

## ***In Wartime: Ethics and the Clinic in the Field of Inhumanity***

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### **Abstract**

The article brings together the perspectives of four authors who talk about their being therapists and “men” in a difficult context such as the current Russian-Ukrainian war.

The editors of the article stimulated this reflection through some questions deeply rooted in Gestalt epistemology, starting from the care of the ground that is never only individual, but always co-created and shared, and the attention to the phenomenological and social field.

The authors interviewed, two Russian psychotherapists, one of whom is currently a guest in Italy, a Ukrainian and an Italian, responded starting from their direct experience, recounting perceptions and experiences of how they are going through the complexity that such an event brings with it.

Clinic and ethics thus intertwine while respecting each other’s pain and positions.

The therapists’ responses leave us open to hope and remind us that caring for the pain of others is an act that has an impact not only on the individual patient, but on humanity as a whole. Maintaining an attitude of humility and proximity towards pain is the ethical choice capable of stemming the narcissistic or individualistic drifts that can be triggered in a complex field full of anguish and death.

*Keywords:* Ethics in psychotherapy, wartime psychotherapy, phenomenological field, gestalt epistemology, clinical practice.

## ***Torture in Libyan Hell. The Psychotherapeutic Path of Ebrima***

Giuseppe Cannella

### **Abstract**

The author describes his personal experience as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist within a mental health clinic in Ragusa, Italy, sponsored by MEDU-Medics for Human Rights, for migrants who are victims of inhuman, degrading treatment and torture. The therapeutic journey of a young migrant from Senegal, who were forced to leave the Casamance region, the scene of armed conflict, in search of fortune and work in Italy is described. The migration route proved to be extremely harsh, and the patient was locked up in Libyan prisons where he was subjected to cruel treatment and torture. The symptoms that emerge recall a clinical picture of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with dissociative symptoms. In the Gestalt therapy setting, the perceptual style that emerges at the contact boundary is posttraumatic, related to unbearable experiences that endangered the patient’s survival.

Much of the therapeutic work, that in this work is described according to the “dance of

reciprocity” model, was aimed at reconstructing a perception of a safer ground and creating more solid grounding skills. Thanks to this process, the patient was gradually able to overcome dissociation, cross the immense pain of trauma and meet the other.

*Keywords:* Torture, reciprocity, Gestalt therapy, migrants, Libya.

## ***New Perspectives in Therapeutic Work During the War: The Traumatized Field***

Olga Movchan, Elisabetta Conte e Marilena Senatore

### **Abstract**

The author describes how her experience as a psychotherapist changed during the Russian-Ukrainian War. Having been born and raised in Russia and having, like many Russian therapists, friendly and professional ties with Ukrainian colleagues, she experienced significant personal repercussions. When a patient enters the therapist's study, he/she brings with him/her his own traumatic experience, and some aspects inevitably resonate with the therapist's traumatic experience. The situation becomes even more difficult for the therapist if the traumatic event is global, shared by therapist and patient, for example in situations such as war, political or natural disasters. This is what happened after February 24, 2022.

In the article, the author shares her view on the change she has experienced in the therapeutic setting since the beginning of the war: for example, the power of transgenerational reactions, a different level of self-narration of the therapist, the violation of borders and the interweaving of contexts. It is very important that the therapist is aware of his/her own traumatization and that he understands his own limitations. If the attempt to avoid re-traumatization leads to the repression of part of his personality and, consequently, to a decrease in his presence in contact with the patient, this feeds the traumatic fields, strengthening the disconnection.

The author points out that some working methods have also changed. In some cases, the usual models and therapeutic values are inapplicable, if not dangerous. The idea of being fully aware of one's own experiences, for example, or the process of *unfreezing* or going through one's own feelings, are all unenforceable things, particularly when working with volunteers who are in direct contact with refugees. *Freezing* is their natural adaptive response. At the same time, the retroflexion of feelings cannot leave no trace, and therefore it is important to find a balance between maintaining vitality and adaptive retroflexion of feelings, supporting and naming the experiences. It is important to draw on your own resources, rely on the support of colleagues, turn to supervisors and supervision groups. In order to be with each other, it is necessary to maintain balance and continue to find the resources to work in a traumatic field.

*Keywords:* Traumatic field, Gestalt therapy during the war, therapist's re-traumatization, transgenerational trauma, supervision.

***We are the Good Guys, You are the Bad Guys,  
and We Must  
Destroy You. The Gestalt View of Human Aggression***

Giuseppe Sampognaro

**Abstract**

The Gestalt therapist tends to read – from a holistic and contextual perspective – the movements that characterise today’s society, steeped in anger and violence (the war in Ukraine is an example). Aggression has long been considered, by mainstream psychological models, as a biologically determined instinct with an adaptive purpose. Gestalt theory frames the concept of aggression as the natural drive for growth and change and distinguishes it from that of violence. Perls speaks of it in *Ego Hunger and Aggression* – the text that already contains in embryo some of the central ideas of Gestalt psychotherapy – as a propulsive force that allows the human organism to move in the world to satisfy its vital needs. In Gestalt Therapy, Perls and Goodman specifically focus the distinction between aggression and annihilation in light of the concept of contact between organism and environment. According to this new perspective, the therapist’s mission is to foster the healthy ad-gress of his patients as contact intentionality, and to prevent violence – which is the degeneration of aggression of the desensitised self – as a desire to annihilate one’s opponent. “Looking the enemy in the eye” means maintaining contact with the Other even when experiencing feelings of animosity, anger and resentment: this is how to turn conflict into an opportunity for growth and awareness. In this article, a clinical example illustrates how this can be achieved. Drawing a parallel between the therapeutic setting and the broader relational context, even at the social level, the therapist can embody the role of facilitator of relations between opposing groups and sides, between communities and even between nations in conflict. Here again, the intention is to shift the focus of interest to the situation that the disputants are experiencing, to what unites them and their relationship. If the basic principle becomes the mutual recognition of all those experiencing the conflict in the given context, it is impossible to desire the destruction of the Other and to take pleasure in it.

*Keywords:* Aggression, violence, conflict, situation, contact.

***Roots and Shoots: Gestalt Psychotherapy and  
Transgenerational Trauma***

Federica La Pietra

**Abstract**

In the succession of world events such as pandemic and war, the need to deal with, treat and process the wounds of traumatic experiences so that they do not permanently shape perceptions of the future becomes critical. We live in a historical era of widespread and intense traumatization, and the effects of these sufferings are likely to have consequences for future generations, who, as we have seen, are not expected to know or be able to learn from past

experiences. In light of this, psychotherapy is the key to individual and societal change and, as psychotherapists, we are called to act responsibly not only toward patients but toward the entire community, dealing with the spread of trauma in society and the propagation of violence from one generation to the next. Gestalt psychotherapy, while centering its gaze on the here-and-now of the therapeutic relationship, considers the background in which the individual figures, crossing time and space, the familiar, the social, the cultural, and promoting behavioral and cerebral changes, through bodywork, reprocessing and integration. In the face of the tragedies currently affecting the entire world, there seems to be a need for creative renewal in which we return as protagonists of a story that appears to have been written by others. Possible clinical-operational implications open up in the possibility of working on the function-ego and the intentionality of going-wise, which the body preserves and maintains, to enable the person to place himself or herself in an intentional field, no longer characterized by automatic repetition, but a field in the here-and-now where it is possible to consciously choose new paths, to reactivate a life story integrated in a sense of existential freedom. Providing a context, creating new and current meaning, making narrative connections of experience will make the pain less dominant and allow new figures to emerge from the background, sustaining the tension toward the future, rather than a staticity in the past, new shoots on ancient roots.

*Keywords:* Trauma, transgenerational, epigenetics, traumatic memory, psychopathology.

## ***Pilot Study of Adolescents in the Covid-19 Era: Outcomes of an Online Gestalt Therapy Group Intervention to Improve Relational Well-being***

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Serena Iacono Isidoro e Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb

### **Abstract**

The article proposes a pilot study aimed at measuring and describing how a Gestalt approach, operationally defined in 10 online group sessions, can support the development of adolescents' relational well-being in a period marked by social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Two groups of adolescents (64 subjects), recruited through the network and with the involvement of an educational institution and led by two Gestalt psychotherapists, were further divided into experimental group and control group.

The research was divided into three phases: during the first phase a questionnaire was administered for the collection of socio-demographic information and tools aimed at measuring dimensions such as empathy, resonance and body awareness, and assessing the presence of risk factors. During the second phase, the two experimental groups participated in 10 audio-recorded online group meetings; at the end of each meeting, the conductors filled out the Therapist Experience Journal to note observations on the research process and group dynamics. In the third phase, questionnaires were re-administered to check for any differences in scores between the pre and post-intervention and between the experimental and control groups.

The descriptive analysis allowed to verify the equivalence and the presence of

homogeneity within the two groups. The inferential analysis, using a two-way mixed ANOVA (Analysis of Variance), showed a significant increase, in both experimental groups involved, in empathy, resonance and body awareness, as well as a decrease in anxiety and depression scores, highlighting the effectiveness of the proposed intervention. The results seem to support the efficacy of the Gestalt therapy approach carried out online in a group setting in improving adolescents' relational well-being, which is essential for building a solid identity, along with adequate social skills, and stable social relationships over time.

*Keywords:* Adolescence, group therapy, Gestalt therapy, online, relational well-being.