

Integrating Couple Polarities through Gestalt Counseling

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Abstract

Gestalt therapy is used primarily for individual counseling and psychotherapy. Other models, however, have demonstrated the utility of extending the approach into different contexts. Mate selection processes, facial expressions and other physiological cues, and verbal and non-verbal communication are all important informational tools available to the Gestalt counselor. Through a case study in counseling with a married couple, conducted by the first author, the hypothesis was examined that the 4-stage model of Gestalt therapy, developed by the second author, would be effective in working with the conflicts of a long-term intimate couple.

Keywords: Gestalt Counseling, Couples Counseling, Marriage Counseling, Psychotherapy, Clinical Psychology.

Introduction:

Gestalt therapy focuses on the immediacy of experience as emotions and feelings are brought into awareness to challenge pre-existing patterns of thinking and action (Yontef, 1993). Founded by Frederick and Laura Perls, this phenomenological-existential approach brings together a type of “stepping outside of one’s self” to discover a clear and fresh perspective for the individual in relating to his or her environment (Yontef, 1993). Through hypothetical dialogue, Yontef also contends that contact is made beyond personal boundaries to explore interpersonal relations as well as a vehicle for taking responsibility as one’s true self.

The Gestalt Approach

Paivio and Greenberg (1995) tested the efficacy of Gestalt therapy using the Empty-Chair dialog (ECH) against a psychoeducational (PED) support group in resolving unfinished business toward a significant other through an imaginary dialog. After 12 to 14 weeks of the

treatment conditions, ECH showed “clinically meaningful improvements” and “statistically significant changes” (Paivio & Greenberg, 1995, p. 424) that held through follow-ups at 4-months and 1-year. The researchers also reported ECH to be more effective than the PED group in reducing distress from general symptoms and interpersonal relationships, affecting positive change in specific target complaints, and resolving unfinished business.

Roubal (2009) posited that the core of Gestalt therapy is not only working to integrate the polarities of an individual’s personality, but equally essential is working within the therapeutic polarities of dialog and task-experimentation. This approach, according to Roubal, blends the necessary elements of verbalization and experience that is critical to the Gestalt approach. With the background of theory, research, and practice demonstrating the utility of Gestalt therapy to integrate polarities within the individual, this paper examines the use of Gestalt within the couple or marital framework.

The premise proposed here is that long-term intimate unions develop as deep and profound bonds between partners with a merging of beliefs, values, experiences, and actions, just as these constructs are held separately and uniquely within each partner. Consequently, in the same way that individuals have opposing motivational drives that may become buried within conflicting perceptions of how to manage within the world, the same may be said for long-term committed couples as a whole. A second premise, then, is that a couple’s polarities may reflect the opposing strengths and weaknesses of the two partners, or may also reflect opposing needs of the unified dyad. These polarities are exemplified when the strength of the one reacts to the weakness of the other (and vice versa), or when the couple jointly experiences opposing needs (e.g., the desire to start a family vs. the desire to remain unencumbered by children). The second (unified couple) polarity may, perhaps, potentiate less conflict due to a greater degree of shared goals. Thus, the focus of the present study is to examine the utility of Gestalt therapy in integrating marital polarities.

Past research has shown the flexibility of the Gestalt approach to operate in contexts outside of the lone individual. Gestalt therapy was noted by Hatcher (1978) as a valuable short-term tool for exploring boundary limitations between persons. The author also demonstrated the combined effect of Gestalt (Intrapersonal) and family (Interpersonal) therapies.

Gestalt Therapy and Marital Counseling

In 1956, Foster addressed the burgeoning field of marriage counseling and working with interpersonal relationships within the marriage context. He claimed the new field brought psychotherapy for the married individuals into the marital dyad and stated the case for delineating between the roles of psychotherapist and marriage counselor. Four stages were offered for evaluating individuals beginning psychotherapy: the individual’s symptoms, developmental history, character structure, and approach to reality. When progressing from individual to marital therapy Foster contended that only one change was necessary: replace the focus on the character structure of the individual with the conflict patterns of the couple, and how they face problems that confront them in their lives. It is also important to note Foster’s directive that counseling varies on a case-by-case basis: from couples in mild conflict, which may involve individuals diagnosed as “near-normal”; to severe conflict, which may also involve psychotic individuals. Referral to another specialist was recommended for these clinical cases.

Fow (1998) introduced his concept of *partner-focused reversal* to work with the Gestalt concepts of confluence and contact. Respectively, these are the personal boundaries that others cannot cross and the boundaries which are pliable and open to change. Fow’s reversal technique has each partner speak in the place of the other. His goal in doing so is to engage each partner in reaching out (empathically toward the other in the union) and reaching in (to

better understand the needs of the other). As Fow states, “Empathic failures are often significant in couples who seek therapy... Therefore, an express goal of using the technique is the strengthening of empathic attunement (p. 231).” Fow’s view was that for counseling to be effective the counselor needs to treat the individual before he or she can successfully treat the couple. Thus, therapy would become reciprocal between the partners toward the goal of each turning inward and identifying with the other’s desires. As Gestalt therapy typically works with autonomous individuals, the reversal technique is designed to enable each partner to “get inside” the perspective of their mate.

Zinker (1983) argued that partners in all mature relationships by necessity share much in common that brings them together and creates a secure base for the union. Yet he equally maintained that healthy relationships also have some amount of differences, or complementarity. This added diversity acts as a stimulating agent in the union despite the inherent potential for conflict. Zinker further asserted that couples are better equipped to manage life together with their combined characteristic assets. Balancing the ratio between similarity and complementarity, however, is not only the challenge for couples but also the key to survival for the relationship (Zinker, 1983). As Gestalt therapy specializes in integrating polarities, it is believed to be an effective tool for this task.

The Implications of Mate Selection

In line with Zinker’s report on the need for complementarity and the characteristic ingredients of a robust union is the idea of *filter theory* in mate selection as discussed by O’Brien and Foley (1999). According to the authors, filter theory is the selective process of filtering out those within one’s eligibility pool to arrive at the best possible choice for a mate. The criteria are different for each person but these researchers reported that the vast numbers of U.S. marriages are primarily homogamous. This includes 97% between members of the same race and 90% with compatible religious affiliations. One shortcoming of the O’Brien and Foley account, however, is the sole inclusion of major social factors (e.g., social categories and status) and the absence of more finely tuned aspects of selective differences.

The relevance of mate selection to the present study lies between the synergistic and detrimental effects of different characteristics brought into the relationship of long-term committed couples (e.g., personality types, special interests, various strengths and weaknesses, etc.). There is great potential for both happiness and sadness when attracted individuals enter a union based on their expectations of one another. Those expectations may initially be incorrect, unexplored, assumed, or idealized, or life experiences may alter one partner’s needs and goals. Whatever the case may be, the perceived investment made by each partner into the selection of his or her mate will help define their joint relationship polarities. At some point, these polarities may also become an issue in need of therapeutic resolution and integration.

The theory of complimentary needs (Winch, Ktsanes, & Ktsanes, 1954) was proposed as a motivational theory for attaining an optimal level of need-gratification. According to Winch et al., the selection process is both conscious and unconscious and involves both partners mutually seeking to find in one another that which is lacking in themselves. An example given by the authors is the passive and dependent male who is reciprocally attracted to a motherly woman. Subsequent research on homogamous relationships only focused on the broader levels of race, religion, education, and social class defining the “field of eligibles” (Winch et al., 1954, p. 244). Conceptually, the (similar) social level does not need to contradict Winch’s (complimentary) psychological level of motivational selection. Instead, it suggests a layered, pyramid-shaped pattern with the broader social criteria at the wider base and the more finely-tuned psychological criteria at the narrowed peak. To support this theory (albeit with some controversy), the researchers reported significant correlations between

paired variables among mated subjects that were hypothesized to be attractive (e.g., the overt succorant-nurturant pairing of spouses).

Karp, Jackson, and Lester (1970) suggested a modification to the Winch hypothesis, stressing that complimentary and homogamous needs are both found in mate selection. The research team also reported studies showing mixed results in replicating Winch's correlational findings. Karp et al., therefore, proposed the *ideal-self fulfillment hypothesis* based on personality traits instead of psychological need. Their dual hypotheses were that their female subjects would select a mate with traits homogamous to the *self*, yet the selection would be in accordance with the *ideal-self* – not the *actual-self*. Karp et al. reported that both hypotheses were confirmed: most traits between subjects were homogamous, and those that were not were found to correspond to the subjects' ideal-self (as measured by questionnaire responses). Their explanation was that, at the deeper level, people seek out the personality traits that they see as lacking (and desired) in themselves (their actual-self) and would otherwise make them complete (their "ideal-self").

Kellerman (1977) described *circular* models of mate selection engendering bipolar dimensions. His instruments were the Pair-Attraction Inventory, which included two bipolar dimensions of *Love-Anger* and *Strength-Weakness*, and the Emotions Profile Index, which included four bipolar dimensions of *Optimism-Pessimism*, *Love-Misery*, *Obedience-Defiance*, and *Alarm-Aggression*. In these circular models, individuals will fall into any one category (e.g., Optimism); yet, the more opposite a partner is in relation to his or her mate (i.e., closer [e.g., Love] or farther away [e.g., Pessimism] around the circle) the more likely they will be to experience conflict.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Cues in Therapy

Being attuned to the client's verbal and non-verbal cues are both key factors in Gestalt therapy. Gottman, Levenson, and Woodin (2001) exhibited how spouses' facial expressions and word selection correlated to marital satisfaction and outcomes. Gottman et al. suggest that facial expressions offer important clues to therapists regarding the state of the marriage and its success or failure. They reported that across their research variables, expressions of *Felt* or *Unfelt Happiness*, *Contempt*, *Anger*, *Sadness*, and *Fear* each had unique associations to outcome variables such as *Feeling Flooded*, *Belief that Problems Cannot be Worked Out*, (living) *Parallel Lives*, and *Problem Severity*. The number of months that spouses reported being separated four years after the initial study was predicted by spousal Unfelt Happiness expressions, and specifically, the husband's Unfelt Happiness and the wife's *Disgust*. Physiological responses (i.e., sympathetic nervous system activations and body movement) and conversation markers were also important variables. Verbal factors were *Fondness/Admiration*, which assessed positivity in the relationship; *Negativity Toward Spouse*, including neutrality of attraction; *We-Ness versus Separateness*, which measured identification as a couple; and *Cognitive Room*, evaluating the psychological connection between the partners (Gottman et al., 2001). Within the Gestalt therapy framework, the findings of Gottman et al. are important for not only the therapist, but also for the clients as their underlying signals are brought into awareness by the therapist to enhance their *here and now* experiencing.

The Gestalt 4-Stage Method

A Gestalt therapy session can be constructed using four stages: (1) the Emergence of the Problem, (2) Working with External Polarities, (3) Working with Internal Polarities, and (4) Integration (Fiebert, 2012). The counselor uses these successive stages as a guide to lead the client from awareness of an immediate experience into a related conflict expressed in an imaginary conversation with a significant other. From that standpoint of resolving the external

conflict, the client is then ready to be brought “inside” himself with awareness of the external connection to conflicting internal polarities. These polarities are competing elements of one’s personality; through a dialog between these revealed polarities, self-discovery and integration can take place as the client adopts a new, unified perspective of himself (Fiebert, 2012). In light of the literature presented here, it is hypothesized that the 4-stage model of Gestalt therapy will be an effective vehicle for integrating intra-marital polarities.

Method

Study Design

The 4-stage model of a Gestalt therapy session (Fiebert, 2012) was used. A total of three sessions were conducted by the first author in this study: two individual private sessions with both the husband and the wife, and one conjoint session with the couple. The purpose of this 3-session design was to work with the two individuals’ polarities before working with them as a couple (Fow, 1998). Additionally, Session 1 and 2 set up Session 3 with a fourfold purpose: (a) priming each partner for success with the empty-chair technique through enhanced personal awareness, (b) conditioning empathic awareness to the counseling session, (c) enabling (greater) empathic projection toward the unmet needs of one’s partner, and (d) enhancing the desire for integration (or, unification) of the internal polarities of the couple as a unit. Session 1 and 2 were standard sessions beginning with the question, “What are you experiencing right now?”

Session 3 was modified for conjoint therapy opening with the question, “What are you experiencing in your marriage right now?” Stage 1 was conducted as a joint interview to explore a problematic area, whereas Stage 2 (External Polarities) was conducted with each partner speaking in the place of the other (Fow, 1998). Undirected speech was encouraged in the first round of dialog for the clients’ own experiential awareness, with successive rounds directed as needed toward the partner’s perceived and unmet needs. Upon negotiating the polarities of the couple, Stage 3 was split into two separate intrapersonal dialogs to explore each partner’s unique experience in the polarity paradigm. Stage 4 brought the couple back together for integration of the polarities, addressing balance in the relationship.

Participants

The participants were one husband-wife dyad, married for 32 years and living in Orange County, California. They are both 52 years of age. The husband is White from European descent and the wife is Mexican-American. Together they have two children, both in their mid-20s. The couple stated that they were not in marital distress but were interested in participating in the counseling sessions.

The two individuals were both informed that their names would not be associated with the present study. They agreed to the sessions being recorded for the sole purpose of writing the present paper, with the understanding that the recordings would then be erased.

Case Study Sessions

Session 1

Stage 1: Emergence of the problem: The first session began by asking the female participant, “What are you experiencing right now?” She stated that she came in tense and nervous from thinking about the counseling session. Knowing this involved a type of marriage counseling, she was afraid that she might “betray” her husband’s confidence, noting

that he is very reserved. She was asked to demonstrate what that tension looked like in her body, and took up a locked or braced position.

A short exploration into her sources of tension led directly to the recall of experiences in her childhood home. Her father, she reported, became an abusive alcoholic who brought tension, volatility, and scandal to the family. Her mother later became a source of strength and inspiration for her, which led to the mother as the present choice of significant other in interpersonal dialog.

Stage 2: External polarities: The participant was directed in an *experiment* to imagine her mother in the empty chair, then to tell her the first thing that came to her mind that she wished she could have told her. She almost immediately started crying and said, “I wished I could have fixed it! I wish I could have made it better – I know as an adult I couldn’t have, but I wish I could have made it better.” This assumed behavior pattern of being a “fixer” would re-emerge in Session 3.

Within the daughter-mother dialog, the participant projected forgiveness and reassurance from her mother, yet also revealed her own fears of “messaging up” her marriage and family and winding up alone like her mother. She also verbalized that it cast a shadow over her life, although it made her more compassionate to people in hardship, and acknowledged a selfish side to her personality. Interestingly, these three themes were also prominent experiences in Session 3. As a transition point, the participant was counseled on the connection between interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. Hence, three possible polarities were explored: *Open and Loving* vs. *Afraid to Trust*, *Being Connected* vs. *Being Alone*, and *Brave* vs. *Fearful*. She clearly identified with all three but since she identified strongly with her mother’s bravery, the *Brave-Fearful* polarities were chosen.

Stage 3: Internal polarities: To fully experience her conflicting elements, the participant was asked to display the polar postures and gestures, as well as a motto for each side. The chosen motto for *Fearful* was, “Don’t hurt me,” while *Brave* was given “Hell no, I’m not afraid of you!” The latter motto elicited feelings of strength and confidence in the participant evident in her body language and tone of voice. Progressing through the dialog, she resolved that her *Fearful* side was a connection to the love she feels toward her own family, and her *Brave* side was giving her strength and renewed faith. When asked to have *Brave* give one piece of advice to *Fearful* it was, “Think higher of yourself. You have more than you realize. Try believing in yourself... *Yeah, that’s it.*” She then relaxed her posture as a peaceful look came upon her face. Mutually sensing an integration, she was kept in the *Brave* chair for the final transition.

Stage 4: Integration: For one final experiment, the participant was asked to hold out her hands representing a scale. She was asked which side has been more representative of her, and what percentages she attributes to each one. She reported that lately it was 2/3 *Fearful* and 1/3 *Brave*, but at the moment, it was 1/2-1/2, and ideally it would be 1/4 *Fearful* and 3/4 *Brave*. To get from the now to the ideal, she stated that she would have to give up imaginations and “what-ifs.” In looking at what each side respects and admires in the other, it was the tenacity in her *Brave* side (which she called a “selfish weariness, really”) and the deep love she feels for her family through her *Fearful* side.

The session was closed as her voice softened again and her smile projected peace. She was complimented for her openness and honesty, her love and respect for her mother, and the ability to see both sides of herself. During feedback, she proclaimed that she felt great but was exhausted and needed to take a nap. Additionally, she found inspiration in the dialog with her mother. In discussing her polarities she concluded, “I never thought of looking at myself that way before and giving myself a pep talk. You know what I mean? It was great!”

Session 2

Stage 1: Emergence of the problem: The second session with the male (husband) participant began with the standard question, “What are you experiencing right now?” Upon receiving a perplexed look without an answer, the alternate question was posed: “What are you aware of – in your body, your thoughts, or your emotions. The response of “*Really?...Wow.*” was an indicator of his reservations and how this session would proceed. The majority of the session was spent in trying a number of different experimental angles to get the participant to gain a sense of personal awareness in his experience. Personal problems did surface regarding either money or work. Attempts to get the husband to work within the tension-inducing problems he presented were often met with silence or replies of, “I can’t think of anything...” Experimenting with feelings of discomfort at the various suggestions was met by resistance through avoidance and denial, and a reluctance to speak in the first-person.

Stage 2: External polarities: Stage 2 began with an attempted empty-chair dialog between the husband and his wife; when that also reached an impasse, a new significant other was proposed. This was an admired friend from his church. Thirty minutes into the session, the first real answer was given to a suggestion, although it was in a low monotone voice. Toward the end of the stage the participant forced out an answer, possibly in the hope of bringing an end to the session. A more formulated problem eventually emerged within this stage concerning a lack of pride in their aging house and the lack of money for repairs. A dialog with the significant other finally revealed a level of embarrassment and an opportunity for highlighting polarities.

Stage 3: Internal polarities: A series of polarities were presented before arriving at *The need to let things go* and *The need to keep things together*. Although dialog was very much at the surface, the participant finally looked for reasons to engage in some discussion. In response to a stressor that involved talking about it with his wife, he replied, “I get overwhelmed and I shut down – but I don’t want to speak from that part.” This counselor’s reply was, “That’s exactly where I do want you to speak from!” Yet again, there was silence.

Based on verbal cues, another temporary adjustment was made to his polarity labels, as he redefined them to *What I should be doing* and *What I shouldn’t be doing*. Through the *scale and weights* exercise, he estimated those at 2/3 “should” and 1/3 “shouldn’t.” He demonstrated a good posture leaning slightly forward, and a motto of “Did it!” or “Done!” to this “should” element, so we finally renamed it as *Did It*. In the “shouldn’t” element, he demonstrated a slouching posture in a so-called catatonic state with the motto of “Leave me alone.” Therefore, we redefined the second polarity as *Leave Me Alone*.

After nearly an hour of patient work with the participant, we seemed to finally find his real polarities. He suddenly became animated without prompting, showing honest emotion for the first time as he enacted a bipolar role-play; grabbing *Leave Me Alone* by the collar, slapping him in the face and demanding, and “Snap out of it!” When directed to repeat the action with the statement he did it willingly with a raised voice! When asked what kind of feelings that evoked, he stated, “Well, I have to do that to myself periodically and pull myself up by the boot straps.” A final experiment in attributing something respectable in each side elicited real affect in his voice. He revealed that he compared *Leave Me Alone* to being an alcoholic and actually saw nothing good in it (possibly accounting for his reluctance to self-identify). Looking at *Did It*, he was proud again and saw in that side the desire for, “Getting things done – just... finishing things off! Yeah, that’s good!”

Stage 4: Integration: While no real integration was made, the session ultimately showed some value for the participant in helping him bring an important issue into the *here and now*, and a seemingly rare occasion to identify with his true feelings. The session was closed with

compliments for his working through the discomfort of the session, taking hold of self-knowledge to get him going, and recognizing what he does not want to be and striving for better. For this, he seemed satisfied.

Session 3

Stage 1: Emergence of the problem: In a modified version of the 4-stage method, the conjoint session began with the question: “What are you experiencing in your marriage right now?” The couple recounted a number of problematic situations, including low finances and too many bills, a pending bankruptcy, interpersonal problems with one of their daughters, and a difficult family situation involving a beloved 14-year-old niece trying to date a 19-year-old boy. When asked which of these circumstances was causing the most tension in their marriage, both spouses agreed that it was not any one factor but their cumulative effect.

An experiment was proposed to the couple, asking each of them to show what this tension felt like. The wife was the first to act (which would become the expected pattern for the session), pretending to pull out her hair, and making a frantic-looking face while letting out a controlled scream. Asking the husband for his demonstration, he feigned the same response saying, “I agree with my wife.” The wife followed with her comment, “He doesn’t know that there’s a problem unless I tell him there’s a problem.” The husband chuckled and replied in a lowered tone, “And then I skulk into the bedroom so I don’t have to deal with it.” Therefore, another experiment was proposed for the husband, asking him to say, “Whatever my wife says is okay by me!” He willingly made the statement even when asked to repeat the phrase, which offered a salient cue for the rest of the session.

Further queries into their stressors revealed an additional time and resource strain of extra housemates and volunteer work in their church community. The husband then presented his view of the larger problem saying that they were typically at odds over the wife needing to learn to say “no” to people’s requests. This was in spite of the fact that he stated that their personal load was not out of balance. Transitioning into Stage 2, the emergent area of focus became the couple’s life being filled to the point of sapping the joy from their relationship (mainly from the wife’s perspective).

Stage 2: External polarities: This interpersonal dialog simultaneously engaged each partner from the position of the other. This involved the husband speaking as the wife (H[w]) and the wife speaking as the husband (W[h]). Each spouse was asked to embody the persona of the other for the purpose of empathic understanding toward their partner.

The first question was directed at W(h) to tell H(w) what “she” needs to know about not taking on so much and not saying “yes” to everybody. The response was quick and decisive: “You can’t do everything. You can’t fall for every sob story you’ve ever heard...You’re out-doing Christ – even he would have said *no* to some of the things you’re saying *yes* to.” This immediate response out of the wife seemed to surprise the husband, eliciting one of his most emotional responses of the day. H(w) replied, “Wow (in his own voice tone)... (And then attempting her softer, caring tone) If we don’t take them [in] *who will?*” As he continued, his tone was quite empathic toward his wife. Notably, during the rest of the session the couple sometimes stopped and connected in brief moments that were much more emotional and touching than expected. The wife, who displayed a naturally empathic style, also seemed attuned to her husband’s needs when asked what was not being met in his life. W(h) responded, “I don’t want you to forget about me while you’re taking care of everybody else.”

An earlier comment was made by the wife that the husband almost prides himself on being emotionally detached. This cue presented an opportunity to explore an obvious cognitive–emotional couple polarity. However, the feeling of the session led to the decision to pursue an

alternative path. Thus, transitioning into Stage 3, the couple's internal polarities were proposed and accepted as *Generous* (in all resource modalities) vs. *Selfish* (of the need for personal time). These labels were agreed upon by both partners.

Stage 3: Internal polarities: Interspersed throughout the session, the husband frequently exhibited discomfort and resistance in sharing his feelings often working hard to protect boundaries and avoid contact. Although he did break through at times, he just as often gave non-verbal cues to show his displeasure with attempts to draw him out from his defenses. This included making noises while slowly changing chairs, pausing at length while thinking of answers, and repeatedly resorting to third-person speech. Some experiments were more successful than others in helping him to take ownership of his feelings. One example of an unfruitful experiment was in having him voice his resistance to the session. This was met with blank stares and assurances that he just could not think of things to say. The wife, however, was highly invested in the sessions so she was selected to go first in these separate intrapersonal dialogs.

As both partners individually explored their *Generous* and *Selfish* sides, it came into awareness that it was the wife who was more selfish of their time together. One of her identifying statements in dialog was, "I'm overwhelmed with giving out too much... we need time together for just us." This was revealed as an imbalance in her need to include more people and "projects" in their lives, even within their home. Conversely, the husband revealed that he was okay with people living in the house and voiced the desire to be even more generous with their resources (e.g., "That's what I want our lives to be about.").

Stage 4: Integration: More movement toward and personal contact with direct experience of motive and emotion was demonstrated by the wife than by the husband. Examples of this were individual responses to the question of, "What do you respect in your *Selfish* side?" The wife showed true integration in relaxing her dual needs of giving and taking: "It's okay to be selfish – to want things for yourself. But God always makes a way for me to have what I need and it's okay to wait for God to make them happen for me." The husband was still resorting to third-person experience in respect to their *Selfish* side: "It's something every couple should do to bring them together." His wife later commented that it was an "awkward" statement. When asked to physically depict a scale to show the balance between these polarities, both were in agreement, yet, with interesting caveats. They both rated the current balance as 75% *Generous* and 25% *Selfish*. The ideal balance of *Generous-Selfish*, however, was 90:10 for the husband and 25:75 for the wife. Yet when asked what each would be willing to give up to move toward their ideals, neither wanted to give up anything, choosing not to upset the balance they have worked out in their marriage.

During a time of feedback between counselor and clients, an interesting explanation was offered by the wife. Her reason for the compromise of balance was in her being more "personally jealous" of their time, while her husband is more "personally generous." The 75:25 ratio, then, is a reflection of the balance that they now mutually perceive and can live with in harmony.

Discussion

As hypothesized, Gestalt therapy was viewed as effective in integrating intra-marital polarities in this setting. In the conjoint session of the present study, the partners expressed new perceptions within their relationship and in the way they viewed their situation together, although certain challenges were presented. On one hand, this marriage was only experiencing mild conflict in the union; as such, there was not a great empathic distance between the partners so a positive therapeutic energy was easily maintained. On the other hand, the personality types of the two individuals are significantly different, and with over 30

years of marriage the marital relationship itself will have developed a unique “personality” with behavioral patterns of its own. Together, individual personality types, defense mechanisms, and coping strategies (as well as other factors) all play a part in the variance of the outcomes. Thus, the complexity of the relationship required a deeper level of exploration to expose all relevant polarities within the dyad.

Theories of mate selection offered valuable insight while exploring the couple’s polarities, regarding possible underlying motivations and perceptions of balance within the relationship. Both complimentary needs and the ideal-self hypotheses showed conceptual validity within this framework. The participants in the present study seemed to show these complexities: that is, the complimentary need of finding what one is functionally lacking, and an attraction to what one is ideally lacking.

Another related hypothesis offered here is that while the pursuit of these needs may serve a measure of unity, it may also be a source of conflict. For example, conflict may arise when one partner looks for support from the perspective of similar goals or values (i.e., expecting agreement). However, if the other responds from the perspective of complementarity (i.e., reflecting differences), the expectation of the first partner will go unmet and, perhaps, even perceived as an assault. Thus, conflict may be the result of a mismatch in relational exchange when one expects the similarity but gets the complimentary difference instead. Therefore, empathic awareness toward the immediate needs of the other can be a productive use of the Gestalt approach to couple or marital counseling.

Distinction between polarity types should also be made during the conjoint session; that is, polarities that are between the partners (e.g., different personality types) or polarities that are experienced together by the partners (e.g., equal to polarities as experienced by an individual). Close attention needs to be maintained by the counselor during the conjoint session as more therapeutic cues are communicated by each partner, pinpointing the type of polarities in need of immediate exploration. This will help toward a more accurate and, thus, productive session.

Modification of the 4-stage model (Fiebert, 2012) worked well in jointly exploring an emergent stressor in Stage 1 and partners speaking as the other (Fow, 1998) in Stage 2. The difficulties experienced in this study were viewed more as a personality conflict within the husband, not a methodological problem. Future use with other varied couple structures will prove or disprove the efficacy of the method. Separate work with the individuals in Stage 3 was similar to standard sessions but was believed to accomplish the purpose of vicarious empathic awareness. Stage 4 enactments of polarity balance also enabled the couple to see their situation as a union, despite the individuality of their experiences.

In agreement with the method of Paivio and Greenberg (1995), more than one session will be necessary to treat more difficult problems. Their model conducted therapy once a week for 12 to 14 weeks with the first two serving as relation builders before more therapeutic work was attempted. Determining the necessary approach would depend on the level of conflict experienced either *between* the partners or *within* one or both partners.

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