

FIELD THEORY: ACTUALIZATION OF POTENTIALITY THROUGH THE BODY

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In essay is explained how out of potentiality emerges “of the field” pre-phenomenal experience in the person’s body. For therapist’s work according to field theoretical perspective is of primary importance his embodied presence and not some explorative activity in order to “look at the total field”.

Key words: potentiality, the field, the body, experience, presence, faith

Problem

Kurt Lewin defined the field as “a totality of coexisting facts seen as mutually dependant” (Lewin in Robine, 2011).

As I understood from some of the literature and from some of my GT training, a more holistic, field oriented therapeutic approach is usually achieved through the so called “exploration of the field“ – e.g. “wider field”, this usually includes situations or events outside of the therapeutic room, such as the present relevance of the client’s partner, boss, or the current economic crisis; the “historical field” such as the client’s childhood memories...; the “therapeutic field”; the “intersubjective field”... - to name a few.

The limitation of focusing on the content and (wider) context, the structure, organization, or causality based on interconnectedness of coexisting facts, as presented above, was already described by Max Wertheimer:

If one tries to describe process of genuine thinking in terms of formal traditional logic, the result is often unsatisfactory: one has, then, a series of correct operations, but *the sense* of the process and what was vital, forceful, creative in it seems somehow to have evaporated in the formulations¹. (Wertheimer in A. I. Miller, 1975, italics mine)

What gets lost is the “autonomous criterion of the depth and reality of experience” (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951; hereafter PHG). What gets lost in the explorative process is the process at the contact boundary itself.

The key question is, how is experience and formation of Gestalt possible - meaningful whole, which is more than the sum of its parts. Also, how can we experience something as beautiful²?

As I will try to present below that the therapist’s field oriented, holistic approach is not so much about exploring facts outside of the therapeutic room³, but primarily in his contactful

¹ Or, as French Dasein analyst Françoise Dastur has put it: “The danger here is that we substitute a fixed set of meanings for experience itself, which is always in the process of becoming.” (Dastur, 2007)

² Robine wrote about “aesthetics of contact“- aesthetic terminology is used for naming some of the observable properties of contacting, e.g. clarity, brilliance, liveliness, meaningfulness, sharpness, intensity, unity, uniqueness, harmony, vitality, rhythm, symmetry. It is important to note, that “These terms are not based on clinical, social, or cultural criteria but on direct sensory experience.” (Robine, 2007)

³ When I am talking with clients about their concerns and past and present issues outside the therapeutic room, it is more in a way, as Violet Oaklander has put it about her work with children: “In child work it is essential for me to know the child’s “story” – his history, the life he comes from, the life he is in now, without this understanding of the child’s field, the experience lacks connection and substance.” (Oaklander, 2001)

It is important to note that, for me, the above description is primarily about the co-creation of the client-therapist relationship and the therapist’s general orientation and not much about some special field theoretical therapeutic approach – if words about field would be taken from the above statement, its meaning, message, would remain intact.

attitude which is based on his embodied⁴ presence. The therapist's experiences could be then meaningful wholes of *the field*.

Pre-phenomenal emergence of experience: primacy of the body

Robin wrote: "The field has to be thought of as an experience" and furthermore "experience is developed, from pre-phenomenal, towards figure formation more and more according to the interplay between observer and observed" (Robine, 2011). On the other hand, it is important to note, that explorations of the field, as described above as "exploring the field", are all within as Lewin named coexisting facts – things and events existing in the physical world, that could also constitute the person's phenomenal worlds.

On the other hand, Robine (2011) is clear that the organism and experience are pre-phenomenal. Also in PHG, the experience at starting (and end) point of the self process according to the id functioning of contact and withdrawal process is not about things (physiology and its homeostasis, proprioceptions, perceptions...). In the beginning, self process emerges from (and turns back to) *the void*.

I need to assume that there must be something else besides "things" in order for the pre-phenomenal nature of experience to be possible, some other "level". There are different names in the literature: idea (Merleau-Ponty), the field (M. V. Miller), unmanifested quantum states and operators (Clarke).

As M. V. Miller has put it: "If experience is not given, something has to be, and we call this something the field, a set of conditions that precedes both individual and the world" (Miller, 2007). In my opinion is the level, which is preceding the individual and the world, best described in terms of quantum theory:

According to Clarke (2005) is the basis for quantum theory on a small scale space of states and of operators acting on them, which are together forming the basis for defining of observables, which are large scale manifestations - "things". On the other hand, quantum states and operators remain defined as mathematical abstractions. Due to their unmanifested status they only give probabilities for different manifestations.

I prefer to call above explained unmanifested, pre-phenomenal set of conditions "potentiality" rather than to "the field", as M. V. Miller did⁵. This is supported by Robine's view that "every field is the "field of..." [...] because the field has to be defined in relation to somebody or something" (Robine, 2011). At the pre-phenomenal experience this "something" is the body, as I will explain later.

It is also important to note that at this pre-phenomenal emergence of the bodily experience, it is not yet "my body", my-self or your-self (others), thus, it is also not "my experience"⁶ (Philippon, 2009). Or, as Merleau-Ponty wrote: "the distinction between subject and object is blurred in my body". (Merleau-Ponty in Carman, 1999)

Since the field does not exist by itself⁷, and since the pre-phenomenal experience is also *pré* subject/object split, the theoretical dilemma of the primacy of either the individual or of "the field" and relationship becomes obsolete⁸.

⁴ I added embodied (presence) solely in order to emphasize the special meaning of the body, although, for me, a person can not be present, if not embodied - there is no un-embodied presence.

⁵ M. V. Miller is also clear that "the field in Gestalt therapy, as in physics, can be considered as pure potentiality." (M. V. Miller, 2007)

⁶ Which comes later, with identification – according to the discriminative ability for identification/alienation of ego function of the self in the phase of contacting in the contact and withdrawal process.

⁷ The (phenomenal) field of experience is not an entity: "due to some ambiguities in Lewin's ideas, field is sometimes reified, as if field were an entity." (Robine, 2003)

⁸ I am relieved since I don't have to take sides. The tone of the debate is sometimes just too moralistic for me. E.g.: "I hope to invite my client in out of the cold lonely place of his individualistically conditioned life-space." ([37]). Anyway, I agree with Brownell on both parts: "It seems en vogue and very "proper" for Gestaltists these

In order for the pre-phenomenal emergence of experience to be possible, the body⁹ has to be also pre-phenomenal in nature. According to Robine the organism is also pre-phenomenal (Robine, 2011), furthermore, “the body is at the centre of all experience, it is alpha and omega, the irreducible dimension and essential component of the field which it forms with the environment” (Robine, 2011). As Merleau-Ponty has put it: the flesh is “element” of Being, “midway between spatio-temporal individual and the idea”¹⁰.

Primacy of the embodied presence

Thus according to my understanding, the body inhabits both: the world of manifested “things“, observables, and the pre-phenomenal level of unmanifested potentialities. More importantly, it also means that any *embodied experience*¹¹ is the experience of the field, and that every field is the field of some-body. Thus, for therapist to be field oriented on therapy session the primary condition is his (embodied) presence!

The therapist needs to be “middle in mode and engaged with it’s situation” (PHG, 1951) or “actor AND observer” (Robine, 2011, capitals in original). As I understand, the therapist needs to be, paradoxically, passive and active at the same time. As Robine interprets Edgar Morin: “we are part of but not part of. [...] in order to see ourselves as part of nature, we have to “withdraw from it” ” (Robine, 2011). Then, sometimes, just by being present and interested enough, the therapist could experience “another aspect of reality”, such as beauty, unity, meaningfulness, awareness and also love¹²: “when he reflects on the living world of nature, he sees in it organic forms that are essentially purposive. It is another aspect of reality that emerges in the worlds of art and nature, different from the reality which is the object of physical and mathematical sciences.” (Dastur, 2007)

In the beginning of this essay I explained the dangers of the therapist being mostly active – by being focused on, e.g., the “wider field” and loosing the meaningful experiencing of the moment-by-moment therapeutic process. The danger of loosing the uncertainty of his embodied presence in favor of a feeling of safety gained by primarily cognitive, “in the head”, understanding of causality due to the interdependence of coexisting facts. This might be, e. g., understanding that the reasons for client’s current experiencing of anxiety or sadness are due to his/her recent quarreling with his/her partner or due to problems with his/her boss at work or to financial problems due to global economic crisis... .

In a way, explorative activity in therapy session about “the field”, when there is too little current bodily experiencing, is similar to “barking at the wrong tree”: it is not about which

days to say that because of the field, because of chaos, because of quantum mechanics, and because of postmodernism, there is no individual reality. There is no individual. To me, Newtonian physics wasn't proven totally wrong, just not enough.” (Brownell in Crocker et al., 2001)

⁹ There are more naming in literature: the body, the organism, flesh... which are also more or less clearly defined and distinguished by authors. For the purpose of this essay am I using general terms – the body and embodiment.

¹⁰ “The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being [...] is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term “element,” in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being.” (Merleau-Ponty in Rosen, 2000)

¹¹ Extreme example of un-embodied experiencing is in psychosis.

¹² Sometimes, while being in nature, I am having moments of awareness, when I also feel more that nature is alive: river, trees... everything and everyone in their own special way being individualized and at the same time at one with others – “more than a sum of it’s parts”. In PHG there is somewhere a brief remark, how was Darwin observing the flower for hours. I find this example beautiful and I can connect to it.

tree is right or wrong to bark at and why, not even that trees are in the wider context of the forest. Barking is the present process that matters!

Later on in the essay I explained the pre-phenomenal beginning of a person's experience and the special role of the body in it. All in order to explain and to emphasize the importance of the embodiedness of the therapist also from field theoretical perspective. As Robin describes:

Although this may seem paradoxical, locating our therapeutic practice within a field perspective makes us pay closer attention to the body, particularly to sensations (proprioceptions), perceptions and motor activities. Here again, taking into account the somatic (bodily) dimensions of experience goes hand in hand with the principle of contemporaneity, that is, seeing bodily experience as both shaped by and shaping the situation. In this respect, we can better understand Gestalt therapists' attention to what is felt from moment to moment. Bodily sensation is in fact the starting point for lived experience (even if it originates within the situation) and it takes form within and through contact, that is, emotion, sentiment, thought, image, gesture, action, representation, fantasy, creation and so forth. (Robine, 2011)

The therapist needs to open to his "bodily sense" (Gendlin in Rosen, 2000) to the "atmosphere" (Robine, 2000), also to his/her "gut" feeling (Kepner, 2003). Infants are mostly like that¹³.

Kepner (2003) is clear that "deep embodiment is not just adding body experience onto a predominantly cognitive orientation" but "the capacity to experience an integral continuity between body experience and other aspects of one's being". Indeed, it is very important for cognition, intuition and especially for some transpersonal experiencing to be grounded in the body in order not to flee away from the present actuality into some kind of uncontactful imagination and egotism.

Case example

Following is an example from my work with clients that made me think more about (of the field...) emergence of therapeutically relevant issues, with the therapist and client being primarily present and prevalently passive in the session:

When the client came to the session in the evening she said that she was tired, that she needs rest. I supported that, also because she usually didn't allow herself to stay with her tiredness in the session because "she shouldn't be lazy"... Both of us adjusted our chairs to the most comfortable position, put our legs on the table and closed our eyes.

After about half of the session was over we somehow started to chat. I mentioned the special subtlety of Korean movies, about the unspeakable and yet, unforgettable "something" in the movies of Andrei Tarkovsky¹⁴. She mentioned some biographical movie on a certain painter... She then all of a sudden, with some astonishment, realized that something about the painter's suicide is strikingly similar to the suicide of her parent some years ago – a therapeutically very relevant issue, which she only occasionally

¹³ "Some evidence that young infants respond to the holistic qualities is emerging within a small-scale research project, directed by the author, which is investigating the long term effects of having participated in the Second World War as an infant. It appears that while few, if any, "conscious" memories may be available to the adult looking back, there may be "preconscious" memories of the original experiences of the wartime situation, in the form of diffuse and non-specific feeling states. It may well be, that both mother and child may have similar overall reactions at a feeling level to the shared field conditions at the time, including the atmosphere and the public mood at that point of history, but while mother may have all sorts of ways of coping and self-managing, the child did not, and simply responded to the prevailing climate, ethos or atmosphere of war in which she/he was immersed. Early findings suggest that felt reactions of those born in similar extreme circumstances (e.g., in London in 1940 – 1944) may be strikingly similar, along with the long-term effects." (Parlett, 1991)

I am stating, that infants were having very limited capacity for "Looking at the total field" (as is, according to Lewin, proposed also by Parlett in the same article), let alone did they have cognitive abilities to understand causality and interdependence of certain events at the time, but, they were still "field oriented" – by their bodies they knew enough what was going on around them, and their body remembers! Same as for infants could go also for therapists. This is my main point in this essay.

¹⁴ As said poet Arseny Tarkovsky, Tarkovsky's father: "Andrei, these are not films that you are doing." (Tarkovsky, 1986)

briefly mentioned and which she has otherwise largely avoided in the sessions till then. The issue became then the focus till the end of the session and continued to be so in the forthcoming sessions.

The point being that I can not explain how this came about. How the issue *emerged*. I cannot sufficiently explain it by some context: her tiredness, our immersion in bodily feelings, not paying much attention to and little engagement with the other, chatting about movies... – according to id functioning: “accepting without engagement” (PHG, 1951, p. 381). More importantly, I do not know which field¹⁵, or what “in the field” was to be explored for the understanding of the above presented process of figure-ground formations (how one thing led to the other towards a therapeutically very relevant issue).

Cultivated uncertainty and faith

There are two kinds of therapeutic approaches: structure oriented and process oriented. In the structure (and also content) oriented approach the therapist tends to be one step in front of the client – guiding the client somewhere. Whereas in the process oriented approach, hopefully, the therapist and the client are generally a bit behind of the present actuality with their understanding: experience is always in the process of becoming (Dastur, 2007); contacting is movement towards the unknown (novelty), grounded in person’s id functioning, which is always oriented towards the “next”.

As Frank Staemmler wrote: “Although we unilaterally attribute meanings to our client’s behaviors, in fact, we are not in position to confirm anything at all. We are thus irremediably uncertain. We are even to some extent destined to uncertainty.” (Staemmler in Duenas, 2007)

I found my example of irremediable uncertainty in the following story about subjective phenomenal worlds and transphenomenal world¹⁶ by Kurt Koffka:

On a winter evening amidst a driving snowstorm a man on a horseback arrived at an inn, happy to have reached a shelter after hours of riding over the wind swept plain on which the blanket of snow had covered all paths and landmarks. The landlord who came at the door viewed the stranger with surprise and asked him whence he came. The man pointed in the direction straight away from the inn, whereupon the landlord, in a tone of awe and wonder, said: “Do you know that you have ridden across the Lake of Constance?” At which the rider dropped stone dead at his feet.

In what environment, then, did the behaviour of the rider take place? The Lake of Constance. Certainly, because it is a true proposition that he rode across it. And yet, this is not the whole truth, for the fact that there was a frozen lake and not ordinary solid ground did not affect his behaviour the slightest... the psychologists will have to say: There is a second sense to the word environment according to which our horseman did not ride across the lake at all, but across an ordinary snow swept plain. His behaviour was riding-over-a-plain, but not a riding-over-the-lake. (Koffka in Staemmler, 2006)

The traveler from the example above can not always know if the snow he is standing on is covering firm ground or the thin ice on the frozen lake. But..., even if he would know about the lake and also see the ice, he nor the others can not know for certain, if the ice would crack

¹⁵ Good question for me, since there are so many names: e.g. Gordon Wheeler in his article on shame used following terms: “personal field”, “intimate field”, “my field”, “inner field”, “internal field”, “social field”, “your field”, “external field”, “outer field”, “wider field”, “whole field”, “behavioral field”, “experiential field”, “whole field of experience”, “the field of relationship”, “intersubjective field”, “current field”, “immediate field of therapy”, “parts of the field”, “infantile field orientation”. (in Wheeler, 1997)

¹⁶“The transphenomenal world (Koffka calls it the “geographical environment”, which equals Lewin’s “surroundings”) exists independently from the various ways in which human beings (and to certain degrees, animals) construe their phenomenal worlds (in Koffka’s words, their “behavioural environments”). Both from a logical point of view and because of its greater extension in time and space the transphenomenal world is prior to the various phenomenal worlds. [...] However, for every human being her or his phenomenal world is most important and makes the decisive psychological difference. [...] Both in the phenomenal and the transphenomenal world “field forces” are at work.” (Staemmler, 2006)

or not if someone would step on it. Of course, the traveler could “explore the field” more and gain even more information, but some uncertainty would remain... always.

Also on the therapeutic journey the only thing granted is the body - the “element” of Being (Merleau-Ponty) - “for the self can be felt only as a potentiality; anything more definite must emerge in actual behavior. The anxiety roused by this advice is fear of the void and confusion of so indefinite a role.” (PHG, 1951, p. 375)

If therapist lets go his quest for security by gaining more information on about “in the field” there and then, by just being in the body within the uncertainty of the present therapeutic situation, he is more with the present actuality and the creative possibility in it. Then, not so much more information but *faith* is needed for the next step: “For faith is knowing, beyond awareness, that if one takes a step there will be ground underfoot: one gives oneself unhesitatingly to the act, one has faith that the background would produce the means.” (PHG, 1951, p. 343)

Conclusion

After intensive study I found the writings on field theory and it’s relevance for Gestalt therapy to a large extent dissimilar and sometimes quite vague. I chose to limit myself and to write solely about the special role of the body in the emergence of a person’s experience *of* the field and consequently about the importance for an embodied presence of the therapist.

Putting complicated theories aside, I prefer to understand it as some field theoretical interpretation of Fritz Perls’ es statement “Loose your mind and come to your senses”.

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