

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY AND GESTALT-THEORETICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

by Hans-Jürgen Walter (1997)

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Familiarity with cognitive behaviour therapy, particularly the social cognitive approach, is widely assumed here. My paper is a part of a more comprehensive treatment of this theme in which my sister, Irene PAULS, wrote large parts of the section dealing with cognitive behaviour therapy.

It is undeniable that even today there are behaviour therapists who pay homage to the atomistic and associational view which Gestalt theorists have opposed since the beginning of the century. But the social-cognitive approach, as it is known today, justifies the following question: Is there anything left for Gestalt Theory to criticize? Does the cognitive behaviour therapy, particularly the social cognitive approach as represented by MISCHEL, BANDURA and MAHONEY, still have anything in common with WATSON's behaviour therapy? I think at most only a little. It has become possible to speak of awareness, insight, setting aims, self-observation, anticipation, self-direction and self-control. Many of these concepts are in harmony with LEWIN's concept of life-space. Anyway, the concept of conditioning has been radically demystified by the realization that conditioning does not happen automatically but is cognitively mediated (BANDURA, 1974). Analogously to the Gestalt laws (proximity, closure, etc.), "conditioning" merely describes certain possible connections (e.g. stimulus-response associations) which may be realized by an individual, depending on his/her subjective phenomenal world (life space). Rather, self-determination is regarded a basic condition of human existence which cannot be denied. In general, this can be agreed upon, the problems concerning self-determination can be simply illustrated by the following example: If a vicar speaks of politics in his church then he's being political - if he does not bring in politics then he's still being political.

WERTHEIMER, as a founder of Gestalt theory, would probably not feel misunderstood by BANDURA's statement: "*The task ahead is to explore in greater detail how self-knowledge of efficacy is acquired and how it in turn shapes the course of personal development*" (BANDURA, 1980, p. 171). BANDURA's and WERTHEIMER's ideas and concepts concerning self-determination must be carefully compared in order to be able to decide if they have a relatively similar understanding of this subject, thus enabling them to pursue similar lines of research.

WERTHEIMER analyses the problem of self-determinations particularly impressively in an essay on the subject of "freedom" published in 1940 (in ANSHEN, 1940, new published in HENLE, 1961). In "*A Story of Three Days*" he describes a "good man's" attempt to find out what freedom means. The "good man" is disappointed in his hope of finding a solution to his problem through conversations with a sociologist and a philosopher and by reading the works of a famous author and a

psychoanalyst. Each time he ends up feeling that he has, in fact, learnt nothing about freedom in spite of the famous people's clever ideas. And then - alone with himself again - he bursts out. "First let me realize," he said passionately, "what I have seen with my own eyes. Have I not seen in my experience strong and indeed very characteristic cases of men, of children, who were free, who were unfree? What were the essentials? My experiences, of course, are no sufficient basis for statistical generalizations; nor do I wish to make any now. What I want is to grasp, to realize, what I have seen." He recalled a number of cases. Then he said, "Sometimes one sees a man, and by the way he goes through life, by his attitudes, by his behaviour in dealing with life situations one feels: this is a free man, he lives in an atmosphere of freedom. And so in observing children. On the other hand, one sees men or children, and feels strongly that in their behaviour there is no freedom - there is no air of freedom in their world."

"It is," he thought, "not easy to put into words what one faces so vividly in these extreme cases. Let me think - what were these cases concretely? The free man," he recalled, "- frank, open-minded, sincerely going ahead, facing the situation freely, looking for the right thing to do and so finding where to go. The opposite - he first thought of children he had often seen - inhibited, pushed, or driven, acting by command or intimidation, one-track minded..."

The man concludes that everything that had been written and said to him concerning freedom by these clever people was a product of piecemeal thinking which sees it

"... in terms of a choice, of a wish, of an instinctual impulsion, etc. One's whole attitude towards the world, towards the other fellow, towards one's group, towards one's own momentary wishes was involved." ... "He recalled discussions. What differences! In the way a man faces a counterargument, faces new facts! There are men who face them freely, open-mindedly, frankly, dealing honestly with them, taking them duly into account. Others are not able to do so at all: they somehow remain blind, rigid; they stick to their axioms, unable to face the arguments, the facts; or, if they do, it is to avoid or to get rid of them by some means - they are incapable of looking them squarely in the face. They cannot deal with them as free men; they are narrowed and enslaved by their position" (in HENLE, pp. 59-61).

In his work "Some Problems in the Theory of Ethics" (1935, new published in HENLE, 1961) WERTHEIMER points out that logical operations can be illogical in the context of a situation, simply because they do not fulfil the demands of the situation. In the previously described example, it could be a case of a fascinating firework display of logical and knowledgeable trains of thought which, as a whole, completely miss the point. The man sums it up thus:

"Freedom is (1) a condition in the social field, and a terribly important one. In viewing such, a condition we should not view it as a thing in itself and so define it, but we should view it in its role, in its function, in its interactions, in its consequences for men and for society. Freedom is logically (2) not just a condition; what matters is how men are and how they develop, how society is and how it develops. Freedom is a Gestalt quality of attitude, of behaviour, of a man's thinking, of his actions. (Think of the difference between the free and the unfree, the description of which was of course only a first approach to viewing the essentials.) Now logically freedom as condition (1) and freedom as Gestalt quality (2) must be viewed not as two pieces, but in their intimate interrelation. Freedom as condition is only one factor, but a very important one with regard to freedom as character quality" (in HENLE, p. 64).

It does not seem to be a coincidence that none of the words WERTHEIMER uses to describe

freedom begin with "self". He would probably see the distinction between external determination and self-determination as an expression of a piecemeal view. He would, on the other hand, agree with the view that the free man is able to determine himself, because the feeling of freedom allows him to confront situations without reservations. I would really like to give up the concept of self-determination in Gestalt-theoretical psychotherapy and, together with METZGER (1962), and also based on WERTHEIMERS point of view, see the main concern of Gestalt-theoretical pedagogy and also of Gestalt-theoretical psychotherapy in the promotion of "creative freedom". We can only find out what promotes it, we can promote it, but we cannot find out how to create it - this character quality of "creative freedom" out of which the appropriate self-determination grows. To what extent could a person who is unfree in the sense of character quality benefit from his awareness of, his insight into and his anticipation of contingencies? Of what use is his logic? It would be the logic of an unfree person, the activity of an unfree person. WERTHEIMER speaks of the atmosphere of freedom emitted by a free person which can be felt, the air of freedom which the unfree person lacks. Only the encounter with an air or an atmosphere of freedom can liberate him. To be brought into a social field where the air of freedom can be breathed in - as the "good man" in WERTHEIMERS story has already experienced - can seem to someone as though he had suddenly recovered after a long illness. The language of WERTHEIMERS "A Story of Three Days" is full of feeling, contains many images and is therefore very different from most texts of cognitive behaviour therapy; it seems to me that this is already an indication of a difference between the Gestalt-theoretical approach to self-determination and that of cognitive behaviour therapy. Let us assure ourselves again. In cognitive behaviour therapy we are concerned with knowledge of, awareness of and information about behaviour contingencies. Logical operations constitute self-determination. Clarification is what counts. What has been logically clarified is the basis of further clarification by means of logical operations. I think the tradition of an atomistic "summative" approach can be felt here. It is, of course, pointed out that emotions also determine thinking, but it seems to me that the step of seeing a person's thinking, feeling, actions, perceptions, attitudes and logical operations as an indivisible unity, as a holistic phenomenon, as a Gestalt quality has not quite been taken. Where lies the logic when, on the one hand, cognition is seen as being influenced by emotions and, on the other hand such "emotional cognitions" are reduced to logical operations as a kind of intellectual strategy? If, (as WERTHEIMER let his "good man" express pointedly), empirical inquiry into the conditions for the development of freedom is only useful when conducted by a free man, then the rationalistic reduction of self-determination to a logical handling of knowledge of contingencies is unsuitable for this task, because this one-sidedness avoids the confrontation with the Gestalt character of the person as a whole. Furthermore, if in cognitive behaviour therapy the conscious mind, defined as knowledge of interconnections which can be verbally recalled, is the foundation of self-determination, then such a rationalistic view ignores the unconscious in consciousness. In this concept of self-determination man is reduced to a "logical doer". For Gestalt theory, however, the unconscious in consciousness is no less a source of self-determination than the conscious mind, the inaccessible no less than the accessible, the ground no less than the distinguishable figure, the functionally bound (which evades attention because only a particular problem or particular aim is centered on) no less than that which is seen, the visual constant (which I would not think of questioning) no less than the visual variable in whose transformation I anticipate success (RAUSCH, 1949; HOETH, 1979), and finally, to sum up, the properties of individual parts (perhaps also conditions for a person's freedom), their relationship to each other, their role in the whole no less than the Gestalt quality of the whole (perhaps also the free personality). All pieces of information which cannot be reproduced verbally are not "inevitably lost" as maintained by the client-centered therapist WEXLER in his "Cognitive Theory of Experiencing, Self-actualisation and Therapeutic Process" (1974).

But can Gestalt theory offer a way to make the inaccessible accessible? Surely it is only meaningful

then to insist on its existence? A holistic view, one could say, is fine, but is it not just vague rubbish if this leads to the claim that the inaccessible is the source of free behaviour, the source of self-determination? I would like to answer this. The impatience expressed by a "doer mentality" such as WATSONs shows its persistency perhaps not only in the fact that Gestalt theorists are asked the wrong questions but also that Gestalt theorists may give the wrong answers. That which is inaccessible cannot be made accessible, it can however become accessible. The "good man" in WERTHEIMERs story named crucial conditions which enable this to take place: a free, open and unprejudiced acceptance of that which is. WERTHEIMER speaks of the "demands of the situation" and maintains that intelligence is the capacity to let oneself be led by the situation (1945, in German 1964). For WERTHEIMER truly creative achievements are unthinkable without this process of accepting and letting oneself be led by one's situation. This characterizes the scientific research method of Gestalt Theory no less than it does Gestalt-theoretical Psychotherapy. METZGER (1975) describes the method of inquiry used in Gestalt theory as "movement from top to bottom". In order for logical operations to take place within a meaningful framework, the researcher is not afraid to ascribe scientific worth to his first intuitions as he approaches the object of his inquiry. To go into these intuitions - however unclear their appearances in the object of inquiry - increases the chance that the matter at hand, the situation itself takes charge rather than preconceived assumptions. In research as in therapy, logical operations are only used with a specific purpose when the Gestalt relationship between researcher and the aim of his research, between therapist and client, between client and his aim has been clarified adequately. There is no guarantee that this is practised. What can be done is to set up adequate conditions (such as "the path from top to bottom") which increase the chances that old rigidities are not strengthened by illogical logic. In therapy, for example, we are concerned with allowing confusion and the lack of clarity. It is not a matter of supporting confusion and the lack of clarity as aims, but merely of allowing them. Acceptance of that which is, allowing the confusion which is present, is necessary in order to develop a clarity which is not entirely primitive ("primitiv-prägnant"). Creative freedom (cp. Metzger, 1962), creative self-determination takes shape in letting go of that which has been done long ago, that which is known or claimed to exist. Perls is, at least in this point, a real Gestalt theorist, to him awareness means directing his attention fully to the present experience, listening inside himself, remaining in the flow of consciousness, not investing activity in logical inquiries too early, but simply being there, following whatever happens, whatever pushes itself into the foreground; in this way, perhaps for the first time in ages becoming aware of elemental needs for peace, security, affection and pleasure, for making an effort and achieving something. Acceptance of the present situation (of which Lewin says that it is the only place where change can take place) is something, I am convinced, hardly anyone masters. It is much more usual to juggle hypotheses, assumptions and suspicions about the past and future, to worship second-hand ideas, and thus to neglect our connection with the present most crassly. Experiences in Gestalt-theoretical Psychotherapy (which can include the use of Gestalt therapy exercises and procedures as well as those from psychodrama, client centered therapy and even behaviour therapy), has, in my opinion, demonstrated adequately that by creating adequate conditions which encourage a person to be concerned with himself, his current situation and encounters and confrontations with the other group members success is rendered possible such as Wertheimer understands it, and describes it in an example from "Some Problems in the Theory of Ethics":

"Further, there are experiences like the following. One knows a man who is an outstanding example of a certain caste, whose entire behaviour expresses very definitely the evaluations of his caste. And in a serious moment the outer shell falls away, and from behind this exterior there now comes out a simple, good, somewhat immature man, for whom the seemingly serious attitudes which he had exhibited are in fact like strange, superficial clothing. There seem to be layers in men, and it is a question of fact what the inner layers of men really are. Concerning our problem there are opposing theses. I would

believe that the optimistic thesis is the right one, however difficult, indeed however impossible it may be at times to penetrate to this layer." (in Henle, p. 40).

Wertheimer's optimistic thesis is that people always have that layer which has preserved creative freedom in spite of the greatest external opposition and that it is a matter of penetrating to this layer. I see the danger that even the most progressive behaviour therapy, the social cognitive approach of the cognitive behaviour therapy in all its serious attempts, sometimes promotes a rigid "computing" (which PERLS also calls "mind-fucking") rather than freedom for creative self-determination. In his book "Schöpferische Freiheit" (Creative Freedom) METZGER quotes the swordmaster TAKUAN with the statement:

"There are two kinds of schooling; one in final understanding and the other in method. The first, as already mentioned, aims to understand the ultimate significance of things for which actions are not limited by prescribed rules. There is only one meaning which goes its own innate way. However, mastery of the individual method is equally necessary. If you have no knowledge of this, you don't know how to approach your task" (1962, p.77, Author's translation).

I think it is not too daring to compare this duality with WERTHEIMERS. Here it is a question of investigating the conditions which promote freedom with scientific methods while taking into account that freedom is a Gestalt quality of character which, as a holistic phenomenon, will never be entirely accessible to rational analysis. Freedom can be hidden behind experiences, behind knowledge of contingencies, which is inaccessible but can become accessible when one is prepared to use knowledge of meaningful conditions (yes, certainly this is also knowledge of contingencies). According to this view there is no reason for Gestalt theorists to distance themselves from cognitive behaviour therapy. It can play its part in making more precise the rational and reasonable strategies of Gestalt theoretical psychotherapy. And at the same time Gestalt theory can offer cognitive behaviour therapy a wider framework in the sense of a more comprehensive view of man freed of disastrous limitations.

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