

Exploring The Impact Of The Client's Trauma On The Gestalt

Trainee Therapist:

A Phenomenological Exploration

Abstract

The study explored the experience of trainee Gestalt therapists who work with clients who have experienced trauma. The aim was to determine the extent to which therapists experience Vicarious Traumatization (VT), the impact of working with trauma clients, and the coping strategies used to deal with this. There is growing literature on the effects of VT on therapists and others who work with survivors of all types of trauma (Figley, 1995; McCann & Pearlman, 1990a; Pearlman & MacJan, 1995; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995a; Saakvitne, 1995). Working with clients who have experienced trauma may evoke certain feelings or responses in the therapist (Danieli, 1980). Foder (2001) states that 'While many of us in the Gestalt field work with trauma, we do not have a Gestalt literature on trauma work as such' (p.85). Yontef (1993) points out that the main aim of Gestalt therapy is awareness and therefore as therapist we need to be aware of the impact the client may have on our emotional and psychological well being. Therapists who work with traumatised people require an ongoing support; just as no survivor can recover alone, no therapist can work with trauma alone (Herman, 1997). The risk of VT on therapists cannot, and should not, be underestimated. As therapists we "hold" and "contain" our clients as they revisit their traumatic experience. The lack of insight by Gestalt trainee therapists into this phenomenon may have a huge impact on their own emotional and psychological health. A phenomenological methodology was used to explore the experiences and coping strategies of six Gestalt trainee therapists

and their work with trauma clients. Data was analysed with the aid of NUD*IST software computer package. The following themes have emerged: impact of working with clients on the trainee, motivation to work as a therapist, supervision, training and trainees coping strategies. It also revealed that all too often the cost of working with clients can be traumatic. The results have highlighted the importance of further exploring the impact on the therapist. The lack of insight into this phenomenon by Gestalt trainee therapist may have a huge impact on their emotional and psychological health.

Personal statement

My motivation for undertaking this piece of research was born out my curiosity as to the impact of working with clients. The professional and personal converged when I started to question the impact on me as an individual working with clients who had a similar history to my own. I started to question to what extent the client's story and at times their re-enactment of their traumatic experience was affecting me, out of my awareness. Was I out of awareness reverting to a creative adjustment in order to work with the client's trauma? What was the impact in working with clients with similar trauma? What strategies, aware or otherwise, do I use in working with the client's trauma? How best can I safeguard my own well being in doing this work? Where, if at all, had my training support me in this regard? Many questions to be answered, some remain unanswered, some now sit on the edge of my awareness.

I was conscious of the lack of literature on trauma and Gestalt and wanted to investigate this in depth. I was particularly interested in my embodied experience of trauma both when working with clients and when working through my own trauma. My interest in

VT grew out of my clinical experience of actually feeling traumatised and not knowing what that was about for me. My desire to understand what happened unconsciously to me led me to explore this process. I now recognise that my desire to meet my client in a dialogic and inclusive way had impacted more than I realised at the time.

In undertaking this research I wanted to get a greater understanding of my own process and other trainees subjective experience of working with clients and their trauma. It is my intention through my research to raise other therapist's awareness and encourage discussion, debate and further research in Gestalt psychotherapy.

The Outline of the study

Because of the relative absence of detailed empirical research on VT and trainee therapists the choice of methodology for this study was phenomenology. Many of the studies reviewed utilised quantitative approaches. I wanted to explore trainee's subjective experience of working with clients. Before proceeding it may be appropriate to reiterate the primary objectives of the study. They are:

- To explore the impact of working with clients who have a trauma history on the trainee therapist.
- To explore the impact of the trainees own trauma history and its impact on working with clients.
- To identify coping strategies.

In order to fulfil these objectives Chapter 1 will provide a general introduction to the work; Chapter 2 will explore the literature related to trauma, vicarious trauma and trauma from a Gestalt perspective.

A high percentage of the research review was taken from the USA, this concept is in its infancy in Europe and requires further investigation.

A detailed discussion of the methodology, ethical consideration and limitations appears in Chapter 3. The importance of exploring VT is endorsed by the data presented in Chapter 4, which draws attention to a number of significant themes that emerged from the research. In Chapter 5 I will also explore the impact of undertaking this research. I will discuss the wider implications and relate to this in Chapter 6. The analysis of this study demonstrates that many of the trainees did experience VT. I will conclude in chapter six with my recommendations based upon the findings of the research.