

## EXPERIMENTATION: A GESTALT APPROACH TO COUNSELLING

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### Abstract

This paper describes the "experiment", a Gestalt approach to stimulating client awareness. The authors present examples of experiments which may be used to facilitate the client in trying on new ways of being. To clarify the roles of the counsellor and client in the experiment and to describe the process and goals of the method, the authors contrast the experiment with behavioural rehearsal. Gestalt principles and theory are explained. Promoting client involvement through the experiment requires the active participation of the counsellor and leads to the development of new understanding for the client.

### Résumé

Cette étude décrit "l'expérience", l'approche Gestalt visant à augmenter la prise de conscience chez le client. Les auteurs présentent des exemples d'expériences servant à encourager le client à tenter de nouveaux modes d'être. Afin de clarifier les rôles du conseiller et du client dans l'expérience et afin de décrire les processus et les buts de la méthode, les auteurs comparent l'expérience à la répétition d'un certain comportement. Par la suite, on explique les principes et la théorie du Gestalt. Donc, favoriser la participation du client par le truchement de l'expérience exige le concours actif du conseiller et conduit le client à l'acquisition de nouvelles perspectives.

Since effective helping involves more than responding, counsellors must be able to initiate and intervene actively in the counselling relationship (Carkhuff 1969; Egan, 1975). Counsellors in training want to be more active and are attracted to more active models (Kelly & Byrne, 1977). However, many trainees often want to move quickly from responding into formulating action plans without paying adequate attention to an important intermediate stage, a stage of stimulating deeper client experiencing in order to facilitate new understandings.

The typical trainee question midway in supervision, "What else can I do now that I understand the client's problem?" is often answered by the statement, "Continue to reflect at deeper levels or use some of the more active confrontation skills of self-disclosure and immediacy." It is at this intermediate stage of the counselling relationship between responding and action facilitation that experimenting with new ways of expressing oneself can lead to discoveries that serve as a base for behavioural change (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman 1951, Gendlin 1969, Rice 1974).

The counselling process that fails to stimulate the client to deeper levels of experiencing and self understanding once safety and acceptance are established often lacks direction. In addition to confrontation immediacy and advanced accurate empathy the counsellor can use stimulation skills

to add impetus and direction to client exploration. Stimulation of deeper experiencing and involvement by these more initiative methods often moves the client directly to emotional resolution of the problem being explored (Wallen, 1970).

Gestalt approaches have much to offer in promoting client awareness through methods which emphasize the here and now, self-confrontation non-verbal expression, and sensory awareness. Creation of experiments is a primary method in the Gestalt approach for stimulating client awareness, experience and discovery. This paper focuses on the use of experiments in counselling to develop experimentally based understandings.

### *Experimentation*

Experimentation is the 'trying out' of ways of being that often involves enacting what one has been talking about. The counsellor creatively sets up improvised experiments in order to stimulate exploration. A relevant fantasy can be created, a particular client characteristic dramatized, a specific behaviour repeated or exaggerated or parts of the self can be set up in a dialogue. Clients are encouraged by means of a here and now experiment to confront personal issues, to experience themselves as fully as possible, in effect to *do* that which they have been talking about. The action is live, open-ended and emotionally oriented.

The counsellor by setting up experiments acts as a catalyst to precipitate exploration and change which otherwise might not occur. In setting up an experiment the counsellor does not prescribe the end point of this process, rather the counsellor shares control and observation with the client, thereby facilitating discovery of the most appropriate resolution for the particular client. Resolutions will differ depending upon the client's unique situation and resources. This creation of experiments often enlivens the counselling interaction and leads the client to significant personal discoveries and change (Passons 1975, Greenberg & Clarke in press).

A large number of experiments that may be used in counselling have been compiled in a growing literature on the uses of Gestalt approaches in counselling (Stevens 1971, Polster & Polster 1973; Passons 1975; Dye & Hackney 1976; Coven 1977; Greenberg in press). Awareness experiments can be created in a variety of different modalities such as language, movement, non-verbal behaviour, or body process. Fantasy and dialogue with the empty chair are two major methods of experimentation for dealing with interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. Examples of how these experiments are implemented in the counselling process are given below.

A language experiment is used to focus clients on their choice of words and how that choice influences their experience of themselves. For example, a simple experiment is carried out by a counsellor asking the client to experiment with personalizing a pronoun.

*Client:* It was different at the party this time.

*Counsellor:* What was different?

*Client:* It was more fun and lively. It wasn't so dull.

*Counsellor:* I have a suggestion. If you're willing, try saying "I" instead of "it."

*Client:* Sure, I was more fun and lively. I wasn't so dull.

*Counsellor:* How do you feel saying "I"?

*Client:* I feel pleased. I really was more exciting.

Dialogue experiments are effective in facilitating resolution of inner conflict (Perls, 1969). In a conflict there are two parts of the person in opposition and each part in the dialogue occupies a separate chair. The purpose of the dialogue is to enhance the awareness of the feelings and experiences of each side, and how these sides relate, in order to promote the resolution. From the discovery of the dialogue underlying the conflict the client has the opportunity to integrate the opposing points of view. For example, the counsellor initiates an experiment with a client who is attempting to make a decision as to whether or not to leave school.

*Client:* I don't know whether to stay in school or get a job. I just can't make up my mind.

*Counsellor:* You're torn between school and work. Let's try something. It seems like there are two side of you — a part that wants to stay at school and a part that wants to work. Let's have the two sides talk to each other. Are you willing to try this? Which side do you feel most like now?

*Client:* O.K. I feel like the part that wants to take a job.

*Counsellor:* From that chair describe yourself, what you're like and what you want.

*Client:*

(P1): I'm the part that wants to take a job. I like money. I'm outgoing and I like challenge.

*Counsellor:* Will you change and now be the other part. What are you like?

(P2): I'm cautious and well-prepared. I want to be safe with the security of a degree.

*Counsellor:* What do you say to the other part?

(P2): Don't be foolish. Don't risk your future. How do you know that that job will develop into something later?

(P1): I'm sick and tired of waiting. I want to try myself. I like the job and the freedom of having some money.

*Counsellor:* Are you aware of what you're doing with your hands and arms?

(P1): No.

*Counsellor:* You were going like this. (Counsellor mirrors movement of pushing.) Do this some more.

(P1): I'm pushing him away.

*Counsellor:* What are you pushing away?

(P1): I'm tired of your stodginess. I want to break free.

*Counsellor:* Continue this dialogue. What does this part say?

This dialogue continues until the two sides listen to each other and generate a satisfying solution. In addition to the counsellor having initiated the dialogue, the counsellor also directs the client's attention to non-verbal expression and asks him to experiment with this within the dialogue.

Fantasy experiments are useful to help clients utilize their total resources including intuitive and non-rational capacities. For example, a fantasy identification with another person who is different can lead to a discovery of similarities. This can contribute to improved understanding of the other when the relationship has been based on imagined differences. In this experiment the counsellor suggests that the client become the other, see the world from the other's point of view and imagine what it is like to be this person. (Passons, 1975)

In these experiments the client is invited to try on certain behaviours in order to see what is experienced. The essence of this approach is captured in the counsellors' directing clients to do something and then following this by asking the clients what they are experiencing. It is an approach which integrates behavioural and phenomenological intuitions by asking the client

to express and act out situations in a behavioural way rather than just talking about them. The client then reflects upon the heightened internal experience generated by the expressive activity, and utilizing all their present resources is able to comprehend new possibilities for choice and action. The counsellor promotes this process by providing feedback on observable non-verbal behaviour. The combination of the client's heightened inner experience and the counsellor's behavioural observations form the data for the evolution of the experiment.

The counsellors' confidence in their own abilities to deal with new material as it emerges is crucial to the facilitation of experiments through to completion. Initiating experiments requires a willingness on the counsellor's part to risk being more active. Students report that responding empathically as counsellors feels safer to them whereas using Gestalt experiments requires that they risk initiating, directing and creating with their clients. In this stimulating stage the counsellors must be willing to actively focus their clients on their experience and encourage them to explore the unknown.

To further clarify the experiment it is helpful to contrast it with behavioural rehearsal. In behavioural rehearsal the counsellor and client start off with an idea of how the client should ideally behave and use role playing to attain this goal. In fact, the counsellor may segment the competencies and reward successive approximations. In addition, the counsellor may model the behaviour. Thus, in behavioural rehearsal a total performance to be achieved is identified by the counsellor and then broken down into smaller steps in order to facilitate the mutually agreed upon goal.

Experimentation, on the other hand, uses role playing in order to discover something. It is an evolving process which builds upon itself. The counsellor and client are not aiming towards a specific goal but rather are creating and discovering something new as the client's experiencing unfolds. An experiment is designed to increase the client's awareness and depth of experience. The focus is on a deeper exploration of one's inner world and an expression of this world rather than on achieving a situationally specific behavioural competence. In experimentation it is the counsellor's role of heighten expression and give observational feedback in order to increase the client's awareness and deepen the client's experience. This differs from the role in behavioural rehearsal in which the counsellor gives feedback in order to reward particular performances and shape behaviour.

Behavioural rehearsal is suited more to the action planning phase of counselling where behaviour change is directed, practiced and

accomplished. The experiment is initiated in an intermediate stimulating stage of counselling in order to encourage the client to deeper experiencing and awareness of new possibilities.

### *Theory*

Although experiments are created from the unique material of client experience and counsellor observation, they do follow a common set of principles and are based on Gestalt theory. The first principle guiding the conduct of experiments is that change comes about by people changing to become what they already are, rather than what they are not. This acceptance of what "is" encourages client exploration and a deeper experience of discovered feelings. The next important principle is that once one accepts where one is, a natural process of change occurs. Polster and Polster (1976) state this as the principle "one thing follows another." Together these two principles constitute a 'faith in the organism' which frees the counsellor from trying to make something happen and allows him/her to focus on what *is* happening. The third principle is that the experiment is set up in order to aid in the discovery of information that is not yet in awareness.

Gestalt, in addition to these three principles of experimentation, offers a number of other specific theoretical concepts regarding human functioning and subjective experiencing which serves as a framework for creative experimentation (Perls, 1951).

The following diagram, called the contact cycle, represents the Gestalt view of human functioning.

Awareness → Excitement → Action → Contact

Individuals are in an on-going process of awareness. Awareness leads to an increase in this general level of arousal (excitement), and this mobilizes action. The action is executed to make contact with an object of choice in the environment. For example, a person who becomes aware, in the moment, of a need for affection generates some excitement which leads to the action of seeking out and requesting what is desired. Contact is experienced in the process of being held or prized by another.

This contact cycle can be interrupted in a number of ways. A person may block the awareness of inner or outer sensory information as in the case of a client who is unable to experience feelings of sexual excitement. Desensitized sensory experience can be brought into awareness by an experiment which focuses on bodily process. By focusing on muscular contractions and concentrating on dulled sensory messages the client is able to slowly regain full sensory awareness.

A more usual form of interference with awareness is found in the manner in which clients deploy their attention. For example, a client can avoid feelings of anxiety by selecting not to pay attention to muscular tension in the stomach and arms. An experiment in which the client is asked to focus attention on what is happening inside of him may bring this information into awareness and aids the client in providing a truer experience of himself.

In addition to these two methods for avoiding awareness, Gestalt theory identifies three mechanisms of inhibiting action. These are introjection, retrofection, and projection. An introject is a value or attitude which governs one's behaviour even though one does not ascribe to the belief. These are usually acquired from the environment without truly integrating the values into the self. Such statements as "Boys don't cry" or "Girls shouldn't get angry" are examples of simple introjects.

Retrofection is the holding back or turning back of activity against the self. The squeezing back of tears, the choking back of anger, the clenching of one's jaw are all muscular forms of retrofection inhibiting authentic expression. Retrofection also appears when clients report that they are doing things to themselves, scolding themselves, holding themselves back or pressuring themselves. For example, a client who is angry with someone else, scolds himself rather than finding an acceptable way of acting on her feelings.

In projection individuals attribute disowned aspects of themselves to others and become very sensitive to the appearance of these attributes in others. An example of projection, as it is primarily used in the Gestalt approach, is a client who believes that others see him as dishonest when he actually feels he is not living up to his own standards of honesty.

These three mechanisms — introjections, retrofection, and projection — are used to interfere with action. The person who was aware of wanting affection or closeness but is conflicted about this could interfere with seeking contact by saying to herself, "Strong people shouldn't need others" (introjection); or by tightening her muscles and comforting herself (retrofection); or by imagining that others see her as too lonely or needy (projection). The act of interference with the action tendency creates the experience of conflict. Resolution is achieved by the integration of the resistance and the action tendency.

Working in a group with this person on the issue of wanting affection and closeness, the counsellor would ask the client to experiment with polarities of being close and being distant. This polarity represents the action tendency (wanting

to be close) and the interference with that tendency (keeping distance). The client is asked to approach someone else in the group and experiment with verbal and non-verbal ways of getting closer while maintaining awareness of her own level of discomfort. After becoming aware of some of the ways she prevents herself from getting close, she is asked to set her own boundary of how close is comfortable for her. The emphasis is on her taking responsibility for how close she wants to be. Having set the limit for herself, she is free to transcend the boundary as she feels comfortable.

Experiments explore points on the contact cycle at which a person is stuck. Dulled sensory awareness, avoidance and conflict may be explored to facilitate the client's movement along the contact cycle. The counsellor uses knowledge of desensitization, deployment of awareness, introjection, retrofection, and projection to structure experiments which increase the client's awareness of what he/she is experiencing and how he/she functions.

Gestalt experiments can be used with both individuals and groups. This method is most appropriate for use with people who have relatively strong and intact ego functions. Coping people may enhance their functioning by experimenting with new ways of being. All clients may not be able to immediately make use of experiments and the counsellor should introduce this new form of exploring gradually; e.g., a language experiment may be less threatening to a new client than a dialogue. Experiments can be used with all age groups, but the counsellor should be sensitive to the capacities of the client; e.g., fantasy works well with small children while reowning projections works well with adults. Clients' responses to this whole approach or to particular experiments varies according to their resistance to change and their willingness to take responsibility for their behaviour. The counsellor's attitude should at all times be one which induces a failure-free environment tinged with supportive humor in order to promote clients' involvement. By using Gestalt experiments clients risk trying on new ways of being and develop experientially based understandings.

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