The Interactive Field: Gestalt therapy as an embodied relational dialogue

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Abstract

Through attention and dialogue based on our mutual embodied awareness we can explore relational patterns of our clients and create alternative experiences and supports for change and growth. This approach is presented in contrast to the cultural patterns of desensitization and objectification of our bodily and relational experience. Gestalt therapy focuses on the interactive and body dialogic aspects of the field created by the therapist and client. To practice gestalt therapy in this way requires a discipline to notice our own embodied presence. A specific set of skills for attending to this embodied interactive field are described and illustrated with case examples. These skills: *embodiment, attunement, resonance and articulation* are also illustrated within the context of shame in the therapeutic relationship.

The world we live in moves at an accelerated pace, sometimes as fast as our wireless connection and mobile phones seem to carry us. Thinking or *processing* faster than we can sense has become a way of life. Information, video representations of combat, sex, house designing, musical creation etc, rush to us often before we can notice our sensory and bodily responses to them. Action swifter and more efficient has become the by-word of the Western world and the global culture that yawns before us all. Many clients coming for therapy feel ‘disconnected’, ‘isolated’ and complain of not having ‘relationships’. My experience is that clients come to therapy to feel a sense of connection or coherence in themselves and in relationship to another. Given these field conditions,
our present challenge is to experience the whole of our selves at this moment in relation to others.

Psychotherapy is a unique relationship where one person (the client) comes to another with a need and the other (therapist/consultant) attempts to help. In gestalt therapy, this ‘helping’ occurs, not through advice giving, but through our presence (Jacobs, 2006) and relating to our clients with the fullness of ourselves. This fullness includes our thoughts, feelings, sensations and movements as they emerge within the context of the relationship and in service of the client’s emergent needs.

To clarify the embodied approach, we need to examine the embodied sense of presence and field. Presence is our grounded embodiment, the multitude of movements, structures and knowings that co-create our physical relationships within a contextual field. Field is ‘the contextual, interactive, energetic and interpersonal environment that supports a particular way of interacting’. (Kepner, 2003, p8). When these interactions are primarily desensitized, mechanical or disembodied our sense of our self and of the world we live in are diminished. We become, as Kennedy (2005) describes ‘absent’ in our interactions, going through the motions, not fully present to our own process or to others. This is the ennui of our present field context, where it is possible for an individual to commit suicide on the internet and have a multitude of observers observing as a disembodied audience. So our experience of our self is embedded in the surrounding context which we co-create. In contrast, the client therapist relationship can be an alternative field in which to experience the meaning of our behavior and a greater range of interacting styles.

The emphasis in gestalt therapy on present moment and process orients us to what is occurring between the client and ourselves. From a Dialogic perspective reality emerges between the therapist and client as we encounter and transform each other.
This is dialogue and an inherently interactive process. By attending to how this ‘in between’ emerges and can be directly known through our bodily experience, relational patterns become explicit for the client. Many gestalt therapists attend to this ‘in between’ through the dialogic verbal process (Hycner 1995; Jacobs, 1995, 2006). What is being described here is an extension of that dialogic approach to include the emergent physical experience of the client/therapist field in the moment. The Gestalt therapist, by focusing on the immediate embodiment in the client and his/her own allows a deeper dialogic resonance to become possible. Nowhere is this more salient than in the pas de deux of psychotherapy where minute movements, gestures, tone, and glances communicate and co-create meanings, the senses of wholeness and relatedness for the client.

It is important to distinguish between what we refer to as “the observer” perspective and embodiment. From the observer perspective, everyone ‘has a body’. He/she is a body right before us; they take up space, move, breathe, vocalize their experience and seem to be ‘here and now’. Frequently people ‘know’ they are ‘here’ through their thoughts or concepts of self. But this is not embodiment. This is thinking about or observing our self from previous experience, what we might refer to as ‘body as object’ (Clemmens, 1997). Another aspect of this observer mode is the sensate ‘feeling’ our body like an athlete or performer. We can sense our body, stretch, perform sex and do many tasks but without experiencing my body as ‘me’ in relation we are merely working the machine (Clemmens & Bursztyn, 1997).

In contrast to this, embodiment is the sensate experience of my body as self in relation to others and the world about me. I know my arms as I reach my heart as I feel it/me beat together, my eyes as I gaze upon the other. Embodiment is a quality of presence, an ontological sense of ‘here and nowness’, and the sense of being awake and
fully engaged in the relational world. But my embodiment is not only how I experience myself (felt body), it is also how others experience and perceive me. That is, others experience me as a body that moves, speaks gestures and impacts them in many ways. As Kennedy (2005) points out, referencing Merleau Ponty, our body is the cohesion that allows us to experience the unity of the world. This coherence is reciprocal: the world comes to me and me to it, feels me and I feel the world or horizon. We make sense of our experience; we integrate our experience by including ourselves as others and with others through embodiment. It is through my embodiment that others experience me, know me. The contacts between mother and child in early development, the experience of being seen and noticed (or not noticed), the gaze of a lover, all of these and many more co-create a sense of being ‘some-body’ and ‘somewhere’. The relative absence of these contacts may be useful at any given moment, what we call a creative adjustment and/or reflective of an impoverished sensate field. An embodied relational therapy can explore a more impoverished relational field and offer an alternative experience embedded in a richer sensate field.

From a field perspective, two aspects of embodiment are inseparable. We experience ourselves through how we sense self through proprioception (alignment, internal tensions and muscular adjustment) (Frank 2003) and the experience of being seen, touched, and creating space with each other. It is not that we each have a separate field with the possibility of bumping into each other, but rather the embodied field we experience is interactive, a dynamic tension between us. Consider the image of two dancers. The movement they create develops between their individual proprioception. Yet this becomes fully activated at the boundary through their hands, arms and legs, in every contact point where they touch, adjust and interact. The pressing, pushing, yielding, feeling for the other, these ‘small’ exchanges create the sense of ‘I/we’. This
is what occurs in the interaction between the client and therapist, an ongoing process of sensory adjustment, dances of affect, attunements of position in relation to each other, and meanings embedded in our experience often not yet verbalized. To try and separate what is mine and yours as if we were separating variables in a laboratory is a meaningless and impossible as separating out the effects of the experimenter in the same experiment. Who I am now, how I experience my body is never field independent. We are the shared context for each other’s experience and development through our physicality.

If we fully abandon the myth of objectively observing to include our own sensate experience in response /relation to our clients, we can practice psychotherapy as a mutually embodied interactive dance. By learning to attend to this mutual dance and the relational and developmental themes that emerge from it, we can provide a forum for connection and reparation. This is the advantage of an embodied gestalt therapy.

Skills for attending to the embodied relational field

In attending to the embodied relational field there are four skills that support our process as facilitators. These skills are embodiment, attunement, resonance and articulation. As defined before, embodiment is experiencing my body as self in relation to the other and the field. So how do I maintain embodiment when sitting with my client? I can do this by noticing my breath, feeling my feet on the floor, my back on the chair and noticing my eyes and all of my sensing and orienting processes in this moment. All of this process needs to be an ongoing discipline and as figural as my thoughts or theories about the client and our process. Our embodiment as therapists is the fundamental condition to support the following other skills. Without experiencing our own embodiment we can not attend to the client/therapist field is this distinct manner.
The discipline of embodiment is to remain sensitized and curious when we become desensitized. Through sensitization we can orient to our mutual physical experience, as the significant organizing force the field. From this basic stance, what occurs in the embodied relational field becomes meaningful. It is as meaningful as the client’s language and thoughts and is the cohesion or basis for these verbal and cognitive figures.

**Attunement**: Attunement is *opening or reaching out with my senses to whatever ‘echoes’ or shifts in the field (within us and our client)*. It is a receptive mode. In order to do this we must empty our task oriented mind and allow our bodily experience to be part of the foreground. The guiding questions are how the client’s content is embodied in this moment and conversely, how my embodiment is in relation to their process. Thus, my attunement takes the form of noticing how my client moves, breathes, and gestures as he/she speaks. My goal is to have my client share this curiosity. I want to support my client to be attuned to their sensate experience in the relational field.

**Resonance**: The third skill in working with relational embodiment is to notice my own movements, breathing and posture in response to my client or in concert with him/her. Or how I can feel their voice, their tension resonating inside of me. This skill is what I call *resonance*, the process of sensing and attending to shifts in my own embodiment and that of my client like ripples in a stream of water.

Once I am attuned to the client and myself and my client I can ‘stay with’ and allow myself to experience what emerges in me in relation to become more developed. Resonance is the skill of noticing and amplifying my sensate response to my client in the moment. This experience is similar to being a bowl or resonant instrument (Clemmens & Bursztyn, 2003), that is, how I vibrate in resonance with my client. I may
chime at different tones or feel empty and soundless inside at other times in our
encounter. This is the embodied experience of Inclusion (Hycner, 1995) or what
Kepner (2003) refers to as embodied empathy. For example, I might notice myself
pressing my feet into the floor while listening to my client’s voice float around the
room and seeing their feet dangle above the floor. Or in concert with my client I might
tighten my jaw as she does when talking. These behaviors, differentiation (doing some
opposite of my client) and confluence (mirroring) are forms of my embodied
responsiveness.

**Articulation:** Following with the process of allowing myself to experience
resonance, the movement is to allow this resonance to form into thought or language
. This skill is articulation, the point in the contacting process where I put into meaning
through thoughts for myself and statements to my client. Articulation *is the process of
making known either to our self or or/the client the embodied shifts current in the field
as we sense them.* Of course, the timing and choice of articulating to my client about
my embodied self experience or of their embodied experience needs to be bounded by
considerations for their functioning, the stage of therapy and other field conditions. I
also don’t always have to comment of what I attune to and resonate with in this
moment. I am also curious how his/her bodily supports relate to the cognitive and
verbal themes he/she talks about in the session. Whether body is background
(supporting and out of the client’s immediate awareness) or foreground (the immediate
focus of his/her awareness), my task is to remain interested in how these spheres of
experience are intertwined and significant.

*Case Example - Thomas*

The following is a description of an encounter between me and a client. It
illustrates using these skills as a method to opening up the dialogue to the emergent
embodied patterns.

Thomas was referred to me by his father, an actor and a very charismatic man. ‘Tom’ had a recent history of feeling depressed and suicidal following some professional disappointments. What struck me when we met was the economy of his movement. He sat on the couch across from me with little gesture, barely raising his head to speak. When I spoke, he would slightly smile and then drop his head again. I began to notice my own body movements in relation to him. I took up much more space in my chair, my legs widely set and my shoulders square. The contrast between us initially was like we were two end of a continuum. This was the initial sense of attuning to the field and our relational embodiment.

I found myself trying to sit like Tom, narrowing my shoulders and dropping my head more as I spoke. I had begun to resonate with his way of organizing himself in relation to me (and possibly the world). Two changes occurred during this shift of me trying on his way of sitting. First, I experienced a sense of being smaller inside of myself. It was as if I was shriveling inside as well as taking up less space in the room. Secondly, he began to look up at me more frequently and even square his shoulder. My sense was that I was making more space for him and he was taking the space I offered. After a few minutes of this shift in our postures, I asked Tom if what he felt was significant in his life. To my excitement, he said: ‘I feel small, particularly with people like my dad who are talented. And some times I just give up because there doesn’t seem to be enough room on the stage for him and me’.

At this point I articulated to Tom what I had been experiencing in my body and how I saw him taking so little space. He was skeptical and a little curious about how what he talking about could be ‘played out in our bodies’. I invited him to experiment with using his body in different ways and notice how he felt about himself and his
experience of me. ‘You mean I might sit like you?’ he asked. Tom tried to sit as he saw me, with his shoulder back and legs widely set and his head upright. He began to breathe more fully and his eyes widened much more. His experience was that of feeling more exposed and he was worried that he was being rude to me, ‘not respectful’. At this point Tom and I were attuned to each other’s posture and through resonance exploring the possibilities of our relationship.

Tom then went back to exaggerating his “narrowed” stance and said he could feel how much less space he inhabited. I asked him if he wanted to know about my experience when he was in the different positions. He was very interested but said he already knew that I wanted him to be like me, sit like me, be strong, and look confident. I immediately narrowed my shoulders and my knees again while dropping my shoulders. I said ‘how about I will be Tom and you be Michael?’ to which he said ‘No you be Tom and I’ll be Dad’. From there we had a dialogue of the big father to the lesser son, each of us starting in our postures but ending up both in a middle position. Tom was crying as he articulated (as his father) to me: ‘I see you are not me and I want you to be you, do things your way’. I asked Tom what he would say in my position as the son; he lifted his head up a little more and said: I can’t be you …only me, I need to do things my way”.

This session exemplifies the potency of attending I embodied Tom’s posture as I listened to his words and he assumed the position that he did when sitting with his father. Through dialogue, both physical and verbal we were able to explore the meaning of the stance he took with me and in the world. My willingness to resonate with his posture allowed Tom to see how he embodies himself in relation to me and his father. His willingness to explore the range of his options led to a very important experience of his relationship with his father, a passage to manhood through his body.
This embodied approach of gestalt therapy emphasizes phenomenological experience without beginning with a verbal understanding our construct. What is unique here is the development of this experience from the resonance or embodied empathy emergent in the client/therapist field. We developed a figure through our shared embodiment, a fractal of his relationships with his father. My client experienced an important developmental field he was embedded in and was able to ‘dis-embed’ himself from an adolescent field (McConville, 1995) and to position him in the next developmental stance. I facilitated this development initially by attuning to our mutual embodiment in the moment and articulating this experience with him. The second movement of our dance developed as Tom tried on both his way of sitting and mine, as the stance of an adult. This led to his awareness of the embodied field and the meaning of the lived space for them as father and son. Tom’s developmental theme was lived out in the interactive field created by our physical selves in relation.

Shame and in the embodied field: a special case of an embodied relationship

From an interactive field perspective, shame is a lack of support and acceptance in the field for our basic needs and experience (Wheeler, 1996). Shame is fundamentally a relational and bodily experience, relational in that we learn and perpetuate the sense of being “unacceptable” through our inter-subjective experiences, and bodily in that this learning and lack of support is experienced through our bodies. Through gestures, the ways we are looked upon /do not look upon each other, the tones of our voices; the sense of shame is co-created and perpetuated. The interactive dialogue can enable and perpetuate feelings of shame for either client /therapist or both of us. We can also create supports for the client to “have a new experience”. One of the most significant components of support is our embodied interaction.
Long before we can articulate it, there may be a felt sense of shame as fundamental ground in our relationship. Shame often exists at what Kennedy (2008) refers to as ‘the pre-personal level’ preceding verbal and cognitive levels of interactions. Shame can emerge when looking or being looked at by another, in the tone with which we are spoken to, from the entire range of facial and affective responses from the other, all of these can contribute to our sense of shame. We can feel shame as frozenness in our face or as a holding back or tightening of our musculature. Shame is a physical withdrawal, aversion or disconnection when we have the experience that we are unacceptable, unlovable and bad (Wheeler, 1996). It is a profound sense of kinesthetic separation in the relational field. We feel separated and repulsively different. Other embodiments of shame are a desire or movement to curl inward, inhibiting our movements or gestures out of fear that we will seem ‘too needy’, nausea or feeling ill, heat or flushing in our face, a desire to flee or “get out of the room” anger or rage at being noticed or exposed, and dropping our eyes or looking away to manage the degree of intensity.

The following is an example of shame in the embodied field and the use of the skills of embodiment, attunement, resonance and articulation to support working with shame.

Jimmy is telling me about his prostitution for drugs during his addiction. He asked me if this was ‘okay’ to talk about with me. He leaned his head in toward me when asking and when I responded pulled his head back as I answered. I took a deep breath and scanned my own body in order to give him an answer that was based on my felt experience, not just an immediate ‘of course’. I told him that I was interested in what he was saying. As I said this I could feel myself as heavy in my chair, as if there was more gravity in the moment between us. I then asked him how he might know that I
was remaining with him while he spoke about his behavior. I also suggested he try doing what I just had done, breathing and taking the time to feel himself. He was silent for a few minutes as he sat with his head down, eyes on my shoes and his body still. He finally looked up at me and said: ‘I need to see that you are not disgusted with me, I want to see in your face that you won’t turn away from me’. We devised an experiment that he would look at my face while he spoke. I felt excited by the clarity of his request. As he spoke of his experience of selling himself for drugs, I paid attention to my body and his, it was as if he was giving me his experience of shame and looking to see if I would cut off from him. At one point, I began to tear up and he said: ‘what is happening, are you feeling sorry for me’. I responded that I was remembering my own experience of embarrassment. He stopped and said ‘you too?’ I said though soft eyes ‘yes’. Jimmy continued to speak and he began to tear up. At this point his head was no longer swinging but steady on his shoulder. He looked at my face and said: ‘You do not look disgusted. …. so I am not disgusting to you’. I asked him how he could tell, and he responded that my eyes remained open and I did not turn away from him. I then asked Jimmy to try on his question as a statement while we looked at each other. He repeated ‘I am not disgusting’. He stopped after two repetitions, and looking straight at me said: ‘I am not disgusting but I felt disgusted in my body when I did this’.

This vignette illustrates the power of contacting through attention to shame as emergent in our relational field with emphasis on our embodied interacting. Jimmy’s experience of ‘knowing I was not disgusted with him’ (or that he was not disgusting) emerged through his attunement to my face. He was already attuning to me as he risked showing his ‘face’. We explored how what he believed and felt about him was manifest in our interaction in the moment. By physically offering and including me in his shame experience, we were able to create enough support and context for him to both
articulate his embodied shame and to experience himself differently. He did this through articulating what he feared and felt in relation to me in our embodied dialogue. The support offered to him was my attention to his physical pattern, my face, my own emotional resonance and a context to explore this with safety and mutuality.

**Concluding thoughts**

Through attention and dialogue based on our mutual embodied awareness we can explore relational patterns of our clients and create alternative experiences and supports for change and growth. In this Chapter, I have focused on the therapy/consulting situation as an embodied interactive field co-created out of the client and therapist relationship. Our experiences are not unrelated isolates but constantly mutually influencing steps in choreography. If we accept the fact that we are our bodies in relation with each other (embodiment), then we can attend to the meaning of our client’s experience through embodied resonance.

This approach has significance for the practice of gestalt (and all therapies). Mutual embodiment means that all themes and figures are supported and available through attention to our physicality. Our feelings, our dreams, our thinking are all supported and emergent in our bodies at this moment with each other.

Secondly, emphasizing embodiment as a focus in therapy requires that as practitioners, we learn to pay more attention to how we create this interactive dance and how we can intervene with clarity and embodied awareness. The skills of attending to embodiment, attunement, resonance and articulation are not implicit but “practices” that contrast with our cultural and individual tendencies to intellectualize and desensitize. To practice gestalt therapy in this way requires that we discipline ourselves to notice our own embodied presence, not as metaphor or idea, but as we are actual pulsing, gesturing, and breathing partners. It is through our resonance that we connect with our clients and help
them fully articulate their experience in the process of change.

References


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