Can awareness per se, of and by itself, be curative?

Stephen Kenny
(100197211)

Supervisor: Fiona Kennedy
Introduction: What is Awareness?

The fluidity of awareness is equivalent to the perceptual flow of figure/ground (Crocker, 1999). According to the Gestalt framework awareness is generated between the figure-ground dichotomy. The figure is projected against a background which produces consciousness. And according to Perls (1951), “such awareness is possible only of a whole-and-parts, where each part is immediately experienced as involving all the other parts and the whole, and the whole is just of these parts, but it is more than ground for it; it is at the same time the figure of the parts, and they are ground” (p.416). In addition, the unity of figure and ground consists of thematized and tacit components. For example, when things come to the forefront of our awareness people construct different themes, Piaget’s reference was schema’s, and when things go to the background they are unthematized (tacit stimuli). Therefore, people construct different thematized components and have the ability to choose what schema’s to be aware of; otherwise schema’s which are not brought into awareness are placed into the background of awareness (unthematized). To clarify and to expand the role of thematization further, Marton & Booth (1997) in their book, Learning and awareness, states, “the thematic field or fields and the margin belong to the external horizon of the experience. Thematic fields relate to other thematic fields and the margin stretches indefinitely in space and time. In a sense we could say that we are aware of everything all of the time. But we are surely not aware of everything in the same way. Certain things are focused, others less and less. Of most things we are only very, very marginally aware. Then the situation may suddenly change and with it the structure of our awareness. Something else will be come to the fore and
other things will surround it closely while yet others will recede into peripheral awareness” (p.98). Therefore, awareness consists of multiple dimensional collapses of possibilities. In any given moment we choose, or sometimes not, what to bring in from the background of awareness. Awareness is the constant movement of background information into the foreground of consciousness. Without this constant movement disparate elements within the field would not be obvious; thus a generation of darkness would persist.

In contrast with this view of awareness other disciplines view the mind as a passive receiver of impressions. For example, in the field of psychoanalysis the mind is seen as an associator of impressions. Nevertheless, the field of Gestalt posits that human beings construct their own reality and are not just passive victims of stimuli. In addition, to this view, people have the ability to construct other forms of interpretation on reality, contra to their conditioning. Nevertheless, in presenting a cognitive framework of Gestalt’s awareness additional frameworks have being produced within the field. For example, in his book, *the theory and practice of counselling*, Jones (1995) presents three layers of awareness. The first level of awareness is the outer zone, which consists of awareness of the world. The next level is the self zone, which is the place within the skin. And finally, we have the intermediate zone, often called the mind or consciousness, which prevents people from good contact or being in touch with themselves or the world (p.54). Therefore, Jones’s posits to expand one’s awareness all three zones need to be in synce with each other.

And the final interpretation of awareness is from Perls (1951), and he states, “awareness is the spontaneous sensing of what arises in you – of what you are doing,
feeling, planning, etc” (p.75). Therefore, all three models of awareness presented above consist of a bottom-up approach. Starting with a physiological explanation (Marton & Booth, & Perls) and moving onto a psychological framework (Jones & Perls). In addition, it has to be acknowledged that the Gestalt framework on awareness is one perspective of many within the field of psychology. Additional fields like philosophy and quantum mechanics offers alternative concepts of consciousness. Nevertheless, a Gestalt framework will be integrated in explaining awareness per se, of and by itself, can be curative.

The Problem with Figure-Ground Regulation

The problem with figure-ground regulation is the inability to encompass all background figures in one’s perceptual field of observation in any given moment. However, this gross neglect of awareness does not de-comprehend the functional status of human beings; instead it is components of our awareness which are blocked, denied, and repressed within ourselves, which interfere with the perceptual flow of observation. For example, aspects of our personality which run contra to our self-imagine are pushed far back into the background of awareness and stay unthematized. Hence, what is responsible for these abandoned aspects of our awareness? Our psychosocial inheritance! In the words of Zwieg (1991), “each of us has a psychological heritage that is no less real than our biological one. This inheritance is transmitted to us and absorbed by us in the psychic soup of our family” (p.47).

Through this psychological heritage people inherit denied aspects of awareness.
We were all born whole but culture and family dynamics demand that we only live out certain aspects of our personality and the neglected, rejected, and unacceptable qualities in us are denied and disowned, which results in ‘blockages’ in our awareness. And in the words of Corey (2001), “when feelings [figures] are not fully experienced in awareness, they linger in the background and are carried into present life in ways that interfere with effective contact with oneself and others. And when figures emerge from the background but are not completed and resolved, individuals are left with unfinished business, which can be manifest in unexpressed feelings such as resentment, rage, hatred, pain, anxiety, grief, guilt, and abandonment” (p.198). In addition, Polster and Polster (1973), “maintain that these incomplete figures do seek completion and when they get powerful enough, the individual is beset with preoccupation, compulsive behaviour, wariness, oppressive energy and much self-defeating behaviour” (Corey, 2001, p.199). Hence, unacknowledged feelings or figures emerging from the background create unnecessary emotional debris that clutters awareness. And, the inability to allow the perceptual flow of figure-ground clouds one’s consciousness. Therefore, in the words of Corsini (1989), “the person who verbally acknowledges his situation but does not really see it, know it, react to it and feel in response to it is not fully aware and is not in full contact. The person who is aware knows what he does, how he does it, that he has alternatives and that he chooses to be as he is. (p.347).

Therefore, what prevents people from becoming fully aware of their inheritance and to reclaim the disowned aspects of their personalities (background figures)? Fritz Perls used the word mind-fucking to describe the activity of the intermediate zone (Jones, three layers of personality), which hinders people from coming to their senses. This
intermediate zone consists of fantasy activity and denial which consumes the mind and leaves little energy over for being in touch with reality. In addition, Perls (Corey, 2001) describes how the personality needs to be peeled like an onion for full awareness/contact to be restored. The first neurosis to be stripped is the phony layer which consists of people not being real to themselves or others. Once we become aware of the phoniness of game playing and become more honest, we experience unpleasantness and pain within our lives. This leads us onto the second layer, the phobic, which consists of denied traits and emotions emerging from our unconscious mind. We resist these because we believe other people will reject us. The third layer is the impasse, which represents our emotional wilderness. After stripping away the phony and phobic layers we feel stripped, naked, and dead inside. We need to be able to stay with our deadness to move onto the next level. The fourth layer, the implosive level, where we expose our defences and allow our true authentic self to emerge. And finally the explosive layer emerges in which we let go of phony roles and pretences. By doing so we release a tremendous amount of energy, which we were holding in pretending to be who we are not.

**Can Awareness per se be Curative by Itself?**

The gestalt theory of change posits that the more we attempt to be who or what we are not, the more we remain the same. According to paradoxical theory of change, we change when we become aware of what we are as opposed to trying to become what we are not. (Corey, 2001, p.196). Therefore, awareness by itself can not be curative. We all possess awareness; however, it is where we place this awareness that generates the
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curative solution to change. In the words of Corsini (1989), “in Gestalt therapy, the only goal is awareness. This includes greater awareness in a particular area and also greater ability for the patient to bring automatic habits into awareness as needed” (p.347). Nevertheless, the ability to bring automatic habits into awareness is difficult, because this is where most of us are handicapped. It is our psychological defences, which places a barrier to full contact with our environment, because these defences prevent unwanted thoughts, sensations and feelings coming into awareness. However, these mechanisms maintain a sense of homeostasis within the individual; without them equilibrium is not maintained. According to Jones (1995), “the basic tendency of every organism is to strive for balance. The organism is continuously faced with imbalance that is disturbing through either external (demands from the environment) or internal (needs). Life is characterized by a continuous interplay of balance and imbalance in the organism” (p.49).

Therefore, psychological mechanisms help to maintain equilibrium within the mind of the organism. If these mechanisms were stripped away unbalance would occur. In addition, the more defences somebody possess the more restrictions they have on their consciousness. Therefore, how can an organism reduce their psychological defences and still maintain equilibrium within? According to Perls (1951), “what one can do is bit by bit to extend one’s awareness by discovering and dissolving the resistances in oneself which have prevented this, but one cannot command what one is unaware of to march obediently into awareness” (p.36). However, discovering and dissolving these resistances can be extremely difficult, and can produce a lot of pain and anguish for the individual. For an individual to maintain equilibrium, within the mind, the process of liberation and restoration needs to be carried out in a supportive environment; otherwise the individual’s
Awareness defence mechanisms are maintained to protect homeostasis. In conclusion, awareness per se is not curative by itself. It consists of breaking down defence mechanisms and bringing into awareness parts of us we have disowned.

**Gestalt Approach of Breaking down Resistances**

To diminish one’s capacity to experience pain is to diminish also one’s capacity to experience pleasure (Branden, 1978, p.104). Hence, if the continuation of figures are blocked within the background of awareness our capacity to experience all aspects of our humanity are denied. To expand one’s capacity different schools of psychotherapy have concentrated on different methods of heightening awareness. Within the field of Gestalt therapy the aim is not at analysis but at awareness and contact with the environment. This approach entails confronting and frustrating the client’s escape from responsibility. Perls (1951) conception of human nature, “…is that clients are manipulative and avoid self-reliance and responsibility” (p.119). Hence, the avoidance of responsibility is the manifestation of defence mechanisms within the organism. To confront these internal defences or resistances the therapist, according to Corey (2001), “…assists the client to increase awareness, which will allow re-identification with the part of the self from which he or she is alienated” (p.196). Therefore, the field of Gestalt therapy has developed numerous therapeutic techniques and experiments to restore contact within the individual, who have created anxiety, depression, and so forth by rejecting themselves. However, many of these techniques/experiments can be inappropriate for clients who are
uncomfortable with the emotional aspects of themselves. Gestalt therapy is not for the weak of heart.

**Awareness Techniques**

The basic assumption of Gestalt therapy is that individuals have the capacity to self-regulate in their environment if they are fully aware of what is happening in and around them. Therapy provides the setting and opportunity for that awareness and contacting process to be supported and restored. (Corey, 2001, p.196). Therefore, to enhance the awareness of clients Gestalt therapy uses certain techniques to restore contact. These techniques are important because they allow for the reintegration of mind and body. For example, over intellectualization can restrict body sensation. This is due to the inability of the Ego to protect itself; unable to live in the body it moves to the mind, where neurotic and psychotic thinking takes place. To restore this imbalance the client needs to move into their bodies, because their bodies represent blocked and repressed energy, which needs to be freed. Thus, these unblocked feelings or sensations are reasonable for producing a neurotic state of mind, and restricting one’s consciousness. Therefore, to enhance body sensation certain *techniques or practices* are needed. Within the Gestalt framework, for example, O’Leary (1992) in her book *Gestalt Therapy* talks about verbal and non-verbal techniques to restore body contact. In the non-verbal communication body awareness is facilitated by five techniques. The first technique is *eliciting body sensation from clients*, this consists of the therapist directing the client in becoming aware of different parts of their body. The second technique is *naming the
Awareness, either located within the body or the mind. This allows the client to become aware of sensation, which allows for reintegration of feelings. The third technique is giving feedback to the client, which consists of the therapist bringing attention to certain blocks or feelings within the client. The fourth technique is mirroring body language back to the client. This allows for the client to become aware of disowned behaviour within themselves. And the final technique is undoing retroflections. This entails taking back projections of behaviour and taking responsibility for them. Overall, these techniques reduce a client’s psychological defence to new stimuli/figures coming fourth from the background of awareness. This prepares the client, and therapist, to move onto deeper techniques to enhance awareness.

The use of Experiments

The therapist’s job is to invite clients into an active partnership where they can learn about themselves by adopting an experimental attitude toward life in which they try out new behaviours and notice what happens. (Corey, 2001, p.203). Therefore, in reducing the client’s defensive mechanisms they are more open to experiment within the therapeutic setting. Hence, Gestalt therapy developed several experiments to facilitate new behaviour. And according to Polster and Polster, 1973 (quoted in O’Leary, 1992), “the experiment in gestalt therapy is an attempt to counter the aboutism deadlock by bringing the action right into the room. Clients are mobilized to confront the emergencies of their lives by playing out their aborted feelings and actions in relative safety” (p.62).
Therefore, the most famous and widely used experiment is the two-chair technique to resolve splits. This entails clients switching back and forth from both chairs. This allows for the reintegration of polarized states within the mind. For example, a client who abused by a dominating parental figure may develop passive tendencies and the inability to express themselves. The two-chair technique would allow the client the opportunity to express suppressed feelings by imaging the parental figure occupying the other chair. Afterwards the client would play the role of the parent, which would allow the client to hear what they needed to hear growing up. Thus, this process allows suppressed emotions to arise and to be dissolved. Hence, the inability to bring up repressed emotions/figures interferes with the perceptual flow of consciousness. For example, Branden (1978) states that, “feelings which are not permitted to be experienced, expressed and thus discharged, are frozen into his body, barricaded behind walls of muscular and physiological tension, and a pattern of reaction is inaugurated that will tend to recur again and again when he is threatened by a feeling he/she does not wish to experience” (p.282).

Therefore, if clients do not take reasonability for their suppressed emotions/figures they follow a pattern of reaction towards their environment. This causes an imbalance within the organism, because they have no control or choices in how they react to inner stimuli/figures arising from the background of awareness. They continue to collapse the wave function of possibilities down to one form of interpretation. Therefore, the use of the two-chair experiment within Gestalt therapy is therapeutic for resolving inner splits and facilitating expansion of consciousness, because by not owning all
aspects of our personalities and integrating them, we continue through life with a restrictive *interpretation* of reality.

**Limitations and Strengths of Gestalt Therapy to enhance Awareness**

One of the early criticisms of Gestalt therapy was that cognitive factors were dismissed by Fritz Perls (Corey, 2001, & Corsini, 1989). Perls believed by staying in the present moment exploration of feelings were the key to expanding one’s awareness. Therefore, cognitive factors were some kind of neurotic merry-go-round, which prevented the client from making full contact with the environment. Nevertheless, many critics cite that cognitive factors are important in the liberation of the mind. If the client is unable to explore past or future situations he is restricted in the present. However, O’Leary (1992) states, “even descriptions of past situations can be present-centred by inviting clients to tell their story in the present tense. This allows them to re-experience the feelings associated with the events” (p.53).

Another criticism towards Gestalt therapy, according to Corsini (1989), “is that a Gestalt therapist uses his/her own person as a therapeutic medium for change. The willingness of a Gestalt therapist to be present during the therapeutic contact requires strong personal commitment to abide to the principles of Gestalt therapy and a high level of self-awareness. Yet, to the extent the therapist has unresolved personal issues, and is therefore unable to engage in real contact, the therapeutic effectiveness will be detrimentally impaired” (p.347). Therefore, depending upon the maturity level of the therapist, Gestalt therapy can be ineffective and detrimental for the client. One form of...
processes within Gestalt therapy, that can seriously go wrong, is the use of experiments. According to Corey (2001), “therapists occasionally use these powerful experiments to stir up feelings and open up problems that clients have kept from full awareness, only to abandon the clients once they have managed to have a dramatic catharsis. Such a failure to stay with clients, helping them work through what they have experienced and bring some closure to the experience, can be damaging” (p.221). This type of failure on behalf of the therapist to facilitate closure activates the clients defence mechanisms to maintain homeostasis. Thus, the client does not receive the opportunity to benefit from the experiment, because they are driven back into their neurotic state of mind to protect themselves from unwanted feelings/figures. Therefore, the role of any good therapist is to initiate the release of suppressed emotions and have the ability to see these emotions through expression and resolution. Anything sort of this only maintains the psychological mechanisms of the client, due to the fact homeostasis needs to be maintained within the individual. Therefore, some therapists are inept to use the tools of Gestalt therapy, because unable to finalize resolution within a client, is a reflection that the therapist could not find resolution within themselves. In addition, a therapist who hides behind techniques and experiments can end up damaging the therapeutic relationship, because they did not possess the relevant practical experience of self discovery.

Nevertheless, Gestalt therapy used in the right hands can be liberating and freeing for the client (Harman, 1984, & Corey, 2001). For example, some psychotherapies can keep the client trapped in the past (psychoanalysis) or blinded by behavioural contingencies in the present (behaviourism), but Gestalt therapy is all about enhancing the perceptual flow of figure and ground, which enhances the awareness of the organism.
In addition, since the days of Fritz Perls a new style of Gestalt therapy has emerged, which pays more attention to cognitive, phenomenological, and development factors within the individual (Wheeler, 1998; McConville, 1995; Lobb & Salonia, 1993). Therefore, the enhancement of knowledge, techniques, and training, within the field of Gestalt therapy, has increased its effectiveness. However, it is important not to lose the original philosophy of Fritz Perls, who believed liberation was achieved in dealing with ones emotions in the present moment. If a therapist is unable to confront the client and relies on cognitive factors alone can end up maintaining the disintegration of figures within the background of awareness.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, awareness per se, of and by itself, can not be curative by itself. People regulate the perceptual flow of figure and ground and suppress any figures emerging which threaten homeostasis. Therefore, for the organism to maintain homeostasis awareness stays with the familiar, because adventuring outside the familiar produces unwanted thoughts and feelings. Hence, the organism rushes back into its *enclosure* of familiarity to balance its equilibrium. Thus, people have developed elaborate defence mechanisms to maintain homeostasis. Therefore, for awareness to be curative attention needs to be focused on certain resistances within the individual. Only by dissolving these resistances can awareness by itself can be curative and healing. Therefore, within the practice of Gestalt therapy this process can occur through the techniques and experiments developed by Perl’s and associates.
References


