THE ROOTS OF GESTALT

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5/2017
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According to e.g. Smith (1997: p. 3) the father of Gestalt Therapy, Fritz Perls was primarily influenced by five traditions: Psychoanalysis, Reichian Character Analysis, Existential Philosophy, Gestalt Psychology and Eastern Religion. In this essay, of these five roots of Gestalt therapy, I chose to examine the Reichian Character Analysis and what it has brought to Gestalt therapy. I wanted to know more about the bodily approach as I am teaching yoga as well as TRE (Tension and Trauma Releasing Exercises). Also, bodily reactions or sensations have been a very important way for me to get in touch with my feelings along my personal growth process. So, when I came in touch with Gestalt therapy, I very much appreciated the way the physical sensations were part of the therapy. Therefore, as I find the bodily aspect so important I want also to become familiar with the origins of it.

Reichian Character Analysis

Reichian Character Analysis was created by Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. Reich was born in the late 19th century and he initially trained as a psychoanalyst with Freud and then moved from standard theory and practice and developed his own theory by bringing the body into psychotherapy.

Reich created the term character armor, coming from character and muscular/body armoring. Armoring refers to the total pattern of chronic muscular tensions in the body. Reich called them armor because they protect an individual against painful and threatening emotional experiences. This muscular armor shields a person from both his own impulses and from attacks by others. (Lowen 1994: p. 13; Smith 1997: p. 7–8.)

Reich talked about energy economy or sexual economy (during 1930's), which Reich (according to Lowen 1994: p. 15) saw as synonymous. Economy refers to the balance between energy charge and discharge, and when this economy or
balance is upset, the neurosis develops. Muscular armoring or chronic muscular tensions serve to maintain this balanced economy by binding the energy that cannot be discharged. (Lowen 1994: p. 13.) These chronic muscular tensions would appear e.g. as stiff neck or tense jaw. According to Lowen (1994: p. 19), Reich had also observed that "there is no neurotic individual who does not show a tension in the abdomen".

Reichian influence to Gestalt Therapy

When talking about Reich one can identify two theoretical systems corresponding to the two periods in Reich’s life, and it was from this first period and system that Perls borrowed to Gestalt Therapy and for which he expressed appreciation. Reich’s later period and further developments Perls did not follow. (Smith 1997: p. 7.)

Fritz Perls’ supervisor Karen Horney suggested him to become an analysand of Wilhelm Reich to recover from his wartime traumas. Perls was in analysis with Reich during 1931 and 1932 and continued participating in Reich’s seminar the following year. (Smith 1997: p 7; Hostrup 2010: p. 22.)

Body

Perls liked that Reich concretized the psychology of resistances through his demonstrations of tension binding in musculature. Whereas Freud in Psychoanalyses talked about resistances in regard of mental defenses, Reich discovered the “muscular armour” and saw the resistances as total organismic functions. (Smith 1997: p 6–8.)

According to Lowen (1994: p. 19), Reich’s first step in the therapeutic procedure was to get the patient to breath easily and deeply. Reich had noted with his patients the tendency to hold their breath and to stop exhalation to control their feelings. He interpreted that by holding the breath one cut down organism’s energy by reducing its metabolic activities, which in turn decreased the production of anxiety. The second step after freeing the breathing came
mobilizing the emotional expression that was most evident in the patient’s face or manner.

Perls included much of Reich’s body orientation in his system. According to Perls (Smith 1997: p. 8), one needs to pay attention to patient’s non-verbal communications: voice, posture, gestures, and “psychosomatic language”. Perls also encouraged enhanced body awareness and bodily involvement to get in touch with emotions, even suggesting exercises for that.

In Reichian therapy one also uses direct contact with the patient’s body to release the muscular tensions. Reich occasionally applied pressure with hands to some of the tense muscles in the patient’s body to help them to relax, like the jaw, the back of the neck, the lower back and the adductor muscles of the thighs. (Lowen 1994: p. 26) Even though body contact is sometimes found in Gestalt therapy, it is not emphasized or formalized into a treatment mode as in Neo-Reichian (or Bioenergetics that is also developed from Reichian therapy by Lowen) (Smith 1997: p. 8).

*This body orientation shows in Gestalt therapy also nowadays: When sitting in the hot seat as a client, I am first asked to come to my body, to scan the sensations that I am experiencing on that moment (in the here and now). If I start holding my breath, the therapist reminds me to exhale.*

*I am also encouraged to exaggerate or mobilize my gestures (which may also originate from Bioenergetics by Lowen): if I make a slightly rejecting face, and then exaggerate it and even turn my side to the therapist, I get in touch with the feeling, releases the tension and we can work with that with the therapist.*

**Now and how**

Gestalt Therapy walks on two legs, “now and how”. To hear the “how” the focus is on the non-verbal communication ie. in “how” something is said rather than “what” is said. Perls even suggested that in therapy the patient’s verbal communication (the “what”) is usually a lie. (Smith 1997: p. 9.)
In practice this shows when Gestalt therapist quite quickly points out if I as a patient am smiling while telling a sad thing or if I say I am calm but my fingers are tapping etc.

This “how” instead of “what” was further developed by Kaiser, who pointed out inauthentic communication as a way to avoid taking personal responsibility. He saw (Smith 1997: p. 14) that through authentic communications of the therapist the patient may find the model and support to gradually move behind his words himself and take responsibility for his life.

This language of responsibility is also present in Gestalt Therapy (e.g. Rosner, J & co 1987: p. 69).

**Feelings**

Reich saw that remembrances must be accompanied by the appropriate affect, and compared to the traditional psychoanalysis he put strong emphasis on bringing powerful feelings and dealing with them in the therapy session. Also Perls made a difference between the awareness-enhancing experience and psychodramatically returning to the past incident from the emotionally avoidant, purely cognitive “mind-fucking”, as he called it – anything that is not experienced (felt) in the here-and-now is a waste of time. (Smith 1997: p. 7.)

However, according to Smith (1997: p. 7) there was this difference that Reich saw emotions as piece disturbing and something to get rid of, whereas Perls saw them as a natural element in the organism’s homeostatic cycle.

This avoidance of “mind-fucking” in Gestalt therapy sessions is seen when the therapist quite quickly invites me back to my senses if I start to talk and explain too much, in other words if I am “going into my head”. It often feels important to explain “the whole story”, but this easily works as a way to avoid the feelings, and does not lead anywhere.
Active and confronting analyst

As new to traditional psychoanalysis, Reich made the analyst a more direct force in the therapeutic proceeding. Reich sat facing the patient where he could be seen and made physical contact. (Lowen 1994: p. 27) He also saw that during resistance phases of therapy it is the analyst’s job to direct the course, first noticing that the patient is resisting, then interpreting how the resistance is taking place and finally finding out what is being resisted. (Smith 1997: p. 9.)

According to Smith (1997: p. 8), Reich saw that the patient should constantly be confronted with his character resistance until he experiences it as something to get rid of. Smith sees Perl’s active, at times frustrating and confronting style as a Reichian influence. Perl's had also himself credited Reich for teaching him brazenness. Perls stated that psychological growth comes only through frustration and because of that, the therapist must sometimes be cruel to be kind. Perls balanced the sympathy and frustration by supporting the patient when he was expressing his true self and frustrating him when he offered the expressions that reflected manipulatory techniques, neurotic patterns and the patient’s self-concept. Perls saw that his basic responsibility as a therapist is to challenge all statements and behaviors which reflect the patient’s lack of self-responsibility.

Smith (1997: p. 34) also takes this “being cruel to be kind” up when talking about Eastern religions’ influence to Gestalt Therapy, comparing the Gestalt therapist to the Zen master, who knows that the growth comes out of frustration.

Even though I don’t have the experience of Psychoanalysis to compare with, I recognize the active role of the Gestalt therapist. We sit face-to-face and the session or personal work starts with checking the contact between me and the therapist. The therapist being active is seen through the whole session: bringing me back to my senses when analyzing or explaining, confronting me if what I say is not in line with how I say it or if I am not taking responsibility. However, I don’t so much connect the brazenness with the confronting. I have heard it was more the style in the earlier days. Confronting is powerful also when done gently yet firmly.
Impasse

Smith (1997: p. 10) also finds that Perls's five-layer model of the neurosis was influenced by Reich's dynamic formulation of the “phase of the breakdown of secondary narcissism”. Reich saw that the lasting frustration of primary natural needs leads to a chronic contraction of the armor. The inhibiting of the primary impulses makes the energy build up within and intensifies the secondary narcissism. Loosening and dissolution of the characterological protective mechanism goes through a complete helplessness, which he named the “phase of the breakdown of secondary narcissism”.

In Perls five-layer model the neurosis is characterized by a cliché layer, the layer of tokens and meanings. Below that is the role playing layer or “as-if” layer. Beneath this role layer is the impasse, characterized by the phobic attitude that results in avoidance and in turn the feeling of being stuck or empty or lost. Under the impasse is the death layer or implosive layer where the person is paralyzed between giving in or holding himself together. Unfolding the implosive layer takes one to the final layer of explosion, expressing his authentic emotions. The explosion may be into grief, orgasm, anger or joy, depending what is the feeling that has been suppressed or avoided. (Smith 1997: p. 10)

Smith (1997: p. 10) points out the similarities in Reich’s “phase of breakdown of secondary narcissism” and Perl's progression through “impasse, implosion and explosion”: In both cases the essence is the dissolution of core defenses in order to emerge, after a ‘walk through hell’, with an authentic behavior. Perls also described the impasse in terms that are close to Reich’s theory: “Impasse is the position where environmental support or obsolete inner support is no longer adequate and authentic self-support has not yet been achieved”.

I recognize this “walk through hell” experience. During a seminar week, in a group I ended up in an encounter with the leader. I remember thinking that I see no way out or no way to solve this, but if I step back like I have done earlier (to the ‘as-if’ layer), this will never change. So I just stayed there totally helpless or lost
(...impasse). When staying there still keeping the contact, came the deep fear of confrontation that I think I have had all my life (explosion).

**Authentic self-support**

Connected to this, I will next take up what Smith (1997: p. 12) also has found common for both Reichian and Gestalt Therapy: Both had as aim the immunization for the neurosis in the future instead of just the cure of acute problem or neurosis. Reich saw that this goal was achieved through the dissolution of a neurotic character structure, whereas Perls aims at the same goal through the development of authentic self-support, instead of environmental support or inadequate self-support. After going through this “walk through hell” or these five layers, the avoidance or suppression, nor the need for defense mechanism, are no longer there.

**No “ready-made schema”**

Reich, according to Smith (1997: p. 11), emphasized that one should never impose any “ready-made schema” of therapy, as the technique has to be derived from the individual's circumstances. Smith sees that Perls followed that as Perls emphasized the danger in learning to use different techniques in therapy but having little sense and appreciation for the natural individualistic growth process. To promote the process of growth Perls invented techniques, but the techniques were invented for particular uses and employed only when they fit, even with modifications.

*In Gestalt therapy this is seen in how the techniques are modified according to different situations and clients e.g. in group work and in individual therapy. Even though at the beginning students practicing therapists tend to use the techniques the same way, there is still space to be creative and to follow how the session is going.*

**Political undercurrent**

Smith (1997: p. 11) also counts a political undercurrent in Gestalt Therapy rooting from Reichian influence. Perls stated that “the meaning of life is that it is
to be lived, not to be traded, conceptualized, and force-fit into categories”.

Shepherd, according to Smith (1997: p. 12) concluded that as the Gestalt therapy is a therapy of self-actualization, not a therapy of adjustment, those who successfully experience Gestalt therapy will likely become less fit and less adjusted to contemporary society.

_I have often heard that Gestalt is a way of living. And I think that political undercurrent is hard to avoid if one becomes more aware, more responsible and starts daring to confront._

**Discussion**

I found more influences from Reichian therapy than I expected: when choosing the root I mainly had the body armor in mind. Somehow I see that, at the same way he took the patient’s whole body/organism into account, he also involved the whole therapist to the therapeutic situation as active, face-to-face contact (compared to the Freudian/classical psychoanalysis). I still want to read more about the Character Analysis, also from Bioenergetics’ point of view.

On my essay, I very much relied on Smith’s article on The Roots of Gestalt Therapy and what he interprets as the Reichian influence. I think that the strict definitions of what and who has influenced and how, is not clear as many wise things have emerged in several places at the same time, as a result of what is happening in the society.

After getting some picture about the history and the roots of Gestalt Therapy, it will also be very interesting to continue reading more about the contemporary theory work. When writing this essay, I only briefly had a chance to browse the writings by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb and I found very inspiring the way she put the development of Gestalt Therapy in the time perspective in “Fundamentals and Development of Gestalt Therapy in the Contemporary Context”. Also, I read her example of the empty chair technique, how it (or any other technique) needs to be used considering the changed social feeling
(Francesetti 2013). That fits to Perls’ saying about modifying techniques to fit to each individual to each specific situation.

Reference list

Francesetti, G. & co. (2013) Gestalt Therapy in Clinical Practice. From Psychopathology to the Aesthetics of Contact. HCC Italy.
Lowen, A. (1994) Bioenergetics. The revolutionary therapy that uses the language of the body to heal the problems of the mind. Arkana.