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APPLYING GESTALT THERAPY IN WORK WITH ADOLESCENTS

Valdete Adili Selim
Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences
South East European University
Tetovo, North Macedonia
v.adili-selimi@seeu.edu.mk

ABSTRACT

Since the founding of Gestalt therapy by Perls (1940), it has been successfully applied to various age groups for more than 80 years. In this paper I will try to present how this approach is applied with high school students, aged 14 to 18 in the high school where I work as well as to explore which Gestalt techniques are most easily accepted by them. Adolescence is recognized as unique developmental period characterized by significant biological, cognitive and psychological changes that are essential parts to healthy development. When examining adolescence, one can observe both the complex and often problematic development processes described in the empirical studies of Hall more than a century ago, as well as the many possibilities that this stage of life offers, which Stenberg referred to as “age of opportunities”.

As a psychologist working in a high school I constantly meet both aspects of this developing period of the students, and my task is to support them overcome the difficulties while fostering their developmental potential. My closer work with them meets their fragility, from which the strength often emerges, grounded in the relationship we build together with our presence.

Key words: adolescence, gestalt therapy, dialogue, intervention, experience

INTRODUCTION

This research paper begins by listing four gestalt perspectives proposed by Polster and Polster (1974) which have been confirmed in my ten years of practical work with clients:

1. The power is in the present;
2. Experience is most valuable;
3. The therapist is his or her own instrument
4. Therapy is too good to be limited to the sick.

Young people also find the therapeutic process very supportive, as it allows them to increase spontaneous moments of contact with themselves and the environment, it helps them improve self-regulation and facilitates personal growth. In one of her articles in Gestalt journal Oaklander (1997) wrote: "I notice a natural progression in working with children and adolescents; I call it the therapeutic process. From some perspective it may seem that nothing is happening and that children and I are just playing, but in fact there is a well-defined process or sequence when working with children ". McConville *stated that "Adolescents can be understood only as part of the larger fields in which they live, and only when we see and appreciate their very personal, subjective struggles to renegotiate their status within those fields, find meaning and a place for themselves, and at the heart of that struggle, give birth to an existential self"*. In his psychotherapeutic work with adolescence McConville identified three distinct approaches to work with adolescents: These approaches include working with adolescents' family context, working through the therapeutic relationship and facilitating self-exploratory processes. Third approach uses variety of gestalt techniques which of course they always emerge from the field. Techniques that involve role playing or enactment are generally more easily accepted by adolescents (McConville, 1995). Gestalt therapy supports adolescents in the development of the ego strength, a sense of self and authenticity in young people, thus enabling them to experience and integrate their sensations and feelings more successfully. My findings are based in the work with 38 students (around 150 individual sessions) with high school students in the school where I work as school psychologist.

Contacting the students

The schools in North Macedonia have changed significantly over the past decade, and the school where I work reflects these broader developments. One major change in the role of school psychologists has been the introduction of mandatory counseling processes, which has significantly transformed the way professional support is provided within school. Psychologists are now required to conduct counseling sessions with students and their parents. There are three main criteria for inviting the student to counselling: change of behavior, declining performance - lower grades and missing school classes. Over the last years, these have been the ways how I meet students at my school. This is usually our initial contact. I meet the students in the school building and then we establish a schedule for individual sessions in order to try to improve their situation. Not all the students stay in the process, some attend only the obligatory part and do not continue. My paper focuses on those who remained in therapy, examining which Gestalt techniques they found most accessible and the role of the therapeutic relationship in supporting their engagement.

	2023-2024		2024-2025		2025-2026	
	Recommended	Stayed in counselling	Recommended	Stayed in counselling	Recommended	Stayed in counselling
Changed behavior	13	5	16	4	11	4
Lower grades	19	2	15	3	13	2
Missing classes	26	6	24	7	18	5

Table 1. Participants in therapy process

Dialogue

Gestalt therapy is not a set of techniques applicable to anyone, but a relational process, what is directly seen, felt and experienced in the “here and now” and that is considered more relevant than any explanation and interpretation. In working with students, the “I-Thou” model taught by Martin Buber is the key moment in the therapeutic process. Following the principles of the “I-Thou”, the client (student) and I meet as separate but equal individuals. I have responsibility to maintain the position of the therapist even when the student projects a parent or older sibling in me. Although the sessions take place within a school setting, I am not their teacher, I do not use the voice of a teacher, class teacher or other authority figure and that makes a difference in our meeting. I am authentic as I am, I have my own points of view, I have personal limitations that I am aware of, while creating a space where students feel accepted without judgment. I am there to encourage their self – exploration, to improve their self-confidence and to develop their communication skills. I respect each student’s pace and their choice of topics, including their decision not to address certain topics and this leads our relationship to be developed. Sooner or later the transference occurs in our relationship, and sometimes it is difficult to refrain from “creating” a future for the client, but I am not afraid of my feelings, I accept them and use them within the process. As for the organizational part, I schedule the sessions in agreement with the student, at time that suits them best so they do not miss classes. We begin and end on time, I provide a safe room where we would not be interrupted, with the discretion that is necessary for the therapeutic process.

Providing support

Helping adolescents express their feelings is not as easy as it is assumed. Young people know how to suppress their feelings and have difficulty to get in touch with them. This repression is often reflected in their physical state and is experienced as frustration, confusion, anxiety or impatience. Young people usually avoid facing deep feelings and often pretend that everything is fine. It is not often a case that a student comes to a session, sits down and says : “ Today I want to work on my relationship with my mother”. Unpleasant, intense feelings toward parents and family, such as anger, rage, hostility or contempt are often suppressed. Such feelings are kept outside of their awareness and one of the goals of our sessions is to bring them to awareness and articulate them. Of course, the process is not easy but meeting these feelings,

getting permission to feel and to integrate them afterwards, makes the biggest change, the paradoxical change. As a gestalt therapist my work is not to push the client towards the change, but rather to support the client to acknowledge where he or she is at the moment and by doing that, the change occurs.

Low self-confidence and self-acceptance are particularly common among students who are victims of domestic violence. Helping those students to accept and nurture themselves is a challenge because such students have a poor self-image due to introjecting false self-statements such as “I am bad”, “I am not worth it” received from their families or the close environment. The negative self-image is very persistent and occurs especially during stressful situations, they tend to blame themselves for the traumas that have occurred in their lives (Oaklander, 1997)

Clients who experienced serious abuse early in their development are often unable to establish a relationship with their environment, therefore building a relationship with the therapist becomes a key moment of the therapy process. Creating a safe space for sharing previously hidden experiences was essential. Secrets have this power of blocking the emotions and the client can develop different behavior as obsessive-compulsive, intrusive thoughts, poor self-image. Suppressed trauma is creating new ways to come to consciousness through repetitive behavior such as binge eating or irresistible need for cleaning hands or other intrusive thought.

Grief has emerged as a recurring theme in working with high school students, particularly in relation to a separation process that they go through due to loss of a parent, divorced parents, health issues or even migration of relatives and friends. Therapeutic sessions with them depend on their stage of separation, sometimes clients can be completely inhibited if they are in denial, dramatic in the anger stage or with a lot of crying and sadness if they are in the depression stage. Students during the period described in this paper were also affected from losses that happened due to COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them who experienced losses during pandemic time were not aware of their emotional suffering and need for grief. Usually they come to therapy for other issues as physical symptoms or anxiety and are totally surprised when staying with the symptoms lead to their loss without the separation. Students are not usually aware of how much time is needed for a grief and how much the loss affects their emotions, bodies and lives, they lack knowledge of the importance of grieving. Most of them are not really aware that death of a loved one is the most profound of all sorrows and sometimes it marks our lives forever.

Techniques and experiments

In working with students, I use various Gestalt techniques as part of the authenticity of the meetings and that is often experienced by students as engaging and meaningful. Commonly used techniques include:

- Externalizing the internal dialogue “top dog”/ “under dog”
- “I take responsibility for ... where the client completes the sentence or the statement themselves
- Staying with the feeling – the client is asked to stay longer with specific feeling, analyzing what it has brought them
- Empty chair – the client addresses the empty chair as if another person or part of their personality were sitting there in order to help them get in touch with some aspects of their self ;
- Exaggeration- the therapist exaggerates the client’s use of a word or mannerism or asks the client to exaggerate themselves in order to become aware of the true feelings associated with it by doing or saying the thing over and over again

- Rehearsal – the client, together with the therapist tries to express a feeling, opinion etc. out loud.
- “Reverse” technique – asking the client to do the opposite of what they usually do
- Guided fantasies – The client is encouraged to visualize in the here and now their experiences
- Playing projection – the client is asked to play the role of a person with whom they do not feel connected
- Silence
- Dream work – gestalt approach - each part of the dream is assumed to be a projection of the self, in the dream the client creates scenarios of how different parts of their character meet, a dialogue is created between there opposing sides whereby the client gradually becomes aware of the spectrum of personal experiences, memories and feelings. According to Perls, dreams are the most spontaneous expression of human existence. Dreams usually represent unfinished situations from real life and contain existential messages about oneself and personal struggles (Perls 1983)

Therapeutic process

Regarding the techniques I listed above, with this group of clients I noticed that some techniques (interventions) were accepted more easily than the others. During this work I noticed that for example the *topdog – underdog technique*, this dialogue between the “good” and the “bad”, which Perls believed to be the biggest spilt in human personality. Top dog is always right, it represents all the “shoulds”, the parental looking like and usually creates an inner conflict or frustration with the underdog which represents the immature side, not responsible one, the child looking one. Underdog also creates frustration with the immaturity and impatience. Externalizing this dialog between the two parts of the self, helps students become more aware of their introjections and responsibilities. The more each aspect of the opposing polarity is dramatized and experienced, the more growing chances for resolving the conflict. During the sessions, using this intervention clients/students were giving voice both sides and the core element here is reorganizing the problem. At this point they release what they carry; tears, laughter or rage, moving toward integration which in Gestalt it’s a continuing process rather final. There is always something new to acknowledge and integrate in their everyday life experiences.

Staying with the feeling was also a common intervention I used with students in our sessions. Being very much aware of the background of this generation, how fast they consume experiences ignoring how they feel about what happens around them, pretending like nothing touches them whether good or bad, inviting clients to stay with their feelings came like true confrontation in the beginning of our process because they usually felt so uncomfortable to stay in contact with their feelings that arise while not talking. Although they would be hesitant in the beginning, they quickly realize that it was exactly what they needed most, to acknowledge and validate their own feelings, body sensations or experiences. Staying with feeling, a typical gestalt technique rooted in the paradox theory of change when the change occurs when we stay with what is happening instead of running away from it.

Silence, what a powerful moment to stay with. Gestalt therapy recognizes that verbal contact is only one of the modes of contact, and therefore silence and stillness can be seen as a universal language, providing a sense of being most authentically in contact with ourselves and others. Working as a therapist with adolescents, one must be prepared to stay a lot in the silence because adolescents don’t really talk a lot. Their silence is not a passive or empty moment in therapy, it is more like a loaded silence with numerous untold experiences, feelings and insecurities and with everything they believe others don’t understand. Respecting that silence

and waiting for them to open makes a turning point in working with adolescents, it is like meeting them in their place. In my experience with students, sitting together, in front of each other for certain amount of time, even not talking, was meaningful for the students who kept coming regularly to our sessions, sharing as little as a narrative but investing a lot in building the relationship. Their silence was more like whispering: “wait for me”, “give me more time” or “not yet”. It was a true test if I was really interested in them or just doing my job just like the other adults they meet during the educational process. Silence in working with adolescence is part of relationship between therapist and the client where things are sensed without being spoken. As researches made for exploring the importance of the silence in psychotherapy suggest that silence sometime can be source of working, Lang suggested that silence can be seen as the therapist’s acceptance of their patient, for Sabbadini “silence is not, or not just, an absence (of words) but an active presence” (Sabbadini, 1991, p. 232). Lehmann (2014) suggests that in the development of any psychotherapeutic process, moments of silence emerge with a wide spectrum of meanings.

Nevertheless, using an intervention in therapeutic process is not something that the therapist decides to do just for the intervention as such, interventions always come from the process and from what the therapist and the client co-create together. So, nothing from the interventions above was used a priori planned, they emerged from the process and the clients’ willingness made them effective. In gestalt therapy, nothing is decided in advance, the therapist approaches the client with openness and without predetermined expectations. Then, depending on what emerges as the figure in the client's awareness, the session unfolds in that direction.

Ending the process

When should therapy end? At what point? How many sessions are enough? Ten meetings? More? The end of the therapy is highly individual, just like the beginning of the therapy, therefore there are no generalizations, it is an individual rhythm of completing the work that the therapist respects. However, there are some signs when therapy is coming to an end or when it should continue. If the students are doing well, the problem for which they sought help has been overcome and also other important topics have been worked out; and our meetings would resemble socializing if we continued, then therapy should end no matter which session it is, it can be done within two months. If the student is doing well but our sessions are still useful, then they should be continued. Oaklander believes that if our client who once looked forward to coming to a meeting becomes very busy with various activities, new friends or commitments and does not have time to come, then it is probably time to end it. (Oaklander 1988). It may happen that the sessions are going poorly and I get the impression that nothing is happening, but that is not a sign that we should stop but rather I am not seeing something correctly and not doing it correctly. If, despite attempts to work something out during the meetings, the client resists, it may be better to stop for a period of time and continue after some time, when the topic is more mature. Working as a school psychologist gives me a kind of continuity in following my clients throughout high school, so that we can meet again at some other time for something new. As a therapist who somehow stays in touch with them, I have the advantage of witnessing when Gestalt has taken my clients to another place.

CONCLUSION

Psychotherapy with adolescents, as well as psychotherapy in general, relies mostly on the therapeutic relationship between the client and the therapist. Adolescents are particularly perceptive in evaluating those with whom they interact and can readily discern whether the therapist is authentically engaged in the therapeutic dialogue or not. When adolescents perceive that the therapist is genuinely present and committed to their well-being, they tend to be more

receptive to therapeutic interventions and techniques. Nevertheless, techniques such as role-playing, *top dog–underdog* dialogue more effectively embody and bring to life the experiences that adolescents are already going through. Considering that such a conflict already exists within them, therapy provides a space in which these inner conflicts can be expressed and verbalized. Using this technique validates their rebellion, the "Underdog" role legitimizes their resistance and frustration. Other techniques, such as *staying with a feeling* or respecting *silence*, are often unfamiliar to the client. They are not accustomed to these approaches because, outside the therapeutic setting, individuals typically tend to avoid difficult emotions or interrupt periods of silence. In Gestalt therapy sessions, however, the opposite occurs, clients are encouraged to remain with their feelings and to experience silence rather than escape it. This often becomes an intriguing and meaningful experience for adolescents. When therapists allow silence to occur or when they don't disturb it, they support students to organize their inner chaos, to verbalize it using other techniques and integrate it later. The observations described above are based on my experience working with students at the school where I work. Being part of the same institution for a period of time influenced the therapeutic process and contributed significantly to the development of our work together.

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