

Value Of Research

Introduction

To explore the importance of research for Gestalt Psychotherapy requires to first providing an understanding of what Gestalt Psychotherapy is and secondly to understanding the meaning, type and purpose of research. In the context, then, of Gestalt and Research I will explore the importance for theory and practice and in so doing reflect on the ethical issues attached to this.

Gestalt Psychotherapy

Gestalt psychotherapy is a humanistic, holistic model of therapy that provides for a non-judgemental approach to a clients living. The therapist accepts where the client is and holds the client as they are, respecting that any values, morals and ethics have enabled the client to live and be in their world; allowing the client to protect their self and be who they are now.

In treating the individual in a holistic way Gestalt practice fundamentally holds that an individual strives to be complete, to be who they are.

In breaking away from the psychoanalytical model Gestalt therapy emphasised what people knew and what people could learn by focussing their awareness Yontef, (1993, p7)

A Gestalt approach is more than a set of techniques or strategies to be used to affect awareness in therapy. A Gestalt approach is ultimately a way of being, of living, and so also a code of practice that is lived by.

We (Gestaltists) see that meaningful wholes exist throughout nature, in physical and conscious behaviour both, in the body and the mind. Perls et al (1951:1984, p257)

What Is Research?

Research, is essentially, an inquiry, a questioning for finding out what is going on. As such research is human inquiry into the world around us, or each of us. When I meet someone I sometimes will want to inquire as to their well-being, their activities, where they are going and what they are doing. This is research existing in everyday life.

A dictionary definition of research shows:

Research: A careful search or inquiry; endeavour to discover new facts etc. by scientific study of a subject, course or critical investigation. Oxford Dictionary (1973)

This fits almost completely with the every day inquiry of person to person. Where this may not fit is in the use of the word scientific. Many of us would not describe our daily inquiries as scientific.



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In fact the prefixing of scientific opens a hotbed of debate with regard to research. What does it mean to be scientific?

The Oxford Dictionary defines scientific as:

(Of investigations etc) according to rules laid down in science for testing soundness of conclusions, systematic, accurate; of, used, or engaged in, especially, natural science.

Oxford Dictionary (1973)

What Is Scientific Study?

Traditionally scientific study has related to the approach of investigation undertaken and established since the time of Newton. Not that this is when this started or was discovered; merely that this last 400 years has seen the stamping of this particular marker on our development, progress and life structure.

In the 16th Century there was a radical reformation within the Western world of the framework employed for gaining knowledge. Up till this time the scientific framework in Europe rested on two authorities Aristotle and the Church Capra, (1988, p53).

Sir Francis Bacon sought to promote a new philosophy based on Aristotlean concepts. However it is with John Locke that the birth of mechanistic inquiry began. This was later taken up and developed by Sir Isaac Newton. Newtonian mechanics has held its position in the modern world, rightly so in respect of its validation and application.

The development, moulding and honing of this scientific study has been going on for over four hundred years. Our Western culture has the basis of its value system deeply rooted in this time, formulated in their essential outlines in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Capra, (1988 p53)

In place of scientific I offer rigorous and therefore define research as the rigorous study to endeavour to discover, through a careful search or inquiry.

Gestalt Therapy Research Paradigm

The two main research paradigms in use for research are the quantitative and the qualitative models. As well as the appropriateness of fit for the research in question there are philosophical and ethical issues to be met in the conducting of research in Gestalt therapy.

Quantitative Research

The nature of quantitative research provides for;

- An objective approach shunning any influence of the researcher

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- Large scale studies suited to classification of data and statistical analysis
- Empirically driven relying on experimentation and observation

However, fundamental to all this is the reductionism approach of breaking down the organism to its constituent parts, like dismantling the clock or the computer.

In response to this reductionist framework an alternative has grown and developed over the last one hundred years; the qualitative research framework.

Qualitative Research

This research has its roots in early twentieth century psychoanalytical developments of psychology and psychotherapy.

Denizen and Lincoln (cited by McLeod, 2001, p7) show five stages of evolution for qualitative research and this demonstrates its relative youth compared to the grandfather of quantitative research

- Stage 1: began in the early 1900s
- Stage 2: post war (1945) up to the 1970s
- Stage 3 to 5: from the 1970s to the present.

Clearly the development of qualitative enquiry is in its childhood with a growth spurt in these last thirty years. There has been four hundred years of development of quantitative enquiry in the natural sciences. I believe there is great potential to learn from this, and great hope for the future of qualitative enquiry to spark further knowledge and understanding at a more holistic level, and this is a position promoted by Capra,(1988) a holistic paradigm of science and spirit.

Qualitative research acknowledges the philosophical point that there are many ways of knowing; that in the human sciences there are many alternative or complementary definitions or understandings of reality. McLeod, (2001. p7).

Qualitative research does not produce data for statistical analysis. In essence qualitative research provides the why result in the research. The research leads to a better understanding of people and their behaviour within their environment.

In essence the qualitative research framework is better suited when

- The research project is small-scale, not representative of the population at large
- In-depth questioning is wanted, making use of open ended questioning techniques
- Research is wanted to be intensive and flexible, allowing the researcher and participant to investigate around the subject, and influence the outcome of the research.



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- The results provide much more detail on behaviour, attitudes and motivation
- The analysis of the results is recognised as more subjective.
- There is less criticality for replication.

So, today, there are two major frameworks for research - quantitative and qualitative each with its own purpose, and with qualitative being born out of the need for knowledge of the living organism in a holistic paradigm.

The research methodology is required to fit both the nature of the research and also the philosophical framework.

How, in consideration of the holistic nature of the approach of Gestalt, is research to be conducted?

Within the qualitative paradigm Brown, (1997) identifies four major areas where common ground exists with Gestalt practice.

1. **Awareness** - The researchers awareness of self, other and field is essential to reveal what is actually going on as we collect data.
2. **Availability** Being present; the researchers ability to be immediate and in contact with the interviewee/ client participant in the here-and-now. The I-Thou, dialogic relationship, rather than the I-it.
3. **Ability to use self as instrument**; to be in touch with own affective response; to use all our senses; to be alive to the obvious to reverberate to what happens in this interaction so that it becomes part of the dynamic... (Polster & Polster, 1973).
4. **Process orientation** A process is a succession of events that one experiences, responds to and helps create. (Brown, 1997, p 80). Both Qualitative Researchers and Gestalt Therapists need to follow the tide as it flows [and] maintain a flexible, exploratory attitude (ibid.). The researcher/therapist forgoes attempts to control the direction of the course of a therapeutic experience or a qualitative study and lays aside a desired outcome. (ibid, p 81)

There is a clear correlation from this common ground for the use of qualitative methods of research with Gestalt therapy. However this does not exclude, nor invalidate, the use of quantitative techniques.

In respect of my daily life, my work and my leisure, research provides the opportunity to learn the effectiveness and value of what I do; the gaining of knowledge to enhance my life, to offer opportunities that without inquiry might not show to me.

So, whilst working on Nottingham I find it useful to inquire and enhance my knowledge on the bus timetables for my journeys. Initially I am gathering quantitative data, in the published bus timetables and then also I gather further quantitative data from noting the actual frequency of the bus.

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My experience of following the given timetable, waiting for the bus at differing times I am engaged in gaining knowledge to how I am, how those around me are, in the actual experience of waiting and travelling on the bus. This is a qualitative inquiry in respect of my world of local travel. I gain a better understand of how my world is constructed.

Also, I am reminded how such a situation currently exists in our secondary education system.

Students receive both a written statement and examination results within the same report. In my time as a secondary school teacher I have seen and experienced both the appropriateness and anomalousness of these two measures. I recognise, however, that each the measuring is of aspects of the same student.

As with the student and with my travel I am able to make use of both quantitative and qualitative data to know more about my own world reality

Mason, (1993) cites Silvermann(1983) that these measures should be used as displays of reality; and further cites Filstead(1979) perhaps the bottom line in the integration is that the qualitative method provides the context of meaning in which the quantitative findings can be understood

What Is The Purpose Of Research?

McLeod (2001, p2) gives the purpose of research as to enhance knowledge, to enable us to know more Well, there may actually be other reasons, like, to gain academic qualification or/and prestige.

For example, SPTI has a resource room with shelves of research dissertations at Masters level. This represents a valuable store of knowledge available to all students and yet the, at least 5 years, of knowledge lacks even an index for students to refer to.

In this, I would suggest, the research is driven primarily by the need to fulfil academic requirements. In saying this I do not intend any diminishing of the knowledge there-in more I seek to note figural cause for conducting research.

Dissertations aside, though, as already stated, research is part of our everyday experiencing.

The purpose of research is to inform and through this provide the opportunity, through awareness, to change and to enhance our world.

With, and from, the therapeutic relationship research provides for the therapist to consider the work in relationship to the theory and orientation of the therapeutic model; for myself this is Gestalt theory.

Only by attending to the therapeutic model will the therapist be able to consider fully, and authentically, the value and purpose of the work with the client; the direction and pacing possibilities for the client; and the attention of the therapist to owning what is theirs in the work relationship.



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In addition, there is an obligation, I believe, for us to be sharing how we work. Only in the sharing of our knowledge, our experiences, our dilemmas may we enhance our understanding of the possibilities in relationships with clients; and the ways in which we may meet our clients, and our self, in the therapeutic alliance.

Our primary data come from the ongoing contact and awareness work in psychotherapy. Yontef, (1993, p4)

How we might achieve this requires, I believe, attention to two critical points. These are the attending and adhering to our philosophical stance as therapist, and the ethical considerations for both our clients and our self

In these respects I am bound (I bind myself) into approaching research in the context of being a Gestalt therapist, and the ethical considerations that flow from this.

Importance of Research

Within the framework of Gestalt therapy and within the context of those who practice research is an ongoing activity within the client-therapist domain. By its nature of inquiry research is conducted.

However this will not suffice in the context of the profession in relation to the wider professional community.

Gestalt therapy is freedom to do therapy with spontaneity, liveliness and creativity. But it also entails responsibility to name what you are doing and share it so the effects can be studied Responsibility to improve therapy Yontef, (1993, p20)

The importance of research is to better inform our practice of gestalt therapy. I believe also we have an obligation to our profession to show what we do has substance, value and worth.

Yet, the current climate in the UK seems not conducive to the promotion of research. The British Gestalt Journal is published with a stated aim for promoting research and yet suggests, through its editorial, that promotion of research and importantly the findings of research and its value to practice is not easy.

We have already published an exchange of correspondence - sadly on the meagre side compared to the Big Debate we intended to foment - Parlett, (2002)

Meanwhile there is increasing pressure to show therapy works; that therapies show evidence of effect. Believing what we do works and is effective is not sufficient to justify continuing our clinical model.

Additionally in working as Gestalt therapists there is a need to recognise and maintain awareness of the Gestalt philosophy and be clear that our work, our clinical interventions are justifiable and appropriate.

Yet how might this be achieved?

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How might we gain clarity of our practice?

How might we confirm our model of operation?

The answer is through research. Research in its fullest context of enquiry; through reflective practice; through appropriate supervision; and through ongoing professional development.

So, research may be process orientated or outcome orientated.

Process orientated research might enable the theory of Gestalt to be

- More fully validated and supported
- Enhanced by blending techniques
- Expanded through experimentation.

After all, as a theory, the process is able to both qualify and question

Outcome orientated research might enable practitioners of Gestalt to

- Appreciate areas of effectiveness
- Understand limitations of approach
- Validate working practice

Yet there are obstacles that may often not be totally overcome. I wonder whether a measure of human growth through therapy is at all practicable. Like the Holy Grail and Alchemy I believe the quantifying of where a person is and where a person moves to in their own human growth will never be fully possible. The categorisation of DSMIV and ICT10, for example, merely describe jigsaw pieces of the human spirit.

The Question of Ethics

The relationship model of Gestalt therapy provides for the client to receive trust and positive regard, without the therapists interpretation, will, or desire impacting the client.

How, then, once there is an objective of research, does the therapist reconcile self interest with that of the client?

The SPTI handbook, Evans (2003) details the ethical code for therapists and additionally provides a clear framework of ethical guidelines for conducting research.

However, whilst clearly establishing what needs to be achieved in research work with clients there is nothing to provide for how this might be achieved. So is as much as having the parts of a car and being expected to drive it away. There is a need to construct the framework for operating the research.



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In all research the most important requirement is the consent of the participants. More than consent though, this is required to be informed consent.

Informed Consent

The difficulty is to ensure that not only is consent freely given but also that such consent is given from an informed perspective. I am reminded of the numerous films that have the character selling their soul to the devil and not realising the implications until it is too late! Consent given, yet not fully informed!

Clients involved in research need to be aware, and supported, to the possibility of reopening past work. This is a serious matter that needs to err on the side of caution when discussed.

Summary

Research is required to follow the epistemology of Gestalt and fundamentally requires recognition of its holistic approach.

In terms of research being an inquiry I have taken research to mean a rigorous and careful study or search.

There is purpose in this inquiry at several levels and whilst an academic qualification might appear at eye level there is much more worth in taking our inquiries to levels of better understanding of what we each might do in our practice of therapy. Further, we may take our inquiries to a level of sharing and co-operative exchange. Through this we establish a better working model of our discipline and engender a value, both personal and commercial to our profession.

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