

GATLA on "the experiment." Tue, 24 Apr 2001 13:07:14 EDT

Dear "experiment" Contributors and Readers,

It is important to separate, the central issue of the place of experiments in Gestalt Therapy from the issue of what GATLA's position and practice with regard to the use of experiments allegedly is. What seems important to all of us philosophically, theoretically and clinically is the former and not the latter.

However, since the origins of this current discussion are predicated on GATLA's alleged point of view and practice regarding holism and experimentation, it is crucial to us that we represent our position with regard to this important dimension of Gestalt Therapy. Therefore, Todd

Burley and Rita and Bob Resnick (as GATLA core faculty) want to make clear our perspective on the question of the place of experiments within Gestalt Therapy.

Although we highly value the judicious (contextual) use of experiments, we do not see them as within the same fundamental level of organization (or importance) as Field Theory, Phenomenology and Dialogue. Experiments, although obviously useful to collect new experiential near data, can be a technique in the service of awareness (we mean here the denotative meaning of technique, not the connotative pejorative meaning which is held in some circles). Awareness is crucial for therapy to occur - not experiments. Certainly, experiments are one valid way of facilitating awareness. The particular form, subtly and magnitude of the experiment is limited only by the creativity of the client and the therapist.

We value experiments that emerge from the interaction of the client and his/her world (sometimes including the therapist) and we usually do not value "canned" experiments brought into the situation by the therapist and having little or nothing to do with the client.

As a faculty, we mostly see technique as the least important part of Gestalt Therapy. Much of the "bad" reputation gleaned from the abuses by some in the 60's and 70's (and sometimes even persisting today) have, at their base, the passing off of a few techniques (usually dramatic) as the essence of Gestalt Therapy. Of course, the process of creating experiments is not the same as the repetitive use of fixed techniques. It is precisely the whom, where, when and how the experiments are created and implemented that determine an elegant personal and clinical interaction as compared to an insensitive imposition.

In our training in GATLA, experimentation is part of the attitudinal stance we are teaching from - part of the fabric (ground) in all of our work and part of the figure in some of our work. Experimentation, at its vital best, is more subtle, contextual and profound than the "required" and mechanical experiments (or other techniques) which tend to be stylized and frequently formulaic - as in "all work should

contain one or more experiments". It is the introjected "experimenting" and other techniques which has re-arranged cart and horse and has contributed to giving "technique" a bad name. For someone to observe a therapist working with a client and then to be critical of the work because there were no experiments - makes it clear that such a person has not yet grasped the essence of Gestalt Therapy - confusing a "means whereby" with an "end gain". When this happens, then the experiment is being held in higher regard and importance than the function it was there for in the first place - awareness.

(Similarly, when a therapist insists on focusing on the relationship between client and therapist when the client's foreground is clearly and appropriately elsewhere, is to be making the dialogical/relational into another methodological and intrusive dogma).

Importantly, even when an experiment (or technique) might be very appropriate, and useful, creative therapists need not be limited to this or any other modality. Both Fritz and especially Laura Perls encouraged therapists to find their own way, their own style, using their own backgrounds, interests and skills - all within the basics of Gestalt Therapy - to create something anew. The question, of course, is not whether experiments are "good" or "bad." The question is when are experiments facilitating contact and awareness and when are experiments introjected filler, "show off" drama and/or avoidance?

Finally, there are many important Gestalt supports and concepts that we do not explicitly include in the threesome of Field Theory, Phenomenology and Dialogue - existentialism, self-regulation, awareness, aggression, figure formation and destruction, character development, introjects, boundary anomalies, etc. to name just a few. Although all of these (and more) are important parts of Gestalt Therapy, we do not see them as fundamentally defining of Gestalt Therapy as are Field Theory, Phenomenology and Dialogue.

Re: Holism: Rather than being excluded from our work and training, holism is a central component of Field Theory. It would be difficult to imagine the field from other than a holistic point of view. The very essence of the field is that everything (including the history of the field) is related, in flux and mutually effecting everything else. The integrative wholeness of the field (field theory) is self defining - holistic.

We value this discussion and want to be clear what our point of view regarding experiments actually is. We have no need or desire to be anyone's "straw man" attributing polarities to us that we do not hold.

For those who are interested in more about GATLA, a history, description and philosophy of the GATLA program along with personal and professional accounts from almost 25 faculty and participants can be found in the current issue of the electronic journal Gestalt! At: <http://www.g-g.org/gej/5-1/index.html>

Cordially,

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GATLA website
<http://www.gatla.org>