

Gestalt therapy contribution for the intuition and responsiveness of the therapist: the Aesthetic Relational Knowledge Scale

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb¹, Federica Sciacca², Serena Iacono Isidoro³, and Zira Hichy²



1 Istituto di Gestalt HCC Italy, Syracuse, Italy
2 Department of Educational Science, University of Catania

3 Institute for Biomedical Research and Innovation (IRIB) - National Research Council of Italy (CNR)
Corresponding author: Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb - margherita.spagnuolo@gestalt.it



Introduction

Although there are many studies on the relational skills of psychotherapists (Wampold, 2017; Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005), there are no studies that specifically indicate the therapist's relational intuition and its development during training.

This study has explored the construct of *aesthetic relational knowing* (ARK) (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2018) as a contribution from Gestalt therapy to describe the intuition and responsiveness of the therapist: an experience that emerges from the phenomenological field created in a meeting between therapist and client. A scale to measure this construct has been built and validated.

The ARKS is a tool to describe and measure some complex aspects of the intuitive capacity of the psychotherapist. The construct of aesthetic relational knowledge (ARK) has been described as a phenomenological and aesthetic tool able to support therapeutic intuition and clinical use of their responsiveness, drawing on a field/relational perspective.

Method

The concept of ARK has been examined in literature and a questionnaire has been developed, finally composed of 58 items. In the attempt to describe the construct of ARK, we have considered three basic dimensions: empathy, bodily awareness and resonance.

Empathy - (11 items) as the therapist's ability to identify, understand, and mentalize the patient's emotions; it includes emotional contagion, emotional disconnection, and cognitive empathy

Bodily awareness - (28 items) as the therapist's interoceptive ability to recognize the emotional-bodily activation in their own body

Resonance - (19 items) as the therapist's ability to fully immerse themselves in the situation, and experience "the other side of the moon" of the patient's feeling: the feeling of the other with whom the experience has been co-created

Items of the scale were extracted from the *Basic Empathy Scale* (BES) and the *Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness* (MAIA). A series of questions was created ad hoc for the assessment of resonance. A pilot study has helped to arrange items in an appropriate order to create the scale.

For each item, participants indicated their level of agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with 4 meaning neither agree nor disagree.

A sample of 94 Italian Gestalt psychotherapists ($M = 40.19$, $SD = 8.15$) has completed an online protocol containing the scale. Two exploratory two- and three- latent-factor analyses were conducted to identify the variables that best explain ARK.

Table 2. Item analysis of the ARKS

| Item | M | SD | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|------|-------|----------|----------|
| 1. After being with a friend who is sad about something, I usually feel sad. | 3.36 | .960 | .032 | -.649 |
| 2. I can understand the happiness of my friends when they do something right. | 4.14 | 1.053 | -1.185 | .653 |

Discussion

The ARK can be defined as a three-dimensional construct that supports the complexity of the therapists' intuition and responsiveness in terms of aesthetic knowledge of the phenomenological field of the therapeutic situation.

More thoroughly, the results showed that some items about empathy (6, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 19, 20) that belong to the BES scale (Carré et al., 2013) saturated well with the resonance factor and not with that of empathy. In particular, these items belong to the factor called cognitive empathy. According to the above mentioned study, cognitive empathy concerns the ability to understand and mentalize the emotions of other people (Elliott, 2010); in our case, it can be configured as an aesthetic sensitivity to the field.

This view supports the idea that cognitive empathy has to do with what in the concept of ARK is called resonance, that is, the therapist's ability to experience "the other side of the moon" of the patient's feeling, which originates from an aesthetic sensitivity to the field (the therapist "vibrates" in front of some aspects of the patient's presence) and is defined as a contextualization (i.e., a particular form of mentalization) of the feeling of reciprocity felt by the therapist in the field. In this sense, our study has expanded the previous studies on empathy, approaching the concept of resonance in more detail.

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Results

The principal components analysis was performed with the aim of analyzing the dimensionality of the scale. Three dominant components were identified. The initial version of the scale consisted of 63 items (20 of the BES, 32 of the MAIA, and 11 questions on the resonance). In the first factorial analysis, five items that did not saturate in any factor or that saturated in several factors at the same time were eliminated. The final version of the ARKS consists of 58 items. Factor structure of the ARKS was conducted by matrix of rotated components analysis with varimax rotation, shown in Table 1.

Table 2 shows the item analysis of the ARKS. Cronbach's alpha was .730 for resonance (19 items), .921 for body awareness (28 items), and .672 for empathy (11 items); moreover, the alpha coefficient for the total scale was .873.

Table 3 shows the factor structure of the ARKS.

Tables 1 and 2 are excerpts from the original paper

Table 1. Factor loadings of the ARKS conducted by matrix of rotated components analysis with varimax rotation

| Item | Body awareness | Resonance | Empathy |
|--|----------------|-----------|---------|
| 4. I am easily involved in the feelings of others. | | | 0.741 |
| 5. I find it hard to tell when my friends are scared. | | -0.500 | |
| 20. When I am tense, I notice where the tension is located in my body. | 0.564 | | |

Table 3. Factor Structure of Aesthetic Relational Knowledge Scale (ARKS)

| Factors | M | SD | Correlation | | | |
|---------------------|------|-------|-------------|--------|--------|---|
| | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 1. Resonance | 4.22 | 0.334 | 1 | | | |
| 2. Empathy | 3.52 | 0.481 | .06 | 1 | | |
| 3. Bodily awareness | 2.78 | 0.497 | .299** | -.011 | 1 | |
| 4. ARKS | 3.39 | 0.307 | .610 | .313** | .884** | 1 |

**p < .001

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research allowed us to validate the ARK as a construct that expresses the therapist's ability to identify with the patient's body feeling and to resonate with field elements that allow a broader sensitivity than just about the patient's experience: a sensitivity on the field from which that experience emerges (Macaluso, 2020a, 2020b; Parlett, 1991, 2000, 2003, 2005; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, this study allowed us to validate the ARKS as a scale useful to describe the ARK. In fact, this scale appears to be a reliable tool to describe the therapist's ability to be intuitive and responsive to the patient's request and to the situation (see Stiles et al, 1998; Watson and Wiseman, 2021).

The ARKS can measure the degree by which the therapist can immerse themselves in the phenomenological field that is cocreated with the patient (Husserl, 1965). This measure provides useful information for them to intervene therapeutically by providing the relational support that is needed by the patient in their relational field. Moreover, this measure can provide basic information on the process of learning of students during psychotherapy trainings and interesting data for different populations of patients or therapists.

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