

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Gestalt Theory and Sexuality¹

Introduction

The topic of ‘sexuality’ appears in Gestalt theory literature in a general form, e.g. in Wertheimer (1940) and later Metzger (1970) in the context of the critical examination of psychoanalysis and its conception of the drive. Duncker’s important work “On Pleasure, Emotion and Striving” (1941) can be read as a basic text on the subject of ‘sexuality’, but does not explicitly touch the topic. Kurt Lewin deals with sexuality as part of his analysis of needs, for example by emphasising the rhythmic nature of hunger and sex as well as the danger of feelings of disgust when oversatiated (1928). From a more praxeological perspective, he devotes a short paragraph to the topic in his 1940 essay („Der Hintergrund von Ehekonflikten“), but remains general in his allusions.

The somewhat neglected treatment of the topic is remarkable insofar as ‘sexuality’ touches on the interface between body and soul like hardly any other topic and thus raises questions about the connection between cultural imprinting and biological determination. Kurt Goldstein has expressed himself most clearly on the subject, not only by taking a critical stance on the rejection of instinct, but also by emphasising the possible positive effect of tension and making the connection to his central concept of ‘self-realization’: „The tension-release theory (as, e.g., in the form of Freud’s) knows only the urge to release, not the pleasure of tension, which is not only at the basis of all creative activity, but also an essential part of the pleasure corresponding to all so-called lower needs, as hunger, sex, etc. Certainly, I do not want to deny that there are also normal conditions in which the need for rest and release of tension is in the foreground. Also, normal life is full of catastrophes, and we can fulfill our goals only if we have intercessions of rest and release of tension. But how much we submit to these needs, is determined by their significance for self-realization of the total organism. If they come to the fore as all-determining forces, then there is something wrong with the total organism, with the personality” (Goldstein, 1947, p. 415).

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More recently, Bischof (2014), with a clearly critical-realist stance on the one hand and a biological perspective on the other, has attempted to find further answers, e.g. to the question of how homosexuality can be reconciled with selection theory assumptions.

Nevertheless, given the importance of the topic, there is room for conjecture as to why the literature on Gestalt theory has not dealt more intensively with sexuality. Until the beginning of the 20th century, sexuality in general was not a topic for serious science, but was treated almost exclusively under the heading of 'morality and ethics', e.g. also by Christian v. Ehrenfels (see Böhm, 2022), who was told by his long-time pen friend Sigmund Freud that he was a 'silent supporter' of his sexual reforms (Waldvogel, 1997). However, Freud's emphasis on the role of sexuality was in turn criticised by Gestalt theorists. The reaction to Sigmund Freud's emphasis on sexuality in his drive, development and personality theory was proportionally strong. In Gestalt theory, too, this attribution of a general key role to sexuality met with rejection – not out of prudery, but because Freud's entire drive theory was criticised as misguided. It may therefore also have been a kind of counter-reaction to the overemphasis on the role of sexuality that so little was researched and written about sexuality on the Gestalt theory side for so long.

In the following, an attempt will be made to apply central Gestalt theoretical concepts to the topic of 'sexuality' and thereby come to conclusions that can be helpful, especially from a psychotherapeutic perspective.

Wertheimer, in one of his rare comments on the topic, weighs the question of culture and biology/physiology as follows:

"Sexual behavior is social behavior and social relationships matter more than physiology in sexual behavior. [...] To understand the subjects' behavior it is necessary to study the place, role, and function of a person's sexual act in the structure of the social situation in which it occurs and to find out also how the participants view the situation and each other's role in it." (Max Wertheimer, 1938, quoted by Abraham S. Luchins & Edith H. Luchins, 1978: *Revisiting Wertheimer's Seminars*).²

Wertheimer's general perspective for understanding human behaviour is 'from the top down', including the area of sexuality. How a person lives and experiences their sexuality depends on their overall life situation and can only be understood in this way. Wertheimer attaches more importance to social factors than to physiology, which also means that the latter is not without significance. Physiological factors

² 1938/1967: Max Wertheimer / Abraham S. Luchins & Edith H. Luchins: *Social Dominance, Sex Deviates, and Morality*. Seminar Report 52 from *Revisiting Wertheimer's Seminars*. Lewisburg: Bucknell. [In this seminar, Abraham Maslow presents his studies on the relationship between sexual and dominance behaviour as a guest in Wertheimer's seminar; Wertheimer comments on and questions various hypotheses about sexual behaviour, extensive discussion with and among the students].

play a role, regardless of whether or not the concept of drives – as in psychoanalysis – is given a high priority. Sexuality is also dependent on the body and physical developments in interaction with psychological events, everything in turn is embedded in a specific culture, which in turn has a significant influence. This could be summarised in a certain arbitrariness in the anaemic, unfortunately very common formula of sexuality as a bio-psycho-social event. If you don't want to be satisfied with this, you can ask more specifically 'So what is sexuality?', as the sexologist Sigusch does. He then immediately relativises: 'The fact that sexuality, which is separate from procreation, is a luxury of the good life, becomes apparent in life crises and when life is threatened, when bare existence is at stake. Then the sexual disappears as an attraction and feeling, proving to be dispensable. It is also a modern fairy tale that life is poor and boring without sexual activity. The opposite has been proven millions of times, and not only in other cultures. Sexual actions and physical touch are not required to create closeness with a person' (2023, p. 207; transl. Th. F.).

In principle, I agree; nevertheless, sexuality *can* contribute to the liveliness and intensification of a relationship and a messed up sexuality *can* mean psychological suffering. In this respect, the question remains important – especially from a therapeutic perspective – under which conditions sexuality is experienced as enriching or not.

What an explicitly Gestalt-theoretical perspective can contribute to the understanding of sexuality will be indicated by the following selected topics:

- Sex and relationship/attachment
- Biology vs. psychology
- The body in sex
- State of consciousness and sex.

Sex and relationship/attachment

From a critical-realist perspective, it is important to ask what part of the overall process sexual experience and behaviour represents, especially depending on age³ and gender, social, cultural and historical affiliation. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that sexuality can remain without any effect on a relationship. Incidentally, this is already true of masturbation, as Woody Allen recognised: 'Don't knock masturbation, it's sex with someone I love'⁴.

Even if one could critically object that masturbation also works when I am at war with myself and it applies in general (see below): The arousal does not come – as the quote implies – from the self-relationship (except perhaps with narcissists), but

³ In relation to the entire lifespan – infancy to old age – sexual experience and behaviour change dynamically, depending on physical and mental development and cultural and social influences.

⁴ Quote from the film „Annie Hall“ (1977).

from fantasy. In this respect, masturbation is usually a relationship between the person masturbating and an imagined person. This will have different consequences depending on whether the imagined person is a pure fantasy being or a concretely existing person. If my English teacher keeps appearing in my erotic student fantasy, this will have an effect on my relationship with her, even if I have never physically touched her. Or in the therapeutic field: erotic fantasies between therapists and patients are significant for the relationship as a whole and require special attention and possibly targeted reflection through training and supervision.

This means that every sexual act in real contact between two or more people, be it of a mimic, verbal or tactile nature, is a (co-)determining part of the relationship. This is valid for (supposedly harmless) flirting just as much as to a “one-night stand”, even if both parties emphasise that it is “only” about sex and nothing else. The same applies between the sex worker and the client: the relationship begins with the purchase of the commodity “sex”, which is not for free. (Incidentally, the same applies to the commodity “therapeutic attention”.) In this respect, the relationship does not begin with the sexual act and does not end there either. A young patient who regularly makes use of sex workers reports in the therapy session about his “favourite prostitute”, who was very attentive and empathetic towards him; authenticity and empathy are experienced and have an effect, regardless of the “purchased nature” of the relationship: this applies to purchased sex as well as to psychotherapy.

Such examples prove that sexuality can, in principle, never be separated from a relationship. From a critical realist perspective, we can also speak of a relationship event if the sexual fantasy takes place in the phenomenal world of a person without another person knowing about it or a physical encounter having taken place (see Fuchs/Stemberger, 2018).

In the following, however, the more difficult question of *how* sexuality and relationship/attachment are connected will be explored in a narrower sense. Even the supposedly obvious connection, namely that a functioning partnership requires or results in satisfying sex and, conversely, that a fragile relationship must be sexually problematic, is not true – at least not in this simplified form. Rather, all possible combinations are conceivable.

Nevertheless, there is much to be said in favour of the thesis that there are describable connections between the relationship and the sexuality that takes place within this relationship.

Successful romantic relationships⁵ are generally based on the realisation of describable conditions: in addition to obvious aspects such as loving and respectful

⁵ In psychotherapeutic practice, it is still the classic couple relationship, whether same-sex or opposite-sex. More recently we see also polyamorous relationships, i.e. where a person lives their love with two or more partners.

interaction, openness, transparency, tolerance and the willingness to stand up for relationship issues, etc., it is above all an awareness of one's own individual characteristics and those of the other. This enables processes of mutual adaptation on the one hand and an awareness of the necessary autonomous areas of the partners involved on the other. The question of how both partners behave in the event of conflict is also crucial for the development of a long-lasting relationship. If conflicts escalate easily, the relationship becomes strained and more fragile; if the parties involved have an interest in understanding conflicts and their backgrounds and therefore also behave empathetically in the event of conflict, this will strengthen the bond in the long term and contribute to further development. It is hardly imaginable that all of these aspects are not also linked to successful or unsuccessful sexuality. Nevertheless, here too, the connection is not clear. There are always examples of stable and obviously loving relationships in which sexuality is unsuccessful or remains difficult or in which sexuality is completely dispensed with (which is also an option) and vice versa: fragile relationships in which, for example, there is a lot of ineffective arguing, which constantly threaten to break up, but in which a pleasurable and lively sexuality is realised.

Sex and aggression

This latter variant refers to a connection between sexuality and aggression, in particular thinkable here as a kind of “tipping point” that is achieved by changing the frame of reference: Conflicts may be distancing, but the concrete dispute generates closeness, a quasi-aggressively charged intimacy and liveliness. If this intimacy and liveliness comes into contact with erotic instead of aggressive references (on the question of the frame of reference, see below), the event “tips over” from an aggressive to an erotic encounter. The aggression is discharged in the sexual act. (This can be consensual, but violent acts are also conceivable here, which are then unilaterally sexualised). In the consensual case, this would be an example of how sexuality and aggression⁶ can “stabilise” an essentially fragile relationship.

What about the supposed “normal case” (as a counter-model to the “aggressive” variant above): the loving and tender affection of two people, which then

⁶ In these examples, ‘aggression’ has a destructive, violent form. In terms of gestalt theory, this is merely an extreme variant. If we look at the psychological situation of the so-called ‘aggressive’ person in Lewin’s sense, then we can describe it as follows: This person is in a state of tension that arises from the fact that there is a target in his or her psychological environment that has a strong challenging character, a so-called positive valence. The valence of the goal is related to a need of the person, which Lewin refers to as a tension system. This results in the development of a force that leads to a movement, a so-called locomotion in the direction of the target (positive valence). Understood dynamically in this way, aggression is nothing other than the movement towards something, caused by the demanding character of a thing or a goal that someone wants to achieve’ (Sommer 2019, 9; transl. Th. F). The ‘first step at the beginning of a love relationship is ‘aggressive’ according to this expanded understanding, and even the most tender version of ‘vanilla-sex’ contains aggressive elements.

eventually turns into sexual activity? Here, too, a necessary transition can be marked, namely from closeness and tenderness (needs for tender touch, support, closeness, security are in the foreground) to sex (needs for pleasure and arousal are in the foreground). The ego involved (in critical realist terminology) changes the frame of reference (see below). However, this does not happen “automatically”: if sexual acts occur between two (or more) people, consensuality is desired (morally and possibly legally). What sounds simple and obvious at first glance turns out to be more complicated on closer inspection. What exactly happens when people decide to have sex with each other? In the supposedly simple case, the participants decide to engage in sexual activity together and consensually, but this does not rule out the possibility of conflicts arising later on. The following should apply here: Couples who also have a functioning culture of conflict in other areas of life can then always re-establish consensuality. On the other hand, it is possible that couples can argue well about financial or political issues, but are speechless when it comes to the shameful topic of sexuality.

Sex and power fields

However, it is also often the case that one person wants to persuade, seduce or win over another for sex. Countless constellations are conceivable here – depending on the people involved and their personalities, role and power relationships, cultural influences, etc. Lewin’s concept of the field of power seems to be helpful in understanding this: “In using concepts like attack, defence, aggression, friendship, one has to be aware of the different dimensions of the concepts power field, force field, force and behavior” (Lewin 1944 in Lewin 1951, p. 40). Sexuality can also be categorised in this conceptual dimensionality.

‘Field of power’ in Lewin’s sense does not merely mean that someone powerful asserts himself against someone with less power as soon as the latter comes into the field of power⁷ of the stronger; rather, there are also various possibilities here. A fundamental distinction is the following: ‘Psychologically, of course, it makes a big difference whether the induced forces are opposed to the forces based on one’s own needs or are aligned or at least compatible with them: If someone expects something from me that I also want from my own actions, this can strengthen my aspirations; the situation is quite different if someone expects or demands something from me that runs completely counter to my own aspirations – in this case, a conflict with different developmental possibilities will arise’ (Stemberger, 2016, p. 23; transl. Th. F.). It is also important to note that

⁷ “Power does not have the same dimension as psychological force. That the power of A is greater than the power of B does not imply that A actually exerts pressure on B. The concept of power refers to a ‘possibility of inducing forces of a certain magnitude on another person’. The concept of power field, therefore, does not have the same conceptual dimension as that of a force field” (Lewin 1944 in Lewin 1951, p. 40).

it is not always about concrete pressure that is actually exerted. Rather, 'field of power' already refers to the *possibility* of inducing forces in another person. In the area of 'sexuality', this applies in particular to the variant of inducing an inner change of state in another person via the field of power, specifically the possibility of inducing sexual desire in another person, for example. Of course, variants are also possible where it is not lust but other aspirations (e.g. needs for recognition, importance, having a secure attachment, etc.) that are induced in the other person, which can then lead to engaging in sexual acts. This is particularly important and can be tricky where people come together in different roles and power relationships and are therefore in certain states of dependency (adults and children/teachers and pupils/superiors and subordinates/doctors or therapists and patients).

Sex and dependency

For many people, the term dependency has a negative connotation. However, it must be understood as an indispensable part of every relationship. People are existentially dependent on each other. More specifically, this is reflected in the assumption that we must constantly balance the conflict between the need for dependency on the one hand and the desire for autonomy on the other throughout our lives⁸. This is not just a 'private', internal psychological process. The dependency relationships just mentioned as examples are the concrete social and societal 'arenas' in which this conflict is played out. Whether those involved (especially those in the more powerful position) behave responsibly or not will always be determined by 'atmospheric' influences in the group or society as a whole (see below for the significance of the 'atmospheric' according to Lewin). A patriarchal atmosphere, for example, fosters the danger that sexuality will have an abusive, exploitative and violent effect in these relationships. From the perspective of depth psychology and developmental history, existential early childhood dependency leads to the desire to merge. With regard to the therapeutic relationship, Trombini states: 'Here, on the one hand, the patient directly asks for help on his path to further development and progress. At the same time, however, he can also show rather intense expectations of merging, which are connected with nostalgic needs in relation to the primary relationship' (1995/2023, p. 37; transl. Th. F.). If these expectations are met with an unreflected, needy and therefore dependent (sic!) therapeutic attitude, this can lead to very damaging and entangled relationship structures. The actual relationship can be characterised by different fantasies on both sides, including erotic and sexual ones. The tendency to 'act out' these fantasies increases.

⁸ In terms of the *Operationalized Psychodynamic Diagnosis* (OPD) this is the conflict between individuation and dependency.

It should become clear that sexuality, like all social behaviour, can only be understood if it is embedded in a comprehensive understanding of all the forces that regulate a relationship. The variants described above (aggressive vs. affectionate) are examples of countless other variants or styles. Every person develops their own sexual preferences or aversions in the course of their life⁹, which either complement each other happily or have to be negotiated when meeting another person. In the worst case, one partner asserts 'their' sexuality powerfully (or even violently) and the other partner submits and puts up with it. In this respect, it can be said as a first approximation that roles and power relationships that determine the relationship as a whole will also have an influence on the couple's sexuality.

Biology vs. psychology

The above quote from Wertheimer emphasises sexuality as a social event from a strictly phenomenological perspective, which does not mean that physiological factors are irrelevant. A radical constructivist position should be distinguished from this, which claims that sexuality essentially takes place 'in the mind'. This means that sexuality initially has something to do with thinking, wanting, desiring – in the broadest sense, the mind – and that the body is 'only used' for this, so to speak.

The opposite of this would be a materialistic position: the spontaneous morning erection ('morning wood') that men are familiar with is understood as somehow a purely physiological phenomenon (which could then result in sexual motivation). This 'physiologicistic' approach – taken to its logical conclusion – means that sexuality is a biological, 'natural' drive that serves to preserve the species – anything spiritual is then at best an epiphenomenon.

In John Irving's novel 'The world according to Garp', Garp's mother becomes pregnant after, as a nurse in a military hospital, she 'exploits' the recurring erections of a soldier in a coma. One could have the idea that this is 'organic', purely mechanical sex on the part of the comatose soldier, so to speak, without a specific experience. From this perspective, one could ask: Where does sexuality begin from a physical/physiological perspective? Perhaps at the moment when – whatever the

⁹ The sexologist V. Sigusch describes the connection between individual sexuality and attachment as follows: 'All sexual desires, the realisation of which is able to satisfy, have their psychophysical basis in early childhood sensations and their precipitation: being touched, being held, being caressed, sucking, touching, anal and urethral and cervical erogeneity, the fetishisation. By sucking lifeblood from an organ, the mother's breast, the infant lays within itself the exciting ground for the development of objectophilic and subjectophilic desires. Since the light and shadow of the first other are reflected in the sexual, the new sub-jects, the new subjugated and isolated, want to be held and caressed in love as adults, for example, in the same way they experienced it, please god, with pleasure in childhood, whereby being caressed can be much more satisfying than an orgasm.' (2023, 208; transl. Th. F.).

trigger – some messenger substances are released that organically cause something that makes sexual experience and action at least potentially possible.

The question of physiology or the phenomenal is on the one hand mere theory, on the other hand it has massive practical consequences for any (sexual) therapy, which perspective is taken, especially if it is very one-sided: For many people, ‘functioning’ still seems to be the top priority when it comes to sexuality, whereby ‘functioning’ still refers to largely simple heterosexual acts: an erect penis must be able to penetrate the woman until ejaculation occurs. Such a perspective logically focuses on the organically functional: surgical or drug therapies (penis pumps, Viagra, lubricating creams, etc). A rather one-sidedly understood performance principle seems to be the inspiration for this. The aesthetic dimension of this sexuality also follows the guidelines of ‘faster, higher, further’: huge artificial breasts or buttocks, elongated penises, surgically constricted vaginas, injected lips, etc. are an expression of this aesthetic.

A phenomenal perspective, on the other hand, poses other questions: How is sexuality experienced, which experiences determine the individual experience, how can sexual desires be communicated, etc. ‘Phenomenal’ can also be asked: Where does sexuality begin in experience? Sexuality perhaps begins where I perceive something that has a pleasurable or arousing effect on me.

The phenomenal perspective does not take place in a physiological no-man’s land. What sexual desires relate to, for example, also depends on what is physically possible or not possible (in the case of physical limitations due to illness or age, e.g. the stimulation of the earlobes in the film ‘The Intouchables’). So even if critical realism distinguishes between the physical and the phenomenal (linguistically and functionally), the phenomenal remains connected to the physiological: every sexual impulse, however weakly experienced, has a physiological trace, but conversely not everything physiological is capable of consciousness. The aroused lover’s sentence: ‘I can feel my endorphins starting to surge!’ is metaphorically understandable, but otherwise a classic category mistake (Ryle, 1969), because at best only some kind of arousal can be felt. The fact that this has to do with messenger substances or hormones is not an experience, but (more or less well-founded) theoretical knowledge.

The body during sex

Critical realism as an epistemological perspective allows clear statements about the connection between mental processes and physical events. On the one hand, this concerns the aforementioned conceptual separation of the physical and experienced world, whereby the experienced world remains connected to the physical world. According to Köhler (1920) and Bischof (1966) the location of this coupling can be named as the psycho-physical level (PPN).

Gestalt theory uses a field-theoretical terminology for the description of experienced (phenomenal) processes. Metzger (2001, 194ff) speaks of the phenomenal total field (*anschauliches Gesamtfeld*) when not only the perceived world but also the perceiving, experiencing and acting ego is included as part of this field. The body experience (body ego) is conceptualised and described in its relationships and interactions with the ego on the one hand and the environment on the other. The experienced body can appear in the total field under changing conditions and influences in very different states: close to or distant from the experiencing ego, present or alienated, massive and centred or fleeting to non-existent (e.g. when experiencing a 'punctiform' or 'pure' ego, see Rausch, 1982).

Tholey also sees the total field as the highest regulatory centre of the sensorimotor system, which 'enables the organism to engage with the physical environment in a way that saves energy and balances out disturbances' (Tholey, 1980/2018, p. 35; transl. Th. F.). Physiologically, the intention to touch someone with the hand, for example, corresponds to certain brain processes that continue 'top-down' from the brain via the shoulder/upper arm muscles to the fingers and are fine-tuned via certain feedback processes and other (sensory) organs involved. This occurs on the basis of a cerebral 'mirroring' of the body, an area in the cerebral cortex with a so-called somatosensory homunculus and a motor homunculus with proportions depending on the significance of the corresponding body parts. For example, the hands and mouth take up a disproportionately large amount of space, precisely because they are very important in terms of sensory and motor function. The body's own states and processes are processed in this way and lead to certain central nervous states of arousal, to which certain phenomenal experiences (e.g. hunger, thirst, pain, urge to move, sexual arousal, etc.) are then assigned. The exact laws governing this connection between phenomenal and physical processes remain an open scientific question; Gestalt theory postulates a structural correspondence (isomorphism) between phenomenal and central nervous processes.

The physical or anatomical body ends at the surface of the skin. This does not necessarily apply to the experienced body. The tennis racket of the trained player is experienced as an extension of the arm; the transition from palm to racket grip 'disappears': the racket is integrated into an inner, functionally effective body image (body schema) and thus enables the 'force-saving and disturbance-balancing confrontation of the organism in the physical environment' just quoted. What does this mean for the area of sexuality? Here too, one's own body is never perceived in isolation, but always as part of the total field. This is not just the immediate physical environment, but everything that is present in the outer (and inner) world: the environment including the other person(s), one's own body including all thoughts, sensations and feelings, as well as the directly perceived reality including inner images, fantasies and imaginations. All of this enables a

certain state of consciousness, an individual 'state of mind', in which ego experience, body experience and environmental experience are linked in a specific way.

State of mind and sex

"We have learned that desire exists only in a state of body and mind in which one would be capable of feeling the actual pleasantness if the anticipated situation or experience were actually given, that is, in a state attuned to, or sensitized for, the pleasant experience in question" (Duncker, 1941, p. 423). In sport, this 'state of mind' is geared towards the most effective, powerful, fast or sensory-motor skilful use of the body possible; in sex, the 'state of mind' is generally geared towards arousal and increasing the sensation of pleasure, possibly to the point of discharge in orgasm. However, combinations are also conceivable: the prostitute uses her body skilfully and effectively (without any particular pleasure of her own) for the pleasure of the client.

In the following, this 'state of mind' will be scrutinised in more detail. Incidentally, it can be more or less pronounced or intense, ranging from sexuality as a more or less controlled 'performance' emphasising physical stimulation to ecstatic, enraptured states of sexual devotion.

Reference system

A sexual 'state of mind' has a lot to do with perception. A look, a gesture, a word, a thought must first be perceived in a corresponding frame of reference (Metz-Göckel 2014, Galli & Trombini 2013, Metzger 1963) in order to be experienced as arousing or pleasurable. The gynaecologist views a vagina without a sexual motive in a medical frame of reference. Similarly, nudity in the sauna is experienced in the frame of reference 'well-being/health' and not 'sex'. In this respect, the meaning of an isolated perception only arises through a corresponding frame of reference.

Centring

If sexual acts are then initiated and intensified, the world of perception changes in a characteristic way: thoughts, feelings and sensations that are perceived as pleasurable or arousing come to the fore and disturbing things are faded out (this is why the gag about the missionary position works: 'Honey, the ceiling in our bedroom urgently needs a fresh coat of paint!').

In terms of Gestalt psychology, the principle of centring is at work here (Metzger 2001, 175ff). At best, sexual perception centres around everything that has a pleasurable or arousing effect. This applies to all sensory perceptions. Tactile sensations appear to be very important for sexuality. On the one hand, the touch

of the other body (active) is arousing, on the other hand, the experience of being touched by the other person (passive) is arousing. Auditory: Certain sounds (moaning, screaming), sentences, words have a pleasure-enhancing effect, others kill the mood. Visual: what arouses you may vary greatly from person to person. As a rule, it is the body of the other person, in the case of the narcissist possibly their own body, or the visual 'fading out' of the surroundings, for example, in order to devote oneself entirely to tactile stimulation or one's own fantasies and inner images. From an olfactory perspective, it seems that you have less control. It is easier to close your eyes than your nose. In any case, the following applies: a specific interplay of sensory perception is at the service of the organising principle of 'centring'.

Centring is therefore a necessary condition for successful interpersonal sex. However, this also means that both (or three or many in the case of group sex) must contribute to this centring. The aforementioned prostitute presumably does this in an acting manner (plush, red light, certain sounds, certain sentences), which she assumes contributes to better centring in the client. However, this also applies to couples who have been having sex with each other for a long time. If you haven't been completely ignorant over the years, you know what the other person likes and behave accordingly.

The phenomenon of the fetish occupies a special position: This is something that is particularly sexually charged for a person (e.g. a foot fetish). This phenomenon also has to do with centring and reference systems.

Atmospheric

According to Kurt Lewin (1963/2012, 105), the concept of atmosphere plays an important role. This refers to a supra-personal effect that is then transferred to the individual: the class atmosphere, the atmosphere in the sports stadium, social atmospheres, e.g. in times of war or crisis. This can also create erotically charged atmospheres. The 'candlelight dinner' would be an example that creates a personal and intimate atmosphere, so that barriers in the living space that are otherwise stronger are reduced. You get into the right mood.

Synchronisation

The term synchronisation goes one step further. This refers to the synchronisation of the actions of several people in certain situations, e.g. the clapping of the audience. There are now a whole host of empirical findings on this phenomenon. 'Synchronisation, however, essentially takes place in the layers of the anonymous subject or passive intentionality. These anonymous or passive intentional performances enable what is researched in various disciplines as intercorporeality,

bonding systems, interaffectivity, sensorimotor or intercerebral synchronisation, social entrainment or communicative musicality. High-level cultural practices such as making music and dancing together, many forms of sport and play and, as is now recognised, all the rhythmic forms of verbal and non-verbal communication that are carried out in a shared, living presence, thus prove to be achievements founded in intentional passivity' (Schmicking, 2017; transl. Th. F.). Although sex is not explicitly mentioned here, it could also be an area in which this phenomenon could play a role.

Atmospheric or synchronisation may contribute greatly to a shared experience during sex in the sense of a supra-individual event. In the (probably overrated) ideal case from the fairy-tale book of sexuality, the participants synchronise themselves into ever higher spheres of arousal, which discharges in orgasms that are as simultaneous as possible. The reality of lived interpersonal sexuality is probably closer to the fact that there are alternating, non-synchronous processes: One is more active, the other passive, one more aroused while the other stimulates and so on.

According to Gestalt theory, the people involved in sex are always in their own experienced world. In this sense, consensual sex is also conceivable, even though the people involved have completely different motivations (one person thinks/feels: 'I need sex to wind down after a stressful day.'). – The other thinks/feels: 'I've been so immobile all day. I need sex to get me excited!' This doesn't have to be disturbing; both can be realised in the same sexual act. The example of the prostitute mentioned above also shows that feelings, intentions and motivations can be completely different. This applies all the more in non-consensual situations, including violent sexuality.

Multi-field events

What actually happens when you masturbate? The actual physical event is conceivably non-erotic: you stimulate yourself genitally until you reach orgasm. What is actually erotic takes place in the imagination. Incidentally, this also applies if you watch pornographic images or films. They do not 'kill' the imagination (at most, they limit the range of possible imagination), but rather intensify arousal through their explicit depiction and enable identification processes. According to Stemberger (2018), this can be described as a multi-field event: It does not remain with the ego1 and environment1 (I am lying alone on the couch, masturbating and watching porn on the laptop), but I identify with one of the acting persons in the porn and thus experience (as ego2) the sexual encounter with the porn star in the film scene (environment2/E2). The second field develops because the sexual action in the film cannot be reconciled with the masturbating viewer lying on the couch (experience of "Non-Prägnanz").

A multi-field event is also possible in interpersonal sex when, in intense imaginations, a different self arises in a different environment that is not compatible with the sexual event that is actually taking place. Overlapping situations, as Lewin (1969, 224) calls them, represent a 'preliminary stage' to multi-field events. An ego is simultaneously in different situations (the innocent example in Lewin: The boy eats his snack and hears the birds chirping at the same time). A mere internally arousing fantasy does not necessarily cause a multi-field event; it remains an overlapping situation (real sexual action/situation in the fantasy) if both situations can be reconciled with one ego.

The relationship between body and sex takes on a new connotation in the rapidly developing versions of cybersex, i.e. masturbation with the help of VR (virtual reality) glasses, avatars, artificial intelligence and special stimulation machines. All of this technology basically serves to facilitate the transition to a 2nd total field and then to make it as 'realistic' as possible (an ego2 has sex with a virtual partner moulded according to individual desires in an environment2, while ego1 is wired, so to speak, to the technology in environment1). A multi-field event is always made possible when the direct sensory stimulation is reduced to the bare minimum (in the case of cybersex, this is the tactile genital stimulation). This can be understood as a technical development of familiar forms of facilitated transition: The soft cinema seat and the darkening in the cinema hall allow the immediate physical anchoring (ego1 in E1) to recede into the background and promote identification with the film heroine (ego2) in environment2.

The meaning of all the phenomena described here can be summarised by linking them to what is 'required' in consensual sex: the sexual act should be successful, i.e. depending on the need, it should be pleasurable, lively, exciting or tension-relieving, quickly performed, etc.

Hints for therapy

In therapeutic practice, the topic of 'sexuality' manifests itself in different facets: logically very clearly and in the foreground where someone explicitly seeks therapeutic help because of sexual problems. If other issues are in the foreground, sexuality may not be an issue at all. In many cases, however, sexuality can become increasingly important in the course of the therapeutic process: The depressed young man who 'escapes' into his masturbation fantasies to avoid a moment of loneliness, the older person who develops a language in the course of therapy and thus a new approach to his/her sexuality, the stressed manager who 'admits' his erection problems at some point in the course of therapy, the anorexic girl who has alienated herself from her body and gradually learns to 'accept' her body and discovers her sexuality, the socially anxious man who proudly reports his first

successful attempt at flirting, the young mother who does her partner 'the favour' even though she is completely exhausted, etc.

The topic plays a particular role where traumatic experiences are the source of suffering. In many cases, these are assaults, abuse or rape offences, so that sexual experience and behaviour is directly affected in the sense that a lively and pleasurable sexuality is not (or no longer) possible. But even in cases where no direct sexualised violence has been committed, sexual problems can occur later on. People who have been deprived of the necessary support and solidarity in the course of their development do not develop enough trust to be able to engage in sexual encounters without fear (Wöller, 2006).

This suggests that a trustful therapeutic relationship must be established before it is possible to discuss sexual matters. Despite the omnipresence of the topic and the emphasis on sexualisation in many areas of our everyday lives, many people find it very difficult to talk about their sexuality. The topic is almost always associated with shame and guilt. This applies not only to patients, but also to therapists. Why is this the case? Here too, one could argue with the social and societal atmosphere, which makes sexual matters appear highly ambivalent: In the public sphere, it is intrusive and omnipresent, linked to expectations of performance and aesthetics that cannot be met and, as a result, burdened with fears of failure in the private sphere on the one hand, but still also with guilt and sinfulness on the other. In the practical/therapeutic process, it will depend on how shame is dealt with. It depends on whether sexual issues can be addressed and negotiated in a way that enables therapeutic progress.

Shame is a very unpleasant, 'burning' feeling at the moment it is experienced and carries the peculiar demand to no longer want to be there, to want to 'sink into the ground' with shame. This makes the defence against all shame-laden topics understandable, both on the part of the patient and the therapist. Feeling ashamed is unpleasant, but embarrassing someone else is equally unpleasant – unless someone derives pleasure from the act of embarrassing. But shame has another facet, namely a specifically social and communicative one, which can be recognised in a therapeutic setting and which can be worked with very constructively and creatively. Those who feel ashamed distance themselves, avoid and withdraw. This also manifests itself physically. In his analysis of shame, Hell writes: 'The special thing about this physical demarcation is that – in contrast to the offended or angry reaction – it does not have a deterrent effect on others. On the contrary: the reddening of the face and the rather stooped posture correspond to a gesture of humility in the sense of the message: 'Have sympathy with me. Don't attack me!' [...] Shame has something mysterious about it. It sets boundaries without cancelling the human bond. It conceals and reveals at the same time (2018, p. 102; transl.

Th. F.). In this respect, the following applies on the therapeutic side: 'Humiliation, not shame, is the poison that kills empathy and acceptance' (Hell 2018, p. 223; transl. Th. F.).

Furthermore, the task for therapists is to be able to perceive their own sexuality (and the neediness associated with it), to assess its effect on their own image and that of others (e.g. in relation to age and gender: the 60-year-old male therapist towards the 20-year-old female patient/the 30-year-old female therapist towards the older man) and, last but not least, to train linguistic skills in dealing with the topic. All of this will sensitise therapists to the topic, regardless of whether sexuality is made an explicit topic. Therapists with a depth psychology orientation will initially understand the topic as part of the transference process and decide on a case-by-case basis whether to address it with the patient. On the other hand, whether the patient dares to address sexual issues will depend on how she assesses the therapist's relationship behaviour towards her and whether she has felt respectfully and sensitively accompanied on other topics.

Summary

Gestalt Theory and Sexuality

The understanding of sexuality (and sex therapy) depends very much on whether a more narrowly somatic or more broadly phenomenal perspective is adopted. The presentation transfers the fundamental concern of Critical Realism, namely to take a position on the question of the connection between the soul and the body, to the field of sexuality. Essential classical terms of Gestalt theory (reference system, centring) and newer concepts (multiple-field approach) are transferred to sexual events. A Gestalt-theoretical perspective on sexuality as a phenomenon isolated from the whole of human life and coexistence is inconceivable: sexuality is therefore also considered in terms of its function in relationship and attachment. This also applies to the relationship between patient and therapist. The implications of this perspective are discussed in regard to the practical therapeutic approach.

Keywords: Sexuality, Sex therapy, Gestalt psychology, Critical realism, Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy.

Zusammenfassung

Gestalttheorie und Sexualität

Das Verständnis von Sexualität (und Sexualtherapie) hängt ganz wesentlich davon ab, ob eine eher engere somatische oder eher weiter gefasste phänomenale Perspektive eingenommen wird. Der Beitrag überträgt das grundsätzliche Anliegen des Kritischen Realismus, nämlich eine Position zur Frage der Verbindung von Seelischem und Körperlichen zu beziehen, auf das Gebiet der Sexualität. Wesentliche klassische Begriffe der Gestalttheorie (Bezugssystem, Zentrierung) und neuere Konzepte (Mehrfelder-Ansatz) werden auf sexuelles Geschehen übertragen. Eine gestalttheoretische Perspektive auf Sexualität als ein vom Gesamt menschlichen Lebens und Zusammenlebens isoliertes Phänomen ist nicht denkbar: daher wird Sexualität außerdem in seiner Funktion auf Beziehung und

Bindung betrachtet. Das betrifft auch die Beziehung zwischen Patientin und Therapeutin. Daher werden die Implikationen dieser Sichtweise auch in Bezug auf das praktische therapeutische Vorgehen diskutiert.

Schlüsselworte: Sexualität, Sexualtherapie, Gestaltpsychologie, Kritischer Realismus, Gestalttheoretische Psychotherapie.

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