



# PSYCHOTHERAPY IN POST MODERN SOCIETY

Psychiatrist Gianni Francesetti and Dr. of Psychology, Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb have, since 2010, collaborated on developing an International Training Program 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 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 and Experiential School of Psychotherapy. Significant knowledge and relational beauty can be lost in the work of mental health and human suffering, if Gestalt psychotherapists fail to meet contemporary demands for research and evidence based practice.

Txt & Photo: Rolf Aspestrand



# 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 diagnoses 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.



In this article, Gestalt psychotherapist Rolf Aspestrand shares some of his reflections after completing a post-graduate training at the Istituto di Gestalt HCC in Italy, with psychiatrist Gianni Francesetti, Dr. of Psychology, Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb and clinical psychologists Jean-Marie Robine and Carmen Vazquez Bandin.

Rolf Aspestrand is a Gestalt Psychotherapist and supervisor (MNGF) at Sentrum Psychotherapy and Supervision in Oslo, Norway. His motivation is to strengthen the academic and scientific approach to Gestalt Psychotherapy and to contribute to achieving official authorization for the profession of Clinical Gestalt Psychotherapists in Norway.



**T**he Gestalt psychotherapist works from a Phenomenological perspective and aims to meet the client in a non-interpretative and non-normative manner. Standards such as 'well', 'pathological' or 'disturbed' refers to norms made by someone who does not know the unique experience and story of the person sitting in front of the therapist. Thus, there is a paradox in using a normative tool for a psychotherapist resting on the foundation of Phenomenology and Gestalt Therapy Theory.

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

Her reaction to the 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 professionals using DSM-5 or ICD-11, a collaboration clients expect and rely on.

In their book *'Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice – from Psychopathology to the Aesthetics of Contact'* Gianni Francesetti together with Michela Gecele and Jan Roubal, have accumulated a number of different author's descriptions of the most common diagnoses and sufferings from the theories of Gestalt psychotherapy.

*'How can you know how to work, if you don't know what kind of suffering you are facing?'*

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb



**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 (SIPIG).

**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 (SIPIG, 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.

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 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 (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman, 1951), the Field (Lewin, 1943) and the relational phenomena typically found in Depressions, Personality Disorders, Anxiety Disorders, Psychosomatic Disorders and others (DSM 5).

## WHAT IS CREATIVE ADJUSTMENT

Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951) described all contact as the Organism's Creative Adjustment to the Environment in which it exists. 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 professionals 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 Pregnanz' 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 in her book *'The Now-for-Next in Psychotherapy - Gestalt Therapy Recounted in Post Modern Society'* it is the task of the Gestalt psychotherapists to recognize the beauty and uniqueness of the individual's psychological suffering; To look for the uniqueness of each person's ability to creatively adjust and adapt to the environment - and to recognize the client's 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 addresses the same pathology, the same suffering, the same diagnosis and the same symptoms as described in the DSM5 or ICD 11, but is genuinely interested in seeing the intentionality and the Aesthetic Language behind the individual suffering – the adjustment to the situation, and the intentionality for contact.

## AN AESTHETIC APPROACH

Aesthetics in this context refers to the *Study of Senses 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-11, and understanding human suffering as a sensory ability to adjust, with the intentionality to contact the environment.

*'Do not take away the symptoms from a person; they are the protection that is created with great effort and precision to survive.'*

*Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb*

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 we seek to find the relational suffering it represents between the client and therapist – the shape and style of contact that evolves in the here and now between them.

The Gestalt psychotherapist explore together with the client 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 ignores the biological and physiological vulnerabilities that may promote pathological symptoms. It is a recognition of human suffering and pathologies as being part of a *Language of the Senses*. The Gestalt psychotherapist 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 has been or still is not supportive enough.

The therapist recognizes the dignity and struggle behind the human crea-

tive adjustment. S/he does not attack the symptoms, but recognize the senses and relational capacity. Spagnuolo Lobb says: 'Do not take away the symptoms from a person; they are the protection that is created with great effort and precision to survive.'

And it is from this perspective the Gestalt psychotherapist start his or her work with the client.

### 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 ourselves 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 between us in the therapy room?

As Gestalt psychotherapists we are concerned with the descriptive and how the formation of Figure and Ground (Perls, Hefferline, Goodman 1951)



*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 developments in their clinical practice was inspiring and helpfull. We are now part of a supervision group that meets once a year and that will ensure a continued professional and academic development. Here we are: all the participants together with Spagnuolo Lobb.*

evolves between us. We are interested in recognizing and building awareness of what we create together in the here and now - not primarily focused on what happens intrapsychically, 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 or Field phenomenon based on previous experience, which has stimulated the organism's ability to adjust. The suffering occurred in relationships or in the Field 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 Code system (i.e. DSM5/ICD11), 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 call this a movement of post-modern or contemporary Gestalt psychotherapy. It 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 experience and/or suffering. They imply that the suffering in various ways represent an adequate response to both early and contemporary social phenomenon and societal change, as part of the human evolution and growth in relation to an ever changing environment.

The Gestalt psychotherapist's 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.



## CREATIVE ADJUSTMENT IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY TIMES.

Spagnuolo Lobb has provided an analysis of how the past and the present time impact our *relational skills*. How the times we live in now and the times we grew up in impact on 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 (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013). This article does not leave enough room to go through them. I will address the phase that represents our present time, and therefore in part characterize phenomenon 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 Modernity, 2006). In this society the meeting place between people has 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 excite-

ment one feels in facing new social technology, without the physical presence of the other. Social media and various online platforms have opened up for us a myriad of impressions, emotions, relationships and information to be managed and integrated - often alone in front of a screen, PC or phone.

Baumann's hypothesis is that the child of the 'liquid society' largely lives with the absence of lasting intimate relationships. The parents are less available for the child in facing their own career, divorce, need for self-fulfillment, social media and the pressures of perfection. These are times of mass migration where traditions change or may get lost, boundaries within and between countries are more fluid and changing. The shift from war to terrorism and new socio-economic tendencies will for some spark feelings of ruthlessness, detachment and fear as an appropriate response.

De-sensitization of the body is one way to survive and regulate what at times is a massive frequency and intensity of impressions and change. 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 you 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

'De-sensitization of pain is(...) the creative adjustment of our time.'  
Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

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 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.

Spagnuolo Lobb propose that today's health care professionals are too concerned with alleviating or silencing these symptoms, instead of showing a genuine curiosity and support 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 relational style of contacting, and that our profession must acknowledge how this must affect our therapeutic interventions in each individual relationship.

'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

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 also means bringing in potential feelings of meaninglessness, loneliness, fear, emptiness and/or pain that may exist in the meeting between you and the other. As Gestalt psychotherapist we welcome these feelings and work to accept that there is no way around 'what is' - no way around the pain and the creative adjustment (symptoms) that appear in any relationship. By acknowledging and familiarizing ourselves with the pain and what is, a new creative adjustment can start to find its form (Beisser, 1970).

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 describes how the cli-

## Secondo piatto

## CREATIVE ADJUSTMENT AND THE THEORY OF ORGANISM | ENVIRONMENT.

Carmen Vazquez Bandin, Spanish Psychologist and Gestalt Psychotherapist is one of the lecturers in the International Training Program at the Istituto di Gestalt HCC, Italy. She elaborates further on the contemporary relevance of Creative Adjustment, by re-counting the Theory of Organism/Environment (Perls et al. 1951)

In light of Spagnuolo Lobb's description of the present time as being Liquid and the need for contemporary therapists to support the re-sensitization of the body, 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 inadequate support from the environment (i.e. parent/care giver/society), it can be safer not to allow yourself to be aware of or feel body sensations and

Istituto di  
Gestalt  
HCC  
Italia

### 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 Next in Psychotherapy**  
Gestalt Therapy Recounted in post-modern Society  
Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb



ent 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 may provide the therapist some support in enduring what occurs between him/her and the client; knowing that they 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. Knowing that it is now at this moment that the client and the therapist, 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 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 psychotherapists to attempt to stay at this Contact Boundary with the client.

#### SCIENCE AND RESEARCH - THE FUTURE OF GESTALT PSYCHOTHERAPY.

This article has attempted to introduce a perspective and a movement in Gestalt psychotherapy and its relevance in contemporary Psychotherapy. I have attempted to touch on some of the key learning points from the International Training Course, and the teachings at the Italian Institute of Gestalt HCC, Italy. I hope that it may spark an interest in seeking more information and knowledge of the discipline of Gestalt psychotherapy,

From the teachings in Italy there is much more to convey: A detailed description of the relational creative adjustments associated with each individual diagnosis; or Francesetti's theory of 'Half Entities' exploring the relational phenomena 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 more articles will emerge from colleagues and alumni from Italy, or me.

Spagnuolo Lobb and Francesetti are adamant that a particular responsibility rests on clinicians in Gestalt psychotherapy: to develop a culture that documents the experi-

ences and results of our practise, and share these with other professions to ensure the best results and quality within our profession. Only through an academic and scientific approach 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 inspiring to recognize 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 their way to achieve 'national authorization as clinical gestalt psychotherapist'.

The international training in 'Gestalt Therapy Approach to Psychopathology and Contemporary Disturbances' is given over two years. For more information on content, literature and lecturers go to: [www.gestalt.it/en](http://www.gestalt.it/en)



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

*Rolf Aspestrand, MPH, M.Sc.  
Gestalt psychotherapist, MNGF.  
Norway*

*This article was first published september 2014 in the Norwegian magazine GESTALT.*

*'The Gestalt psychotherapist 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 has been or still is not supportive enough.'*

*Rolf Aspestrand*