THE EMBODIED FIELD¹

James Kepner
Received 15 February 2003

Editor’s Note: We are very pleased to be able to publish the adapted text of a keynote presentation given by James Kepner at a recent conference. In this ground-breaking article he elucidates what being embodied entails, and suggests the need for therapists to be more embodied themselves. He makes an important contribution to the development of field theory and its application by describing how Gestalt practitioners need to create an experiential field that supports the particular work they are doing. He describes the ways in which practitioners and clients can create an embodied field. He concludes with a passionate plea for therapists to attend to their clients’ ‘embodied soul’ and their ‘ensouled body’. This article is adapted from a keynote presentation to Deutsche Vereinigung Für Gestalttherapie Conference. Bad Kissingen, Germany. May 2002. As part of his presentation he invited the audience to undertake exercises in awareness, which we print here as they would have been addressed to the conference audience.

Key words: embodiment, body-oriented psychotherapy, embodied field.

Setting the Scene

A while ago I attended a conference of body oriented psychotherapists (the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy). I felt very at home there: I found a group of people who regularly referred to their body experience as an intrinsic part of their reactions, comments, casual interactions, and so on.

Much of the time, as a body oriented therapist and ‘pioneer’ in this area, I have felt isolated and working against the strong tide of traditional verbal oriented therapy which operates within the normal, rationalist, disembodied worldview of our Western culture. It was a rare relief for me to be with colleagues of similar orientation.

However, on about the third day of the conference I was conversing with a colleague. We were sharing how we both had found ourselves increasingly hypersensitive in our interactions with others, and how we had begun to avoid rather than seek contact with peers. Both of us had attributed this to our own neurotic patterns of social avoidance.

But in conversation it became clear to us that our reactions were not just personal: they were part of a common field. We recognised that, in the embodied environment of the conference, our own internal sensations were much more amplified and available to us than would otherwise be the case, even as dedicated body therapists. This made us more acutely sensitive to the whole of our response in our interactions with others. Every nuance of sensation, every reaction, every emotion, all of our somatic defences were more heightened in this context. Posture, movement and breathing were regularly noticed. Sensations and internal bodily experience were commonly referred to in current interpersonal contact. In short, human embodiment was taken seriously... and it was all a bit too much! The conference environment could be referred to as an embodied field.

In the embodied field of the conference, the ways we normally and culturally dull sensation, hold defensive body structures, stop our breathing, even our deeper visceral responses, were all more resonant and unavoidable and more stimulated than during ‘normal’ life. Now we were both pulling back defensively, surprised at our need to diminish what we usually worked so hard to create in our professional lives: heightened body awareness.
One would think that psychotherapy in general would help foster a clearer connection to one’s internal life as it does for other aspects of our fragmented self, but this is not really the case. Interpretive work in therapy does not help this much because the analytical emphasis maintains the duality, objectively examining body sensation as symptom, and guessing at its meaning using intellectual theory. Cognitive therapy, with its focus on thinking, similarly fosters and maintains the split between bodily experience and self-experience. It assumes that physical process, including affect, is a function of cognition or vice versa (i.e. two interactive but separate domains in a kind of parallelism), rather than understanding thinking and body process being an intrinsic whole. Even many Gestalt therapists, in a method whose theory is holistic in nature and where body process is normally attended to, often find it difficult to work in a truly embodied way. Why is this so challenging even for Gestaltists?

**A Disembodied Field**

One of the reasons is that we live in such a profoundly disembodied culture. This disconnection of bodily life from the identified ‘I’ is deeply embedded in Western religious, philosophical and cultural life. Our culture has reified the intellect as the ‘self’, leaving emotion and embodiment as distinct and separate realms. The roots of our Western rational tradition, reflected in Descartes’ dictum, ‘Cogito ergo sum’, deeply reinforces our belief that our thinking equals self-existence.

Daily life also affirms this. Our interactions, our conversation with others and our self-reflection includes little of our bodily experience. It is difficult enough to go against our own personal restrictions and lack of connection to our body experience, but it is even more challenging to climb uphill against the larger social field. Hence my initial relief at the supportive social environment of the body therapy conference.

The result is that most of us are quite impoverished in experiencing our bodily nature. Our ability to sense deeply into our embodied life is limited. Our language for referring to sensation and movement is inadequate and undeveloped, as is our sense of our body experience being part of our self-experience. We do not naturally help each other to connect our inner visceral and somatic experience to our being-in-the-world. Our field of experience gives little support for the inclusion of embodied experience as an intrinsic part of our ongoing self-perception and contacting.

**Experiential Exercise:** I’m going to give you a very brief time, 3 minutes each, to introduce yourself to one person sitting next you. Shake hands, tell each other your names, then – in just two or three sentences – each share whatever you are comfortable with about your experience of coming to this conference.

Reflect if you will, on how little your body sensation, body experience and body process were part of this interaction. When you shook hands did you sense the person you were touching? Or did you organise this as touching ‘their hand’, i.e. touching an object possessed by them? Did you have a sense of bringing yourself to your touch as you shook their hand? Did your report to each other refer to your body experience at all? Did your partner gesture to their body to locate what they were reporting?

Most often, our conversation and common contact includes little of our embodied experience in its content, little reference to embodiment in gesture, and little conscious experience of ourselves or the other as embodied beings. Even when we report emotions they are rarely acknowledged as bodily events, located in our bodily self, even though one cannot experience emotion without bodily location. We keep it all very abstract with little bodily referent. It is as if our emotions had no bodily origin or location, but are something we ‘thought up’. We may say we are sad but not that we ache in our gut; we may note we are angry but not our clenched jaw and rigid back.

(What followed here was an extended series of exercises in movement, breathing, stretching, to heighten body awareness.)

**Exercise:** Greet your partner again. This time when you shake their hand, be conscious of bringing your own presence into your hand, and that as you hold their hand you are touching them, not merely something they possess. Once again, share just one or two sentences about your experience of coming to this conference. This time, include something of your feeling or bodily experience and as you report it, gesture to where in your body you felt this, and describe the quality of sensation.

Reflect on the quality of your contact with each other this round, as you included more of your embodiment.

Note the increased sense of intimacy and contact, beyond the surface so to speak, from this form of greeting the other with more sense of your own, and your partner’s, embodied self.

Just as we do not include embodied experience in common contact, our awareness of another’s body is usually objectified and divorced from their being. We see mostly the surface appearance, often with an evaluative rather than contactual emphasis: are they fat, thin, muscular, pretty, sexy, and so on? We do not see their
embodied self.

In fact, in Western culture I believe that it is a taboo to comment on a person as an embodied self unless we have been given explicit permission to do so. Think about how it would be to comment to the person you have just met in the last exercise, ‘You look so pulled in, hardly breathing, as if you have frozen your insides.’ Too intimate and personal? Even with intimate friends, most people consider it rude or inappropriate to refer to another’s bodily being as if it has something to do with their person.

Precisely because embodiment is the person and we live in a very impersonal and private culture, we have been trained not to recognise embodiment as ‘self’, not to comment on this visible, every day reality and to pretend this truth is not so. Actually, we do something more perverse (from a body therapy perspective). We attribute as personal many aspects of a person’s bodily nature which are actually a function of their genetic heritage, such as physical beauty, athletic capacity, or body fat. We then ignore the aspects of their embodiment which are more related to self, such as posture, body structure, breathing, and affect, etc.

Body oriented psychotherapies direct themselves at healing this split. The experiencing of life and of oneself as intrinsically embodied is not something, however, which comes about through the mere application of techniques in body oriented therapy: examples are exercises, experiments, and the use of touch. While techniques help to promote the necessary conditions for bringing embodied experience and process into the work, what is more significant, and what the techniques really serve, is the total context created by the therapist, what amounts to creating an embodied field.

Before I continue on the topic of an embodied field I would like to spend some time expanding the general notion of ‘fields of experience’ of which an embodied field is a subset.

Fields of Experience/An Experiential Field

There is a lot of confusion about the use of the term ‘field’ in Gestalt therapy. This stems from the multiple sources from which the concept has been developed. One origin of the term ‘field’ comes from Gestalt perceptual psychology where, in reference particularly to visual perception, they referred to a perceptual field as that which is organised into meaning by the various built-in rules of perception, such as figure/ground (Koffka, 1935). In this use of the term, the ‘field’ is that which is perceived by a subject – hence linking Gestalt therapy’s emphasis on phenomenology (the organisation of experience) to Gestalt psychology’s organising principles such as figure/ground, closure, and so on. A ‘field’ in this sense is purely a subjective experience and not an objective reality. There is no ‘the field’ outside of one’s subjective perceptual field.

But Gestalt therapy also borrowed from Kurt Lewin’s notion of the organism/environment field, also called the life-space: that behaviour is a function of the person and the environment (his famous equation: B=f(P,E) Lewin, 1935). To Lewin, and to our Gestalt formulation of this in the notion of the unitary organism/environment field (O/E field), this is about behaviour being embedded in a context which intrinsically includes the person, with all their characteristics and perceptions, and the environment with all its forces and influences. In this notion, we cannot say that anything ‘originates’ solely from within the individual, nor for that matter, are we just creatures of environmental forces. All functioning is inherently both: an integral field phenomenon.

Note that in one version of ‘a field’ we are speaking of subjective experience, and in the other we are speaking about what influences behaviour: subjective organisation on the one hand, objective determinants on the other. In Gestalt therapy, we do not usually mark whether we are using the term to refer to subjective experience or to understanding the impact of objective context and social reality on behaviour (as in creative adjustment, for example). To avoid confusion, it is important that we indicate what kind of ‘field’ we are referring to in our discussions: the objective person/environment field perspective, the subjective perceptual field, or some combination of both.

My own use of the term here is an attempt to integrate both subjective experience and objective frames of reference to understand how we create O/E conditions which effect personal experience. When I speak of a field of experience, or alternately, an experiential field, I am referring to the contextual, interactive, energetic and interpersonal environment that supports a particular way of experiencing.

This notion lies at the heart of what we understand is healing in the Gestalt approach. It is not our personality theory, not our empty chairs or our creative techniques, and so on. The core of what is healing in the Gestalt approach is our contextual, relational and experiential orientation to create the experiential conditions that make for growth. It is the creation of a person/environment field as the interactive whole in which growth may take place, just as it is conditions of the field which create the ‘mental health’ problems which the client is bringing to us.

This notion of creating fields of experience is perhaps the most significant contribution of Gestalt therapy to the pragmatics of psychotherapy and understanding human experience, yet it is virtually an undeveloped concept in our approach. Much of our methodology centres on how to generate experiential processes that illuminate some particular aspect or limitation of experience or glitch in
The Embodied Field

the contacting process. We call this the technique of developing experiments. I suggest to you that the technique of experiment is really part of this much larger theoretical orientation and concept: that of creatively generating conditions and situations where experience can be explored and learned from.

As Gestalt practitioners, our goal is to create the conditions and situations where something not previously accessible in experience is made available to ongoing contact and therefore to growth and development. This is true whether we are intervening in a large organisation to improve communications between departments, working with an individual to develop a deeper sense of his/her embodiment, opening a group to the spiritual dimensions of their connection to each other, or working with a couple’s conflict. We work to heighten some domain of experience in order to bring into play its particular contribution to forming a ‘good gestalt’ related to the particular area of interest. The particular techniques we use are not important in and of themselves, only in how they serve the task of generating an experiential field that may make more available for the client’s experience the domain and process we are interested in supporting.

What supports the development of one kind of field, say an embodied field, and what supports the development of another, for example a transpersonal field, will of course be very different. But in the broadest sense, any ‘field problem’ for a facilitator has three basic elements: the facilitator (consultant, therapist, etc.), the client (individual or system), and the situation. What are the essential ingredients for each element in creating an experiential field?

**Therapist Ingredients**

First is the capacity of the therapist to hold that aspect of experience as figural (bounded, central and relevant) even if, or especially if, it is not figural for the client. By this I mean not just an intellectual belief or understanding but a developed intellectual-perceptual-experiential awareness. This is especially important when that aspect of experience is not part of the client’s normal experience and/or not part of the larger sociocultural field of experience. To work with embodiment, as an example, the therapist must be able to hold a constant awareness and appreciation that the body is intrinsic to all human process. To work with family systems the therapist must be able to hold the family in its wholeness as the ‘organising frame’ for seemingly unrelated behaviours. To work in a transpersonal way the therapist must be able to hold an actual awareness of the spiritual dimensions of which the client’s mundane concerns are a reflection. It is precisely because these are things that are not commonly held as relevant to psychological figure formation that the therapist must hold these dimensions of experience in their own experiential field.

This requires of the therapist a deep personal development in the particular domain and at the level of experience the work with their client demands so that they can operate fluently in that domain. In terms of personal development and growth, for example: a body therapist must have access to their own deep embodiment and relate to the client in a deeply embodied way; a systemic consultant must have access to the experience of membership and of serving ‘for the system’, so to speak; a transpersonal therapist does not just believe in the spiritual dimension, they have direct access to the numinous, the spiritual. This capacity comes about through self-development, practice and growth.

The therapist also needs a range of techniques particular to that level and domain available to draw on for creative and appropriate interventions. For example, a body therapist must be knowledgeable about body structure and its psychological function and have ways to intervene to change it. Similarly, the more knowledge one has of family interventions and process, the more one can create a family field of experience, and so on.

The energetic dimension of the therapist, group and environment is also crucial in supporting or mitigating certain kinds of experience. This concept is not a standard part of Gestalt therapy theory, nor mentioned in our Western education, but I have come to know it as essential to creating experiential fields. All of us know how with a particular teacher, therapist or group we can access experience that we could not easily gain access to otherwise. Some facilitators seem to be able to create a ‘magic’ that is more than the sum of their intellectual knowledge. Eastern spiritual disciplines have long noted that merely being present in the aura or energetic field of a highly developed teacher can increase one’s own access to spiritual states. Development of the chi or body energy is considered crucial for this reason in the Oriental schools of the healing arts.

All realms of experience have an energetic tonality or quality, be they the realms of embodiment, of emotion, of intellect, or the transcendental. As individuals we may not have access to a particular frequency (tonality) of energy, or have enough to access that realm of experience either. A therapist with a strong and well-developed energy field in a particular frequency literally resonates the client’s field into more of that frequency, making it easier for the client to access that kind of experience. In the words of a healer I know, the biggest aura wins.

**Client Ingredients**

The client, of course, is also part of the experiential field. They bring their own readiness, access to, and availability for the particular level and domain of experience. Clients who more readily orient towards
systemic process make the creation of a systemic field of experience easier than those for whom the systemic dimension is unknown. Those who are numb and disconnected from their body require much more from the therapist and the context to make body process relevant to their therapeutic concerns. Willingness, interest and excitement from the client also contribute much to the creation of the field. The client always brings creative resources which can be enlisted to serve the developing field, even if they have been part of the fixed gestalt which has maintained the problem so far.

Context Ingredients

We might think of this as the feng shui of creating an experiential field. This includes the physical environment and situation, the group context and social milieu, as well as the emotional context. These contextual factors can carry much weight we are developmentally unable to carry for ourselves. The group and emotional climates we create as therapists and consultants have a significant impact. To expect vulnerability when the climate we create in a group is cool, critical, or fostering of competition amongst group members for our favours, for example, is not to understand the contribution our own emotional presence has to the field. Workshops and therapy sessions can have the characteristics of a terrarium, intentionally isolated from the ‘normal’ socio-cultural context in order to make some ‘non-normative’ experience more figural, such as one’s emotions. Situational factors, the room, the physical environment and so on, are included in here. We all know how developing emotionally oriented work in a cold, medical environment feels like working ‘uphill’.

Group process builds an energetic field that makes certain kinds of experience more accessible than might be possible in other settings. The cohesiveness, coherence and power of a group is not just in the social process, but also in the energetic aura it creates which is either conducive to the experience we are intending or the opposite. We can walk into a room and feel the impact of this group energy, even if our science cannot measure it yet. The artful and intentional nurturing of this group energy creates much more powerful experiences than will occur otherwise.

These conditions ‘of the field’ all work together to create the necessary field of experience. The less strength in one area, the more one must compensate in another, to generate the field of experience that will support the client to formulate new integration.

With this understanding about fields of experience as our ground, let me return to our main purpose here, understanding the embodied field.

An Embodied Field

The creation of an embodied field is crucial to the work of a body oriented psychotherapy: supporting the client’s development of their own embodiment; making the connection between their body process and experience and their self-experience; and using body oriented methodology for effecting psychotherapeutic change.

This is why working as a body oriented psychotherapist in a day to day, hour to hour psychotherapy practice is more challenging than doing such work in a workshop setting. In a workshop an embodied field is created by exercises, witnessing body oriented work with which we can identify, developing the inclusion of body experience into normal events, etc. In a day to day practice, clients come from the disembodied field of ‘normal life’ and it takes time to develop the embodied field needed for body oriented work. It is not just the client’s particular disconnection from their bodily nature, sensation and embodied life that is the difficulty. They also enter the session embedded in a socio-cultural field which denies the importance of bodily life to one’s sense of self. It is a problem ‘of the field’ which, by its nature, includes the client, the therapist and the context.

It is, of course, the work of the body oriented therapist to create a situation where embodied experience can be brought out of this deep background and woven into the realities of moment to moment experience, and into the life concerns which the client brings to therapy. The therapist must, each hour, foster an embodied field powerful enough to support the client in holding their bodily life and experience as intrinsic to their ongoing experience. Phrased this way, we can appreciate the challenging nature of what we are involved in as body oriented therapists.

Perhaps it would be best illustrated by contrasting with an example of how we normally support the ‘disembodied field’ in which the client is embedded.

The client comes in rushing, looking scattered and revved up, moving quickly into the therapy room and dropping heavily into the chair with a sigh. The therapist notices this and reflects to herself on the difficulty the client has managing stress because of his hesitancy to set limits and denying the impact of taking on too many demands. Seeking to foster insight about this she asks, ‘You seem rushed today. Why do you think you are so stressed?’ The client looks at the therapist for a moment, shrugs his shoulders, and responds, ‘It’s been busy at work.’ The therapist pursues this theme, asking questions to elicit more information about the client’s current stresses, the impact on his function,
and how he has created this by not setting limits on others’ demands on him.

Contrast this with an interaction rooted in the therapist’s holding an embodied field.

The client comes in rushing, looking scattered and revved up, moving quickly into the therapy room and dropping heavily into the chair with a sigh. The client then reviews his week, but seems distracted and disconnected from what he is saying. Feeling in herself that she is both breathless and focused in her head, the therapist takes a deep breath, settling herself more in her chair and into the support of her back and legs as she exhales, nodding to the client. Now she is more able to feel the rest of herself, including her heart and gut and, looking at the client, she recognises that her feelings of warmth and concern for him have been pushed aside in his rushed mode at the start of the session.

Taking another, easier breath into her chest she looks at the client, places her hand on her heart and with a caring and concerned expression says, ‘Welcome.’ The client takes a deep breath of his own, drops his eyes and seems to attend to his body for a moment. He takes another breath, more fully and deliberately this time, and slows down his headlong pace. After exhaling, an expression of sadness comes into his face. He says, ‘I think I’ve been rushing around so I don’t have any feelings.’

The first example is not typical of a more cognitive and intellectual approach to therapy: using questions to elicit information, problem solving, and so on, operating from a more disembodied field perspective. Good work is done from this orientation, of course, but it certainly does not do much to create an embodied field.

In the second example the therapist received the client, registering and interacting with him from her whole embodiment. In the face of the client’s hurried and disembodied rush she connects even more deeply to her own embodied presence by breathing and feeling the physical support of her chair, her legs and her back, while still connected with the client. She breathes again to stay anchored in her own sensation, because she knows that minimising breathing also minimises body sensation. It is her embodied self-contact which connects her to her own affective response to the client and the tone of the contact between her and her client. She touches her heart, locating for herself and her client where she feels her affective resonance and affirming the emotional warmth which comes clearly into her voice tone and into her eyes as she says ‘Welcome’.

The embodied field she has created supports her client, even without intentional ‘body interventions’, to shift out of his ‘heady’ rush. He registers what he is feeling in his body, inside himself really, and begins to attend to the aspect of himself that he has been rushing ahead of. He begins to feel, as he settles into himself, his sadness: a sadness that has been inside him all along, but which he has not been inside himself enough to feel. All this with only one word from the therapist!

Of course, we would all like to have such impact in the first mere minutes of a session — and rarely do so! Most clients need much more time and work to connect to their embodied experience. An embodied field usually takes time to build both within each session, and over the course of sessions. But on a good day, this kind of thing can occur just as described — if the configuration of the whole field supports it.

So, what goes into creating an embodied field? Using the schema developed earlier in my discussion of creating an experiential field, what are the ingredients in creating an embodied field? I will focus on those related to the therapist and to the client.

**Therapist Ingredients in an Embodied Field**

**The Intrinsic Embodiment of Human Process** To the practitioner who truly integrates an embodied approach, body process and experience of this process are not just an addition to the ‘real stuff’, they are intrinsic to everything human. We cannot relate, think, struggle, feel, know, live, other than as embodied beings. But holding this awareness against the psychosocial tidal undertow of disembodiment is not an easy thing. It takes conscious intention and purposeful action on the part of the therapist to assure the constant inclusion of embodied process and experience as relevant and meaningful to the problems of life.

In the example presented earlier, the therapist notices the client’s body processes, and attends to her own. She takes seriously her feeling of breathlessness as not just symptom or sign, but as her lived experience of the interpersonal field with the client. She finds her way to her deeper experience by supporting herself physically to access more of her body core, her visceral experience. Her feelings of warmth are not metaphorical or intellectual, but are literally experienced as warming and opening in her chest and her heart as she registers the client. When she responds, she does so not just verbally, but she indicates with her gesture where her feeling is located, and her skin, face and eyes carry the energy and expression into visibly embodied communication. She sees the client register the impact of this on him in his posture, breathing, and emotional expression.

Our own body experience and process is an intrinsic part of the transaction with the client, as well as theirs. We
must hold embodied experience as equivalent in importance to cognitive (verbalisation and imagery) aspects of experience and not privilege the cognitive over the embodied.

Moreover, it is a way of holding and enacting our stance that we are intrinsically embodied in every moment: that thinking is a body process, that sensing inside our body is sensing inside our self, that our ‘depths’ are literally that which is deep in our body core, and that speaking from our insides means speaking from our actual gut and belly and heart. My favorite quotation for this is from Boris Pasternak:

... Your health is bound to be affected if, day after day, you say the opposite of what you feel, if you grovel before what you dislike and rejoice in what brings you nothing but misfortune. Our nervous system isn’t just a fiction, it’s a part of our physical body, and our soul exists in space and is inside us, like the teeth in our mouth. It can’t be forever violated with impurity. I found it painful to listen to you, Innokenti, when you told us how you were re-educated and became mature in jail. It was like listening to a horse describing how it broke itself in.  

(Dr. Zhivago, 1958)

Deep Embodiment  Of all the factors that contribute to the creation and maintenance of an embodied field, the most fundamental is that the therapist (or consultant in the case of an organisational context of intervention) has a deep connection to their own embodied experience (Kepner, 2001). What does it mean to be deeply embodied?

To be deeply embodied is to have access to one’s body experience as self-experience. It requires sensitivity to one’s own body sensation and having contact with one’s visceral ‘insides’ as much as with one’s thoughtfulness and intuition; and the capacity to experience an integral continuity between body experience and other aspects of one’s being.

It is not enough simply to use your own ‘bodily cues’ as many have been trained to do. You may do this and still not register body experience as self-experience! You can pay attention to the cues and signal from your car, but the car is still an object, not a subject. Paying attention to ‘body cues’ (like paying attention to ‘car cues’) is better than not paying attention at all. We ignore the ‘no oil light’ on the dashboard at peril of ruining our engine block, just as we ignore bodily pain at the peril of damaging our tissue.

Nonetheless, being connected with and aware of what is going on inside me implies that I am resonant with my embodied experience, what I am feeling in my gut. For example, I notice how I have caught my breath at my client’s mention of their pain: I am not sitting in the cockpit of my head, reading the dials about ‘the body down there’. There is an immediacy and fullness of life that comes with being in a truly embodied mode. Reading one’s own signals is abstract, indirect, and maintains the split between body and self which supports a disembodied field, not an embodied one, no matter how much quantity of ‘body data’ is reported or used. Deep embodiment is not just adding body experience onto a predominantly cognitive orientation; it emerges from a reclamation of our physical reality and experience, and the integration of an ever more inclusive self – a self that includes embodied experience in any contact.

This, of course, takes work! Deep embodiment is a result of accumulated and constant personal development that constantly widens and deepens access to one’s embodied life. This life includes body sensation, body experience, movement, breathing, and energy as well as sensitivity to others as embodied beings. It takes years for most of us to acquire enough development to claim a deeply embodied integration, and it takes regular exercise, self-development and challenge to maintain and continue to integrate on new levels.

Embodied Listening and Embodied Empathy  One of the big challenges for any student is learning to interact with the client as an embodied being. This means listening with one’s own body by registering what the client is saying, what they are doing, their body structure and so on, in one’s own body. One works even to replicate the client’s internal sensation and physical process in one’s own body, a process we call ‘modeling’. Embodied listening and empathy leads to responding to the client ‘body to body’. Embodiment is increasingly included as part and parcel of every interaction, every self-reflection, every insight and understanding.

Embodied Language and Gesture  One of my major tools (Kepner, 2000a) for weaving embodiment into the course of therapeutic process is through what I have come to call embodied language and gesture. Our normal linguistic ways of referring to body process and experience tend to refer to body experience and process in object terms, as ‘it’ instead of ‘I’. This reifies the split between our mental and physical experience.

To counter this, I often rephrase statements in terms that make body process as about the person and emotionally meaningful. I include gesture which points to where in my body I am locating my experience and use phrasing which is personal rather than objective. I refer to the client’s body process and experience as their process and experience, not as ‘the body’ or ‘your body’ or in object terms. This is not a mechanical thing or a Gestalt introject: ‘Thou shalt make I-statements!’ It is an
in the body of life, as the embodied entity is scantily on of on udes.

Body Oriented Intervention Of course, by using interventions which are specifically directed at our physical being, the embodied field is enriched and fleshed out. In my work I commonly use touch, movement, attention to body structure and breathing. I work actively to generate energy, and teach physical exercises to support the work. I am always learning new body techniques, adding developmental movement, new hands-on techniques, and developing new methods myself. Recently, for example, I have been working with a colleague to develop hands-on energetic techniques which support greater body awareness via the nervous system (Kepner, 2002). I also continue my studies of infant and child development, especially of the psycho-neurological and affective processes (see Schore, 1994), better to grasp how patterns of embodiment are rooted in early states and relationships.

Embodyed Energy One of the purposes of the therapist being engaged in regular body oriented self development, exercise, movement and so on, is that they generate their own energetic field which carries the frequencies necessary for body sensation, emotional texture, groundedness, and so on (Kepner, 2001). In the presence of a high amplitude energy field that resonates in frequencies which the client may not have available in their own field, much can be accessed that could not be otherwise. Self-development is not just a Gestalt value; it literally enhances the energetic qualities the therapist ‘brings to the field’ and makes more possible for the client.

The Client Ingredients in an Embodied Field

An Embodied Soul The primary ingredient a client brings to the creation of embodied field is their existence as an embodied soul. I use a word here, soul, which has not been popular in Gestalt therapy or in psychotherapy. I believe that our striving for wholeness, healing, growth and completion is a reflection more of our spirit rather than of our biological organism. Our organism, a biological entity, wishes only for homeostasis. It is this polarity and tension between our biological, embodied limitations, and our soul’s reaching for growth which is the meta-condition, the existential reality which galvanises our existence. Neither the simplistic monism of science (we are biological creatures explainable by scientific principles) nor the simplistic denial of our embodied being in intellectual or religious philosophy (we are uniquely of mind or of spirit) does justice to the reality of human incarnation.

Our embodied being is not a container imprisoning our soul; it is intrinsic to our worldly existence. Our body is both the tool and record of our soul’s pathway through life. Our limitations of form and function are the challenges that engage our soul in this existence. Every creative response to the person/environment situation we have traversed is carved into our muscles, nerves and cells, and every reflexive bodily response challenges the soul with the reality of embodiment. Embodiment, actual lived experience, is the means by which we grow. For some, therapy and healing is galvanised best by calling to this fundamental reality.

Capacity for Embodied Experience Clients bring to the field their own particular capacity for embodied experience. Where this is limited, the therapist’s first job is to do the body oriented work that can enhance this capacity. Movement, hands-on work, developmental work with the nervous system, exercises and so on, are all body oriented techniques that, in a Gestalt mode of work, are ways we foster the development of the clients to access embodied experience. In any thematic experiment in therapy we must constantly determine if the client has the physical supports that such contact demands, and whether they can draw on their embodied experience adequately to serve the experiment.

Body Structure Clients, like therapists, bring their own characteristic body structure, the fixed bodily patterns which reflect their developmental history, the particular contact resources they use most, and the limitations of movement, sensation and experience which their structure constrains them to.

Creative adjustment to life circumstances is not just a psychological organisation. It is structured into the organisation of our tissue in a way that profoundly shapes our bodily form as well as our experience.

Our body structure always reflects both our limitation and our strength. An example is the client with narrow, tight, pulled in up body organisation (often reflecting very early dilemmas of the person/environment field). This structure both limits their experience of embodied life – they have not enough literal space in their torso to hold the lively energy of sensation – and their retreat into the head away from bodily life also becomes their strength: intellect and rationality. Similarly, a well-energised and developed musculature is formed in a person who has met parental manipulation by engaging in the social world before it engages at his or her own boundary. This readiness of musculature to engage is a tremendous resource of embodiment, and yet its very strength means that they will be undeveloped in attending to their internal bodily experience and tolerating softer,
less action-oriented contact.

Knowingly or not, the client brings these things to the experiential field, shaping and influencing what gets organised in experience. Many of the techniques of body oriented therapy are ways to open the bodily limitations to contact and experience and draw on the strengths manifest in each client’s physical being.

**Their Embodied Potential** Finally, inherent in each person’s given embodiment, with all its limitations, stored experience and struggle of their soul, is a vision of potential. I hold for each client a ‘possible body’, a sense of ideal bodily form and function. This is not an ideal to fit them to but rather it provides a sense of what might be possible. Peak experiences in body therapy, say the deep sense of compassion and open heartedness which comes from release of the chest, or the coursing energy and power from the physical release of stored anger, serve to give us a feeling for our potential. It is this sense of embodied potential in ourselves and others that supports movement and growth, even if our ultimate integration does not fully reflect our vision or peak experience. By knowing possibility we keep alive our openness to change.

**In Conclusion**

One of the greatest gifts of the Gestalt approach is our offering to the world a chance for healing what has been split from its intrinsic wholeness. So, know that you are part of the field, and that what you do, how you attend to yourself and others, how you listen and what you bring of your experience in your speaking, all contribute to the creation of the embodied field. Bring your breath, your deep embodiment. Meet your client holding the awareness that they are here in body, in soul, that you shake hands and touch their person and not just ‘their hand’. Hold in you a sense of love for each embodied soul, each en-souled body, and offer your faith that a greater and more whole gestalt is always possible.

**Dedication**

Dedicated with my deepest gratitude to the memory of Elaine Kepner, a stalwart and brilliant Gestalt therapist who believed in writing and thinking about Gestalt therapy, and believed in me.

**References**


---

**James Kepner**, PhD, is a psychologist in private practice in Ohio, and is the author of *Body Process: Working with the Body in Psychotherapy* (1987/99) and of *Healing Tasks: psychotherapy with Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse* (1995). He is on the professional staff of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland where he co-chairs the training programme ‘Working with Physical Process’. His professional interests include training psychotherapists in Gestalt Body Process Psychotherapy and in the Healing Tasks approach, as well as the integration of energy healing methods and psychotherapy in the treatment of chronic disease.

**Address for correspondence:** Tower East, Suite 750, 20600 Chagrin Blvd., Shaker Heights, Ohio 44122, USA.

**Email:** JimKepner@aol.com