

This article is written by one of the participants of the 2012/14 International Training at the Instituto di Gestalt HCC Italia, in 'Psychopathology and Contemporary Disturbances'.

From Psychopathology to Creative Adjustment

Introduction and intentionality

There are new and interesting developments in the area of post-modern Gestalt psychotherapy, and in Italy there is a particularly interesting movement that resonates well with current analysis of contemporary trends and developments in society, and how this affects our understanding of and approach to psychotherapy.

In this article Gestalt psychotherapist Rolf Aspestrand shares some of his reflections after completing a specialization training with psychiatrist Gianni Francesetti and Dr. Psychology Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb at the Instituto di Gestalt HCC Italia.

Francesetti and Spagnuolo Lobb have since 2010 collaborated on developing an International Training Programme in 'The Gestalt Psychotherapy Approach to Psychopathology and Contemporary Disturbances'. They promote a movement where we as Gestalt psychotherapists affirm our perspective on psychopathology as part of a relational suffering, and our theoretical foundation of psychopathology as being part of the human ability to creatively adjust to the environment, with the intentionality for contact.

Francesetti and Spagnuolo Lobb's programme is also part of a movement towards a more academic and scientific approach to Gestalt psychotherapy. Spagnuolo Lobb and Francesetti are adamant that a particular responsibility rests on our profession to document our expertise, experience and findings from the Humanistic School of Psychotherapy. Significant knowledge and relational beauty can be lost in the work of Mental Health and human suffering, if we fail to meet contemporary demands for research and evidence based practice.

Gestalttherapy – from Psychopathology to Creative Adjustment.

DSM 5 and ICD 11 are the two international classification and diagnostic systems for pathology and health problems. In Norway somatic and psychiatric diagnosis are defined by ICD 11 (developed by WHO). In the US and some European countries, DSM 5 (developed by the American Psychiatric Association) is the primary diagnostic system for mental suffering.

The Gestalt psychotherapist work from a phenomenological perspective and seek to meet the client in a non-interpretive and non-normative manner. Standards such as 'well', 'pathological' or 'disturbed' refer to norms made by someone who do not know the unique experience and story of the person we have in front of us. Thus the paradox in using a normative tool for a psychotherapist resting on the foundation of phenomenology and Gestalt therapy theory.

Norms are practical as a general framework and for a conceptual understanding. But for any psychotherapist norms can stand in the way to see the unique suffering and struggle that gives meaning to what may appear as inappropriate behaviour, reactions or emotions. Spagnuolo Lobb is despite these limitations refreshingly adamant that the Gestalt psychotherapist can and must make good use of the diagnostic system.

Her reaction to the critical question of using DSM 5 as a Gestalt psychotherapist is: 'How can you know how to work, if you don't know what kind of suffering you are facing?'

Spagnuolo Lobb is not undermining the need of the therapist to explore the relational dynamics and history together with the client. But she stresses how the therapist can profit from the descriptive knowledge in the diagnostic system, allowing our interventions to be more precise. In addition a common reference to symptoms has the potential to strengthen the dialogue and collaboration between Gestalt psychotherapists and other health care professions using DSM-5 or ICD-11. A collaboration our clients expect and rely on when needed.

In their book 'Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice – from Psychopathology to the Aesthetics of Contact' Gianni Francesetti together with Michela Gecele and Jan Rubal have accumulated a number of descriptions of the most common diagnoses and sufferings. And they address them from the theories of Gestalt psychotherapy. As Gestalt psychotherapists they do not primarily explore the individual suffering, but rather the relational style and contact created between the client and the therapist. The *Creative Adjustment* and phenomena's emerging in the therapy room. They explore the various symptoms and diagnoses with the intention to better understand the relational variations and styles they represent. More precisely, they explore the organization of the Self, the Field and Relational phenomenon's typically found in Depressions, Personality Disorders, Anxiety Disorders and Psychosomatic Disorders.

What is Creative Adjustment

Fritz Perls (1951) described all contact as the organism's Creative Adjustment to the environment in which it exist. According to Francesetti and Spagnuolo Lobb this description adds a unique and important perspective to the diagnostic system (DSM-5 and ICD-11): It has the potential to help the therapists or health care professional to recognize the client's competence, beauty and capacity, with less risk of a limiting understanding or interpretation of the client.

Creative Adjustment is understood through the 'Law of Pregnance' first formulated by Kohler, Wertheimer, Koffka in 1912. It suggests that our ability to creatively adjust to a situation will only be as good as the conditions the environment permits. Human perception will always find the easiest way to make sense of reality; the psychological organization that requires the least cognitive and emotional force on the basis of the environment in the given situation.

According to Spagnuolo Lobb it is our task as Gestalt psychotherapists to recognize the beauty and uniqueness of the individual's psychological suffering. We are looking for the uniqueness of each person's ability to creatively adjust and adapt to the environment - and to recognize the clients' intentionality for contact. Spagnuolo Lobb thus defines all being and all actions as an intention from the organism to contact the environment.

The Gestalt Psychotherapist address the same pathology, the same suffering, the same diagnosis and the same symptoms as described in the DSM5 or ICD 10, but is genuinely interested in seeing the intentionality and the *Aesthetic Language* behind the individual suffering – the Creative Adjustment to the situation and relationship, with the intentionality for contact.

An Aesthetic Approach

Aesthetics in this context refers to the study of sensations and emotions. Francesetti describes this perspective as a movement from a Hermeneutic (interpretive) approach to psychopathology, to an Aesthetic (the study of the senses) approach. The Gestalt psychotherapist seeks to acknowledge and address the gap between the diagnosis and symptoms described as pathology in DSM-5 and ICD-1, and the understanding of human suffering as a sensory ability to adapt to the environment, again with the intentionality for contact.

Spagnuolo Lobb and Francesetti see this as an expansion of classical psychiatry and psychology. By demonstrating a genuine curiosity for the client's capacity to creatively adjust to the environment, we are better able to explore the link between the diagnosis and the story the symptoms are telling. The pathology can be identified and observed, but first and foremost to find the relational suffering it represents between us. The shape and style of contact that evolves in the here and now between the client and the therapist. What this style of contacting represents; the roots of this relational organization and suffering; the sensations and emotions behind the behavior; and finally the potential of unfolding additional forms of expressions and sensations through awareness achieved in therapy.

This does not mean that the Gestalt psychotherapist ignore the biological and physiological vulnerabilities that may promote pathological symptoms. It means that we as clinicians recognize human suffering and pathologies as being part of a *Language of the Senses*. We see psychopathology as part of an ability to creatively adjust to our environment in order to survive. An evolutionary capacity to create a protection or regulation from an environment that have been - or still can be destructive.

We recognize the dignity and struggle behind the human creative adjustment. We do not attack the symptoms, but recognize the senses and relational capacity. Spagnuolo Lobb says: 'Do not take away the symptom from a person; they are the protection that is created with great effort and precision to survive.' And it is from this perspective we start the psychotherapeutic work with our clients.

How the Creative Adjustment takes shape.

The Gestalt psychotherapist is concerned with the unique relational style that a certain diagnosis or symptom suggests. How the creative adjustment takes shape and how it expresses itself in the relationship here and now. The questions we may ask with a client diagnosed with a Borderline Personality Disorder (DSM5) can for example be: How does the situation or field between us (me and the client) organize itself in a 'Borderline Style'? How are we affected? So we ask: Who are we in this situation (Personality Function)?; what are we doing (Ego function)?; and what are we feeling (ID function)?

Gestalt psychotherapists are interested in finding the *functionality* of the Creative Adjustment, and thus interested in how the creative adjustment arose: How is this way of being in a relationship a function of surviving earlier relationships - and what is the link between past experience and what is unfolding here and now in the therapy room?

As Gestalt Psychotherapists we are concerned with the descriptive and relational. We are interested in recognizing and building awareness of what we create together in the here and now - not primarily focused on what happens intrapsychic, but what happens between us – what figures in the 'in-between' in this particular situation and relationship.

The hypothesis is that the emotional suffering, trauma or disorder is a relational suffering based on previous experience, which has stimulated the organisms' ability to creatively adjust. The suffering occurred in relationships with others and will only be found and potentially changed in relationships with others – in this case in the interaction and in the 'in-between' with the psychotherapist.

Francesetti describes the Gestalt Theoretical understanding of psychopathology as a movement from a diagnostic system DSM-5, to the understanding of Creative Adjustment; a movement from a purely descriptive diagnosis, to recognizing the beauty of creative adjustment with the intentionality of reaching the other. A movement from a systemic code, to the description of sensations and intentionality. From a Hermeneutical perception (the study of interpretation), to an Aesthetic perception (the study of sensations/emotions), and Semiotic perception (the study of meaning – the meaning of signs and symbols).

Francesetti and Spagnuolo Lobb calls this a movement of post-modern - or contemporary Gestalt psychotherapy, and represents a direction in psychology and psychiatry where we look for what is the intentionality, beauty and appropriateness in the human suffering – the language and the meaning of the senses and the individual suffering. They imply that the suffering in various ways represent an adequate response to early and contemporary social phenomena and societal change. As part of the human evolution and growth in relation to an ever changing environment.

The Gestalt psychotherapists' expertise lies in managing an academic curiosity and a well trained interest for each individual relational style and creative adjustment - unique for each relationship, moment and place. To recognize the uniqueness of each meeting and moment is vital in the process of recognizing and building new experiences in meeting the other.

The quality of the relationship that unfolds in the therapy room is an expression of the experiences that both the client and therapist brings into the situation. At the same time we are influenced by the times in which we live in.

Creative Adjustment in the light of contemporary times.

Spagnuolo Lobb has provided an analysis which for me is useful in seeing how the past and the present times impact our *relational skills*. How the times we live in now and the times we grew up in impact our expectations and style of contacting that characterize our relationships.

According to Spagnuolo Lobb we need to pay close attention as psychotherapists to what is happening in society, contemporary trends and movements, in order to recognize the context, field and situation we and our clients are a part of.

Spagnuolo Lobb describes three different eras in recent times as follows:

1950 - 1970 - Narcissistic Society

1970 - 1990 - Technological and Borderline Society

1990 - 2010 – Liquid Society

I encourage the reader to examine the first two phases by themselves. This article does not leave room to go through them. I will address the phase that represents our present time, and therefore in part characterize phenomena and trends relevant to working as a psychotherapist today.

1990 - 2010: De-sensitization as the Creative Adjustment of our time.

'The Liquid Society' is a description of our time first used by Professor of Sociology Zygmunt Baumann (Liquid Society, 2006). A society where the meeting place between people have moved from our home, our office or the local cafe, to the '*global village*' of online social networks and platforms.

It can be difficult to know where and how to remove the tension and excitement one feels in facing new social technology, without the physical presence of the other. Social media, various online platforms have opened up for a myriad of impressions, emotions, relationships and information to be managed and integrated - often alone in front of a screen, PC or phone.

De-sensitization of the body is one way to survive and regulate what at times is a massive frequency and intensity of impressions. In such a society Baumann argues that there are no clearly defined boundaries that can accommodate our emotions. No enclosing walls that hold and support you in what you are feeling and experiencing. There is no one who looks you in the eye and says "I'm here and I see you and recognize your reaction." Instead we are experiencing a force that stays in your head, without finding support in the body. De-sensitization of pain is according to Spagnuolo Lobb our contemporary way of surviving - the creative adjustment of our time.

As a result Spagnuolo Lobb describes a significant task for therapists today is to *re-sensitize the* body. That we as psychotherapists need to provide relational support so that the client can find his/her way back to a body where sensations and reactions can be recognized and tolerated in the meeting with the other.

Spagnuolo Lobb claims that twenty years ago, the challenge was *to be* in a relationship. Today, her claim is that it is hard *to feel yourself* in a relationship. She refers to this as *Liquid Fear* (Baumann 2006). The boundaries and framework that would allow us to feel who we are, are liquid, dynamic or missing. The healthy energy and tension that may arise between us and give us contact, becomes according to Spagnuolo Lobb an unidentified energy, which instead of contact transforms into restlessness, lack of clarity and confusion. A liquid, uneasy sensation without clear direction or anchoring.

According to Spagnuolo Lobb, health care professionals are too concerned today with alleviating or silencing the symptoms, instead of showing a genuine curiosity for what the symptoms are telling us. She advocates a movement in our work that requires us to open our hearts for our clients and meet them with an authentic curiosity towards their unique relational style of contacting, and be open to accept how this will shape our therapeutic interventions in each individual relationship.

Creative Adjustment and the Theory of Organism | Environment.

Carmen Vazquez Bandin, Spanish Psychologist and Gestalt Psychotherapist is one of the lecturers at the Instituto di Gestalt HCC, Italy. She elaborates further on the contemporary relevance of Creative Adjustment, by re-counting the Theory of Organism | Environment (Pearls et al.) She points out that this theory clarifies the relational dynamic that unfolds in our lives and in the therapy room between client and therapist.

If the client for example has experienced a non-supportive caregiver, ambivalent, dismissive or failing support from the environment (i.e. parent) in early childhood, we have the potential to build new experiences in the therapy room together, where the "old" creative adjustment - once created to survive or endure - can change through new experiences in our interaction here and now.

In light of Spagnuolo Lobb description of the present time as being Liquid and the need for contemporary therapists to support the re-sensitization of the body, I find it interesting that Vasquez Bandin makes a parallel argument: That an essential task for the psychotherapist of our time is to support a motion *from Egotism to Relationship*. Here she describes the Egotistical form of contacting as a Creative Adjustment where 'I do it myself – but only in my thoughts'. That is, if you have learned to cope with life through ambivalent and/or inadequate support from the environment (i.e. parent/care giver), it can be safer not to allow yourself to be aware of or feel body sensations and emotions. It will be perceived as unsafe to take in the sensations you have in your body while facing an environment or relationship that is non-supportive or threatening. So, instead you quickly and autonomously reach your goal, but you reach it alone without the other.

The challenge for the therapist in both descriptions is *to bring the body and therefore the senses and emotions back into the relationship*. This means also bringing back into the relationship potential feelings of meaninglessness, loneliness, emptiness, fear and/or pain that may exist in the meeting between you and the other. As Gestalt psychotherapist we know that there is no way around what is - no way around the pain and the creative adjustment (symptoms) that emerge in any relationship.

This is when the Gestalt psychotherapist may ask: *'From the pain you are feeling right now; Can you find some words, a shape or movement that describe it?'* (Expressed symptom). And then: *'Can you look me in the eyes and say these words/ or make this gesture to me?'* (Bringing the symptom/ the creative adjustment into the relationship). And finally: *'How does it feel in your body when you say/do this to/with me?'* (Bringing the body, the sensations, and emotions into your awareness).

Vasquez Bandin reminds us how the clients past relational experience with the environment, affects his or her ability to interact with others in the here and now. As a Gestalt psychotherapist this acknowledgement gives me a greater ability to endure what occurs between me and the client; knowing that we are in the middle of a relational suffering, pattern or at a familiar boundary that the client may have repeated in many previous situations and relationships. And knowing that it is now at this moment that we, the client and I, have the opportunity to build a new experience together.

The *Contact Boundary* Vasquez Bandin defines as the space and time where something authentic and new can arise and be experienced. Where an early creative adjustment can be experienced in a new situation and in a new relationship. A moment when a new experience can be integrated in the body and in our mind. This time with awareness of sensations, breathing and emotions present in the body, and still in contact with the other. It is according to Vasquez Bandin our obligation as Gestalt psychotherapist to attempt to be at this Contact Boundary with the client.

In my view Vasquez Bandin shows us through her teachings the true potential of the *for-contact phase* (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman, 1951) in psychotherapy. From a phase that for me primarily have been a focus on how we meet, greet, sit down with attention on the *outer-* and *middle-zone* (Perls, 1969), to a phase where perceptions and sensations in the body unconsciously begin their creative adjustment towards the other, and a phase where we as therapists already are aware of how the creative adjustment takes shape between us.

Science and research - the future of Gestalt psychotherapy.

I have attempted to introduce a perspective and a movement in Gestalt psychotherapy that inspires me. A movement where we as Gestalt psychotherapists underline our relevance and expertise in contemporary psychotherapy. Francesetti and Spagnuolo Lobb reminds us of the Gestalt therapy theoretic view of mental illness as part of a relational dynamic and part of the human capacity for creative adjustment, with the intentionality for contact.

I have only touched on some key learning points, but nevertheless hope that this may tempt you to seek more information and knowledge of the discipline of Gestalt psychotherapy and the teachings at the Institute of Gestalt HCC, Italia.

From the teachings in Italy there is much more to convey. I am eager to describe in detail the relational creative adjustments associated with each individual diagnosis; or Francesetti's theory of *'Half Entities'* exploring the relational phenomenon's that occur in the 'in-between' and at the Contact Boundary; or Vasquez Bandin's *'Relational Model'* packed with new discoveries in the various phases of contacting. Hopefully we will see more articles coming from colleagues, alumni's from Italy or myself.

Spagnuolo Lobb and Francesetti are adamant that we have a responsibility as clinicians in Gestalt psychotherapy to develop a culture that documents our experience and results and share this with other professions to ensure the best results and quality within our profession. Only through an academic and scientific approach to psychotherapy, will Gestalt psychotherapy and its theoretical principles find its rightful place and acknowledgement within the general treatment of mental illness.

On this note it is especially inspiring to see the 'Norwegian Gestalt Journal' having achieved the approval of Publication Channel 1 (academic credits awarded by publishing); that the Norwegian Gestalt Institute (University College) have integrated CORE and research in its curriculum; and that the Norwegian Gestalt Psychotherapist Association has established a research grant. It is an exciting development and an important step for the Gestalt psychotherapy profession, on our way to achieve 'national authorization as clinical gestalt psychotherapist'.

The international training in Psychopathology and Contemporary Disturbances, are given over two years. For more information on content, literature and lecturers go to: www.gestalt.it/eng

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Pix 1.

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

Is a psychologist, a licensed psychotherapist, the founder and director of the Istituto di Gestalt HCC, approved by the Italian Minister for Universities, with premises in Syracuse, Palermo and Milan. She is a Full Member of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy, past-president of the Italian Federation of the Associations of Psychotherapy (FIAP), past-president and first Honorary Member of the European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT), past- and Honorary President of the Italian Association of Gestalt Psychotherapy (SIPG).

Gianni Francesetti

Is a Gestalt psychotherapist, psychiatrist and international trainer. He is the program coordinator of the two year International Training Program on Gestalt Approach to Psychopathology and Contemporary Disturbances organized by the Istituto di Gestalt H.C.C. Italy. He is the President of the EAGT, former Chair of the EAGT Training Standards Committee, former President of the Italian NOGT (SIPG, Italian Gestalt Psychotherapy Association), President of the Italian NAO (FIAP, Italian Federation of Psychotherapy Associations), and an associate member of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy.

Pix 2

Rolf Aspestrand

is a Gestalt Psychotherapist and supervisor (MNGF) at Sentrum Psychotherapy and Supervision in Oslo, Norway. He works to strengthen the academic and scientific approach to Gestalt Psychotherapy, and to build an authorized profession of clinical gestalt psychotherapists.

Pix 3

It was touching to meet psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses and other health care professionals from all over Europe. All Gestalt Psychotherapists and clinicians with a great interest and love for psychotherapy. To learn about their experience, challenges, and new trends in their clinical practice was inspiring and helpful. We are now part of a supervision group that meets once a year and that will ensure a continued professional and academic development. Here are all the participants together with Spagnuolo Lobb.

Pix 4.

My good colleague Helene Fellman and I with our mentors Francesetti and Spagnuolo Lobb. We were a bit star struck...

Box 1

If you want to read more, I recommend these books:

Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice.

From Psychopathology to the Aesthetics of Contact
Gianni Francesetti, Michela Gecele and Jan Roubal.

The Now for the Next in Psychotherapy

Gestalt Therapy Recounted in post modern Society.
Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb.

Quote box 1:

'How can you know how to work, if you don't know what kind of suffering you are facing?' Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb.

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Quote box 3:

'Significant knowledge and beauty can be lost in the work of Mental Health if we as Gestalt psychotherapists fail to meet contemporary demands for research and evidence based practice'. Rolf Aspestrand.