**The Application of Gestalt Theory to the Case of Francoise**

PSCY 6153 (2U) – Counselling Methodologies: Psychodynamic and Humanistic Models

# Presenting Problems

Francoise is a 30-year-old woman who is coming to therapy due to issues with fear and anxiety. She reveals that her parents immigrated to Canada due to a civil war in their home country, and from that, they struggled with trauma. She is currently enrolled in graduate school, where the demands for her time and energy are high. Her support system is limited due to a disagreement with her brother and her mother passed away two years ago. She does, however, have her sister and father to reach out to, and she is part of a church community. Francoise's excessive worrying contributes to health issues such as stomach/digestive issues, muscle tension, fatigue, and difficulties with sleep. Furthermore, she has difficulty in school because she cannot maintain concentration and finds complex tasks exhausting and time-consuming. Unable to control her anxious feelings, she is in constant need of reassurance from her friends and family. Since her mother's death, Francoise has noticed an uptick in her anxiety which is now impacting her relationship with her partner. She describes her goals for therapy are to feel better and decrease her anxiety, worries and fears.

Francoise would likely fit the diagnostic criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) 300.02 (F41.1) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5th Edition (DSM5) (2013). The diagnostic criteria include excessive anxiety and worry about events or activities such as school or performance. Additionally, these apprehensive expectations are to be regularly occurring for at least six months. In Francoise's case, she has been anxious for years. Currently, she feels completely overwhelmed by her school assignments. When it comes to writing papers, she explains how she overthinks things to a point where she becomes paralyzed and is unable to complete the task. Additionally, the DSM5 states that the individual must find it difficult to control their worry. This difficulty is related to specific symptoms such as being easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating or mind going blank, muscle tension and sleep disturbances. These symptoms align with the health issues Francoise has been experiencing. Both the anxiety and physical symptoms she describes, are causing what the DSM5 would consider clinically significant distress or impairment in social and academic areas of functioning. Francoise has no other medical conditions and does not take any specific medication that could be attributed to her anxiety.

# Theoretical Assumptions/Principles and Foundations

Gestalt is a humanistic psychotherapy that is based on individual awareness. It is an experiential approach that actively and personally engages the client. In that way, it is processed based and integrative by utilizing affective, sensory, cognitive, interpersonal, and behavioral components (Yontef, 2019). Gestalt theory recognizes how the individual cannot be separated from their environments—known as *field theory* which describes how one's context influences one's experiences. In the case of Francoise, she can recognize how her anxiety affects both her relationship with her partner and her ability to do well in school. For example, she explains how her worries are time-consuming and leave her feeling physically and emotionally drained.

The fundamental approach to Gestalt therapy is based on the *Paradoxical Theory of Change*. This paradox assumes that the more one tries to become who one is not, the more one stays the same (Yontef, 2014). In other words, the more one tries to fit into a mold, the more one becomes fragmented rather than whole. The essence of Gestalt therapy is in knowing and accepting the truth of one's feelings, beliefs, situation, and behavior which builds wholeness and supports growth. In a case conceptualization, the presenting problem helps guide the therapeutic focus of the counsellor, this focus could initiate this essence of knowing (Kenofer,

2015). For Francoise, she is concerned about how her incessant worrying affects her relationship with her partner and her performance at school. Her concern reflects a disequilibrium she is experiencing, which is reflective of a fundamental contradiction she cannot resolve, that is, *what is* and what *should be* from her perspective. An aspect of Gestalt therapy is to help change the way the client experiences this problem. Brownell (2016) states the change takes place when a person is invested in actualizing an authentic self in the situated moment.

One of the main concepts emphasized in Gestalt therapy is *contact*: being in touch with the here and now (Yontef, 2014). Contact can determine a person's capacity for growth and development. In that sense, the therapist is not responsible for the change that occurs in the client so if change does occur, it emerges from the client or the dialogic engagement (Kenofer, 2015). For Francoise, the therapist will have to help her understand the process of her anxiety within the context of where it is taking place. Yontef (2014) states that the cognitive creation of anxiety results from *futurizing* and failing to remain centered in the present. When one futurizes, they focus their awareness on something that is not yet present.

Another central concept of Gestalt therapy is *conscious awareness* of being in touch with the present (Yontef, 2014). Awareness is focused attention necessary for *contact* in situations when habitual modes of thinking and acting are not working. Francoise often expects the worst to happen even if there is no evidence to warrant such extreme concerns. She futurizes about almost anything to the point where she is consumed by paralyzing fear or what is described as an impasse in Gestalt therapy. When her consciousness is placed in this unknown future she cannot exist in a state of conscious awareness. In Gestalt therapy, Francoise would begin to learn to master her anxiety cognitively through the experimentation that arises from the flow between therapist and client (Brownell, 2016).

The third concept of Gestalt therapy: *experimentation*, is based on the act of trying something new to increase understanding (Yontef, 2014). The results from experimentation could be in the form of enhanced emotions or realizations of something that was not initially in the client's awareness. Repetitive experiments within the safety of the therapeutic relationship may enable the client to contact their vulnerabilities in a creative adjustment process –this process assumes people are inherently growth-oriented and will try to solve problems by living in ways that best serve their situatedness.

For Francoise, experimentation would be existential in that it is a risk where neither the client nor the therapist knows where the process will lead (Tinsley et al., 2016). In that sense, experimentation cannot be prescribed for a predetermined end, such as it is in cognitive behaviour therapy where experimentation is used to disprove cognitive distortions. In that sense, experimentation requires faith; the therapist and client must trust the process even when they do not know what the outcomes will be. An experiment in Gestalt therapy occurs in the context of the relationship so working with Francoise, the therapist would need to center the relationship to move from the abstraction of what is causing her anxiety into action towards change.

## Gestalt Interventions and Techniques

Gestalt psychology looks at the individual holistically and asserts that humans are inherently self-regulating, growth-oriented and connected to their environments (Yontef, 2014). The phenomenology of experimentation in the here-and-now is at the core of Gestalt experiential psychotherapy. It envisages how the self exists through interactions with others, and it is expressed through the process of human contact (Raffagnino, 2019). Through clinical process and therapeutic dialogue, the Gestalt approach considers the human experience as being lived in the present. Gestalt interventions and techniques explore this experience to help the client make sense of their world and their relationship to others within it. Two techniques for this process include making the client aware of unconscious emotional processes and the two-chair/empty chair intervention.

# Awareness Processes

The Gestalt conceptualization of awareness is described as a direct experience developing between an ongoing organism-environment transaction in the present moment (Lobb, 2018). This concept entails thinking and feeling based on the perceptions of the current situation and includes intention and directionality of the self towards the world. From a Gestalt viewpoint, the therapist asks the client, what do you feel? The response to this question cannot be understood as a onesided answer without considering how the therapist perceives it.

*Social-sensing* in psychotherapy establishes a contact boundary to support the sense of self that emerges from being recognized by the other. Established through the I-Thou relationship, social-sensing in therapy would be to ask Francoise to describe what she feels and thinks about her presenting concerns. From that, the therapist can experience the situation with her as Francoise discusses her perceptions in real-time. Yontef (2019) describes the awareness process as a conscious and fully embodied human experience with another. For the therapist, this process helps the client to gain a greater understanding of themselves by unblocking emotional energy and establishing skills in self-monitoring for patterned processes of awareness.

## Chair-Work: Two-Chair/Empty-Chair Dialogue

Yontef (2019) discusses the process of enactment where the patient is asked to experiment with putting their feelings and thoughts into action. Two-Chair and Empty-Chair techniques involve the client having a dialogue with an imagined other from the past, present or simply a symbolic representation placed in the empty seat(s) (Pugh & Salter, 2018). This technique is also known as *unfinished business*, which requires the client to speak from the empty chair to represent a different perspective or position. Sommers-Flanagan (1994, as cited in Alexandria, VA:Microtraining Associates, 2016) explains the empty/two-chair process as personifying or bringing an aspect of the self or another person into the room for dialogue. For example, having a dialogue that supports or disconfirms a negative self-belief. For Francoise, she could place her worries about her relationship onto the empty chair by enacting the space to become her partner. From that, the therapist could guide her to interview the partner regarding their intentions and needs. Chair-work is an effective therapeutic tool in that it allows the client to explore multiple realities and discern from that new truths and perspectives.

# Evaluation of Techniques

Applying interventions techniques such as the awareness process and chair-work may not be a successful technique for every client. Therapists need to develop these interventions through practice and experience to be competent in using these techniques (Pugh & Salter, 2018). Furthermore, clients that are highly avoidant or struggle with affect regulation are likely to find action-based techniques anxiety-provoking or exceptionally emotionally demanding. In this instance, it is helpful to prepare the client by providing a brief outline of the techniques to be used before they are put into action. In that way, clients can ask questions or relate concerns about the process. It is important to note that these techniques should not stand alone; instead, they should be part of the overall therapeutic process.

# Gestalt Theory from a Multicultural Perspective

*Gestalt* is a process-oriented theory that supports people regardless of their cultural values (Yontef, 2019). Gestalt theory requires the therapist to recognize the implications of the socio-cultural and political context from which they and their clients are situated. This awareness helps the therapist be cognizant of the cultural norms they may have that differ from their clients. Recognizing these differences helps the therapist to navigate any strong emotional reactions that will inevitably come up when working with clients from profoundly different and possibly disturbing worldviews. Moreover, the therapist gains competencies by knowing their situatedness while at the same time attempting to understand the cultural context of the client. Furthermore, awareness of the differences between being in the position of the expert as a therapist and the marginalized situatedness of the client can create a space to open meaningful dialogue. For example, Francoise's anxiety around her school performance could intersect with proving herself against the negative stereotypes of being a Black female in a racially divided society. Showing an openness to discuss the larger context around her life, would allow

Francoise to feel safe to talk about her racialized experiences.

Gestalt field theory recognizes how culture impacts the individual. Working with the client to understand who they are and where they come from in terms of being from a nondominant group supports phenomenological and experiential explorations in therapy (Yontef, 2019). Furthermore, being culturally responsive emphasizes the contact and awareness concepts in how field conditions shape the individual. This awareness allows the therapist and client to come together in their cultural understanding of one another and enhances their capacity to make creative adjustments.

According to Frew (2016), Gestalt therapy developed as an alternative to the status quo, which was not inclusive of the ideologies and values of marginalized groups. In that sense, Gestalt therapy is inherently multicultural as it centers the client's context through field theory. In that way, the client’s lived experiences and worldviews are considered the most relevant aspect of the therapeutic relationship. This process helps to achieve cultural accommodation within psychotherapy as it integrates the cultural context within the clinical service design (Tanaka-

Matsumi, 2000, as cited in Frew, 2016).

## Personal Alignment with Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy allows for the complexities of an individual to be integrated within the therapeutic process. For instance, the perspective of looking at the individual through their sociocultural and political context stood out to me. As a child of immigrants, I grew up in two different worlds, so to speak; the first was at home, where I was immersed in my parent's language and collectivist culture. The second world was outside of my home, where the culture was individualistic. These experiences created my reality through a contextually emergent process and made me aware of how people's lived experiences constructed their realities.

One of the basic assumptions of Gestalt theory is the belief in the potential for human growth. This perspective resonates with me as it is why I chose to work with children in my first career, and which is why I am motivated to work as a counsellor in my future career. I fundamentally believe in the power of relationships and just as light cannot exist without darkness, an individual cannot exist without the other. As a species, human beings are social creatures and the world we know today could not have been created without our collective contributions. This coming together as a collective supports the compassionate attitude in Gestalt theory which I find essential for best practice as a future therapist.

Finally, the I-Thou relationship of Gestalt theory stood out to me as it recognizes how it is impossible for the therapist to be wholly objective. Instead, it acknowledges the intersubjectivity between the client and the therapist (Yontef, 2019). The I-Thou relationship further supports a mutual and reciprocal emotional influence to search for shared meaning within the therapeutic relationship. This ongoing meaning-making process recognizes the multiple realities in the therapeutic dyad and uses them to create significant connections between client and therapist that supports therapeutic change.

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