

Field Attunement for a Strong Therapeutic Alliance: A Perspective From Relational Gestalt Psychotherapy

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Abstract

This article addresses the basis for the centrality of the therapeutic relationship in effective therapeutic outcomes, especially as distinct from technique, which prevails in the 21st-century Australian mental health context as a focus in determining what constitutes evidence-based practice. Presence-oriented therapeutic approaches infer an intersubjective field within which transformative enquiry can occur. This forms the basis of the article's exploration of the function of the phenomenon of the "field" for intersubjective therapeutic relationship and its relationship to Levinas' "third" as the basis for transformative, ethical, therapeutic practice. Work on "fields," in different disciplinary domains that share a focus on understanding underlying processes and patterns of physical and social organization, yields sufficient common ground to speak of a field as a substantive principle on which to base practice. Relational Gestalt psychotherapy has developed the concept of field sufficiently to have evolved principles for working with the felt effects of the field, without firm resolve yet as to the ontological status of relational fields. Paradigmatically the work remains emergent in most disciplines. Further transdisciplinary research into field theory may yield more nuanced analysis of how to work intentionally with field conditions.

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In the field of psychotherapy and counseling, the urgent drive from the evidence-based practice approach has come to reorient research and practice toward identifying effective therapeutic techniques based on an almost exclusively empirical model of validation. And yet according to the Common Factors research the pressure on clinicians to adopt only evidence-based practice “simply is not supported by the research evidence” (Wampold, 2010, p. 72). The Common Factors research calls for a shift in emphasis away from evidence-based practice toward enquiry into the factors of an effective therapist and effective therapeutic process. It is a radical call, responses to which are still forming and slowly transforming the field.

Therapeutic effectiveness is not based on manualized techniques and model specialization but on the here-and-now unfolding of the therapeutic alliance (Miller, Hubble, Duncan, & Wampold, 2010). Effective practitioners are more likely to ask for client feedback about both their application of therapy and their part in the therapeutic alliance, to engage clients in the therapy, and to address any challenges within the alliance itself. Relational and field-oriented therapies address and train for these factors. The focus in this article is on the specific and potentially rich contribution from relational psychotherapies and, in particular, Relational Gestalt Psychotherapy into current debates about what makes a therapist effective. It makes no sense, according to the Common Factors research, to replace the mantra of evidence-based practice with arguments for the predominance of one school of psychotherapy over another. The argument through this article is therefore not for the predominance of the Gestalt, or any other modality, *per se* but for the currently heightened relevance of an intersubjective and field orientation to therapeutic effectiveness, in response to the Common Factors research.

This article addresses first the basis for the centrality of the therapeutic relationship in effective therapeutic outcomes; especially as distinct from technique—which has hitherto prevailed, at least in the 21st-century Australian mental health and well-being context—as a focus in determining what constitutes evidence-based practice. Relationally oriented therapeutic approaches infer or imply an intersubjective field within which transformative enquiry can occur. The article explores the use and meaning of the phenomenon of the “field” for intersubjective therapeutic relationship, and the relationship of the “field” to Levinas’ notion of the “third,” as the basis for transformative ethical therapeutic practice. Levinas is, of course, important to

posthumanist (including Gestalt) therapeutic discourse, for his influential ethics of a post-enlightenment post-rational subject characterized by sensibility and responsibility to the Other (Levinas, 1969, 1978). As the always intersubjective subject arises in relation to the Other, Levinas' notion of the "third" provides a socially rather than metaphysically ethical delimiting factor for the intersubjective subject. In other words, the intersubjectively arisen subject responds to the Other within a field of others. The posthumanist subject is therefore not condemned to endless relativity but, rather, held within the realm and laws of the social. Field theory may offer a phenomenological frame for the workings of the "third" in a therapeutic context, and a therapeutic process that allows the subject to reengage with the field's ethical laws. The article concludes by drawing practice implications from a field-orientated approach to the therapeutic relationship.

Common Factors

The development of psychotherapy over the past two centuries has proceeded through argument and counterargument with the prevailing sciences and philosophies of its context. Throughout the 20th century this occurred largely through the establishment of schools of thought and practice. Prominent examples are the various schools of psychoanalysis that branched out from Freud, Jung, Klein; the philosophically derived and posthumanist psychotherapies (Existential, Person-Centered, Gestalt), behaviorist schools, systemic and postmodern schools. In disciplinary terms psychotherapeutic modalities have been derivative, taking in elements from, for example, Eastern teachings on mindfulness, Western philosophical inheritances—some of which have been well elaborated in Orange (2010)—as well as behaviorist and related sciences. Wampold (2010) divides psychotherapy into two developmental strands: the first strand comprises the medical (science-practitioner) model and the second strand comprises contextual or common factors (the reflective practitioner) models. In the pursuit of staking their therapeutic claim the science-practitioner and the reflective practitioner models have to varying degrees and within their own paradigmatic frame provided some indication of the effectiveness of their methods in achieving successful therapeutic outcomes. However, the meta-questions about effectiveness in therapy across a diverse range of modalities were not satisfactorily addressed until the Common Factors research found pantheoretical factors common to all effective modalities (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). Researchers and practitioners analyzed data from 40 years of outcome research, and from different perspectives, yielding consistent patterns.

The chief finding was the identification of the client lifespace and therapeutic relationship as the key determinants of therapeutic success. The client lifespace comprises the totality of influences on the client within their wider social world, beyond the therapeutic space. During the course of therapy, these domains may not feasibly be taken to be distinct, yet the domain of intersubjective influence from the perspective of the therapist is the space of the therapeutic relationship. It follows from this research that the disciplines and practice of psychotherapy stand to profit considerably from further analysis of how the therapeutic relationship works its effects.

Technique was shown in the Common Factors research to be of relatively minor significance to therapeutic effectiveness. This is important to note, given that manualized techniques are generally the end product of the evidence-based industry. Technique is driven by the implicit or explicit notions of self posited by the given modality and is not necessarily separable from the context for which it was developed. Where the self is taken to be primarily a rational and reasoning construct, interventions will be cognitively oriented. Where the self is taken to be emotionally constructed, interventions will be directed toward affect identification and regulation. The same follows for a primarily somatic notion of self: where the self is identified as the body, interventions will be directed toward embodied process.

While each intervention thus directed may contribute to an effective outcome—short or long term—the limitation of this approach is its reduction of the complexity of subjective experiences of selfhood to an atomistic and materialist entity: the client as “other” to the therapist, to be worked on within a Cartesian dynamic of subject–object relations. The current dominance of cognitive-behavioral therapy in many discourses of evidence-based therapy, for example, leads from a predominantly rationalist notion of self, and is measured for its effectiveness by predominantly rationalist methods and empirical biases. The cognitive self is not explicitly oriented for empathic expressions, though, or somatic engagement; the affective self is not well met by cognitive analysis. These elements of self, as Gendlin (1982) has axiomatically concluded, inter-inform subjective experience to weave a richer tapestry of information and options for optimal responsiveness in the field of therapeutic engagement.

In Levinasian ethics, a “third” is required, beyond the dyad of self and Other, for the operation and experience of subjectivity and social justice (Levinas, 1978). In relational psychotherapy the “in-between” of the field of engaged subjects may serve as metaphor of the “third.” The in-between is the relational space in which subjects engage with each other. It is at once liminal and central to intersubjective relating and may be taken to convey and transmit the charge of the field.

Field Orientation

A field orientation presupposes an intersubjective notion of self, beyond the simple duality of the Cartesian subject inferred from more instrumentalist therapeutic modalities that privilege technique over relational process. Field theory draws from the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and physics, among others. A glance at the work on “fields,” in different disciplinary domains that share a focus on understanding underlying processes and patterns of physical and social organization, yields sufficient common ground to speak of a field as a substantive principle on which to base practice. The psychotherapeutic modality that works most comprehensively with the concept of “field” is Relational Gestalt Psychotherapy, which has developed the concept of field sufficiently to have evolved principles for working with the felt effects of the field, without firm resolve yet as to the ontological status of relational fields. From a Gestalt perspective and the work in other disciplinary domains discussed here, the following can be said about the relational field: it emerges where subjectivities interact and it operates with immediacy; it conveys the qualities of information, intelligence, and presence, in excess of the individual subjects; the field is the ground for potentizing transformation; an engaged subject may activate the change process through attunement to the field, and what is figural for the client and in need of therapeutic processing will emerge.

A Field Notion of Self

From the perspective of Gestalt and relational therapies, therapeutic interventions are guided by a notion of self that is both form and process: *form*, in its accretions of developmental history, and consequent character style; *process*, in its existence in the here and now, arising into being at moments of contact at the boundary (with self, other, environment). Self is here understood to be more verb than noun, more event than singular form; a moment-to-moment reformation of subjectivity dependently arisen from a context. This process-formation of self is what makes possible structural or ground change, as distinct from shorter-term cognitive or behavioral change (Jacobs, 2003; Parlett, 2005; Yontef, 1993). Here, change can be taken as code for optimal responsiveness, at times a therapeutic end in itself. It is pointedly not a manipulated event involving the ministrations of the therapist on the client. Change is suggestive of insight, increased consciousness, analyzed content, agency, transformation.

Particular attention is required to work with self—oneself, other selves—not as a continuous entity but as a moment-to-moment proposition undecidable in advance. Selves call one another into being, at the contact boundary,

Table 1. Construction of Self and Corresponding Interventional Orientation, Mode, and Experience.

Construction of self	Orientation of intervention	Mode of intervention	Subjective experience
Cognitive self	Rational	Analysis, diagnosis, (sharpness, clarity)	Abstract, experience-far
Affective self	Emotional	Relational (empathy, resonance, curiosity)	Felt-sense, experience-near
Somatic self	Physical	Embodied phenomenology as prompt for enquiry	Felt-sense, experience-near
Awareness	Nonlocal: field attunement	Integrative, attention to field information and organization, process oriented, nonlocal, nonpersonal	Meta-experiential compassionate discernment

within the field that is of and yet exceeds them. To meet this selfing adequately the therapist attunes to their own ontological experience and to the field within which the selfing is emergent. Crucially, the attunement is achieved by the application of mindful awareness, Freud's evenly suspended attention. Just as cognitive therapeutic interventions pertain to the rationalist notion and expressions of self, affective interventions to the emotional self, somatic interventions to the physical self, and so on, so mindful awareness pertains to the field notion of self. Table 1 shows the relationship of the given therapeutic construction of self and its corresponding interventional orientation, mode, and experience. The constructions of self are not mutually exclusive; however, the table shows the significance of the distinction between local (fixed) and a nonlocal constructions of self for field-oriented therapeutic work.

Awareness is nonpersonal, nonlocal, belonging to no one, and therefore not an aspect of self, as such. It is what powers intersubjectivity, carrying the qualities and texture of compassionate discernment, of acceptance, and intelligence. From a subjective and experiential perspective these qualities charge the field of the therapist and client, increasing the collective intelligence and potentizing transformation. Though nonpersonal the field is intimately and subjectively felt. Field attunement parallels the function of the "third," bringing forward the ethical and political dimensions to the therapeutic dyad, and expanding the relational possibilities beyond the dyadic mirror, the infinite regress or sadomasochistic structure of two; as the field has its own laws and supports subjects to self-regulate in an ongoing process of informational

exchange. This process matches Levinas' formulation of the self (Levinas, 1969, 1978): through encounters with their world, the self forms and re-forms its layers of interiority which are infused with sensibility precisely because the self is borne of relationship.

The relational self in Gestalt psychotherapy draws both from the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl, via Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Buber, and from Buddhist understandings of awareness and consciousness. Phenomenologically the self is oriented toward the world or environment for its frame of reference, and it co-arises at the contact boundary with others in its phenomenological field. Consciousness is taken to be *intentional* (Husserl, 1900/1970). Consciousness is always *of* something, intending toward phenomena, not free-standing from its own side. The self in classical Buddhism is also co-emergent with phenomena. However, within Buddhism consciousness is understood at its clearest to be existent from its own side, independent of phenomena. Moreover, accessing this consciousness freed from entanglement with the phenomenological information reported in from the senses, including from the mind itself, is the start of the process of enlightenment. Within therapy, the relative and relational world is often the focus and is therefore not dispensable. Its goals inevitably diverge, therefore, from the more radical goals of classical Buddhist practice.

Relational Gestalt psychotherapy owes most to Levinas—who worked at the border between phenomenological philosophy and religion—for a notion of self whose precognitive experience and intersubjective relationality is marked not so much by *intentionality*, per Husserl, as it is infused with *sensibility* (Levinas, 1969, 1978). The sensibility and fellow-feeling at the core of the ontological self is Levinas' important contribution to the expansion of phenomenology; and it is this notion of self that implicitly if not explicitly informs much contemporary relational psychotherapy.

Defining the Field

Whereas a Cartesian or dualist relational structure posits separate individuals each an object to the other's subject, a field orientation infers a relationship between subjects who are co-influencing each other's momentary subjective experience and expression. The "in-between" of their relating is a space—metaphorically and, perhaps, literally—charged with the implicit and explicit memories, thoughts, affect states, identity constructions, perceptions, and other mental formations that each reverberates from their past and present subjective experiences.

In relational Gestalt terms, the field is a "totality of mutually influencing forces that together form a unified interactive whole" (Yontef, 1993, p. 297).

With a co-created reality a field comes into existence. The field itself, once organized and structured, like a dance, begins to “regulate the dancers” (Parlett, 1991, p. 76). It requires an “engaged subjectivity” to register a field (Parlett, 2005), and “there is no way to know a field except within it, as part of it” (Latner, 1992, p. 22). In this ontological designation of “field,” activating elements are presence, engagement, and mindfulness—or meta-awareness—of the present engagement. Through the moment-to-moment engagement of therapist and client each is co-creating the current field. The field momentum gathers and in turn influences what can be experienced and expressed by the subjects of the field. The therapist and/or the client’s capacity for meta-awareness provides the field attunement necessary for harnessing the momentum for transformation.

From a field orientation, the self is neither a self-serving nor pathologized construct. Selves in this orientation emerge as intersubjective and co-created, locatable by the multiple constituents of the field. These are the system information, or intelligence, that encodes histories of how the engaged subjects have been culturally identified (sexed, gendered, raced) and organized within their family, national, and other systems, as well as the introjects and resistances around these constructions.

The dynamic flow of matter–energy and information in the field organize and reorganize the field with infinite degrees of freedom. Field formations are unpredictable and it requires an attitude of present-centered, “cultivated uncertainty” (Staemmler, 2007) to discern and work intentionally with an intersubjective field to therapeutic effect. This nonmaterial field is apprehended through the nonmaterial action of mindful awareness. Mindfulness arises in consciousness where knowing and being converge, in direct here-and-now experience. The cultivation and application of mindfulness, and the intentional interaction with the co-emergent field, are thus integral to psychotherapeutic practice in effecting transformation within the client.

Gestalt psychotherapy has effectively developed interventions and refined its training for the skills to develop a strong therapeutic alliance, through its theoretical construal of the field as an intersubjective and relational construct, charged by the levels of intentionality, sensibility, and awareness of the subjects who form and are formed by it. Whether understood as a substratum of information, as a current of intelligence or consciousness, as an effect of the intentional collision of the developmental self with the self-as-process in the present, the field is worked with by relational Gestalt therapists as the very structure of ground where sustained transformation is possible.

Gestalt Field Theory

Gestalt's working notions of field are derived from and continue to evolve through engagement with other disciplinary domains. Within discourses of Gestalt therapy, research questions remain regarding the epistemological and ontological status of the concept of field. Parlett (2005) and O'Neill (2008) encourage dialogue between Gestalt and quantum physics regarding developments in field theory. Latner (2005), in contrast, considers the quest fruitless, preferring a connotative definition of the field as a personal construction, a "good enough" approximation of a concept rather than an overdetermined theory governed by rules of logic. He connotes field as an "orienting principle" or attitude useful for prompting the possibility for "new vistas of thought and imagination" in therapy (Latner, 2005, pp. 2-3).

Latner's resistance to dialogue with scientific discourses may be understood through his assessment of the key difference in the orientations: "We are way ahead of the materialists in deciding what an experience is, since we aren't bound to define experiences only in terms of what can be measured" (Latner, 2005, p. 7). While his hesitation regarding the reductiveness of the prevailing orthodoxy of empiricism is understandable (if reactive), from a historical perspective Gestalt therapy has been derivative of Buddhism (mindfulness, presence) philosophy (phenomenology) and psychological science (Kurt Lewin's field theory) for its core process. While the therapeutic practice continues to evolve those elements for and from a Gestalt orientation, it seems imperative for the continued evolution of the therapy that it maintain dialogue with ongoing developments in those areas. Importantly, the approach to quantum and other disciplinary field theories can be one of dialogue not of deference to, or constraint within, an empirical frame of reference. In other words, the enquiry into quantum fields is not undertaken to prove through physics what we might claim to know through hermeneutic research and practice; it is, rather, to enquire and enrich understanding at the contact boundary of distinct but not alien areas of enquiry.

For O'Neill (2008), the correlation between Gestalt practice and recent developments in physics are clear enough to the extent that physics has posited the wave-particle duality as the basis of matter (light). This is indicative of a dynamic between matter and field that is underscored by nonlocality and unpredictability, with implications for the impact of the measurer on the measured; indicative too of the potency of intentional awareness. "In phenomenological terms, our phenomenological field is a 'special case' of the wider existing quantum field potential. Awareness by and of itself has an effect and as we become aware of each other, we change each other" (O'Neill, 2008, p. 17).

More specifically, the relativistic quantum field can be understood to carry information, as indicated by the famous Double Slit experiment. In this aspect, it is particularly parallel to the experience of working therapeutically with a field orientation:

The information in the quantum field that accompanies a particle that has passed through either slit is available to the other particles as they pass through . . . there is information in the field as a whole that is accessible to individual particles which, in turn, influences them. (O'Neill, 2008, p. 19)

The capacity of a field to convey information is a principle inferred and relied on by field-attuned therapists. A therapist may discern an implicate pattern or insight emerging from the field of the therapeutic interaction, through attention to their own phenomenological experience in the immediacy of the interaction with the client. Such information is checked out with the client to identify whether it is indeed figural for them. Notably the therapist is not in a privileged position as expert on the client's thought world. Rather, she/he is responsible for the process and maintenance of contact with the momentum of the field. In the event that a therapist's hunch resonates for the client, the client can choose to take up the identified pattern for enquiry; to engage the material through dialogue, experimentation, and embodiment; and integrate into subjective experience the offering of the field.

Bloom (2012) argues for a modification of Gestalt notions of self to incorporate consciousness into the frame of awareness and deepen the phenomenological import of Gestalt's contribution to relational psychotherapies. He proposes adding to the foundational organism/environment field a supplemental self/world field to take into account the personhood integral to the experiencing self. Perhaps with crossovers to emergence theory, for Bloom acts of consciousness provide the ground for continuity of the person emergent through contact on the awareness-consciousness continuum. His linkage of awareness and consciousness to self functioning is a worthy modification that draws from and insists on dialogue with a broader disciplinary field than the world of Gestalt theory alone.

Other Fields

In other related disciplinary domains, however, the question of the definitions and dimensions of "field" and its ontological status has barely been asked, much less, settled. Inevitably a concept that may exist as theory alone, but with putative material existence, is contentious in the more empirical frames of reference, where measurability is a prerequisite to validity. Nevertheless,

within the area of quantum physics, as well as neurobiology, for example, the concept of field continues to be explored and in some instances taken as material reality at different levels of physical manifestation. Systems analyses within emergence theory and within the discipline of biological sciences—for example, Miller's (1978) systems theory analysis of living systems—also provide some parallel to the constructions of field theory in Gestalt psychotherapy. Enquiry here is not to posit a biological basis alone for intersubjective resonance but rather to discern the ontological status of systems of information—and perhaps of consciousness—that proceed from and exceed engaging subjectivities.

Quantum Fields

For the purposes here of discerning a transdisciplinary common factor for field theory, quantum fields can be considered to illustrate the “in-between” of particles whose charges influence each other. Quantum field theory describes the dynamics of the interaction of physical fields with matter, such as the gravitational or electromagnetic fields. The gravitational field was initially taken as a conceptual construct to allow calculations of the gravitational force acting between a pair of massive objects in a given point in space. The construal of the field as an independent entity later emerged with quantum mechanics in the 20th century, through which subatomic particles came to be understood as the quanta (excited state) of a given quantum field. Rather than particles standing apart as individual objects, from the etheric background, they were now understood to be defined by the quantum field of which they were measurably a part (Weinberg, 1977).

Fields within quantum physics therefore have independent physical reality, occupying space and carrying energy (Wheeler, 1998). Fields are systems with an infinite number of degrees of freedom. A particle entering into such a field “feels” a force, and the impact of one component of a field is felt by another component of a field after it moves through the field:

The fact that the electromagnetic field can possess momentum and energy makes it very real . . . a particle makes a field, and a field acts on another particle, and the field has such familiar properties as energy content and momentum, just as particles can have. (Feynman, 1963, pp. 2-4)

Following the quantum models, it may be speculative but nevertheless has explanatory force to say that waves of mutual influence move between client and therapist. These waves convey diachronic (developmental histories, relative cultural, and sociopolitical locatedness) and synchronic (present time)

information in the form of energy. In this way the field implies a continuance of the in-between of client and therapist: the intersubjective space charged with subjectivity. Just as sound waves move through space to convey sound from one source to the other, so meaning—or exchange—can be inferred to occur in ripples or waves through the in-between of the client and therapist.

Resonance

Rupert Sheldrake (2008) has famously and contentiously proposed morphic resonance to identify transgenerational inheritance, beyond DNA, of behavioral and memory patterns. The inheritance is passed through the nonmaterialist medium of morphic resonance. His work has been critiqued within mainstream science as unfalsifiable and inconsistent with current established scientific theories. Yet Siegel's work in neurobiology might suggest that the positivist science is catching up with the hypothesis. More recently, Sheldrake has issued a challenge to what he described as the closed system of scientific research, calling for an expansion from empirically oriented research foci to engagement with nonmaterial manifestations of mind and consciousness (Sheldrake, 2012).

His earlier radical propositions find common ground with more recent work in neurobiology on the physiological impacts of interrelationship. Work on mirror neurons suggests that human nervous systems are designed for empathic response and intersubjective relating, and that the impact—resonance—generates neural pathways that direct growth and development of the subject (Siegel, 2010). The mutual influence and consequent construction of senses of self and subjectivity parallels the theory of field:

The physiological result of presence and attunement is the alignment of two autonomous beings into an interdependent and functional whole as each person influences the internal state of the other. With resonance we come to “feel felt” by the other. This joining has profound transformative effect on both people. Resonance is what our human nervous system is built to require for a sense of connection to others early in life. . . . The need for such intimate and vulnerable connection persists throughout our lives. (Siegel, 2010, p. xx)

Living Systems

Within the biological sciences, Miller's (1978) systems theory analysis of living systems construed such systems as open and self-organizing, interacting with their environment through the medium of life. They comprise sub-systems that process matter–energy and/or information (Miller & Miller,

1992). To the extent that information systems can be said to organize or order matter, this model corresponds with Gestalt's field theory inasmuch as the field is an open self-organizing system (comprising interacting subjects), in which the processing of energy-matter and information has the potential to yield new patterns and variations within the system.

The ontological analysis provided by emergence theory also extends the notion of field. Emergence theory is concerned with understanding the processes of consciousness and evolution. One defining element of emergence is "property emergence," according to which "when aggregates of material particles attain an appropriate level of organisational complexity, genuinely novel properties emerge in these complex systems" (Clayton, 2008, p. 2). In addition, emergence implies irreducibility: "Emergent properties are irreducible to, and unpredictable from, the lower-level phenomena from which they emerge" (Clayton, 2008, p. 2).

"Life" and "mind" are considered emergent and, therefore, are not reducible to the Cartesian duality of subject and object. In parallel with the Gestalt notion of self-as-process arising through relationship within a given field context, for emergence theory the foundational substance of living, or emergent, systems is relational. It proposes "the primary working matter of the world to be causal relationships, which are connected to one another in a variety of ways—and together make up patterns of causal networks" (Wimsatt, as cited in Clayton, 2008, p. 3). The outcome of the causal networks is greater than the sum of their parts, and according to Clayton (2008), the empirical and conceptual challenge is "ascertaining when and why the complexity is sufficient to produce new effects" (p. 4). This formulation parallels the clinical question from a Gestalt perspective of how to work with field attunement to optimize therapeutic outcomes, or "produce new effects."

Intentional Field Work

Field theory supports a therapist to observe a situation as a whole, including themselves within it, and to notice the process. The therapist's own awareness and interpretations are understood as functions of the field. They do not exist independently but emerge from the context; and they contribute to the process of enquiry (Roubal, 2012). To work with field sensitivity is thus to recognize that there are not separate selves meeting across empty space. Rather, there is intersubjective exchange in a recursive (mutually influencing) loop, with each participant of a field shaping and being shaped by the field's organization.

Mindful awareness that is nondirective, inclusive, phenomenological, and ontological supports intentional attunement to the field of the client and of

the client–therapist relationship. A field-oriented therapist will attune to the synchronic and the diachronic information of the client and therapist. Far from the ontological stance here producing a self-serving subjectivity—per Levinas—it provides the ground from which the Other and the “third” can be placed into dynamic relationship.

Gestalt therapy works with five field principles for discerning and engaging a field orientation. Parlett (2005) sets them out as:

Organization: Unexpressed needs organize the dynamics of the field; therapy involves mutual investigation of this. The constellation of a field as a whole conditions given types of behavior.

Contemporaneity: Both past and present are experienced in, and inform, present moment experience; meaning is constructed according to the present and past contexts in which selfing emerges.

Singularity: Each situation and perspective is unique; the “same story” is never the same, as each iteration affords the possibility for fresh insight. To respect this, uniqueness requires the capacity to tolerate or cultivate uncertainty. Unique occurrences require unique perspectives, rather than generalized assumptions. This makes transformation possible.

Changing process: There is no static, absolute place to get to within the enquiry. Experience is provisional and context bound, and the field undergoes continual change. Emphasis is on moment-to-moment process. What will unfold cannot be wholly predicted. Diagnoses are to be held lightly. The phenomenological method supports the articulation and integration of experience as it emerges in real time.

Possible relevance: Nothing of the field can be excluded in advance as irrelevant to the current unfolding process; attention to what is momentarily or persistently relevant or interesting will show how the field is organized.

These principles come closest to mapping the process for transformation in the intersubjective therapeutic relationship.

From the perspective of Siegel (2010), the therapeutic interaction activates neural circuitry that allows people to “feel felt” by each other. Mindful awareness, which is a kind of self-attunement, makes this possible. Within the purview of mindful awareness is the entirety that a subject holds to exist in their world. Whatever is taken in through the senses sits within awareness, whether or not the subject is attuned to it. Awareness is impersonal and operating at all times and places. Attention can be directed to awareness at will; however, awareness cannot be grasped, just as space in the field cannot be grasped and yet makes material locatedness possible. Just as space enables

objects to be arranged in relationship to each other, so awareness enables selves to be adjusted (intra- and interpersonally) in relationship to each other within a given field.

The field features of nonlocality and intelligence have implications for the client's life space, which—according to the Common Factors research—taken together with the therapeutic relationship, contribute 70% to the effectiveness of therapy (Asay & Lambert, 1999).

Because the field manifests the approach of the Other—arising on contact of self with self, consciousness with consciousness—the sensibility inherent within the field elicits optimal responsiveness. The ontological grounding of the self of the therapist actively amplifies the intelligibility of the field. A therapist working with field orientation is called on by the immanence and immediacy of the field to take therapeutic responsibility for/with the Other. The field may be seen to possess the qualities of a law, operating impersonally but intersubjectively, regulating the dancers—to take Parlett's image—linking ethics of the relational with the politics of the intelligent “third” of the field. The notion of field extends the therapeutic alliance beyond the client/therapist dyad to the broader social field within which the therapy takes place, and thus increases the stakes for the effectiveness of the process.

Concluding Thoughts

The shift from evidence-based practice to client-informed practice calls for greater therapeutic and research emphasis on the therapeutic relationship. This is not established sufficiently by reliance on a generic application of empathy within the therapeutic situation. Rather, the relational process is a subtle and developmental practice that relational psychotherapies place at the center of their training and process. The philosophical basis for most relational psychotherapies warrants serious reconsideration within contemporary discourses of the therapeutic process.

Gestalt, among other relational psychotherapies, bases its therapeutic alliance on a combination of factors informed by phenomenological theory and practice. These factors are the phenomenological method; embodied and inclusive therapeutic dialogism, and a field orientation based on the principles of organization, contemporaneity, singularity, changing process, and possible relevance.

Different working notions of self inform the variety of therapeutic modalities, and each posits implicitly if not explicitly a locus of attention—cognitive, affective, somatic—for its interventions. Mindful awareness is the requisite mode of attention and intervention for intentional therapeutic

engagement with the field that arises in intersubjective relational work. Mindfulness is the unity of nonconceptual knowing and nonspecific being. It generates a form of presence that is open to intersubjective relations, rather than closed to the Other in an ego protective stance. Mindful practice therefore generates conditions optimal for field orientation; and field orientation is a condition for the development and maintenance of a therapeutic alliance that can support transformative work at the deepest levels of the structures of ground for the client.

A field orientation, moreover, bears an implicit ethics of intersubjectivity allowing, with Levinas, a transcendence-in-immanence, whereby the therapeutically facilitated performativity of the field yields what was out of awareness for the client. As the client re-constellates their lived experience transformation occurs through present attention to the promptings of the field, and through reconfiguration of the field's conscious elements. The laws of the field thus regulate the client, through a consensual process of engaged enquiry. The field, as the "third," enlarges an otherwise potentially solipsistic enquiry into a broader ethics of context and social relations.

Field theory and practice belong to no single disciplinary domain. The relational Gestalt approach is offered here simply as one basis for enquiry into how the therapeutic alliance may be more fully understood and developed. Paradigmatically the work remains emergent in most disciplines. Further transdisciplinary research into field theory and its relation to mindfulness may yield more nuanced analysis of how to work intentionally with field conditions, and would constitute a timely intervention within the still emergent discipline of psychotherapy.

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