

Expressive Arts in Gestalt Therapy

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Teaching Lecture from the X International Latin Gestalt Conference, Cordoba, Argentina

As a gestalt therapist, I sometime use arts activities as a class of experiments within therapeutic practice. Arts activities stimulate attention to unlanguageed ways of knowing and communicating, thereby brightening awareness of id functioning and building a lively ground for client/therapist interaction. Arts activities easily revealed fixed gestalten and provide a way here-and-now for experimenting with new patterns of functioning. Arts media facilitate expression of the whole experience of the field in a sound, movement or visual metaphor, which conveys more than language alone can. Arts expression is part of the ground of anthropological history that is in the room with us. In engaging in arts experiments in therapy, we are drawing upon what our ancestors have done in social bonding for millennia.

In professional field of arts therapy, there are two basic viewpoints. 1) the doing of the arts activity is itself therapeutic; and 2) the meaning made by the client of the activity or resulting product is therapeutic. While I believe there is some truth in both of these views, my own interest lies in the second. I invite my clients to process their arts experiences in the group or session in order to assimilate it through the use of language, so that they say what it means and specifically not that I, the so-called authority, be the one to say what it means. Without processing, there is danger that the facilitator (therapist) will be idealized and that the art maker will give up self-agency, or that the activity itself will be thought of as magical, which it is not. Arts expression is an integral part of natural human functioning – metaphor making.

My particular arts specialty is singing. This is an activity, which is as old as human group formation. Some anthropologists believe that singing preceded speech. Claude Lévi-Strauss could not find a single human group, which omitted singing from their group-bonding activities. Developmentally, singing emerges between infant and caregiver from about six months of age and is an important avenue through which healthy attachment is facilitated. Physically, singing mobilizes body and breath; and studies have shown that group members singing together have the same blood pressure, pupil dilation and brain waves. Singing is an integrative activity coordinating feelings, thoughts and somatic processes. Songs are integrated productions, which express affect and ideas simultaneously. To enliven personal expression and thus intensify contact, Laura Perls occasionally asked her clients “Can you sing that?” In the same spirit, I encourage therapists to use singing experiments within their practices.

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