

The process of investigating the phenomenological experience of relationality

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First and foremost I would like to express my deepest appreciation to both New Gestalt Voices and Relational Change for awarding me the research bursary for my research examining the phenomenological experience of relationality with Gestalt therapy. As the purpose of the bursary was to provide a hand-up to new Gestalt voices within the Gestalt Therapy literature, I can gladly say that the bursary fulfilled its purpose.

During my time as the Researcher in Residence with Relational Change, I have had one peer-review publication with a further two articles peer-reviewed and accepted for publication and currently In Press. My first peer-review publication within the Gestalt literature, 'Cerebral Integration as Underlying Relational Gestalt Therapy' was published in the *Gestalt Journal of Australia & New Zealand* in December 2018. The paper discussed that the underlying philosophical underpinning of Relational Gestalt therapy each have in common a cerebral right-hemispheric predominance, with the neurological aim of Gestalt therapy to integrate the working of the two cerebral hemispheres. Although, it can be argued that with recent neurological imaging, both hemispheres have been found to work in concert in a range of cognitive tasks. Nonetheless, both hemispheres have been found to attend to the information in different ways. For instance, the left perceives the world as the sum of its discrete elements, providing focused attention. On the other hand, the right perceives the world as one whole, providing more global attention. For instance, in terms of integrating both ways of attending to information, a Gestalt therapist must hold what is figural (left) whilst also being aware of the ground (right) from which the figure arose.

The second peer-review article, written whilst Researcher in Residence at Relational Change, is a critical review of the Gestalt Therapy Fidelity Scale. This article has been accepted by *British Gestalt Journal* and is currently In Press. The critique essentially indicates that the theory in developing a fidelity scale is in fact inconsistent with the philosophical principles of Relational Gestalt therapy. Therefore a situation arises where Relational Gestalt therapy is in fact augmented to fit with the

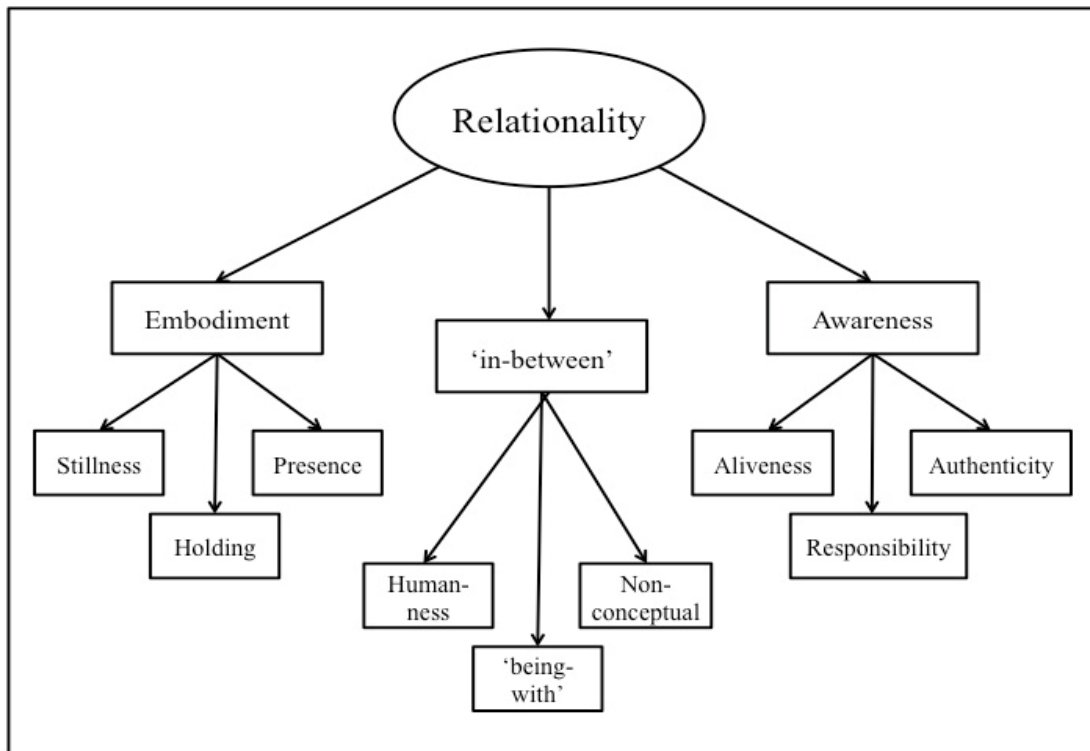
theory of the research paradigm. A number of recommendations are further discussed in terms of developing an ‘evidence-base’ for Relational Gestalt therapy, including the use of the idea of ‘implementation with integrity’ rather than a fidelity scale. As opposed to meeting certain behavioural criteria, the therapist must demonstrate that they are implementing the therapeutic modality with integrity by actively reading research in the area, being true to the underlying philosophical principles of the therapeutic modality, as well as engaging with other clinicians in the wider community of similarly oriented therapists.

The research bursary was specifically used to fund the researching and writing of my third peer-review article, ‘The Phenomenological Experience of Relationality within Gestalt Therapy’, which has been accepted by *Gestalt Review* and also currently In Press. The aim of the study was to examine the subjective experience of relationality according to clients who had or are undergoing gestalt psychotherapy. The idea was essentially to flesh out the current understanding of relationality with the perspective of the client, as Gestalt literature primarily discusses relationality from a theoretical perspective written in the voice of the therapist.

The recruitment of participants for the aforementioned study was actually very difficult in the beginning. I had advertised the study on social media on various gestalt interest pages with only a few responses. It was not until both Gestalt Therapy Australia and Gestalt Australia & New Zealand (GANZ) provided invaluable support by advertising in their respective newsletters that I was able to attain a sufficient sample of participants. Online interviews were then conducted with a sample of eight individuals who had undergone at least 50 sessions of Gestalt therapy. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by myself. The transcripts were analysed with the qualitative method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Rather than focusing purely on the content of what is said, IPA analyses an individual’s phenomenological experience and the meaning that they derive from such experience. As IPA provides an in-depth account of an individual’s experience and how they make sense of such experience, it is essential to have relatively small sample sizes otherwise the quality of the data is sacrificed for the quantity of responses.

IPA is a process of identifying themes consistent across participants and how these themes relate to each other. The results of the IPA concerning the phenomenological experience of relationality determined that relationality, for the

current sample, was comprised of three higher-order themes, each consisting of three subthemes. The interrelation between these themes is provided within the illustration below. As can be seen, the phenomenological experience of relationality was identified to consist of a sense of embodiment, an experience of the ‘in-between’ space between the participant and their respective therapist, as well as the development of awareness through gestalt therapy.



Embodiment. The participants discussed the idea of embodiment as the foundation to relationality. It was discussed consistently across those interviewed that when their therapist was able to attune to their own body and subjective experience, this process is then reflected and internalised by the client. Essentially, by the therapist developing a sense of embodiment provides the modelling for the client to do the same. Embodiment was further identified to comprise the three subthemes of stillness, holding, and presence.

When the therapist develops their own sense of embodiment, participants described a sense of stillness as permeating the therapeutic space. This sense of stillness facilitates the internal process of the client, whereby there is space to process

what is happening in any given moment within the therapeutic situation. Participants further described that embodiment was strongly related to mindfulness, they identified being more present within their own bodies, thereby allowing their cognitions to settle. According to the participants, the process of embodying provided a quality of holding, where it was experienced that the embodied therapist was able to adequately hold the space in which the therapeutic relationship developed. Thus, participants described that by the therapist stepping out of their own mind, bringing their attention to and settling within their body, the therapist was experienced as surrendering in the service of the ‘in-between’ space.

In-between. As embodiment was considered by the participants to be the foundation of relationality, the ‘in-between’ space was discussed as the foundation to the therapeutic work. By the therapist being able to attune to his or her sense of embodiment, the therapist was then able to also attune to the feelings of the client within the inter-subjective space. This allowed the therapist to process and make sense of these feelings and then give such feelings back to the client in such a way that the client was able to integrate and understand. According to the results of the IPA, the ‘in-between’ space further comprised the subthemes of the therapist’s humanness, a sense of being-with the other, as well as the difficulty in encapsulating the ‘in-between’ space with words.

Participants further identified that they experienced the therapist as co-constructing the ‘in-between’ space only through their own humanness. Essentially, the therapist needed to be experienced as a ‘whole’ person in order to have any impact on the inter-subjective field. Participants further indicated that experiencing the therapist within their human-ness felt as if the therapist was being-with the client in all their complexities and paradoxical feelings. The experience of being-with was described as a joining, attunement, or unconditional love. In terms of the experiential quality of the ‘in-between’ space, participants indicated that this inter-subjective paradigm was elusive and non-conceptual – to provide a description to this space is counter-intuitive as the space is constantly evolving and changing. Thus, any description would invariably be incomplete.

Awareness. According to the participants, the development of awareness resulted from the experience of greater relationality with their gestalt therapist. Awareness then was discussed as the outcome of contacting processes within the

therapeutic situation. The interviewed participants discussed awareness developing in the areas of aliveness, responsibility, and authenticity. The subthemes identified for awareness point toward the existential philosophical base of Relational Gestalt therapy. Through a greater feeling of aliveness, one feels more responsibility to meet at the contact boundary in an authentic way.

The next stage of this particular research idea is the development of a scale that assesses the phenomenological experience of relationality. For this purpose, items were developed to represent each of the themes and subthemes identified through the IPA. The next step then is to have individuals respond to the items in order to determine the internal structure of the scale. Therefore if you have experienced being in therapy regardless of therapeutic modality and are over the age of 18, you are invited to participate in the questionnaire, which is expected to take no more than 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire can be accessed through the following link:

http://monasheducation.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6yXUWLdwnfN3LWB

Much appreciated.

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