

Gianni Francesetti (Ed.)

Panic Attacks and Postmodernity

Gestalt Therapy Between
Clinical and Social Perspectives

Preface by Dan Bloom

*With the collaboration of
M. Spagnuolo Lobb and G. Salonia*

Istituto di Gestalt H.C.C. Italy

FrancoAngeli

PSYCHOTHERAPIES



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First Italian edition:
Attacchi di panico e postmodernità.
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G. Francesetti (a cura di)
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*On the cover: from Vincent Van Gogh, *Starry Night**

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To Luisa

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Preface to the English Edition

by Dan Bloom

The United States is at least a nation of immigrants, their children and grandchildren. This was true for the ethnically mixed neighborhood of New York City where I grew up. It was a common occurrence on special days for unfamiliar cars to drive up in front of one of my friend's houses and for people to gather, embrace, and greet one another with the sounds of what were to me foreign languages. More often than not, I, a stranger, would be caught up in the whirlwind of family love, embraced and kissed while Italian endearments were murmured in my ear.

These memories came to mind as I read this volume. Page after page, I found myself reading familiar material, family material as it were, written by my European relatives. This analogy is apt. Gestalt therapy was originated by European émigrés, who brought it with them to the United States, codeveloped with the American Paul Goodman, and, after some time budding further in America's cultural soil, was returned to Europe through, among others, the teachings of Laura Perls, Isadore From, and Richard Kitzler, three of my own principal teachers. The authors of the essays in this book, then, are in my gestalt therapy family, brothers, sisters, and cousins. They are taking the model of gestalt therapy of The New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy, founded in 1952 by the Perls's and others, and are applying and developing it, within their own cultural context, and by so doing, shining a clarifying light on it. As I read the essays, I see what elsewhere I have called "the foundational model" (Bloom, 2004) in all its glory, but I also see the richness of their European perspective, their direct application of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. The stream of gestalt therapy inevitably acquires the character of the land through which it flows.

But more than merely being a fine book of basic gestalt therapy, this volume is itself an important original contribution to our literature. It is a phenomenological and clinical discussion of a specific disorder we find in our psychotherapy practices. Gestalt therapy traditionally excels as an experiential practice; but the literature in gestalt therapy has been deficient in serious scientific research and clinical case material. This book from the Italian branch of our gestalt therapy family is a continuation of the foundational model and, moreover, fills a deficiency in gestalt therapy literature.

Despite the claim of some that gestalt therapy is a system built upon intuitive understanding rather than theory, gestalt therapy is in fact a psychotherapeutic modality with a unity of theory and praxis, an approach to clinical work that attends to the passage of experience itself as a function of the phenomenal field of the therapist and patient. In foundational gestalt therapy, there is no separate theory from practice, and no separate practice from theory. We hold, paraphrasing Immanuel Kant, that practice without theory is empty, and theory without practice is blind. Gestalt therapy is built upon the foundation of the arts and sciences, that is, all the achievements of our culture. Our work as gestalt therapists is that of our *intuitions informed by our knowledge*, integrated and integrating one with the other in a whole process as we continue to develop our art, our science (Bloom, 2004). Our art and science will develop further as we engage with one another in meaningful dialogues about our work, utilizing the concepts of our theory together with the experience of our clinical practices. This book is such a meaningful dialogue in this development.

Yet, to have a meaningful dialogue, we must use a common vocabulary. The original texts of gestalt therapy began to create the language for our method. First, in *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression* (F. Perls, 1942/1947), Frederick Perls (with Laura Perls) first outlined his radical departure from classical psychoanalysis which would later be called “gestalt therapy,” and presented such notions as dental aggression, creative indifference, and mental metabolism. It was with the 1951 publication of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* written by Frederick Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, that gestalt therapy was presented as a new modality with complex terms sufficient to describe human experience. The model of gestalt therapy presented in Perls et al. is the foundation upon which the authors of this book practice their art.

The authors develop *contact*, *contact-boundary*, the *sequence of contact*, the critical role of *support for contact making*, the *interruptions to contact*, *self functions and structures*, *creative-adjustment*, and the *relationship of therapist to patient*, and show these concepts deployed in the successful

treatment of panic disorders. These are the central ideas of Frederick and Laura Perls (L. Perls, 1992), Paul Goodman, and Isadore From, which were transplanted to Italian soil. The terms found in the glossary to this book itself are words first defined in Perls et al., and are continuing to be refined and developed in the worldwide practice of gestalt therapy. Look closely at this glossary: The definitions are not mere repetitions from Perls et al. or any subsequent source, but a careful synthesis of those sources with this book's authors own research. In this unity of theory and practice, the contributors bring new understanding to basic themes of gestalt therapy.

One of the threads connecting the various essays is how the nature of our concerns as psychotherapists changes over time. What were significant clinical concerns at the time of gestalt therapy's emergence in the 1950s were no longer crucial in the 1970s, and similarly, the concerns of society in the 1990s could no longer be central in this new century. Consequently, how therapists respond to these concerns must likewise change. This is the hermeneutics of gestalt therapy, our understanding that meaning is inevitably changing and always co-created by therapist and patient as partners in the ongoing creative-adjusting in our clinical work. The authors ask us, then, to consider panic disorder to be the disorder of our time.

The temporal and cultural contingency of meaning is at the heart of gestalt therapy. The narratives and metanarratives which inform our work have long been our concern. The authors of this publication take this from gestalt therapy and link it explicitly to postmodern ideas. Drawing on sociology, psychology, and philosophy, the authors show the relevance of gestalt therapy to other contemporary approaches that consider panic disorders from a broad cultural perspective. By doing so, they firmly establish gestalt therapy as a continually developing psychotherapy, not as an artifact of any time or fashion. Moreover, they do this while using the concepts of the foundational model itself, clearly and succinctly applied to the clinical situations of their research. It is gratifying to read how clearly the phenomenon of panic can be understood when viewed through the lens of gestalt therapy.

Importantly, this volume is not restricted to the clinician's perspective. In keeping with gestalt therapy's attention to experience as emergent of the social field, and that psychotherapy itself as a phenomenon of the contact-boundary *par excellence*, this work includes a chapter written from the perspective of an actual patient. This is both a dramatic entry into the world of someone suffering from panic disorder and a direct example of the phenomenological research method of the authors.

It has been a privilege for me to write an introduction to this book. I ex-

pect it will produce in you the same desire for the translation into English of more writings from this community of Italian foundational gestalt therapists as it does in me, a member of their English-speaking family.

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Preface to the Italian Edition

by Eugenio Borgna

With the large number of books being published on the topic of anxiety from many different perspectives, this volume, superbly edited by Gianni Francesetti, stands out for its methodological and epistemological approaches that distinguish it in its originality and authoritativeness.

In particular, focusing on aspects of rigor and critical awareness, I would like to stress the distinct clarity that characterizes the discussion of anxiety and anxiety so heightened as to become panic. This discussion is presented here in all its historical, psychopathological, and psychotherapeutic dimensions within the context of such a great school of thought as Gestalt psychotherapy. (We should note that panic attacks, although only now concisely defined in clinical terms as such, are nonetheless manifestations of a psychopathological and human condition already known by the great clinical psychiatrists of the 19th and 20th centuries.) This thematic and expressive clarity, free of ideological bias, is evident in each of the contributions to the volume: starting with the emblematic title that draws us into a network of inexorable correlations between individual psychic experience, such as anxiety, and models of social life, characterized as they are by a tendency towards fragmentation.

The expressive clarity is all the more to be admired considering that the discussion of anxiety and panic attacks addresses not only psychopathological and clinical aspects but also existential and philosophical issues. These are approached with an acute awareness of the intrinsic problematics that characterize philosophical and metapsychological theories. At the same time this clarity characterizes the discourse structures that lie at the very foundation of Gestalt psychotherapy—structures indicated and made explicit through their epistemological background and in their various dialectic-

tical and semantic connotations. (The very useful glossary provided enables the essential thematic elements of Gestalt psychotherapy to be learned and relearned in all their endless correlations between the I and the Other, that is, between the I and the World. This occurs in the wake, of course, of an epistemological revolution of a radical phenomenological matrix that, in the schematic though emblematic Heideggerian affirmation, identifies being-in-the-world—*In-der-Welt-Sein*—as the fundamental basis of the human condition.) In this approach to therapy and critical reflection, which unfolds through rigor and discursive cogency, the extensive bibliography is never an external ancillary. The references are critically drawn upon and brought to converge into the overall unifying horizons of each and every contribution to therapeutic strategies marked out in the book.

A second important aspect of this volume is the wealth of cases illustrated in their psycho(patho)logical and human dimensions, which strike a chord through their emotional immediacy and direct emotional expression, through the lived experiences represented. The cases offer not just reflections on the outcomes of therapy, but also the very words and emotions of patients, of men and women who tell of their anguish and their unease, and the changes they go through over the course of therapy. In this way, we are confronted with the throbbing reality of anxiety, which rises and falls at distressing rates, and which is crystallized into what we call panic attacks.

Putting aside symptomatological reductionism, the experience of anxiety as lived by men and women is described with all its radically phenomenological and anthropological connotations. That is, in its simple human dimension and in the hermeneutical foundations which these states of being conceal within themselves, and in their interpersonal and environmental echoes. After all, it is only in this way that we can gather the sense of psychopathological phenomena (and of anxiety and panic in particular) and interpret such phenomena from a theoretical but above all therapeutic perspective—a psychotherapeutic perspective.

Through the Gestalt interpretation of panic attacks, which is another emblematic aspect of the discussion unfolding through the contributions to the volume, beyond the intrinsic and distinctive models specific to Gestalt psychotherapy, meaning structures can be identified. The psychological and human dimensions of these meaning structures, when inserted into a clinical context (note that my own training is clinical), can be expanded and radically explored. This would seem to me to be one of the most exciting insights that emerge from this book. Bringing at least some fragments of

Gestalt psychotherapy into everyday psychopathological and clinical discourse, together, of course, with Jungian and Freudian elements, means truly extending the epistemic and therapeutic value of rigorous theoretical approaches, with the involvement of all those interested in reintroducing into psychiatry and psychology the *meaning* that lies hidden within behavior and exteriority, in the sense introduced by Emmanuel Lévinas.

I believe this is important, as it would seem to me that the theoretical boundaries of Gestalt psychotherapy, as with phenomenology per se, are much more open than other schools of thought to the perception and appreciation of the categories of the sayable and the unsayable, as understood by Edmund Husserl.

At any rate, moving beyond clinical and nosological categorizations, which are themselves elusive if not perhaps quite useless, the heart of panic attacks lies in the lacerating and distressing wound torn open by anxiety, a dizzyingly Kierkegaardian expression of freedom. And it is precisely this existential and phenomenological dimension that cannot but lead us to reflect upon the profound eidetic core of all illnesses and break free of the unsustainable dichotomy of illness and nonillness. This dimension allows us to appreciate, rather, the transitions and shifts which lie at the heart of the models and meaning horizons of Gestalt psychotherapy, as so rigorously illustrated in this volume and outlined with great originality, not only in its reality, but also in its theoretical and practical perspectives.

Anxiety is understood as the expression of a radical crisis of the world and society in which each and every one of us is necessarily immersed. Anxiety is understood as the reflection of the shattering—or at least the fragmentation—of society and interpersonal relationships, which are increasingly splintered and devoured by feverish individualism.

Even these quintessentially phenomenological aspects are present, albeit necessarily expressed in the language of Gestalt theory of forms—a language not unlike the language of phenomenology itself.

There is one last aspect I wish to underline. This regards the mutual relationship posited between psychotherapy and pharmaceutical treatments. I cannot but agree with the argument so clearly expressed in the book that there can be no effective pharmacological solution without psychotherapy. Pharmacological agency is always in some way influenced by the relational and, thus, psychotherapeutic context (be this understood either in a strict or in a general sense) existing between patient and therapist. Pharmaceutical therapy can treat intense symptoms (and thus is often essential), but it does not modify the psychological landscape within which anxiety has flared up

and spread. Notwithstanding this, even the temporary relief of symptoms immediately improves the chances for psychotherapeutic success.

In short, this is an immensely interesting book, not only from the point of view of doctrine (whereby the radical epistemic and methodological importance of Gestalt psychotherapy and of Gestalt theory is brought to light), but also from a clinical and therapeutic perspective. From the various contributions to the book emerge concrete models for the understanding of panic attacks and psychotherapeutic strategy, unfailingly anchored in the social context that necessarily affects therapy.

This book is of great interest and use for those interested in discovering, or exploring in further depth, what Gestalt psychotherapy is and what panic attacks are, both symptomatologically and phenomenologically (or eidetically) speaking. It further teaches us about the necessity to subjectively confront the boundless growth of anxiety, and to intuitively perceive the unsayable that lies concealed within all human experience torn apart by suffering and solitude. A book for all practitioners of psychotherapy and of psychiatry—which itself cannot survive without psychotherapy.

Acknowledgments for the Italian Edition

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Finally, I would like to thank my wife Luisa for her incessant encour-