

5. GESTALT THERAPY RESEARCH CONFERENCE HAMBURG 9/2-4 2022

Saturday, 9/3.2022 2.30 - 4.00 p.m.

Challenges in the development of research questions from Gestalt therapy theory

The theory of Gestalt therapy draws on various different source theories, e.g. Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, American pragmatism, phenomenological philosophy. It is generally agreed that our founders combined these different theories masterfully and that any inconsistencies between them are not a problem. However, in the research process they may make it difficult to clearly explicate research questions and develop valid experimental hypotheses. We will examine this issue, giving examples of inconsistencies that may be an obstacle - but also a stimulus to continue developing our theory.

Deirdre Winter, B.A./G.B., Dipl. Psych., Gestalttherapeutin DVG. Born and grew up in England, in Germany since 1975; works with traumatised refugees and English- and German-speaking private clients; DVG clinical Gestalt therapy theory group

Dr. Albrecht Boeckh Sociologist, Gestalt Therapist (DVG) and Supervisor (DGSv) Trainer for Gestalt Therapy and Supervision. Editor of the Journal: GESTALTHERAPIE. Member of the DVG study group on clinical theory of Gestalt Therapy. Author.

Albrecht Boeckh: Some Ideas regarding the topic

Our idea originated in the thought, that developing research designs for Gestalt therapy might be problematic because of the inconsistency of its theories.

What seemed to fit together well in therapeutic practice:

Gestalt processes + phenomenology + field theory + relationality + organismic self-regulation in the organism-environment field + etc., turns out on closer inspection to be a hodgepodge of theory set pieces, **some of which are contradictory or at least incoherent with each other.**

My friendly hypothesis on this is:

Gestalt therapy may be so successful in practice, because it has integrated everything that was common and seemed helpful ("there is no end to integration" F. Perls). By the way this unfortunately also includes esoteric and pseudoscientific elements.

This raises the question whether we stay with this strategy of success, or whether we finally have to clean up the mess in order to develop a pure teaching that can be deduced from basic principles, as F. Perls probably always had in mind (cf. K. Höll's article in the penultimate issue of the Journal GESTALTHERAPIE (2/2021, p. 89-11), which ultimately believes that everything can be deduced from Gestalt principles in a universal-theoretical way).

My suggestion for kindness is:

First collect and order before declaring components of Gestalt Therapy theory sacrosanct or inappropriate.

From the point of view of philosophy of science

Theories are not "platonic ideas" from which one can derive the right view of reality, but tools which serve for orientation in confusing fields. They are - as systemicists tend to say – maps, that provide orientation and are not to be confused with the land itself. Therefore, one should not set the standards for theories too high, but rather deal with them pragmatically as more or less useful tools.

The problem, however, is that the theory-guided view of reality determines the way in which this reality is dealt with, and this may lead to the formation of artifacts and other self-confirming false assumptions. - A reproach that is often made to the theory-guided interpretations of psychoanalysis.

However, it also becomes difficult when the maps are contradictory.

To give an example:

The model of organismic self-regulation in the organism-environment-field represents an abstract process model, which as such is not verifiable, but has proven - like an axiom - to be a useful assumption for all possible self-regulation processes. It corresponds to a structure-functional systemic thinking that explains its deviations from the observable reality by avoidance mechanisms that have to be remedied in therapy.

Quite in contrast to this, phenomenology preaches that one has to exclude presuppositions (epoché): "to the things themselves!" – as Husserl said, and has to refer to the immediate experience. There would be no place for a structural-functional model of self-regulation in the organism-environment-field. At most, one could claim that an organism which does not organize its self-preservation would have no chance of survival in the long run (the Darwinian argument).

So: How do you get these two approaches together now?

In my opinion, this is only possible, if both approaches: the structural-functional and the phenomenological approach are not set absolute, but are regarded in their respective limited meaningfulness as "heuristic principles", which can only be meaningful in coordination with each other.

Any absolutization - "Platonic idea" - then leads to the theory exceeding the area in which it is/was meaningful.

An example of this: Gestalt therapy in its theoretical tradition has declared "oral aggression" to be the central paradigm of the contact process (e.g. Ego-Hunger-Aggression, Dreitzel's approach etc.) All contact processes are interpreted along the Ego-Hunger-Aggression-process, whether it is about eating itself or about love relationships does not matter. To me, this is a glaring example of how a theory can become false when it is paradigmatically extended and generalized.

Conclusion:

All theoretical approaches united in Gestalt therapy retain their meaning as long as their usage do not exceed the boundaries of their meaningful validity.

An other result is, that we don't have to derive research questions out of the Gestalt therapy theory but we have to search the theory (out of the wide range of theory in the frame of Gestalt Therapy) for concrete research questions.