

GESTALT THERAPY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAM 2022

For: Blagica Rizoska Vanikj

First Year Assignment

CONTACT BOUNDARY INTERRUPTIONS

Seda Usubütün

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CONTACT BOUNDARY INTERRUPTIONS

In this paper, contact boundary in Gestalt and its functions will be defined, followed by the summary of main interruptions to contact boundary functions, colored by A Gestalt therapist's symbolic drawings for training purposes and examples from real life situations.

The contact boundary

The contact boundary is where we meet and withdraw from our environment. As Polster and Polster (1973) states: "The contact boundary is the point at which one experiences the 'me' in relation to that which is not 'me' and through this contact, both are more clearly experienced."

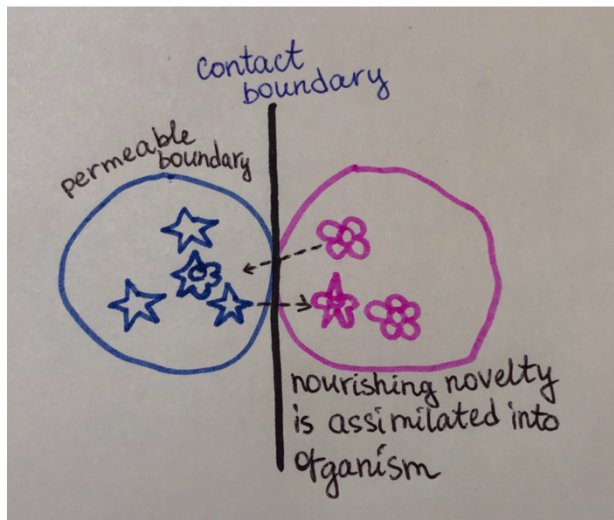
The boundary is not solid. Latner (1985) describes the fluidity of the contact boundary as an analogy of the shoreline's meeting of sand and sea: "We would not say that the shoreline belongs to the sand or the sea. It is brought into being by their meeting". In relations with the other (or the environment) we shift the boundary from being solid to semi-permeable and to permeable depending on how much we need to take in for nourishment and how much we need to keep distant for protection.

There are several functions of the contact boundary: a) Providing limits and containing; b) Permeability and flexibility in contact and; c) Differentiation and assimilation.

For healthy functioning, our contact boundaries need to be permeable enough to allow nourishment and intimacy in, and sufficiently impermeable to maintain autonomy and to resist what is toxic in the environment. Thus, healthy functioning is not defined by how permeable or impermeable our contact boundaries are in isolation, rather by our capacity to move along a permeable – impermeable continuum in relation to the present situation. At one end of this continuum is complete merging, what we refer to in gestalt as *confluence* and at the other extreme, *isolation* marked by an armouring against letting anything in.

As stated in Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (PHG, 1951): "Primarily, contact is the awareness of, and behavior toward, the assimilable novelties; and the rejection of the unassimilable novelty. What is pervasive, always the same, or indifferent, is not an object of contact."

As in the drawing of Svetlana Vasilyeva, one organism is composed of star shaped content, while looking for novelty from the outside. When comes in contact with the organism mainly composed of flower shaped content, it assimilates some of the flowers, not as they are but turning them into starry flowers, symbolising the adaptation function of the organism. It makes the introjected material its own by not just assimilating but also adopting to its needs. As PHG states, the novelty is assimilated and if the outside material is one of one's own material, there is no contact there.



Drawing by Svetlana Vasilyeva

The gestalt cycle of experience

Contact function in Gestalt is a process defined in detail by many scholars of Gestalt history. In *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* Fritz Perls (1947) proposed the concept of the cycle of interdependency of organism and environment in which he outlined a map of experience covering six phases in the process of the organism contacting the environment.

1. The organism is at rest
2. A disturbing factor that may be internal or external comes into awareness (such as a noise from the neighbors)
3. An image or reality is created (they might be arguing on some relational issue)
4. The answer to the situation is aimed for (not to interfere may be an option but the noise is too high, so better knock the door?)
5. There is a decrease in tension as achievement of gratification or compliance with the demands result in . . . (the action is taken, the complaint is transmitted and the neighbors apologized, resulted in silence)
6. The organism returning to balance (no noise and back to the resting position)

After Perls, other scholars also worked on the life cycle of contact process. Two major contributions referred to widely are the Awareness–Excitement–Contact Cycle (Zinker, 1977) and The Cycle of Gestalt Formation and Destruction (Clarkson, 1989).

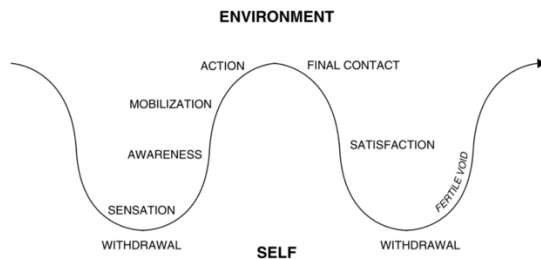


Figure 1.4 Zinker's Awareness-Excitement-Contact Cycle

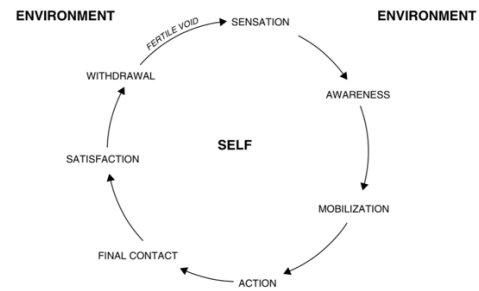


Figure 1.5 Clarkson's Cycle of Gestalt Formation and Destruction

Resistances, interruptions, moderations to contact

Different ways of diminishing or adjusting contact with our environment have been identified by Perls (1947) and PHG (1951) and expanded upon by, amongst others, Polster and Polster (1973), Zinker (1977) and Clarkson (1989). Originally described as resistances by Perls and PHG, these processes, which occur at the contact boundary, have subsequently journeyed through many different collective terms including: resistances, moderations, modifications, interruptions and disturbances.

The interruptions that will be covered in this paper are: Deflection, Introjection, Projection, Retroflection, Confluence, Egotism and Desensitization.

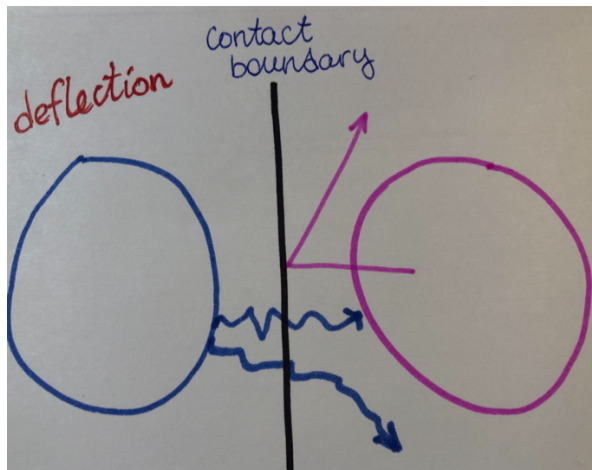
Deflection

This process describes sidestepping or turning away from direct contact.

Deflection will often present in language; the use of 'we' rather than 'I' statements, the use of generalizations, stereotyped language, discussing the past when the present is of greater relevance, by diminishing the impact of what one has just said by dismissing it or laughing it off, by diluting emotional responses.

Deflective language will be accompanied by a bodily reaction to avoid full contact with the other – shallow breathing, lack of eye contact, distractive movements. Through deflection, expressions of love, care or criticism may be bounced back. Energy is invested in turning away from direct contact.

In drawings of Svetlana Vasilyeva, deflection occurs either by direct bouncing back, not letting the contact to happen, or it can be diminished by diluting or distorting it, where the contact happens but in an unauthentic way. I don't hear my spouse's criticism on whatever I'm doing and turn my back and leave the scene in direct avoidance. Or I may listen to him with distracted ears and answer to some other irrelevant issue by using my sarcasm and laughter.



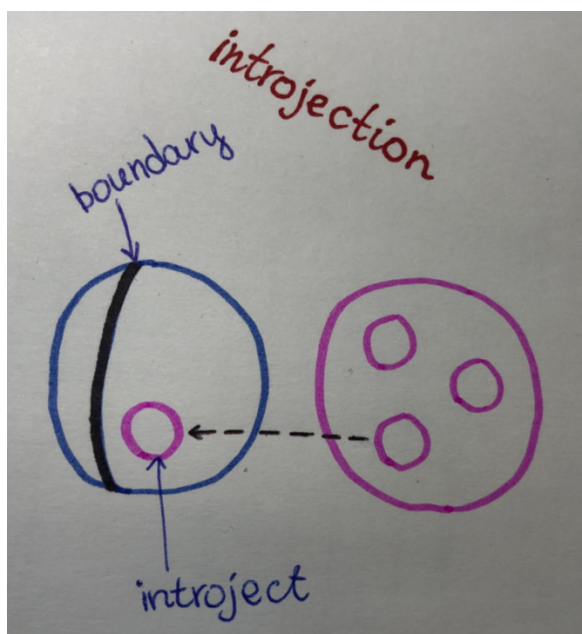
Drawing by Svetlana Vasilyeva

Introjection

The process of introjection can be described in simple terms as swallowing whole messages from the environment without chewing.

In introjection the person takes on board without question an attitude, trait or way of being from the environment resulting in the building of an internalized rulebook of shoulds, oughts and similar absolutes. The person responding to introjected material, usually out of awareness, will feel a strong pressure to conform to these internalized rules and is likely to feel uncomfortable if they go against them.

Originally that was a developmental strategy to ensure safety or acceptance and was the best way of creatively adjusting to the environment at the time. People who habitually introject lack a sense of self and consequently are often searching for how they 'should' be and what they 'ought' to be doing.



Drawing by Svetlana Vasilyeva

In drawings of Svetlana Vasilyeva, introjected material keeps its exact form after taken into the organism. Even the assimilation cannot pass through the inner boundary of the organism symbolising that the material is not adopted according to the real needs of the organism. It's swallowed without chewing. In that sense, although the organism aims to comply with this introject, it gives discomfort not to be able to comply as it's foreign to the organism. An example may be: even I'm so sick and in need of care from others, I believe that one must be able to look after him/herself no matter what, so I force myself (in vain) to get out of the bed and to prepare myself something to eat, although I can easily ask from my friend to get me some meal and take care of me until I gain enough power to stand on my own.

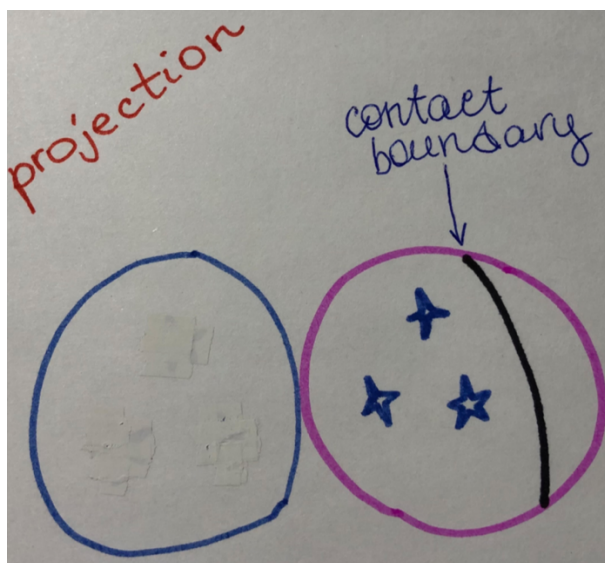
Projection

An attitude, trait or quality is assigned to another (individual, group or object) and in the process, is disowned by the projector. Projection is seeing in others what is present in myself.

Projection tends to occur when an aspect of the person does not fit with their self-concept. Projection is marked by distancing. This can occur in relation to our own bodies and is evident in the language used where the body is considered an object of experience and not part of the subject (Kepner, 1987).

Alternatively, one may attribute disowned shadow qualities - such as a capacity for hate, terror or evil - onto a group. That style of disowning leads to all forms of prejudice and racism.

Healthy: Because projection is an assumption about other's thinking, experience, possible choice of action, even emotion, it's also a tool for artistic creation.



Drawing by Svetlana Vasilyeva

In drawings of Svetlana Vasilyeva, a quality of mine is perceived as to be a quality of the other. This is mainly an assumption I prefer to make on behalf of the other's perception of me, as in saying he thinks I'm unworthy of having a relation with so he does not call me or

reach out for me. Most of the time there is no evidence at hand that proves he thinks that way. I'm not asking him what he thinks of me and I just assume that he does not like me. My own belief about my own unlikable qualities are projected to the other.

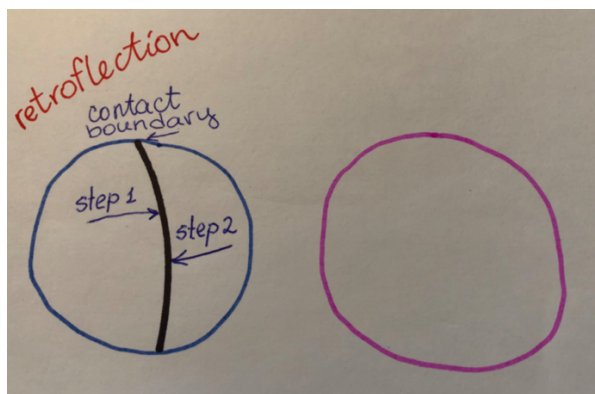
Retroflection

In retroflection the contact boundary increases in rigidity, protects oneself from the environment and holds one's body back from contact with the environment. Impulses are turned inwards towards the individual experiencing the reaction rather than being expressed. Contact with the present environment is resisted.

The person is doing everything for himself, by himself. Underneath retroflection - is introject

One form of retroflection is *turning an impulse back in upon myself*. The individual splits himself into the aspect who does and the aspect who is done unto. In doing so the individual substitutes himself for his environment. At one extreme, retroflection can lead to self harm, but equally, it can lead to self-motivation in positive ways – I push myself to go down to the gym or engage in positive self-talk to encourage myself.

There is a second kind of retroflection that is *doing to myself what I need from the environment*, sometimes called *profection* - the process of rocking oneself to sleep or self-soothing



Drawing by Svetlana Vasilyeva

In drawings of Svetlana Vasilyeva, the two steps of the retroflexion process is highlighted by making all the contact within the organism. The person does things to herself, creating the environment within herself. What is needed from the environment is fabricated by the self for the self. Healthy part of this process works on self compassion and self direction. Whereas, the turning inward of unexpressed emotions, especially the negative ones result in self harm, as in me being angry with myself for not being able to control the negative attitudes from the environment. How could I let that person steal my parking spot or my place on the line or my flowers at the backyard?

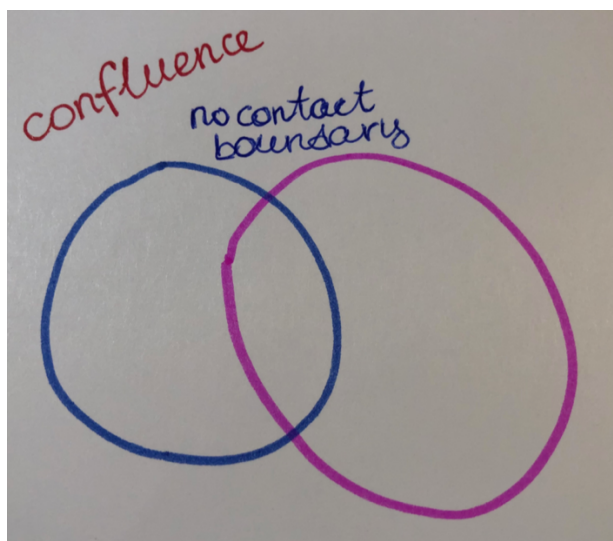
Confluence

A merging or dissolving of the contact boundary that leads to a lack of differentiation from

the other. The confluent person in 'going with the flow' may not end up where they truly would like to be, but they will expend very little energy in getting there.

As PHG (1951) states: "Without this sense of boundary - this sense of something other to be noticed, approached, manipulated, enjoyed – there can be no emergence or development of the figure/ground, hence no awareness, hence no excitement, hence no contact!"

A person who seeks a dysfunctional closeness in a relationship demonstrates an unwillingness to discover his or her own resources; A person who invests in confluence's polar opposite, isolation, demonstrates an unwillingness to engage in healthy dependence; A person who has the ability to flow with fluidity along a continuum between these polarities in relation to the changing situations they encounter demonstrates an ability to live healthily.



Drawing by Svetlana Vasilyeva

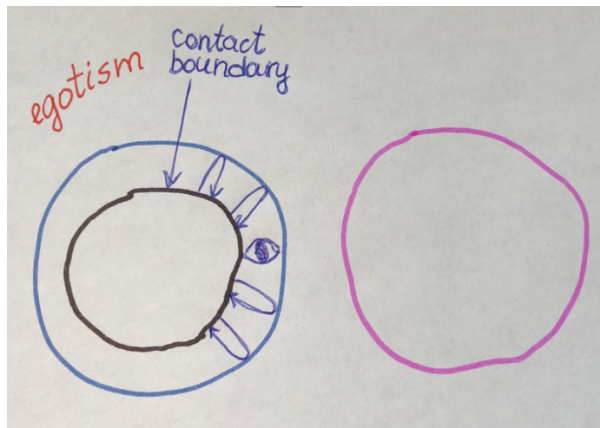
In drawings of Svetlana Vasilyeva, we can see no contact boundary when confluence happens. Person does not seek for novelty and nourishment but stays in her comfort zone where everything is familiar and nothing is unexpected. This form of merged relationships lacks the differentiation hence the separation capacity which is necessary for authentic union in relations. I never get in touch with what is unfamiliar to me and I give myself no chance for facing the novelty that may change my relationship with the environment.

Egotism

Egotism is a slowing down of spontaneity by further deliberate introspection and circumspection. I step outside myself and I watch myself. I am not fully in relation with the other, but am observing myself being in relation. The process of egotism blocks spontaneity through control, as one *appears to be* in relation rather than *is* in relation.

Can be a useful process when there is a need to assess one's ability, for example when learning a new skill such as working as a therapist or driving. Congratulating or constructively criticizing ourselves, this can be relationally constructive or destructive depending upon the

situation. Nothing new, unpredictable or dangerous can happen and the person “is safe” and “in control”



Drawing by Svetlana Vasilyeva

Through the drawing, we can see that the other organism is not in the Picture. Everything happens within the one organism, all by himself, for himself, upon himself. There is an inner environment constructed by the self for serving self needs to be observed and directed by the self. No real contact with the environment but imaginary.

Desensitization

The person numbs himself as in the acute phase of a grief reaction. Deadening of our emotional selves. We act on ‘auto-pilot’. The psychological detachment from physical pain; Someone who employs a creative adjustment to survive abuse. A degree of desensitization will be present in any addictive behaviour whether this is compulsive eating, sexual addiction or substance abuse

Response Range in Terms Of Interruptions

The following model based on the work of MacKewn (1997) better illustrates the need to develop a range of responses. The whole situation at the time will dictate where on the following continuums is healthy or unhealthy, safe or unsafe. The terms on the left and right of each continuum represent the polarities of that particular dimension of being; the term in the centre represents a marker for the middle ground.

| | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Desensitization | Sensitivity | Allergic Reaction /Hyper-sensitivity |
| Deflection | Staying with | Being Mesmerized |
| Introjection | Questioning, assimilating | Refusal to Accommodate |
| Retroflection | Expression | Unbridled Expression /Explosion |
| Projection | Owning | Own Everything /Literalness |
| Confluence | Differentiation | Isolation |
| Egotism | Spontaneity | Lack of all field constraints |

The model shows the spectrum of possible positionings while adjusting contact boundary functions by using interruptions to some degree depending on the conditions. For all the interruptions, there is the polar opposite positioning which can be comprehended easily as they exist together in all organisms. As far as one can desensitize oneself emotionally from an experience can also find himself hypersensitized to the same experience. An avoidance can turn into a phobic attitude or vice versa.

And the middle points of the spectrum always shows what the specific interruption is really about in terms of Gestalt principles. While egotism is about spontaneity and control, confluence is about the degree of differentiation. Projection is about the degree of owning one's experiences, whereas, retroflexion is about the degree of self expression. Deflection is about staying with the experience (here and now) and introjection is about questioning the experience before (and after) the assimilation. Thus, the awareness about the when, how, how much, whose, how come of our day to day, moment to moment experiences leads us the way for authentic contact in our relationships with the environment.

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