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Key Concepts of Gestalt Therapy and Processing

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Chapter 1 touched briefly on some of the concepts of gestalt therapy. In this chapter, these and other gestalt therapy concepts will be examined in greater depth.

Key Concepts of Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt

The word "gestalt" is of German origin. It is difficult to define since it has no equivalent definition in the English language. According to Sinay (1998), the word first appeared in 1523 in a translation from the Bible and meant "exposed to the looks" (p. 4). The closest approximation in modern English is "whole," even though such words as form, configuration, structure, or shape are closely related to it. Perls (1969a) stated that a "gestalt is an irreducible phenomenon. It is an essence that is there and disappears if the whole is broken into parts" (p. 63). Therefore, the wholeness of a response must be complete. A concrete example of a gestalt is an outdoor maze seen in its wholeness from a helicopter. Although the hedge of the maze contributes to the making of the whole, it is not the maze.

Christian von Enhrenfels (1859–1932) (Sinay, 1998) is credited with identifying that, through perception, a psychical whole is formed. He concluded that "the whole is different from the sum of the parts" (Sinay, 1998, p. 5). Hence, it is impossible to generalize from one aspect of the person to the whole person. If such a generalization takes place, vital dimensions are omitted, oftentimes to the disadvantage of the person. Thus, the adjective "domineering" might be used to describe Simon, but, in so doing, his other characteristics are overlooked.

The concept of gestalt was developed further by the gestalt psychologists, who concluded that the whole preceded the parts. From his work with brain-damaged children, Goldstein (1878–1975) expanded gestalt psychology from an approach dealing with perception to one dealing with the human being. He concluded that if a part of the body is injured, the injury affects the whole body. Recently, I have been having trouble with my radial nerve. Such a difficulty has affected my whole body, sometimes resulting in my inability to type.

As stated in Chapter 1, Perls' time in South Africa coincided with that of Prime Minister Jan Smuts, the person usually associated with holism. Smuts (1926) considered it to be a tendency in nature to form wholes that are greater than the sum of the parts. These wholes (or gestalts) are not static but continuously evolving. He stated, "The final net result is that this is a whole-making universe, that it is the production of wholes, of ever more complete and advanced wholes, and that the evolution of the universe, inorganic and organic, is nothing but the record of this whole-making activity in its progressive development" (p. 426). Thus, the human person is a breathing, moving, walking, and talking being. In relation to development, Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) stated, "Every successive stage is a new whole, operating as a whole, with its own mode of life" (p. 450).

In a healthy person, there is no need to search for gestalts. They emerge and "All parts of the organism identify themselves temporarily with the emergent gestalt" (Perls 1969a, p. 115). Perls (1973) wrote, "Always the most important gestalt will emerge first" (p. 119). Metabolic energy flows into emerging gestalts and is called excitement, which is experienced as emotions and the feeling of being alive. O'Leary & O'Connor (1997) stated, "gestalt therapists postulate that individuals organise their experience into a whole which has a pattern" (p. 148).

Figure and Ground

It was Kurt Koffka (1935) who asserted that, during the process of perception, figure and ground occur. The Danish phenomenologist Edgar Rubin, in 1925, introduced the reversible goblet as an illustration of figure/ground. Depending on the observer, either a goblet or a pair of silhouetted faces is seen (Goswami, 2000, p. 46). Abell and Abell (1976) spoke of figure and ground in its relation to a gestalt when they defined a gestalt as "a configuration consisting of ground (general background) and figure (what the perceiver observes as standing out from the background)" (p. 27). They further stated, "Perls uses the word 'gestalt' to refer to a specific kind of relationship between the observer and what s/he observes in his/her environment, so that the 'figure' in the perceived field is the satisfier of a need" (p. 27). The figure emerges from the background depending on the primary need of the organism.

The gestalt psychologists maintained that if something is missing in a figure, we seek to complete it. This was brought home to me recently when, on instructing my computer to assign a file to my desktop, it chose a space which had been created by the deletion of another file. Even the computer could not bear a space! Similarly, a round drawing with a segment of the contour missing will be viewed as a circle. In therapy, individuals seek to finish a figure and to view it as a whole.

Once attended to, the figure fades into the background as a different object becomes figure. Thus, figure and ground change as a new gestalt is formed. Clarkson (1989) spoke of the tendency of some people to hurry towards the next figure without taking sufficient time to relish the development emerging from the previous experience.

According to Yontef (1993), "whole figures emerge in relation to a ground and this relationship of figure and ground is meaning" (p. 182). He pointed out that contact with something which we sense and with which we are excited leads to a meaningful figure/ground configuration. Healthy functioning depends on these meaningful experiences which require a focus on some aspect of current experience (figure) with other elements in the background. An example of figure/ground in my everyday life occurs as I write. I look out the window and become aware of the treacherous ice-covered street outside. My attention returns to the script. As I continue to write, I question whether the street is as treacherous as it seems. The need to explore the situation further becomes more persistent, so that it is more difficult to concentrate. I go out to my car, start the engine and test what looks like an icy patch in front of the car. As I begin to drive slowly over it, I can feel a slight skid. I decide that I am not going to town. Having made the decision, I am psychologically free to return to my writing.

The figure–ground of gestalt therapy is clearly illustrated in the above example. At first, the figure was the writing while the ground/background was the treacherous icy street outside. As my awareness moved to the street, the ice became the figure. Within a few minutes, the following sequence of events alternated as the figure of my awareness: writing, the treacherous ice, writing, the car, the starter, the icy patch, and, finally, writing again. Healthy functioning required this fluidity of process. Initially, I was distracted from my focus on writing with my concern to print the details of my travel ticket for the following Friday. Since my own printer was not working, the necessity to go down town was vying with my desire to write. However, having discovered that going down town was not advisable, and becoming aware that I was not traveling for another two days, I was free to devote myself to my writing as the figure of my endeavors.

At any moment, healthy individuals have a focus of awareness which forms the figure against their overall experiencing. This results in a precise picture of what they need for their satisfaction. Take, for example, a woman in a nursing home whom I visited. I offered her a biscuit from a packet which I had brought. She declined and asked for milk. I then noticed that her lips were dry and swollen, indicating dehydration, so it was not surprising that she expressed a longing for milk. On receiving the glass of milk, she drank it in one gulp. In this manner, awareness of her need, namely quenching her thirst, resulted in a precise picture of its fulfillment, namely milk (the figure).

The figure is unique to each individual. For example, at a celebration, a hungry person will first notice food, an alcoholic will go to the bar, and another who expects to meet a friend will look for the friend. The celebration is the ground, but the figure for each person is determined by his/her needs at the particular moment. Each person is at a different party.

From time to time, many competing demands may claim a person's attention. That which is most important to the person will become figure. Thus, the busy executive whose mobile phone constantly rings as he walks into a meeting may choose to make the meeting his figure and to attend to the phone-call later. Rather than being controlled by the phone-call, he makes a decision that it can stay in the background and become figure when the meeting is over.

The emergence of a clear and well-defined figure is disturbed if the person's attention flits rapidly from one moment of experiencing to another. This results in a number of vague and incomplete figures in competition with each other which become sources of anxiety and distraction. Since no one need becomes figure, there is a failure to attend to unfinished situations, be they positive or negative.

In 1996, I reported five major differences between figure and ground identified by Rubin (cited in Woodworth and Schlosberg, 1954) as follows: "the figure has form, while the ground tends to be formless; the ground appears to extend continuously behind the figure without being interrupted by it; the figure has a quality of 'thingness' while the ground has a quality of undifferentiated material; the figure appears nearer than the ground and it is the figure rather than the ground which is more impressive, better remembered, and more apt to be given meaning" (p. 12).

Balance and Polarities

The biological principle of homoeostasis maintains that organisms strive to maintain a steady state; this principle applies to the physical, mental, and affective aspects of the human person. An appropriate balance of all parts of the individual is necessary for health to occur (Perls, 1969b). People strive to maintain equilibrium by the acceptance of their feelings, thoughts, actions and bodily experiences. They may be temporarily out of balance as they explore one of these dimensions in order to have a better understanding of themselves and develop their full potential.

At any moment, a person may be faced with dissonance which occurs either through external demands or internal needs. Individuals can choose to accept these demands or assess them relative to their own needs. Gratifying or eliminating external and internal demands was defined by Perls (1969b) as organismic self-regulation. Attaining this self-regulation or balance may be difficult, since certain behaviors are more approved of by society. What is important is identifying which behavior is relevant in a given situation.

Perls was particularly interested in Sigmund Friedlander's (1918) differential thinking. Its underlying assumption was that whatever is, will polarize into opposites. The balanced person has the advantage of being able to stay at the zero point (in homeostasis). In contrast, the unbalanced person is trapped in one of the polarities. Take the case of Sylvia, who is always lauded for her gentle nature. Such affirmation may be pleasing to the ear, but if Sylvia always associates herself as being gentle, she will not have the opportunity to use the opposite characteristic. A long-term outcome could be that Sylvia may be unable to physically defend herself if an occasion requiring self-defense should arise.

The subject of polarities (or opposites as they were then referred to) has been of importance across the centuries. In 1980, I pointed out that Taoism (associated with the philosopher Lao-Tzu, 604–531 BC), referred to Yang and Yin. Yang signified warmth, light, and masculinity, whereas Yin denoted cold, darkness, and femininity. A counterweight, Tao, was required to reconcile these opposites. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (540–480 BC) also spoke of the existence of opposing forces and referred to their regulative use as enantiodrama, a running contrariwise. He held that everything runs into its opposite, as depicted by concrete examples; for example, drinking sea water causes harm to people but is advantageous for fish (O'Leary, 1987).

Jung (Read, Fordham, Adler, & McGuire, 1950/1971) spoke of the play of opposites. In this play of opposites, Jung considered that a shadow was the opposite of the strong characteristic of an individual. The shadow, an area of undeveloped potential, is the less dominant and weaker part of the personality, and to a large degree, the less well known. The existence of the shadow is often demonstrated when individuals disown some of their behavior by using phrases such as "I do not know what came over me." What came over them was an increase in the power of their shadow in a particular circumstance. Jung (in Von Franz, 1978) stated, "The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself/herself" (p. 284). Shame often accompanies an awareness of the shadow. Without acknowledgement of a shadow, the dominant characteristic does not have a background. The shadow provides balance for the person's owned characteristic. Only when the shadow is acknowledged as part of the person's personality is it possible to change it. In gestalt therapy, this acknowledgment is called "owning." An encounter with the shadow leads to integration.

Foremost gestalt therapists have always considered polarities (Perls *et al.*, 1951; Polster & Polster, 1974; Zinker, 1978). In literature, Tolstoy's (1869/1994) novel *War and Peace* by its very title emphasized the theme of polarity. In art, a drawing with the same title by Picasso shows the uplifted sword in the hand of the aggressor who is ready to strike the foe who hides behind his hand trying to ward off what is apparently inevitable. Between them, Picasso inserts a circled dove, thus bringing into focus that any act of aggression has within it the possibility of integration. These approaches from literature and art illustrate that both author and artist acknowledge polarities in their work.

Perls *et al.* (1951) spoke of the polarity of topdog/underdog. The topdog is righteous, evaluative, judgmental, domineering, parental, and authoritarian. It commands, directs, scolds, and manipulates. The underdog, on the other hand, is acquiescent and apologetic. However, it is cunning and sometimes gets the better of the topdog – a fact that is not always understood. What is helpful for individuals is to identify themselves in both roles. They may need to be evaluative and judgmental if they are on an interview board, whereas they may need to be submissive in the presence of an authoritarian boss. The goal for the individual is to allow both voices to be heard as appropriate. In previous writing (O'Leary, 1996), I pointed out that when polarities are identified they can either complement or compete with each other.

The relationship between two ends of a polarity is often like a seesaw so that when one end is up the other must be down (Passons, 1975). The end that is up is more in awareness while the other side is less so. What is important is that both sides of a polarity need to be expressed, explored, and integrated within an individual. Each can be energized depending upon the demands of a particular situation. Without this attention to both sides of a polarity, no forward movement is possible. Thus, the docile, compliant son may need to scream his rage before he can express his anger appropriately. Zinker (1978) stated that this process turns the light on inside our psychological lives.

If, in the past, individuals have identified themselves with one end of a polarity, the exploration and acceptance of the other will create a new gestalt as they reorganize both sides into a new whole. A moment of change occurs, and they move forward in their personal growth journey. The previously unnoticed parts begin to manifest themselves slowly and with increasing frequency as they become familiar with them. Individuals are no longer as they were. They have changed for the better.

Many polarities can be seen in nature and in everyday life. I remember a particularly striking example of this while living in Spain. One morning, I drove my nephew, Martin, to the beginning of his hiking expedition in Sierra de las Nievas. As we drove up the mountain, we were surrounded by an extremely dull, dark, and dense fog in its higher reaches. I switched on the lights, and for a while I had to drive very slowly and carefully. Then, suddenly, brilliant orange sunshine broke through, resulting in the juxtaposition of orange and grey which was stunning to behold.

Various factors can militate against the exploration of some polarities. A society often has definite views of what is acceptable in the development of individuals. In my previous writing (O'Leary & O'Connor, 1997) I have pointed out that an unnecessary division emerges between thinking and feeling in our youth – the cognitive is given precedence over the affective. Difference as opposed to balance is emphasized. Personally, I was fortunate in my teens to have an eighty-year-old grandfather who learned and sang the latest hits of Jim Reeves with me, although heretofore he had never heard of the singer. At school, I was taught how to waltz, do Irish dancing, and play the piano. Music, song, rhythm, and companionship thus obtained a value that has stayed with me throughout my life. In this way, a harmony of the cognitive and affective was achieved.

As individuals grow in personal awareness, they come to appreciate that there are many polarities within themselves. Several related opposites may exist to any one polarity. These opposites were called multilarities by Zinker (1978), who attributed the term to Erving Polster. I remember vividly this experience of multilarities as I sat outside my apartment while on sabbatical in Malaga. What I saw was pleasant: trees, a swimming pool, green grass, a nice patio; what I felt in my body was also pleasant: the warm sunshine, the feel of my skin; what I heard was not pleasant: noise pollution, cars whirring by, the sound of frequent hooting horns on the road from Malaga to Cadiz, the very length of their possible journeys seeming to add to the haste of the drivers. Thus, seeing and feeling were

multilarities to hearing. Zinker (1978) stated that individuals with healthy self-concepts are aware of many opposing forces within themselves and are willing to see themselves in a multitude of competing ways.

As in intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict, polarities lie at the basis of conflict in groups and organizations. This is evident in the opposing views usually taken by Democrats and Republicans in the USA with respect to the reduction of the national debt. When we polarize, we arrive at no solutions. Yet, polarization does not necessarily lead to conflict. Two major questions emerge: Can we live with polarizations within ourselves and between ourselves and others? Can we live, accept, and work with people who have diametrically opposite views? When there is no room to express what either oneself or the other feels, there is no way to grow together, since the true reality within is hidden.

In summary, polarities and balance are interrelated. Exploration and acceptance of both sides of a polarity allow balance to emerge. Polarities have been discussed in history as far back as the sixth century BC. Perls *et al.* (1951) illustrated polarities through the example of topdog/underdog, whereas Zinker (1978) expanded the concept to include multilarities holding that any side of a polarity may have many opposite sides. Polarities can also occur within groups and organizations. The essential question is whether the various players can respect the polarities that emerge, accept these polarities, and still continue constructively with the task in hand.

Awareness

Awareness featured highly in the writings of the founders of gestalt therapy. Awareness is both the goal and the methodology of gestalt therapy. Perls *et al.* (1951) wrote, "Awareness is the spontaneous sensing of what arises in you – of what you are doing, feeling, planning" (p. 75). Latner (1992) referred to it as a "form of experiencing. It is the process of being in vigilant contact with the most important event in the individual/environmental field with full sensorimotor, emotional, cognitive and energetic support" (p. 183). It was Perls' (1969b) belief that it is possible for all people to become fully aware of and act upon their needs. He claimed that "awareness is the only basis of knowledge and communication" (p. 44). In my previous writing, I stated that awareness is "an integrative concept which can be defined as consisting of cognitive, affective, bodily and behavioural processes. Awareness is dynamic and, once established, usually continues to develop over time" (O'Leary, 2006, p. 162).

Awareness is the realization of the obvious and begins with what is. Thus, therapists focus on the actions, postures, speech patterns, quality of voice, gesticulations, and the way clients relate to them. Enright (1972), speaking of awareness, stated that "although it includes thinking and feeling, it is always based on current perceptions of the current situation" (p. 300). For many individuals who misuse their senses, staying in the here and now is essential for awareness to occur (Perls, 1969b). Polster and Polster (1974) held that, "At its best, awareness is a continuous means for keeping up to date with one's self … It is always there, like an

underground stream, ready to be tapped into when needed, a refreshing and revitalizing experience" (p. 211).

Within psychotherapy, awareness is most closely associated with Perls (1981), who stated that "awareness is in and of itself curative" (p. 17). According to Latner (1973), it is closely associated with health. He stated that "regaining our health is a matter of restoring the awareness we have lost" (p. 3). Enright (1972) viewed awareness in a similar light, asserting that the mentally healthy person was "one in whom awareness can develop without blocking wherever his organismic attention is drawn" (p. 119).

Awareness can be conceptualized as consisting of what is relevant in the external and internal world of the individuals. Changing external circumstances result in moment-to-moment changes in their internal worlds. Awareness includes an awareness of the self, the world, and what is in between (Perls, 1969b). It was considered by Perls *et al.* (1951) as consisting of four characteristics: contact, sensing, excitement, and gestalt formation. Yontef (2005) defined these four characteristics as follows: contact is what one is in touch with, sensing is how one is in touch, excitement relates to emotional and physiological excitation, which may be pleasant or unpleasant, while gestalt formation occurs through figure and ground. Yontef (2005) stated, "The figure and ground form a gestalt, an organized and meaningful whole" (p. 89).

Awareness is different from introspection. The nature of introspection is such that it operates at a cognitive level only and involves a subject–object split (James, 1890), as can be seen in such expressions as "I blame myself." Awareness is thus different from introspection, in that, in introspection, the "I" observes the "me" and so the self is split and looks at itself self-consciously. Awareness, as Enright (1972) pointed out, "is the whole self, conscious of that to which the organism is attending" (p. 119). Perls *et al.* (1951) stated that "Awareness is the spontaneous sensing of what arises in you – of what you are doing, feeling, planning; introspection, in contrast, is a deliberate turning of attention to these activities in an evaluative, correcting, controlling, interfering way, which often, by the very nature paid them, modifies or prevents their appearance in awareness" (p. 88). Perls (1969b) compared awareness to the glow of a coal which comes from its own combustion and introspection to the light reflected from an object when a flashlight is turned on it. Introspection has an evaluative dimension, whereas awareness has a process orientation.

The concept of awareness was distinguished from insight by Erving and Miriam Polster (Polster and Polster, 1974). Awareness is in the moment. We have, one could say, to "catch" it. It has been referred to by Korb, Gorrell, and Van de Riet (1989) as "the AHA experience, the moment of clear understanding" (p. 119). Clients arrive at the AHA moment by focusing on moment-to-moment changes. So important is this moment that I chose it as the cover-design of my book *Gestalt Therapy: Theory, Practice and Research* by having a fork of lightning depicted on it – an apt symbol for the overall impact of awareness – lighting up what until that moment was in darkness. My initial choice had been an electric bulb but the publisher suggested that lightning was more natural and dramatic. Now, almost two

decades later, I consider that both are apt metaphors for the overall impact of awareness – lighting up what until that moment was in darkness. Awareness is a cognitive, affective, and bodily experience, whereas insight involves cognition only. As we become aware, we come closer and closer to our organismic experiencing. Insight may signal a particular behavior which is causing difficulty, but a cognitive marker alone may not be sufficient for a positive outcome. Intellectualization can hinder awareness if we seek only causes and do not look at how and what individuals do in particular situations, their feelings, and bodily experiencing.

Thus, the therapeutic core of gestalt therapy is increasing awareness. In this development, experience is a key factor. According to Kempler (1974), subsequent awareness is influenced by present awareness as psychological processes move from awareness to experience and back to awareness. Thus, life is perceived as it is right now and people are able to deal with all aspects of this realization.

Present-Centeredness

Perls (1981) was of the opinion that gestalt therapy was a form of existential philosophy. He stated, "What is important is that gestalt therapy is the first existential philosophy that stands on its own two feet" (p. 16). According to Patterson and Watkins (1996), "Perls was influenced by the existential emphasis on the individual's responsibility for thoughts, feelings and actions and on the immediate experience – the now, the I–Thou relationship, and the what and how, rather than the why of experience and behaviour" (p. 349).

Gestalt therapy incorporated the process approach of existentialism. This processing explores what underlies the experience of individuals in order for them to become aware of how they live, including how they perceive events in the present moment. Kierkegaard (1944) stressed that people are defined by what they do in a real situation. Existentialists hold that experiences change by focusing on them in the present moment. Explaining current behavior is not fruitful because it may result in speculations and interpretations which are not related to the original experience. Perls (cf. Rosenfeld, 1978) invited his clients to begin each sentence with the words "here and now." In so doing, he was encouraging them to move towards their internal frame of reference. It is no wonder that Levin (2010) referred to gestalt therapy as the "here and now" therapy. He goes on to say, "The here part of gestalt therapy refers to its situatedness in the world. … The non-personal environment is personalized and incorporated into support through contact. … The now part of gestalt therapy refers to temporality. Time is measured by change, change is measured by difference, and difference is measured by contact" (pp. 156–157).

Perls (1973) did not consider gestalt therapy to be merely verbal, but rather it includes all experience. Like the frames of a film, the present consists of a series of consecutive moments which form a stream of consciousness. Every "now" is part of a sequence of "nows." As I compose these words in the now, they are already past and a new "now" is formed as I continue writing. Polster and Polster

(1974) stated, "A most difficult truth to teach is that only the present exists now and to stray from it distracts from the living quality of reality" (p. 7).

The healthy person is capable of being fully here in the present moment. Perls (1969b) stated that whatever is actual always exists in the present, while Melnick and Nevis (2005) pointed out that this emphasis on the present was a revolutionary focus of gestalt therapy since the past had been the area of interest heretofore in depth psychotherapeutic approaches. Naranjo's (1972) observation that living in the moment is a prescription for life is apt.

The "now" occurs against the background of the past and the future. Melnick and Nevis (2005) stated, "A basic belief of gestalt therapy is that the present encompasses the past and helps influence the future. Everything that we have learned, everything that we have experienced is carried in the present moment … we focus on the present moment where the past is embedded and therefore alive and obvious" (p. 105). The amount of energy invested in the past and the future, the less space will exist for the present.

The past is important insofar as it exists in the present. If present experiencing includes experiences and feelings that have not been processed fully in the past, they are revisited in the present. Labeling emerging from past experiences is only useful when these events are still alive in the present for the individual. Thus, a statement such as "I am the adult child of an alcoholic" is no longer useful to a person if related bad experiences have already been processed and worked through. Labeling in this manner describes a part of the individual as if it were the whole. I am reminded of Kate, who had been sexually abused by her now deceased father. She told me that one of the most liberating experiences of her life was when describing herself as a person who had been sexually abused in an experiential group; the facilitator looked at her and said, "Yes, and what else are you?" Perls (1969b) maintained that people cling to their past in order not to assume responsibility in the present and thereby deprive themselves of new experiences.

Living in the present assists clients to deal with anxiety relating to the future. The energy of individuals suffering from anxiety symptoms emerges for the most part from preoccupation with their future. Anticipating the future unduly divests energy from the present, especially when such anticipation may bear little relationship to the eventual reality. Since the future has not yet arrived, the richness of the present is lost. The future is significant only when it is rooted in the now. Gestalt therapists work on the future with the goal of freeing individuals from imaginary situations which prohibit them from being fully in the present.

Directing attention to one's internal experience points to what is figural in the present moment. The more individuals can attend to the immediate moment, the more they can live in the present. For example, if I am going to a wedding in a week's time and have no suitable shoes, it behoves me to attend to the matter. The value that Levitsky and Perls (1972) placed on the present moment is reflected in their description of it as "one of the most potent, the most pregnant and most elusive principles of gestalt therapy" (p. 164). Four years before he died, Perls (1966) stated at the Atlanta Workshop on Gestalt Therapy, "To me, nothing exists

except the now. In my lectures in gestalt therapy, I have one aim only: to impact a fraction of the meaning of the word now. To me nothing exists except the now. Now=experience=awareness=reality. The past is no more and the future not yet. Only the now exists" (p. 16).

Perls *et al*. (1951) emphasized the importance of the non-verbal in the present moment paying more attention to the psychosomatic accompaniments of content. Perls' (1969b) advice in this regard was "Don't listen to the words, just listen to what the voice tells you, what the posture tells you, what the image tells you … the facial expression, the psychosomatic language. If you use your eyes and ears, then you see that everyone expresses himself(herself) in one way or another" (p. 57). Talking about a situation can distract from internal experiencing with the result that potential change moments are lost. In O'Leary (1996) I stated that "Self-criticism, blame, guilt, judgments relating to self and others, can prevent individuals from becoming involved with themselves or with others in the present. Many people find that they need to criticise those around them in order to avoid considering their own experience. Others dismiss their 'now' when they have time to reflect on what is happening. Growth will only occur when they open themselves to the possibility of considering the now" (p. 17).

The nature of interaction in the present moment has multi-potentialities. I was reminded of this when I traveled from Cork to Dublin recently. As is customary in Irish train stations, I had to queue by a closed gate. While doing so, one of the passengers struck up a conversation. This was all very well until I boarded the train, and we were sitting opposite each other. I had decided beforehand to do some writing during the journey, as the deadline for a book submission was fast approaching. As an Irish person I questioned myself, "Do I stay with my writing and so move forward with the book which has an approaching deadline, or do I choose to engage in further conversation with this most genial of passengers?" The question emerged, how can I do what is best for my overall functioning? I decided to do a little of each and to stop writing at the end of each page and converse. As I spoke with my fellow traveler, retroactive inhibition was prevented from emerging, and I returned to the next page refreshed, renewed, and ready to move forward. Two other people entered our carriage, and we fell silent. The field had expanded, but no connection existed between these two newcomers and us. My attention moved outward to the countryside, and so I moved from focusing in the present moment on self to the other, back to self, to the two strangers, outwards to my environment, and finally back to myself. What one engages in at a particular moment depends on what has most interest.

Unfinished Business

Although in frequent use in society, the term "unfinished business" was originally derived by Perls *et al*. (1951) based on the gestalt psychology principle of closure. This principle holds that anything that is incomplete persists in memory and seeks completion. Such incomplete situations absorb energy. Polster and Polster (1974) stated in this regard, "These incomplete directions do seek completion and when

they get powerful enough, the individual is beset with preoccupation, compulsive behavior, wariness, oppressive energy, and much self-defeating behavior" (p. 36).

Tobin (1976) viewed "unfinished business" as "the inhibition of an emotion that was experienced at one or more times during a relationship" (p. 373). A death, divorce, or the termination of a relationship may result in unfinished business. This unfinished business may take the form of unexpressed emotion such as not grieving. According to Cohn (1972), "Unfinished business includes emotions, events, memories, which linger unexpressed in the organismic person; avoidance is the means by which one keeps away from unfinished business. By avoidance, the person tries to escape from feelings that must be felt in order to release him(her) into his(her) own custody" (p. 158). Refraining from the expression of unfinished business by the client usually occurs for good reasons (Perls *et al.*, 1951); for example, the sexually abused person may not want to relive the experienced trauma. However, by ignoring painful emotions, their possibilities for development are blocked (Perls, 1969b). It is a difficult task to deal with these blocks. Nevertheless, through working on the block, both the therapist and the client can become aware of the basis for the avoidance and thus facilitate the working through of the unfinished business.

As individuals become aware of the whole range of their feelings, they come to realize that many feelings relating to experiences in their past are unexpressed. Instead of experiencing them at the time, individuals blocked them, since they were reluctant to admit the pain that accompanies self-disclosure. Such blocking deprives the person of the energy to become involved in other activities, since it dulls awareness of present experience. Goulding and Goulding (1979) claimed that clients who neglect to say goodbye are locked in their past; for example, individuals who grew up in an orphanage and suffered some injustice may hesitate to relate to those in authority. Recalling the injustice would dredge up the painful experiences that still exist emotionally for them. Unfinished emotion seeks completion and will press for attention until resolved. The form of the resolution may not be what the discloser would ideally want, but, through the expression of the pent-up emotion, both realistic and alternative outcomes emerge. Describing and working through the incident with a gestalt therapist can lead to resolution and release. Lack of disclosure, on the other hand, will not alter the unfinished situation. Such a lack often occurs if the person has a fixed attitude with regard to the situation. Perls (1972a) considered that fixated people display a certain stubbornness. Instead of letting go of the event, they mull over and cling to it.

Unfinished business may also relate to unfulfilled needs. For example, at the ending of an unsatisfactory relationship, individuals may have expressed all the feelings that accompanied the termination. Nevertheless, they may not have considered how they were then going to fulfill their need for closeness. Similarly, the person who experienced a happy marriage and whose spouse is now dead often feels guilty in considering a new relationship and so avoids its exploration. Perls *et al.*

(1951) pointed out that such avoidance exists for good reasons, and what is needed is to become aware of them. Despite feeling lonely, the bereaved spouse may stay blocked and unable to move forward due to what could be seen by family, friends, or others as a perceived betrayal of the bereaved. In not identifying the issue and working through it, possibilities for new relationships do not emerge.

Unfinished business can also exist in ongoing relationships. A fear of the breakdown of the relationship can prevent some individuals from expressing what is unfinished. Instead, they carry around this material and sap themselves of energy that could enhance the interaction. By continuing a less than complete relationship, they often accept what is less than fully satisfactory in their lives. Perls (1969b) stated that most people choose to avoid painful feelings rather than carry out what is necessary to change.

Unfinished business is particularly important where individuals grew up in cultural settings in which the expression of feelings was not socially acceptable. O'Leary and Nieuwstraten (1999) stated in this regard, "If the only socially acceptable way of expressing oneself is formal and impersonal, it is hard to attend to one's emotions" (p. 410).

Unfinished feelings are what Glasser (1985) viewed as long-term feeling behaviors. An example of a long-term unresolved feeling and its gradual diminishment is illustrated in the following example. Marcella recommended to her friend, Jane, to see a counselor, since Jane was experiencing difficulties in her current relationship. Subsequently, when Jane decided to marry, she did not invite Marcella to her wedding reception. Nevertheless, Marcella continued to be a friend of Jane's despite her feelings of hurt. Jane subsequently apologized and admitted to Marcella that she must feel very disappointed. Some time later, Jane's husband died in an accident, and Marcella supported Jane in her bereavement. Jane even told Marcella that only two of her friends had been there for her – Marcella and one other. Subsequently, Jane remarried and against all Marcella's expectations she was not invited to the second wedding. Marcella was deeply hurt and broke contact with Jane. Jane sent a Christmas card and tried to speak to Marcella in public places, but Marcella deflected interaction as much as possible. One day, as Marcella was walking down a street, she was admiring an extremely well-dressed woman in front of her accompanied by a little girl. Imagine her surprise as she went past them to find that it was Jane! A brief conversation ensued in which no reference was made to the wedding. However, Marcella noticed that she did not feel as hurt as before, although she did not wish to be as close to Jane as she formerly had been. In the situation, full resolution was never attained, since neither of the two people expressed to the other what either of them felt. However, the encounter on the street gave Marcella the opportunity of partly working through her unresolved hurt. Prior to this, she had expressed this hurt to her mother frequently, and thus worked through a considerable amount of it. As long as two people are alive, a possibility always exists of resolution or partial resolution of long-term feelings.

Perls (1972b) viewed resentments as the most common kind of unfinished business involving demands that have not been made explicit. Resentment involves the demand that the other person feels guilty. An interesting metaphor was coined

by Passons (1975), who referred to them as "the bulldogs of unexpressed feelings in terms of retaining their bite" (p. 18). Since the experienced anger or hurt was never expressed, the emotion grows into an enduring state of resentment. Both the resentful and the guilty were described as "clingers" by Perls *et al*. (1951). Guilt involves self-punishment, while resentment is transferring guilt onto another person. They are similar in that the situation remains inconclusive.

Just as many issues arising from interactions between individuals are not concluded, so too in groups. Although desiring to share positive or negative feelings, group members may keep such feelings to themselves through fear, shame, or embarrassment and leave the group with unfinished business. The resolution of such difficulties requires courage, since it involves dialogue in the "here and now." Hence, it is important that sufficient time should be allowed for issues to be resolved as far as possible.

Participation in a group environment can often awaken unfinished business. Schoenberg and Feder (2005) expressed it well when they stated, "The quantitative increase in present-centered interactions between group members offers a great chance to awaken some unresolved issues (unfinished business) in members and offers a correlating increase in opportunity to use group process to finish those historically incomplete figures" (p. 228). Although sharing the content of these feelings is important, it is the expression of them which brings completion to the unfinished situation.

Personal Responsibility

The introduction of personal responsibility as one of the key concepts of gestalt therapy reflected Perls' incorporation of an existential principle. Being responsible for oneself was highlighted by Perls (1971) as "responsibility" (p. 30) – the ability to respond – while Maples and Sieber (1999) referred to it as "response-able" (p. 243). According to Latner (1973), there are two ways to be responsible: we are responsible when "we are aware of what is happening to us" (p. 59) and when "we own up to our acts, impulses, and feelings" (p. 59).

At the outset of therapy, clients do not internalize feelings, emotions, and problems. They shift responsibility for their actions onto others, excuse their own behavior and are only aware of their own immediate needs. They let their past dominate, rather than assuming responsibility for the present (Perls, 1969b). By focusing on the past, they can excuse themselves from any responsibility in the present. They never allow themselves the opportunity to engage in new possibilities or to alter lifelong patterns. This attitude obstructs their development as responsible adults.

By becoming responsible for themselves, clients come to realize that they can do many things for themselves. Perls (1969b) overemphasized this lack of dependence on others probably due to his desire to stress the importance of personal responsibility. He also considered that individuals should not seek to live up to the expectations of others. Although self-responsibility was the focus for Perls (1969b), modern developments in gestalt therapy include consideration for others.

Being responsible for themselves is a sign of healthy adults. Yet many sabotage themselves in this process. An example is that of the twenty-five-year-old who still lives at home and leaves laundry, cooking, and car maintenance to be taken care of by parents while contributing nothing to the household either financially or by way of labor. Perls' (1969b) definition of maturation as the "transcendence from environmental to self-support" (p. 28) is particularly relevant in this respect.

In the group situation, a sense of responsibility involves assisting members to move from dependence on the facilitator and other participants so as to act from their own felt experiencing. It is only the individual member who can decide to change anything relating to himself/herself. Thus, change is closely connected to the development of self-support. Rather than seeing their lives as being outside of their control, group members begin to view themselves as having an input into it. The realization of the many choices that they have grows. Oftentimes, they experience, for the first time, a sense of what being adult really means. Outside of the group, they may lean on others for support of different kinds. These supports can be subtle and so anticipated that individuals do not see their own lack of responsibility. Gradually, participants move from environmental support to self-support. They realize that they cannot demand anything of others, but rather can make a request which others are free to respond to or not. In this manner, game playing is reduced or eliminated. For example, the girlfriend who is sorely disappointed that her birthday has been ignored by her boyfriend becomes aware that she could have been more proactive in reminding him of the event. The game of "If he loved me, he would have remembered" is thus avoided, as she comes to realize that many factors could have been at play in such behavior.

Process and Processing

Internal processing occurs through focusing inwards. Focusing, developed by Gendlin (1981), empowers clients to experience a "felt sense" (p. 77) of themselves. This activity can be hindered by unfinished business or demands from the environment. To engage in internal processing, attention has to be directed inwards.

Like the waves in Shakespeare's *Sonnet No. 60* (Wells and Taylor, 1992), each experience takes the place of that which went before. The more we process, the closer we get to our internal experiencing. Processing allows us to stay in the present moment and, by so doing, change occurs. Beisser (1972) referred to this phenomenon as the paradoxical theory of change, of which he stated, "change occurs when one becomes what one is, not when s/he tries to become what s/he is not" (p. 77). Rogers (1961) spoke of the flow of this process as happening when individuals experience themselves as received, welcomed, and understood as they are. Thus, the quality of the environment can assist or hinder this change process.

Processing in a group can be assisted through the use of questions to increase awareness. The facilitator can ask the following questions: What bodily sensations are you experiencing? What feelings are you aware of? What are your

thoughts right now? What actions are you engaging in? Through processing, clients are thus enabled to identify and express these different dimensions of their experiencing.

Processing is central to the possibility of change occurring along the awareness–action continuum. Before a behavior can be assimilated, it needs to be processed. Behaviors which are not processed absorb energy and time, while through processing necessary action occurs. Without action, the energy emerging from awareness and processing becomes locked in the body, since it lacks an outlet (Polster, 1995).

In the absence of processing, irrational assumptions and generalizations, which can account for certain faulty thinking patterns, cannot be identified. Take the case of James, a cardiac patient, who suffered from the belief "Nobody loves me." He was fearful and silent in the group, afraid to express himself, since he did not expect a positive response from any of the other group members. When the facilitator inquired how it was that he was silent, he responded that he did not trust the group. On the invitation of the facilitator to identify if there was anyone in the group whom he trusted, he looked around and identified Pat. The facilitator then invited him to tell Pat that he trusted him. When he did so, the facilitator checked how he felt. To James' surprise, he discovered that he really did trust Pat. On further exploration, it emerged that James had been brought up in an orphanage where he felt that nobody loved him. This vignette demonstrates how the processing of the behavior of silence led to the identification of the feeling of lack of trust, and then to that of trust in one person in the group. Processing of James' behavior allowed awareness of its origins to be established, resulting in a freedom from the generalization "Nobody loves me." His experience illustrates the important role processing plays in the life of the individual.

The processing involved in the development of authentic living was compared by Perls (1973) to the peeling of an onion. This gradual unfolding can be viewed through five layers of functioning: the cliché or phony, the role playing or phobic, the impasse, the implosive, and the explosive. While this is the sequence favored by the present author, it is important to point out that Perls placed implosion before impasse.

People use certain clichés to avoid communication with themselves or others; for example, "Good evening" or "It looks like rain today." Although these clichés do fulfill the role of establishing initial social contact, if they become a habitual pattern of the person they can stultify interaction.

In the role-playing or phobic layer, people use their roles rather than contacting their true selves; for example, the outstanding student, the perfect religious sister, the model president, the caring father, the loyal daughter, or the capable doctor. These roles emerge from pictures that individuals have of how they would like to be. Two difficulties arise. Individuals in the role-playing layer cannot tolerate deviation from the picture they have of themselves. Should anyone dare to question the picture, they will likely seek reassurance from others close to them and then reject the person who disagrees. They must protect their role at all costs. Such role playing originates from low self-esteem.

In the impasse, people stop playing roles as they glimpse the possibility of engaging in new behavior. However, such a possibility can fill them with fear and uncertainty as to what they should do. Thus, the monk who has never contemplated taking his habit off, even in temperatures of 40 °C, may come to the realization that he can be just as religious in a light sweater and pants. An old Irish proverb reinforces this position: "Ni hiad na headai a dheineann sagart," which translated means "The clothes do not make the priest." However, the disapproval which he may encounter may stop him from proceeding. He remains stuck, although he has glimpsed the new possibility. Thus, a feeling of not knowing what to do next and of being in a vacuum arises. Korb *et al.* (1989) held that the impasse occurs when clients do not work beyond a certain point. It is necessary to stay with the void in the impasse to ensure that progress takes place. According to Patterson (1973), the impasse lacks a basis in reality since individuals have the necessary resources to undertake the new behavior. The person in the impasse does not move forward through fear or catastrophic expectations.

Perls *et al.* (1951) held that, in the impasse, individuals give up using their own eyes and ears. They imagine what could go wrong if they engage in the glimpsed possibility. They cannot see how they can survive if they allow themselves to consider seriously this emerging possibility. Survival seems impossible to them without roles and games. A feeling of panic may begin as they doubt if they have the resources to survive in the new situation. Opposing feelings and thoughts emerge as individuals become aware of these contradictions. Authentic self-support arises gradually.

An example of the impasse and implosion layers is outlined in the following dialogue between Tony and Perls, where Tony is sitting in the chair besides Perls. Neither of them interacts for several minutes. Eventually, Perls addresses Dick, another group member.

PERLS: Dick, didn't you tell me Tony wanted to work on a dream?

TONY: (Haltingly) I recently had a dream in which … I had an opportunity to go abroad. I've never been out of New York. I'd never been to Europe … and I had an opportunity to go to Europe and I was going to fly from New York but I had to get a flight from my home in Ohio.

PERLS: Please tell it in the present tense.

TONY: OK, I've got to go to New York.

PERLS: What's your left foot doing?

TONY: Bracing against that little stool.

PERLS: Close your eyes and enter your body. Describe what you feel physically.

TONY: Fear … Physically, I'm warm. I'm breathing hard and my heart is pounding.

PERLS: What kind of voice do you use?

TONY: It's more sure than it actually is … It's affected.

PERLS: Well, you see it is clear that he is much too preoccupied with the stage fright to be ready to really work on the dream. We'll do some actual work first. Now, can you look at the audience? What do you experience there?

TONY: (Silently looking around the room) I … feel better. I experience … sort of a patience and I think they have a …

PERLS: Close your eyes and withdraw again. Any place you would like to go. Where would you go?

TONY: Do you mean in my body?

PERLS: Where you would feel more comfortable, away from us your body, your fantasy, I don't know, just go away.

TONY: I'm out on one of the rocks out in the ocean.

PERLS: Yeah, what are you doing there?

TONY: I'm looking back at Esalen, at the grounds.

PERLS: Yeah, are you all by yourself there?

TONY: Yeah.

PERLS: How does it feel to be by yourself?

TONY: Well, I feel secure in the fact that I am out here … and yet I feel incomplete in that I should be back on the grounds … encountering people.

PERLS: OK, open your eyes and encounter people.

TONY: (He pauses for a long time as he looks at the members of the group.)

PERLS: What do you experience?

TONY: Again I experience a patience and sort of a calm … and … a good feeling … a rapport.

PERLS: A good feeling. I see your right hand doing this. (Tony's right hand is clutching his right knee.) What does this mean? How do you experience this?

TONY: As tension.

PERLS: What kind of tension? May I interpret it? May I make a mistake? It looks to me like pushing away. Ok, now close your eyes again and withdraw into your dream. What do you see, feel and hear? I don't want a story, I just want to see what you encounter when you go into your dream.

TONY: Shame.

PERLS: Yeah, what are you ashamed of?

TONY: … Of not accomplishing … trivial little things.

PERLS: Such as …

TONY: I … up … I wasted just enough time so that I missed the airplane … and the opportunity to go to Europe. I …

PERLS: Have you ever been to Europe?

TONY: No.

PERLS: Keep your eyes closed. Go to Europe, whatever Europe means to you. Go to Europe. What happens? Take the plane. I don't let you miss the plane. I put you on the plane.

TONY: Uh, Up … new people. A lot of people I don't know and they don't know me … uh, fresh personalities that … I mean that … they're all in need.

PERLS: For this you have to go to Europe?

TONY: (Sighing) I don't know if that's my exact motivation … that's what I'm seeing when I get there. That's one of the first things I experience.

PERLS: Ok, now I put you back on the plane again. The plane lands in Monterey and I put you on a helicopter down to Esalen … you walk up to Fritz's room and open your eyes and what happens here? Open your eyes.

TONY: (Pausing for several minutes) I want to ask you what it is that you would imagine that I would imagine that I would do … I'm not … sort of what you would expect.

PERLS: Ok, produce a few expectations.

TONY: Sir?

PERLS: Produce a few expectations. (Tony sits in Perls' "empty chair" and they sit in silence for several minutes.) Please don't change your posture. What is your right hand and left hand doing? How are they relating to each other?

TONY: (Tony is pounding his right fist into his cupped left hand.) It's an encounter … tension.

PERLS: Can you sit here and keep the posture? (Perls motions for Tony to return to his seat which he does and cups his right hand in his left.) What does the right hand say and what does the left hand say?

TONY: The left hand is stopping the right hand from moving … but the right hand has a grip, or has a catch … is holding the left hand.

PERLS: Give them words, "I stop you," "I hold on to you." Make a Punch and Judy show out of it. Make it like two puppets talking to each other.

TONY: The left hand is saying, "Stop."

PERLS: Say it again.

TONY: Stop!

PERLS: Again.

TONY: Stop!

PERLS: Again.

TONY: Stop!

PERLS: Louder.

TONY: Stop!

PERLS: Louder.

TONY: Stop!

PERLS: What does the right hand say?

TONY: (He sits silently for several seconds.) The right hand isn't going anywhere but it doesn't care because …

PERLS: Now, say I don't care.

TONY: I don't care.

PERLS: Again.

TONY: … I don't care.

PERLS: Again.

TONY: I don't care.

PERLS: Again.

TONY: I don't care.

PERLS: Ok, now go into the dialogue.

TONY: … You must stop pushing … No I don't … Stop pushing immediately! (The film pauses at this moment to allow the camera to be reloaded. During this period, Tony completes the dialogue between the left and right hands, a conversation that ends in an impasse. Dr. Perls directs Tony's attention to the group. The film resumes.)

TONY: (Tony surveys the group quietly.) It isn't a fear, but I sense that other people are … sort of gaining an insight … possibly to me …

PERLS: Other people gain insight, but you don't. It's still there … other people.

TONY: Yeah … I'm starting to formulate something …

PERLS: I know, but don't force yourself. Well, there is one thing that I want to point out that you might have noticed. Tony is an example of the implosive layer. There's an implosion here. (Fritz illustrates this layer by re-enacting Tony's hand dialogue.)

This excerpt illustrates that Fritz did not view groups as safe and comfortable places; rather, his emphasis was on the development of the participant. The importance of being responsible for oneself is seen at the beginning of the dialogue when Fritz looked around the room and said to a group member, "Dick, did you say that Tony wanted to work?" Dick had been told by Tony that he wanted to work with Fritz. However, Fritz was not going to rescue him when Tony did not take the initiative in communicating his wish to Perls. Rather, he communicated with the message-giver, Dick. Through this indirect communication, Fritz was stressing the importance of self-responsibility, a necessary feature in attaining explosion and authentic living. He waited until Tony became responsible for the implementation of his own wish.

The impasse is evident in Tony's work with his right and left hands. He states that the left hand is stopping the right hand from moving while the right hand has a grip on the left hand.

In the implosive layer, clients feel paralyzed as two equally strong opposing forces battle within the person. Clients may have become aware of how playing roles has hindered them in their past; they can see dimly the changes that would free them to develop themselves further but are fearful of the movement away from what they consider to be a secure way to live. They come to a realization of how they have limited themselves in the past with an accompanying sense of regret. They do not wish to continue in this way, but a sense of anxiety or fear prevents them from moving forward. Speaking of implosion, Clarkson and Mackewn (1993) stated, "We pull ourselves together, we contract our muscles, and we implode. We believe that if we were to explore, we would not survive or be loved anymore" (p. 79).

In the explosive layer, a new release of energy occurs as awareness develops of the "AHA" moment (Korb *et al.*, 1989). O'Leary (1996) stated that explosion occurs when the scales fall from the eyes of the client.

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