

An Introduction to Gestalt

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The Relationship in Gestalt Practice

We believe that the health and growth of human beings are best facilitated in the context of a relationship. Probably the most important thing a practitioner can offer to clients is a willingness to see, hear and accept them as they are, without preconception, expectation or judgement. By paying respectful attention to our clients' thoughts, feelings and behaviour, we invite them to do the same for themselves. We encourage them to become aware of themselves and express themselves as fully as they are able at that time. We act as a witness and in so doing provide confirmation of who they are. As Joseph Zinker said: 'Our deepest, most profound stirrings of self-appreciation, self-love and self-knowledge surface in the presence of the person whom we experience as totally accepting' (1975: 92).

Sometimes we may think we need to offer our clients sophisticated techniques or theoretical insights, but the therapeutic relationship may be the first time that our clients have experienced being truly attended to and heard – and this experience of confirmation can be the most healing feature of the work. In fact, as we said in Chapter 2, numerous research studies (e.g. Asay and Lambert, 1999; Martin et al., 2000, or, for a full summary, see Cooper, 2008; Wampold, 2001), including major meta-studies of positivist research, point to the quality of the therapeutic relationship, alongside the client's motivational and social factors, as the key determinant of effectiveness in psychotherapy, rather than the method, mode or theoretical orientation. After all, we are born from relationship, and as infants we are born into relationship with the world. Mackewn (1994) emphasises that the power to heal lies not in the therapist or even in the client alone but in what happens between them. It is the quality of this between-ness in the relationship where the source of healing and growth occurs. Our function as relationally orientated practitioners invites particular attention to this co-created between, and Clarkson reminds us not to take this lightly as 'the responsibility is awesome' (2003: 25).

Why is the relationship so important? One reason is simply the presence of 'other'. Gestalt therapy and coaching is not about changing people or telling them what they ought to do. We trust that it is an innate drive of human beings to be oriented towards health. It is not even about encouraging them to change themselves. It is

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about holding hope for the person's potential and all that a person can become. Gestaltists believe that human beings – even those in distress – are best able to grow and take charge of their lives by becoming more aware of who they *are* in all their needs and wants, feelings and thoughts, ambivalences and conflicts, what they say and what they do. Only then can they feel responsible for their own lives and make choices in order for them to find the best resolutions to their problems.

If a person is to have a better awareness of who they are, they must have a clear sense of 'I': what is 'me' and what is 'not me'. Have you ever been in a flotation tank? You are immersed in warm (body temperature) water in the dark and the quiet; it is hard to tell where your body ends and the water begins. You begin to feel as if you were at one with the universe. This may be an experience close to that of a baby inside a womb. You have some sensation inside you, but no sense of the size, shape or position of your body and limbs – no clear sense of yourself. In order for us to feel ourselves as solidly separate, we need to have something that is obviously 'not us' impinging upon us, touching our boundary. This is how we describe the self in Gestalt: the process of contacting that occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment. This boundary is not only physical. Psychologically, a clear sense of ourselves happens in the same way. A person can only define himself as 'I' and have a solid sense of who that is, when that 'I' is in relation to something or someone which is 'Not-I', even though, paradoxically, *the self that is experienced* is inevitably shaped by the encounter. No discussion of the relational in Gestalt practice can exclude this unique perspective of self: the self is relational, and emerges within a given situation. Self is a function of the situation, continually in process, where aspects of the self are enduring over temporal, spatial and cultural dimensions. The Gestalt perspective of self as a process and function of its environment is still novel in psychotherapy models, where the emphasis is often more on enduring structure.

Self as Process and Function Emerges from Relationship

Self is a process of making contact through which we manage our context by adaptation or 'creative adjustment' (Perls, 1969: 45) to the environment; a process where certain aspects of a person's total experience become figural and other aspects become unnoticed in the ground. In Chapter 2, we linked the repeating pattern of contact to a person's (probably early) learned way of getting his needs met. However, if this pattern is not rigid, the process of relating in the present can also be '... the means for changing oneself and one's experience of the world' (Polster and Polster, 1974: 101).

Gordon Wheeler is an articulate advocate for understanding the self in social context and relationships. He says that we understand our selves within intersubjective matrixes of other selves. Our individual expression of self emerges from '... our own process out of a field [context] which includes the inner worlds of other selves' (2000: 109). In other words, we have multiple selves depending on the context. For example, we experience ourselves as different when we are with our boss than with our children or our best friend or alone on a mountain top. The self emerges and

becomes known only in relationship to our environment and other person(s), even if the others are actually internalised in our imagination. We will explain this unique perspective in a little more detail.

This process of making contact emerges *of* and *from* the situation (in other words, it is part of and also a result of the situation) that we are co-creating, and *changes moment to moment*, while aspects also *endure over time*. For example, right now I (Billy) am immersed in writing. Looking out the window, I momentarily become captivated, pausing to see and make contact with the burnt orange sky of twilight. My skin is tingling, and excitement emerges where I feel connected to the outside world. I am moved, my torso, and facial muscles feel soft, eyes tearful with awe at such beauty. My felt sense of self, being interconnected to the wider world after being moved by nature, is an experience of self that endures over time: in that moment, incorporating the memory of my experience of previous sunsets over the course of my life.

In comparison, my experience of self two hours previously was different. I was writing an email to an old friend whom I hadn't seen for over six months. I was feeling a sense of loneliness and told him that I wanted to see more of him as I find his presence in my life enriching. I noticed a feeling of longing and hope emerging as, in his reply, he suggested that we consider meeting sooner rather than later. Here, I felt the loneliness was my experience of self as I sat to write my email, which then changed to longing and hope in the next moment upon his suggestion of meeting. Here, my self was spontaneously and creatively adapting during our moment-to-moment email exchange to facilitate meeting a person I cared for and enjoyed.

In summary, the self is born of relationship and emerges from relational encounters over the duration of our lives. The self as process is the capability we possess to respond spontaneously in our contact with the environment and to develop the capacity to creatively adjust to meet our needs. Self changes moment to moment *and* has enduring aspects over time, across cultures and in its environment. The self includes one's ongoing identity, one's here-and-now embodied experience of being, and also the capacity to separate one's own experiences from another, to reflect and to choose.

Healthy and Unhealthy Relational Contact

'Healthy' Relational Contact

Although it seems somewhat prescriptive, we want to articulate some parameters of healthy functioning that are implicit in Gestalt philosophy and principles. In general terms, healthy people think and feel positively about themselves much of the time. They have satisfying relationships and find ways of using their life in satisfying and creative ways. They are spontaneous in their contact, responding fluidly and creatively in their environment. Healthy people are actively involved with other people and the environment, relating rather than reacting, aware of their needs and taking responsibility for meeting them creatively and constructively while remaining aware and respectful of others and the environment.

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Part of being healthy is the ability to manage one's feelings and to support oneself in times of stress as well as to recognise the need for the support of others. This means the development of mutually interdependent relationships as opposed to ones of dependence, independence or exploitation.

Healthy people also take responsibility for the choices they make in life and for the meaning they make of their lives. Awareness of themselves and their environment is intrinsic to this responsibility (we will say more about awareness in Chapter 4). Healthy people experience themselves and the world and make appropriate and creative adjustments informed by their awareness.

As you will see as you read this book, awareness is not a laborious process of perpetual or obsessional navel-gazing. The Gestalt view of healthy awareness emphasises immediacy of contact with others and the environment without the 'baggage' of the past or the future. That is not to say that the past or future is not relevant. It is an inevitable part of peoples' contact with one another and their environment, in so far as it is remembered, experienced and lived in the here and now. Healthy people have the capacity to live fully in the present with all the aliveness and vibrancy that implies. This does not mean being happy all the time but being alive and in contact with others and the environment with a whole range of feelings, thoughts and actions. A healthy person feels sad, angry, excited or scared and fully expresses those feelings in appropriate ways.

In his book, *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy* (1977), Zinker suggests that, in the course of therapy, a person:

- moves towards greater awareness of himself – his body, his feelings, his environment;
- learns to take ownership of his experiences, rather than projecting them onto others;
- learns to be aware of his needs and to develop skills to satisfy himself without violating others;
- moves towards a fuller contact with his sensations, to savour all aspects of himself;
- moves towards the experience of his power and the ability to support himself;
- becomes sensitive to his surroundings, yet protected within situations which are potentially destructive or poisonous;
- learns to take responsibility for his actions and their consequences;
- feels comfortable with the awareness of his fantasy life and its expression.

Naranjo (1970) gives a list of healthy injunctions regarding desirable ways of experiencing, including:

- Live in the 'now';
- Live in the 'here' in the immediate situation;
- Accept yourselves as you are;
- See your environment and interact with it as it is, not as you wish it to be;
- Be honest with yourselves;
- Express yourselves in terms of what you want, think, feel, rather than manipulate self and others through rationalisations, expectations, judgements and distortions;

- Experience fully the complete range of emotions, the unpleasant as well as pleasant;
- Accept no external demands that go contrary to your best knowledge of yourself;
- Be willing to experiment, to encounter new situations;
- Be open to change and growth.

We would also add that in the therapy or coaching relationship a person has the opportunity to develop the capacity to hold the tension between being inseparably interconnected with the wider world and at the same time sufficiently autonomous to take responsibility for him or herself.

All the above aspects of health are ideals. In this sense, health is a process of development towards these ideals – a continuing process, not just throughout therapy or coaching but throughout life. As in life, self-development is usually a cyclical or spiralling rather than a linear process, coming back to the same issues perhaps, but at a different level or angle such that our experience is deeper and our contact with the world more choiceful. This, we hope, increases the likelihood of ongoing healthy relationships with self, others and the wider environment.

‘Unhealthy’ Relational Contact

In using the term ‘unhealthy’ we are not seeking to disapprove of the quality of individuals’ relational contact. We all adapt or creatively adjust our contact, to create a way of interacting with our environment that served us well historically, even though it may not now meet our needs. In other words, we all have disturbances of one form or another which may block our achievement of these ideals of healthy relationships. Gestalt practice directly addresses these disturbances as we move towards our objective of psychological health. In this section, we consider some of the common patterns which prevent us from living our life to the full.

- We may be over-dependent upon environmental support, becoming passive and undirected, waiting for others to look after us or to tell us what to do. Alternatively, we may live in an over-independent way, rebelling against the demands of others or refusing to participate in the ‘give-and-take’ of relationships.
- We may limit our range of experiences by suppressing our sensations, feelings or thoughts so that we are out of contact with our real selves.
- We may disown parts of ourselves by clinging to a specific self-image. A useful concept here is the yin and the yang: two opposite types of energy, the two sides to each situation or state of being. Gestalt describes this concept as ‘polarities’. Every quality has its opposite quality. Sometimes, however, we are attached to the idea of ourselves as being a particular way, for example, calm, kind or gentle. We are unwilling to ‘own’ the inevitable ‘other side of the coin’ which may be boisterous, selfish or rough. Polster and Polster (1974) stated that individuals are a never-ending sequence of polarities. It is the therapist’s task to support the client making contact with both polarities in a flexible way.
- We may be either stuck at one end of a polarity or constantly swinging to extremes without the subtler, flexible gradations of experience in between. Thus we miss

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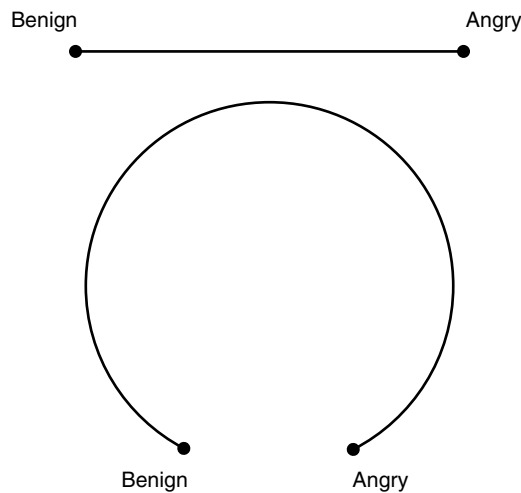


Figure 3.1 Polarities

the 'point of creative indifference' (Friedlander, 1918): the mid-point between the polarities when we approach the world without investment or prejudice, open to any experience and any possibility. Figure 3.1 depicts polarities first as a line with opposite extremes and secondly as a circle with the two polarities very near each other. The latter illustrates the phenomenon of the violent switch from one polarity to another when suddenly they do not seem far apart (as in the benign person who perhaps rarely gets angry but becomes immediately aggressive when he does).

- We may be acting from habit, unaware of the options we have in any given situation. We react to the world from fixed patterns based on expectations formed in past experiences. Our relationships, instead of being grounded in the honest exchange of thoughts, feelings and wants, are distorted by prejudices, hopes and old beliefs.
- We may be 'acting out' our lives rather than living them, spending energy outside the here and now, dwelling on, or even living psychologically in the past or the future. At any given moment we may be concentrating, not on what is happening to us in the present, but on memories of what has passed or on concerns for what may be going to happen. Or we may be saying, 'I wish I knew what Jim is doing now,' focusing on the 'there', rather than on our own surroundings, the 'here'. We may reject who we are and strive constantly to be somebody else. We may cling to the familiar and smother our natural drive for growth.

In the relational branch of the Gestalt approach, greater emphasis is placed upon the interconnectedness of individuals with their surroundings, including awareness of the environment and responsibility within that context (see Afterword). If we do not attend to these things, we are not in good contact with ourselves, others or the environment. An unhealthy relational dynamic becomes a fixed gestalt where the present becomes a misty place devoid of clear figures and the excitement of the moment.

In summary, health is the natural state to which we are born. Consider a healthy young child: aware, lively, flexible, creative, adaptable, responsible, relational. Unhealthy contact is any interruption, disturbance or rigidity in these qualities. We will now introduce the concept of dialogue as an attitude we can hold in our connection with others that supports the development of healthy and full contact.

Dialogue: A Person-to-Person Meeting

Sustained dialogue is a characteristic of intimate interactions between people where we truly experience the other in all their sameness and difference to us. According to the existentialist philosopher, Martin Buber (1965a), dialogue between person and person manifests in relationship with the potential for healing and growth. In the dialogue both parties are changed in the between-ness of the encounter, which is greater than sum of the individuals.

In Gestalt, the quality of the between-ness that is experienced in the relationship between client and practitioner is defined by what Buber called 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' dimensions of relating. These are two primary attitudes a person can assume in relation to other individuals, their environment and the world.

In describing the I-Thou attitude of relating, Buber (1965a) struggled to identify what it was that caused people to grow and become the finest they could be. He decided (as others, such as Carl Rogers, have done) that the development of 'personhood' could only come out of an authentic meeting between two people who encounter each other as openly and non-defensively as they can, in the full awareness both of their individual separateness and of their connection. The I-Thou relationship is a genuine meeting of person to person and a '... stance of genuinely being interested in the person we're interacting with as a *person*' (Hycner, 1991: 6; emphasis in original).

Buber also talked about another form of relationship, which he referred to as I-It relating. In this form of relating, we approach the people and things as if they were objects or functions whose existence is for us to affect, control or manipulate. (Equally, we may feel as if 'It' affects, controls, or manipulates us.) In ordinary living we must, of course, often relate to the world in this way in order to focus on our own needs, wants or plans. Hycner informs us that 'an I-It stance is a *necessary* aspect of human living' (1991: 6; emphasis in original). A frequent example is when we assume what a person is like (for example, from the way they look) and relate to them as if they were our image of them. This may be a correct image based on good observation or intuition, or it may be purely based on the fact that we expect the person to treat us in the way someone else has treated us – for instance our parents, teachers, or friends. This is what is called transference, because we 'transfer' our experiences from the past into the present. In either case, it is I-It relating because it is based on our expectations rather than the here-and-now experience of the person.

We are very likely to adopt an I-It stance when the other person is in a particular role in relation to us, and we focus on the role instead of the person. For example, a social work manager, Sally, is reviewing cases. She phones Sophia, one of the team, to clarify some details. This is done with courtesy, efficiency and with a real clarity on

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the outcomes required. Here Sally is in an I–It mode of relating to carefully complete an important task. Later, Sophia sees Sally for supervision of a particularly challenging and sensitive client case. Sally is open, empathetic and able to fully immerse herself in the case and Sophia’s experience as if it was her very own. Sophia feels seen, heard and understood. At this point, she no longer experiences Sally as her manager, but as a person who is deeply interested in her and her whole experience. The relationship has become I–Thou. There is a qualitative difference in the encounter.

Our sense of self as a person emerges from our context, which includes the quality of our relational encounters. A life lived without the meeting of person to person would be sterile and, according to Buber, could not truly give us a sense of our real selves. Jacobs says: ‘The I–It mode is vitally necessary for living, the I–Thou for the realisation of personhood’ (1989: 26), and quotes Buber as saying: ‘Without It a human being cannot live but whoever lives with only that is not human.’ We all need to spend much of our time in the I–It mode of relating to organise our lives. In describing the therapeutic relationship, Jacobs uses the term ‘dialogic process’ to refer to the essential movement between the two modes of relating. The therapeutic relationship offers a special opportunity to engage with another human being in the I–Thou relationship in order to become our fullest selves. But it is worth noting that the I–Thou mode is a position we can hold – not something we can create.

Clearly, the therapy situation is a very particular form of meeting. Though the personal growth of both therapist and client is possible, we must be aware that our clients are not there for *our* growth. We are both there with an agreed focus: the growth and development of the client. Our satisfaction must come from commitment to this task. In this sense, therefore, there is not mutuality within the relationship. Here is an interesting paradox. We have said that, in terms of intention, there is not mutuality. This means that in the wider context of the therapy or coaching situation, the relationship must be I–It. But this does not prevent a very real meeting from taking place. Within the therapeutic relationship, the practitioner holds a continuum between I–It and I–Thou. It is our task to approach clients with an I–Thou *attitude* or *intention*. We believe also that the client’s growth involves developing the capacity for a fully mutual relationship.

Clients coming into therapy or coaching are unlikely to engage in an I–Thou relationship immediately. Indeed, most who come to see a therapist will do so at a time of difficulty or distress; they will see their therapist perhaps as a potential problem solver, or even a ‘magician’ who will make them feel better. Some may rarely have had the experience of being fully aware of themselves in the present moment. Even those who have frequently had such experiences are likely to approach the therapist or coach at first from an I–It position. This is only natural and applies also to the practitioner. Before meeting, both will have created images, fantasies and expectations regarding each other based on past experiences. Importantly, the practitioner will bracket (see Chapter 9) these preconceptions, referring to them only in the service of understanding the client. As soon as they meet, she will make herself available to engage with the client in an I–Thou attitude. It is a practitioner’s task at this point to facilitate the client in developing his here-and-now awareness. The client, naturally, will take time to adjust to the new setting and the new situation, gradually moving from an I–It relationship to more frequent moments of I–Thou dialogue. This may

happen in the first session, but some clients will take longer – weeks, or for therapy clients, even months or years.

To reiterate, we are not suggesting that the practitioner will never use an I–It way of relating to her client. On the contrary, in our roles we will use the I–It mode much of the time. To be constantly in I–Thou mode would not only be impossible but would mean that we never *thought* about our clients within sessions (reflective self-supervision) or outside the sessions (external supervision). Both of which are I–It.

It is our responsibility to use our professional knowledge and experience within these relational encounters with clients as well as outside them. For instance, in a therapy session, the client says he feels dreadfully depressed and cannot sleep, the therapist may be aware of a moment of anxiety and particular concern. A ‘priority’ figure emerges: ‘Could this client be so severely depressed as to need medical help; could he even be a danger to himself?’ It is important to find out what other ‘symptoms’ there are. The therapist approaches the client with the express strategic plan of clarifying her judgement. For this period, the therapist is inevitably relating in an I–It way, as she is not simply giving herself to the emerging moment, she is steering the conversation.

In Part III of this book, we describe a variety of techniques or ways of thinking about and using Gestalt theory. In order to facilitate their effective use, we have to be relating in an I–It way. However, the therapist’s intention is always that these interventions will arise out of having been in real dialogue with the client, and never just ‘applied’.

Different Relational Interactions Required for Effective Relationships

This fluidity of types of relationship extends to many different kinds of communicating and interacting. Nevis et al. (2003) suggest both strategic (I–It) and intimate (I–Thou) interactions are required. We will illustrate these in the following example.

A chief executive of a national charity is working with her executive team on the five-year strategy that trustees will review. The chief executive has engaged in both individual conversations and group workshops to ensure all voices are represented from each of the organisation’s directorates. The intention of this approach was to foster a sense of care for each other and attain a better understanding of what they do, by listening attentively and being genuinely curious about what each person was thinking and feeling. Here, each person, regardless of role, length of service or power, was open to being influenced and influencing. A mutuality of exchange was experienced in their relating and when significant differences emerged there was a commitment to sustained dialogue. Additionally, a stance of creative indifference was taken where people withheld the pull to be invested in any particular outcome and new awareness and insights were attained. This seemed to further enhance the quality of the five-year strategy. These were ‘intimate interactions’ (Nevis et al., 2003): forms of communication, verbal or non-verbal, that encourage closeness between people, where exchange is spontaneous and mutuality

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is experienced in the relational encounter with inequality of status or power of role suspended.

Two months into the work, a sense of urgency becomes palpable in the executive team. Cuts in funding have just been announced and membership donations are in decline. The trustees have requested to review the work two weeks early. Decisions are required and time is running out! The chief executive, after some further consultation, decides on a way forward to ensure the strategy document and plan is completed on schedule. In the next executive team meeting, she explains her intentions and then hears from others before clearly articulating the way forward with a decisiveness and firmness in her voice. Some team members who are not fully in agreement choose to remain silent as they acknowledge the importance of an expedient choice and the executive decision-making power and responsibility of the chief executive. These types of interactions where the focus is on the task, where dialogue may be robust, interruptive, abrupt and where unpopular decisions are made are described by Nevis et al. (2003) as 'strategic interactions'.

They advocate that both intimate and strategic interactions seek to maintain connection between all persons involved. It is necessary to recognise that there is a distinction in these interactions; mutuality and empathy are experienced in the intimate interactions; while in the strategic interactions, the attitude is an acknowledgement of authority, or recognition of the role of a person as a function of a particular situation.

Both types of relational interaction are necessary for the development of authentic and genuine relationships that can withstand ruptures and encourage reflective and reflexive learning. The dialogic relationship, a stance where the practitioner moves between I–It and I–Thou modes of relating, is a major factor in the quality of support that is experienced for all persons in the relationship. (See Chapter 10 for further discussion of this issue.)