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Theory

Integrated Masculinity: Using Gestalt Counseling With Male Clients

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This article examines several central aspects of Gestalt work that have potential for helping male clients. The authors explain that although a search for literature on Gestalt counseling with men produced no results, Gestalt approaches have much to offer clinicians working with men. Theoretical concepts and interventions are addressed and illustrated with case examples of Gestalt work with male clients. Research implications are discussed.

Keywords: Gestalt counseling, masculinity, counseling, men

Many of the theoretical principles and techniques common in Gestalt work fit well with recommendations for conducting effective counseling with men. Gestalt therapy values each client's unique context and diversity variables and strives to understand the client's experience from his or her perspective (Resnick, 1995). This alone suggests that a client's gender expression will play a vital role in a counselor's ability to connect with the client and help him meet his therapeutic goals. Additionally, Gestalt work is often characterized by active experiments both in and out of session that can challenge traditional notions of counseling (Clarkson, 2004). This matches nicely with recommendations for working with men in therapy, including using "male-friendly" language rich with active verbs (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010), sitting side-by-side (instead of face-to-face) with men, or engaging male clients in physical activity while working with them (Kiselica, 2003). However, a literature search using PsycINFO revealed no published works exploring the use of Gestalt counseling with male clients. Although some published works did stress the importance of gender as a diversity variable, none provided specific recommendations for tailoring counseling to meet men's needs. In this article, we examine some of the constructs and interventions common in Gestalt work and how this applies to work with men. Masked case examples are used to illustrate the use of certain ideas and techniques. Finally, implications for clinical practice and future process and outcome research are discussed.

Gestalt Counseling Overview

Field Theory, Dialogue, and Phenomenology

Gestalt counseling is a humanistic, process-oriented therapy that integrates dialogue, field theory (Lewin, 1951), and

phenomenology. For a more complete discussion of Gestalt theory, see Joyce and Sills (2010) and Resnick (1995). Although the word *dialogue* commonly refers to talking or discussing, it has a more profound place in Gestalt counseling. Here, it is an expression of both parties' genuine experience in the moment. The term also reflects both parties' willingness to join with the other's experience while maintaining their own centeredness. Additionally, dialogue is the willingness to surrender to the interpersonal process that develops in the interaction between the parties without either one trying to control the interaction's outcome (Resnick & Estrup, 2000).

Field theory is the tool through which Gestalt counselors will most directly attend to issues of masculinity. The theory might be best understood through the metaphor of a photograph. Looking at a picture, one might initially see one's mother. In this case, the person prominently pictured represents the figure. The ground is composed of the grass, sky, birds, and other objects that appear in the picture's background. If, in discussing the picture, a person explains that the dog stole her mother's sandwich, the dog might suddenly seem more prominent in the photo. Similarly, a client's specific content discussed generally represents the figure in session. Also, the counselor's agenda or recent influential experiences might be the figure in the session because they are prominently in the counselor's awareness. As other factors become important, those factors emerge from the ground into the figure because they were always present but have become prominent (Polster & Polster, 1973). Diversity and ecological factors in the ground constantly interact with one another in constant and complex ways. Social norms regarding masculinity and their effect on the client (e.g., adherence to restrictive gender

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483

norms) inform the client's ground and might become figural during the course of counseling. A counselor's awareness of the client's field will ensure that he/she recognizes the role that masculinity plays in informing the client's behavior, internal experience, and relationships.

Phenomenology is a Gestalt term for each person's unique relationship between figure and ground (Resnick, 1995). Figure and ground are composed of and informed by many factors, including one's past. People often develop a way of understanding and responding to stimuli and experiences in a fixed way. This *fixed gestalten* is often born of the individual's need to creatively adjust to a situation in which there exist limited resources (e.g., childhood). Because social gender norms will likely inform men's phenomenology, their creative adjustments will likely emerge in relation to those norms. Men might remain emotionally disengaged, take unnecessary risks, and behave violently, among other things, in their attempts to cope with life's challenges. Similarly, some men might experience distress because a particular fixed gestalten deviated from masculine norms (e.g., running from a physical confrontation).

The principle supporting and surrounding dialogue, field theory, and phenomenology is *awareness* (Perls, 1973). Gestalt counseling does not necessarily strive for change as an outcome, but instead hopes to foster choice through awareness. Change, in a Gestalt approach, is understood as paradoxical and can only occur "when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not" (Beisser, 1970, p. 77). According to this paradoxical theory of change, when a client becomes fully aware, then the client has the power to choose. The counselor's role in Gestalt counseling is to cultivate the client's awareness and to empower that choice. Although change is a common therapeutic outcome, it is not a necessary one.

Client names and identifying information in the following case examples have been changed.

Gestalt Theory Case Example

This case example demonstrates the use of field theory as a frame for understanding a client's experience in the moment. The counselor showed a commitment to dialogue and tracked the phenomenology of his client, Enrique, to help him transcend his initial feelings of anger and access more authentic emotions.

Enrique is a middle-aged Latino man. He has a history of substance dependence and crime, which led to his incarceration at a residential facility. Enrique grew up in an abusive home in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. Despite this, he managed to achieve an upper-middle-class status through education and hard work. He is divorced, but loves his ex-wife and his son. Enrique once received a letter from his ex-wife mentioning that his 16-year-old son told his girlfriend that he loves her. This upset Enrique.

"She's turning him into a wimp," Enrique explained.

"In what way?" asked his counselor (Friedman).

"He's telling his girlfriend he loves her. That's such a sissy thing to do. How is he going to maintain the upper hand in the relationship if she already knows he's whipped?"

"It's important for him to be in control in the relationship," the counselor reflected.

"The man should ALWAYS be in control in the relationship."

"And by loving her, he is giving up that control? I'm not sure I understand, but it seems like that makes you angry."

"No, I'm happy that he loves her. I'm mad that he told her. Now she's in control."

"So it sounds like there is nothing wrong with your son loving this woman—just that he told her and now others will know. Say more."

"I don't know. I'm just pissed off. If I were there, things would be different."

"But you're not there."

"Yeah, I'm not there, and now his mom's messing him up, turning him into a wuss."

"There is no one to teach him how to be a man?"

[*long pause*] Enrique says nothing but his lip quivers and his face turns red.

"That's hard to hear, isn't it?"

[*Enrique nods his head but still says nothing. He is sniffing and avoiding eye contact.*]

"I can hear you sniffing and see your face getting red. You are trying so hard not to let me see what you are feeling. What's going on?"

"I feel bad."

"Bad?"

"I hurt my son, because I wasn't there for him. Now other people will hurt him."

"I'm hearing worry, shame, guilt. Do any of these fit for you?"

"All of them."

"Can you talk about some of those?"

"I should be there for him. He doesn't know how to be a man because I am not there. I am supposed to take care of my family and instead, I'm here."

"It's important for you to support your family?"

"It's important for me to protect *mi familia* [my family]! *Mi hijo* [my son]!"

"And telling his girlfriend he loves her is weak."

"Yes. He is not in charge. If he is not in charge of his woman, he is not in charge of his life, of his family. He commands no respect. Others will take advantage and hurt him."

Initially, Enrique's anger was the figure in this example. Cultural issues informing his beliefs about gender expression, experiences of being a racial/ethnic minority, and other diversity variables were all the ground. As Enrique explored his anger, elements from the ground gained prominence because of their influence on his feelings until culture, gender, and minority status became figural, and anger evolved into worry, shame, and guilt. Enrique's work illustrates an important aspect of therapy with men. Although men are conditioned to readily identify and express anger as their primary experi-

ence, adept clinicians can help men transcend their anger and experience more primary emotions, thus helping to access a more authentic internal experience (O'Neil, 2006).

Enrique's values and attitudes about family and gender roles are a meaningful part of his identity. In the dialogue, the counselor did not direct the discussion, but submitted to the process. The counselor tried to see the issue from the client's perspective and appreciate his experience in the moment (i.e., phenomenology). This approach may be particularly advantageous with men, especially given men's fear of being shamed or judged in counseling (Wexler, 2010). To Enrique, being there for his family was how he expressed love for them. His feelings of fear and concerns about weakness might have been informed by his Latino identity or by his socioeconomic background. Additionally, adherence to masculine norms encourages men to avoid any and all things potentially feminine, including feelings of fear and weakness (David & Brannon, 1976). Also, those who live in geographic areas with fewer resources may develop stricter views about masculinity and, as a consequence, have a lower tolerance for seeming weak or afraid (Good & Brooks, 2005). Enrique's reactions likely resulted from interactions between these factors. When Enrique felt his vulnerabilities exposed, those factors emerged from the ground to become the figure, expressed as anger.

Here-and-Now Orientation

Maintaining a here-and-now focus can help counselors attend to both the client's lived experience and the counselor's reactions to the client (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 2001). Traditionally masculine clients can have trouble accessing, expressing, or discussing vulnerable emotions, such as sadness, because they have been socialized away from vulnerable, though authentic, emotional experiences for fear of being viewed as weak (David & Brannon, 1976; Levant & Pollack, 1998). It is not uncommon for men to display anger (or no emotion at all) while discussing an emotionally salient event (Wexler, 2009), which can limit their authenticity and, by extension, the intimacy in their relationships. Anger is generally better for keeping people out than for building closeness and connection with them. An astute clinician will note that the client's presentation of anger (or lack of affective presentation) does not seem to match the content. Men tend to appreciate immediate, direct, and pragmatic feedback as long as it is not delivered in a shaming way, making the here-and-now orientation particularly helpful for working with masculine clients.

Here-and-now case example. The counselor in the following example noted and shared his experience of the client in the moment. If the counselor was not present, aware of the client's experience in the room, and aware his own reactions to the client, then he would have been unlikely to uncover important information about the client's other relationships.

Sam struggled to connect to others. He saw the bond that his family and friends shared with each other, but he felt dis-

connected. He struggled to experience love in any meaningful way. In fact, Sam did not seem to feel much of anything.

During one session, Sam detailed an argument with his fiancé. According to Sam, he explained to her his introverted nature and his need for solitude. He explained that she became angry, yelled at him, and cried. In response, he became irate and yelled back.

"That sounds like it was a difficult discussion," replied the counselor (Novack).

"It was awful."

"I wonder what it's like for you to recount that story with me now."

"It's fine. Why?"

"Well, you're telling me about an argument with the woman you plan to marry. Tempers ran hot. You yelled at each other. But you seem composed as you tell me about it now. I wonder if remembering the argument stirs any feelings in you."

"Well, sure. I feel angry, frustrated, and afraid that she would call off the wedding."

"How would I know that you're feeling all of those things?"

"Well, because I just told you I was."

"Of course, I know you're honest with me. My concern is this; you shared an emotional story with me, and said that you reexperienced some intense feelings while telling the story. As someone who cares about you, I want to experience some of that intensity. I want to have a sense of your experience of frustration, anger, and fear, but I don't. I feel disconnected, like you could have e-mailed me that story and had more or less the same impact."

"So, you want me to cry or scream or something?"

"Not necessarily. In fact, it's not that I want you to do anything specific, but you often discuss a sense of disconnect in other relationships. I wonder if others might experience you similarly to the way I do now."

"Well, my brother tells me that I seem distant. I wonder if this is what he means."

By using a here-and-now intervention, the counselor provided Sam with feedback about how he was being received by the counselor in a safe and supportive environment. It is worth noting that the working alliance had been well established with a strong sense of trust between the client and the counselor, which enabled the counselor to effectively provide such feedback (Horvath & Bedi, 2002). By remaining in the here-and-now, the counselor helped Sam gain awareness about his level of intimacy and interpersonal risk taking with others. Importantly, it was Sam who made the connection between the counselor's feedback and his relationships in his family of origin. Finally, whereas the counselor used an interpersonal process observation to highlight his here-and-now experience of Sam, this need not be the only use for this technique. Gestalt therapy values creativity and spontaneity (as long as it is informed and guided by theory and empirical understanding; Resnick & Estrup, 2000; Yontef, 1993). Ultimately, a Gestalt counselor's use of any technique is limited only by the level of creativity and presence in the moment.

Physical Sensations and Emotional Experience

One route to a client's here-and-now experience is through her or his physical sensations. Male clients often struggle to identify and name emotions in the moment. With help, though, men can often recognize physical sensations and use them to better understand their emotional experiences. Rabinowitz and Cochran (2001) recommended experiential interventions such as exaggeration, role playing, and psychodrama with masculine clients to help them recognize their physical sensations and connect those sensations to their emotional experience in the moment.

Levant et al. (2006) identified a phenomenon called *normative male alexithymia*, in which some men lack the ability to recognize, name, and express their emotions. The commonly accepted understanding is that boys are taught less than girls about how to label and express emotions. Moreover, when boys do express emotions, they are rarely validated; rather, they are often ridiculed or ignored, if not punished outright (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010). Wexler (2009) demonstrated how this phenomenon can leave some men able to express only anger. As a result, some men experience an inconsistency between their internal experience and their behavioral expressions. For many men, a lifetime of being socialized away from their inner experiences has contributed to the belief that they do not or cannot feel. This is simply not the case. Levant and Pollack (1998) have demonstrated that, with nurturing guidance, most men can learn to access and express their emotions.

Physical sensations and emotional experience case example. In this example, the counselor used physical awareness to help his client, Bruce, transcend his experience of anger and identify more vulnerable and authentic feelings that previously seemed unavailable. He expressed great concern about being viewed as weak if he expressed feelings of sadness, fear, grief, or love, which is a common concern for masculine clients.

Bruce was traditionally masculine. He came to counseling to improve his relationships with his wife and children. Raised with severe abuse and neglect, Bruce struggled with fathering his children. He wanted his children to have a better childhood than he had, but Bruce attributed much of his success to having overcome adversity. He worried that his children would be weak and unprepared for life's difficulties if he was easy on them.

After making some improvements at home, Bruce reported having had a difficult week. Concerned, the counselor (Novack) inquired.

"My kids piss me off," Bruce explained. "I ask them to clean their rooms and they don't. They need to learn respect and responsibility. How will they survive in the world?"

"That sounds frustrating."

"Frustrating?! I'm pissed, and I gave them a piece of my mind. Now they look at me like I'm a lunatic."

"I can tell that you are really angry, Bruce, but I wonder if there might be other feelings. Your reaction feels disproportionate to the situation to me. Until today, I have experienced you as more even-keeled than this."

"Well, maybe you've perceived me wrong. I'm their father and when I say clean up, they should clean!"

"It's my job to challenge you, Bruce, and to ask you to work with strong feelings, but I'm concerned that if the feelings are too big that they might get in the way of the work. On the one hand, I feel like this might be a valuable opportunity for us to work with strong feelings, and yet it's important to me that you feel safe and supported when we do."

"I trust you, Jerry," he said, "I'm so angry, but we can explore it."

"Well, don't lose that anger, Bruce. That's the valuable material. Feel it. Intensify it. Help me understand what the anger is like for you."

"Huh? I don't think I get it."

"Where in your body do you feel the anger? What is going on physically?"

"Well, my fists are clenched, and I feel my shoulders rise. My face and ears are hot."

"Tension in your hands and shoulders, heat throughout your face and ears. What else?"

"My breathing is fast and shallow. I just realized that my toes are clenching the floor."

"Short, rapid breaths and toes clenched. Fists clenched. Heat in your face and ears. Tightness in your shoulders. Are you feeling that now? Can we feel the anger you experienced early in the week now?"

Bruce responded, "Oh, yeah. I can feel that anger now. Wow. It's a strong feeling." [*The counselor, too, felt anger, tension, and heat through his face and head.*]

"I get that sense, Bruce. I feel as though I can feel it emanating off of you. Now, try not to think too hard. Just let your body show you a picture. When else have you felt this same way?"

"I was a kid. I would feel this when I heard my father pull in from work."

"So, your dad coming home from work made you angry? Pissed you off?" the counselor probed.

"No. Not angry. Afraid. I never knew what mood my dad might come home in. He might want to go out to dinner and ice cream or he might want to beat my ass. When he was in a foul mood, he would always challenge me—accuse me of something I didn't do or call me names and dare me to respond. He would challenge me and I could either back down and get my ass kicked for being a wimp, or respond and get my ass kicked for being disrespectful."

"It sucks being trapped like that. There's no way to win. Okay, so fear. I can even get a sense of the fear as you explain it. I feel really connected to you at the moment. It'll be interesting to explore your fear reaction to your kids' not cleaning their rooms."

Through continued exploration and experiential interventions, Bruce had a powerful insight. He realized that when his children did not obey him, he felt challenged by them, which surfaced unfinished business about feeling challenged in no-win situations by his father. Bruce would experience intense fear reactions any time he felt challenged by someone (he frequently perceived others to be challenging him). His creative adjustment (i.e., fixed gestalten) was to overcompensate for that fear by displaying intense anger and rage. Ultimately, by working through the aforementioned unfinished business, Bruce was able to experiment with new ways of being and to develop a fathering approach that empowered him to enforce boundaries with his children without losing his temper and using hypermasculine expressions of anger and rage (Pleasants, 2011) to overpower and bully the other members of his family.

Integration of Parts

It is not uncommon for men in counseling to feel pathologized for adhering to traditional and expected gender norms (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010). Men tend to see a problem as something to be fixed or solved, which implies a judgment that problems are inherently bad. This judgment about their problem(s) keeps them stuck, which could contribute to men feeling like failures in counseling, which, in turn, could lead to shame and guilt. This cycle is especially tricky when the problem is somehow associated with traditionally masculine behavior.

If the client's presenting problem is a behavior commonly considered a masculine norm, then the "cure" is for the man to become less masculine. By helping men to examine and experience both the limitations and the benefits of their traditionally masculine tendencies, counselors can facilitate the integration of various parts of the self. A holistic, integrated man will have choice. Choice is the goal for a Gestalt counselor. Masculinity can be an important and meaningful identity piece for many men. Just as a multiculturally competent counselor would not engage in counseling without consideration for how the client's various cultural identities affect one's presentation, a counselor should attend to social gender norms when examining a client's presentation (Jolliff & Horne, 1996). Integration allows men to maintain their masculine identities and still choose alternative ways of being when desired.

Integration case example. Mark had trouble integrating portions of his history and his emotional responses. In particular, he had a hard time feeling his sadness and often resorted to humor or stoicism instead. Mark was deeply depressed and dangerously obese, in part as a result of his avoidance of feelings. He came into counseling one day feeling particularly depressed.

"I am so sick of feeling depressed."

"What happened this week? You were feeling pretty good during our last session," remarked the counselor (Park).

"I don't know. I mean it was the anniversary of my mom's death, but that was so long ago." Mark became visibly tearful.

"That sounds important."

"Yeah, I guess, but it was so long ago and I hate it when people just cry and whine about the past. [Mark's voice starts to rise]. Amanda [Mark's wife] always brings the past into our fights. This week she brought up something that happened 5 years ago! I am so sick of it!"

"That sounds frustrating."

"Eeeh, it's not a big deal. She's just stupid. It doesn't matter." There was obvious sarcasm in Mark's presentation.

Frequently, Mark had demonstrated a similar process in session. He would start to feel some sadness about something, then he would tell a story that would make him angry, and then he would become sarcastic and move on to a new topic. Mark tended to use humor and sarcasm as a way to circumvent his feelings. The counselor described this pattern to Mark after this interaction; Mark did not quite believe it but acknowledged what the counselor offered. Later, in the same session, he started to repeat the process, again concerning his mother's death.

"I just feel so lost without her (mother). She always protected me. [starts to become tearful] She gave me whatever I wanted, and I guess that's why I feel like others should give me what I want. I remember this one time this guy was calling me names and I got so pissed off at him so I . . ." [As Mark becomes irate at the memory, the tears begin to dry up]

"Mark, I think you are doing that thing again. Are you making yourself angry to take you away from your sadness? Is that what you want to do?"

"Why would I want to stay with my sadness? Can't I just take a pill so that I have no emotions?" [Mark's anger was becoming palpable in the room, and his request for a pill to get rid of emotions introduced sarcasm again]

"Yeah, sadness is hard for most people, but it seems like you keep feeling sad about your mom's death and you keep avoiding it. Sometimes the sadness might be good to avoid because you are at work or just not feeling up to it, but, eventually, you will have to deal with those feelings. They are not going to go away when you ignore them."

Ultimately, Mark chose to stay with his sadness. In subsequent sessions, the counselor needed to help Mark recognize the process by which he avoided his experience, but soon he was able to notice it as it happened. The counselor also helped Mark accept that this was his tendency (i.e., fixed gestalten) and that it had served him well until now. As Mark gained awareness, he would get angry with himself and wonder why doing things differently was not easier for him. The counselor urged Mark to accept that while avoiding his sadness limited his ability to work through it, it also kept him safe from potential vulnerability. Accepting that this was his struggle, without necessarily judging it, freed Mark to experiment with new ways of being. This awareness and acceptance allowed Mark to choose whether he was able to express his sadness in any given moment, or if he would rather enact a different coping strategy. With this outcome, even if Mark chose to avoid his

sadness in a given context (e.g., while at work), he did so as a choice, with full awareness of what he was doing, not because of internalized social gender scripts. By contrast, in the past, Mark would engage this creative adjustment without realizing it and wind up angry, irritable, and exhausted much of the time.

Conclusion

In this article, we made several recommendations for effectively using a Gestalt counseling approach with masculine clients. Our intention was not to suggest that a Gestalt approach is necessarily better than any other approach to counseling men, but it was to help counselors already interested in Gestalt theory better use their skills to effectively work with male clients. Also, we wanted to highlight that experiential-process-oriented work can be effective with men. It is sometimes assumed that because men are often instrumental and concrete in their worldviews and problem solving, counselors should use only cognitive behavior approaches with them. It has been our experience that men are often thankful for more experiential and emotion-focused therapeutic work. Although some men find this approach challenging early on, they often find that they have been hungering for greater understanding of their own internal experiences and for more meaningful connections with the people in their lives. We have shared several clinical examples in which the authors have done just that, but there is currently little or no empirical evidence supporting the use of Gestalt counseling with male clients.

Future Research

There are several research considerations for studying Gestalt work with men. First, researchers could study the immediate, in-session or postsession effect of the interventions mentioned here along with other typically used experiential techniques. Second, there is a clear need for outcome studies with men who have participated in Gestalt counseling. Knowing which types of therapeutic trajectories and outcomes might be expected and normative when a male client enters counseling might prove valuable for the Gestalt counselor.

Minimally, we recommend a mixed methods research approach that will use statistical analyses of data collected from large samples to provide some information about generalizability, along with more in-depth qualitative data to help researchers thoroughly understand the meaning that participation in Gestalt counseling had for the participants and clinicians. Taken together, in-depth qualitative data and generalizable numerical data will provide counselors with a complete perspective about the use of Gestalt counseling with male clients.

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