

Essentials of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy

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CONTENTS

Overview and Introduction (*Gerhard Stemberger*)

1. Psychotherapy: The Challenge and Power of Consistency (*Gerhard Stemberger*)

2. Critical Realism: The Epistemic Position of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (*Katharina Sternek*)

3. Personality Theory in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy: Kurt Lewin's Field Theory and his Theory of Systems in Tension Revisited (*Bernadette Lindorfer*)

4. Ego and Self in Gestalt Theory (*Gerhard Stemberger*)

5. Basic Principles for Therapeutic Relationship and Practice in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (*Angelika Böhm*)

6. "The way you make me feel" – Feeling-causality in language communication (*Andrzej Zuczkowski and Gerhard Stemberger*)

7. The Task of Diagnostics in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (*Doris Beneder and Bernadette Lindorfer*)

8. Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy – A Clinical Example (*Thomas Fuchs*)

9. Reconciliation of Time Perspectives as a Criterion for Therapy Completion (*Giancarlo Trombini, Elena Trombini and Gerhard Stemberger*)

10. Relational Determination in Interpersonal and Intrapsychic Experience (*Edward S. Ragsdale*)

Bibliography

About the Authors

Overview and Introduction

Gerhard Stemberger

This is not a "How to..." book. Its focus is not on any particular therapeutic techniques or special new suggestions, which mental illnesses could be hidden here and there, and how to deal with them. Instead, it introduces basic ideas and concepts that theoretically "underlie" a particular understanding and method of psychotherapy - that is, ideas that are "behind" how Gestalt-theoretical psychotherapists see themselves and their clients, their problems in life, and how to face these problems together. This thorough reflection on what ideas of man and his life are behind this method of therapy is perhaps somewhat unusual, and for some readers, perhaps challenging. But we think it is necessary to come to more than a quick but superficial understanding, and it is worth the effort.

The reader for whom English is the native tongue may forgive the weaknesses of the language in this book. With one exception (Ed Ragsdale), English is a foreign language for all the other authors of this book, and they themselves suffer from the fact that here they lack the more sophisticated and beautiful expressive possibilities of their mother tongue. Nevertheless, they have tried to make their ideas understandable to people who are not native speakers of German or Italian, and they hope for the patience and linguistic sensitivity of their readers.

The current volume builds on the first-time introduction of basic concepts of GTP in English, as presented at the 21st Scientific Conference of the GTA "Motion - Spaces of Human Experience," 13th-15th June 2019, Warsaw, Poland, and subsequently published by *Sciendo* (a De Gruyter company) in a thematic issue of the Open Access e-journal *Gestalt*

Theory (vol. 43, issue 1/2021: <https://sciendo.com/issue/GTH/43/1>). To promote and facilitate communication and exchange with colleagues from the psychotherapeutic field who do not speak German, ÖAGP has decided to present this collection - somewhat revised and expanded by additional contributions - now in the form of this printed workbook.¹

The current volume presents some essential basic concepts of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy in a coherent compilation². A side effect of such a systematic presentation might be that it also helps to avoid the frequent confusion with Gestalt therapy, which has a similar sounding name, but in most of its forms - there are exceptions - differs substantially in its basic concepts. (A brief note on the history of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy is given in the annex to this introduction.)

Ten contributions by authors from Austria, Italy, Germany, and the United States:

1. The papers on various core concepts of GTP and related subjects are preceded by a rationale and discussion of the importance of **consistency** in the substantive orientation of a psychotherapy method: "The power and challenge of consistency", by Gerhard Stemberger. Such consistency is not a mere theoretical-scientific matter, but a requirement of the nature of man and his life.

2. Because of the elementary role of cognitive processes for human experience and behavior, the second paper in the current volume highlights the **epistemological orientation** of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy, which underlies all sub-concepts of the method from personality theory to praxeology: "Critical Realism: The Epistemic Position of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy", by Katharina Sternek.

3. Psychotherapy is an intentional, planned, interactional process that implies that the therapist has assumptions

about the human person and its functioning and about the nature and functioning of such an interactional process. Bernadette Lindorfer's third contribution in this volume deals with a core piece of **personality theory** in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy: "Personality Theory in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy: Kurt Lewin's Field Theory and his Theory of Systems in Tension Revisited".

4. Lindorfer's contribution on personality theory is complemented by a critical synopsis and further development of the views on **ego and self** in Gestalt psychology and their heuristic potential for psychotherapy: "Ego and Self in Gestalt theory" (G. Stemberger).

5. The frame of reference in which the practical procedures in psychotherapy acquire their meaning and develop their effectiveness is the relationship between therapist and client in the particular therapeutic situation. This is the focus of Angelika Böhm's contribution which outlines the understanding of the **therapeutic relationship and praxeology** in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy and explains the main features of its therapeutic practice: "Basic Principles for Therapeutic Relationship and Practice in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy".

6. "The way you make me feel" – **Feeling-causality in language communication** by Andrzej Zuczkowski and Gerhard Stemberger sheds light on the role of phenomenal causality of feelings, as experienced by people and expressed linguistically. In many situations, it determines their experience and behavior in interpersonal relationships. Thus, the great importance of language in life and psychotherapy is demonstrated by the example of emotional life.

7. Doris Beneder and Bernadette Lindorfer present the basic ideas of **diagnostics** in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy as a process that primarily aims to enable the client to become a constructive diagnostician of her

situation, the possibilities it offers, and the resources available for coping with it.

8. Taking the example of specific Gestalt theoretical approaches to **understand anorexia using the multiple-field approach**, Thomas Fuchs explains some aspects of Gestalt theoretical psychotherapeutic practice: "Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy - A Clinical Example".

9. Psychoanalyst and Gestalt psychologist Giancarlo Trombini (in collaboration with Elena Trombini and Gerhard Stemberger) presents possibilities of a Gestalt theoretical **analysis of the progression of psychotherapies**, offering central criteria for the decision on the completion of therapies based on Gestalt psychological concepts: "Reconciliation of Time Perspectives as a Criterion for Therapy Completion".

10. Edward Ragsdale concludes the thematic focus of the current volume with an exposition and discussion of one of the most fundamental principles of any Gestalt-theory based psychotherapy: "**Relational Determination** in Interpersonal and Intrapsychic Experience."

The reader may feel invited to send the editor and the authors her/his critical objections and own ideas on the topics touched upon in the contributions to this volume:

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Annex:

A brief note on the history of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy

The history of the clinical-psychotherapeutic application of Gestalt theory cannot be adequately presented within the narrow confines of this introduction. I must limit myself to some necessarily highly abbreviated remarks.³

In the now more than 100-year history of Gestalt theory, this approach has radiated from its beginnings to a multitude of people working in clinical psychotherapy and

the "schools of therapy" developed or represented by them. It did so in interaction with similarly directed scientific developments and new orientations of its time, which above all had in common the aim of overcoming mechanistic conceptions of life and man and the search for more appropriate holistic-dynamic alternatives (cf. Ash 1995, Harrington 1996, King & Wertheimer 2005). For example, people trained and inspired by Gestalt theory significantly influenced the development of group psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, hypnotherapy, and catathym imaginative psychotherapy, various methods associated with humanistic psychology from Rogers' client-centered approach to Gestalt therapy and Moreno's psychodrama, to name a few. In this broader sense, then, psychotherapy based on or inspired by Gestalt theory has been around for more than 100 years. However, this early history of Gestalt theory in psychotherapy consisted, on the one hand, in the insertion of certain ideas and concepts, procedures, and research findings from Gestalt theory into other ideas, whereby these adoptions were often not insignificantly distant from their origin; on the other hand, in the personal integration of Gestalt theoretical thought into therapeutic practice by individual clinically active Gestalt psychologists who never set themselves the task of systematically formulating the basic concepts of their Gestalt theory based psychotherapeutic work. (e.g. Levy, Luchins, Harrower).

The impetus for such a formulation and thus for a Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy in the narrower sense was given a little more than 40 years ago by a small group of psychotherapists in Germany around Hans-Jürgen P. Walter and Rainer Kästl within the framework of the GTA, which they co-founded in 1979. Walter had previously presented a first outline of a Gestalt theoretical rationale for the integrative application of Gestalt therapy, psychodrama, talk therapy, depth psychology, behavior therapy, and group dynamics in 1977. Since then, the focus of further

development and application of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy has increasingly shifted to Austria, the motherland of so many psychotherapy methods in history. It is now being further developed there by the Austrian Association for Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (ÖAGP) with the GTA as its scientific umbrella organization, integrating the impulses of other Gestalt-psychologically oriented clinicians from other countries - among them especially from Italy (e.g., Giuseppe Galli, Anna Arfelli Galli, Giancarlo Trombini, Andrzej Zuczkowski).

¹ We thank Ed Ragsdale and Ian Verstegen for their help in reviewing some of the manuscripts and their suggestions for possible language improvements. They are in no way responsible for the remaining deficiencies.

² Up to now, there have only been scattered publications on individual aspects of the field of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy in English: H.-J. P. Walter's contributions on the compatibility of Gestalt theory and cognitive behavioral therapy (1997) and of Gestalt theory and Gestalt therapy (1999; cf. on this topic also Wollants 2008/2012 and Ragsdale 2010); M. Ruh (1999) and G. Stemberger (2008) on the issue of diagnostics in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy; K. Sternek (2007) on the relationship of Gestalt psychology and attachment theory; U. Wedam (2007) and S. Wieltschnig (2016) on trauma therapy.

³ For a more detailed account, we refer to the chapter "Anwendungen der Gestalttheorie in der Psychotherapie," in Kästl & Stemberger 2011, 27-47, and for an account of the development of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy within the GTA to Stemberger 2019.

1. Psychotherapy: The challenge and power of consistency

Gerhard Stemmerger⁴

Summary:

As an introduction to the current volume, this article substantiates the possibility and meaningfulness of a coherent theoretical system for psychotherapy, as it is strived for in Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy and presented in several articles in this issue. The necessity of consistency in the theoretical assumptions and concepts of a psychotherapy method is not derived from scientific considerations alone, but already arises from the elementary role of consistency in human life. This also results in requirements for the consistency of theoretical foundations of psychotherapy. It is not fulfilled in a mere internal, logical consistency of its models, but only in the actual fitting together with the critical-phenomenal and naïve-phenomenal worlds of the therapists and their clients (in interaction with their „naïve psychologies“) in the reality test of life.

Such a coherent presentation of basic theoretical concepts as it is aimed for in the current volume has an implication that will be made explicit in the following introduction to this thematic focus: Namely, that consistency in thought and behavior plays a key role in human life – and therefore also a theoretical conception of psychotherapy needs consistency.

Psychotherapy rooted in the overall system of Gestalt theory

Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (GTP) sees itself as a method of psychotherapy that bases its theoretical assumptions not only on *partial* theses and *partial* findings of Gestalt psychology, as we find in various other schools of psychotherapy, but tries to apply in a consistent way the *overall system* of Gestalt theory of the Berlin School (Wertheimer, Köhler, Koffka, Lewin and others).

That this is possible at all presupposes that Gestalt psychology (or more precisely: the Gestalt theory of the Berlin School) *is* actually an organized system whose various sub-approaches are systematically related to each other.

According to Wolfgang Metzger and Paul Tholey one can name five such subsystems of Gestalt theory: Gestalt psychology as *methodology* (holistic view and experimental orientation), Gestalt psychology as *phenomenology* (a wealth of research-backed knowledge about Gestalt phenomena in perception and cognition, behavior and life processes, including social relations), Gestalt psychology as a *theory of dynamic processes* (from productive thought to the psychology of will and social life), Gestalt psychology as a *psychophysical approach* (including the working hypothesis of isomorphism), and - permeating the four sub-approaches mentioned above - Gestalt psychology as an *epistemological approach* (critical realism).

These five subsystems of Gestalt theory are mutually dependent and support each other (cf. Stemberger 2020a). Whoever takes only partial aspects from this overall system accepts substantial losses. For example, Gestalt theory shares a holistic orientation with numerous other systems; detached from the experimental orientation of Gestalt psychology, however, the holistic attitude loses the possibility to determine the reach and limits of what the whole in the concrete case *is* and what holds it together as a whole. A speculative "everything is somehow connected

with everything" then easily takes the place of a clarification of the concrete connections in the specific case.

On consistency in psychotherapy concepts

Nevertheless, it would have little relevance to strive for consistency in the formulation of the theoretical foundations of one's psychotherapy method if consistency did not also have corresponding significance in the actual life of human beings. This conviction is among the most fundamental in Gestalt theory. According to this view, the striving for consistency is part of and an expression of the basic dynamic ordering principle that has been identified in Gestalt theory as the striving for *Prägnanz*, the umbrella term for the so-called „Gestalt laws“ or – as Max Wertheimer called them in his groundbreaking work of 1923 – the *Gestalt factors*. Metzger formulates on this principle pointedly: "The urge to fix what is in disorder and to be an obstetrician to what is undeveloped is undoubtedly one of man's deepest drives....." (Metzger 2001, 232; transl. GSt; for a discussion of the *Prägnanz* principle see Luccio 2019)

In many schools of psychotherapy, echoing this and kindred thoughts, one finds similar emphases on the role of consistency in the life of man. One thinks, for example, of the pursuit of meaning in Adler's (individual psychology) and Frankl's (logotherapy and existential analysis) therapy systems. Or the idea of the necessary integration of the personality during individuation in C.G. Jung's therapy system, where personality integration and maturation is reached by overcoming inconsistencies between the individual and collective unconscious. One thinks, to add a further example, of C. Rogers' call for overcoming the incongruity hampering the unfolding of the personality, the necessity to close the gap between the „real self“ and the „ideal self“, between the "I am" and the "I should"; and one thinks of his „Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of

Therapeutic Personality Change“, with the dual emphasis on the importance of congruence, both on the side of the client and on the side of the therapist. Common to all these approaches, albeit in different forms, is the conviction that consistency is essential to human life and that supporting the pursuit of it is one of the core tasks of psychotherapy.

A key question in this context, however, is: What does the respective consistency claim refer to? *What is* something supposed to be consistent with?

Probably the most elementary claim to consistency for human life is that of the matching of our individual phenomenal world of experience with the extra-phenomenal reality which we share with other human beings. Human life and coexistence in society and shared natural environment would not be possible if veridicality of our perceptual world would not be given to a very high degree. Even more: The dynamic peculiarities of our phenomenal world described by Gestalt theory make this phenomenal microcosm even "super-veridical" - it is not only able to represent the realities of the extra-phenomenal world to a large extent accurately, it can furthermore grasp their meaning, function and valence for the respective human being; this is more essential for the life of the human being and thus more veridical than the completely exact representation of the other physical features of the extra-phenomenal world.

Inconsistency in life

Even in the simplest everyday experience, however, one repeatedly encounters inconsistencies, facts that do not fit together for oneself in the given situation. One may feel compelled to review one's perception and one's previous models of understanding and explaining the given facts and relationships. Especially if this concerns one's most important interpersonal relationships, the task of gaining a new consistency of one's world and oneself within this world

may put oneself to a hard test. Already the earliest Gestalt theoretical works on psychopathology, still initiated by Max Wertheimer himself, illuminated these connections between the demand for consistency and mental health in their essential outlines (see Schulte 1924; Levy 1943; Levy 1986). Failure to meet the requirement of consistently in reordering one's life and one's view of it, especially after crises, can lead to great psychological distress (and thus to psychotherapy). During or in the wake of such a crisis "detailed processes must take place again and again if the recentering is to result in a liveable, concrete, and consistent view of life and world, compatible with the objective data and structures of the world, as well as with the psychological needs of the person. " (Levy 1943, 66f)

However, we know that people often differ quite widely in whether they perceive something as inconsistent at all. And also, the reaction of humans to the finding of inconsistencies in their world can turn out quite differently. Leon Festinger, for example, has put forward the thesis (still popular today) that humans, when confronted with inconsistencies in their world, tend to eliminate the resulting "cognitive dissonance" by restructuring and reinterpretation (Festinger 1957). In my opinion, Solomon Asch was right when he rejected this notion (Asch 1959). That the modes of reaction described by Festinger exist and that this can also lead the striving for consistency astray, all this is undisputed. However, if this were the dominating basic tendency of man, there would have been no further development of mankind at all - only the perception of inconsistencies and the confrontation with them enables further development, be it in science, be it in the individual life of man. Man's striving for consistency is both a challenge and a powerful driving force, in coping with everyday life as well as in psychotherapy.

If one looks at the theory systems of the various psychotherapeutic schools, it is not unusual for their

development that from time to time they contain concepts and approaches that are incompatible with each other. Giuseppe Galli points to a historical example of this in the development of psychoanalysis: "While Freud based therapeutic treatment on the relational and dialogical method, the theory was created with building blocks that were characterized by a monopersonal way of thinking. However, this contradiction between theory and practice in Freud was overcome by some of his followers through the application of a relational model." (Galli 1997 in 2017, 109)

In the development of Gestalt theory, too, such inconsistencies have repeatedly come to light. Wolfgang Köhler, for example, has pointed out that even core theses of Gestalt theory, such as the understanding of the striving for Prägnanz, had to be corrected over time compared to their beginnings, because their original understanding could not explain certain phenomena without contradictions (Köhler 1951/1993). Giuseppe Galli, on the other hand, has pointed out other inconsistencies in the course of the development of Gestalt theory - where its relational approach was not consistently implemented, for example in the sometimes one-sided attention to the object side of the field of experience, or where, for example, Lewin's model of life space, by neglecting the psychophysical connections, did not fit together with his discoveries on interpersonal processes and group dynamics (see on this Galli 1997 and Lindorfer in the present issue of this journal).

"Naïve psychology" and therapeutic concepts

The contributions in this volume show the effort to achieve the greatest possible consistency of the presented basic concepts of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (GTP), on the one hand, regarding their internal conceptual consistency, and on the other hand, regarding the

correspondence with today's realities of life of psychotherapists and clients in our time and our world.

Especially the work of the Gestalt psychologist Fritz Heider (Heider 1958⁵) reminds us, however, of another, ultimately even decisive dimension of the requirement of consistency. Insofar as the explanatory and orientational models of psychotherapy theory find their way at all into the everyday consciousness of the therapists and their clients (or rather: find their way *back*, for that is where all these concepts once had their origin), they encounter there what Heider calls "naïve psychology," "the unformulated or half-formulated knowledge of interpersonal relations as it is expressed in our everyday language and experience" (Heider 1958, 4). As Heider rightly points out, it is this "common-sense psychology" that - more or less influenced by scientific ideas - "guides our behavior toward other people" (and generally in life, one could add). Transferred to psychotherapy, one can and must say: This applies to both sides in the therapeutic relationship, by no means only to the client's side. In their „naïve psychology“, therapists are more alike their clients than they sometimes believe.

This is, of course, another challenge to the pursuit of consistency in psychotherapy. On the therapist's side, the theory system of the psychotherapy method she has learned meets a "naïve psychology" already fully formed and quite largely tried and tested in life. "Scientific theory" and "naïve psychology" temporarily enter into a coexistence, in the successful case perhaps a mutual penetration and enrichment in the course of processing inconsistencies between these two. The touchstone for this process will ultimately be the interrelation and the fitting together of the resulting "critical-phenomenal world" of knowledge and half-knowledge, of beliefs and concepts, with the "naïve -phenomenal world" of immediate experience.

The "naïve psychology" of everyday life is so strongly anchored in immediate experience that it outstrips many an intellectually acquired theoretical concept that is incompatible with it in terms of experiential and behavioral effectiveness. One of the strengths of the Gestalt theoretical approach is precisely that it gives priority to phenomenology even in the process of cognition, and thus runs less risk of contradicting people's world of experience in its conceptualizations: "There seems to be a single starting point for psychology, exactly as for all the other sciences: the world as we find it, naïvely and uncritically," Wolfgang Köhler says (1947, 3). Even if this is often hard to recognize, the most complex and abstract concepts of the various schools of thought also took their starting point mostly in phenomenology. Henle, to give an example, makes it plausible that Freud's concept of the superego was originally "more a phenomenal report than a psychological theory" (Henle 1962, 398).

Gestalt theory and GTP try to keep this close connection between naïve phenomenology and theoretical-conceptual processing alive and in awareness. This is also an essential basis for mutual understanding in the therapeutic encounter between client and therapist.

From this understanding it also follows for GTP that the therapist's self-experience in her training cannot only be exhausted in working through her own personal history and strivings but must also encompass her own world of ideas and the way she generates these ideas. Therapists often say of themselves, "I'm more the practitioner, not so much the theorist." But this is a big misunderstanding. In fact, there are only practitioners, nothing else: Those practitioners who know something about their implicit theories and thus have an ear for the implicit theories of their clients, and those practitioners who are blind to their own implicit theories and therefore enslaved by them. The latter then also have a

hard time being a help to their clients in dealing with the inconsistencies of their world of ideas.

Hilarion G. Petzold expresses a similar, but even more far-reaching thought, when he speaks of the necessity of co-response processes in one's own person, the confrontation with the existing 'believe systems' and, on the other hand, of the co-responding, collegial confrontation in the field of research, theory and practice tradition in which one stands" (Petzold 1992, 464).

Alternatives to embedding psychotherapy in an overall theoretical system

To attempt to base the formulation of one's own psychotherapy theory on an overall theoretical system, such as Gestalt theory, is by no means without alternatives. There are also counterarguments. For example, one has pointed out the danger that such an overall system can also tempt one not to take note of facts or possibly even to bend them if they do not fit the chosen system. Festinger's dissonance theory, mentioned above, and related approaches, for example, emphasize this direction unilaterally, without analysis of the concrete conditions that promote or hinder such an erroneous development.

As an alternative to the overall systems, two approaches are mainly advocated today, which partly overlap: on the one hand, eclecticism, the compilation of "evidence-based" techniques and practices without reference to an overarching theory; on the other hand, "overcoming the outdated schools" by integrating different approaches into a „general psychotherapy“. We are critical of both approaches - eclecticism for fundamental reasons, but also rash attempts at integration where the conditions for such a general psychotherapy are still lacking.

Mary Henle describes the problem of eclecticism thus: When there are divergent theoretical approaches to a

particular topic, it is often the case that neither has a fully satisfactory explanation to offer (otherwise there would be no controversy). "Controversies do not exist in science with regard to processes which are fully understood. Thus, the task seems to be one of arriving at new, more comprehensive theories of the processes in question." (Henle 1957 in 1986, 91) In her view the „parallel between productive solutions of theoretical problems and of personal problems becomes striking", and she refers to C.G. Jung's conviction: "Conflicts are never resolved on their own level. They are outgrown. Only on a higher level can you see both sides." (ibid, 92).

These are also valid arguments in our eyes against a hasty "unification of the schools" in a "general psychotherapy". As desirable as this goal of a new overall system may seem, its achievement cannot be arbitrarily accelerated. Edwin Rausch, eminent German Gestalt psychologist of the second generation, once stated on this subject - referring to the science of psychology:

"While for a later time a development of psychology can be imagined in which the various directions and currents unite, such an integration should not be attempted hastily. In particular, it is to be rejected that one or the other side claims to be able to absorb the Gestalt theory, while in reality its foundations are abandoned or have not been taken note of at all. So it is better to march separately for the time being." (Rausch 1979 in 1992, 144; transl. GSt)

Similarly, Henle has spoken out against a "premature reconciliation of Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis" (Henle 1986, 85). Such an endeavor needs "a systematic analysis of the assumptions of both psychologies, one concerned with implicit as well as explicit assumptions," to "reveal both important differences and surprising compatibilities of the theories" (86) This is now several decades ago, progress has been made on this path, in many schools of therapy, but it has not yet come to an end. A

prerequisite for further progress on this way is the disclosure and reasoning of one's own concepts in their systematic context, not to assert their superiority over all others, but to open them up to scrutiny for similarities and differences. This is also the aim of the presentation of some basic concepts of GTP in this volume.

Petzold's plea for a "plural therapeutic culture" still remains relevant in this state of affairs (Petzold 1992, 460), and will probably remain so in the long run, because - as Kriz puts it - "The diversity of basic concepts thus ultimately reflects the diversity of human life and will therefore always be encountered by us in professional psychotherapy as well..." (Kriz 2014, 15; transl. GSt).

⁴ Revised version of the editorial for the special issue "Essentials of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy" of the journal *Gestalt Theory*, 43(1), 1-12.

⁵ Developed in close cooperation with Beatrice A. Wright. Fritz Heider turns to the analysis of "basic components of our naïve ideas about other people and social situations"; the concepts investigated were "Life space; Perceiving; Causing; Can; Trying; Wanting; Suffering; Sentiments; Belonging; Ought" (1958, 18). The oversimplification of Heider's work in contemporary attribution theories has been countered in recent years primarily by Bertram Malle and his colleagues (Brown University), who also advance Heider's approach in promising ways (Malle 2008, 2011).

2. Critical Realism: The Epistemic Position of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy

Katharina Sternek⁶

Summary

In this contribution, I discuss the relevance of epistemological models for psychotherapy. Despite its importance epistemology is seldom explicitly dealt within the psychotherapeutic landscape. Based on the presentation of critical realism, the epistemological position of Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (GTP), I intend to show to which extent this explanatory model supports a differentiated understanding of problems between human beings, arising from the differences in experiencing "reality". The presentation deals explicitly with some conclusions that can be drawn from the critical realistic model for practical psychotherapeutic work. In particular, the aspects of basic therapeutic attitude, therapeutic relationship and praxeology are highlighted.

Introduction

In psychotherapy science, there is a certain general emphasis on the demand that psychotherapeutic approaches reveal and reflect the epistemological views that underlie or are inherent in their understanding of psychotherapy, both in their theoretical concepts and their practice (cf. Buchmann, Schlegel & Vetter 1996). In the portrayals of psychotherapeutic methods, however, one rarely finds an explicit response to this claim. As an example, I am referring to an anthology containing the self-

presentation of 50 different psychotherapeutic and psychotherapy-related approaches practiced in Austria (Stumm 2011). In his introduction, the editor refers to Petzold's "Tree of Science" (Stumm, 2011a, 13-15) and the necessity that every psychotherapy method must also explicate its basic epistemological assumptions. However, the following descriptions of the various methods in this anthology only in a few cases refer more than peripherally to the epistemological orientation of these various approaches. A similar picture emerges in international compendia (see Corsini & Wedding 2010; Lambert 2013).

If we leave aside those methods and conceptualizations of psychotherapy that do not explicitly deal with their epistemological stance at all, it seems justified to distinguish in the remaining area three main directions of dealing with epistemological questions:

a. The first of these directions addresses the different "epistemic approaches" people prefer to use to obtain clarity about their situation and possibilities [e.g., "phenomenological, dialectical, empirical-analytical, hermeneutical" (Pieringer & Fazekas 1996, 229ff)] and then determines which of these approaches is addressed primarily and elaborated in a praxeological way in a given therapeutic method. Wagner, for example, ascribes to the Daseinsanalysis a rather phenomenological epistemic process, to modern psychoanalysis a hermeneutical one, to behavioral therapy an empirical-analytical one and to systemic therapy a constructivist one (Wagner, 2007, 169). Against this background and connected to it, there is also a discussion concerning the question of which psychotherapy methods can be effectively integrated with others and which cannot. Buchmann for example, speaks out against a hasty integration of methods which are incompatible in their epistemic approach into a "general psychotherapy", and pleads instead for the explicit presentation and critical reflection of the epistemological positions of the various

methods, because: "From these epistemological considerations it seems to be clear that a 'general psychotherapy' that strives for uniformity virtually prevents the further development of psychotherapy." (Buchmann et al. 1996, 108; transl. KS) The same thought is expressed by Norcross & Newman: "Profound epistemological and ontological differences also impede rapid or wholesale integration." (Norcross & Newman 2003, 5) Some heterogeneity of epistemic approaches can also be seen as an opportunity for psychotherapy to develop a "genuine scientific identity" (Slunecko 1996, 294; transl. KS). Alternatively, in more practical terms, "a core skill needed to be an effective therapist is to have developed an awareness of one's own ontological and epistemological positions in relation to one's work as a therapist". (Willig 2019, 1)

b. The second of these directions focuses, above all, on the scope and limitations of human cognition and derives a variety of conclusions from that for many fields of psychotherapy practice. In this regard, the most important example is the debate about (radical) "constructivism" first above all in the community of systemic family therapies (cf. Becvar, 2003), which has also radiated into communities of other therapeutic methods. The "constructivist turn" in the debate among the systemic family therapists has focused on the question of the possibilities of insight and their limitations. The experiential world of human beings is seen as a private construction which consequently must be fully acknowledged by the psychotherapeutic approach, e.g., in founding the therapist's attitude of "impartiality" on this, or in understanding therapy as "a form of conducting a conversation" (Stumm 2011b, 251f; transl. KS), in which the therapist supports the "modification in attribution of meanings." (ibid.)

c. Finally, there is the third direction [to which Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapy (GTP) belongs – but probably also to a large extent Petzold's Integrative Therapy], which

brings together both previously mentioned directions based on an explicit ontological position (about the human being, human life, the human organism, the human community) and thus bases the entire system of therapy theory and the entire practice on this epistemological position. In this sense, Petzold calls for a consistent scientific approach to method integration in psychotherapy, in which "clarity of the epistemological standpoint" is one of the central criteria (Petzold, 2011, 267). In relation to GTP, Stemberger characterizes this position as follows: "If one compares the therapy theory of GTP with that of other methods, it is striking that in its 'conceptual architecture' the foundation is not a specific praxeology, psychopathology or the like, but a specific epistemological position. This, the so-called critical realism (Köhler, 1968; Bischof, 1966), is the basis for further core concepts of GTP. In GTP, critical realism (CR) is also a fundamental anthropological position – a differentiated statement about man and his world." (Stemberger, 2011, 219f; transl. KS)

Any psychotherapy faces the challenge that besides externally observable behaviors, conditions, and messages of clients, there are obviously "internal processes" that are not directly accessible to the therapist. Psychotherapeutic approaches understand and conceptualize differently this relationship between such an "Inside" and "Outside". From these are drawn representations regarding personality, psychic disorders, as well as appropriate therapeutic treatment. In the following, I shall present the basics of CR, and thereafter consequences will be outlined. The latter ones result from the particular approach for the understanding of human behavior, the therapeutic attitude and therapeutic relationship, as well as praxeology.

Critical Realism

The epistemological position of GTP is based on Critical Realism (CR), as it was formulated first by Köhler 1929; Koffka 1935; Köhler 1938; Metzger 1941 and further elaborated and differentiated by Bischof 1966 and Tholey 1980/2018.

From an ontological angle, Gestalt theory takes a monistic position on the psycho-physical problem (i.e., in simple terms, it advocates the unity of body and soul), but from an epistemological point of view, it takes a dualistic position (Köhler 1971; Tholey 1986/2018). Concerning the epistemological dualism, the central premise of critical realism emphasizes the clear distinction between the transphenomenal world and the phenomenal world. Early experimental results of Gestalt psychology investigated and proved the difference between physical facts and perception, such as Wertheimer "studying the relationship between the organization of the geographical⁷ and phenomenal fields." (Luchins & Luchins 1999, 216)

The transphenomenal world encompasses the macrocosm of the physical world and all physical objects and physical organisms which are embedded therein. It is to be understood as the world and a reality that cannot be accessed directly by people. What can be deducted, hypothesized, and said about the transphenomenal world is the interpretation of data obtained with phenomenal means, theoretical constructions, and models. Their data and results constitute the "critical-phenomenal worldview" (Bischof 1966, 28ff) in contrast to the "naïve-phenomenal world" of our everyday life experience. However, within this physical macrocosm, each person (just as every conscious being) has his/her own microcosmic phenomenal world, which he/she perceives and experiences as reality. It is the world that faces every individual and it is intuitively accessible to him/her. The phenomenal world stands for the entire world man experiences: The phenomenally experienced bodily

ego and the phenomenal environment which includes the other people.

Based on the distinction of critical realism one speaks of a "doubling of the world" (the concept of epistemological dualism) and one can act on the assumption that the phenomenal world "represents" the transphenomenal world in a more or less adequate way, but not like a "passive image" (it is thus a representational approach to cognition, but one that goes far beyond a mere representational function of consciousness, as will be shown). As Tholey argues (Tholey 1986/2018, 247) this representational effect rather constitutes the end result of a complex process, which can be described as follows: Physical stimuli from the physical environment meet our physical senses and enter (as well as proprioceptive stimuli from the physical body) via afferent neural pathways into the brain to an area in the cerebral cortex, for which Gestalt psychologist Köhler used the term "psychophysical level" (cf. Köhler 1938/1968). At the psychophysical level (PPN) based on physical-physiological processes, a transformation of the stimuli takes place, as a result of which certain contents can be experienced psychologically. In his research, Köhler formulated the so-called "isomorphism assumption." Isomorphism assumes that there is a structural equivalence between physical and physiological processes (brain operations) and psychological operations. This means that for every phenomenon in the experience of the individual there is a corresponding neurophysiological event in the sense of a central nervous counterpart. As a consequence, we have as well to differentiate between our physical organism and our phenomenal bodily ego. Therefore, the question as to why we perceive other persons and objects in front of our perceived bodily ego, could be answered, as Köhler (1929) did.

Concerning the relationship between physical world and phenomenal world, one also assumes a structural