

Abstract:

Gestalt therapy is described as existential, yet I realised that towards the end of my training I was not able to explain clearly the influence of existentialism on Gestalt. The early texts make very few references to existentialism, or to well known existentialists. This prompted my interest in researching in what way Gestalt therapy is existential from the point of view of theory, and in terms of practice, and whether either of these has changed over time. I examined the Gestalt literature for the main existential themes and then interviewed three experienced Gestalt therapists to talk about how existentialism has influenced their practice. The information from the interviews was then grouped into themes and compared with the theoretical literature. I found that the influence of existentialism on Gestalt therapy is pervasive and infuses every aspect of both theory and practice. The key ideas adopted from existentialism appear to be the focus on direct experience, the theory of the self as a process experienced only in contact with the environment and the importance of relationship to the therapeutic process. These ideas are so axiomatic to Gestalt that they are rarely even credited to existential thought yet clearly the legacy from existentialism is substantial.