

Growing by Embracing and Overcoming Traumas

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Abstract: The Gestalt approach has a different viewpoint on the “negative” experiences. Life is full of trauma and unfinished business. Unfinished business is defined as the stresses, traumas and conflicts in relationships which are experienced in the past but not finished and still have an internal effect. Relationships, events can end, however inner feelings like anger, resentment, frustration, sorrow, guilt and shame continue to be experienced. Here these are the effects of the unfinished business. The concept of contact has a significance for the Gestalt approach. The person can relate with the world, grow and develop only through healthy contact. The disruption of the rhythm of contact while preventing the unfinished business to be completed causes the individual to develop neurotic symptoms. It is important for the client to realize, to be aware of what is held in deep level and recreate meaning of the unfinished business while being handled at the therapy. The goal of this article is to evaluate the trauma experience and growth process from Gestalt point of view.

Key words: gestalt, trauma, unfinished business, growth, contact, relationships

1. Introduction

Derived from ancient Greek, the word “Trauma” means any kind of physical wound which corrupts the integrity of the skin (Doğan, 2001). The situations effecting daily life in a negative way; causing, terror, anxiety and panic and corrupting the individuals meaning making processes can be defined as traumatic experiences. All the fields of psychology emphasize the integrity of the human. The most distinctive feature of traumatic experience from the usual negative experience is the individual’s encountering a threat and violence directed to his/her life and biopsychosocial integrity (Türksoy, 2001). In Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association (DSM-V), 2013) the individual’s direct exposure to events such as life-threatening danger, injury, sexual assault or escaping from such events with no harm, witnessing such events occurring to other people or the individual’s family member’s or close associate’s encounter to such events are defined as traumatic experiences. Gestalt is not only a therapeutic approach but also a way of life and a point of view. This approach is phenomenological. It is against judging people according to general criteria and categorizing them. A Phenomenon is everything that is presented in the current moment. It is believed that each individual has his/her own culture, values, resources and beliefs and consider him/her in the light of these aspects. Grasping reality can only be possible by understanding the individual’s subjective and phenomenological world. In Gestalt therapy approach the effects of traumatic experiences are explained by the concept of unfinished business. The Gestalt approach has a different point of view on the “negative” experiences. Life is full of trauma

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and unfinished business. Unfinished business is defined as the stresses, traumas and conflicts in relationships which are experienced in the past but not completed and still has an internal effect. Relationships, events can end, however, inner feelings like anger, resentment, frustration, sorrow, guilt and shame continue to be experienced. Here, these are the effects of the unfinished business. The individual's not being able to resolve and recreate meaning of the past traumatic experiences — that is to say remaining as “unfinished business”— increase the risk of disorders. The person has experienced traumatic events and his beliefs regarding the world is a safe and predictable place and he/she has sufficient internal and external resources to cope with difficulties become corrupted. Trauma causes the person to confront with his/her vulnerable part and his/her mortality. He/she realizes that he has no control over the negative events that can happen to himself/herself or to his/her loved ones and his/her safety is not guaranteed (Janoff-Bulman & Berg, 1998). In Gestalt approach, the most predominant viewpoint is Existentialism. According to Existentialist Philosophy, the human being has no control over his/her being born (“thrown into the world”) however, he/she has the power and responsibility of maintaining his/her own existence. By making free choices among the possibilities, he/she can determine his/her authentic existence (being in itself). If he isn't sure of his choices' correctness or if he/she is waiting for the others to make choice for himself/herself, he will experience existential anguish. Making choices in accordance with others or waiting for others to make choices for himself/herself is related to “the other's look”. The biggest barrier to existence — which is authentic not judging and not restricting freedom — is the perception of “other's look” (Sartre, 2012). By embodying this viewpoint, Gestalt approach emphasizes that each individual is responsible for his/her own senses, emotions, thoughts, behaviour, needs and the ways to satisfy them. The person can create his/her own values, decide what he needs to do and by determining what is important and valid for him, choose appropriate behaviour (Perls, 2007). It is not that simple for the individual to take responsibility most of the time. It is certain that he/she is not responsible for all the things happening in his/her environment. However, he/she is responsible for his/her actions, thoughts, emotions and choices. When the individual takes responsibility he/she creates the opportunity and ground to make choices for himself/herself. According to Existentialist viewpoint, the most important issue is the individual's need to accept his/her own mortality. The main reason for the occurrence of fear, anxiety is actually the denial of death (Hartmann-Kottek, 2012). Death is one of the existential realities and human being cannot escape from his/her own interaction between the physical activities, thoughts and emotions. There is an emotion accompanying each thought and every thought with its accompanied emotion has a projection on the body in cellular base. So, if the individual denies death in thought, this will be projected on the body as a cell denying to die. Acceptance of death means maturity. Because now, the individual knows that he/she cannot control the future and does not search for assurance or guarantee regarding that something bad will not happen to him. He/she accepts that there is no guarantee for that. The individual, after a trauma, usually search for guarantee regarding that something similar will not happen again. If he/she cannot find this guarantee (since this is not realistic), then, he/she experiences much more anxiety and depression. In the process of maturity, he/she gives up searching for guarantee and fictionalizing the future in a negative way.

2. Methodology

As a nonsystematic literature review, this article was prepared according to the key Figures of Gestalt therapy like Perls, Polster, Dreitzel, Hartmann-Köttek and Boeckh.

3. Trauma and Contact

The concept of “contact” has significance for the Gestalt approach. The person can relate with the world, grow and develop only through healthy contact (Polster & Polster, 1974). The individual by nature is a being who can exist neither “alone” nor “dependant”. He/she desires to be together with other people. His existence begins inside another being and when his/her in utero development is completed; he/she has his/her first differentiation experience. This -the most fundamental experience of the individual- is the starting point of “autonomous” and “interdependence” polarities which he/she will be dealing with through his/her lifetime. Afterwards, his/her need on one pole will be “being himself/herself” and his/her need on the other pole will be “belonging” to a relationship or a group in a closeness frame. The person’s the fundamental concern in his/her lifetime (even he is not aware of it) is to overcome this existential duality and maintain the integration of both poles. Besides this, Korb and friends (1989) also indicated that the contact is the essence of the human life and it creates the essential energy for change. Contact plays an important role in ensuring growth and change. It also has a significance in emerging psychological problems (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951/1996). This subject is also the research area of the attachment theorists. Bowlby (2012) emphasized that the universal human tendency regarding building close relationships begins from infancy. Mother has the most significant position in the attachment relationship. Secure attachment only occurs with love, compassion and warmth projecting from the mother. If the mother is able to establish a loving, warm and secure relationship with her parents, this will reflect on her relationships with the significant others (partner, child) (Biller, 1993). In later periods of life, the traumatic separation from the attachment figure in infancy, manifests itself as disease and fatigue (Goodfriend, 1993). According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2005), the features such as “immunity”, “endurance” and “resilience” in the presence of stress and diseases, are associated with the quality of the bonds established with the significant others. Due to the strong bonds established with accessible, sensible and supportive attached person, the individual is more resilient especially under difficulties, is less affected by compelling external factors, is less worn out and is usually full of life. On the other hand, the closest emotion to death is only experienced when this bond weakens, damages or breaks off. These kind of traumatic events become unfinished business and start affecting the individual in a negative way. After the traumatic events, the individual using different contact styles can try to absorb a situation which is impossible to be absorbed. The cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes experienced in this process is the expression of a natural need towards completing the trauma’s unfinished aspects. The individual tries to meet his/her needs using these familiar means, however, they are insufficient to meet his/her needs and he/she cannot assimilate his/her experience and his/her attempts repeat continuously (Cohen, 2003). The contact styles that the individual uses to establish contact with the environment plays a significant role in his/her unmet needs (Korb et al., 1989). In Gestalt therapy approach, there are seven contact styles: Introjection, projection, retroflection, confluence, desensitization, deflection and egotism.

4. Contact Styles

4.1 Introjection

This contact style is the individual’s embracement of the values, norms, roles which he/she was raised with as it is without discriminating and assimilating. This attitude — embracing without evaluating — is natural in growth process, however, from adolescence to adulthood, this process is expected to be updated and adapted to the

self. The people who embrace introjection excessively, avoid novelty and do not direct their energy to explore new situation, new people and new connections. They usually refer to the information they swallowed as a whole without questioning or they wait for the significant others to interpret for them. The disadvantage of this contact style is that it does not enable the individual to grow and mature through his/her nourishing experiences and it causes him/her to develop a self-identity against its nature. This individual is terrorized by his/her parents and compared with other people and also take excessive advice from his/her parents many times.

4.2 Projection

This contact style is a tendency which the individual attributes his/her disowned or alienated traits to the others and experiences these traits through them. The individual who is exposed to the projection embraces the personality trait which is incompatible with his/her essence and act accordingly. This contact style is interpreted as a creative adaptation state caused by interacting judgemental, disciplinary and perfectionist parents. When the projection is used dysfunctional and unhealthy way the individual attributes the traits, attitudes, emotions or behaviours that is actually owned but not accepted by him/her to the people or objects in his/her environment (Perls et al., 1951/1996; Dorn et al., 2007).

4.3 Retroflection

This contact style distinguishes as a creative adaptation style in people who have dysfunctional family experience and unhealthy contact with their parents. The individual who embraces this contact style, instead of directing his/her energy to the appropriate targets for fulfilling his/her needs, he/she reflects it to the self and uses it to handle things internally. This retroflection contact style distinguishes in different ways. The individual reflects to the self the things he actually wants to reflect to the others. For instance, redirecting anger and hostility to himself/herself is observed as self-blame and self-anger. When self-anger is experienced in extreme level, it emerges as self-harm (nail-biting, self-cut, trichotillomania, alcohol and drug use etc.). When the child's wants and needs are not met due to various reasons for several times and his/her negative reactions concerning this are not comforted, his/her frustration is not fixed and being maltreated because of these, he/she even if not give up his/her wants and needs completely, gradually embraces not expressing him-/herself, keeping his/her feelings to him-/herself as a creative adaptation. Some of the most typical consequences of the redirection of natural impulses trapped in the body are; muscle pain, chest tightness and hormonal imbalances. The other way of retroflection is in which the individual treats himself and the others the way he wants to be treated, such as showing love, compassion and caring. This is also a matter of indirect experience intended to satisfying needs (Dreitzel, 2004).

4.4 Confluence

This contact style is a state in which the boundaries diffuse between the self and the others and the individuals exist according to each other. In this contact style, one cannot experience the acceptance of subjectivity and differentiation. Personal boundaries are violated and the desire to act as a "single entity" and living without differentiation is dominant. The people who use this contact style cannot tolerate other people's differences and they especially desire to resemble the people they are together with. They are usually dependent on relationships. The needs are unmet and as a result, the individual experiences disappointment, boredom, aimless anger and depression. The individual being continuously in confluent contact style can prevent his own identity to emerge and therefore met his/her unique needs (Polster & Polster, 1974).

4.5 Desensitization

It is the state of not perceiving the stimulation coming from himself/herself and the environment. This contact style prevents the physical and emotional pain to emerge and take its form. On the base of desensitization, the individual struggles and be disturbed because of his/her senses. It is stated that, when this contact style is embraced as a creative adaptation in occasions, there are usually traumatic experiences such as emotional/physical abuse, violence and poverty. People who use this contact style frequently are desensitized to their own senses and emotions and of others as well (Boeckh, 2006).

4.6 Deflection

The individual avoids direct contact with others with deflection contact style because he/she tries to lessen the effects of close contact. To maintain this, he/she may change the direction of contact. Over using of humour, not taking the conversation seriously, avoiding eye contact, moving away from the main topic and focusing on details, pretending to listen and yawning are the types of deflection that we encounter. By this way, while individual protects himself/herself from the contacts that may create strong emotions, he/she shuts off his/her inner world to sincere interactions. According to Gestalt theorists, deflection is learnt in childhood because of the parents' or the caregivers' not taking care of the child's emotions, thoughts and needs, not paying attention to him/her and sometimes accusing and humiliating him/her because of these factors (Boeckh, 2006).

4.7 Egotism

Egotism is when the individual instead of experiencing a situation, goes beyond the experience and focus on himself/herself and the environment. From that moment, he/she switches into self-monitoring and self-reflecting position and he/she toughens and becomes timid. The enjoyable spontaneous experiences replace with the unpleasant ones. According to Laura Perls, the people who are encouraged by this contact style try to protect themselves against the possible criticism. It is stated that this is a creative adjustment developed with the perfectionist and judgemental parents and it creates a barrier in the process of satisfaction (Sills et al., 1998).

5. Discussion

5.1 Unfinished Business in the Therapeutic Process

According to Gestalt approach if the individual does not unveil and recreate meaning of the traumatic experiences he/she will continue to experience intense negative emotions when the trauma is recalled and it will remain as unfinished business loaded with energy in individual's life and threat his/her bio psychosocial integrity. The unfinished business can be completed only when the individual is ready to face his/her emotions and contact his inner world. As the unfinished business accumulates, it prevents the individual to focus on the current moment and new experiences and it also contributes to the emergence of neurotic symptoms (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993, p. 63). While the unfinished business is discussed at the therapy it is important for the client to recognize these and to be aware of what is held in deeper level. For instance, recalling that memories using the empty chair technique enable the individual to contact the needs in deeper level and express and accept the emotions related to that need (Zinkler, 2001). There is a particular emphasis on the attached others and the persons significant to the individual. One of the frequently used technique is inversion. Using this technique, the individual recognizes the polarities of his/her emotions, contact them and integrate with them. Using "I" statements in Gestalt therapy enables the individual to realize that he/she can take responsibility for his/her emotions and behaviours and can

make choices. The most important goal for the individual is to consider himself active not passive (Prochaska & Norcross, 2007; Davison & Neale, 2004). Using metaphors and Gestalt approach to dream work are also important techniques for the identification of needs, closure of unfinished business and expression of the emotion (Prochaska & Norcross, 2007). Apart from these, Perls emphasize on the awareness related with the non-verbal signals: “What we say is either lies or bullshit. But the voice is there, the gesture, the posture, the facial expression, the psychosomatic language.” It is quite important to be able to experience “here and now” upon growth or development (Pröpper, 2007). The individual realizes the factors that withhold him to be here and now and rearrange them with the support of all these techniques.

6. Conclusion

An emotion related with a past experience can affect the individual in the current moment in a negative way. For instance, when a trauma was experienced “there and then” emerges as a physical discomfort “here and now” this indicates an unfinished business, unexpressed feelings until that experience is unveiled and recreated meaning of. As the unfinished business increases the individual feel much more tired, exhausted and desperate. When these are “inclusively overcome” the individual matures, develops and increases the contact with him-/herself. The encountered problems (disease, accident, separation, death) are major opportunity for the closure of unfinished business.

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