FEEDBACK IN GESTALT THERAPY
and in gestalt therapy training

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The concept of feedback is essential in gestalt therapy due to its theoretical and methodological basis in existentialist phenomenology and the understanding of self-regulation in gestalt psychology. A distinction is made here between professional feedback and the feedback that occurs on an ongoing basis in everyday contact, and the myths and misunderstandings that exist about giving feedback are outlined and addressed. The article explains how and why professional feedback must be part of training in every stage of gestalt therapy education.

Feedback is a concept that contains the essence of what gestalt therapists do in the therapeutic contact.
That may sound quite simple, and of course it is not; it is in fact a difficult art that requires extensive and repeated training to benefit our clients.

Feedback is a response to an effect. It is a message from one person to another which says something about the effect of this other person's behaviour. Therefore, the person who receives feedback gains important information from the environment that he or she is situated in. The feedback expresses how the person affects his or her environment, and how he or she is perceived in a particular situation in a particular contact. It is a message that can reveal whether a particular behaviour should be corrected, reinforced or abandoned altogether to ensure optimum survival conditions in a particular environment. Thus, feedback is crucial for maintaining psychological and physical self-regulation.[i]

I

WHY IS FEEDBACK SUCH A CRUCIAL CONCEPT IN GESTALT THERAPY?

The crucial role of feedback in gestalt therapy stems from the fact that gestalt therapy is founded on *phenomenological existentialism, gestalt psychology and the phenomenological method*.
This meta-theoretical foundation moors gestalt therapy in a perception of humanity that does not consider man self-sufficient. For that matter, there is no I, except in a field (Lewin 1951, Yontef 1993). Consequently, there are no subjective experiences that are not somehow connected with an object. A truly autonomous inner psychological function (as described in classic psychoanalysis and as reflected in the emphasis on free associations) does not exist in gestalt therapy, and development/growth can only occur as the result of an interaction between the individual and the world. Individuals are not seen, as they are in behaviourism, as stimulus-response machines that based on learning reflect the outer world as an objective world (as reflected in the therapist's suggestions for changes in thinking and behaviour). In gestalt therapy, the individual is seen as a dialogic, relational being with an inherent or innate capacity for making sense of stimuli and for "responding" to

stimuli with his or her own unique "interpretations". According to *gestalt psychology*, which provides the basic understanding of perceptual phenomena, the meaning-making process unfolds as the automatic organization of input into a pattern where what is essential – in relation to the person's needs and experience – is organized as foreground, while the less important becomes background. With this fundamental view of man as a relational, forward-looking, actively meaning-seeking being, the mutual exchange of information with the world becomes essential and indeed a prerequisite for maintaining psychological and physical self-regulation.

Awareness (unfocused alertness) and (phenomenologically based) dialogue are therefore the key methods in gestalt therapy, and thus, the therapist must participate, alertly and with awareness, in the mutual exchange of information that takes place in the therapeutic contact (Yontef 1993, p.144). To ensure that the dialogue represents an authentic exchange of information, the therapist must strive to establish a horizontal relationship as far as this is possible. Contact/dialogue is considered the most important reality, and the task for the therapist is to point out and highlight what is going on <u>between</u> the therapist and the client (in a description of immediately recognizable facts) rather than encouraging the client to turn the gaze "inward".

The therapeutic goal of gestalt therapy is not change as such but <u>clarity</u>; a goal which implies that the therapeutic contact should help the client identify with him/herself as he/she is, for better and for worse.

Thus, gestalt therapy rejects dualism, i.e. the assumption that the individual can be seen and understood as an entity that is separate from the world. It also rejects social constructivism, which exclusively sees the individual as a product of the social system that the individual is situated in. In gestalt therapy the individual is seen as simultaneously separate and connected, as independent and dependent, i.e., as a social being as well as a being with his or her own volition and the ability to choose. This dual position contains an existential dilemma that requires the individual to relate and participate actively all the time.

Thus, I am not seen as separate from or part of a field but always as someone affecting and responding within a FIELD[ii] – within a context. This view of the world and of human psychology permeates the theory and practice of gestalt therapy, and as a consequence it is only possible to understand other people's (clients') reality in accordance with their own definition (perception) of it.

On this background the concept of contact takes on a central and nuanced role in the theory and method of gestalt therapy.

FEEDBACK AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL

Our clients usually come to us because they want to change – or because they want something or someone in their world to change. As we/the therapists are not part of the field (the feedback system) that created the client's desire for change we cannot fulfil their wishes directly. All we can do is take an interest in their experience of reality and respond to what we are hearing and seeing in the therapeutic meeting. And this is where professional feedback comes in as our most important therapeutic tool.

In the therapeutic meeting the client experiences herself in a different relationship than the one that led to her desire for change. *The client is simply positioned in a different phenomenological field or feedback system.* She has moved physically out of her customary field and into a new one, but she probably continues to behave as though she were still in the relationship or environment that generated the problem.

When the therapist is able to tell the client, simply and clearly, how she has heard, seen and experienced the client's words and behaviour, the client receives new information about herself. She simply experiences how she *also* comes across, i.e., who she *also* is.

That is why it is so important for the therapist not to help the client change in accordance with the desire she originally presented. If the therapist did this, she would become part of a project that belongs in a different feedback system, which, sooner or later, would reveal the therapist as false. In gestalt therapy the therapist's only task is to *experience and respond to the client as she is or comes across <u>here and now</u>*.

To achieve this, the therapist must direct her attention both at her own phenomenology (figure/ground gestalt formation), which appears as experience/response, and at the client's phenomenology, which appears in nonverbal behaviour and stories about her experiences. This requires respect for and attention to the issues of separateness and difference. It also requires a capacity for "bracketing", i.e. the ability to set one's own prejudices, hypotheses, assessments, analyses etc. aside in order to be able to offer a phenomenological response to what is happening in the contact. It also requires the ability to select the relevant response among the many, many different possible "replies" that arise in the therapist.

As a horizontal relationship is the condition for a truly reciprocal interaction, the gestalt therapist refuses to assume a "top dog"[iii] position; that is, she refuses to tell the client how to be, or how the people in her world should be. The therapist "merely" tells the client about the effect (with regard to emotions, thoughts and bodily sensations) that the client's behaviour has on her. This is precisely what constitutes the therapeutically active element, as the therapist's responses become a new "piece in the puzzle" of the self-image that the client started out with at the beginning of therapy. When new "pieces" are added to a gestalt, the automatic effect is a reorganization of the entire gestalt.[iv] The client's self-image is shaken out its customary pattern, and a new gestalt is formed. In a sense, the gestalt therapist does the opposite of what the client expects, as the therapist does not want to change the client but "merely" seeks to register, accept and respond to her as she comes across in the therapeutic meeting. This encourages the client to edit or expand her self-image – *to be more of herself (authentic)*, which can be experienced like a surprising and important change.

However, the condition for this process to be effective is that the therapist is able to give and receive feedback in a way that *respects the boundary between I-YOU without polluting the relationship with contact disturbances*.

PROFESSIONAL FEEDBACK

All living beings automatically give and receive feedback constantly. *Professional feedback, however, cannot be automatic.*

The story the therapist tells the client and the way it is delivered is what constitutes feedback. It is *dialogic in nature*, as it reveals as much information about the person providing the feedback as it does about the person receiving it.

The meeting between therapist and client therefore contains the potential for what Daniel Stern calls "A process of mutual regulation".

Feedback in therapy is testimony to the client's work and thus reinforces the impression of what is happening and underscores the meaning of the relationship. ("When I experience what you do and are, I am affected/changed.")
There lies a message both in the content of the feedback and in the way it is delivered. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure consistency between the therapist's personal authenticity and her professional knowledge and discipline. In brief, this can be defined as a requirement that feedback must be given in a *personal, clear, phenomenological and clinically useful way.*

Personal means that the therapist manages to remain true to her own everyday manner and demeanour (her style). This means that she cannot assume some therapist's facade that hides her way of being.

Clear means that the therapist conveys to the client what arose in her here and now – without polluting her messages with some sort of boudary fusion.

Naturally, any normal contact involves the *transfer* of experience from a previous situation to a current one. But if the therapist transfers experiences from a previous relationship, without correcting for the current time and place, and from a contact that was characterized by contact disturbances (e.g. projection, deflection, confluence, retroflection, introjection) the contact becomes unclear.

Phenomenological means that the therapist keeps her messages purely descriptive. The messages are simply descriptions of the therapist's responses in relation to the sensory experiences that the therapist registered and which caused the responses. If the feedback is polluted by explanations, hypotheses, consolation, advice, new questions, causal analysis, assessment or self-centred sentimentality, the *attention is shifted* away from the client's efforts to the therapist's own inner processes, which is not the purpose of feedback. The therapist is not neutral when she shares her observations and responses with the client in a sincere manner. However, she also does not claim to be able to sum up the client. This highlights the boundary between I and YOU as well as their mutual bond – and thus our responsibility for what we as humans do and are.

Clinically useful means that the feedback is offered with understanding and with a sense of the workings of the client's *self-support system*, i.e. in a way where the messages that the therapist chooses to share with *this particular client* can be received and help bring about a clarity that helps the client with herself.

This requires a phenomenological diagnostic professionalism that uses feedback to promote growth and development without offending the client's (sense of) self or underestimating the client's capacity for learning but instead *coordinating it to match the client's psychological potential.*

Professional feedback supports and facilitates the development of the client's self (and the therapist's), as it underscores and accepts WHAT IS, as it is. Professional feedback helps the client (and the therapist) find the ability/willingness/courage to be what she is. In gestalt therapy this insight is considered the prerequisite of development, a point that has been articulated by Arnold Beisser as "the paradoxical theory of change".[v]

RESISTANCE

If the therapist fails, the client will respond with *resistance*. In gestalt therapy resistance is understood as the client's way of protecting herself from abuse. Thus, resistance is not a sign of the client's unwillingness to develop but instead a form of *feedback for the*

therapist; a message that the therapist made a mistake by doing or saying someone that failed to fully consider the client's *self-support*.

Resistance is an invitation to examine what it was the therapist did that the client could not abide. When resistance occurs it is, therefore, a welcome opportunity for both the client and the therapist to develop greater "awareness".

This aspect of therapy requires considerable therapeutic skill and tact, and in particular, the therapist must remain aware of her own narcissistic tendencies, so that the process does not turn into a devaluation of the client (you're no good) or of the therapist (I'm no good). In some cases, however, resistance can be a *hidden message* that the client may wish to undergo therapy but is unwilling to discover anything. She wants to be heard, be met with compassion and feel validated. In brief: The client demands a feedback that coincides with her own self-image. This is of course necessary in the early stages of therapy (especially in relation to a client with a personality disorder) in order to establish a relationship of trust between client and therapist. But if the process ends there, the therapist has to examine and assess whether the client in fact has the capacity and the willingness to discover and learn. If that is not the case, therapy will be a waste of time (and money), and it is then the therapist's responsibility to suggest a different treatment approach and, in any case, to terminate the therapy.

II
FEEDBACK IN TRAINING

I have often come across fully trained gestalt therapists who feel insecure about the true nature and purpose of feedback.

The only explanation I can think of for this confusion is that the activity of giving feedback does not occupy the key position in training that in my opinion it should.

In the following, therefore, I will briefly outline how feedback training is carried out. Obviously, gestalt therapy can only be learned and practiced within the framework of an experientially oriented approach.

Most gestalt training programmes last 3-4 years and can be divided into three stages that overlap and interact. *Part one* consists of own therapy in the training group; here the student undergoes individual therapy in a group with the trainer as a therapist. This part of the training does not require any form of theoretical or therapeutic skill or knowledge from the students. Here, the emphasis is on giving the student insight into his or her own contact competence, contact disturbances, etc. In *part two* of the training the student gets an opportunity to work in triads, i.e. the student works with two other students, taking turns to "play" the therapist, the supervisor and the client and sharing and discussing the difficulties and discoveries that they make in the process. The trainer pays close attention to this activity, and afterwards the students "report". In *part three* of the training programme the student works as a therapist for a model client, i.e. an outside person who agrees to be a client, and who is not part of the training programme. This takes place with direct supervision from the trainer and with the group members as observers who afterward offer feedback to the client and to the therapist and supervisor.

In all three stages, feedback is an essential skill that has to be trained. This incorporates and clarifies both the individual student's process and the group processes and makes it impossible for the student to hide under a passive

"knowledgeable" mask. Throughout the training process there are theoretical discussions in the group and brief lectures by both the trainer and the students. Throughout the training process students can also ask for *individual therapy in the training group* with the trainer as the therapist – however, toward the end of the training this will mostly revolve around problems that the students experience in the group in their role as group members, therapist or supervisor. Some training programmes require a certain number of sessions of <u>own therapy with a gestalt therapist</u> who is independent from the training programme.

Training therapy should not be confused with "real" individual therapy, as it has a different purpose. Both types of therapy *focus on developing awareness[vi]*, but in training therapy this includes the development of the student's professional/therapeutic skills, as the student's knowledge of him/herself, his/her resources and limitations, blind spots etc. are associated with the client-therapist relationship. Another purpose of training therapy is to have the student *experience the role of client first-hand*, and thus it emphasizes both the equality of therapist and client and the difference in terms of roles and tasks as well as the distinction between the therapist's *own material and the client's material*.

The therapeutic "craft", however, cannot be learned from the client's position alone. Therefore, the student is not only active as a "client" but also an observer and a group member. From these two positions the student can relate to the therapy on different levels. As already mentioned, later in the training the student is also allowed to act as a "student therapist" under direct supervision (practice therapy).

TRAINING IN PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL FEEDBACK

When a group member has worked with own therapy in the group there is an opportunity to offer the "client" feedback. Students who felt stimulated by the session can now tell the "client" about the impression that it had on them.

Here, the students are supposed to learn to express themselves in a way that facilitates the client's self-discovery (or points out the lack of self-discovery). This requires feedback that is given in a *personal, clear, phenomenological and clinically useful manner* (see the description page 4).

When the student fails to achieve this – and that is often the case in the early stages of training – the trainer must help the student understand why and how. The trainer does this by intervening in a variety of ways, either during the process or afterwards. The purpose is both to *protect* the "client" from being harmed and to give the student an opportunity to *address* any contact disturbances or lack of theoretical insight.

Some students are profoundly interested in learning and hence perceive the trainer's intervention as a welcome opportunity to develop their therapeutic competence. Others have difficulty accepting correction and invariably perceive it as a (narcissistic) transgression.

This aspect of the training demands a great deal of the trainer. He needs all his therapeutic and educational competence to help the student become aware of his/her contact disturbance or lack of diagnostic understanding. Besides, the trainer must be able to control his own narcissistic tendencies to avoid offering correction in a way that devalues the student. In some cases, however, the trainer has to realize that a very

touchy student does not belong in the training group. A responsible trainer will take the consequence of his own flawed assessment and ask the student to either do that year over, get more own therapy or leave the training programme altogether.

Giving feedback in a training group trains the most important therapeutic skill there is: *giving the client back to herself in a form that helps her discover how she comes across once she has been "digested" by a YOU.*

It is very difficult to fully master this discipline, as in our culture we are used to fixing problems. Shortcomings and insecurity should be transformed into competence and confidence. Suffering should be alleviated or encountered with consolation and compassion. In gestalt therapy, however, the goal is not problem solving, consolation or change. The goal is *clarity*. And the process that leads to clarity is discovery on various levels of experience. Professional feedback is the therapist's way of telling the client that she has been seen and heard the way she is. Many clients have no idea, after all, that everybody has to be what they are – that it is in fact impossible to be anything else. They have often learned the opposite: being who others want them to be.

The student should learn to provide professional feedback to clarify the phenomenology of the contact disturbances and the way in which they occur, thus clarifying the important *existentialist message*: that no one can free of guilt and responsibility, since we always affect one another[vii].

MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Unfortunately, many strange notions and ideas have developed about feedback. This is undoubtedly due to earlier incarnations of gestalt therapy, which were a mix of cultural rebellion against any form of structure and authority and the atheoretical American "therapy import" in the 1970s.

Some gestalt circles seem to construe feedback as a matter of being "nice" to the client. Other environments take pride in delivering the "cruel truth" served straight up, without any sweeteners. Some, in turn, think that feedback should contain a lecture or an assessment of the client or that it should serve as the basis for a discussion with the client. These are all misconceptions.

The tricky part is that there is no simple recipe for offering feedback, because feedback is the function of an experience here and now and thus always unique. However, the presentation of the experience should always be phenomenological and stay within the gestalt therapy framework – in theory as well as practice.

Example of professional feedback:
"I was going out of my mind seeing how you struggled so stubbornly to solve the problem that you told again and again that you cannot solve. It was an amazing moment when you discovered the true nature of the situation – and took it in. You practically seemed to melt. Your face and your body suddenly relaxed, and I was so happy for you and became quite calm myself. Your work reminds me how I sometimes struggle in vain myself to maintain control over something that I really can't control."

Example of unprofessional feedback:

"I was very affected by your work, because I have experienced the same problem in my relationship with my parents. They're completely disrespectful and lecture me constantly and tell me what to do, like I'm still a little girl. They ... (here follows a long story about what they do). And for far too long I have tried to put up with it – as you have – in order to maintain good relations with them, but fortunately I finally realized that I couldn't stand them. It has been so painful for me (crying), but I have solved the problem by cutting off contact with them. I really hope for you that you can break free as well."

Bad feedback is far too often an opportunity to share one's own feelings and problems. It may look like an attempt at telling the client that she has an effect on others, but the attempt fails because it is self-centred and thus fails to facilitate the client's self-support. At its worst, this sort of feedback turns to self-promotion and manipulation and carries the message, "You will never be really happy until you do what I did."

This is a mistake that should be pointed out because it prevents the student from becoming a competent gestalt therapist.

FEEDBACK FOR THE THERAPIST

In training groups the students also give the trainer feedback on his work as a therapist. This promotes a learning that is at least as important as learning to give the "client" feedback, as it confronts the student's ability (or inability) to deal phenomenologically with what the therapist did without losing the professional angle and without selling out on authenticity, courage, integrity or sincerity. It is a demanding process, because it involves *giving feedback to an authority figure*, and the student may rightly worry that the trainer will be angry, hurt, happy, flattered or critical in response to what the student says. The trainer is not just anybody; he is someone who is ultimately involved in assessing the student's competence.

It is also challenging for the trainer to receive feedback from his students. He has to be prepared to hear their responses, positive as well as negative, and he has to take what he hears under serious consideration. He has to be able to "swallow" critical and perhaps unfair feedback "raw" without rejecting the bits that he cannot "stomach" and "spitting them out" in the student's face. This part of the training confronts narcissistic tendencies both in students and the trainer, and it is therefore perhaps the most demanding part of the training.

THE THERAPEUTIC LANGUAGE

However, it is not enough to be able to provide phenomenological and clinically precise feedback. It is at least as important to provide feedback in straightforward and down-to-earth everyday terms. *Clichés and jargon have no room in therapy.*

In theoretical discussions between fellow professionals, of course, a certain professional terminology may be quite appropriate. But in therapy any form of jargon or other form of linguistic exclusivity serve only to undermine the gestalt therapy project because it introduces *alienating elements*[viii] into the therapeutic meeting. Many therapists have adopted a "psychotherapy lingo" that seems self-important and pompous. Apparently they do not care whether they are talking to a colleague or a client. What is even worse is when the professional terminology is distorted into pseudo psycho-babble. Examples of this practice include expressions such as, "You are unable to *contain* me", "You have to *own* it," "I have *come into contact* with," "I *hear*

you saying that," etc., etc. By now there is a whole host of peculiar phrases that are used instead of everyday language. Unfortunately, gestalt therapists too have adopted this strange language and use it to gain entry to a therapeutic subculture where these strange linguistic quirks are in vogue.

In training, any form of psycho-babble must be rooted out because it repels so many people or makes them feel inferior. A good gestalt therapist should of course use everyday language like a fellow human being, not some sort of therapy jargon.

CREATIVITY AND FEEDBACK

Once there was an attempt to teach doctors to communicate better with their patients by means of what was sarcastically referred to as "parroting". It was a pathetic attempt at teaching the general practitioners to offer phenomenological feedback. The trick was simply to repeat what the patient had just said: "I *hear you saying that* you are upset because your wife has left you," etc. Presumably, patients would feel that they were being heard, and they would benefit from hearing their own statements. The intentions were good, but the outcome was bad. The patient found it somewhat disorienting to simply be quoted. The method has little in common with phenomenological feedback, as it lacks the other person's personal "digestion" of what was heard and seen. The creative aspect of the feedback is completely absent in parroting.

Phenomenological feedback is the result of a process where one person is affected by another person, and where this effect kicks off a gestalt formation process where the less relevant aspects (to the person providing the feedback) become background, while the essential aspects are the foreground. This puts the trainer's creativity to the test, as he has to be able to offer a "live" demonstration of the effectiveness of allowing the gestalt formation process to lead to creative elements that are known as *condensations* (or metaphors). What is so particularly effective about condensations is that they offer a *brief and clear summary of a complicated story, condensed into one powerful image*. This is a creative process that unfolds in the therapist and is then shared with the client.

Example:
"You keep saying that you can't solve the problem but also that you have to solve the problem. You can't – yet you must! To me it sounds as if you are being your own tyrant. I'm beginning to understand why you are confused – and why you are suffering."

The phrase "your own tyrant" creates a powerful image of the dilemma where two opposing forces: control/power and powerlessness/oppression are at war with each other in one and the same person, making action impossible (a process that is typically expressed as ambivalence).

The creative condensations make up the "gems" in the professional feedback, because they make the vague crystal-clear without altering it.

CONCLUSION

There are many factors to consider in learning how to provide feedback. Of course, many students complain that it is such a difficult skill ("... and now I don't know if I have the nerve to say anything at all").

Of course it is hard to learn a new discipline, and it takes time to make it one's own natural process. Therefore it is also an illusion to think that the student will master this skill after completing the training. However, it must be a minimum requirement of

the trainer and the training institution *that the students have been told and have experienced what good professional feedback is about, and why it is so essential, and that they have had the opportunity to practice it under supervision*.

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TERMINOLOGY

[i] Self-regulation: a process that ensures our survival as needs and varying situations are automatically and mutually adjusted to maintain a sort of physical and psychological equilibrium. Gestalt psychologists have documented how this process takes place by virtue of an innate, automatic process where gestalts are formed as figure/ground.

[ii] Field: is understood here as psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) described it in his field theory, that is, as the physical/psychological mutual context that we as humans enter into.

[iii] Top dog: an expression used by Fritz Perls (1893-1970) about someone who behaves dominantly/oppressively in a relationship, while the other assumes the role as "under dog".

[iv] Reorganization of the gestalt: the process that occurs when a person acquires new meaningful experience(s). As a consequence, old experiences, habits and fixed ideas that until then had been organized in a particular pattern/gestalt, governing the automatic response patterns, are broken up and reorganized into a new pattern. This in turn generates new response patterns.

[v] The paradoxical theory of change was articulated by Arnold Beisser in 1970 and is contained in the sentence, "When you become who you are – you change" (see the reference list).

[vi] Awareness: In gestalt therapy awareness refers to a state of alertness, a form of unfocused attention that makes it possible, at any time, to notice and focus on inner/outer phenomena that have an impact on self-regulation.

[vii] The existentialist understanding of guilt and responsibility: differs from what one might call actual guilt and neurotic guilt. The existential understanding of guilt is a given aspect of existence, since as living

human beings we cannot avoid having an effect on others. This means that we have to assume responsibility for our being/actions. Existential guilt may cause existential angst because it reminds us that we are connected and responsible for ourselves and others, which is a condition of life.

[viii] Alienation: means that certain factors can make a person feel anonymous – out of touch with their social reality. It leads to a sense of being a non-self. A phenomenon that has been described in particular by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.