

Gestalt Psychotherapy in Our Time

Gestalt Psychotherapy is a therapy of our time. It provides the psychotherapist with tools to treat the new discomforts and the new pathologies, as well as the interpretations to consolidate the sense of Self and openness towards the other.

But above all, the aspect of Gestalt Therapy that continues to fascinate me after so many years is that it transmits to persons a way of being together that marks the rhythm between belonging and differentiation, connectedness with the community and self-realisation.

The encounter with Gestalt Therapy represents the opportunity for a targeted response to the emerging needs of this difficult and stimulating millennium.

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Psychosocial Gestalt and Gestalt Psychotherapy

In this article, I will review a number of key principles of Gestalt Psychotherapy on which Psychosocial Gestalt developments and innovations have been grafted and have germinated, in order to appreciate how the Psychosocial Gestalt method (1976) developed.

Psychosocial Gestalt is based on the essential and phenomenological humanistic matrix of Gestalt Psychotherapy, in its original formulation established by Frederick Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline and Paul Goodman (1951), and on the subsequent innovations and developments introduced by Erving and Miriam Polster (1973). In addition to these authors, Psychosocial Gestalt has collected the contributions of other initiators, such as Isadore From, James Simkin and Joseph Zinker. These initiators have left the indelible mark of the origins by teaching in our school.

Psychosocial Gestalt has drawn on this heritage and, during more than thirty years of formation, research and innovation, has developed principles and working frameworks concerning the person, the relationship and the society; it has created, experimented and updated tools and techniques to address the complexity, the sense of confusion and the problems of today's life.

In particular, the arrival of Erving Polster in our school in 2007 marked a further extension and step forward in the methodology, thanks to the innovations which he gave generously to all of us. On that occasion, I edited the Italian version of his latest book: *Uncommon Ground – Harmonizing Psychotherapy and Community to Enhance Everyday Living* (Polster, 2007), whose Italian title is *Psicoterapia del quotidiano – Migliorare la vita della persona e della comunità*.

Gestalt Psychotherapy was established in 1951 by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman as a revision of the psychoanalytical theory and method. F. Perls, a psychoanalyst, had already presented a report on mental metabolism to the *International Psychoanalytic Congress* held in Marienbad in 1936, that was subsequently extended in the book *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* published in 1947. The opportunity for the review proposal was represented by a different view of the function and the meaning of introjection and aggression. The vicissitudes experienced by F. Perls and his wife Laura Posner, a Gestalt psychologist and also a psychoanalyst, as the result of Nazi persecution, caused the couple to travel to the United States, after a period spent in South Africa. The meeting with the other founders of Gestalt Psychotherapy resulted in the publication of *Gestalt Therapy, Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951), and in the foundation of the first Institute of Gestalt Therapy in New York in 1952.

Correlation between Individual and Environment

The Gestalt Psychotherapy of the origins sustains that the **individual** and the **environment** form a whole in an endless interchange, and attributes the utmost importance to their correlation in

assessing human behaviour. The feature characterising this relationship is represented by the **contact**, which is the source of growth and change. The proper working of a person can be assessed by the quality of the contact, namely, by the individual's capacity to express himself/herself with persistence and clarity in an environment that arouses interest and responds in an unforeseeable form to the individual's needs. The tendency of responding to the environment, from which the principle of **responsibility** and **personal power** will then be generated, is considered to be a *creative adaptation* to the environment (relational, domestic, and social).

Relationship and Identity

The context into which the child is born represents a world that is already certain – a world that will be unable to fully and completely satisfy its needs. The child is a *relationship activator* in the same way as an adult, and in fact, even before being born, it shows precocious forms of inter-subjectivity. The child moves searching for **a sense of self and a meeting with the other**, on this path towards self-realisation. It will model parts of the Self which respond to the need for attachment (maternal code) and parts of the Self which respond to the tendency towards exploration and differentiation (paternal code) (Menditto, 2006). During its development, the child will alternate the curious knowledge of the world and the taste for exploration and **differentiation** from alterity with the sense of **belonging** and indivisibility from the other. This gradual modelling, combined with the knowledge of the sense of Self and of parts of the Self, determines the formation of *Identity*, which originates in the relationship, develops within the relationship and is reflected by it. The child has a further capacity for adaptation in addition to modelling, being able to “resist” in the relationship and to the relationship, through the methods of contact resistance (Polster & Polster, 1973), which are inside each of us and are the social human being's defence of the historical memory, to indicate – as Freud states - that “humanity trades freedom for a little security”. Therefore, the person consolidates relational and connectedness models with alterity, as the basis of its own interior security, and, at the same time, adopts and consolidates methods, forms of conduct and beliefs to avoid the risk of constant rejection, disapproval, abandonment and fragmentation.

The person's development foresees the interior creation of the *I* and the *You*. Psychosocial Gestalt extends this view and introduces the interior formation of other factors: **the relationship and the exploration**. Contemporary identity is born and lives in the relationship, moves inside it and explores the differentiation paths, remaining within the relationship itself. According to Psychosocial Gestalt, the two organiser principles of the post-modern identity are the following (Menditto, 2008):

- the principle of belonging;
- the principle of exploration.

Here-and-now and Experience

The initiators of Gestalt Psychotherapy introduced the value of **here-and-now**. In the '50s, when the interpretive psychoanalysis model prevailed, the power assigned to the present entailed a significant change in methodology, by including **experience** in the setting, both narrated and experienced directly, and by considering each experience in the therapeutic relationship as valid in its own right (Polster & Polster, 1973). The possibility of experimenting (not only relating) a significant situation in the setting produces a driving force to eliminate both depersonalisation and the passive adaptation to cultural models. The value of here-and-now and of experience introduces a wave of new energy in the therapeutic relationship.

The transcripts of Perls' seminars present demonstrations which introduce the **empty chair technique**. Perls allows the related experience to enter the scene directly. He has the intuition that the mere account strengthens the tendency to concentrate on talking and blocks the capacity for action and experimentation of new behaviour forms. For example, a patient who talks of how difficult it was for him as a child to receive a caress from his father provides an opportunity in the present: he/she **puts on stage** the episode, instead of talking **about** his/her difficult experience; in this way, what was petrified in the mind (incomplete Gestalt) comes alive, once it is played in the therapeutic experience. The technique of representing the story is defined by the Polsters as an **experiment** (Polster & Polster, 1973) and is introduced in the setting, thanks to a phrase spoken by the therapist that sounds more or less like this: "You could imagine that your father is here, and that you speak to him directly ...".

Context and Connectedness

Psychosocial Gestalt also broadens this perspective, affirming the **connectedness** of the current experience in the therapeutic relationship with the patient's history (Polster, 1985). The "here-and-now" represents the present that is located between a "before" and an "after". The patient's and the therapy's complete history represents the background, the fertile receptacle of the person's experiences, from which the current experience emerges. The current context and the historical context intersect in the therapeutic relationship, that summarises the person's history in the present, just as the person's history represents the trace that leads to the live and fragrant contact in the here-and-now.

Psychosocial Gestalt includes interpreting the **context**, alongside the importance assigned to the experience and to the here-and-now. The individual and the environment form a whole indivisible from the historical, rational, social and cultural context. The live experience that emerges in the relationship's here-and-now, and in the therapeutic relationship in particular, stands out against the entire context in which the person lives and functions. An invisible and indivisible connectedness exists between the present and the person's history. The Gestalt therapist uses the therapeutic situation as the meeting's crossroads and the relationship summarises the person's history in the present, just as the person's history is part of a broader context, which is the community to which the person belongs (Menditto, 2005).

Thanks to the latest innovations by Erving Polster (Polster, 2007), Psychosocial Gestalt has introduced connectedness in its theoretical and methodological system, referred to:

- *moment to moment;*
- *event to event;*
- *person to person;*
- *Self to Self.*

Phenomenology

Gestalt Psychotherapy represents a non-interpretative approach; the principles of **phenomenology** become tools to read the person, the relationship and the context (Menditto, 2006). Putting on the "glasses of the senses, the live experience, the awareness and the contact" the actual facts can be observed, instead of using the interpretation of the facts themselves. In the meeting with the other and also in the therapeutic relationship, there is frequently the risk of attributing the same meaning to both the facts and to interpretations of the facts themselves, as well as and to consider the subjective and personal world in the same way as the live and present experience.

Moreover, the current difficulty of experiencing emotional relationships, the more and more common conflictual relationship levels and the faded identity disturbances complicate the meeting between the person and alterity: the contact boundary is no longer perceived as a natural and healthy limit, but as an anxious, dependent or aggressive imposition on the other.

The Value of Experience

The Gestalt psychotherapist begins from the observation in the here-and-now, describes what he/she sees with his/her own eyes, collects what is heard with his/her own ears, suspends the interpretation automatism, pauses to experience awareness and is captured by the genuine interest in the meeting with the other (Polster, 1985). Fastening on to the present experience, he/she restores the powers of the senses, the awareness and the concentration. Direct experience with the full awareness of Self, of the relationship and of the context implies that the therapist follows the flow of the experience.

An ongoing use of the **phenomenological observation** tool enables perception flexibility to be acquired, and helps to shake off the own and unique point of view. The psychotherapist's communications represent assumptions concerning the patient's experience to be subjected to verification – and not judgements carved on a conceptual rock-like system.

Therefore, phenomenology has influenced the thinking of the founders and of the initiators of Gestalt Psychotherapy, and their view of the world, of human existence and of suffering. Psychosocial Gestalt has broadened the phenomenological perspective further, and in these latest years principles like phenomenological observation, suspended judgement and description of the facts have produced specific tools and techniques.

Gestalt

The studies on perception performed by the Gestalt psychologists have demonstrated that the individual, in his/her relationship with the environment, has an inborn tendency to search for the meaning of the experience and of its constituent factors. Our eyes and our mind must provide a possible meaning for what we do; otherwise it is complicated, ineffective or pathological for us to interact, respond and move within the experience and in the relationship.

The term **Gestalt** indicates that what we call the meaning of what we are perceiving and experiencing does not represent the simple sum of the parts which comprise the experience itself. On the contrary, the **tendency towards the meaning** is a complex, elaborate and essential activity. The meaning that we subjectively attribute to the experience is what we call *Gestalt*. The sense that we give to the experience is a representation, a personal construction. We do not photograph reality for what it is, but we attribute a meaning that is the result of the combination between the present perception and the subject's reference scheme on himself/herself, the relationship and the context (Menditto, 2008). The perception and the meaning we attribute are the results of subjectivity, relativity, incompleteness and complexity.

It follows that we enter into contact with the other and with the context through our perception and not because of the reality in its own right. Personal experience is always formed and developed in a continuously evolving inter-subjective system. This represents the challenge characterising the relational field: the sense of indivisibility to the rhythm of diversity and the originality of each subject that claims its right to the difference, by maintaining himself/herself in the relationship (Refer to: "*Io diverso-verso di te*" - *I different-towards you*), XII Summer Gestalt Training, 2002).

Background Figure

Gestalt psychologists have represented the incessant flow of experience with the **background-figure** principle. The process of perception and awareness of ourselves, the other and the world is incessant and interminable. A figure emerges in the foreground and, once the experience has been completed and the meaning of what one is doing has been understood, returns into the background and a new figure emerges. This represents a continuous and essential process to understand and to manage ourselves and reality. The background represents the context (historical, social, cultural, relational) that confers a unique and original meaning to the single experience.

Gestalt Psychotherapy supports a holistic view of the person. The individual throughout its life seeks the sense of interest and fullness, although declaring its right to differentiation (Polster, 2007). The patient is helped to experiment the sense of connectedness *moment to moment*, in the therapeutic relationship. Otherwise, the mere experience would be a moment lived in the present, but alienated from the person's history. If the experience that emerges has no historical perspective – in other words, lacks background – causes rashness, a sense of emptiness and a loss of history, bonds, identity and sense of belonging.

Awareness

The process of consolidation and flexibility of Self encounters hindrances and obstacles in modern man's risky tendency of delegating to others the capacity to observe with his own eyes, to listen with his own ears, to perceive the emotional changes communicated by his own body, to reflect and to think with his own vigilant mind. An antidote to the depersonalisation phenomenon was identified by the founders of Gestalt Psychotherapy by restoring **awareness**. The work with awareness was the result of revisions and innovations over these years. Let us now see what awareness is and how its use in Gestalt Psychotherapy has evolved.

Joseph Zinker, one of the initiators of Gestalt Psychotherapy, developed the **Cycle of Needs**, which outlines the phases by which the person satisfies his/her own needs, in his/her on-going contact with the environment. The following phases are involved: sensation, awareness, energy mobilisation, action, contact and withdrawal (Zinker, 1977). The person reactivates awareness after an undifferentiated "feeling", and moves deliberately towards meeting its own need. It is evident that we are referring to a perception of awareness achieved both if the person understands spontaneously what is the Self compared with the other than Self, and if the person clearly delimits the contact boundary between himself/herself and the environment. Furthermore, awareness forms the basis for a good quality contact. A view of the person emerges with a sufficient or clearly outlined sense of self, of its own boundaries and of the subsequent choices. The world at that date – from the early '50s to the end of the '60s – was less complicated, and the individual sense of Self was more structured. In the contemporary era, the *I* is more and more incomplete, fragmented and non-coherent (Polster 1995, Menditto, 2006). Psychosocial Gestalt has conditioned the capacity to remain in the relationship and to consolidate a clear sense of Self to the capacity to impact the environment and to satisfy one's own needs (Menditto, 2004). The **Relationship Cycle** (Menditto and Rametta, 2002) and the **Exploration Cycle** (Menditto, 2006) have been introduced in this sense.

Awareness and Phenomenology

Psychosocial Gestalt has developed new considerations and new ways of applying awareness. Achieving awareness means being concentrated and present as regards one's own sensations,

actions, feelings, values and opinions, as well as highlighting the clear difference between the intentional and the spontaneous function.

Awareness represents an inter-subjective guiding compass for the psychotherapy of Psychosocial Gestalt. It is a function to be used in daily life to develop concurrent, pro-active and targeted behaviour. The attention paid to awareness attenuates continuous reasoning about the past and reduces anxiety for the future. It is useful to associate awareness with phenomenological observation. In fact, focusing on what I am observing combines well with the perception of what I am aware of in that precise moment, in the relationship with the other and with the environment. For example, a colleague of mine does not greet me when I enter the office (phenomenological observation) and I understand that his disinterest irritates me (awareness of my emotional state). Perceiving the correlation between the fact and my state of mind (context) is useful in managing the relationship.

I can have various options on the action to take:

- a) I can pretend not to notice, since I know my colleague and I know that he does not consider these forms of politeness;
- b) I decide to say to him: "When you don't greet me, I become irritated", so I give him the opportunity to get to know me better;
- c) I am motivated to investigate the relationship further and I ask him: "I get irritated when you don't greet me. You are my friend: could you remember to greet me, or is it impossible for you?". With this phrase, I open the communication on the relational level and I show him my interest in our friendship.

Awareness and Connectedness Continuum

In the framework of Psychosocial Gestalt, awareness represents a daily guidance function of Self in the relationship, that has the relational field as its context. The therapist's attention focuses from awareness in itself to the **awareness continuum**, which, in its underlying flow towards experience, guides us in a sensible and targeted form and helps us to perceive that we are not letting ourselves live, but that *we are really alive*. The awareness continuum represents the connectedness of the *moment to moment* (Polster, 2007), it renders the sequences tight, guides our senses, emotions and body and generates involvement, interest and concentration in what we are doing. The connectedness *moment to moment* focuses the **tight sequences in the mutual and invisible connectedness**. The connectedness is interrupted when the person diminishes the trust in himself/herself, in the other or in the environment. The interruption produces confusion, deadlock and uneasiness. These obstacles are due to the loss of self-esteem and the lack of confidence regarding personal capacities to address a difficulty, an unforeseen event and a shock.

Relational Field

Gestalt Psychotherapy is influenced by the general theory of the Kurt Lewin field, that sees the observer as an integral part of the observed system. The object and the subject belong to the same system and characterise and establish a relationship in the system. Every factor of well-being or illness is contextualised in the patient's whole personality that, in turn, is connected to the other and to the environment. An **inter-subjective view of identity** emerges: the individual, the environment and the relationship are concurrent and co-acting in the field, which is defined by Psychosocial Gestalt as the **relational field**.

Contact

The contact principle has become firmly established in the Gestalt Psychotherapy methodology thanks to the reorganisation work carried out by Erving and Miriam Polster. In *Gestalt Therapy Integrated* (1973), Erving and Miriam remind us that each exchange between me and the other is a contact experience: we are in contact when we breathe, when we drink, when we make love and when we argue. Contact is the exchange between the individual and the environment and it represents the individual's capacity to respond in a flexible and creative way, with persistence and clarity, to an environment that arouses interest and corresponds to the individual's needs. The contact in its own right represents an experience of change: it is the tendency that drives us to move with curiosity towards the novelty and the exploration of diversity. It means remaining fascinated and intrigued by something that is perceived to be outside one's own contact boundary and it represents the tendency to render the different from the Self comparable and integrated within one's own boundary. The movement to search for a contact with the different from the Self implies a breakdown of the balance achieved, a curiosity towards knowledge, as well as the experimenting of new possibilities and configurations of Self, the relationship and the context (Menditto 2008).

Interior Security, Separation, Exploration

The breakdown of the balanced situation and the search for the new and the different characterise the individual's exploration in the environment. The original interiorised relationship will represent the basis characterising the exploration style of Self, of the other and of the environment. The attachment condition from which the person begins to go, in order to explore new possibilities, is highly significant for the configuration of Self, the building of the bonds and the consequent sense of belonging. It is like saying that the person must have interior confidence and willpower to explore the Self, the other and the environment, and to achieve a real change, which suggest being able to withstand the "temporary loss of security" (Menditto, 2004). The individual must "know" that it has a berthing base to which to return. The departure from its own "secure" boundaries, to go beyond the gate towards the unknown (contact boundary), must be based on the interiorisation that the "come back" is possible. The confidence towards the environment has its foundations on the confidence that a berthing is more or less possible.

I-Different-Towards-You

The rhythm of the attachment-separation movement guarantees a kind of equi-distance between an excessive separation and a confused attachment. The interior security feeds on a mobile, flexible, permeable, multi-polar boundary that changes configuration and that adapts to a changeable, complex and unstable environment. The individual perceives himself/herself in a different way when he/she places the need to move first and foremost, in order to be Self-assertive (leaving momentarily aside his/her need for a relationship), compared to when he/she moves to maintain the contact in the relationship. When moving away perceptively and physically from the relationship, in order to explore the environment, the individual is forced to self-assert himself/herself as a subject, with his/her own sense of diversity and separateness, compared with the relational situation (with the other or with the group) that it has momentarily set aside (Menditto, 2006).

Change in the Therapeutic Relationship

This experience is to be lived and consolidated in the therapeutic relationship and acts as a watershed between the real change and the apparent change. After having made a detailed diagnosis and assessed with sensitivity and care the patient's ability for "change", the therapist creates an ad hoc therapeutic project for the person who embarks on a course of possible and sustainable change in a protected situation, like the therapeutic setting (Menditto, 2004). The suffering, the shock and the anxiety of the separation that heralds the identification of a nuclear Self are experienced and addressed in the therapeutic relationship: the person feels it is possible to reveal a restored sense of his/her own existence in the therapist-patient relationship, where the *I* and the *You* form a third entity: the **relationship** (Menditto, 2008).

Living and Observing the Relationship

Psychosocial Gestalt has identified **living and observing the relationship** among the psychotherapist's tools, where the term relationship means the relationship phenomenologically experienced and experimented in the present that, like every significant relationship, "transfers" fragments, emotions and projections of the previous relationships to the other. The Gestalt therapist gathers and experiences this paradox together with the patient: he/she "experiences" and "observes" the relationship simultaneously, and this represents a "treatment" and a metaphoric experience of all the other experiences. Moreover, at one and the same time, it represents a live and current meeting for the persons involved in the relational field (1996). This principle is currently submitted to consideration and integration.

Contact boundary

Psychosocial Gestalt uses the **belonging-differentiation** rhythm as a therapeutic tool, to be utilised at the contact boundary. The **contact boundary** concept acknowledges the contact's paradoxical nature, in which the organism maintains its own separation, and simultaneously, searches for assimilation and union. The contact boundary represents the "middle ground", the common ground where the *I* and the *You* meet. Where the contact is made, there is a temporary loss of Self. At the contact boundary, the experience of the third entity – the relationship (the *We*) – is produced (Menditto, 2006).

The belonging-differentiation rhythm for Psychosocial Gestalt characterises the inter-subjective identity and characterises the relationship's complexity. The work is carried out at the contact boundary, to build-up and to consolidate both the **sense of separation** from the environment (the person implements the methods of contact resistance where a satisfactory contact is not achieved), and the **sense of belonging** in the relationship. The migration from the experimented relational experience to its symbolisation and meaning is frequently a source of stalemate, uneasiness and pathology (Menditto, 2008).

Methods of Contact Resistance

The Polsters introduced a new vision of the methods of contact resistance to Gestalt Psychotherapy, in addition to the value of experience, conscious action and contact. The method of contact resistance is the way in which the child interrupted its tendency to impact and to explore the environment. The method of contact resistance can be temporary or chronic and persistent. The interruption was generated by a priority need, which is that of protecting the attachment and the relationship.

The methods of contact resistance represent the child's creative adaptation to the environment, in

order to remain in the relationship with the significant other, and to avoid experiencing the anxiety or the threat of rejection or abandon.

In the interviews preceding the acceptance of treatment, the therapist identifies the methods of contact resistance and makes a note of the patient's prevailing methods, which, combined with other information about the person, enables the therapist to establish the diagnosis and the therapeutic project.

We have identified five methods of contact resistance:

1. introjection;
2. projection;
3. retroflexion;
4. deflection;
5. converging.

Originality and Creativity of the Methods of Contact Resistance

The originality of the Gestaltic vision of the methods of contact resistance is represented by the fact that the individual finds a possible adaptation with the other and with the context, in order to protect the need of belonging and the relationship.

If those methods assume a **flexible** and **temporary** form, they represent relationship styles which are adequate and contextual to the situation – and are put in place just in order to cope with that situation, which can assume difficult or conflictual characteristics for the Self.

When the resistance methods assume a **chronic** and **fixed** form, they represent blocks and obstacles non-contextual to the situation, preventing the person from responding to the relationship and to the environment in an adequate and effective way.

The methods of contact resistance play a fundamental role for the young in the human species, in their evolutionary development. The alternation between the attachment adaptation strategies (methods of contact resistance) and the balance breakdown strategies (the intrinsic methods in the exploration cycle) slowly favours the path towards self-realisation in the individual, based on interior security.

Contact and Therapeutic Relationship

The focus exercised by Gestalt Psychotherapy on the *contact* functions and on the related *anomalies* highlights the fact that the psychotherapist is an active subject in the process. In particular, if the therapist welcomes and allows the abnormal contact methods associated with “reviving” old sufferings to live within the therapeutic relationship, a real and current emotional investment is achieved in both partners. The therapist and the patient engage in a human relationship that is characterised not only as a treatment, but also as a space where real persons, mutually interested-interesting, meet (Polster, 1985).

The persons move with dancing steps in a belonging-differentiation rhythm. The individual walks towards the other, indivisible from the Self, to then seek autonomy, stepping through the gate of the unknown and exploring new parts of the Self, in a continuous flow of experience. In this endless process, the person includes self and the other on the path to self-realisation (Menditto, 2006).

The I of Post-Modern Identity

A vision of **post-modern identity** emerges that lives and is nourished in the relationship, which is complex, precarious and liquid (Bauman, 2007). Gestalt Psychotherapy has seen various characters enter the scene, from the origins to the present day: Instability, Anxiety, Aggression, Isolation, Dependence.

The *I* of the post-modern identity is weak and fragmented, and perceives a transient and permeable boundary of the Self. Insecurity, fear and psychic discomfort are widespread, permeating social relationships and bonds in a hidden form. A widespread unhappiness, a need for security and a creeping fear can be clearly seen by everyone. It is more and more difficult to provide effective answers to the discomfort and the suffering which the patients report in the studies of the psychotherapists. The anxiety generated by what we can observe around us and by what we can perceive within ourselves and in the interpersonal relationships drives towards new considerations and new working tools.

Our Difficult Times

The dichotomy between strong and weak, impulse and consideration, insanity and normality, nature and fiction broadens more and more in our period. The defence of fragility, diversity and discomfort outside and inside us is a slightly blurred ideal in our culture, which is proving to be more and more sensitive to force relationships compared with support relationships.

The contemporary individual lives in a precarious balance and slows down its path towards interior security and self-realisation, since required to build itself up more on the outside than on the inside. The social request is to sew on a luxury "facade" and to strengthen the own soul with shatterproof glass.

Up until a short time ago, the outside world was the place that was explored, while the interior world and the bonds were defined by the emotions and by family education. Today, the world enters inside the soul and finds open doors needing affection, approval and identification for the emptiness left by the paternal codes of social behaviour.

Fragmentation, Isolation, Dependence

The human being, being in a precarious balance (Bellow, 1976), is afraid and insecure. The massive use of means of communication renders the individuals more and more alone, separated from one another, shut in a defence niche that cannot protect those who have never learnt to do that. The facade is more and more polished, while the interior structure is more and more neglected and fragmented.

The care of the soul and the training of the mind are neglected, the social codes of conduct are ignored, the boundaries of exterior and interior protection are "frayed". The "soul's make-up artists" are replacing the masters who have always had the function of instilling in the pupil the ways and the tools to create the habit of consideration, decision and choice that produce security, interior autonomy and conscious actions.

Researchers talk about new forms of the symptom, of cold psychoses and of the *vacuum clinic*.

New Discomforts and New Pathologies

The **new** blurred and widespread psychological **discomforts** highlight the absence of real or symbolic boundaries and the subsequent incapacity of choice. The symptoms are losing the metaphoric value of the expression of conflict, and therefore, of a division of the subject, and are assuming more and more an identity-making value. Today, preparing an initial **diagnosis** using old tools and finding effective answers to the discomfort is a difficult and complex task for the psychotherapists.

Attachment and Exploration: two Organiser Principles

As I have already mentioned, the person's development follows an alternation and interweaving between two fundamental dynamics: attachment and exploration. On the one hand, the person tends to maintain belonging, acceptance and containment situations, while, on the other hand, pursues the tendency to break the balance and stagnation, in order to move towards the exploration of new and unfamiliar environments. The drive to exploration, as fundamental for the interior well-being and the person's balance as is the drive to attachment, has been analysed in slightly less detail by the researchers, who, until now, have privileged the human dynamics of attachment (Menditto, 2006).

The Supremacy of Lived Experience over Experience

The attachment experience is known and enables us to establish sufficiently accurate assumptions about how the person will experience the bond in the primary attachment and in the subsequent relationships, as well as in the separation phases of the bond itself. I take the liberty of assuming that the attention paid to the bond aspect has influenced and polarised the view of the person's stability and security prevailing over the tendency to search for a "secure base". Researchers have focused on placing great significance in this sense, to achieve a solid sense of interior balance and to construct the world of bonds and the capacity to live and maintain the relationship.

The analysts have also pursued this path, and during the sessions, have often lingered on the account of the history that the person had constructed inside himself/herself concerning his/her world of bonds, maintaining **attention on the "lived experience"**, as the field of privileged investigation.

The Value of Experience and Phenomenology

And so, the supremacy of "feeling" over the phenomenology of the facts has often neglected to include in the treatment both the **being and living within the relationship, and the observing and describing the experience**, forgetting how the comparison concerning the transmission of the cultural codes, which connect with reality, the context and the group, is nourishing inside the relationship's dialogue and the therapeutic relationship in particular. Understanding the cultural codes in a significant relationship, such as the therapeutic, training or educational relationship, leads the person to live the "secure base" inherent in the relationship itself, and then leave the confused world of lived experiences and sensations and go on to explore the environment, having learned in a protected context the possible ways of acting and the relationship with the world outside the Self.

To learn a rhythm of healthy contemporary presence between the inner world, in which the history and lived experiences are hidden, and the real world, forms the basis of the person's balance and well-being.

Attachment and Cultural Codes

It was found very useful to attribute importance to the world of contact, attachment, emotional undertones and containment in the Freudian era and in the era immediately after. I do not believe that great attention was paid to the subjectivity and to the needs of children in that period. Freud and his pupils had the great merit of bringing to the fore the world of emotions and irrationality, and to study with attention the pregenital phase of infant development.

Everything changed after that. Today, the person is insufficiently differentiated from his/her infant world. Wanting to maintain attention and significance to ensure the person's equilibrium regarding the acknowledgement of his/her needs and the need to put them in practice protects against the real interpretation of the separation and hinders the drive towards self-realisation.

Differentiating Interior Life from the Outside World

The personality that has completed the organisation of the basic functions of psychic life – and is therefore able to differentiate its own interior life from the outside world – may be considered mature. Knowing how to mediate between these two parallel universes indicates that the person has abandoned the claim that his/her own way of seeing things is the only, the best and the most correct, and – above all – that it must always and however prevail over the others.

Many young people, now forced to prolong their adolescence, remain in a "compound psychology" for a long time, finding it difficult to implement this differentiation. What they feel and imagine frequently substitutes the facts and the reality of the outside world. This phenomenon is amplified and fuelled by media psychology, that permeates the souls, and from the virtual universe created by videogames and by the internet. All this prepares them to live in an imaginary and virtual world, without having firstly learnt sufficiently well how to identify reality – that disappoints and depresses them – while they seek all-absorbing environments and sensations giving them the impression of existing.

These methods, which in part structure the new pathologies, are the result of an education system and schooling that fail to educate the young to train the mind, but accustom them to living principally at an **emotional and sensorial level**, to the detriment of reason, understood as knowledge, memory, consideration and curiosity. Instead of saying: "*I think, therefore I am*", with their behaviour the youths state: "*I feel sensations, therefore I am reassured*".

From the Confusionary Bond to the Reciprocity Relationship

Authentic self-assertiveness means breaking the balances, differentiating oneself and, at the same time, perceiving the bond with the other. To achieve this, it is necessary to perceive oneself as differentiated internally, as well as to have interpreted detachment as the separation from the original bond. When detaching from the confusing bond, one learns that the other is not something that limits or opposes personal happiness and is not a subject on which one can claim predatory rights. In that sense, the perception of alterity reveals the own self-realisation. The person is familiar with himself/herself and identifies with himself/herself, to the extent the other sees, recognises and identifies him/her. However, he can feel to be seen, recognised and identified if, in turn, he is able to see, recognise and identify the other.

Maternal Code and Paternal Code

I believe that the **maternal code** contributes to the formation of the interior sense of indivisibility between me and the other, which forms the basis of the empathy, understanding, *pietas*, and generosity towards the other. "What I do to the other, I am also doing to myself".

Whereas, different relational methods are directed by the **paternal code**, that favours the tendency towards the exploration of new experiences, the power of knowledge and the search of ideas, solutions and personal decisions.

The transmission of the paternal code interrupts the relationship "fusionality", permitting to escape from the confusion with the other indivisible from the Self. It drives the child to feel differentiated from the other and forces it to make a mental effort and to take action, as well as to "think" and to "experiment" verbal and non-verbal languages, which enable it to be seen in its diversity and to be effective in the expression of itself towards the other different from the Self. It is the institution of human culture based on the paternal code that prohibits a confused relationship, interrupts the restraint and distracts from attendance, accompanying the person in accessing the world and in searching its own place in a larger and less reassuring environment.

The Individual Bases of Empathy and Assertion of Self

Therefore, a clear sense of the interiorised paternal code drives the person to sever the secure moorings and to risk asserting himself/herself, developing the desire to stay with the others, to cooperate and to participate in the community. The purpose of this developmental effort is also that of being included, understood and accepted, while showing himself/herself, through the spoken word and the body, in its risky diversity. In fact, if it is true that the person is abandoning the relationship's fusionality, it is equally true that, in turn, he/she runs the risk of being abandoned, by daring to expose himself/herself. I believe that the need to be understood originates in the relationship with our mother. It is this first relationship that transmits to us biologically, neurologically and psychologically the basic capacity to understand and to imitate the other, which in time becomes empathy and indivisibility (Menditto, 2008).

Reciprocity and Interdependence

The importance of reciprocity and interdependence are confirmed in the neurological discovery of mirror neurons. We can imitate the action of the other and/or understand the intentions, because our mind resonates together with the mind of the person we are observing. I believe that the need to move away from fusionality to seek differentiation and the assertion of the unique nature of our existence originates from the transmission of the paternal code, that teaches us the skills of "knowing how to think", wandering off the track, how to learn to interpret new solutions and how to explore with the body and the mind. I tell you who I am and I assert myself in front of you, with my different aspects. **Firstly, I understand you, then I identify myself.** Therefore, for Psychosocial Gestalt, attachment and exploration are two organiser principles: firstly I understand you and secondly I identify myself. There is a **creative antagonism** (social, biological, relational and psychological) in each one of us between understanding and imitation of the other (maternal code) and the assertion of the Self and exploration (paternal code).

The Therapeutic Relationship between Belonging and Exploration

The **Exploration Cycle** and the **Relational Cycle** represent two interpretation and working matrices which allow the interconnection between the exploration-expression of the Self and the search for the bond-relationship. The two working matrices enable the psychotherapist to foresee

a time to accept the soul's injuries and a later time to move towards exploration, which generates possibilities to reflect, relativise and select.

During the therapeutic treatment, the person experiments: on the one hand, the sense of belonging, which determines the relationship methods and drives the person towards acknowledging the contemporary presence of Self and the other in the relational field, and, on the other hand, the sense of differentiation that completes the connection of the parts of Self (Polster, 2007).

Contact and Connectedness between the Individual and the Community

In *Uncommon Ground – Harmonizing Psychotherapy and Community to Enhance Everyday Living* (2007), Erving Polster defines the urgency of a methodology that favours the sense of connectedness between one person and another, and between the person and the community. He illustrates the connectedness principle in this sense: "I use the word *connectedness* because it signifies wholeness, while simultaneously recognizing the individual components of which it is composed. We feel connectedness when we integrate our present life with all that preceded it, when, in the face of diverse pressures, we concentrate undistractedly in what we are doing, and when we feel freedom while belonging to a group of people. Though we want wholeness, we also want each of our experiences to merit simple focus on itself, without concern with the way it fits with other aspects of life [...]" (Zeig, Tucker, & Theisen, Inc., 2006, pages 97/98).

As J. LeDoux, the neuroscientist, stated: "An answer to the question of how our brains make us who we are can be found in the synaptic processes that allow cooperative interactions to take place between various brain systems that are involved in particular states and experiences, and for these interactions to be linked over time" (ibidem, page 101).

In this struggle to create and to maintain the sense of interest, when faced with a universe of different and frequently fragmented experiences, it appears to be established that in life, despite the enthusiastic efforts to ensure that the totality wins over individualisation, the feeling of wholeness is not a foregone conclusion, but it is a success that we can only achieve by reconciling strengths which could potentially fragment us.

Conclusion

In the contemporary era, the person sways like a sleepwalker on the wire of life, who, while walking, experiences both the sense of totality and the sense of fragmentation. The sense of Self is always less permanent and persistent, and it is a success that is achieved if, during the hazardous journey of life, the path towards self-realisation is taken.

In this complex millennium, the psychological disciplines remind man that the path of its own self-realisation indicates the need to identify new cultural paradigms being able to integrate the sense of Self with the meeting with the other.

Alterity is no longer what prevents, limits and threatens the search for one's own happiness, but, on the contrary, has become an unavoidable factor. And the sense of identity is possible only within the relationship with the other.

The **connectedness** reminds us that our sense of differentiation is confirmed by the hidden energy of indivisibility from the other, as well as from the sense of fullness and wholeness within ourselves and in the relationship with the other and the community.

The person knows himself/herself and identifies with himself/herself, to the extent that the other sees, recognises and identifies him/her. However, he can feel himself seen, recognised and identified if, in turn, he is able to see, recognise and identify the other.

Mutual recognition represents an essential experience for the birth and the development of Self. The individual finds the access to his/her own subjective identity and to his/her own Self, vitally

changing the cultural system to which he/she belongs, by narrating about himself/herself and listening to the narrations of others, as well as by recognising the other and being recognised by him (Bruner, 1992).

Erving Polster stresses that the current society has an urgent need to recover the sense of connectedness of the person with the community to which he/she belongs. Psychosocial Gestalt is not only focused on consolidating the sense of security of the Self, but also on recovering the sense of connectedness with the context and the community to which he/she belongs.

By accepting the relational dynamics, in which the person and alterity (*I* and *You*) contribute to the common, unique and indivisible well-being, contemporary man recovers the concept of *eudaimonia*, with which Aristotle declared that in no way can happiness be a solitary experience, but represents a *common asset*.

The choice of marking the rhythm of the relationship with the other by using the own differentiation paves the way to the vital and fruitful dynamics of mutual acknowledgement, that represents for modern man the keystone to realise himself. The "relational choice" does not represent an option among the many possible options, but a decisive direction from which our very future may depend.

The challenge of modern psychotherapies is to reconcile wholeness and differentiation in the person: these forces must learn to live together in a rival and non-conflicting form. The psychotherapist must acquire working tools and personal skills which enable the sense of Self and the relationship with the other to be created and maintained in the patient, with respect to a universe that imposes rapid, different and fragmented experiences, as well as short-lived, instable and fluid relationships.

In this complicated and stimulating century, we will still be together in those fields and environments where we are able to find new methods to perceive the rhythm of the sense of Self and of the relationship with the other.