. The challenge for all therapies, including body oriented approaches, is to include in our mode of practice both somatic process and the larger contextual field. Rather than seeing our somatic process as only “my” way of being in the world in the moment or the sum of developmental and environmental forces, there is a much larger lens. This vision and the resulting practice allows us to appreciate any person as evolving bodily in relation within the present moment and context. Through our kinesthetic sense, our actual touch, smell, hearing and vision we know and are known. As we move through life, the field we are situated in becomes increasingly complex and multilayered. Each relational field, both developmentally and socially, has a physical configuration or “Form”. These forms are the situation (Wollants, 2012) in which our body emerges, the contexts from which “I” am inseparable, intrinsically influenced and influencing. Our bodies are part of the situation and yet shaped by the form of the situation. The figures that emerge for us, the meanings we make of our experience and relationships, the way we orient are all embedded in the physical situations we move through. For the man in a tunnel, the world is circular with light at either end shaping how he tends to move or the direction he will go. And the woman in the desert with endless sky above is drawn to looking for a horizon. These physical forms repeat and exist in our relationships with others during significant and consistent moments of our lives. The forms have meanings that influence our consciousness. The actual self/world (Bloom, 2012) is physical yet moves us to meaning. The form of embodiment shapes my embodied consciousness; it is the very meaning of what I call family, other, world.

My own experience as a Gestalt therapist and trainer began with my mentors at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, Elaine Kepner, Rainette Fantz, Joseph, Zinker, Sonia Nevis and Thomas Cutolo. They introduced me to Isadore From and then Lore Perls. It
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was from Tom Cutolo and Lore Perls, along with my work as fellow student, trainee and later longtime colleague with Jim Kepner that I began to explore Gestalt as a holistic bodily approach. During that time, I trained at Duquesne University with Amadeo Giorgi, Paul Richer and Anthony Barton in phenomenology. For many years, I trained in different somatic approaches in order to know what to attend to, look for or even feel with my clients. Over the years I became adept in working with client’s somatic experience, movements, and patterns. While all of this was instructive, I became aware that my sense of working with client’s embodiment was more than a biomechanical process. There was always in my awareness a sense of the context and meaning within which all of these patterns seemed to emerge and be related to both the clients meaning making and my own attention. As Peter Phillipson points out “you cannot reduce consciousness to physical interactions but you also cannot disconnect them” (2014, p205). This is exactly the complexity of the embodied interactions I was exploring in my work with clients and in teaching. Over time, I presented in multiple cultural and national contexts, resulting in my interest in body and culture (Clemmens and Bursztyn, 2003). And as I began to reside for longer periods of time at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Ca, and travel to other compelling physical contexts, my vision and interest has grown to the surrounding fields from which all our sensations and meaning grow. My intention and focus in this Chapter is to explore the different physical and relational contexts in which we live and through we understand each other and the present moment.

In this Chapter I will describe the forms of embodiment from in utero to the largest embodied field possible that which Roszak (2003) called “Person/Planet”. These forms while related to developmental steps are not only rungs of a ladder we climb to some sort of ascendancy or fields we dis-embed from (McConville,1995) but ongoing forms that we re-experience and co-create with others. They also occur simultaneously, for example we are both part of a culture and a family, perhaps a partner and moving in a shared erotic form as well as living in an embodied physical culture. These forms in which we are situated are the very “stuff” of our “life world”, yet so integral that we rarely focus on them.

I will begin each section with an experiential suggestion to you, the reader, in order to more fully evoke your experience of each form, becoming sensitized to the description and experiences that follow.

The Oceanic Bowl

Feel yourself lying on the ground lying next to the ocean, listening to the sound of the waves crashing and receding outside. Allow your body to relax into the ground as your yield to the wave pattern. Focus on the rhythm of the wave pattern, allowing the
This first physical form we develop in is a bowl or container. The shape is like a nut or piece of fruit with inner and outer boundaries. The outer bowl holds and contains and the inner is held and contained. The movement is a gentle rocking and swaying to the extent that we can’t tell who is doing which because both are co-creating the movement. The experience is oceanic, as if we are in the water and swimming and/or as if we are the water. This form begins in utero and can be felt when we are held, making love, sailing, rocking and swimming.

Ideally, this is the ultimate confluent form, both the holder and the held merge. However, many of us have experienced a different kind holding or a lack of holding, for example if the bowl is unsteady. Sometimes when the container is not consistent or erratic in pulsation, we may learn not to trust this form, others or our own self. We may fear being engulfed or suspended as if there is no outer form surrounding us. Our response to an unstable bowl can be a sense that we are too much for others, or the opposite that there is not enough me, or a sense of isolation as if there is only my-self. I can then have I then have difficulty defining my sense of who I am. This embodied experience can then become a style described by Lowen (1971), Judith (1996) as “schizoid” or an existence structure characterized by a withdrawal from the present field by physically moving upward and back away from others and not fully inhabiting our own internal space.

In the clinical or consulting situation this bowl form is described as “the container” which is created by the physical/emotional presence of the therapist. Often therapists literally gesture with hands open towards the client in semi-circular movements as speaking. Some therapists refer to this as “holding space” for the other, holding the other or the other’s interests as we would hold the spine of a baby in our hands. As the client, we experience the bowl in being understood or held by the other, by their eyes, by their words and even by the hands. In this we can relax and drop into the present “world”. It is our comfort as therapists that allows this form if needed. Yet if our experience of this form has been unstable or one of engulfing, we may approach the present situation and organize our self by withdrawing and moving again up and away or compress our internal space. We may also respond similarly to the arms of a lover or friends who seek to hold us or be a support. In this embodied interactive field, both people co-create the quality of contact, yet we each bring our own history and physical organizations which structures (Kepner, 2001, Clemmens, 2011) the situation.

An example from my own practice illustrates this form. My client is a woman who was born five weeks premature and separated from her mother and father when she was by placed in a unit in the hospital to “thrive” and be medically monitored. She could not attach to her parents, particularly her mother during that stay and for years afterward. She entered her first session with me, and upon my offer for her to choose whatever chair
or couch she wanted, she stopped and stared at the barrel like leather chair where I usually sat. “Can I sit there? Isn’t that your seat”? I replied that she could sit there or anywhere else she wanted. Flopping into the chair, she pulled her legs up to her chest and began to swivel the chair from side to side. “This feels wonderful”. When I asked her to stay with her experience, she described feeling surrounded or held in by chair and by my office. She asked me if we could pull down the blinds. When I did this, she started rocking in her body vertically very rhythmically. “I like the feeling of being in a cocoon, being close in and it’s all dark…now I can talk some about why I am here”. I could feel my hands spreading out palms forward and out, my breathing was slowing to a slow pace. I asked her if what she was doing now felt related to her coming to therapy. Her response was to say: yes, but more this is what I need to be here, to be safe and not cold exposed and alone!”. “Can you tell me more about being cold, exposed and alone? From this question emerged her story of the beginning of her life, her birth and her repeated attempts to find comfort and safety in relationships, her feeling that people were studying her (like in the hospital and her early childhood when her family was worried about her being sickly).

The form she craved and which emerged in the form between us in my office (which she referred to as “the cave” or the “bear cave” with me being the bear) was created by her need, my space and our mutual physical embodiment, literally my holding space for her in a rounded open way, her curling movements and allowing her whole body feel supported without the risk of feeling cold, exposed and not alone. It was the basis for a long and successful process of her developing a sense of self warmth and competency as she established an “internal cave”. When she ended therapy after a long hiking trip in the Rockies, she gave me a small Native American carving of a grizzly bear and she suggested that the bear and I would be there for the next person who needed to “be born in a cave”.

**Horizontal/Vertical: The world above, in front of and around**

Return to lie on the floor, look around and above you, imagining someone there. How does the world/other appear to you? Is it/are they soft, welcoming, harsh, noisy or does the world seem empty, vacant. How do you organize yourself in the face of this world of larger others? Do you feel secure on the ground, able to yield or clutching, holding yourself upward from your back?

This Form has two phases, the first being the position of horizontality (Jager, 1971), lying supine to the world with our back on floor in relationship to others above us as horizon. The second phase is the movement from the horizontal to verticality in which we co-create an entirely different relational field. This vertical field is the beginning of supporting oneself through legs and moving towards around and away from others. In between is the middle position and form of being on all fours, crawling with head not
The relational challenges of these forms are different. In the horizontal form the embodied relationship involves yielding to the floor and allowing ourselves to be supported by the other(s). But if the other(s) or the floor (literally and experientially) are not stable, then the form we embody becomes one of holding ourselves up off the floor or reacting warily to other(s). Another response can be one of shame in response to the disgusted or impatient other who stands above and around.

The mid point of crawling involves multiple levels of patterning (Frank, 2001) and carries the form of tentative moving to the possibility of boundless forward movement. The horizon is met but also vertical space is now somewhat in reach. We experience the beginnings of interacting actively with others, objects, pets, and other crawlers from a fuller capacity to approach with our whole body and withdraw when necessary. In the horizontal mode, a continuation of the interaction of being held and given space is what the other offers but now they can be encouraging us to move out and reach. If we are held “loosely” by the other or given too much space, then we reach uncertainly. Or if the other and the field crowds us or surrounds us too tightly, we learn to not venture forth or look for the other’s permission. Or we learn to run from any sense of containment or surrounding because it feels too confining.

Becoming vertical then is more than just “standing on our own two feet” (Strauss 1980). Our world is now three dimensional and parts of it are more attainable or “reachable” such as grasping on to someone or a chair for balance or moving around in multiple directions. Becoming vertical (moving upward) supports a longer reach, thus changing our perspective and intentionally our impact on the world. Up and down are now more clearly delineated. The form involves a greater degree of parallel interactions with adults and adult objects. Our reach can be extended by the extension of our legs and arms. Support from and co-creation by the field of this form is developed by others standing with us or against us or even alongside us. Our capacity to push is supported by the other encouraging this push when the other offers to pushed against by us.

In encountering my client horizontally in the consulting situation, I am the other who can call them forth to move upward and forward (Jager, 1971) or the “visible voice” (Chretien 2004) who sees them with my voice and hears with my eyes. My own experience of being horizontal and moving to the vertical influences how I welcome the other with my face, my eyes and my encouragement. If I too quickly push the client to “stand on their own two feet”, it may be just a re-enactment of my own experience of being “hurried” in my development.

I remember working with a young man who needed to feel welcomed to take more space in our relationship, he not only needed to feel safe but actually encouraged to sit up and take the next step. As a child, all this was assumed of me, I seemed to figure it on my own. This left me with an experience of not noticing support nor my role in supporting others. For a moment, I waited for him to move forward or as we sometimes say in gestalt “take responsibility!” Finally, I looked with my whole face and said: “what
do you need?” He leaned forward and said: “I need to know your there if I am coming forward, in my world there ain’t no one to come forward to”. I sat up and said: “Here I am”. This became the work for him, in order to move forward he learned to look outward as he readies his legs to take the next step. As a child, he was left alone and consequently was “not part of anything…good on my own but disinterested”. The form we created was one of him arising and reaching with his step toward me as the other to greet and welcome him. As Jager (1971) says: “A child who has not been faced cannot face the world, he is in constant danger of falling” (p215). This stands in relief to the old Gestalt dictum personally owning power and “healthy aggression”. The vertical and upright form is initially created solely by my own will but develops through my own muscular imperative and the physical space, gesture and greeting by the field for me to move upward and forward. If others do not welcome us, we can develop a lurching or impulsive thrust of self-determination or a shy hesitation. These patterns are apparent in the consulting situation and our option is to explore how to help the client create a different experience and pattern (Frank, 2001).

**Triangles**

You are sitting in one of three chairs and your parents are sitting in the other two. Notice the three parts of the triangle, the space between each pair and the whole three-sided form. How do you orient your body, where /who do you look toward? How do the three of you interact? Is it an even interaction or does the attention go to one point in the triangle? Now watch your parents interact with each other physically. Is there energy between them or do they focus on you, or ignore you? How do the three of you talk, do you take turns or speak all at once?

The triangle is a fundamental configuration in all interactions. Nowhere is it more salient than in the early years of development and childhood where the opportunity exists for the child to receive a stable attention from both sides (adults) of cooperative field (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery (1999). The quality of this triangular field is co-created by the affect of each parent, whether the primary attending or cooperative partner. The clinical term “triangulation” refers to a triangle where at least two and possibly all parties engage in indirectness of communication and affect. Not all triangles are triangulated, but rather the family therapy term of “triangulation” describes a lack of cooperation or uneven attention. Physically, the triangle is maintained by our mutual kinesthetic and visual sense of all three sides.

What we learn in this early form is our first experience of cooperation and predictability/unpredictability in systems. We learn how the other two sides of the triangle (mother and father) cooperate, manage conflict and share primacy and how I, the
child am the focus. This form re-emerges again in adolescence, in business mergers, partners or couples therapy. An example of the triangle form is in sports. Soccer players are trained to create triangles which are mutually cooperative in moving the ball and seeing each other. In its essence, the lesson and experience of a triangle can be that I don’t have to choose either/or but a possibility of holding all three sides as viable options. Physically our body is two triangles with our feet forming one with the point in our hips and then another inverted triangle from our shoulder to a point in our pubis.

The clinical situation of triangles is emergent in couple’s therapy with two clients and a single therapist. Literally I look from side to side when working with the client. I encourage the couple to look at each other and only to me when I interrupt for a consult or they need help. Yet throughout the session they move in and out of awareness of their side of the triangle and of me.

Even in individual therapy, the triangle can become the situation. Sitting with my teenage client who often feels his “disapproving” father in the room, as we schedule future appointments and as he looks out the window of my office for his father’s car. We could explore this situation as the son’s introjected father and do an “empty chair” dialogue with his father. This would be another triangle of him, empty chair and me. What I choose to do was to pay attention to his physical experience as he stood looking out my window and talking to me. He described feeling “torn” between the two of us. I move my chair so I can see him and the window and we explore how he tries to balance both his need for me and his father without feeling disloyal or deserting himself. Later he describes feeling the same way with his father and another person, his childhood babysitter. In this present situation one triangle leads to his experience of others and his typical way of managing this interactive form. In single parent families, there may be an energy to create the triangle form with others, such as friends or teachers. An interesting aspect of the triangle form is the rich range of possibilities with same sex parents as forming the triangle with a child. The limits of this chapter preclude further discussion of such complexity or similarity.

Family Form- The Table

Close your eyes and go back to the family house, apartment or building you lived in as a child. Go in the front or back door, move slowly to the place or room where you ate your meals. Sit down at the table or stand if that is what you did. Look to your right and left and across from you. Who is there? Who takes up space and how much? What form does the family take? What do you notice in your body, your breathing, the way you use your arms and legs? What is going on above the table and below the table? Again, come back to your body and how you are organizing yourself in this form. You might feel ‘out of
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sync” as if in a different ‘solar system” where the gravitational pull is different from our own familiar and recent experience. Stay with this experience of the older “family form”

This form is an inter-connection of relating and co-influencing bodies. The family embodied field influences us like the gravitational pull on planets in a solar system. We move in ways that are part of that system, whether we feel like we are rebelling or cooperating. For example, becoming angry, “hyperactive” or withdrawn may be our orbit in this form. Each gesture can feel different in the context of this system; it has a resonance unique to that context. The field is developed through or mutual movements, positioning, touch or lack of touch.

We are born to, develop and live in relation to our family. This relation does not mean a confluence, our embodiment in the family form can and at certain times includes opposition, an embodied stance of distance or “againstness” (McConville, 1995). But the form of family is not like a “press” upon us or some anonymous environment but a co-organizing and co-regulating of ourselves physically in that pattern. As with planetary gravity the family field and our varying orbits are maintained by the tension of pull and our own arc. By co-organize I mean that all members of the family move, sit, gesture and speak in ways that are interdependent and at the same time inter influencing. Imagine returning to your family of origin and notice how you begin to behave physically and feel emotionally in some patterns similar to childhood. We have an experience of knowing in our tissue “what is my place”.

The family meal table is the familiar and reinforcing group dance where we move together in “our” way. Our movements and patterns of our family meal table usually appear in other life situations. We may find ourselves moving, sitting and orienting in this familiar way with friends, lovers, at work and in the “new” families we create. Thus, the challenge is how to be aware of this embodied and intrinsic dance in our everyday lives. Also, the figures or themes that emerge are not only our “individual” uppermost needs but what is significant in this situation.

In the clinical situation, clients often describe their perspective of the world of their employment situation, “their new family” from the perspective of their original family form. Hall (1990) description of the “hidden dimension” of space is a significant aspect of this form, how we learn to co-regulate relational space in the consulting session and in all our relational fields. How does the available space influence how we organize our own body? This sense of personal space becomes initially emergent in the family form. My client asked me if his parents could attend a session with me, and after some discussion I agreed and we met the following week. The first thing the three of them focused on was where to sit. They all looked at me upon entering the office and then my
clients’ mother asked: “Where do we sit?” “How do we do this?” was her husband’s request. The son, my client, started to laugh and said:” He is not going to tell us what to do!” So, then all found seats and I asked them about that process, how they decided and if this was how they interacted and organized themselves at home. This lead to a long discussion of how they make decisions and who sits where in the family car. Since my client was now beginning to drive, they explored how the family was changing from the form of their car and what they felt and what it symbolized to them.

**Pairs**

As we move on in life and beyond our families we “pair up” with other people. This happens initially with a playmate or friend, and later in life happens with tasks in business or sports and sometimes with a romantic partner /lover. This embodied form shifts depending on the field conditions or context. Often there is an intimacy that develops within pairs, an intimacy that is not spoken but felt and embodied. From “best girlfriends” to “partners” to “sisters” or “blood brothers” we experience a sense of the “two of us” through our nonverbal awareness of doing and being together. Pairs can create a mutual space of synchronicity, a felt sense of “we”. Depending on the context, pairing is side by side, more often in boys and men (Tannen,1994) or face to face in girls and women (Tannen,1994). So, the form can be either horizontal to our sides or sagittal in front of us. Imagine playing the same game or doing the same task with your best friend or partner, what do you notice in your body as you are “paired up” with the other? How do you align with each other? Do you sit, stand, face to face or at each other’s’ sides in these different forms, how do you experience each other and the surrounding world? Do you feel more intimate facing each other or as a team when side by side?

Partnering is different than being in relation to a parent. Imagine playing a game with your father/mother and feel your body, what do you notice. Now try the same imagining with a peer, someone you have a more horizontal relationship with. Feel the difference in your body. In both situated contexts, there are two people but there is a different form, perhaps of equality of parallel height. Unless of course, you experience all pairs or this certain pair as if you are in that dance with your father. In this latter case, the form that gets created is emergent out of an earlier form of embodiment. This can be the source of competitiveness and authority conflicts, where we approach all interactions as a battle of asserting ourselves against the other. In this experience of the I-thou we might see the other’s face as pushing into us or challenging our proximal space which can evoke an upwardly and forward push back for some and a retreating or collapsing in or spine in the “face of” the other. Frequently, I have heard Gestalt therapists orient to all interactions as if the main concern of the relationship in therapy, consulting or life is one of “making sure you differentiate and not introject”. I suggest that this concern is more based in the parent/child “feel” of a dyad and only one possibility for the emergent pair.
Differentiation is one option of pairs but is not equivalent to connection, we meet at the boundary of our differences and similarities, not one or the other (Wheeler, 1991). A pair can share power by being equally invested face to face or side to side rather than always a dilemma of vertical physical and emotional over/under form. An ironically if I respond with a hard push back when I experience the other “protecting my own reality” then I can evoke or. More accurately we create a field of ongoing evocation of hard boundaries. It can be usual for me to hold my space in relation to the other who may want to press down on me or “tell me my reality” yet this become a persistent way of experiencing the form of pairs, not allowing for other directions and encounters. The “either me or you” form of embodiment, often associated with early Gestalt diminishes the possibility of you and me and might limit any movement to “we” as a pair.

Another way to feel a partner’s experience is to emotionally embody their movement or walk. It is literally a sense of “walking a mile in my shoes”. This what Kepner (2003) call “Embodied Empathy”. I often do this with my therapy clients or have trainees learn to “embody” the other. At times, I have actually intended to do this but early in my practice, I begin to notice I was “taking on” the form of the other without a specific intention or therapeutic rationale, I was forming myself in relation to the other as they spoke and moved. This happens often in everyday life and in the practice of psychotherapy and consulting. That is the facilitator not only attunes emotionally but through his or her body/self, literally “tries on” or somatically mirrors the other. This dynamic interaction of the “pair” form can sometimes develop the embodying of the other. The dynamic, a true embodied dialogue that occurs between the two of us leads to an embodied resonance (Clemmens, 2011).

A second aspect of pairs is that partners or pairs can develop a walk of being together, a pas de deux that involves sensitivity to each other’s gestures and movements. Sometimes this sensitivity feels like comfort/contentment, sometimes excitement and other times like fear, anger or a startle response. This two-person dance exists within the larger contextual field and as a pair, we may create a field around us that is permeable (or interactive) with others or more impermeable and less interactive with others. As the other, we can experience a sense of being outside when we encounter a more tightly bound pair, often we might find ourselves looking at both partners when we speak or we may feel left out and hasten to move away.

In the consulting situation, one way we can experience paring in the way that we sit and create space. Who decides the seating? Does the consultant or therapist have their “own chair”? Where is the clock in the room? The clock is one physical bounder of the situation, our attention to it determines when we begin and end, or at least where we are in time. Is it positioned in a way that both of us can see? Are we both free to move around the room? Is this our work? Or do we see what occurs as the work of the client and we are the consultant, a sort of benevolent “outsider” available for input, like a cool consulting physician keeping track of our vital signs? What I am raising here is that the dance we engage in is shaped by the form of pairing and our own and mutual and
historical experiences of creating the form...

Sometimes in the therapeutic relationship, a rhythm develops where both parties feel like they are “working together” without much instruction. In this case, the pair is a cooperative or at least a complimentary one. Obviously, the way we create a consulting pair is rooted in our history and through our embodiment. To quote Patrice Hamilton (20111, a somatically based colleague “the issue in the tissue” meaning the way we live and orient is emergent in and through our bodies, and often out of our verbal awareness.

**The Erotic Field-The Spiral**

The form of the erotic field is a spiral or snake-like movement pulsing from the lower body on through the upper body. Bodily, Eros is a tension between yielding and moving forward. The pulsation develops from the tension between these two and what develops is a yearning for release or discharge. Try sitting still and moving first forward in your pelvis and then back, then from side to side, eventually the movement moves into the figure eight, now allowing the movement to continue up your spine from your tail bone to your head and neck. Feel your spine in your head and let your head roll back and forth, creating pleasure and warmth. Now imagine or picture someone you are drawn to or a movement/dance that excites you. Feel the full spiraling in your spine. This is the individual sphere of the erotic field, a slow whipping in our spine.

But if we expand our movements to the larger embodied field we can experience this on the dance floor as many people move together to a rhythm. And as partners we can create this form with our mutual yielding and forwardness, and then including moving to the sides. As we inhabit this form, it becomes like ascending circles, each circular movement can lead to more excitement and charge. I am not describing the structured dancing of dance companies since these are rehearsed or the strategic movements of practiced lovers but the spontaneous form that emerges when two or more people co-create the pulse.

Erotic experience can be exciting, shame-filled, fearful and confusing. What is difficult about our erotic experience comes from our experience of loss, shame or differences in power. Some of this difficulty occurs when what is emergent is a trauma or abuse memory as we feel our own erotic energy. The common resolution for people with this experience is to quell most erotic energy or to emphasize the “safe” side of erotic energy, engage in slow careful movement, with inhibited breathing and lots of prescribed rituals of behavior. In this case, the field of interactions constricts and has less of the spiraling and circularity but becomes more linear and less novel.

This is common among survivors of sexual abuse. The paradox is that our erotic energy can allow us to feel power, flexibility and more energy. By diminishing this from emerging, a person remains safe yet doesn’t experience their own full embodied agency. Changing this frozenness is an example of a safe emergency (Perls, Hefferline &Goodman, 1951), too much safety (restraining) and one loses their vitality, too much emergency and I may overwhelm myself. I believe this is what has occurred in psychotherapy in the last twenty years out of a reaction to the boundary violations by
some therapists and a heightened attunement to excesses of power. Cornell (2003) describes this as a lack of passion in psychotherapists, where the present norm is a measured soft speech and minimal affect as “professional”. Oddly, this common presentation can co-create less excitement in growth in the client or any groups. And one meaning we make of such a stilted stance, is a field of danger one that lacks the very liveliness we crave.

A third option then is to ride the edge between excitement and safety, between my longing and my need for boundary. We can allow ourselves to feel the erotic spiral, to feel fully moved, to receive the longing of others and know our own and still have maintain boundaries.

In the consulting context, the erotic field can become emergent in the relationship between the client and facilitator, within the client or the facilitator. In this interaction, there is something in the present context that invites or evokes this energy, perhaps the intimacy of the situation. Using O’Shea’s (2003) definition, erotic sensations and movements are not limited to “libidinal strivings “but are expressed in the creative process and also may express desire between both parties. Erotic energy, sexual feelings and sexual activity are not equivalent. The erotic field that can be created does not need to develop into sexual action but instead is the artful, movement between engaged partners. What is validating about our erotic experience comes from feeling the unity of ourselves in passion and having this respected by others. The challenge is to feel safe and experience our passion. The only way I can hold both safety and passion as the facilitator and partner is to feel my own embodiment, to ground into my emergent and hold safely my clients charge gently as if it is normal and part of the emerging person in the moment. That is not to either patholigize or squelch their lively energy while remaining aware of my own energies and what emerges between us.

My mentor in Body oriented therapy, Tom Cutolo remarked: “it is amazing how attractive people (clients) appear as they become more integrated and healthy. They seem to shine more and exude brighter energy.” (Personal communication). Obviously, beauty is also in the eye of the beholder, so it is with his statement that how people appeared is from his eyes, from our eyes. But if we let go of this as only an individual attribution, there is something to the shine of others and our capacity to see it. In the emerging erotic field the challenge for us as practitioners is to neither freeze nor move beyond the boundaries of the professional relationship but instead to allow the vitality to emerge. We cannot make such a choice if we don’t recognize the erotic form, or patholigize and trivialize this experience as a “transference” or countertransference. The emerging erotic form in the work supports our creativity and allows us to move and be moved by each other without shame or the need to “act upon” the other.

**Culture- The Tribal Matrix**

Let’s begin by picturing some event in your culture of origin or present culture. Imagine
yourself at a funeral, a wedding or some large social event. As you hold this image, notice your bodily experience. Pay attention to any movement or vibration, however small. Feel your posture and stance, notice any way that you lean with your body and face. Feel the expression on your face, notice your eyes and your vision/focus as you remember this time. Notice the other people in your vision. Can you feel how you move with each other? What is the dance that you do as a group, as a tribe? In your body, how can you tell that these are your people?

A larger and ever present embodied sphere of the field in which we are embedded is “culture”. Expanding on Guitterez and Belzunce (2002), I define the embodiment of culture as a group of people moving together, creating space, knowing each other physically in the same ways over time. I would add to this definition that these ways of moving together are in the background of our awareness until we experience the boundary of different culture or they become highlighted in a ceremony. The form of culture is like a matrix including many physical components, our own learned bodily style, the rituals and collective movements of the larger world and the historical ground. We learn, teach and maintain our culture through our physical experiences of touching, being held, speaking and interacting in groups (Montagu, 1978; Guitterez, and Belzunce, 2002). It is a shared field (Parlett, 2000) literally handed down from generation to generation. This is our home culture, the matrix of body movements and sensations that we feel as a connective web, the field incarnate. This is different from an individual making movement and gestures with awareness. The embodied culture is an interaction of unaware movements that are typical or embedded in the common field. As Berreby (2005) describes, we are tribal and tend to see/define people as others or us, good or bad, same or different. This definition occurs on an immediate physical level prior to and often without cognitive awareness.

Another relevant aspect of the cultural form of embodiment is power and privilege. Privilege has been the focus of diversity approaches (Thomas, 1997, Jacobs, 2005, Steinbach, 2005, Berreby, 2005). In this chapter, I want to extend our concern to the embodied privilege, the physical sense of entitlement and choice embedded in either the client’s or therapist’s culture. Privilege is also an aspect of the embodied field, the privilege of having feelings, of speaking up, of safety in creating space, asking questions, of being able to pay for therapy and even the privilege of eating when and what I want. As the therapist in whose office the sessions occur, I may feel relatively freer than the client to attend to these privileges and this difference. In my client’s culture, speaking more freely may not be supported or he may experience himself in my culture, the culture of therapy where he is “visiting”. Movements, gestures and modes of speech are enculturated and form the embodied field. I remember facilitating a group in Indiana where the only non-therapist in the group said after a full day of us speaking in our “normal” subdued voices, “why is everyone whispering or talking to each other as if someone is going to jump off a bridge? It was such a perfect “outlier” comment which heightened our awareness of how we spoke as a group. His comment was very useful to the group yet what is also significant is that he felt empowered enough to speak so
directly. Other people might not feel empowered physically nor have the historical and present field support to inhabit the space as he did.

In the clinical or consulting context, the embodied field of culture influences the horizon of possibilities in many ways; proximal space, touch, expressiveness in our face and body, movement, the tones of our voices, sometimes a client can experience dissonance when immersed in the different culture of our therapy session. Then unfortunately this dissonance can be attributed to resistance or a relational issue between the client and therapist. Often in the consulting context, the client is being asked to “visit” (Clemmens and Burzystyn, 2003), (McGoldrick, Pearce & Gordano, 2002) our culture. Assumptions based in our own culture can lead us to differing and sometimes misattuned choices in therapy. The myth of the objective observer is only half the dilemma. Our cultural biases about physical expression and voice are not only beliefs but how our “ears” hear the other. We hear from how our tribe “speaks”, how our tribe “moves” and for many of us “our tribe” has become the culture of professionalism and therapy which like any other culture has patterns of movement and somatic behavior that are supported and others that are not supported.

I am thinking of an older man who came to therapy after living most of his life in the US Marine Corps. His voice was strong and resonant, as if he was pushing his words out and addressing a group. In fact, this is what he did, he was a drill instructor and sergeant who pushed people. Instead of correcting his speech by teaching him to speak more sensitively and gently, I tried to speak like him by pushing my voice out and sitting very upright in my chair, lengthening my neck and squaring my shoulders. I tried to “resonate” with his experience from his own situated embodied culture Attending to the way he used his voice made me appreciate how he created his voice. I also became aware of how I create my voice. This stance placed his voice within an embodied physical context rather than in an exclusively individual perspective. It restored my curiosity about him and the meaning of his speech as embodiment and the cultural context. I tried to appreciate and inhabit his mode of speaking, not trying to change, influence his voice or way of being but with the intention of joining with him in a mutual exploration. He later remarked that he could “hear me” unlike the other therapist who “whispered to him” and from this experience he decided I was trustworthy. This subtle difference in “voicing” was developed from appreciating the context in which he spoke rather than moving him to speak “as if”. It also leads to deep exploration of how “hard” he pushed himself. His throat muscles and others. Some body oriented approaches might focus initially on his muscular tensions exclusively and hear him as “retroflecting”. What became the richer context in addition to these sensations was the context in which his voicing was useful, appropriate and “made sense”

7) World as Embodiment

Person/Planet
How do we connect myself to the entire world about me through my embodiment and how is our embodied sense creating the larger world?

Notice how you are physically situated as you read this sentence. Are you sitting, standing, or in another position. Notice the room or immediate physical environment. Now widen your sensory awareness beyond this room or immediate place. Can you feel or see where this room sits in a building, on a street? Maybe you are in a hotel or on a boat rocking at anchor. Continue bringing your awareness farther out beyond the immediate space of your chair or standing place. Can you see the horizon, maybe the sun or the stars? As you do this expansion, continue to feel your bodily experience. What do you notice if you allow your sensate experience to include both where you are and who or what surrounds you? What is flying, crawling, buzzing)? Can you hear the dog barking? And when you allow your ears and eyes and skin to widen, what happens to your breathing, your bodily sensations? How are you different when you include more of the world around you? As you practice these attunements, does your sense of or meaning of your awareness change?

Our bodies are situated on this spinning planet amongst all the other species and physical substances. This intellectually appears as to be the most obvious embodied field, that we are physically present here and now. But what are the boundaries of the here? Is the here only the room we sit in, this office, this building? And what is the nature of our relationship to place, physical environment and the aspects of the field that are not human? The largest form of embodiment is often understood and experienced from cultural contexts. Yet, there is more to the surround contexts of the immediate situation, aspects that are other than human. In this collection Adams (2014) in his Chapter in this book discusses our relationship with the physical and animal world in more detail. In this section, I want to focus on two aspects of this form, our sense of place and the somatic processes by which we maintain connection with ourselves as embedded in what Roszak (2003) calls Person/Planet. I experience place primarily through my senses. I see the mountains of Virginia as I drive through the Shenandoah Valley. I smell the dry river bed between Israel and Jordan. The air is different in Seoul and in Big Sur and my feet tingle walking across the sand in Key West, but they tighten as I huddle and trudge across the bridges of Stockholm in February. These are differences in my sensory embodiment which have different meanings to me. My sense of place is both these sensations and what these sensations signify to me. The embodied sense of home place is the interaction of our tissue and terra Firma, we reside here not just at a point on our GPS but in a contextual physical field of body, place and meaning. The physical world (my body and all that I am immersed in) is not an object for me to “observe” but rather my immediately given existence (Merlau-Ponty, 1958).
I had the privilege of speaking to some recovering alcoholics from a Navajo reservation. I asked them what they thought of the theory of alcoholism/addiction as a disease. They laughed and said, for them alcoholism has more to do with an individual being disconnected from the land, becoming a person detached from the land, without culture and place. They also believe that the healing or recovery begins with becoming re-connected to the land, to place, that addicts are restored to be “a person” by re-connecting to this place, this land, this “now and here”. This speaks to our gestalt sense of what we essentially mean by “here” in our code of here and now. Here is not only the room I sit in but, the building that room sits in, the land that the building sits upon, the part of the country, the world this lands sits upon and how it shapes my experience and my embodied senses and ultimately my “selfing”. It is a conceit of “modern” culture to believe that all places are the same and I am the same wherever I am. But the embodied field of place shifts our experience and meaning making.

To expand our sense of this form more, try this exercise. Imagine yourself now in a totally different physical situation. If you are in New York, imagine you are sitting on a rock in Southern New Mexico, watching the heat shimmer over the dirt and sand. What is your experience of yourself? Do you long to return to your NY apartment? Is that because of creature comforts (a bodily description of course) or more than that? Do you not feel dis-placed, embedded in a contextual embodiment that you feel alien, a literal stranger in a strange land? We all can imagine and have experienced examples of displacement. The significance of this exercise is not only from the sense of being in a different place but of the elusive influence of our familiar place. Like culture, place is a form of embodiment that we may take for granted or feel a sense of separation. This separation can mirror the earliest separation of our self from others that occurs in our development (Berman, 1989). We might experience ourselves as not part of the world, then treating the planet and environment as something to be used and discarded since it is not me. Gestalt therapy can add this focus to the sense of field, appreciating it as the largest surrounding context.

Place shapes us while we shape each other. Our self-shaping and mutual shaping supports our connection and awareness to the physical field on which we are situated. Spiritual practices often involve particular postures which remind us of our connection as embeddedness in the world and universe (F. Goodman, 1988). The sun salutation of Yoga, the Islamic practice of kneeling on a prayer rug towards Mecca and the East and Native American practices on acknowledging “Mother earth” and Father sky” are examples of how people orient their sense of embodiment to the physical/spiritual world.

In the consulting situation, the significance of our place of working is often crucial to our clients and what potentially emerges from the work. I have a colleague who works with all clients in a wooden yurt with a fire going during the session while other practitioners work in a multi-storied office buildings. These are such different contexts and the impact the practice of GT that occurs there. How do they affect the client’s sense of their body, their “wildness” or need to be “civilized”? Do they feel displaced by being
in a world of air conditioning or artificial heat, insulated from the “outside”? If you respond to these examples with a certainty or disdain about the yurt or office building as being “inappropriate” for “professional” or “holistic” practice, then notice your bias. Our experience is perspectival, that is, how we view space is embedded in both our present state and the context in which we are usually and habitually situated.

Concluding Remarks

The forms of embodiment in which we are situated create and inform our experience. In each of the contexts described in these pages our sense of bodily knowing is inextricably linked to the present container or context, sometimes more than one. What does this mean for our understanding of relational process and our practice of gestalt therapy?

By sensing and valuing the present embodied context we can more fully apprehend how the situation is related to a person’s physical process and to our mutual relational dance. The relationships we create are embedded or exist within these surrounding and intertwined positions. This “umwelt” or environment is not solely of our creation, but they actually co-create and are co-created by us. We are not only in relationship to the “seen”, to the human others but to the “unseen” non-human, physical forms (Abram 1997, 2010). This kind of relating precedes verbal dialogue, precedes consciousness; instead our embodied engagement precedes and creates our consciousness. We are given to a world of others, and these patterns or forms shape the relationships that we develop, even the possibility of a relational dance is always embedded in a somatic context...

For the practice of Gestalt therapy, attention to the embodiment of situations and particular forms, frees us from the assumptions of individual constructions of world, place and theme. Loosening our sense of embodied boundary allows us to include the various “dances” we and our clients have engaged in and are the ones we are dancing in now beyond mental constructions. The enlargement of this perspective can expand our sense of character and contact style as embedded within a situation that is more than the verbal or even emotional aspects. This expansion moves us to feel and see this present moment as part of a larger dance or context. It allows us to understand what embodied form is more salient for our client and may emerge for us. I am advocating that we can do this by increasing our sensate awareness to the physical situation in this moment as shaping and influencing what is emergent for both us and our clients. Additionally, allowing our mutual physicality to be present more than intuitive knowing offers to our clients the spontaneity that supports true growth. This process is what I call “somatic intelligence”. It makes Gestalt relevant to the contexts of being that are clients are living
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and moving within.

. As Frank (2001) has described, understanding movement and behavioral patterns that continue to adult life offers us a contextual depth to our historical Gestalt concepts such as retroflection. As she points out retroflected reach can be best understood within the context of the child’s (and later adults) reach to another. This is the significance of all of these forms and liberates us from a reductionist “biologism” of exclusively explaining people’s behavior as biodynamics. We reach to another from a position and in a form which shapes our reach. The complexity of the interaction of this form (and the successive forms,) is that we are selfing in embodied interactions across situations. These consistent and habituated patterns of physical organization developed out of the forms are often described as “body structures” or “character structures (Lowen, Judith, 1996, Totton, 2001). From an embodied form perspective, character structure is not an individual event but emergent in the present situation, influenced by our own historical patterns and the co-constituting other, by the situation in toto. Character, body character then is a relational field event, an interaction that emergent in the present moment, not individually but dynamically in the present embodied field.

Finally, in the latter forms of embodiment, in the world body, the non-human and more sensate co-inhabitants can be more fully revealed as both our foreground and background. I recently visited the Freud Museum in London and saw a photograph of Freud. I was amazed to see “Herr Doctor” in a three-piece suit in photos framed by his two dogs. In fact, he was so lost when his first dog was quarantined for months, he immediately found another dog. Then I saw a video of him playing with children at a Garden party kneeling in his impeccable suit (with pocket watch). Looking in his office, I saw many figurines of animals and deities from different religions. Whatever he has written about the id, and the need for repression, I gained a revelatory sense of the physical man in different forms that he embraced. So, it is true with all us, the forms of embodiment, the dances we engage and the ways we are given to mutual embodiment creates the full story of who we are in this moment in relation

References


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