

Contact and the "Modifications to Contact"

1. Contact.

As living organisms it is necessary for us to exist in an environment where it is possible to have our needs met. The meeting of needs sustains life and promotes health, growth and well being. Although there are a wide variety of different needs to be met - from basic needs for food, water, air and so forth right through to complex needs for love, beauty, intellectual stimulation, sense of purpose etcetera - the process of meeting them is always essentially the same i.e. that there is an interchange of physical and/or psychological material between the (human) organism and its environment. This process is known in Gestalt as contact and is one of the fundamental points of interest to Gestalt therapists.

Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1.1951/1969,"Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality", New York: Julian Press) define contact thus:-

"Contacting is, in general, the growing of the organism. By contacting we mean food-getting and eating, loving and making love, aggressing, conflicting, communicating, perceiving, learning, locomotion, technique, and in general every function that primarily considered as occurring at the boundary in an organism/environment field."

Erving and Miriam Polster(2. 1973, "Gestalt Therapy Integrated", Vintage Books) talk of contact between people - often of primary interest in Gestalt - and provide this description:-

"Contact is not just togetherness or joining. It can only happen between separate beings, always requiring independence and always risking capture in the union. At the moment of union, one's fullest sense of himself as a person is swept along into a new creation. I am no longer only me, but me and thee make we. Although me and thee become we in name only, through this naming we gamble with the dissolution of either me or thee. Unless I am experienced in knowing full

contact, when I meet you full-eyed, full-bodied and full-minded, you may become irresistible and engulfing. In contacting you, I wager my independent existence, but only through the contact function can the realisation of our identities fully develop."

Clarkson (3. 1989, "Gestalt Counselling in Action", Sage Publications) talks of how contact has qualitative aspects that are not reducible to individual components:-

"Our sensory and motor functions (seeing, hearing, feeling, moving, touching) are potentially the functions through which contact is made. It is important to remember that just as the whole is more than merely a sum of its parts, contact is more than the sum of all the possible functions that may go into it. Seeing and hearing are no guarantee of good contact, it is rather *how* one sees or hears that determines good contact. Contact can be made with objects or aspects of nature as well as with animals or people, with memories, images, aspects of oneself. It is the quality of contact that makes the difference between the sun going down and the rich, vivid and full experiencing of a piercingly multi-flamed sunset."

In summary, contact between the organism and its environment and particularly between one person and another is a fundamental and important part of the human condition and Gestalt as a psychotherapy is concerned with the quantity and quality of such contact.

2. The Process of Contacting as a Cycle

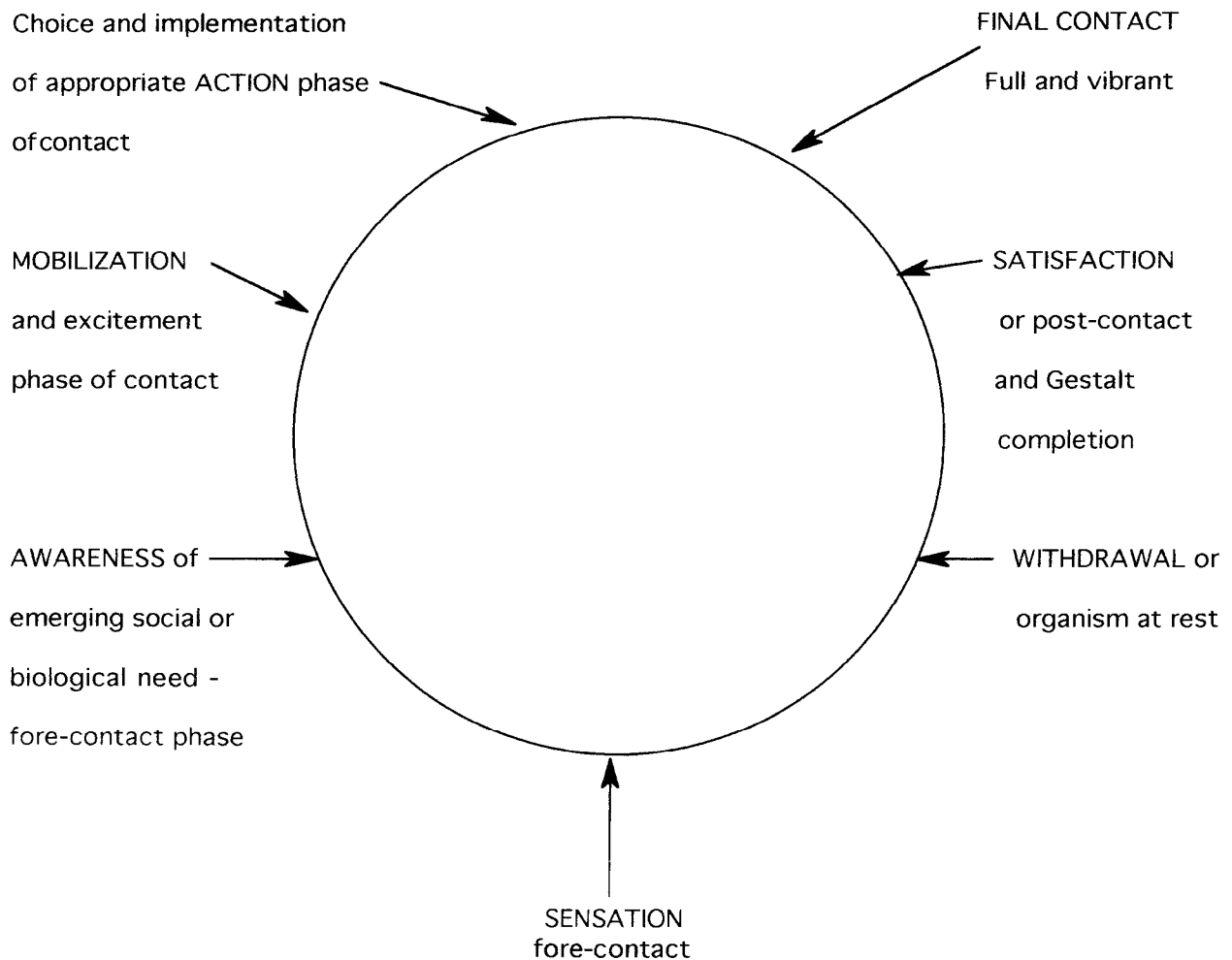
It can now be seen that, in the Gestalt view, we live in certain environments and interact with those environments by a process of *contact* or *contacting*. I will now look in detail at the actual nature of that process, which may be described, for the purpose of explanation, as having a cyclical form. This cycle often appears in Gestalt literature in a variety of different forms and a variety of different names but the basic idea is always the same i.e. that the contact process is one of sensing and becoming aware of needs, arousal, appropriate action, satisfaction and

withdrawal. The prototype of this cycle appeared under the name "instinct cycle" in "Ego, Hunger and Aggression" (4. Perls, 1947/1969, Vintage Books) where he names the stages of the cycle as "fore-contact, contacting, final contact and post-contact". He says (p374) "The present is a passage out of the past and towards the future, and these are the stages of an act of self as it contacts the actuality".

Clarkson (5. 1989, "Gestalt Counselling in Action", Sage Publications) says:-

"Conceptually, the *sequence of moments* in the shift between figure and ground constitutes the so-called 'cycle of experience' or the Gestalt formation and destruction cycle" and "The *process* of a figure/ground shift may occur slowly over a few years of training, as for example the need to qualify as a medical doctor. It may also occur in a matter of seconds as in the sudden 'aha' experience when a client suddenly integrates a new insight, such as a fundamental similarity between what he needed from his mother and what he continues to need from his wife. Such an insight may completely alter the relationship between past and future, expectation and understanding, figure and ground."

Clarkson then goes on to diagram the cycle in a seven-stage form, thus:-



In summary, we can see that the contact cycle can be thought of as having different stages. Different theorists ascribe different numbers of stages along the cycle but in reality there are not separate, discrete stages because if this were the case, the healthy interaction of the organism with the environment would probably have a much more spasmodic quality and this is observably not the case. Joseph Zinker (6. 1977/8, "Creative Process in gestalt Therapy", Vintage Books) supports this view; "This movement from sensation to contact to withdrawal and back to sensation is typical of every organism. In its healthy state, the cycle is smooth, uninterrupted and graceful."

3. Overview of the Modifications or "Interruptions" to Contact.

In the previous section, I have considered the cyclical contacting process as it occurs in the case of a healthy organism i.e. flowing naturally between full contact and withdrawal without

impedance. In this section, I will consider what happens if this process is interrupted either acutely or chronically and what the implications of this are for the health of the organism. Interruptions can occur at any point on the cycle and can either be generated within the organism or be due to inadequacies of the environment. When a cycle is interrupted, it does not disappear or cease to exist in any way, rather it becomes lodged in the organism in the form of "unfinished business" and has a contaminating effect on the "here and now" of the organism. For example, as a child Paula's mother might have been too distracted by her own problems to cuddle her when she was upset about something. This need would not go away; rather it would stay in Paula either in or out of her awareness until such time as it could be met. If this process of her environment letting her down is repeated many times, she will learn that sometimes in life she will not be able to expect her environment to immediately meet her needs. To an extent this is inevitable and is probably no bad thing as it can enable her to live socially with others through the ability to defer her gratifications. If the process were repeated too many times, the number of unfinished cycles in her would start to have a serious effect on her mental, emotional, spiritual and even physical health and the compromises she had to make in order to tolerate this environmental inadequacy would become a deeply ingrained part of her way of being. The compromises I mention are recognised in Gestalt as coming in (arguably) seven different types. Clarkson (1989, "Gestalt Counselling in Action", Sage Publications) has this to say:- "According to Gestalt theory, there are several psychological mechanisms by means of which we maintain in the present unfinished situations from the past, deprive ourselves of the fulfilment of our needs and impede good contact with ourselves, others and the environment. These are sometimes referred to as boundary disturbances since they can be seen as fixations which interfere with healthy functioning of the creative self at the organism/environment boundary. In Gestalt these are also viewed as self regulating acts, and include defensive functions. It is vital to emphasise a process orientation based on the dynamic interaction of organism and environment since this enhances the possibility of change. Any or all of the boundary disturbances discussed here may interfere specifically at the final contact phase of the awareness cycle. However any of them may permeate any or all of the stages of the whole

process."

She then goes on to name the seven main disturbances:-

"Perls (Perls et al. 1951/1969) specifically focussed on confluence, introjection, projection and retroflection as the most prevalent means of interrupting contact: Goodman (Perls et al. 1951/1969) also used egotism and the Polsters (Polster and Polster. 1974) added deflection. Desensitisation (Perls 1969b) is also occasionally used."

In summary, poor health can be seen as acute or chronic interruptions in the flow of the cycle at any of its stages and by the "interruptions to contact" or "boundary disturbances" and the aim of Therapy can be seen as the clearing of these unfinished cycles from within the client. It is important to note however that, in the examples used, the modifications to contact of the child are necessary, creative adjustments in response to an inadequate environment. These reactions can only be seen as unhealthy when they are used without awareness or by habit rather than as appropriate responses to the here-and-now environment.

As has been said, the Gestalt view of psychology is that it is the study of the *total* relationship between the organism and its environment. The vehicle of that relationship is the process of contact across the contact-boundary. The contact process is cyclical in nature and can be interrupted or modified either by the environment or from within.

In the next sessions, we will go on to consider each of the seven mechanisms by activity learning and consideration of the hypothetical client Paula.

4. The Modifications to Contact.

i. CONFLUENCE.

This is where the contact boundary is too permeable causing a lack of differentiation between organism and environment - a quality of sameness. This manifested in Paula in that she would seldom disagree with me and seemed to want to keep things pleasant. The result was a cosy feel to our sessions which I sometimes enjoyed, sometimes felt suspicious of and sometimes felt stifled by.

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE.

In twos / threes, take 5 minutes to talk to each other about.....
but try to have the *same* thoughts and feelings i.e. *do not differ*. Be as polite and pleasant as possible. Having done this, take 10 minutes to debrief and discuss your responses to the exercise with your partner(s). You may use the rest of the sheet to make any notes that you wish to.

ii. INTROJECTION.

Clarkson (1989, "Gestalt Counselling in Action", Sage Publications) sums this up as "Being Ruled by Internalised 'Shoulds'". Material from the environment is taken in to the organism in an unassimilated form. A physical equivalent of this is swallowing a morsel of food without chewing so that it lodges in the stomach in an undigested form.

Paula had displayed several such rules in her life, some of which were contradictory. For example, she had to make her parents proud of her but was not allowed to be *too clever* - apparently due to her parents feelings of jealousy. Not surprisingly, she was clever at school up to 'O' level standard but then discontinued her studies.

The introjects come from "authority figures" that we meet in our lives. These figures give us "should" and "ought" messages about many things, for example:

How and what to *be*.

What to *do* and how to do it.

What and how to think and feel.

Who we should be.

What skills to have or not have.

What is appropriate and non-appropriate behaviour for the gender we are.

What form our sexuality should take.

How we should treat children.

Where and when certain things do or do not apply.

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE.

In 2s or 3s take 20 minutes to discuss what introjects you have been given.

iii. PROJECTION.

In a sense, this is the opposite of introjection. In projection, material from *within* the organism is experienced as being *outside*, in the environment. This was evident in Paula in the way she would sometimes see me as, for example, judgemental or disapproving. Clearly I do have the capacity for such behaviours but Paula would see them in me when they were far from my experience. In imagining such things in me, she would then react with fear, anxiety, guilt or shame and so treated me with a degree of caution. On other occasions, she would endow me with more "positive" qualities such as the power or self assertion or of lovingness while failing to be aware of these qualities in herself.

Fritz Perls believed that the "elements" of our dreams are projected parts of ourselves and that by identifying what qualities these elements represent for us, we could derive clues as to what qualities of *ourselves* we might be keeping out of awareness. The same may well apply to our waking fantasies or to our perceptions of objects and people in our environments.

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES,

Take a few minutes to identify the qualities of an interesting or pleasant object or person in either your waking life, fantasy life or dream life. Consider whether these qualities could apply to you. What do you experience if you say "As... (the object or person)... I am... "or "...I think..." or "...I feel... " or "...I can..."?

iv. RETROFLECTION. This means "to turn back sharply". The impulse to act emerging from the organism is blocked and contained within. Paula had reported - and I had observed in her - many of the experiences that are often associated with retroflection such as tension, shallow breathing, lack of energy, depression, fatigue and so on. The arresting and / or turning back of impulses not only traps the energy of that impulse but requires energy to be consumed in itself.

On occasions where Paula allowed herself to express retroflected impulses, thereby gaining some satisfaction for the unmet need, she would experience a considerable increase in her energy and mood.

v. DESENSITISATION. In desensitisation, the organism deadens feelings and needs are consequently neglected or diluted. This was probably the process producing Paula's passive silences. If in such a silence I would ask her to notice and report her immediate experience, she would have great difficulty in doing so.

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE.

Allow yourself to sense what is happening in your body. Consider your *whole* body if you can - from the tips of your toes and fingers, through your centre to the top of your scalp. What sensations are there? Tension or stiffness? Soreness or aches? Tingling or streaming? Coldness or heat? Any other sensations? Also - is there anywhere in your body with a noticeable *lack* of sensation i.e. a "sensation" of numbness? Now focus on which of these sensations is the most noticeable i.e. that is "figure" (foreground as opposed to background) for you.

Now consider what might be the significance of this sensation for you. What thoughts, feelings, images, memories, etc. might be connected to this sensation? It is *your* sensation and only you can decide what it means. Consider whether this might represent a want or need. Is there something you need to actively *do* at this time in your life?

vi. EGOTISM.

Egotism is a form of detachment from one's own experiences, where the ego seems to observe the experiences of the rest of the person without affect - as if they were the experiences of an unknown stranger. It was apparent in Paula's tendency to "talk about" and intellectualise about her own self in our sessions, e.g. "you learn to protect yourself in relationships" rather than "I am protecting myself".

vii. DEFLECTION.

This is where behaviour does not match what is actually happening in the environment and has the effect of reducing the power of contact - of softening its impact - and actions and reactions do not reach the appropriate target. Similar to egotism, I often detected this process in Paula's use of language e.g. in the way she would talk in generalities. Clarkson (1989; Gestalt Counselling in Action, London: SAGE Publications) says graphically that deflection is "... to turn aside from direct contact with another person".

EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE.

In pairs or small groups, start a conversation about

Now modify the conversation in the following ways:

Firstly, do not make eye contact.

Now refrain from making any personal statements - talk about "it" or "you" rather than "I".

Now talk only in abstractions e.g. thoughts, technical and intellectual concepts, jargon, etc.

Now react to your partners by saying "yes, but..." i.e. contradict and invalidate their words.

Now ask questions but at the same time avoid *answering* any questions.

Now concentrate on changing the subject.

Now stare intently at the others.

5. More on Retroreflection and Introjection.

Gestalt is a psychology that concentrates on the nature of *contact* between (human) organisms and their environments. Contact can be seen as the process of meeting needs in order to sustain and promote life, health and growth. Ill health can be seen as chronic or acute interruptions to this process – the "interruptions to contact". Retroreflection is one of these interruptions in which an impulse to act is turned back and contained within the organism instead of making an impact on the outside world – the environment. As with the other interruptions, retroreflection develops in the personality at an early age as a "creative adjustment" that enables the child to cope with the frustrations of the environment. Retroreflection typically manifests in our clients as muscular and skeletal rigidities representing unexpressed or unacknowledged emotions. Clients may have learned early in life that expressing certain emotions leads to frustration and/or punishment and so habitually repress or suppress them. For example, suicidal impulses may be seen as retroreflections of anger originally intended for another person.

Retroreflection - as with all the other interruptions - serves to maintain the *introjections*. By introjecting, I make a part of me that which is *not-me*. In the above example, the introject in question might be "anger is bad". Introjects are usually material that are incompatible with the healthy functioning of the organism. If they *were* compatible, the organism would assimilate them without problems just as healthy, nourishing food is digested without problems.

The Ego and the Super-Ego.

The ego is not always in tune with the healthy needs of the organismic self. For example, where the body might function to meet natural needs without interruption, the ego can intervene and delay or block the meeting of needs. This is also true of the introjections (the Gestalt term for Superego) and can be seen to reduce a person's healthy functioning. The following are some typical examples:

BEHAVIOUR MANIFESTED	POSSIBLE UNDERLYING INTROJECT
Impatience.....	"It is not OK to take your time"
Greed.....	"You must grab all you can"
Unreasonable disgust.....	"It's dirty" (e.g. a body function)
Compulsive dieting.....	"It is bad to be fat"
Unassertiveness.....	"Others are better than you"

Therapeutic Tasks for Introjects.

The client needs to develop a clear sense of self i.e. to separate me from not me. Becoming aware of which of our beliefs are actual decisions we have made and which are ones we have been forced to swallow gives us the option "spitting out" unhelpful material and/or "digesting" that which is wholesome. One of the best known techniques of Gestalt is "two-chair work" where the client acts the part of self while sitting in one place then switches to another seat and experiments with being someone else in their life. This does help to increase self-awareness but may not work if there is insufficient trust of the therapist.

Defences.

It can be said that all of the interruptions (defences) serve to avoid anxiety. The Gestalt therapist does *not* force clients out of defences as they are an essential part of the psyche. Forced removal of defences creates a "vacuum" in the psyche which can be filled with something unhealthy (e.g. binge eating or drinking) or in extreme cases can cause the whole structure to collapse. Attacks on the defences are considered abusive in Gestalt.

Paralysed Breathing.

This is probably the most common form of retroflection. Without adequate Oxygen, our senses are less able to tell us what we are experiencing and our motor functions are less able to express that experience. Fritz Perls often spoke of "stage fright", meaning that process by which

we turn our energies into anxieties by stiffening the musculature. A Gestalt intervention for paralysis of the breathing would typically involve drawing attention to it and may also include an invitation to breathe more fully to facilitate organismic support.

Incongruity.

Retroreflections often show up as incongruities, for example between verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Cathartic work is an option in Gestalt but it is important to bear in mind that catharsis is only *part* of therapy. Gestalt therapy works mainly by externalising memories in order to find ways of satisfying unmet needs - this may or may not involve catharsis.