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Embellishing 'T Group' with a Gestalt Perspective

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Steve Vinay Gunther, Director, Northern Rivers Gestalt Institute, Lismore, Australia, in his concept note on Gestalt Therapy likens it to a jigsaw puzzle with a piece missing. He says 'We have an inherent desire to fit that piece, and an innate sense of satisfaction when the picture is complete. This drive to completion, wholeness, or Gestalt, is what propels us to deal with unfinished issues in our lives and to experience a nagging sense of discomfort until that is done.'

Kurt Lewin has been credited with having originally conceived

the idea of 'T Group' as we understand it today. 'T Group' is a profoundly experiential human interaction lab where a group of participants work together with a facilitator to learn about human processes that contributes to self-discovery, interpersonal effectiveness and rewarding group working. While he went on to develop the basis for modern day group dynamics and organisational psychology, it was Gestalt psychologists who were among the first to speak of wholism as an understanding of human nature.

Gestalt concepts have been around for a long time and find expression in existentialism and humanistic psychological processes.

Typically 'T Group' and 'Gestalt' share much in common:

T GROUP	GESTALT
Increased interpersonal skills	Focus on relationship
Understanding group development and dynamics	An appreciation of the wider field
Increasing awareness of feelings in the moment	An interest in the freshness of here and now
Increasing understanding of impact of one's behaviour on others, sensitivity to feelings of self and others and taking responsibility for one's feelings	Valuing of authenticity and choiceful living
Experimenting with changes in behaviour and learning from one's own and group's experiences	Emphasis on action rather than abstract interpretation

Gestalt like the 'T' Group process is a phenomenological process, i.e. the science of awareness. Awareness is a major tool of Gestalt. Through being more fully present to our body and immediate environment we can experience life with more depth and excitement. Awareness of 'what is,' the obvious, can lead to change without pushing. It involves the acceptance of the fullness of each moment and thus leads to the acceptance of fullness of ourselves.

The expansion of awareness is supported gently. The result is that each person confronts their own choices which lead them to a particular predicament. Gestalt encourages people to take responsibility for their choice and works to expand the range of choice which is possible. The result is a greater sense of personal power and increased creativity in living.

The experimental dimension of Gestalt makes it a little different from T Group, which often becomes 'A talking therapy.' Abstract ideas are manifested in creative experiments and familiar ways of doing things are expanded by trying out something new. This dimension brings a great deal of colour, innovation and excitement into the process. The emphasis is on immediacy, freshness and playfulness. New possibilities emerge and new skills are developed in a supportive and healing environment.

The three domains of feeling, thinking and action are utilized to assist the person towards wholeness. The process is

Credit for inputs is given to Steve Vinay Gunther, Director, Northern Rivers Gestalt Institute, Lismore, Australia

present focused and pays particular attention to relationship as a central theme of change. The unique style individual's use to make contact with their world is of primary interest. Distortions in contact which leads to needs not being met are identified and there is emphasis on taking responsibility to meet the needs. New ways of acting are experimented with, feelings felt and released and thinking patterns brought to consciousness and updated.

Gestalt, like T Group is very existential in its approach, grounded as it is in here and now and emphasizing that each person is responsible for himself / herself.

Gestalt believes that the human being is fundamentally healthy and fractures within as he / she journeys through life owing to life's experiences. While unlike T Group, Gestalt attends to therapy, like T Group the experience is therapeutic and meant to heal.

T Group will gain from understanding the phenomenological approach of Gestalt which focuses on the individual's reality, aims to increase awareness of both of self and interconnected with others and works with 'what is.' Change results from being more fully oneself.

Gestalt is known as therapy without resistance and T Group attempts to help an individual recognise and work through his / her resistance. As in T Group, where the facilitator is unwilling to give the answers so also in Gestalt the therapist sits with the client in his / her 'creative void' allowing something new and surprising to emerge.

T Group and Gestalt both focus on integration i.e., helping the individual re-owning all parts of self.

Like T Group, Gestalt emphasizes on experiential learning rather than interpretation or cognitive insights: 'how' rather than 'why.'

The four pillars of Gestalt are those of:

1. Phenomenology
2. Dialogue
3. Field theory
4. Experiment

Spinelli (1995) in his public address posits that there are a number of assumptions that individuals make about the nature of the self. The assumptions include:

1. that the self is the source or the originator of experience
2. that the self is fixed in time
3. the self is unitary
4. the self is internally localized
5. there is a real self and a false self

Phenomenological investigation argues that rather than the self being the originator or the source of experience; it actually is something that is the product of the experience. The self comes out of the experience; it emerges through one's experience rather than formulating or creating it. Our sense of self is created by experience.

As the self is plastic and stretches it has no permanence and therefore what I am today is what I was not yesterday. There is no consistency and therefore it is not fixed in time.

The investigation also suggests that the self rather than being a thing or something that is unitary, it is essentially relational. We cannot talk or think about a concept of self other than putting it in relation.

As the self exists only in relationship with the world that is constantly changing the individual is not stuck in 'I am inside myself only and in isolation, but I can only say things about myself by relating it to anything or anyone else outside me. Therefore I am not only internally localized.'

Phenomenology proposes that there is no way of truly distinguishing between real and false self. There is nothing about self which makes it real or false. It is only something about the believer. It is something about the being that conceives him or her and in doing that conceives the idea that the self is real or true or the self is false. The search in the individual is for wanting to be more real, more authentic and more in touch with oneself.

The principle of exploration is thus about how individuals construct themselves. In helping individuals come to realize how they have constructed themselves one will help them recognise how they have fixed themselves in time, in ideas, in possibilities and equally how they have disassociated experiences that do not fit their sedimented notions about themselves.

The Gestalt approach believes that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that individuals are essentially healthy. Resistance is not defenses but an expression of self-protectiveness or a self-striving. Resistance redefined as creative adjustment is seen as the individual's attempt to find wholeness. 'T' Group also attempts to help the individual recognise this wholeness.

Tuckman's model of group development i.e., the process of forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning all relevant to 'T' Group has a similar parallel in Gestalt. Gestalt practitioner such as Zinker, talk of the similar processes as, superficial contact, conflict in identity, confluence and isolation of roles, high cohesiveness and rest or resolution.

In 'T' Groups participants are encouraged to explore awareness, by recognising the rising of sensation within them. The phenomenological process is also about this awareness generation.

'T' Group encourages the dialogic 'I-Thou' approach rather than the 'I-It' approach, a subjective attitude where each person addresses the other person as a person and is open to meeting in mutual and confirming ways as he or she is now rather than wanting the other to be different or using the others as a means to an end.

All relationships exist in context. The 'T' Group process recognises that people cannot be understood in isolation but only as an integral and interactive whole with their socio-cultural backgrounds. Behaviour and experience can only be understood in the context of that field. Experiences emerge at the contact boundary of the individual and the environment. The field or context consists of an interactive phenomenon of the individuals and their environment and are interconnected. This process of recognising that human behaviour and experience happen in the present, so integral a part of Gestalt is also one of the foundations on which the 'T' Group is built.

Experimentation is the essence of 'T' Groups and of Gestalt too.

'T' Groups can learn from the approach of Gestalt which assumes the humanistic belief is striving towards growth and that disorder arises only when there is a poor fit between the needs of a developing person and the resources and the capability of the environment. Thus the model is moving away from being conflict and defensive to development. All boundary disturbances are not defenses but developmental derailments.

Finally development occurs when the need expressed by an individual is identified and accepted and if one has faith in the organism's self-regulation capability.

Where Gestalt and T Group depart is in the manner of experimenting. Gestalt encourages creative experimentation to embody abstract and generalize ideas. Thus the therapist follows an intuitive process of facilitation.

In Gestalt the belief is that everything is interconnected. By working from this perspective the facilitator, the group and individual can use the power of many connections and resources in a person's life which may have been overlooked as

vehicles for change. A small movement in the right place can lead to surprisingly fast, dramatic and long lasting change in the rest of individual's life.

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