ON THE USE OF SOME GENERAL SEMANTICS FORMULATIONS IN THE PRACTICE OF GESTALT THERAPY

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Introduction

Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt therapy, looks at a client. "I notice that you are moving your leg back and forth." With this simple statement, Perls sets off a powerful therapy incident, which I will elaborate on later, using principles typical of general semantics. In this paper, after a brief introduction to Gestalt therapy, I will describe some Gestalt therapy practices which directly use general semantics formulations. I will describe only those techniques which are at the interface of the two disciplines. Although nothing prevents any therapist or counselor from using general semantics, it is my thesis that Gestalt work forms an unusually effective position from which to further the work of Korzybski and the other general semanticists.

Gestalt Therapy and General Semantics

Those who associate general semantics with the study of language, and those for whom Gestalt work means non-verbal expression (body feelings, tone of voice, posture, etc.) are missing much of the richness in each. That Fritz Perls penetrated deeply into the spirit of general semantics will be demonstrated later in this paper.

Gestalt Therapy

Briefly, Gestalt therapy is a congeries of formulations and techniques integrated into a meaningful whole by Fritz and Laura Perls, and used with variations by many who follow them. In spite of contrasting styles and professional attitudes, Gestalt therapists have many elements in common. For example: patients are expected to have an active role in their therapy: hitting pillows, acting out the parts of other people, abstractions, objects; confronting the therapist directly.

Gestalt work is strongly influenced by the existential, here-now philosophies. Past experiences and future anticipations are approached from the experience of the present moment.

The most typical success in a Gestalt session takes place when a client who has been absorbed with the 'abstract' suddenly 'wakes up' and contacts the events occurring in the room, in his/her body, in contact with another person. The most frequently asked question in Gestalt work is, "What are you experiencing right now?"

In addition to general semantics, the Perlses drew upon Gestalt psychology, psychodrama, actor training techniques, dianetics, logotherapy, bioenergetics, Zen Buddhism. The work of Freud, Jung and Adler can also easily be discerned.
Fritz Perls and General Semantics

In an article in *The Handbook of Gestalt Therapy* (Hatcher and Himmelstein, 1976) Jerry Kogan notes that Korzybski and I. A. Richards both influenced Perls' concern with "word-object confusion and, more importantly, with the effect of language upon thought and behavior." He goes on, "Many of Perls' ideas are closely related to principles of general semantics, particularly splits and dichotomies and the relationship of the Aristotelian two-valued system to both cognition and conation." Perls, himself, (in his autobiography, *In and Out of the Garbage Pail*) makes specific reference to Korzybski's work which shows a more profound understanding of general semantics than many so-called 'general semanticists'. In writing about Wilhelm Reich's efforts to combine the philosophies of Marx and Freud, Perls writes:

He made the mistake of attempting to get the two Weltanschauungen to relate to each other on a high level of abstraction instead of on the gut level. The result was rejection and name-calling. The Communists rejected him because he was an analyst, and the analysts rejected him because he was a Communist. Instead of a chair with a broader base, he found himself falling between two chairs. He got into trouble through relating two systems before relating his own subsistence and his own sex. He was, so to say, punished for violating some basic laws of general semantics -- Korzybski vindicated.

This distinction, between "high level of abstraction" and "gut level" is fundamental to both studies. How many general semanticists have explored Marx by relating to their own subsistence or Freud by relating to their own sexual feelings? Alan Watts, in several lectures to general semantics audiences, accused general semantics students of "talking too much." Perls (no slouch at talking, himself) here shows the use of language to probe non-verbal experience, rather than as the tool of the debater therapist who loses contact with everything but words. And this is part of the repertoire of the trained Gestaltist: to use words as a probe of the world of non-verbal experience, and only then to bring in the higher abstraction words.

A "Gestalt" Adaptation of the Structural Differential

For me, the core of all general semantics work is the Structural Differential of Korzybski (*Science and Sanity*, 1933). I present here a slight variation of it, using an optical illusion often used to illustrate general semantics formulations.

What do you see in this picture? You most likely see either a white vase (on a black background) or two black faces looking at each other, nose to nose (on a white background). Whichever image you see, keep looking until the other image appears. Notice that you can see only one at a time, faces or vase. If you keep looking, the other image will appear.
When faces change into vase (or vice versa) what has changed? Not the paper itself or the organization of dots that make up the black print. The changes occur due to the interaction of the drawing and your nervous system. This interaction is not the environment alone nor your nervous system alone, but the point of contact between them.

The word "Gestalt" refers to the image or perception you have: vase is one Gestalt; faces another Gestalt. In this case, we get two very different Gestalts from one drawing. Each Gestalt includes, in this case, your past experiences with drawing, with faces, and with vases.

So, we can distinguish three levels:
1) the many potential stimuli in the environment
2) the Gestalts we form from those stimuli (that is, the point at which we 'recognize' (organize) a pattern and can name it.)
3) the words we use to label gestalts.

To paraphrase Korzybski somewhat, we will represent the flowing, not yet patterned environment as an open ended parabola:

![Parabola Image]

the recognized pattern (it might be a physical 'object', a feeling, a rhythm) is depicted by a circle, and I will call that the object-Gestalt level:

![Object-Gestalt Image]

Finally, abstraction through the use of words is represented by tags, something like luggage tags:

![Tag Image]

These tags are sometimes labels of direct experience, but often are labels of OTHER TAGS.

Here is a representation of the response one might have to the 'optical illusion':

![Response Image]
Gestalt Techniques

I will now present some specific Gestalt techniques, many of them used by the Perlses; some created by me and other Gestaltists. Please note that none of them are intended to be taken as simplistic solutions to complex psychological problems. In some cases, it is true, a simple technique does make an amazing difference in a client's attitude or character structure, but that is not always the case. More often, the Gestalt experiment is the beginning of a long, involved process of understanding and slow growth. Nevertheless, the change brought about in one session can be a milestone for someone whose patterns have been rigidly maintained for many years. In some cases, the client learns primarily that he/she CAN be different and is not unable to try some new experience.

Continuum of Awareness

Fritz Perls used this technique designed to bring one's awareness closer to the dynamic, ever-changing 'parabola'. The person is asked to say a series of sentences, each beginning: "Now I am aware that _______; NOW I am aware that ______." So that he/she might say, "Now I am aware of my breathing; now I am aware of a noise outside; now I am aware that you are looking at me; now I am aware that my face is flushing...."

I often use this with clients who seem, at the moment, remote, disoriented, vague. It is especially useful for clients who are excessively involved with their past or future.

Going From the Verbal To the Non-verbal

Often, as a Gestalt therapist, I work to bring a client's words closer to the object-Gestalt level, or "gut level." For example: a client is talking at some length, when I realize that I am not paying attention to the content. My customary response is to say: "Wait! What are you experiencing at this moment?" Whatever the reason for my lack of attention, this usually brings us both back into contact again. It takes us away from a sea of words and into touch with the present environment. Very often, it turns out that the verbal output was a device to avoid some specific thought or feeling.

Sometimes the client answers too quickly to have allowed for the present experience to register. This avoidance of present moment awareness then becomes the most important work of the session. I raise questions such as: "How do you prevent yourself from experiencing yourself, others, works of art, your breathing, etc?"

Another way of tying up the verbal to the non-verbal is to mention some non-verbal element in the client's behavior. In a session, Fritz Perls observed to a client that he noticed her leg moving back and forth. The client became furious. "You're so pompous! You think you're so smart. You just think you know everything." "I saw your leg moving and I said so. What's so smart about that?" Technically, he brought her attention to the object-Gestalt level, away from more abstract words. The session might have then focused on what her leg moving meant to her. As it was, it focused on how a simple statement of observation was interpreted and analyzed for meaning far beyond what was said.
The client got in touch with the full responsibility for the unwarranted inferences she had made. They were, of course, based on her experiences and hearsay in relation to other therapists and persons in authority. Nevertheless, an observation had been made, not from the position "I know more than you do," but from "This is what I observe; were you aware of it, and what do you make of it, if anything?"

She had been brought out of a verbal deadness, into anger and an awareness of how she interprets what is being said to her.

The incredible power of simply describing the object-Gestalt level to a client always amazes me. Often, I will simply call the client's attention to the gut level and let him/her make the abstractions from it. "You say you are angry -- can you remember what your voice sounded like as you said it? No? Try saying it again." The client may respond, "I guess I don't sound very angry." "What do you sound like?" The answer might be: "like begging" or "like sulking" or "like apologizing"; whatever the case, the CLIENT is the one who makes the higher order abstraction.

The results of this can be startling. Voices that were dead sometimes become animated, filled with emotion. Faces, when paid attention to, may become many faceted, communicative, rather than deadpan. Body postures may respond to "Notice the way you are sitting," by changing from a resemblance to an overstuffed sack of potatoes to human, rhythmic, expressive positions.

Non-verbal To Verbal

Some clients seem unable to describe non-verbal reactions. They will say, "I don't know what I feel" or "I don't seem to have any feelings." In some cases, the person is actually disconnected from awareness of feelings; in other cases, more frequently found, there is a strong reluctance to communicate what is felt. In each case, there is need for an education process. One path is to have him/her notice non-verbal expressions and exaggerate them. For example: a female client notices that her body posture seems like a "slouch." When she exaggerates the slouch, she labels it as a feeling of "hopelessness." An exaggerated fist may be felt as "anger" and an unnoticed smile, "pleasure."

Some of us have learned not to label feelings which we judge to be not intense enough to be 'worth' communicating. Education can begin by having slight, mild feelings named: annoyance, amusement, seriousness. Later, these can be seen as related to "anger," "joy," "grief."

Verbal Transformations

Like Korzybski, Perls was interested in the way changes in our language habits affect our behavior and attitudes. Note, however, that such changes are usually just the beginning of work, not the final goal. Too often, a change of language habit becomes a glib, thoughtless routine. As a means of focusing awareness, such changes are invaluable.
Here are some transformations Perls used:
**BUT — — AND:** Take a sentence with the word "but" in it; change that to "and." For example: "He is a Rumanian, but he is very nice," becomes "He is a Rumanian and he is very nice." Trivial as this example may seem, it shows some of the effect of such a change. The word "but" implies that there are incompatible elements; "and" suggests that these elements co-exist in the world at the object-Gestalt level, without paradox.

Consider: "I want to be with my friends, but I feel sad." "I thought we had a beautiful relationship, but he hurt my feelings."

**IT — — I:** Depersonalized 'it' becomes gut level "I." "It is frightening in here" becomes "I feel frightened." "It's very boring" becomes "I am boring myself," which lead to explorations of how the client scares or bores him/herself. Once aware of how he/she does these things, the choice is available to continue or to stop doing it.

**QUESTIONS INTO STATEMENTS:** To assist a client to grow in self-support (stand on their own feet) Perls, on being asked a question which the client could answer would say, "Change that into a statement." Often a question which is vague, too 'abstract', turns out to have some gut level feelings behind it. "Do you think I did the right thing?" may become: "I think you are annoyed with me for that." Or it might become: "I really feel good about what I did, and want your approval."

**Verbal Orders of Abstraction**

Labels, in general semantics, are often arranged in order of abstraction: from higher to lower or vice versa. Labels close to the object-Gestalt level of direct perception are considered low orders of abstraction. For example: the words "chair", "furniture", "useful man-made object" are arranged in order from lower to higher; "living organism", "bird", "sparrow" are arranged from higher to lower abstractions.

**Use of Orders of Abstractions in Gestalt Work:**

**Lower to Higher Abstractions**

A client may typically use language at only low orders of abstraction. He/she may, when asked "What is your experience?" respond only with terms such as, "My palms are sweating," "I see you smiling," "My hands and feet are very cold," "I feel like pounding my fists." As a therapist, I have the client use language at higher orders: "Say, 'I am afraid!' or 'I am furious.'" These usually hit the mark for the above statements.

**Higher to Lower Abstractions**

Some clients typically use only 'abstract' language. When asked what their experience is they say things like: "I am upset....nervous....uncomfortable." or "I feel O.K." In such cases, it is necessary to have them locate such feeling 'in the body'. This brings it 'down' to the object-Gestalt level, and LITERALLY to the "gut" level.
Often, in a group, a client will say, "I can't talk to men, they frighten me." or "I feel uncomfortable with the others here, I can't talk in front of them." When, however, the client is asked to look at faces and say WHO is frightening, the fear disappears. It was fear of a high order abstraction, not of the lower order extensional individuals. Similar procedures can be used to deal with generalizations about Jews, blacks, redheads, therapists, married people, lawyers, etc. The client can begin to discriminate and say, "I am frightened by this woman, but not that one." Another technique for changing higher to lower order abstractions is to change "should" into what I perceive. For example: "I should be nice to my wife," shows a preoccupation with how the client fancies (high order) he should be. The statement suggests that on the object-Gestalt level, he is NOT nice to his wife. As long as he is preoccupied with how he should be, he is not going to change his behavior toward his wife. Instead, he will have to explore at lower levels HOW he is not nice to his wife. Similarly, "I should eat less," is not as helpful for behavior change as "I eat too much and this is how I do it."

'Up' and 'Down' Abstractions: Summary

So the therapist will go in different 'directions' to correct imbalance: if a client says only, "My palms are sweating," he/she is asked to say, "I am afraid;" if he/she says, "I am afraid," the therapist will ask: "Where do you feel that fear in your body?"

Dream Work Using Orders of Abstraction

Dreams can be worked on at different levels of abstraction. For example: a client brings in a dream which consists of seemingly hundreds of unconnected details. The therapist may get no sense of focus, and so ask the client to give the dream a title. This brings the entire dream into focus so that it can be worked on. Another way of getting the dream on to a more manageable high level of abstraction is to say, "Put your dream over there and talk to it." The client may say, "You overwhelm me," or "I like you," either one of which gives a feeling for the client's attitude towards the entire dream.

Another way of getting the dream on to a higher order is to ask the client to tell it in abstract: "A very fat tightrope walker is running on a blue strip of watermelons when she sees three large subway conductors telling her to get off at the 72nd street stop," becomes more manageable as: "Someone is running and people are telling her what to do."

Dreams can be worked on by taking them 'DOWN' to lower orders of abstraction. A dream, in Gestalt work, is assumed to represent parts of the client which, to some extent, have been 'dis-owned'. A client might dream about a boat. "Be the boat... say, 'I am a boat,' and describe yourself." The client might say: "I am a huge steamship in the endless ocean," or "I am a little row boat toy in a child's bathtub." In each case, we have come to lower, more detailed levels.

Blocks and Abstractions

Often a client will say, "I can't do that because I have a block."
One way of dealing with this is to use the Structural Differential and show that the 'block' does not exist at the object-Gestalt level, but constitutes a higher order abstraction either for, "I don't really want to do it," or "I am afraid to do it." Once I have narrowed the abstract 'block' down to fear or reluctance, I can work with it.

Another approach, though, often bears fruit. That is to ask a client to imagine the block as a physical entity -- to 'be' the block 'itself'. The result might be something like: "I am a concrete wall, four feet thick, pink in color, seven feet high. I am rough in texture and have drawings on me." I then ask the client to keep in touch with the 'block' and see if 'it' changes. Through this kind of imagery, the 'block' often turns into a specific body feeling, attitude, childhood memory, fear, or even a source of considerable strength which has not been tapped. At the very least, the client 'owns' the 'block', rather than projecting 'it' out onto the threatening world.

**Self-reflexiveness and Multiordinality**

Since this paper appears in a general semantics journal, I will only say enough about self-reflexiveness and multiordinal terms to enable an 'unsophisticated' reader to understand what I intend by those formulations.

They involve using a word or phrase at different orders (levels) of abstraction. For example: I may dislike a companion. I may dislike the fact that I dislike him. We get first order dislike and second order dislike, indicated: dislike, and dislike².

Another brief example: we can square a number, and then square the result: square¹, square², square³, etc. The same word used at different 'levels'.

In Gestalt work, I often use self-reflexiveness of language. For example: a client discovers that he is judging himself. Often he will react: "That's really stupid of me to go around judging myself." I point out that he has just judged² himself again. "Now, are you judging³ the way you just judged yourself?"

Another example: a client is aware that she tends to make 'agendas' for herself as a way of avoiding growth. "Well, from now on, I will be sure to remember..." When it is pointed out, she might respond, "Yes, that's true. I see it. From now on, I will stop making so many agendas." In other words she is making another agenda, to stop making agendas. A second order agenda. A way of releasing a client from some of the tendency to judge him/herself is to use awareness of self-reflexiveness as a tool. "All right, you do judge yourself. You may not stop that so easily. I would like you to judge² your tendency to judge¹ yourself.... Now judge³ the way you just judged yourself.... Now keep on judging each level of judgment." Often the client will get literally dizzy doing this. It seems to me that there often results a diminishing of judgments after a session like that.
Here is how that looks on the Structural Differential:

![Diagram of Structural Differential]

This formulation also makes it easier to explain: "You behave, then you judge yourself. The judgments need never stop you -- let them continue, and go on with what you feel you want to do." In this way, the difference between the object-Gestalt, or 'gut' level, and the higher order abstractions is made clear.

Summary

While leaving out some of the most profound, far-reaching aspects of Gestalt therapy, I have shown how many of its techniques further the general semantics work and vice versa. Demonstrated were some uses of the Structural Differential; continuum of awareness; techniques for moving from non-verbal experiences to verbal descriptions and vice versa; from chronically low order abstractions to higher ones and vice versa; verbal transformations of language habits; and self-reflexiveness/multiordinality.

While the ambiance of Gestalt therapy tends toward an avoidance of so-called 'head trips' or intellectual discussion, the awareness of such paradigms as "orders of abstraction" can be useful for the therapist, and, occasionally for the client who is ready for them.

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BIOGRAPHY

Bernard Basescu works as a Gestalt therapist in New York City. A graduate of NYU's Washington Square College (BA, 1949) and the holder of two MA's (Columbia, Education, 1954 and NYU, Music Therapy, 1979), he is certified by the New Institute for Gestalt Therapy. He has attended workshops given by such human potential notables as Alan Watts, Laura Huxley, Poldi Orlando, Michael Kriegsfeld, Stanley Krippner and Ram Das. Basescu's work in music therapy has taken him to the Bronx Psychiatric Center, Bellevue Hospital and New York Hospital. He has taught courses and lectured at the New School, Columbia, New Mexico State University, the Association of Liberal Arts Colleges, the American Humanist Association, the New York Society for General Semantics and others.