

# GESTALT JOURNAL

of Australia & New Zealand



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This Journal, which is owned and supported by GANZ (Gestalt Australia and New Zealand, Inc), an association of Gestalt practitioners, presents the written exploration of Gestalt concepts within psychotherapy practice, training and supervision. It publishes articles, book reviews and case studies that focus on the discussion of current practices, research, organisational development and dynamics, community development, social and political domains and everyday life. The Journal offers an opportunity to writers to express their passion for and understanding of the Gestalt paradigm. The Journal also invites writing that explores (or even challenges) the use of Gestalt principles within other theories and disciplines. Through theoretical, methodological, practical and experiential approaches, with the rigour of a professional peer reviewed publication, the Journal encourages and fosters the growth and creativity of writers and provides a resource for anyone interested in discovering more about themselves and others through this rich perspective.

## **Publication**

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## **Contributions**

We welcome articles, case studies, literature reviews, critiques of theory and methodology, research, senior Gestalt trainee's projects and assignments. All contributions will be peer reviewed twice and will reflect or add to an understanding of Gestalt theory and methodology or practice. *Guidelines for Contributors* can be found in the back pages of the Journal. Further enquiries may be made directly to the Editors. The views and comments expressed by the writers in this journal are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Editors, the Editorial Board or the GANZ council, nor is responsibility taken for the accuracy of statements made by contributors.

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# EDITORIAL: CATALYSTS FOR TRANSFORMATION.

Alan Meara

This belated issue features several articles that resonate in different ways with theme for the GANZ community gathering/hui in May 2019. An update on the progress of gathering planning is located in the concluding pages (Note: Hui is a Māori term for gathering, with other nuances). It could be argued that Gestalt practice is a transformational process, and the gathering seeks to explore potential supportive catalysts through collaborative conversations and activities that may lead to actions in the wider field.

Dialogue is of course a candidate and Miriam Taylor, who will be visiting Australia and New Zealand early next year, shares some of her history and interests with Paddy O'Regan, who also has a background in trauma work and as an educator. Transformation processes are addressed in this free ranging conversation, not only in clinical practice and related theories but also in the development process of practitioners. Several examples are described of the intentions and outcomes from active collaborative workshop and writing engagements within the Gestalt community around the world – not necessarily limited to the Gestalt modality. Miriam notes the value of incorporating considerations of the natural environment at various levels of personal and professional activities, including self-support.

Mark Fairfield's paper while somewhat grounded in American socio-political issues, which are not entirely without interest to the rest of the world, explores how concepts such as leveraging diversity and radical inclusion may lead to transformative community action. In doing so, he first delves into neuroscience and then related evolutionary and sociological perspectives (such as kin), proposing that we are wired for social interaction and collaborative socially coordinated actions rather than competitive isolationism. While not necessarily agreeing with some of the more anthropocentric sources he quotes, that only humans can do this, and it's not my place to comment too much here, I think these ideas seem limiting in terms of a broader ecological perspective, where the key for any sustainable socio-ecosystem is the interaction of many non-human species and inanimate resources.

In any case, his article is a deep and thought provoking examination of how contemporary problematic social issues could be approached through extending the notion of kin and the need for acceptance of diversity across multiple platforms. He illustrates his proposals by descriptions of the approach and practices of the Relational Movement, such as sharing stories of connection, and an extended example of a discussion by a group identified as ‘coalition of resistance’. While the latter addresses American experiences, the principles could easily apply to discussions in either Australia or New Zealand on contemporary issues of inequality in our countries.

Marie-Anne Chidiac, Sally Denham-Vaughan and Lynda Osborne combine to present a model of supervision, in diverse situations from clinical to coaching and organisational that is foundationally built on the concept of ‘relational’. They explore various notions of what this means relative to particular contexts, and building on earlier works propose a comprehensive and useful nine celled matrix. The matrix considers the client, supervisee, and supervisor in one dimension, and self, other (in relation) and situation in an orthogonal direction. Supervision can also be considered a transformational process, and in this case the relational processes in each cell as catalysts. They provide examples of interactions in each of these cells, and cover several issues such as ethics, personal disclosures, transferences, and parallel process. While a supervisor needs the ability to move across the cells, a certain set of cells: a certain set of cells is deemed to be where the figural work of relational supervision occurs, is deemed to be where the figural work of supervision occurs, but note that awareness of the remainder as the ground or context within which the supervision process is enacted is also needed.

Anthony Jones presents a journey in what could be called practice based evidence research on exploring ways that might facilitate a client’s answering of the question: *How would you describe the way you are in relationships?* He includes how to describe the therapeutic relationship in his deliberations as well. Acknowledging limitations of language and underlying issues around the term ‘diagnosis’, he outlines a thoughtful and creative program of experimenting with a particular client over time with frameworks derived from a variety of sources including psychological testing; attachment theory; character styles theory; core conflict relational themes theory; and countertransference material. Importantly he reports on the collaborative process in the engagement with the client and how the value, or not, of each approach was experienced by both. One significant catalyst seemed to be therapist self-disclosure.

Thanks to Leanne O’Shea for facilitating the sourcing of some of the contributions. While overseas authors provide a ‘window to the wider world’ I would prefer to showcase our regional writers more often, and the next issue of the Journal may be able to provide that. Leanne has been a long term supporter of encouraging writing in our region and her contribution seeks to promote the value of writing as a reflective activity, requiring some courage to be honest about what emerges for us in our practice. If I were to add anything it would be to reflect on and question the concepts that we have learned that may or may not support our practice in contemporary times and understandings of human –environment interactions. She quite accurately describes the personal issues that are evoked for both writers and those who work to publish writing. I do invite readers to take inspiration from what’s been presented here and share your voices and views.

Alan Meara

Editor, GJANZ

**Alan Meara B.Com. (Hons), M. Gest Therapy, FM GANZ, CM PACFA** is a Gestalt therapist and clinical supervisor, and has worked as a Gestalt trainer in various locations in Australia and Europe for 20 years. He has a background in Organisation Development and participative group work. He has a deep interest in the potential for complexity theory and critical realism to add to our understanding of field theory and recent developments in eco- and neuro- phenomenology.

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# IN DIALOGUE WITH MIRIAM TAYLOR

## Paddy O'Regan

Miriam Taylor is a UKCP registered Gestalt psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer who has been in private practice since 1995. Her background was in adult education before training as a counsellor and psychotherapist. Working as clinical lead of a young peoples' service pointed her towards specializing in trauma, and for several years she worked in a specialist trauma service.

Miriam's particular interest is in the relational integration of trauma and the role of the body. She teaches in the UK and internationally, is an Academic Consultant and examiner for Metanoia Institute, London, and is an associate of Relational Change. Her publications include *Trauma therapy and clinical practice: Neuroscience, Gestalt and the body*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2014.

This conversation was recorded in April 2018, with Miriam in England and Paddy in Brisbane.

**Paddy:** So thank you once again Miriam for taking time out and particularly for waking up early, and I really admire you having a decent conversation before 8:00am.

**Miriam:** Yeah it's pretty early here but it's not such a cold winter's morning that I didn't want to get out of bed so...

**Paddy:** Of course, that's sweet.

**Miriam:** It's a pleasure.

**Paddy:** Yeah and I appreciate your busy schedule too and looking forward for you being a part of that busyness for us to welcome you here too, around February next year.

**Miriam:** Yeah I'm excited, it's going to be pretty big but I think it will be such a great opportunity to meet people.

**Paddy:** Yeah absolutely. So, so far you'll be in Melbourne and Brisbane and New Zealand, and Sydney or...

**Miriam:** And Sydney.

**Paddy:** Okay, fantastic.

**Miriam:** Four stops and I've got two gigs in Sydney.

**Paddy:** Great.

**Miriam:** Then I can't remember whether it's Melbourne or Brisbane next.

**Paddy:** Okay.

**Miriam:** Then over to Christchurch.

**Paddy:** That's fantastic.

**Miriam:** Yeah.

**Paddy:** So I sent you some questions and I want to stay pretty true to those because I imagine you thought about them and engaged with them.

**Miriam:** Paddy I'm also okay if the conversation evolves in a slightly different direction you know.

**Paddy:** Excellent.

**Miriam:** It's a framework.

**Paddy:** Exactly. We are looking forward to your visit to Australia.

**Miriam:** Yeah, I've been impressed with the few people that I've spoken to already.

**Paddy:** Good. I imagine who they might be and they impress me too. So let's start with: could you tell the story Miriam, about how you got involved in Gestalt?

**Miriam:** Oh gosh, well of course it's a personal story as well. There were personal needs that drew me to Gestalt. But the kind of concrete piece is that I trained as an integrative humanistic counsellor before I trained as a Gestalt psychotherapist and in that training we had a demonstration of what I now know as beautiful dialogic Gestalt. It was about a 20 minute piece and this was over 20 years ago. I don't even know the name of the person who did it and I just went Wow! I want some of that. When I came to the point a few years later that I wanted to train as a psychotherapist my head was saying go down the integrative route. My heart kept saying Gestalt, Gestalt. Thankfully I followed my heart. It was about the body, because I needed - I was quite disconnected from my body at the time. I somehow intuitively knew I needed to do something about that. What I had seen within that demonstration was the quality of contact, the presence and the phenomenological method which I saw as being - in practice it isn't always but -in principle non-shaming. I had huge issues around shame and I needed to do something around that. So I'd seen something that was beautiful and which was also offering me something or some things that were missing in my life. So those are the things that drew me.

**Miriam:** Absolutely. Well you know I wish I knew who that person was. I would love to go back and thank them. I wouldn't have known if I hadn't seen this.

**Paddy:** So Miriam how did that influence your journey? Say some more about how you used that experience to find out more.

**Miriam:** Well I trained at Metanoia, which is a big institute in London, which was both inspiring and challenging. I mean I think on some level it was absolutely hell training! That's not a criticism of the institute. I think because

you're put into that environment where you really have to look at yourself and that hinged around how you are with other people and, the personal therapy was really, really tough.

**Paddy:** Was Gestalt different at that time?

**Miriam:** As different from what?

**Paddy:** Different to how it's generally practised now, a more relational flavour or more care about impact is what I'm curious about.

**Miriam:** Right okay. Yeah, the Gestalt department at Metanoia was evolving as a more relational approach at the time that I trained. So this was the late 90s into the early 2000s. Lynda Osborne had taken over as head of department. The direction that the department went in was very much along the relational lines. I think there was a reaction to the classical Gestalt approach. There is something really quite shocking, I never once saw or participated in a two-chair experiment during my training. We went too far the other way. I'd read about it and I kind of understood what was going on but it wasn't actually part of the training. I think it just got overlooked, it wasn't intentional.

**Paddy:** It's interesting that idea of experiment and what an experiment is, and the technique somehow disappearing in the relational.

**Miriam:** Yeah, I don't see myself as a very experimental therapist in that classical sense. I think there's a huge experiment around contact, about coming into the here and now. About just being present for both of you, for me that's a big experiment.

**Paddy:** That's the biggest one of all.

**Miriam:** For me as well as for my clients. It's a different take on experiment, meeting novelty.

**Paddy:** So was that a move - what was the structure of the training there? Was a formal higher education piece or...

**Miriam:** Yeah it was a Masters.

**Paddy:** Masters degree?

**Miriam:** Yes

**Paddy:** Okay, and a multi-year program?

**Miriam:** We did four years formal training and one year - well it could be more but at least a one year dissertation.

**Paddy:** Okay, and that was a research piece or a...

**Miriam:** Not at the time. It is now a practitioner researcher approach. So it was not formally at the time, although I think that level of enquiry has a research quality - it is inherent in that really. But it's more explicit now.

**Paddy:** Yes okay. Thank you. I kind of interrupted you a little, I think, when you were talking about your experience of training.

**Miriam:** Well of course there were hugely inspiring bits, hugely inspiring

people. I think one of the things that I used to do was to suck up everything. I did all the CPD, I worked with all the visiting trainers, everything that I could do and even after I qualified. I think that became part of my ground in building my book because I ended up with lots of influences from all over the place. So it started early in my training and the first visiting trainer I met was Lynne Jacobs who probably taught me the most useful thing that I learnt, which was her approach to working with rupture and repair. I think I learnt that at the beginning of my second year of training. So that was a really good ground to stand on.

**Paddy:** Is there something about that that you can name that was important there?

**Miriam:** I think not being defensive for me as a therapist would be the most important piece. The piece about really saying okay I'm going to listen. I'm really going to listen to what's happening even if I don't agree, even if I see things differently. We need to hear you out first.

**Paddy:** What a radical position really. I see that as a radical relational position.

**Miriam:** It's a very difficult position because on one level it's very human to want to be defensive when you feel under attack. You know some clients attack for what seem to be the most bizarre reasons. You know you've moved your chair an inch and then you're in the firing line. But you know those things can be incredibly important. I know that but sometimes it's frustrating.

**Paddy:** I went to a workshop of Lynne's in Brisbane last year. She's maybe enhanced or developed that idea around projection. So that sounds familiar, that idea about the sense of not being defensive and not using our language of: 'the client's projecting on me' as a form of defence.

**Miriam:** Yeah. Well I mean I am currently - I mean I'm skipping around a little bit, I don't know if this is okay.

**Paddy:** Yes it is.

**Miriam:** But I'm currently really interested in the therapist's defences against - or in the face of trauma. I think that piece is really interesting. So whether you're under attack or not, when you're sitting with a very traumatised person whose story you really don't want to hear, your defences come in. So I'm really interested in that piece. It feels like a threat. But really appreciating difference, really honouring difference feels so important and it's part of the rupture and repair piece. But it's part of so much more, about how we can meet something that either we don't understand or we can be afraid of or - and this is a question for the world at the moment.

**Miriam:** Sorry we're jumping around all over the place and I...

**Paddy:** Oh well, yes and no. I think what I'm noticing is my excitement

about what you're saying and how enlivened I am at this idea and how hungry, how much I personally need - as a practitioner I need you to care about what you're caring about.

**Miriam:** No one's ever said it that way. I really appreciate you saying it.

**Paddy:** It's important to me. I don't think our culture will - our species can survive. So I need you, yeah.

**Miriam:** Well I hear that and I know it's not all me. The world needs us.

**Paddy:** That's true! Can we stay a little bit more on this piece of what you're thinking about with clinicians or therapists in the face of trauma?

**Miriam:** I am doing one of the keynotes at AAGT in Toronto in August and it's titled 'In The Face of Trauma'. What's the sub-title? 'Relationship Ethics and the Possibility of Presence'. I'm going to keep it really simple and basic- and simple and personal because this is my Gestalt family. I will talk about some situations in which my own defences have come into play as a therapist and the challenge of really dropping some of my defences in order to be present. So some of this comes from the chapter in my book which I think is the most important chapter called 'The Well-Resourced Therapist'. I think the more that we can support ourselves and find support the more we can be present and the less trouble we're going to get into. Trauma is not only out there in the client and in the field, it's in us too. I have a question about how does my traumatised part meet the traumatised parts of my client. What gets stirred in me, what gets in the way, what do I need to be able to have enough support to hear the things I really don't want to hear. But I think there is an ethic and I go to Levinas as the commandment in the face of the other that we respond to. So on a logical level: "like well, why am I doing this?" You know this is mad: day in and day out listening to the awful things that can happen to human beings. But on another level it does feel like a commandment. My colleague Sally Denham-Vaughan actually said to me recently it falls to you to do this work. I just thought yes she's got it.

**Paddy:** I've read her work and am interested in where she's coming from.

**Miriam:** But it does feel like it falls to me to do this. Something settles in me when I remind myself of that, like an anchor. I don't have to fight it. It captures it.

**Paddy:** Yes. I'm aware of the discourse, you know I was socialised into the profession mainly in the field of trauma and industrial trauma. You know the message was about the price of empathy.

**Miriam:** Yes.

**Paddy:** That there was this price of empathy and to be interested and to imagine what was happening for your client and that there needed to be some form of defence.. There was this whole narrative in my early training about that.

**Miriam:** There needs to be defence and we need to be aware of them. We need to as quickly as possible recognise them and make a choice on the basis of what's going on, if we keep hold of our defence or drop it. It's a moment to moment decision.

**Paddy:** Yes.

**Miriam:** Actually I will say I have a great life. I make no apology for embracing life the best I can, for going or a walk in the middle of the day. I live near a beautiful river and you know for just the doing stuff - yes it is the counterpoint, it's the source of the polarity of the deadening effect of that trauma. But I need it as my ground and my container and I need where to find, how to find my ground really quickly when I'm with a client and this is my internal defence a new and expanded capacity to hear and to hold. I argue that this is what clients pay me for. They pay me to take care of myself, to manage the boundaries, to manage my own development as a therapist. They cannot pay me for what happens in session. That comes, if it comes, it comes from my heart. It comes kind of freely given and it can only be like that.

**Paddy:** Yes, I really like that, a restructuring of the relationship and the market based dynamic too. That's kind of a restructuring of the market of therapy somehow.

**Miriam:** Well I'm really passionate about this and I've taken those ideas a step further with a colleague called Vienna Duff and we co-facilitate workshops called the Well Grounded Therapist, going out into natural environments.

**Paddy:** Oh really?

**Miriam:** We have one coming up soon, a four day residential. Really engaging with the natural environment in a relational way, in a dialogic way, in an enquiring creative way, and looking at the whole piece of interdependence. We don't do much theory in this, it's highly experiential. It's an absolute wow. It's difficult to sell because people think this is about self-care and that that's a luxury. They don't really understand how that is part of forming the relationship. You bring into the relationship a more grounded, less defended, more present self. It is part of the work. Vienna and I are writing a paper about it. We're sort of two-thirds of the way into writing it which we hope will be in the British Gestalt Journal. It's also quite experiential, which is a bit off the wall for the BGJ. I really want to get that message across, that the work that we do on ourselves is part of the work.

**Paddy:** Yes, that's the well-resourced therapist piece.

**Miriam:** It makes it possible for us to hang in there the best we can.

**Paddy:** Yes, yes. That's such an important message Miriam. I mean my observations of agency practice around trauma are about putting yourself second, meeting all these demands, many of them nothing to do with practice

anyway. Really like it is a radical narrative to look after, to resource yourself as a part of the therapy practice.

**Miriam:** As a part of the therapy. Yes it's not an add-on, it's not optional.

**Paddy:** Yes, I can see how you mean it.

**Miriam:** I mean it and I live it.

**Paddy:** That's inspirational to me.

**Paddy:** So what else is interesting to you at the moment? I saw a piece around 'The Space Between'.

**Miriam:** 'The Space Between', yes that's a different residential that we're trying to model on the PGI residential model.

**Paddy:** Okay, what's that?

**Miriam:** Lynne and Gary's annual residential in California (Pacific Gestalt Institute)

**Paddy:** Okay.

**Miriam:** So we've been running a Certificate and Diploma in contemporary trauma practice for a couple of years and people are coming out of that program and saying and what next? We wanted to offer something that was different and really about deepening the work. A lot of CPD for trauma at the moment is still about technique. It's still about understanding some of those skills if you like. We wanted to make it a little bit more personal or again in line with what I've already said about looking at the self of the therapist - supporting some of that, putting some space around it.

It's a bit of an intensive but there will be space. We're going to another really beautiful venue that's a thirteenth century manor house with a beautiful walled garden. So it's very held, it's a very contained space, it has a depth to it. So I think that should be really interesting. We will have some more specific workshops than we've been able to offer with the sort of fundamental Diploma and Certificate training. Ruella Frank is going to do a keynote via video link for us. Which is going to be amazing and I think we're really talking about presence and absence. I don't want to give away too much because what she's doing is new. She's just developed it for this. So it's right on the edge for her. But it's going to be very much about presence and absence at the very beginning of life. Then we've got a lovely body psychotherapist called Margaret Landale and she's going to do something on touch. Martin Capps is one of our colleagues who's going to do something on shame. I'm going to do something. I know Mark Fairfield is talking, we're kind of linking up around some similar ideas. But I'll be talking about the ecology of trauma, this is kind of what I've already been saying. Basically we're going to have a bit of input each day and a bit of stepping back into home groups and a bit of process time and just find a space.

**Paddy:** I really like and am impressed or am noticing the importance of

physical space too. The people who made these places knew something.

**Miriam:** Well absolutely and they didn't know what we know about concrete and steel and you know all of that. But they did know something on that deeper emotional level. In our trainings we pay attention to the physical environment and choose venues that feel right.

**Paddy:** That's so important.

**Miriam:** I think when you're working with trauma you've got to try and get those levels of support into place.

**Paddy:** Yeah, yes. I remember listening to a Joseph Campbell tape and he was telling the story about going into a cathedral somewhere in France - you might have heard it. He just said there was no doubt about what this place was about and what it was built for and what it was designed for - just he could feel it as there was just no doubt that this was a place for spirituality and for reflection and prayer.

**Miriam:** About 500 yards from where I am there is the most beautiful medieval cathedral.

**Paddy:** Really?

**Miriam:** I can almost see it from my bedroom window. So yeah I chose place deliberately and in a considered way for myself to hold my own ground. Place is an important part of the being well grounded for all of us.

**Paddy:** So looking at my list now Miriam I wanted to ask this question and I took us away from it. But your thoughts of where we're situated broadly Gestalt in the world now?

**Miriam:** You know with this question I go to two very opposite places. One is almost a place of despair where we are still very much up against the over medicalisation, the pathologizing of emotional distress. The outcome measures, the evidence base, the protocol driven, the impetus to get people back to work as quickly as possible. I mean it's just I could shudder with horror constantly at that stuff. We were saying earlier about the whole problem of otherness in the world.

**Paddy:** Yes, yes and here we are in this discourse.

**Miriam:** And across thousands of miles it feels like you and I are on the way to meet.

**Paddy:** Yes exactly.

**Miriam:** It doesn't feel difficult.

**Paddy:** No

**Miriam:** There feels like an ease and a grace about this conversation.

**Paddy:** Yes I'm feeling that too and yet we're surrounded Miriam by this piece that you're referring to. This reductionist piece and I just wonder you know that our beginnings were about something in the Gestalt movement,

about taking a stand.

**Miriam:** The beginnings were about taking a stand and so when I say that I have two very different reactions, that's one. The other is saying, oh my goodness, we have got the most beautiful therapy here, the most beautiful approach. The most really elegantly articulated theory and I have a lot of hope as well. Whether I'm a naïve idealistic fool I don't know. That hope keeps me going.

**Paddy:** If idealistic foolishness takes you to where we are, go for it!

**Paddy:** Yes that's right. We need each other don't we? We need us.

**Miriam:** I need you. I need every therapist and everybody who reads my book to get out and say "this is useful, let's have a go and see what happens if we hit the tracks."

**Paddy:** Yes. Can we talk a little about the book, Miriam and some of the ideas, the important piece there?

**Paddy:** One of the many of the things I remember, one of them mostly was your recognition of Jim Kepner who was just such an underestimated person when it comes to working with trauma universally.

**Miriam:** I think universally, but I think he didn't quite have the language for it. His work, 'Healing tasks: Psychotherapy with adult survivors of childhood abuse', is solid but he didn't have the language. I know him and he appreciates my work as I appreciate his and I've done some training with him as well in the past. But I think there was something about how he didn't articulate it in a way that was confident enough.

**Paddy:** Yes, yes I see what you're saying. I understand that.

**Miriam:** In the 1990s we didn't really have the language of trauma. It was a book of its time and that was partly why I thought well we've got a huge gap in the market and a lot's moved on and that gap needed filling.

**Miriam:** Yeah well I will say I did my main trauma training after I qualified and had done lots and lots of CPD around neuroscience and trauma, I landed with Sensorimotor trauma training mostly and could immediately see the links with Gestalt. Then I got a little bit frustrated because Gestalt wasn't adequately acknowledged. They were taking ideas like tracking and what they call mindfulness but we call it awareness, contact experiments. I got frustrated with that but I also recognised that actually we needed to slightly modify some thinking about the Gestalt approach.

So, they could take something from us but we could take something from them and refine it a little bit. I think it provided a little bit of fine tuning for my Gestalt approach really. So that was also part of the underpinnings of writing the book. I sat with it for five years.

**Paddy:** Really?

**Miriam:** Just kept thinking there needs to be a book, I wish somebody would write a book. Then it just came like that. Why am I waiting for someone else to do it?

Paddy: Wow.

**Miriam:** Then it all fell into place incredibly fast.

**Paddy:** The piece on the paradoxical theory of change was so enlightening for me and created such discussion for us.

**Miriam:** Yes I haven't heard enough of the discussion. I go back over this and I wrote that five or six years ago and I probably wouldn't write it the same way now. I knew that I was treading on tricky ground, really challenging one of the absolute fundamental principles of Gestalt - saying you need to think a little bit differently about it. It's not wrong. I love the paradoxical theory of change and I apply it to my own life all the time. But I think there probably was a time in my life when it wouldn't have made any sense. So I know that I wrote it slightly defensively. Because I imagined that I would be taking a risk with it. I still do hold by, in some moments with some clients, I think this theory doesn't hold up.

**Paddy:** It is at least premature. It made sense to me from sitting in front of my clients and then berating myself for not somehow creating some magic, that the conditions just weren't there for.

**Miriam:** That's right. I could give you an example which was just from last week of a client I've been working with for some years so I know well, but massively traumatised. She can be massively disassociated. She's someone who's had no contact with mental health services for three years now and had spent long periods of time in hospital. Well she got triggered in a session and was completely non-responsive.

Often when she's triggered I can get some kind of responses, a nod of the head or something. But I couldn't get anything and I offered her an intervention which was a physical one, to help her feel contact. She started shaking and crying so that she moved from this completely frozen out-of-it state into a really shaky state. I thought okay maybe we've released something, maybe we just stay with this. But I was wrong. I stayed with her shakiness too long, you know and there I was encouraging her to feel what she felt and let it through and all the rest of it.

It was the wrong thing and I needed eventually to say right, stop feeling this, undo that. So "open your eyes, look at that" (object in the room) because I knew what would be an anchor for her. I became more directive. But this was in a sense a clinical emergency. Beisser talks in his paper about people playing roles that they think they should be. There was none of that there, there was no, "I should be trying to do something different," there was absolutely

no conscious or even semi-conscious process going on there. It was entirely driven by her physiology related to something in the past. I had to intervene to bring her back into the here and now.

**Paddy:** Yes and how to support her to do things differently to how she was doing them.

**Miriam:** With this client now, there are times when we can stay with what is. I did direct that particular moment, but sometimes it's possible not to. What did emerge was that she told me another piece of her story which I hadn't heard. It came from all of that but we needed half an hour of recovery time before...

**Paddy:** I'm holding images of my similar experiences as you mention this one, yeah.

**Miriam:** The clients literally cowering in the corner.

**Paddy:** Yeah, yes. Yeah that's not a place to stay.

**Miriam:** It's not a place to stay.

**Paddy:** I'm aware that there's a developmental piece here. Like you were saying before that there may be a time and there are times in therapy where a paradoxical theory of change seems like a useful ground of intervention and thinking. But just not then...

**Miriam:** Just not at this moment.

**Paddy:** No, the conditions weren't there, and enduring conditions don't exist, that makes a lot of sense to me.

**Miriam:** So what I came up with in the book was what I called an Integrated Model of Change which is a kind of process over time from being that bit more directive in the moments when it's necessary. It may just be in moments, to a place where the client's relationship with their body, their relationship to me is sufficient to support working in line with the Paradoxical Theory of Change.

**Paddy:** It's really a precursor to the paradoxical theory?

**Miriam:** Or the replacement.

**Paddy:** I understood you to be saying that in the chapter, yeah.

**Miriam:** Right, oh good. Well I'm glad and I notice that I'm still slightly defensive. Because I expected a big comeback on this and I had a little bit of respectful challenge from Lynne Jacobs but not much. That's all. Actually people aren't arguing with me about this.

**Paddy:** No, well I imagine that people who sit with clients who've experienced significant complex trauma get it. Like and for me there was a refreshing acknowledgment of the pace of the work and the attention to relationship and ground and some kind of compassion for the not speeding through some form of mobilisation into action or contact, to perform some sort of experiment or something that just wasn't warranted.

**Miriam:** And that then ties in with what I said earlier something about the

experiment of being in contact. I've just described that.

**Paddy:** Yes that's right, it's a form of contact.

**Miriam:** It's bringing the client into a place where they can be in contact.

**Paddy:** Yes, yes and that's not to be sped or to be kind of mobilising into that to be diminished or made wrong or something.

So the questions I had written here were any other links between your work and Gestalt and other modalities? You've already spoken about the Sensorimotor influence. Are there other modalities that are influencing you currently?

**Miriam:** Well I think hugely now, relational psychoanalysis. So people like Donna Orange and Philip Bromberg in particular. I'm leaning more into the ethics of contact and presence and I found Philip Bromberg's work very, very interesting in relation to trauma. Into how his book *Awakening the Dreamer* he really talks about how the therapist gets caught in a dissociated bubble with the client and then needs to be aware and wake up. That's the awakening and I find that very pertinent to what I'm talking about. Our own defence is knowing that it's not wrong for this to happen, but we need enough awareness to pick it up. Enough vision, enough tools, enough everything to pick it up.

**Paddy:** I'm hearing a congruence in our conversation over the hour in there, in the resourced therapist and the you know like what's important to you is ways to be together in a disassociated state while still awake enough.

**Miriam:** Yep, yep and to not feel bad about it. Not to feel oh I've made a mistake. I wasn't quite there. I mean for me it just becomes interesting. "Oh how come that happened just then".

**Paddy:** Ideas about the future of Gestalt? What's your imaging? I mean we've talked about those two ways you can organise yourself around the current state of Gestalt, what...

**Miriam:** Yep, well I'm involved with an organisation called Relational Change, part of the relational movement. I'm on the leadership team in the UK. It draws on Mark Fairfield's work in LA and I think we have got something and I know I'm hugely biased in saying "yeah this is the way". But there is plenty of evidence out there also, alongside this reductionistic de-humanising, othering of humans. There is also a ground swell that I like to tune into where people are saying this isn't working.

We need something else. It's in the black lives matter, it's in the #Me too, it's around that sort of stuff. I don't see myself as an activist in a formal sense but I can see the links and I think there's something quite radical about it. In terms of Relational Change we are edging towards looking at trauma in the wider field, not just in the therapy room. But Sally Denham-Vaughan and Kate Glenholmes have written a paper which is in press on the traumatised

organisation. So a lot of Sally's work is on organisational Gestalt and I think there's something there that we need to be looking at and shaping up. But you know it's just the seed of ideas that we floated, and we're not yet knowing what to do with it or how to do it. But I do think there's a lot of potential. I am heartened when I see recognition of Gestalt from other modalities.

**Paddy:** Yes me too.

**Miriam:** I was asked to write my book for a wider audience than Gestalt, I teach to people in other modalities. I'm very proudly out there flying the flag for Gestalt.

**Paddy:** Yes. Do you call yourself a Gestalt therapist?

**Miriam:** Yeah, very much so.

**Paddy:** I can see that yeah.

**Miriam:** There are threats, there are challenges, there are opportunities. I just go with my passion and I hope I don't get into trouble.

**Paddy:** Well I hope you get supported when you do. We bring Mark out once a year to our institute to support us in developing the narratives and stories of change and...

**Miriam:** Mark has just become - we've just brought him in as an Associate of Relational Change in the UK. I have just worked with him on a newsletter which links to some podcasts that he did a few weeks ago which was stunning. They're stunning, just so exciting.

**Paddy:** The 'practices of resonance'?

**Miriam:** I think that's a seminal moment. I was amazed to hear how close his thinking was to my own. The things about the natural world and the inter-relatedness - the ecology. So I think there are plenty of opportunities. It's really exciting, really exciting. We'll see what happens next.

**Paddy:** Yes. So Miriam, are there any questions that you wished I had asked or diversion that you would have liked to have loitered more on?

**Miriam:** You'd asked me in your list of questions about who influenced me.

**Paddy:** Yes, yes.

**Miriam:** I think we sort of touched on it and there was one person that I didn't get to talk about and she was just a really, really inspirational trainer at Metanoia called Caro Kelly, who really, really helped me - she was very influenced by Lynne Jacobs. But there was something about the delicacy and the accuracy of her enquiry which I learnt so much from. She's been retired for a few years now. After you'd sent me the question I emailed her and said I want to talk about you. I just realised I hadn't. So I just wanted to just say that.

**Paddy:** Is there more to be said?

**Miriam:** No. She really needs to be honoured.

**Paddy:** So thank you Miriam.

**Miriam:** Thank you, it was a lovely conversation.

**Paddy:** I really enjoyed it. It's so good to have an excuse.

**Miriam:** Well sorry that it's going to be six months or so until we meet though.

**Paddy:** I know, I know. It's a good start though and maybe we'll...

**Miriam:** It would be great to keep in touch. Yeah I feel like I know something about you already.

**Paddy:** Yeah, yeah me too. Me too.

**Miriam:** Okay.

**Paddy:** Have a good day. I'll see you later.

**Miriam:** Bye-bye.

**Paddy O'Regan** is a Co-Director of Gestalt Therapy Brisbane, and faculty member. He is a social worker in private practice and works with individuals, couples and organisations and has worked extensively in the field trauma. He enjoys practicing Aikido whenever he can.

# THE GROUND FOR INCLUSION: DIVERSITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE

Mark Fairfield

*“During extraordinary historical moments—both world wars, the aftermath of the Great Depression, the peak of the civil-rights era—the usual categories dividing ‘activists’ from ‘regular people’ became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life. Activists were, quite simply, everyone”* (Klein, 2014).

## Introduction

On May 30, 2017, a piece written by Donald Trump’s top advisors appeared in The Wall Street Journal, touting America’s competitive edge: “The president embarked on his first foreign trip with a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage” (McMaster & Cohn, 2017). A few days later, in one of a series of poignant New York Times Op Ed exposés on individualism in American culture, David Brooks made reference to what he called *the Trump project* which “asserts that selfishness is the sole driver of human affairs. It grows out of a world view that life is a competitive struggle for gain. It implies that cooperative communities are hypocritical covers for the selfish jockeying underneath” (Brooks, 2017). Brooks warns Americans about the poison that this project plans to dump into our cultural water supply. “By treating the world simply as an arena for competitive advantage, Trump, McMaster and Cohn sever relationships, destroy reciprocity, erode trust and eviscerate the sense of sympathy, friendship and loyalty that all nations need when times get tough.”

To those who claimed Trump’s win was due to a growing contingent of Americans fed up with establishment politics and the economic disenfranchisement of Middle America (the irony of voting in a billionaire to ensure restored wealth equality), Atlantic journalist Emma Green offers an alternative explanation: “new analysis of post-election survey data conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and *The Atlantic* found something different. . . . Besides partisan affiliation, it was cultural anxiety—feeling like a stranger in America, supporting the deportation of immigrants, and hesitating about educational investment—that best predicted support for Trump. This data adds to the public’s mosaic-like understanding of the 2016 election. It suggests

Trump’s most powerful message, at least among some Americans, was about defending the country’s putative culture” (Green, 2017).

Defending its putative culture—that means alleging a cultural identity where there is not sufficient evidence for one. It is the central trope of nationalism. From an immigrant’s point of view, the incoherence of this is obvious, especially as the defenders of a national brand seem always to have a history of invading other people’s lands and co-opting other people’s cultures. But concealing the *price* of this alleged identity (i.e., the people who were sacrificed, the homes that were destroyed) pulls for even more suspicion. Conversely, from the home court perspective, the immigrant’s suspicion is mystifying. Just become a citizen. That is your secure pathway to protection and opportunity: which works perfectly...if you’re heterosexual, cisgender, Western European, white or white-passing, and invulnerable to deportation. Essentially, the putative culture being defended is the situation created at the intersection of all these advantages. Anybody who does not inhabit that situation is, by definition, not worthy of citizenship. They should be kept out to reduce the threat of eroding American culture. By contrast, accepting LGBTQ, non-Western, people of color and foreign-born people as examples of American culture should be condemned. It is a corruption of the American identity (vs. the fuller expression of America’s multicultural complexion).

The point is that there is a story behind the presumptive American identity. And like Obama’s “America’s diversity is America’s strength” story—whose echoes were still resounding in the White House the day Trump took office—is the story of *diversity*. But that story is really a collection of stories we never hear because we are mostly cut off from any opportunities to encounter them.

### **Leveraging Diversity for the Resistance**

We face several mounting crises today, with climate change taking center stage. And a big part of what got us here is that, on top of threat of extinction triggered by our own actions we are hampered by the fact that our best chances for a solution depend on vast amounts of cooperation. Meanwhile, we grow more suspicious of each other every day. How can we cooperate when we find it so hard to trust each other? So, the crisis comes to a head where the sheer size of the problem—i.e., that it involves literally *everyone*—collides with the barriers preventing people from believing that they can work together on a problem of that scale.

Some good news: social movements. In her acclaimed 2014 book, “This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate” (Klein, 2014), Naomi Klein heralds the rise of converging mass movements to both save the environment and fight for social justice. But she qualifies that while climate change can be

“the force – the grand push – that will bring together all of these still living movements,” (p. 459) a climate movement on its own will not win. It must take up “the unfinished business of the most powerful liberation movements of the past two centuries, from civil rights to feminism to Indigenous sovereignty” (p. 458). This kind of movement ecology model is growing more popular. Liberation and labor movements were both in evidence at the People’s Climate March which saw 400,000 diverse constituents in New York on September 21, 2014. The same movements showed for parallel actions around the globe. Klein is clear: “Only mass social movements can save us now.... If that happens, well, it changes everything” (p. 450).

So, how are activists faring in their efforts to collaborate across multiple platforms? Social movements are surely taking the lead in building solidarity. And they understand the role meaningful inclusion must play in building strong coalitions. But activists are requiring more support and new tools to help cope with the relational challenges still here after decades of polarization, extreme identity politics, and in-fighting. Some would say that this task—to meaningfully include diverse perspectives within change-making organizations—presents both the greatest opportunity for transformation and the greatest risk of implosion.

But the stakes get higher, because the term “inclusion” implies the need for something more than tolerance. Inclusion proponents believe that people on the margins should not just be tolerated by insiders, but should be affirmed and valued for their perspectives and contributions, and as proof of that, should have a say in shaping the conditions affecting their well-being.

The term “radical” takes the concept of inclusion further in its insistence that we accept we are already a part of one another *at our roots*. If inclusion goes that deep, we should expect to be changed by it. We should expect to care more about what is important to one another’s survival and well-being. We should expect to re-prioritize our time and resources to take others’ concerns into account. We should expect to lean on others’ leadership precisely when we lack their different sensitivities. We should expect to need others, and to consider ourselves needed by them. In fact, according to the social neuroscience research, if we are really including others, our nervous systems will be mutually attuned, co-regulating, and reciprocally transformed through the relationships in which we are entangled (Lewis, Amini & Lannon, 2000). In short, radical inclusion is the most effective strategy for personal and social transformation.

With these as the indicators of success, our practices of inclusion will have to go deep...enough so that other people get under our skin. The suffering of those to whom we are bonded ought to keep us up at night. Short of that kind of sharing of concerns, we have failed to include.

Yet much of what hampers a capacity for this kind of inclusion relates to our opinions about diversity. By the sound of things, you would think inclusion is practically unnatural. If someone confesses to a sleepless night of worrying about other people's problems, others will almost certainly react with disapproval. The criticisms all generally sound the same: you're too involved; you need to set boundaries; you can only really be responsible for yourself. Yes, there is some moral imperative to include; but it simply goes against the grain of human *nature*. Human nature, so the critique goes, is competition. Apart from close family, it is... wait for it... "instinctual" for humans to hold others in suspicion. So, *of course*, we throw others under the bus. *Of course*, there's racism, xenophobia and homophobia. *Of course*, we are selfish. It's only human, right?

### **Humans are Wired to Include**

Despite the popular tale about instincts to kill and competitive natures, there is contrary evidence that, in addition to the powerful bonding instincts we have inherited as mammals, *inclusion is also core to being human*. In fact, we became human precisely because the most inclusive of our ancestors were the ones who were selected to survive. Inclusion became the human mandate.

This alternative tale grows stronger and more coherent as it gathers momentum from various branches of scientific research and philosophy. But some key points have been added to the plot of the human story of inclusion by pioneers in the fields of both social neuroscience and sociobiology.

### **Once Upon a Polyvagal**

When Professor Stephen Porges, Department of Psychiatry at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, proposed the polyvagal theory (Porges, 2013) in the early 1990s, he was explaining something more than a mechanism for remediating disease. He was proposing a revision to an epic story. He challenged science to reimagine the human brain as fundamentally *socially regulated*. And it comes down to a very old bundle of nerve fibers called the *vagus*.

A key component of the autonomic nervous system, the vagus has two branches, each associated with a different adaptive strategy, both parasympathetic inhibitory functions. The vagus is a counterpart to the sympathetic-adrenal system, which is involved in mobilization behaviors. According to polyvagal theory, these juxtaposed systems are arranged phylogenetically.

The dorsal branch is older. It is unmyelinated. Also known as the "vegetative vagus," it is associated with primal survival strategies in vertebrates, reptiles, and amphibians, which, under dire stress, freeze to conserve their metabolic resources.

Mammals have this same dorsal branch. But due to their increased neural complexity, they evolved a ventral branch as well, which represents only 3% of all vagus nerve fibers. It is more sophisticated than the dorsal branch, expanding behavioral and affective options relative to an increasingly complex environment. It is myelinated, offering greater control and speed of response. Known also as the “smart vagus,” it regulates sympathetic “fight or flight” behaviors in the service of social affiliation, facilitating more communication, soothing, and calming. This branch can inhibit or disinhibit defensive limbic circuits, depending on the situation.

A mammal’s “smart vagus” will come online when it detects clear safety cues. Those cues come via social engagement through which the ventral vagus achieves the right quality of tone so that it can recruit the sympathetic nervous system away from its usual defensive maneuvers. Social engagement supplies an extended, peripheral intelligence-gathering process in which trustworthy familiars signal safety across greater distance and time than it would be possible to detect on one’s own. But what does a safety cue entail? What makes mammals feel “safe”?

As mammals evolved and their brains grew larger, their middle ear bones broke off from their jaws. These detached middle ear bones evolved into a refined acoustic tracking system which equipped mammals with a frequency band for interaction that could not be detected by reptilian predators. It also supplied them with a tool for discerning in other members of their species (conspecifics) whether they were safe to approach or not.

Porges explains how this acoustic tracking technology has been incorporated into the mammalian social engagement system, predisposing young mammals to be compelled by the sound of “caring others,” the prosodic tones that convey soothing, warm intentions. In turn, infants cry out for care using the same acoustic frequency band, as if they are broadcasting a search signal to locate those who intend to look after them.

When we scan our surroundings for risks, sweet smiles with gentle eye contact and soft voices with rhythmic inflections cue the brain structures that regulate the vagus nerve. The viscera lighten up: Heart rate slows, breathing eases. Stress switches off. You feel safe enough to move closer. Intimacy is now possible. . . . And it works two ways. Social engagement creates the sense of safety that calms the viscera. And released from gut-wrenching anxiety, your insides now enable you to advance your social agenda, which further calms you. (Gold, 2007)

This foundational safety-signaling system overrides other forms of language in humans. Put in another way, no matter how much humans attempt to *reason* with each other, if they are cuing aggression or threat of any kind, the result will be a mobilization response via the sympathetic nervous system. Humans can practice self-regulation strategies to try calming this primal trigger, *but only the right kind of social engagement* will sustain it.

And this holds among all mammals. We know that safety cues can be conveyed sufficiently to develop cross-species bonds. People and their pets are the most obvious example, as domesticated animals have coevolved with humans in a context of depending on each other for survival. But humans have adapted the most complex form of the mammalian social engagement system, precisely so they could extend their support circles. *Because humans needed to depend on a wider network of care*, their brains enlisted the social engagement technology to expand their capacities for subtler, more nuanced signaling helpful in vetting dependable carers. In short, it was *interdependency* that generated the conditions to bring our refined signaling capacities online.

Here is the punchline, however. Take away the condition of interdependency and you no longer have the catalyst for mutual understanding and trust. The more our prevailing social arrangements disperse us—insulating us from contact with our vulnerability and needs—the less access we will have to our inclusion technology. Instead, we avoid people because we have no experience of them as dependable. Fear and suspicion follow, as our (much older vertebrate) mobilization system activates our primal defenses. Already on guard, our viscera tight with anxiety, we lack vagal tone, making attempts for meaningful social inclusion practically impossible.

### **It Really Does Take a Village**

Now, enter Sarah BlafferHrdy, a celebrated anthropologist and primatologist who has made several major contributions to evolutionary psychology and sociobiology. Hrdy asserts that humans evolved as cooperative breeders, unable to raise offspring without a helper. She calls this arrangement *alloparenting*, a practice in which relatives other than a mother, such as a father, grandparents, and older siblings, *as well as genetically unrelated helpers*, such as nannies, nurses, and child care groups, care for and provision children (Hrdy, 2009).

This new arrangement propelled the evolution of human mind-reading capacities. Humans had to develop the ability to *accurately detect motivation* because now their lives depended on not only a birth mother, but a caring community on which a single child must rely to guarantee life through to child bearing years. When survival depended on it, infant humans steadily evolved empathic capacities so they could learn who loved them (i.e., who intended to

look after them). From an evolutionary standpoint, humans *understand* others because they *need* others. . . plain and simple. It is very difficult to understand where people are coming from when we do not see how our fates are linked with theirs.

Hrdy's work serves as a frame for a clearer understanding of the evolution of Porges' social engagement system. The signal that turned on our primate genes for empathy and mind-reading was the availability of extended kin *and kith* (people who could be "trusted" like kin) for child care. Of course, it was the crisis of food scarcity which our Pleistocene ancestors faced that prompted them to experiment with new forms of food sharing and child care in the first place. In these new arrangements, human babies could exit their mothers' wombs in a more vulnerable condition because there was now a *social womb* in which they could continue developing. From a natural selection standpoint, this meant human brains could grow larger, because they could continue their growth outside the womb. Larger brains allowed more complex brain power. But the cost for this expensive brain could only be paid by concentrating the resources of a whole village. The greater that investment, the longer the period of dependency was possible. The longer the dependency, the more complex the brain could become.

Despite how recent anatomically and behaviorally modern humans are, Hrdy is convinced that *emotionally* modern humans are much older. By emotionally modern she means bipedal apes born with impulses to share and "empathic, intersubjective aptitudes" fundamentally different from those in chimpanzees. Hrdy traces these hominins to Africa hundreds of thousands of years before the emergence of modern humans. Other primates have the neural equipment to imitate and a basic ability to identify with others. In fact, Hrdy argues, the common ancestor of both modern humans and chimpanzees would certainly have had a strong incentive to evolve a sophisticated theory of mind and "would have benefited from ever-shrewder and more Machiavellian intelligence or from enhanced pedagogical capacities". Yet natural selection didn't favor it. She poses the question, "What happened. . . in the line leading to the genus *Homo* to favor evolution of these traits?" Her answer: *alloparenting*. This *more diverse dependence* "produced selection pressures that favored individuals who were better at decoding the mental states of others, and figuring out who would help and who would hurt" (Hrdy, 2009, p. 66).

### **The Plot Thickens**

Understanding how this back story set the stage for the evolution of the human propensity for inclusion depends on two important associations that can be drawn between Hrdy's and Porges' perspectives:

- 1) The vagal tone that Porges sees as a critical indicator of human resilience was also the very technology that Hrdy argues enabled our hominin ancestors to recruit one another into caring for the vulnerable life on which the future of their species now hinged.
- 2) The interdependence characteristic of Hrdy's alloparenting illuminates how a *shared struggle* and commitment to a *collective goal* are primers for Porges' social engagement system to extend the reach of inclusion

Taking these points together, we can better explain the role of large-scale threats to survival in the development of human resilience. The assumption habitually is that we are likely to find safety *when we seek out "familiar"*. But Hrdy proposes an alternative. Beyond the nuclear family is a safety net, a resilient infrastructure of social ties with *those we can trust*. For sure, it capitalizes on kin. But Hrdy puts her money on multigenerational networks of kin and kith, the kind humans now eschew more and more, trading up these vital resources for trendier technologies. Yet our hominin ancestors, by their living example, passed down a story teaching us that we cannot survive without the extensive investments of neighbors, affiliates, colleagues, compatriots. In other words, Hrdy's work helps illuminate that what is "safe" demands something greater than our unraveling social fabric may now afford us.

The human tendency to include diversity came out of a struggle in which we bonded to those outside our immediate intimate circles, a struggle to protect an asset *critical to our common survival*. When we share a struggle and we hold a commitment together to protect what we deem precious, we *become familiar*, of necessity. Perhaps there is no better allegory to represent this principle than the story of a newborn baby calling a village to action: that symbol of our continuation, a future for "us", the preciousness of life itself, the thing we must protect, the prize we would all sacrifice ourselves to save. Some would now cast Planet Earth in the role of the vulnerable child. What would we sacrifice *together* to protect this child?

### ***But Is Competition Merely Human Nature?***

And now...back to the question of competition. Is it human nature to distrust those who are not our kin? Here is Hrdy's take:

New discoveries by evolutionarily minded psychologists, economists, and neuroscientists are propelling the cooperative side of human nature to center stage. New findings about how irrational, how emotional, how caring, and even how selfless human decisions can be are transforming

disciplines long grounded in the premise that the world is a competitive place where to be a rational actor means being a selfish one. Researchers from diverse fields are converging on the realization that while humans can indeed be very selfish, in terms of empathic responses to others and our eagerness to help and share with them, humans are also quite unusual, notably different from other apes. (Hrdy, 2009, p. 7)

And again...this time citing Michael Tomasello, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology: “[H]uman beings, and only human beings, are biologically adapted for participating in collaborative activities involving shared goals and socially coordinated action plans’ (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005, p. 676). Only among humans do we find large-scale cooperative endeavors involving people who are not necessarily close kin” (Hrdy, 2009, p. 9).

The operative phrase is “not necessarily close kin”. Collaborating with loved ones is par for the course. But having to trust other people is dicey. They are not “us,” the definition of which varies but usually has something to do with blood: *blood is thicker than water*. Or is it?

Curiously, this idiom’s usage may be another example of getting the story wrong. Contemporary usage would suggest it means “your ties with your family will always win out over your connections with others.” Evidently historians disagree regarding the origins of the phrase, with the two most common hypotheses opposing each other (Hall, Wisniewski, & Snipes, 2013).

When blood is left to dry, it leaves a stain; whereas water evaporates, leaving no mark. So, the lesson is: it is hard to erase the bonds of blood. But wait. What about that vague water reference? What does water have to do with bonds? Only an alternate interpretation clears up the confusion: it is the water of the womb. So, to the contrary, it is not the blood, but the water, that signifies kinship ties (i.e., those born of the same womb); the blood refers to the stronger bonds—those made in sacrifice or struggle. It is clever because, of course, blood is also a symbol of what is shared among kin at birth. But we can read the idiom as a nod to ceremonial rites: “blood brothers” whose bonds are thought to be stronger than kinship ties, who will draw their own blood to be co-mingled with the blood of their allies. Covenants were often sealed in blood. And this is the sense closest to the story Hrdy tells of the events that catalyzed the evolution of the modern human nervous system that Porges champions.

Viewing it through the lens of this new tale, the update would be: “The bonds we form in struggle do not disappear.” It is the opposite of what people mean when they use the expression. But this kind of turning upside down is probably more a turning right side up, in the way the new science is doing by putting the record straight about human nature.

Another idiomatic example is “survival of the fittest,” which is often used to describe an instinct to fight for the top, to edge out everyone else’s genes. But Hrdy sets it right when she credits mutual understanding, inclusion and solidarity as the fitness tools our surviving homo sapiens ancestors used to a selective advantage. Fittest, then, should give the sense of “having the greatest ability to fit”: the quality of individuals to mesh with their social intimates; of tribes to adapt to habitat and climate; of the whole species to learn to adjust with the prevailing conditions of the ecology.

What do these story reversals imply about the challenge of including others? Could it be that the struggles working across ethnic, gender, religious and generational divides are actually exacerbated when we reference these competition stories? And how does inclusion shift in practice relative to the reversals we find in Hrdy’s and Porges’ work? These questions stand as the central focus of a body of work being developed to promote a relational culture-building movement which is influencing how some change-makers and healers are thinking about the challenges of diversity.

### ***Relational Culture and Radical Inclusion***

Transferring the values and principles of what has come to be called The Relational Movement from spaces focused strictly on personal development to spaces engaging in social justice organizing and public health promotion, a handful of organizations have worked across a range of sectors in the last decade to develop popular education tools and strategies for equipping organizational cultures to practice radical inclusion. The curriculum for this culture shift project is grounded in and a response to the experience of leaders in movements and social change projects who are confronting challenges to cooperation within their organizations. The core curriculum for the Relational Culture framework has been under development explicitly since 2010, with groundwork being laid since 2000, including contributions published in the Gestalt literature on topics such as group development (Fairfield, 2004a; Carlson & Kolodny, 2014), harm reduction (Fairfield, 2004b), shared leadership (Fairfield & Shelton, 2016), movement building (Fairfield, 2013), and communities of practice (Denham-Vaughan & Clark, 2016). The inaugural project, called the Culture of Radical Engagement, was sponsored by The Relational Center (<http://www.relationalcenter.org>) and then inspired the launch of Relational Uprising (<http://www.relationaluprising.org>), a training project which has influenced dozens of movement-building organizations that now embrace Relational Culture as integral to their movement “DNA.”

While the Relational Culture curriculum owes gratitude to several influential fields, embedded in the foundation of its curriculum is Gestalt

theory. Given the focus of the work—to restore faith in connection and inspire a return to interdependent social arrangements—a commitment to cultivating the attitudes of *dialogue* is inevitable, setting a high bar for the desired training outcomes. An exploration of the use of dialogue in groups and communities called “Dialogue in Complex Systems” had appeared in the Hycner and Jacobs volume *Relational Approaches in Gestalt Therapy* (2010), outlining some of the work having already been done to incorporate Gestalt ideas into grassroots community-focused practice, including social welfare, mental health and organizing. This integration came out of efforts to address challenges faced by communities at greatest risk for harm from the social and economic crises of our day.

Still, though the topic is *inclusion*—one of the aims of Gestalt’s dialogic method—the practice of this radical form of inclusion points farther upstream (before-the-damage) as a prevention effort rather than downstream (after-the-damage) as a mental health intervention. In prevention work, which targets whole populations and aims to influence conditions of culture, there is no therapist responsible for setting the ground; the conditions of dialogue are met by community members who share leadership as peers. So, this inclusion practice relies on a systematized storytelling and listening strategy (discussed below) which supplies structure to keep participants aligned with a common goal, but without constraining the possibility of creative emergence in their connections. Gestalt organization development practitioners have been exploring this interplay of structure and emergence for some time. Carlson and Kolodny report the ways they rely on it as a critical resource for redistributing leadership from consultant/expert to participants/group members (Carlson & Kolodny, 2014).

While its concepts and practices are relevant in any context where people are struggling with inclusion, the curriculum is specifically a program to build capacity in change-making communities that have an articulated unifying mission. The curriculum was not designed to be applied to broader spheres of civil discourse, such as public conversations, town hall meetings, political debates, etc. Its success hinges on the presence of certain conditions: a clearly-defined theory of change and a well-communicated strategy. A shared value uniting people in common struggle is a powerful resource that cannot be replaced by any amount of training. For this reason, attempting this Radical Inclusion process in other situations has uncertain probabilities for success.

Relational Culture trainings target social and cultural conditions, with emphasis on identifying and leveraging the resources that can only be cultivated through the human elements in organizations. As might be expected, the objectives include a strong orientation to the value of life, with a vision for

the role of humans in protecting the future. This aspirational vision is framed by narratives coming out of several disciplines (e.g., evolutionary theory, anthropology, social neuroscience and sociobiology), portraying humans as “sustainability leaders”—called upon to nurture and protect the ecology. This framing invites a shift towards *appreciating* dimensions of leadership that are often *depreciated* in organizational contexts—vulnerability, sensitivity, reactivity, and dependency (Fairfield & Shelton, 2016). The Relational Culture curriculum builds on the assumption that organizational systems benefit from access to these human dimensions; and conversely, that organizations are damaged by their suppression.

### **The Relational Culture Approach**

Consistent with a public health emphasis, Relational Culture is interested in raising awareness about harm to whole populations. This harm consists of corrosive values being pumped into the public imagination by dehumanizing cultural narratives. Audiences are asked to listen carefully for the key propaganda stories that distract them from vital relational connections and interfere with their faith in the potential of human collaboration. The curriculum refers to these narratives as *Stories of Separation*, so called because of their power to organize humans to marginalize relationships. This gradually impairs our thinking, closing us off to our hunger for nature, impairing our grasp of evolutionary principles, disparaging the value of our vulnerability and, yes... frightening us away from diversity.

To cultivate the values of radical inclusion requires more than just insight: we need structure and tools for resisting the *Stories of Separation*. So the Relational Culture curriculum offers antidotes called *Stories of Connection*, which is a discipline of reflecting on the relationships that sustain us, to keep us vigilant to the support and sacrifices others have made for our health, pleasure and growth. It encourages a daily commitment to affirming, rather than merely tolerating, the presence of others. It is a form of resistance. It calls for our faith in a shared human purpose—that we are here to protect life and the relationships constituting it.

*Stories of Connection* remind us to connect instead with life’s oldest lessons...that humans are inseparable from the ecology, embedded in histories and legacies, and dependent on relationships. They agitate about the pain of isolation and the imperative to belong. Most importantly, they build our immunity against the isolating and desensitizing effects of *Stories of Separation*. When we step into a struggle to protect life, we recover gratitude for the conditions that sustain our well-being and existence.

But the capacity to stay in this struggle gets harder the more any evidence of our interdependence is erased. Everybody comes from somewhere, bearing some ancestral memory—even if it is distant—of what it means to struggle to survive. But many of us were never told that story; so, we couldn't pass it down. Losing that story scrambles the channels to a sense of our shared fate. *Without that sense, we lack the motivation to pull together.*

Losing the story also means losing the wisdom gathered by our ancestors on their journeys to survive—the journeys that led to us being here. Then it is lost to everyone. After that, the problem multiplies, for when we forget our stories of struggle and survival, we don't want to hear others recount theirs. If we have succeeded in forgetting our culture by erasing the stories that transmit it, we expect everyone else to forget their culture too. And then we become incoherent. Ask anyone claiming to be a “mutt” about their cultural heritage and be prepared to hear a very confusing response. There will be nothing about a journey...no distinct characters. Few dots will be connected.

Untethered to history and legacy, humans *will* tell an incoherent story. They will tell a story of some kind, of course, because narrative is the most basic way for humans to make meaning. But the story only needs to make the tiniest bit of sense to be repeated. If the storytellers are not pressed to elaborate, they fail to notice they have lost the plot.

It is under these circumstances that people become vulnerable to being swept up by manufactured propaganda, of entitlement and ownership, with no justification. They are incantations, spells cast to summon feelings of allegiance. But all the while, the fabric of relationship—the web of connections from which people take nourishment and resilience—deteriorates, as our real bonds wither along with the real histories and legacies that endear us to one another.

### ***The Power of Gratitude***

Hastening the unraveling of that social fabric is a kind of historical distortion we perpetuate by forgetting the significant figures who have paid a price for us. Into such a conspicuous gap we force our stories of personal achievement, eschewing the contributions of ancestors, elders, and even mentors, friends and partners. But it leaves us in a bind: 1) we are recruited into burying our relational stories, clinging instead to the false dignity of being masters of our own fates; but 2) disconnected from those stories, we lose the dignity only they can impart.

Furthermore, disconnected from the stories that prove we have received support, we tend to project our vulnerability onto the *disenfranchised*. People who are not insulated by privilege will seem to need more support. And the more we project, the more attention is drawn to those needs, distracting us

from the inevitability of our own dependence on support. Thus, the projection of neediness onto “them” is fueled by a *disavowal of needing the help that comes to us secretly*. This is almost always what lurks behind every case of inequality. The motivation for exclusion and even hatred often comes from this basic projection of vulnerability. Phillip Lichtenberg called it “projection upon a primed vulnerable other” (Lichtenberg, 1990).

Not surprisingly, it is only the enfranchised—*those granted implicit privilege for arbitrary reasons*—who struggle to see their privilege. Everyone else can see it plainly. But what everyone else does not see is the vulnerability being disowned. And without access to this vulnerability, there can be no solidarity. Without solidarity, we will avoid sharing resources and distributing risks—the actions that have historically preserved us.

Meanwhile, as we grow more ignorant of the ways our fates are intertwined, we are more deluded into thinking we can accomplish things without support or cost—or more absurdly, without one another. But, of course, there are costs: some we will never see. . . to people we may never meet. And the resources it took to set the stage for us to pursue happiness? We could never accurately account for them all. We are all of us a blend of influences, a chorus of so many voices. The elimination of just one would change who we are. So, just acknowledging the sheer variety of forces moving us forward in life is an affirmation of the value of diversity. There can be no inclusion of diversity without gratitude.

Still, gratitude is hard to achieve in a culture that inspires fear of needing help, where all the signals warn that you will be shamed for depending on support (unless you buy it, in which case you can feel proud of being able to afford it). The way to avoid “dependency recrimination” is to assume a posture of self-sufficiency, a fiction of independence—neatly separate, working hard, earning fair wages, never burdening others to care for you or subsidize your needs. At the end of the day, there’s nobody to thank if you made it all happen yourself.

But the idea that we do it all ourselves breaks down in a gratitude culture. If we make a habit of naming the people who have supported us to ford the river, scale the mountain, unlatch the gate, then we must notice how utterly relational our survival is. And it is only in such a culture—in which we routinely acknowledge the forces that move and protect us—that we truly value the diversity of who we are. Said differently, appreciation of diversity grows out of appreciation of dependency. And conversely, a fear of dependency will breed a fear of diversity.

If nationalism benefits from breeding xenophobia, it must shame dependency and glorify the illusion of self-reliance to ensure its citizens

subscribe to the national identity, severing ties to their native cultures and languages. The resulting putative culture diminishes their experience of “citizen” into something hollow and alienating, ignoring their hunger to stay connected to those whose contributions have delivered them to their present safety. Alienation and longing ensure patriotism. Still, if people cannot acknowledge where they came from, then they cannot bring their rich diversity to the table.

Indeed, the systematic undermining of diversity demands the effacement of all the connections on which we depend. The antidote to such a poison therefore requires the systematic reaffirmation of connection. As with any systematic strategy, a plan is then needed that anticipates potential barriers to achieving this goal and guides in overcoming them.

Of course, the key barrier is the erasure of our personal stories, especially the stories that highlight the contributions of our ancestors and their allies. Overcoming that barrier involves getting already organized groups engaged in subversive storytelling practices that unearth the buried supports which are essential to who we are but disenfranchised by our culture of self-promotion.

### **Telling Stories that Cultivate Inclusion**

The stories that have been erased—that we have been recruited into forgetting—must be recovered. They are the stories of connection: they anchor us to land, to legacies, and to one another. The Stories of Connection tool presented in the Relational Culture curriculum teaches a practice of honoring the people who generate benefits in our lives (e.g., elders, mentors, inspirational figures, unpaid labor, future generations). It uses a narrative structure designed to reconnect us to important elements of our relational nature. It also involves a listening strategy, a discipline of focusing on the most vivid moments in others’ stories. Called “Sharing Resonance”, this part of the practice cultivates an empathic environment. In fact, this resonance maximizes the potential for what Porges calls “vagal neural tone,” which can persuade autonomic mobilization systems in the human brain to downshift, making way for the social engagement system to reactivate. The practice cultivates these conditions by focusing participants on expressing what they notice as they connect with profound human experiences. It also mines for shared values which, when made explicit, restores a shared sense of unifying purpose. The resulting conversations are genuinely openhearted and disarming, as participants give voice to their emergent experience in ways that resemble Porges’ description of prosodic tones—those ancient vocal signals of good will and care.

The structure follows a developmental arc reminiscent of Gestalt’s cycle of awareness, but looking from a birds-eye view at values, multigenerational strivings, and responsibility to broad ecological demands. These are not

“introjects”. They align with what matters to “us” as a species. The structure, which is adapted from the Public Narrative tradition (Ganz, 2004), mirrors a developmental journey in which a community can find many points of connection. The story elements include: 1) an explicitly shared value; 2) a challenge that threatens that value; 3) a struggle that draws people together; 4) supports and resources that were not available before; 5) choices that must be made together; and 6) a vision for a different future.

This arc reflects the awareness development process familiar in Gestalt practice (Zinker, 1977). For example, a shared value resembles (but transcends) the organismic need as the organizer of the field. The struggle around which many people come together is a form of mass mobilization of energy. Contact can be found in the community’s acquisition of new support. Successful collective decision-making becomes the strategic action taken in the service of protecting the shared value (here is evidence of a *value* organizing the field). The resolution takes shape in the form of a vision to which the collective now becomes more committed. The whole journey galvanizes mutual radical inclusion because everybody has reorganized to be more engaged with a vital community whose survival is relevant to the sustainability of what everyone *holds dear*.

Now we can compare this framework with the sociobiological and neuroscientific evidence. Porges tells us that *social engagement* reduces defensive mobilization, even across gaps in familiarity or understanding. The word “engagement” means more than just interest. Hrdy describes something more like a pledge of faith. The arrangements she studied were radically interdependent. So, we need help achieving that kind of engagement. The Stories of Connection structure—with its attention to narrative, social and somatic engagement—combined with the resonance sharing ritual—with its disciplined focus on the most human moments of each story—generate firm commitments to mutual care and respect. It requires rigor, in the way meditation would. But when the structure is consistently observed, participants forge powerful bonds.

### ***A Coalition for Resistance***

Audrey, Mary, Trina, Donald, Terrance, Jordan, Connie and Alejandro are members of the leadership council for a resistance coalition. They are a diverse bunch, each of them vetted for an important aspect of representation. The purpose of the coalition is to generate solidarity across multiple platforms (racial, gender, economic, environmental) to heighten the attention given to social and cultural issues at play in movement building. The conviction they share—that the pursuit of profits over lives perpetually stands to undermine

all other fights for justice—bonds them to a common struggle. In their purpose statement, they reference the words of activist/journalist Naomi Klein on social movements in the last century:

Indeed, a great deal of the work of deep social change involves having debates during which new stories can be told to replace the ones that have failed us. Because if we are to have any hope of making the kind of civilizational leap required of this fateful decade, we will need to start believing, once again, that humanity is not hopelessly selfish and greedy; the image ceaselessly sold to us by everything from reality shows to neoclassical economics.... Fundamentally, the task is to articulate not just an alternative set of policy proposals, but an alternative world view to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis—embedded in interdependence rather than hyperindividualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy. (Klein, 2014)

This shared struggle should also bond them to one another. Or that is their hypothesis. And their mission is the thing they must now defend: the child who has become the responsibility of their “village,” the future of justice, the embodiment of everything worth protecting. Yet each of them hails from different paths traveled by different peoples engaged in different struggles. They must discern how the differences in their stories can serve, rather than undermine, their common fight.

Audrey, 67, Caucasian, volunteers as a youth educator for an environmental organization that sponsors conservation-focused educational programming for young people. She identifies as a straight, cisgender woman. She cares about the environment deeply. And she has been a fierce defender of women’s rights. But she is white. And she is straight. And she is firmly middle class. She appears to many of her compatriots as the embodiment of privilege. And in so many ways she has been insulated from the struggles in which her collaborators are embroiled every day. She needs them—needs to hear their stories, to feel into their sensitivities, to appreciate the wisdom assets collected by generations of their ancestors. Her “privilege,” like a devalued currency, buys her no good will here.

Mary, 30, Caucasian, is an activist working in several movements, mainly economic justice and political reform. Mary identifies as queer and prefers to be referred to with the pronouns “them” and “they.” They are two generations younger than Audrey. And while they stand up for gender justice, gender looks very different to Audrey than it does to Mary. Mary is suspicious of Audrey’s middle class neoliberal sensibilities. Audrey frequently refers to Mary as

“her” and “she,” regularly testing Mary’s patience with these continuous microaggressions.

Trina, 48, Chicana and Native American, is the outreach director for a local grassroots organization focused on combating gender-based violence against trans communities. She has also been involved in Stand with Standing Rock. Trina prefers the pronouns “her” and “she.” Trina feels warmly toward Audrey, but bristles with Mary, whose rants about the oppression of gender essentialism feel hostile and destabilizing. Trina is proud to identify as transgender, but also feels that she is fundamentally a woman, that women are fundamentally different from men, and that despite being assigned a male gender at birth, she is and has always been fundamentally a woman.

Donald, 58, Caucasian, is a retired addictions counselor and recovering alcoholic, 30 years sober. He now volunteers for a crystal meth treatment center, offering community building groups for gay men. He identifies as a gay, cisgender male. Donald feels warmly toward everyone. But he often finds himself confused about gender. He almost always uses pronouns he’s been asked not to, though he catches himself and course-corrects. For Donald, there is a generation gap between men his age and the younger crowd. So, in his mind, he just substitutes the concept of gay for the concept of queer and assumes this translation is adequate to build a bridge.

Terrance, 26, African American, is an organizer for Black Lives Matter. He identifies as a queer, cisgender male. Terrance is uneasy in relation to many of his collaborators. He finds himself at the intersection of multiple identities “under attack” in white, neoliberal spaces, including those occupied by middle class gay men...of every color. He knows strategically the importance of building solidarity across platforms but has never seen the concerns of poor, Black, Queer folks truly included in the policy work most often pursued by those left of center.

Jordan, 23, Caucasian, is a political science student at a progressive liberal arts college. He identifies as a cisgender, straight male. He works to get money out of politics. He lives in a communal house of activists with other Millennials. Jordan often feels “shut down” by conversations that politicize race and gender, fearing they will hijack efforts to unify the labor class around a common struggle for economic justice.

Connie, 36, Chinese American, is a social worker at a local organization that provides trauma-informed services to refugees. She identifies as a straight, cisgender female. She is heavily involved in racial equity work, including the Movement for Black Lives and Stand with Standing Rock. Connie is uncomfortable with Jordan’s rally for class solidarity. She believes this strategy underestimates how racism and sexism continues to stratify the working class,

a reality that undermines the chances of a truly equitable wealth redistribution.

Alejandro, 32, Colombian, is a top leader in an immigrant rights campaign. He identifies as a straight, cisgender male. His family immigrated from South America when he was 4. A key to his activism strategy involves engaging the solidarity of US citizens with enough imagination to consider how it might feel to live in this country since childhood and yet be denied the opportunities available to their peers. One such opportunity is access to affordable education, including scholarship support without which education costs are prohibitive. Alejandro wants us to appreciate that Americans have opportunity precisely because their people came here from other lands to pursue it. His fight is for a real, viable American dream for everyone, which also depends on ensuring safety for immigrants

The council meets monthly for a 2-day session that involves capacity-building, training, storytelling and resonance practice, and strategy development. Training is focused on how to identify and counter influential stories in the dominant culture that undermine mutual support in their organizations, in their personal relationships and in the institutions setting and enforcing the policies that most affect them and their allies. The storytelling practice involves finding points of connection among council members so that they come to appreciate what in their personal leadership histories has happened to sensitize them to each other's values. This is an important prerequisite to crafting a Story of Us—a public narrative that depicts their shared struggle and underscores the unique support they have accessed by forming this alliance and tackling challenges.

Given that this training was first incubated by The Relational Center, its objective is to orient participants to relational frameworks, including a relational understanding of identity as “field dependent.” Identities are the stories we reference to be recognized by one another. They are socially constructed, rhetorical, and performative, though fundamental to how we stay oriented in the world. Consequently, we have multiple identities, each functioning to support our adaptation to different, fluid, and intersecting social and physical environments. They are our relational passports.

Now when we are organizing across multiple platforms and aiming to forge strong bonds in the face of adversity, we need to be thoughtful about how we use identities with one other. In an environment shared with people who oppose our values, we are forced to use them as armor, or even weapons. We politicize identity when the people around seek to annihilate us, when the official discourse ignores or vilifies us, when history effaces our very existence. When identity constructions become the only way for us to protest our own erasure, we cling to them. But back at camp, back where we are all allies, where

we have faith in the collective will to unite in protecting what is precious to us, we cannot afford to use our identities against each other. How, then, should we use them? What is the role of identity among friends?

Terrance has been struggling with this question in every gathering of the council. In other spaces, he must fight for a voice, while anticipating being dismissed when he raises that voice, reduced to an “angry black man who is racist against white people”. But here, among sworn allies, that fight seems out of place. Yes, he is irritated by the neoliberal tone he detects in what Audrey and Donald often share. He finds himself wanting to school Donald—to stop calling him “gay” when he has made it clear he identifies as “queer”; to bear in mind that the Stonewall riots were not about marriage equality, but about police brutality, the same brand of brutality black people encounter in alarming numbers today. He wants to engage this group to care more deeply about ending the school-to-prison pipeline, protecting the human rights of immigrants, and ending police murder of Black people. But the concerns more often associated with the white middle class seem to overshadow these priorities, (e.g., LGBTQ, reproductive justice).

A few months ago, after hearing Audrey urge him to consider using gentler language to recruit middle-class white folks as allies with Black, Brown, Asian, Native, and immigrant activists, Terrance disengaged. At the next gathering, he shared an article which he believed captured the frustration he felt when asked to make himself more “likeable” so that white people have an easier time remembering he is human. Here is an excerpt:

If you do not like me, I will live. If you do not believe in my humanity, I may not. Lack of friendship is not killing black people in America. We are not shot in the street by police because we are unliked. We are not given substandard treatment by doctors because we are unliked. We are not being kicked out of school because we are unliked.... We are being shot because people don't believe that our life is as important as theirs. We are being given substandard treatment because doctors don't believe we feel pain like everyone else. We are being kicked out of schools because educators do not believe that we deserve the same level of education and the same opportunities to be children as everyone else. And if you require anything from me other than my existence to believe in my humanity, then, even then—even when all prerequisites are met—you still won't really believe. (Oluo, 2016)

The piece is eloquent, sobering. It is a request to be unreservedly respected for being human, with no other condition. But it presupposes that the identity of

“human” moves people to care. What Hrdy’s work makes clear is that it was in the fires of a shared struggle to bring forth and protect a shared asset that the “human identity” was forged. When humans have not discovered how they are in a critical struggle *together*, sharing a commitment to defend what they hold dear *in common*, then the context for recognizing this shared human identity unravels. Yes, we are moved to care by the sights and sounds of suffering, particularly in the young. But *first* we must see *how we are connected* to each other. The truth is, there are many “kinds” of human. But it is these kinds that tend to overthrow our identification as a species, precisely because they succeed in rallying us around a more compelling common story. Indeed, the common story by which we could be most compelled—the evolutionary epic of our human ancestors teaching us how to succeed in carrying life forward—is persistently contested and corrupted by the *Stories of Separation*.

The truth is, Audrey sometimes walks on eggshells when Terrance is agitating about racism. And Trina feels stifled when Mary interrogates gender constructs. And Donald is bewildered when Connie admits she doesn’t feel safe in spaces with white people, especially when they don’t speak up, unequivocally and unambiguously in solidarity with people of color. And Alejandro, witnessing members of his community terrorized by ICE and under constant threat of deportation, vehemently disagrees with Jordan’s strategy of setting aside racial identity politics to augment a shared outrage over class struggle. Were this discussion to include all the compelling challenges felt among the members of this council, the results would be impossible to fit into one article. What Terrance has identified is just one example of the kind of challenge that raises questions about whether a Story of Us is inclusive enough to make a difference.

This group has used the Stories of Connection tool many times, with an understanding about its potential for strengthening bonds across difference. But knowing how to use a tool does not necessarily inspire hope in the face of decades of frustration and disappointment. To find the will to use such a tool, we need encouragement and inspiration. In this case, it was Mary who took initiative. They (Mary) piped up with a story about an incident that had happened during LGBTQ Pride weekend. News of the verdict had just broken, that the police officer responsible for ending the life of PhilandoCastille would not be convicted. Another Black life that did not matter to the justice system. Mary was devastated. . . again, after yet another miscarriage of justice for Black Americans.

It was during a local Pride celebration that Mary was alerted to the profound split between racial and LGBTQ justice contingents. Too upset to join their friends at a dance club, Mary chose to spend their Saturday night at a protest

in solidarity with victims of police brutality. But Mary was flooded with text messages to tempt them to join their friends at the club. Some read: “Who’s PhilandoCastille?” Others read: “Don’t let that get you down. Come be with your community and celebrate Pride!” One even read: “Don’t let that racism stuff interfere with the most important time of the year!”

Mary was sharing this with the group, particularly as a signal to Terrance, because they wanted the group to hear how everyone’s *Stories of Connection* provide courage and inspiration to make choices, sometimes at a cost, in support of their dearly held values. Mary addressed Terrance directly: “I wondered whether I was being unreasonable by sitting out the celebration while so many of my friends gathered without me. But then I remembered you, Terrance, and the pressure you feel to separate the Black part of you from the Queer part of you. I felt my connection to you. I wanted to stand with you. So, I stayed with those outraged by this inhumanity, which is the essential inspiration for Pride, right? Because my connection with you and with “us” helps me defend what I value.”

This moved Terrance. He felt the tightness in his fists and belly relax. His eyes pooled with tears. Then he started to share about an incident he experienced the week before, in which some Black folks in his neighborhood were making homophobic remarks. He felt isolated and scared. But he realized how disconnected his neighbors were from real experiences of queer people, especially queer people of color. And then he recalled times when people on this council had moved him to embody a value he had previously cared about only abstractly. Donald, for example, once shared about his days in the AIDS movement, when he and his friends essentially created their own hospice network, devoting tons of resources to ensuring dignified deaths for an army of HIV-positive people—gay, straight, black, white, poor, rich, warm, rude... it didn’t matter. They were all human. Terrance really took that in. When we are ravaged by plagues and famines and catastrophes, there is a certain kind of human experience everybody is bound to have.

But now Terrance needed Donald to take in the terror Black people feel every day as top government leaders openly declare their white supremacist agenda. Some liberals have said it’s a phase; in time the pendulum will swing to a more progressive perspective. That’s just how things go. Yet Terrance wonders if those liberals would be singing to the same tune if their own neighborhoods were under threat of daily persecution by an institution that is supposed to protect them? Can the children in those communities really survive another four years of things getting worse before they get better? Or are they collateral damage? What are the atrocities that *would* compel middle-class white liberals to say “Enough is enough! We won’t stand by for one more day to watch another

dehumanizing blow to our human family”? For Terrance to believe he is joined by “allies”, he must see evidence that the outrage and disgust felt pervasively by Black folks in this country have become *our* outrage... that confronting the inhumanity of slavery—for which justice has never been restored—takes priority in our policies and in our popular culture.

Then Mary thought to say: “Terrance, your stories of outrage and struggle always remind me of what’s important to *me*. They motivate me to protect what’s most precious to *my* humanity.” Terrance replied: “I need to know you need my outrage. I need to feel like a *justifiably angry Black man* surrounded by a chorus of *just as angry allies* refusing to shut up until something changes.” Terrance sees this group *can* be engaged to care about the things that most matter to him. He can afford to pull back on schooling them, but only as he sees evidence that they will stand up. He is counting on it. And an important step is hearing that *their* stories include (rather than efface) the realities lived through and recounted by *his people*. In effect, when people around Terrance affirm those values, concerns, and perspectives, then all of them are his people. The “us” gets bigger, more inclusive, but only when “we” are in solidarity, unwilling to cast aside the concerns that would threaten the well-being of any one of us. It is only because we tune in to our resonance to one another’s struggles and values—and beyond that, engage in ongoing collaborations in which we are literally neurobiologically “co-regulated” (Lewis, Amini & Lannon, 2000)—that our personal stories can be restructured to take our relationships fully into account.

### ***Recap/Summary***

Diversity is a hot topic today. We see it driving policy debates about immigration reform, the refugee crisis, gender equity, marriage equality, even wealth disparity. It is a principal consideration in strategizing for most of the contemporary movements of this decade. Often it is feared as a source of divisiveness despite the imperative to build solidarity across multiple platforms—e.g., labor, gender equity, racial and environmental justice. And it is, of course, the issue on which all identity politics hinge.

Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) its power to determine the course of social and political discourses, we often find ourselves in a state of paralysis at the mere mention of diversity. The position put forward in this paper offers some context to help make sense of that paralysis—that our species has experienced a significant drift away from the central plot of our human story, one that has alienated us from the wisdom our early modern human ancestors once possessed that though we depend on those in our tribe, it is also the case that our tribes need other tribes, by necessity, for their survival. Perhaps our peculiar

amnesia on this topic is the inevitable result of assuming there is no reason for such an arrangement, that as long as we face no immediate global crisis demanding it, we have no reason to remain bound together in that way. But if so, we have been rudely awakened from such a delusion as exactly that level of crisis continues to mount. And now—in our dramatic awakening—we are baffled by the reality of our interdependence.

Yet it must also be true that all our hope rests in that reality, as it did for our ancestors, as it will for the humans of the future. But only if we can rescue that future from the sure destruction that looms behind all the heinous crimes we perpetrate against one another, from atrocious genocides to all the microaggressions we let happen every day under the misguided assumption that progress in the diversity challenge is inevitable. It is not inevitable. In fact, progress is, at this moment, undergoing an alarming reversal. Still, we have the chance to interrupt that reversal...if we reclaim our fundamental identity as the peculiar primates whose offspring would never have survived were it not for the solidarity they cultivated with those on the other side of the proverbial fence.

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## Biography

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# THE RELATIONAL MATRIX MODEL OF SUPERVISION: CONTEXT, FRAMING AND INTER-CONNECTION

**Marie-Anne Chidiac, Sally Denham-Vaughan and Lynda Osborne**

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“All entities in the natural world, including us, are thoroughly relational beings, of great complexity, who are both composed of and nested within contextual networks of dynamic and reciprocal relationships”.

Spretnak (2011, p4)

## **Abstract**

This article proposes a matrix model applicable to a wide range of supervisory relationships and settings; therapeutic and organisational. The emphasis is upon a “relational” approach, where the term “relational” is used to refer to two key inter-related concepts. First, supervisory issues arise as a direct product of situations. Second, the quality of the supervisory relationship is therefore *preconfigured by, and in itself preconfigures*, the content, process and output of the session/meeting. For these reasons we see the context of supervision as being of fundamental importance in framing both the “what and how” of the supervision session. This articles describes these proposals and the relational matrix model in more detail and discusses some implications for supervision that arise

## **Introduction**

The very word ‘Supervision’ holds connotations of assessment and being overseen or managed; power is implied and notions of control evoked. And yet, the supervisory relationship is intended as a support for best quality work and necessary continuing professional development, (CPD). For many organisational practitioners, psychotherapists, counsellors, managers, or coaches the supervisory context is therefore unique in the sense that it brings together a multitude of roles and functions.

At the most foundational level, the supervisor acts as the ethical and legal gatekeeper to ensure professional standards and governance frameworks are adhered to. Very often however, the supervisor's role is also one of mentoring and training and, invariably, a successful supervisory relationship is principally one of support that enables the supervisee to work at their best. The functions of this relationship are therefore both complex and intricate, especially when the supervisor may have a degree of clinical, managerial, or contractual responsibility for the work. Together with Ellis (2010), therefore, we believe that one vital element that makes this delicate balancing possible is a solid working relationship between all parties.

However, beyond the importance of the supervisory relationship itself, supervision must also pay attention to the multitude of connections and relationships it attends to and which form the context, (or ground), that frame the supervisory process. Kurt Lewin, (1951), in his seminal work on field theory, showed that our behaviour at any one time is a function of a multitude of influences in our lives, past and present. He called this intricate web of social, situational and psychological influences the "life-space".

In supervision, the supervisee and supervisor each bring their own 'life spaces', their connection to others, (particularly the client), and the contexts and situations in which they are all embedded. The influences and impact of each of these connections is alive in the room and needs acknowledgement and exploration at different times. Indeed, these connective dimensions have been previously well articulated in Hawkins and Shohet's (1989) "process model" and are recognised as forming an elaborate matrix of influences that configure supervisory processes and affect outcomes.

Our own experience as supervisors however, gathered across many years and a wide range of *contexts* including coaching, psychotherapy, counselling, consulting, management, training, has been that of foundational importance is the context within which the supervision is occurring. Indeed, this variable was recognised by Hawkins and Shohet in 2006 when they included the environment in their expanded '7-eyed' model.

Our wish in this paper is to further define and nuance these contextual/situational factors and, indeed, to elevate them to the status of processes that *preconfigure* what is possible in the supervisory space. In other words, we will propose that the influence of context is so strong that it frames, defines, forms and indeed limits what is possible. We will argue that this is true irrespective of the skills of the supervisor/supervisee, the quality of their working alliance or the field of praxis in which they are working whether organisational or therapeutic. In arguing this, we will therefore be leaning on a deeply contextual, or "relational" approach, proposing that we are "*of the field/context*", (as in

a gestalt formulation), rather than working *within* a field, (as in a systemic or 7-eyed formulation).

This article thus provides a way of viewing, exploring and working with these multiple dimensions in a supervisory context. It starts with defining more rigorously what we mean by relational and then provides an outline of a guiding model of supervision that arises from our work as relational training supervisors. In particular, the impact of the situation, culture and context in framing what occurs within sessions is highlighted. Each individual element of the model will be briefly illustrated with examples from our work in a way that helps bring the model alive and illuminates its use in supervision. Our primary intent however is to emphasise the interconnectedness of these elements and to flesh out and elevate the importance of situation/context in all forms of supervision.

### **What is Relational?**

The word “relational” is becoming increasingly important and widely used in Organisational Development (OD), psychotherapy, coaching, leadership and in everyday conversation. Relational for us transcends the usually polarised view of attending to the other’s need/being of service to others versus seeing the other as a resource to satisfy one’s own relational needs. Rather, as described by Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac (2013), it is based on a key post-modern concept: the idea that rather than individual things or people being the main, sometimes only, focus of attention, it is the relationships existing between or amongst them that offers maximum possibility for change.

This can be viewed in supervision as a move away from only addressing client pathology or the supervisee’s skill base to focusing on the relationships they have, both with others and between them, and the context in which these connections arise. Indeed, it was this focus on relational process and not pure content that initially defined Hawkins and Shohet’s (1989) model. Brooks, (2011, p. 43), states: People don’t develop first and create relationships. People are born into relationships – with parents, with ancestors, - and those relationships create people.

In other words, the quality of our relationships powerfully *define and shape* the “quality” of us as individuals, be that individual people, teams, organisations or communities. Indeed, neurobiological research, (e.g. Siegel, 2007), reveals that our developing brains, although genetically informed, are very heavily influenced by our relationships with others throughout our lives. Similarly, it is well documented that these foundational webs of relationships and interactions within an organisation determines the emerging sense of culture and identity, and has a profound impact on resulting productivity and performance (e.g.

Kotter and Heskett 1992, Truskie 1999, Alvesson 2002).

At Relational Change we captured this relational paradigm in our SOS model, (Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2013) and proposed that a relational stance is one that finds a “situationally appropriate balance” between the three interrelated elements illustrated in Figure 1:

- Self; which can be seen as either the individual, group, community or organisation principally conducting and ‘owning’ the inquiry;
- Other; as the ‘other’ in the relationship at any given moment; when reflecting, this can be the “other within the self”, (for example, the internalised supervisor).
- Situation, here referring to the overall context/culture in which the issues are embedded.

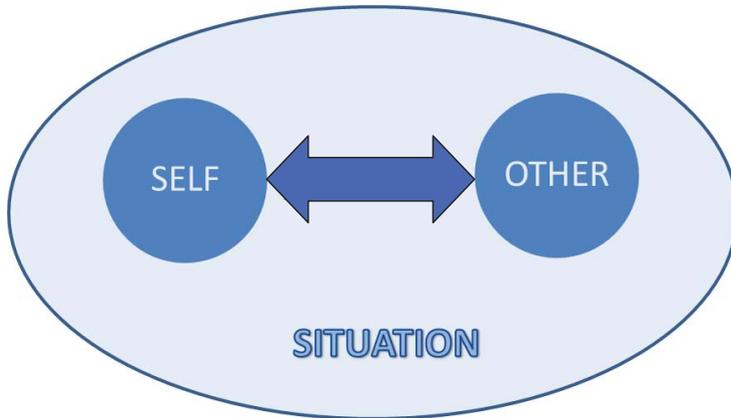


Figure 1: SOS Model

Importantly, we believe that when the three processes of Self, Other and Situation are all operating in ways that respond to the demand qualities of the context, then we are most “Present”; able to access our fullest potential in accordance with our most deeply held values. At this point “SOS” becomes not just a placeholder for three separate components, but also, (utilising its status as a globally recognised distress call), a metaphorical reminder that we are all interconnected, vulnerable and in need of help/support.

As with all ideas, the relational perspective relies on key philosophical and ethical assumptions. Essentially it is a refuting of modernity and its reliance on the irrefutable foundations of reason and a leaning instead towards a postmodern

philosophical stance where knowledge and reality is a co-construction which evolves in relationship. In today's world, where individualism and self-interest still largely dominate the politics at the social, organisational or individual levels, the relational position is still counter-cultural. The SOS model therefore holds ethical and practical assumptions that we are intricately and unescapably linked to each other and our environment. This recognition is fundamental and alters our perceptions of who we are, what resources we really need and, that an ethical future is based on our ability to collaborate, compromise and act together.

We would therefore propose a relational perspective as an ethical state of mind to cultivate when working on either 'side' of the supervisory relationship: whether we are in the role that identifies with potentially more power/control or less.

### **A Relational Matrix**

By combining the SOS model and the dimensions of Client, Supervisee and Supervisor, we naturally come to a matrix of possibilities to explore and be curious about. Figure 2 shows the Relational Supervision Matrix which results from such an amalgamation.

Each element of the matrix provides a specific lens for exploration in supervision. The advantage of the matrix is that it spans the individual (SELF) and the systemic/contextual (SITUATION) whilst retaining the focus on our connection to others, (OTHER). The Matrix Model also illuminates how all three components, (Self, Other and Situation) configure our perception and subsequent behaviours.

Reading across the matrix, the naïve and/or inexperienced supervisee might focus on the first column (Client column) and come full of detail about their client's narrative, history and presentation, unaware of their own essential role in how the therapy or coaching process, for example, is unfolding. At the other polarity lie supervision sessions that focus solely on the supervisee's process and context and thus implicitly place the responsibility of what is, or is not, happening in the relationship, at the feet of the supervisee alone (Supervisee column: middle column). Lastly, the supervisor's own responses, their counter-transference reactions and wider contextual/governance issues are a key aspect of supervision affecting what is brought to supervision, how it is discussed and what actions are taken (Supervisor column: last column). Importantly however, these would rarely be the primary figure of the work, or both supervisee and client issues will be missed and important relational tones effaced.

Considering the rows, we can see that solely attending to row 1, (SELF – whether of client, supervisee or supervisor), takes a highly individualistic

stance, wherein responsibility for both problem and solution are laid at the feet of one or possibly two individuals. In our experience, when this row is overly focused on relational ruptures can easily explode, with individuals feeling blamed and shamed for identified issues. At the other polarity is row 2, (OTHER/Relational field – whether of the client, between client and supervisee or between supervisee and supervisor). While exploration of each of these relationships is crucial to supervision and a sense of support, solely focussing on these dimensions can avoid identification/ownership of crucial actions and a corresponding lack of personal responsibility or accountability for actions. With reference to row 3, (SITUATION – the clients living conditions/culture, legal/ethical/governance codes affecting the work, contracting issues and power hierarchies) these are the situational/contextual issues from which rows 1 and 2 emerge. In our model they are therefore foundational and of vital importance in framing and shaping the supervisory work.

In teaching this model, we have found it helpful to distinguish two parts within the model which can loosely be viewed as typically the ‘ground’ and ‘figure’ of supervision. The ‘L’ shape formed by the situation row (row 3) together with the other two boxes in Column one, (Client and Other), these five boxes, (see in Figure 2, shaded area formed by cells 1, 2, 3, 6 and 9), can be viewed as shaping the ground from which the supervision figures emerge. We suggest therefore that what is often figural in supervision (which can often feel like the ‘real work’), occurs in cells 4, 5, 7 and 8. We have found that this distinction supports the supervisor in being more aware of where they spend most of their time in supervision and the need to work in awareness of the relationship between figure and ground, respecting our existential embeddedness in situations, contexts and cultures.

Figure 2 – Relational Supervision Matrix

	CLIENT	SUPERVISEE (THERAPIST/COACH, etc)	SUPERVISOR
<b>SELF</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on the client, their narrative, presenting issue and self support. <b>1</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on the supervisee, their experiences and self support. <b>4</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on the supervisor, their experiences and self support. <b>7</b></li> </ul>
<b>OTHER (Relational Field)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on client relationships (key relational supports in varying contexts)</li> <li>Focus on relationship of coaching client with organisation <b>2</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on the relationship between the supervisee and client</li> <li>Focus on strategies and interventions used by supervisee in their work <b>5</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on supervisory relationship incl. Parallel processes, co-transference, etc. <b>8</b></li> </ul>
<b>SITUATION (Wider field and Environment)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wider client field culture and context.</li> <li>Wider organisational context and culture (e.g. in coaching case) <b>3</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on supervisee and client field, incl. contracting, professional &amp; ethical codes, cultural and situational context.</li> <li>Focus on relationship of supervisee with client's organisation (if relevant) <b>6</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on supervisory field generally, incl. contracting, professional &amp; ethical codes, cultural and situational context.</li> <li>Focus on supervisor links with client context e.g. 3<sup>rd</sup> party contract (if applicable) <b>9</b></li> </ul>

The remainder of this paper will briefly address each individual cell of the matrix in turn and illustrate it with examples relevant to supervisory work. We recognise however that excellent, detailed and lengthy description of the cells/lenses exists in other texts and would suggest that interested readers consider Casement, (1985), Hawkins and Shohet, (2006), and Carroll and Gilbert, (2011) as starting points for further exploration.

### **Cell 1: The Client in Focus**

This first cell focuses on the psychotherapy/counselling client, direct report or coachee themselves; how they present, what are their issues and narratives? The aim here is to support the supervisee to pay more attention to their client's process and the totality of the client's life/work situation.

With some client presentations, it is often too easy to focus on the 'content' of the issue, be it a conflict with a manager, a relationship difficulty or another complex ongoing situation. The issue itself becomes so figural, the story so broad and encompassing, that we don't gain a sense of the client as a whole situated in their life space. Instead we listen to the details of the story which eclipses the wider field.

As supervisors, at times like these, we often struggle to bring the whole of the client into focus as there is insufficient ground; we have only seen their 'issue'. As relational practitioners we recognise that "Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel" (Polster, 1987), whilst also acknowledging that each story can be described in many ways. In other words, there are infinite different grounds for what appears to be the same figure.

As we know the lens through which we look at people and situations is a subjective one which influences our interventions, the meanings that we make and the fascinations we choose to follow. We will each have a differing perspective on one client presenting with low mood following her mother's death two months ago and another client presenting similarly whose history includes severe trauma and having been actively suicidal on several previous occasions. Likewise, the coachee who describes an aggressive manager who shouted at them in a team meeting contrasted with a coachee who presents with repeated claims of 'bullying at work' and has left at least one previous employment for that same reason.

In these cases, asking for a detailed phenomenological assessment of the client encourages a supervisee to pay attention to their client's process; their appearance, posture, breathing, the way they sit in their chair, etc. These details all support a move towards an appreciation of process that includes an examination of ground and available supports/resources that may not have been in awareness. Indeed, Joyce and Sills (2014) devote a chapter to considering

available resources and the client's willingness/ability to draw on them as necessary to provide a fuller perspective.

### **Cell 2: The Client's Key Relational Supports**

This lens focuses on the client's key relationships both past and present. It involves exploring the nature of the client's experience of relational support – or the lack of it – in differing contexts. The nature of the relationship between the coach or client and their relevant organisation/situation is specifically considered in this cell. We are here 'mining the field' to locate key relationships with others, be they parents, teachers, managers, etc. that can be explored to assess both the ability to access relational support and the current availability of it. In this cell, we acknowledge the foundational work of Heinz Kohut in developing the notion of Self-Object transferences and classifying these as developmentally needed relationships that are vital to confidence and comfort in the world, (see, for example, Kohut, 1984, 1996, for more details). These notions have been developed by two of the authors into a framework for assessing the quality of presence and performance at work, (Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2009).

Exploring and understanding key relational patterns of clients is an important aspect of supervision. For example, supporting a supervisee to notice that his coaching client was interpreting the absence of praise and appreciation from his manager as criticism, effacement and evidence of not being valued was central to working with this client. This was formulated as a lack of 'mirroring' for competence in Kohutian theory, (the coachee had been insufficiently rewarded for competence as a child) and absence of confirmation in dialogic terms. Practically, this coachee needed more explicit appreciation from their manager and a sense that what they were achieving and doing well was both seen and recognised. A simple request to the manager for more positive feedback delivered a substantial change in the coachee's confidence and motivation.

Similarly, working with a high risk suicidal woman another supervisee was able to recognise her client's relationship with her young goddaughter as an ongoing key relational support. At times, this child was an unofficial co-therapist with whom this client continued to learn and to hold hope.

### **Cell 3: The Wider Client Field**

Here the focus is on exploring the client's wider context including their culture; be this familial, the culture in which they currently live or the particular organisational culture in which they work. Our aim is to remain curious about the impact of this culture and its impact in forming and framing both the 'self'

of the client and the presenting issue. We are therefore trying to notice our prejudices, preconceived ideas and fixed expectations which act to dampen our exploration and unhelpfully curb our intentional analysis of the impact on the client.

For example, a supervisee once brought a client struggling with the grief of a young child dying of cancer and difficulties in relating to his wife. The supervisee had not explored the client's cultural background and assumed he was middle class and English. Given the client's unusual first name, the supervisor enquired and was told he was Jewish by the supervisee. As the work progressed, the work came to focus increasingly on the client's sense of isolation and inability to seek relational support from others. A while later, the client's father died and he travelled to an Arabic country and it transpired that this was the client's country and culture of origin. Living in the UK, married to an English woman, the client's cultural background was a predominant factor in his inability to feel understood or accepted despite years of living in the country; the relational resources and current cultural 'norms' did not support his particular way of expressing feelings or performing satisfactory rituals for marking death.

In organisational practice, this wider client field is an essential component in understanding the individual manager or indeed team behaviour. Organisational culture plays an essential role in defining what coaching or OD interventions might be successful or even worth attempting.

#### **Cell 4: The Supervisee in Focus**

Using this lens the supervisory process focuses on the supervisee; their professional development stage, their learning style, specific strengths and vulnerabilities, self-support and relevant theoretical understandings. All these factors, and many others, contribute to bringing the supervisee into clearer focus. Psychometric assessments, coaching tools and measures, organisational scoping and structural charts are all relevant. We wish to become intimately acquainted with the aims, presence and process of the supervisee.

For example, in a psychotherapy context, an experienced practitioner's very long-standing relationship with her previous supervisor both supported and challenged her when changing supervisors; how much difference could she welcome and tolerate? Conversely, a trainee, highly anxious to be seen to work well, arrived with prolific notes held in shaking hands.

In our experience, the supervisee's needs, hopes and fears as well as their habitual patterns walk in to supervision in the embodied presence of the supervisee, whether the supervisee is an organisation, team, manager/leader, coach or clinician. This places a specific importance on attending to checking-

in at the start of supervision and thus making explicit any significant events or changes impacting the supervisee's self-support.

### **Cell 5: The Supervisee and Client Relationship**

This lens focuses on two distinct aspects of the supervisee and client relationship.

First, the focus is on the 'between' of the supervisee and the client. The quality and strength of the working alliance is considered and the co-created "dance" of the relationship, (Parlett 1991) explored. When working in this cell, fundamental aspects of a co-emergent relational and dialogic stance are considered: mutual awareness raising, inclusion, attention to potential risks discussed and repeating patterns reflected upon. Both the supervisee's and supervisor's understanding of the nature of transference, counter-transference and co-transference are relevant here. In other words, what are we 'importing' or 'transferring' from one situation, (the there-and-then), to the co-emerging relational space between us, (the here and now). Our experience is that an understanding and appreciation of the power of this phenomenon is at least as necessary in organisational consulting and coaching contexts as it is in counselling/psychotherapeutic ones.

For instance, a supervisee vividly described her experience at the end of a first session with a vitally attractive young woman of her own age. She had emerged from the session tired, moving slowly and with difficulty, feeling as though she was suddenly at least a decade older. Later it became clear that the client's mother, who had been absent at times in the client's childhood, was now in active competition with her attractive daughter, whom she introduced "as if sisters". The client's care had come from a loving but physically limited grandmother, who the supervisee had resonated with on an embodied level as she tried to connect with the client and care for her whilst building the working alliance.

In organisational work this cell may require more focused attention as the relationships between supervisee and client may be quite complex and an important aspect of the supervisee's effectiveness. If a supervisee coaching a team has for example a prior relationship with the team's leader, this will inevitably impact his/her effectiveness and working alliance with the remaining members of the team. Issues of trust and transparency are crucial in recognising sub-groupings and prior relationships between the supervisee and various parts of the client organisation.

Second, the focus in this cell is on the strategies and interventions that the supervisee has made. This includes exploring the effect of their interventions and exploring alternative choices. The supervisee's recognition of the balance

of support and challenge with their client, consideration of future situations and possible alternative options is included in this lens. Here there is opportunity for creative supervision, (Lahad, 2000), such as sculpting, constellations, sand tray work, playing with metaphors or images, empty chair work or any other form of experimentation that illumines the work. One coachee recently described how much she had learnt in supervision from ‘embodying’ her client and struggling to find words as she sat in her client’s chair and took on her body posture, movements and breathing patterns.

### **Cell 6: The Supervisee and Client Field**

In this cell the focus is on the wider context or ‘background field factors that surround the supervisee and client figure. With reference to Figure 1 described earlier, this is the ‘Situation’ from which the supervisee/client work emerges. In our experience, this cell can be easily overlooked as it can be experienced as burdensome, restrictive or intrusive upon the supervisory figure. However, in our model, this cell is particularly important in shaping what is safely possible in the supervision itself.

Necessary work in this cell includes clarifying the details of the contract for the work both between client and supervisee, and with any other key stakeholders/involved parties such as the agency, training organisation, third-party contract holders, board, etc. The professional and ethical context of the work needs to be taken into account; for example any particular ethical codes/guidelines, legal documents, operational policies, risk guidance. Particularly relevant here are issues of accountability and responsibility for work carried out between the supervisee and client since in some professions, including psychotherapy and counselling, if the supervisee is not qualified, accountability for work done with the client rests, at least to some degree, with the supervisor.

Likewise, in coaching, issues of confidentiality, visibility of coaching work, reporting of outcomes, etc. will all be affected by who is the sponsor and contract holder for the work. Frequently this is not the coachee, but the third-party who has commissioned, and paid for, the work. As such, goals for sessions, expected outcomes, number and duration of sessions and even content of sessions can all be directly shaped by the wider field. This can create a delicate and complex boundary between the supervision figure and the wider field, which is essential to include in discussions when contracting and undertaking the work itself.

Similarly, in our experience, psychotherapy trainees beginning their clinical practice meet clients with dual diagnosis and fragile self-process more frequently than would have been the case twenty years ago. The need for relevant knowledge, grading of interventions and clear risk assessment is

evident and places a demand upon the content of the supervision sessions. This 'demand' might reasonably be seen as restrictive by the supervisee but seen as 'essential' by the supervisor who has more experience of the wider field conditions and shares accountability for the work.

### **Cell 7: The Supervisor in Focus**

As the previous example in cell 6 highlighted, supervisors have influence, accountability and sometimes direct responsibility for the work undertaken. Marie Adams, (2014) in "The Myth of the Untroubled Therapist" vividly describes how, at times, supervisors' personal lives bring concomitant challenges to the work which can be hard to acknowledge. In addition, having acknowledged these challenges, there remains the delicate issue of if and how to bring this to the supervisory process. Will it be helpful to the work to share our vulnerabilities, particular triggers or blind spots? Or is it necessary to 'bracket' these as best we can until, in our own supervision, we decide we can bracket no more or have to temporarily step back from work.

In psychotherapy/coaching supervision, our modality influences both our own approach and choices concerning these issues, as does our developmental stage as a supervisor. Our own 'internalised supervisor,' (Casement 1985) influenced by our experiences of significant supervisory relationships, also arrives in our supervisor's chair.

For example, during a process of long illness of a parent, a supervisor found herself working with three supervisees' who were employed in hospice settings, including one junior psychotherapy trainee. Her coaches were also professionals working with a cancer care charity. In the midst of this, another organisational supervisee announced that she had a new contract to work with a social care agency providing home care for terminally ill people wishing to die at home. The supervisor's sense was of frequently being 'inauthentic' in supervisory sessions due to 'bracketing' feelings of sadness, loss and enhanced empathic resonance.

A constant theme in the supervisor's own supervision was if/how to share the situation regarding her own parent with supervisees and whether this would support their work. Interestingly, the decision with each supervisee was slightly different; some heard quite a lot of the supervisor's own situation while others heard nothing as her judgement was that it would be burdensome or intrusive. Of course, whether that would have been the case cannot be known, but the delicacy of this ethical relational boundary was highlighted for a period of months.

### **Cell 8: The Supervisory Relationship**

In this cell, ongoing attention is given to the establishment and maintenance of the effective working alliance between supervisor and supervisee which underpins the work. This would be of course affected by how and whether the supervisor is chosen by the supervisee, is allocated or is selected for them.

Attending to this lens is important in ensuring that the relational contract is supportive and holding enough for the work to take place. And more than that, a focus on this cell can often be crucial in working through a parallel process emerging in supervision. A coaching supervisee may, for example, present in an unfamiliar way that reflects an aspect of their client's process, such as reluctance to present a client who wishes to remain unseen and unheard in meetings or whose history includes being consistently overlooked for promotion.

Working in awareness of the co-emergent relational stance means that both supervisor and supervisee must share an understanding of the importance of attending to this cell and of parallel process.

### **Cell 9: The Supervisory Field**

In this cell the professional context, including ethical awareness, is fully considered. Clarity is needed both about the contract for the work and the context/field in which the work takes place.

Relevant here are for example issues of dual relationships where managers/more senior practitioners in an organisation may be routinely supervising the clinical or coaching work of other staff. All of these issues we would describe as ones of contracting which relates to boundary issues such as when, where, how often, at what fee, confidentiality, visibility, etc. The three, or sometimes four, handed contracts with the potential complexities of responsibility and communication needs to be both as transparent as possible and explicitly agreed by all concerned.

Gilbert and Evans, (2000, p37), stated clearly that "*contracts work best if they are specific and have well-defined outcomes*". We agree with this but would also emphasise the potential complexity of contracting in many cases, so this cell highlights the need for renegotiating and re-contracting in coaching/clinical work, organisational consultancy and supervision itself.

One crucial aspect of the supervisory relationship and integral to contracting is an agreed understanding of the nature of confidentiality. For example, when a supervisee discloses the severity of his depression, occasional suicidal ideation and wish to continue seeing clients, the ethical issue is apparent. An agreement of limited confidentiality can support both supervisor and supervisee to discuss choices of action.

### **The Figure-Ground dance within the Relational Matrix**

Although each cell has been explored individually, most supervision sessions will touch upon several cells, following the figure of interest emerging from the dialogue between supervisor and supervisee and framed by client presentations as well as situational/contextual issues. The following example further illustrates the interplay between framing conditions and the figure of supervision:

*A supervisee undertaking organisational consulting work with a large public sector organisation brings to supervision a serious rupture between him and his client. The supervisee hadn't been to supervision in over 2 months having cancelled his last 6-weekly appointment without re-scheduling.*

*Listening to the narrative of what has happened between the supervisee and his client, the supervisor becomes aware of feeling inadequate herself. Although she knows the client organisation having undertaken some work there many years ago, she had not worked at a similar level of seniority as her supervisee. She became curious about her own self-support (cell 7) and decided to self-disclose. Her intervention supported the figure of supervision to shift from the narrative of the rupture (cell 1) to the supervisee's own lack of support and shame at having underperformed and let the client down (cell 4).*

*Upon exploration, the supervisor inquires further into the client presentation (CLIENT column, cells 1, 2 & 3) and an intensely politicised and antagonistic client environment is slowly uncovered. There was little relational support to be found in a culture where 'reaching out' was seen as weakness. By exploring possible options for interventions (cell 5) against the backdrop of the client presentation, it became clearer that the supervisee had little possibilities of a 'successful' intervention. Furthermore, by exploring contractual elements between supervisee and client (cell 6), it was also evident that there was not enough buy-in from various members of the top team to the work being performed by the supervisee.*

*The figure of the supervisee's failure and feelings of inadequacy needed to be viewed as emerging from the ground of the client situation, context and culture. Shame and feelings of inadequacy were part of the client field and alive and well in the transferential field between supervisor and supervisee. Although naming these against the backdrop of the client was important, it felt equally important to the supervisor to end the session by discussing the gap in attending supervision (cell 9) and make sure*

*that the supervisee felt supported enough to bring this difficult client to supervision. She wondered if the wider client culture of not reaching out also impacting the supervisory relationship. Renewing the supervisory contract was therefore helpful and supportive to both.*

## Summary

In summary, we hope we have shown that use of the Relational Matrix in a range of supervisory settings and practice applications reveals five key issues that we have listed below:

1. The need for supervisory processes to move fluidly across the 9 cells and the dangers of dwelling too long, or avoiding, any cells comprising the matrix. Although these cells can be discussed individually, in practice they are interconnected. For supervisory processes to flow smoothly the possibility of access to all cells is required.
2. In view of the interconnection of cells in the Matrix there is a consequent need for supervisors of organisational, coaching or psychotherapeutic/counselling work to be both aware of and trained in working with the different cells
3. We recognise that different supervisors will have preferences for particular cells dependent on their style of supervision, modality, field of practice, etc. We believe further research is needed to see if in particular contexts some cells appeal more and what particular cells are more likely to be avoided.
4. We have emphasised the importance of thoroughly exploring the ‘situation’ as outlined in Figure 1, (including key individuals/groups), as this is the ground/contextual and cultural conditions that frame what will emerge in sessions.
5. Accordingly, we have proposed that there exists a relational dependence of the supervisory ‘figure’, (the predominant content of supervisory sessions- cells 4, 5, 7 and 8), on the framing cells (cells 1, 2, 3, 6 and 9). Our thesis is that the supervisory figure, which includes the quality of the supervisory relationship, is a direct product of these framing or ground conditions. As such, although they may seem ‘peripheral’ to the supervisory figure, they should be discussed explicitly early on in supervision as they are central to the process and, we propose, preconfigure what arises in supervision. As such, we argue that processes identified in cells 1, 2, 3, 6 and 9 form the relational frame or ground of supervision.

## Conclusion

We hope the illustrations and descriptions of the Relational Matrix Model we have provided here will explicitly support both supervisors and supervisees in anchoring their explorations in a relational frame that highlights the complexity of all forms of supervisory work.

We wish to acknowledge the pivotal role of Hawkins and Shohet, (1989, 2006) in outlining relational processes operating between all members involved in a supervisory field/situation. We also wish to acknowledge their contribution in describing many of the individual aspects of the matrix. Likewise, we are grateful to and appreciative of Carroll and Gilbert's work, (2011), in describing these aspects in ways that are especially helpful and enabling of supervisees, as well as supervisors.

What we hope we have added to the literature is a clearer definition of what is meant by a "relational" model, a more nuanced definition of the supervisory "environment" and clarity regarding the importance of the environment in framing, supporting or potentially limiting what is possible within supervision sessions.

In particular we have proposed that supervisory issues arise as a direct product of situations: the supervisory figure emerges from the supervisory ground/frame and is *relationally dependent* on that frame. Consequently, the quality of the supervisory relationship is therefore *preconfigured by*, the content, processes and context of the relational context.

Accordingly, our Relational Matrix model, which rests on the Relational Change "SOS" framework, and develops Hawkins and Shohet's, (2006), "7-eyed" approach, places particular emphasis upon supervisors' abilities to attend to the frame/ground of supervision, as well as the relational process within sessions, since they are foundational to the subsequent process. We believe there are significant implications arising from this and in particular, we find ourselves wondering if certain contexts/situations provide the necessary, let alone sufficiently "good enough" framing conditions, to support excellent work. In all too many situations with which we are familiar, supervisors, supervisees and clients are all seeming to have to battle with these framing conditions, trying to find spaces, (physical and emotional), where good work can be carried out. We hope that our model makes explicit the risks and costs of attending to the supervision figure as if it were happening in an isolated bubble, without due cognisance of the relational interconnection to the wider field. We believe this raises important ethical issues relating to whether supervisors should intervene in the case of very toxic framing situations, if/how they might support requests for changes in framing conditions and how they can help clients, supervisees and themselves avoid the potentially disastrous consequences of working in

fragmented, blaming fields where relational interdependencies and connections between framing conditions and quality of work is effaced.

In this way, we hope we will contribute to further deconstruction of the individualistic myth that it is possible for people/clients to thrive in debilitating/dangerous field conditions and that therapy or a given organisational intervention is the sole mitigating factor to enable people to flourish. We find this issue often needs to be addressed directly in supervision and in some cases, supervisors and/or supervisees encouraged to raise awareness of this view with others in the wider field. In this way, relational supervision becomes an aspect of promoting healthy field conditions and one of a suite of Organisational Development, (OD), interventions.

In 1996, Carroll emphasised the need for supervisors to possess “*the ability to see problems and people in ever widening contexts ...*” (P. 85). The Relational Matrix model fleshes out more of these contexts in an explicit way and alerts supervisors to the very wide range of roles and responsibilities that impact on their task.

The model is evolving but has already been presented to a cohort of experienced practitioners in organisational and therapeutic work. Following their feedback, a second group is starting to use the model and take it out into a wider variety of contexts. We are also delighted that Jill Ashley-Jones has recently elected to use the model in her doctoral research exploring coaching supervision. Though her research we are keen to see how use of the model assists in coach development and achievement of coaching outcomes. We are also eager to see which particular cells of the model have most significance and attraction for coach supervisors. We hope to report on outcomes in due course.

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## Biographies

**Marie-Anne Chidiac**, is an experienced Gestalt psychotherapist, organisational consultant, coach, trainer and supervisor. In addition to her clinical practice, she currently works within both public and private sector organisations to facilitate change and coach leaders and teams. She has a background in consulting having worked with board level executives and led major change management programmes internationally. She is an associate of Ashridge Business School and co-founder of 'Relational Change', an organisation that works to develop relational skills in individuals, teams, organisations and communities. Marie-Anne holds a D.Psych in Public Works with a focus on the synthesis of Gestalt psychotherapy and Organisational Development.

**Sally Denham-Vaughan**, DPsych, has a background in psychology and senior leadership in the British National Health Service and now works internationally as a Gestalt practitioner, trainer and supervisor with organisations, communities, groups and individuals. She is qualified as a coach, psychotherapist, and organisational practitioner and specialises in the application of relational approaches to complex systems. She is an International Associate Faculty member with the Pacific Gestalt Institute, Advisory Board member at the Relational Center, Los Angeles, and academic advisor to the doctoral programme at Metanoia Institute, London. She is co-founder of Relational Change, an international organisation aiming to lead developments in relational theory and practice.

**Lynda Osborne**, D.Psych, has been involved in training and supervising counsellors and psychotherapists for over 30 years. After thirteen years in post she retired as Head of the Gestalt Department at the Metanoia Institute in London in 2012. Lynda was the founding Chair of the UKAGP: the United Kingdom's National Gestalt Organization. She is a Teaching and Supervising Member of GPTI and a member of HIPC TSC. Lynda is on the leadership team of Relational Change in the UK. She travels internationally training therapists, attending and presenting at conferences, visiting her family and enjoying new countries.

# HOW AM I WITH YOU? SEARCHING FOR A COLLABORATIVE WAY TO DESCRIBE RELATIONAL PATTERNS WITH CLIENTS

**Anthony Jones**

*Based on a Gestalt Project Seminar at GTA in April 2018, and a presentation at the 2017 GANZ conference in Canberra.*

## **Abstract**

Finding ways to articulate relationship dynamics with clients can be challenging due to problematic language in available theories, the shifting nature of the therapeutic relationship over time, and that some relational patterns were formed at a time in development before verbal language was consolidated. This paper explores a range of methods for collaboratively articulating the relational pattern for a single case study client, including applying psychological testing; attachment theory (Ainsworth, 2015; Bowlby, 1997; Tatkin & Hendrix, 2012); Character Styles theory (Johnson, 1994); Core Conflict Relational Themes theory (Book, 1998; Brown, 2017; Luborsky, 1998); and countertransference material (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2017; Wallin, 2015). The value of engaging in the articulation process itself with the client is also explored.

## **Introduction**

Generally after a time in therapy I ask clients, “How would you describe the way you are in relationships?” This question people really have a lot of trouble with. Relationships are described as “Ok” or “not Ok” in various shades, but the language to describe how people are in relationships seems to be not easy to reach. This is true for myself as a therapist too – it’s sometimes not easy for me to put into words what is happening in the therapeutic relationship – how I am, how the client is, and what happens between us. Sometimes my descriptions seem too rigid – for example I could say “you are an introvert” – and doesn’t really describe the relationship. So I set myself a somewhat optimistic goal of being able to describe relational patterns with clients. A second goal was to keep the description short, no longer than a couple of sentences, as beyond this it’s unlikely to be remembered or accepted as useful for clients. This paper follows my attempts to do this with one client, Max, who I will introduce shortly.

Aside from struggling to find the words in English, one of the challenges here is that the relationship itself shifts and changes during the course of therapy. At least part of the relational pattern formed at a time in childhood before verbal language development (Wallin, 2015). This means that the pattern is held as implicit memory, and is not available to conscious recall – though the pattern can be enacted and resonance felt.

Of course, there are many theoretical frameworks available to aid therapists' understanding of relationship dynamics, but the writing can be dense, jargon heavy and the theory extensive, detracting from the accessibility of this information for clients. Some diagnostic language can also be easily taken as pejorative (O'Brien, 2011; Oldham, 2010). Terms like borderline, masochistic, narcissistic, or neurotic (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Johnson, 1994; World Health Organization, 1992) can be hard to use in a compassionate way with clients, even if these terms are drawn from theories that help making sense of the client's process. Finally, the language of some frameworks (such as DSM-5) can also be individualistic, excluding the therapists role in the relationship except as an implied the recipient of an implied deficiency in the other – separation anxiety, dependent personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) – which does not support the development of a shared language around relationships between the therapist and client. The approach I took to address these challenges was to use multiple methods to explore of the client's relational patterns, and to view this task as a work in progress that would be refined and revised together.

The methods used involved applying psychological testing; attachment theory (Ainsworth, 2015; Bowlby, 1997; Tatkin & Hendrix, 2012); Character Styles theory (Johnson, 1994); Core Conflict Relational Themes theory (Book, 1998; Brown, 2017; Luborsky, 1998); and countertransference material (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2017; Wallin, 2015). At the outset though, I'd like to make the point that the theory chosen, or tests chosen, are relatively less important than this process of engaging with the client on this topic. Consistent with the 2017 GANZ conference theme, each successive method sought to move closer to the phenomenology of the client's relationships, and towards greater collaboration in developing a shared understanding of their pattern with me.

### **Case study**

The case material presented in this paper is drawn from a single long term therapy client "Max". Identifying information has been removed and the client has given permission to the publication of this paper. The reflections are written "through the therapists eyes", and as such need to be held lightly as they represent my perspective on the relationship and therapy, which will be different to that of Max's.

## **Presentation**

Max requested therapy after a relationship he was interested in did not eventuate. He was very distressed, with chronic low level suicide ideation and sense of not belonging in the world. He expressed a strong rejection of social norms to do with capitalism, work, and monogamy. Max smoked a lot of marijuana (10-12 cones a day), without which he experienced the days as long and filled with a sense of existential emptiness and despair. He was not overtly self-hating but had high levels of hopelessness. In sessions, he would say that there was no place for him in the world, and that “he didn’t ask to be born” and that he would have to “cut off” parts of himself to be accepted. He believed that his recovery would involve finding and living in a community but believed that it didn’t exist or would require him to do unwanted things.

At his initial assessment, Max’s scores on a depression screening tool (Beck, 1996) were at very severe level, indicating the presence of a Major Depressive Disorder. His scores on the Outcome Questionnaire .45.2. (Lambert, 2011) indicated symptom distress at a very high level, with significant disruption to interpersonal relationship and to occupational functioning.

## **Background**

Max is a 28 y.o. male of New Zealand background. He is not currently in a relationship, and had a child from a previous relationship with whom he has no contact. He is employed casually as a delivery driver. His parents are alive, and are married, and he has no siblings. There was no early childhood interpersonal trauma or abuse, although he did have a near death experience from medical complication around 6 months old due to an adverse immunisation reaction. He stated that no single “Type I” traumatic incidents had occurred throughout his life, although he did experience repeated illnesses like glandular fever in his childhood and adolescence. These illnesses became a source of frustration for him and focus of relationship with mother, in that he perceived her attempts to care for him as carrying a message that he was easily scared or made ill that limited his life.

According to Max, his experience in primary school was positive, but his high school years were characterised by experiences of not fitting in and dropping out. He joined religious youth group, and moved towards leadership level but lost faith and came to believe that he was tolerated only if silent. By the time Max was 28, he had over 20 intimate relationships, and these were frequently short term and characterised by an initial passion then disengagement. This pattern suggests both difficulty maintaining interpersonal relationships and a difficulty “launching” into adulthood (McConville, 2007).

### **Initial therapeutic relationship**

Initially, Max's way of engaging with me as his therapist was complex. He would tell me that he needed me to take his feelings away and that he needed something to "fix" him quickly. And yet he would also say that therapy was pointless. He was very bright, and had an arguing style, which meant that a purely cognitive behavioural approach was not effective. He could appear irritated, and told me not to talk about his authentic self, "that's hippy stuff", he said, and he "didn't know what it meant". He could be moved to be angry if he felt others' needs were being imposed on him, and dismissive if he thought I was peddling fantasies.

And yet he would always come to sessions.

For me, being with him felt like being with someone in a deep despair, who struggled to access his own power and who had a way of reaching out in an angry, brittle way. For him, he sometimes wondered if I dreaded his sessions or had secret goal to get him into full time work. I didn't dread the sessions, but he was picking up on something important that I will come back to at the end. I certainly both liked and struggled with him.

### **Articulating relational patterns**

Max's therapy covered a range of areas, including his experience of depression and his marijuana use, that are beyond the focus of this paper. Somewhat artificially, this paper focus only on aspects of his therapy that are relevant to the goal of articulating relationship patterns, beginning with the use of psychological testing.

### **Psychological testing.**

Gestalt Therapists have tended to be a little adverse to the use of psychological testing, in part due to problems with the implicit adoption of the role of "tester as expert" (Kline, 2013) and difficulty incorporating testing into a relational framework. While testing offers a measurable framework, it is typically conducted with high therapist distance and low collaboration with the client. So using psychological testing in a paper in about relational work might seem a bit incongruous, but I would argue that psychological tests can be used embedded in a relational approach, and offer useful information.

The first test Max completed was the Inventory of Altered Self-capacities (IASC, Briere & Runtz, 2002). The IASC was developed by John Briere, a leading trauma researcher, in an attempt to identify emotional and relational consequences of trauma in a way that standard PTSD screening tools, such as the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist (Weathers, 2013) don't reveal.

The IASC clusters responses into 3 areas: relationships, sense of self, and emotional regulation, each of which contains several subscales (Briere & Runtz, 2002). The relationship cluster contains measures of Interpersonal Conflicts, Abandonment Concerns, and the tendency to switch suddenly between Idealisation and Disillusionment of people. The sense of self cluster contains measures of Identity Impairment (broken down into self-awareness and tendency to confuse others' emotions with your own), as well as a measure of Susceptibility to Influence. The emotional regulation cluster has subscales that attempt to differentiate underline mood instability from emotional skill deficits, as well as measuring what Briere terms "tension reducing activities" (Briere & Runtz, 2002, p.2). Typically tension reducing activities are external activities intended to soothe internal states (that may not actually address the problem).

Max's results on this test indicated the presence of interpersonal conflicts and heightened (but not severe) concern with abandonment. The sense of self cluster pointed to difficulties with self-awareness, with knowing who he is and what he feels - but not with losing himself in others. Notably, his susceptibility to influence score was towards the bottom end of the range -which may be interpreted as a difficulty letting others in. The emotional regulation cluster suggests an underlying mood instability and high levels of "tension reducing activities" which probably reflect marijuana use.

Following my goal of articulating relationship patterns in an understandable way, one translation of these results might be into a set of statements: "I will watch to see you don't leave me"; "I struggle to know what I want and feel"; and perhaps "I don't want you too close". These statements, and the test results, need to be held lightly, as they do have limitations, and at best they represent a static reflection of something that is dynamic, and also mostly reflect only what is available to consciousness.

This point, the access of information to consciousness is relevant to the second area explored in the therapy with Max, which has to do with attachment.

### **Attachment theory**

Attachment research was initially looking in detail about mother-child relationships, and later this research was applied to adult relationships (Wallin, 2015). According to this theory, attachment relationship patterns are set down in stable form by the time a child is 18 months old, and by and large these map are for life - although a map can be partly rewritten (Brown & Elliott, 2016). As noted earlier, because the attachment map is developed before verbal language and narrative memory is formed, they therefore can only be expressed through enactment - transference - not verbally (Wallin, 2015). Attachment researchers have identified four main types of attachment patterns: secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized (Mooney, 2010).

When a child's needs are met in a satisfactory way they develop a secure attachment pattern. They feel free to express themselves, to explore the world and to come back home (Mooney, 2010). They bring this security into their adult relationships—Tatkin and Hendrix (2012) refer to them as “Anchors”, as in they are anchored in themselves and can be an anchor for others. Now if things don't go well for the child, they can develop insecure attachment patterns. As adults, these people can have trouble being in relationships (Brown, 2017).

The first type of insecure attachment is the avoidant type. These people tend to be remote from relationships, dismissing of feelings, and are not great at expression (Tatkin & Hendrix, 2012). They're the “Islands” – Tatkin and Hendrix's analogy again. The second type of insecure attachment is the ambivalently insecure type. They're the “Waves” (Tatkin & Hendrix, 2012), and their freedom to explore away from a safe base is inhibited. Their ambivalence is passionate, and is more like an intense on and off experience rather than indifference. Finally, there is the disorganised type, a mix of island and wave, who can flip between insecure styles in a seemingly random way and this style may arise from an experience of complex childhood trauma (Wallin, 2015).

The task I set myself is to be able to articulate attachment patterns with clients, with Max in this case. The gold standard for assessing attachment is the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI, George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985). The AAI is a structured qualitative interview, which takes a solid hour to administer, and about 20 hours to formally score (if this level of analysis is needed) (Main, 1991). The time needed to administer, score and be trained in the use of the AAI tends to make the interview a more useful research tool than a practical tool for therapy.

So I used a couple of short cuts. The first short cut was to follow the work of Dan Brown (Brown, 2017) and extract a couple of key questions from the AAI. Rather than ask all the questions in the AAI, clients are asked to come up with adjectives and specific examples that best describe their early childhood *relationship* with their mother (and other primary caregivers). Interpretation is based on the congruence between the adjectives and the examples. People with an avoidant style can tend to initially describe their relationships as “ok” but struggle to come up with details. In contrast, an ambivalently attached person can give a lot of details, but the details are often off topic, and there can be a conflict between examples and adjectives (Brown, 2017)

For Max, his descriptions of his parental relationships weren't awful but the details were sparse and he had difficulty recalling much. His father came across as kind but sometimes remote, his mother caring but engulfing. The sparseness of the details tends to match the avoidant style.

The second short cut I used instead of doing a full AAI was to use another psychological test, the Adult Attachment Scale Revised (AAS-R, Collins, 1996; Collins & Read, 1990). This test looks at three dimensions: Comfort with closeness, Experiencing others as dependable, and Anxiety. Someone with a tendency to experience secure attachment relationships, is likely to report being very comfortable with closeness, having good sense of others dependability, and not being very anxious in relationships. A person with an ambivalent attachment style will tend to a relatively high capacity to be close, but less sense of others as dependable and experiences high anxiety in relationship (Collins & Read, 1990). Those with an avoidant attachment style will tend to not be comfortable with closeness, experiences others as not really dependable but not really experience themselves anxious in relationships because they are not in them.

These patterns are shown in Figure 1.

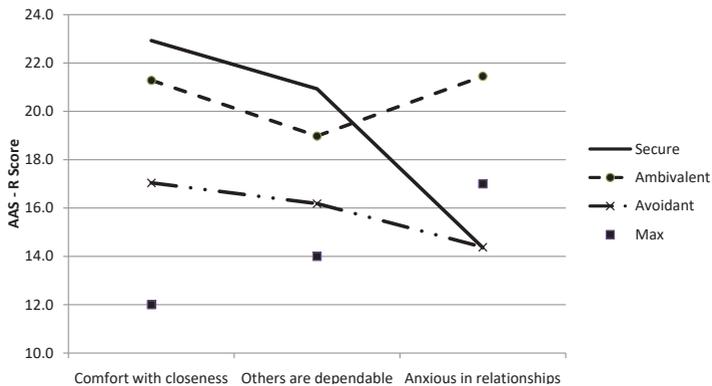


Figure 1. Attachment style (adapted from Collins & Read, 1990)

This figure is compiled from several studies in (Collins & Read (1990), and the lines are actually fairly broad bands – if shown the error bars would be quite large.

Max's results show that he has low comfort with closeness, finds others not really dependable, and some anxiety in relationships. This pattern is closest to the Avoidant style, but doesn't match this style completely, as the elevated anxiety suggests a mix of attachment styles. This point is interesting for Max, as he can often display avoidant behaviours but sometimes will unexpectedly fall into something different in relationships. An attempt to communicate this visually might look like Figure 2, where the size of the circles suggests the

relative dominance of each attachment style.

In Figure 2 the issue with closeness comes through more strongly, and the presence of some internal security is acknowledged – his parents weren't abusive so this may be expected. His tendency to flip into relational anxiety is also indicated and invites curiosity as to how and when this might occur.

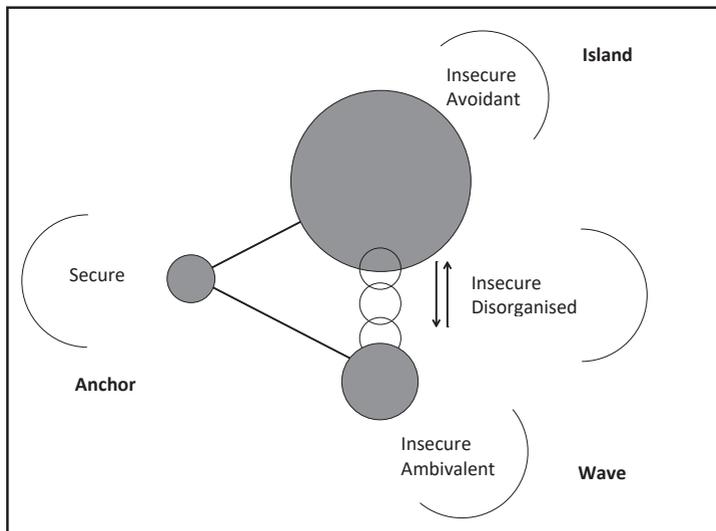


Figure 2. Max's attachment styles visually represented

More importantly, my task of communicating relationship patterns in a way that is useful to clients, needs to include Max's response to this information. Max was interested in this information, but not strongly, and he reflected that he didn't seem to fit any pattern. A further problem was the material, although interesting was jargon-heavy and not exactly relational in delivery.

I then tried another approach, drawing on Johnson's (1994) Character Styles work.

### Character styles

Johnson's (1994) work is one of many ways to look at developmental tasks in early life and the impact of disruptions to needed support at each stage. According to his theory, where basic needs for safety – including emotional safety - are not met, a schizoid character style may result which can manifest in the theme "I have no right to exist". Table 1 summarises key elements of Johnson's theory.

Table 1

*Character Styles and their manifestations*

Developmental Period	Character	Issue	Manifestation
Attachment	Schizoid (safety)	Others source of pain not comfort	"I have no right to exist"
	Oral (need)	Needs denied or too great to be met	"I don't need" "I give myself for you"
Self with Others	Symbiotic (self-Boundaries)	Identity found in others, not self	"I am nothing without you". "You are taking me over"
	Narcissistic (self-esteem)	Identity found in false self, not impoverished real self	"I must be perfect, special, never vulnerable" "I am disgusting"
	Masochistic (freedom)	Control of self-initiative surrendered to overpowering other	"I give up. I'll be good" "I will never give in" ( <i>to you</i> )
Self in System	Oedipal (love-sex)	Disruption/splitting of sex and love impulses	

Note: Adapted from Johnson (1994).

For the purposes of this article, I'd like to note that the manifestations are relational, even when written in individualistic language. For example, the theme "I have no right to exist" implies "I have no right to exist *with you, or in the world*"; a position of "I don't need" becomes "*I don't need anything from you*"; and for the narcissistic style the belief "I must be perfect" could be translated "I must be perfect in *your eyes*".

Max's difficulty with surrendered self-initiative seems to be represented in the "masochistic" style in this theory, but again the language is difficult to communicate in a way that is easily engaged with. My attempt to make this information more accessible involved making up small cards based on the therapeutic goals Johnson spells out, and also a card to match each a character style, shown in Figure 3.

In Figure 3, a "hated" child refers to schizoid character style, "abandoned" indicates an oral character style, "defeated" indicates a masochistic style and so on. These cards could then be used as a prompt for clients as to what resonated for them. This approach, was also somewhat useful, but could be confronting and not attuned to the potential evocative impact of the statements on the cards. In looking for another alternative, I turned to another relationship map, this time the Core Conflict Relational Theme (CCRT, Book, 1998).

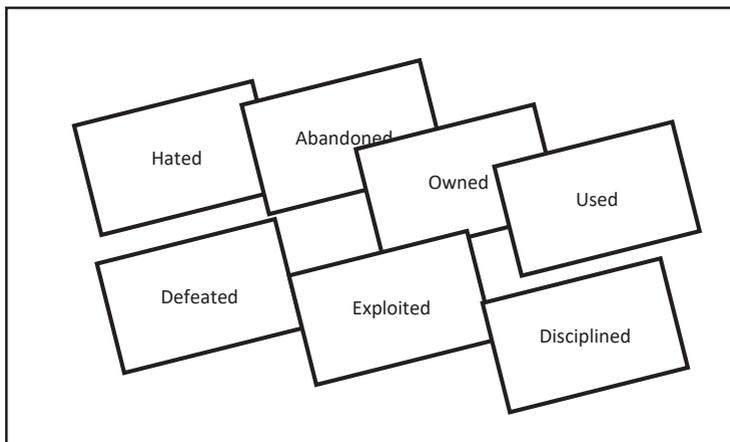


Figure 3. Character styles cards. Based on Johnson (1994).

### **Core Conflict Relational Themes**

According to the work of Book (1998), the CCRT is a later relational map developed around aged 3-4 years of age, which is built on top of the earlier attachment map. The internal CCRT map coalesces at a time when a child's verbal language is coming in, which means that the map is more available to consciousness. The CCRT are based on family and cultural messages about what is and is not possible in relationships, and contains expectations about how you will be treated (Luborsky, 1998). People who have problems in this area tend to have trouble with relationships, in contrast to people whose problems are the attachment area, where the trouble is being in relationships (Brown, 2017). The CCRT is expressed as statement that contains three components: a statement of a person's wish (W) in relationships, the actual or perceived consequences they expect from the other person in the relationship (RO), and the subsequent response from the person themselves (RS) (Book, 1998).

The benefit of this approach is that it is relatively jargon free – instead of referring to masochistic processes, people are asked to talk about things like how they met a partner, what was the initial promise or attraction for them in the other person, and how the relationship ended. People are usually able to identify things like this. The method of articulating the CCRT is also explicitly collaborative, in which the therapist and client exchange ideas together in order to develop the CCRT statement. The procedure is to take a history of all intimate partner relationships and for the therapist to cluster themes that occur in common across relationships into wishes, expected responses, and responses from self. The client then checks the theme for accuracy. According

to Brown (2017) accuracy can be confirmed if the client agrees, and then suggests a refinement; or starts seeing examples reflecting the CCRT in their life. A CCRT may also hold some accuracy if the client rejects the statement but displays an increase in symptoms, but is likely to be inaccurate if the session or client gets confused.

In Max's case we sorted through approximately 20 relationships, and the CCRT theme we came up with together was:

*Wishes (W)*: "In each relationship I repeatedly look for someone who will bring romance, fun, and sex, who will want me and want to be with me. I look for someone who will value what I do, with whom who I can exchange with experiences and ideas that will enhance us both. I also look for someone with whom I can form connections free from the restrictions social norms"

The social norms he referred to are expectations regarding monogamy and employment.

*Expected responses from the other person RO*: "What I typically find instead is that the other person's interest in me is often not maintained for very long or can't exist in the face with my or their interest in other relationships. Sometimes the other person seems to break their agreement with me about their interest in me.

The initial promise disappears. Here, the values that he holds in common are insufficient to maintain the relationship, and sometimes the community around the relationship can be critical or invalidating of the relationship. This agreement he refers to is like an unstated, implied psychological contract.

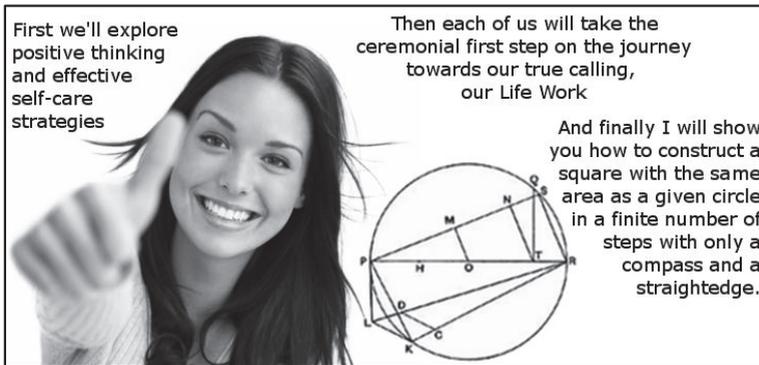
*Subsequent response (RS)*: "I react by either feeling distant from the other person or from my own feelings, or by feeling very distressed and depressed. Where I see a broken agreement I can react with mistrust, anger or disappointment. Where invalidation occurs I can feel silenced and unwelcome".

It seems he either becomes distant or collapses. The experience of the broken implied agreement from the other is important as it is linked to bitterness and self-defeat. Although this CCRT could be refined, now we are getting close to articulating something together, in a language that is easier to understand.

One use of the CCRT approach is to generate hypothetical responses, to predict unfolding reactions, including within the therapeutic relationship. Which brings me to my last approach for articulating relationships, the use of therapist self-disclosure.

### Therapist self-disclosure

After a particularly difficult session, Max emailed me a graphic that he created, shown in Figure 4:



*Figure 4.* Max's meme

He wrote with it:

*I hate it when it feels like Anthony is pushing normy shit on me” and by this he meant things like “people have meaning, people suiciding is bad, employment is an important part of your life, you can be content. Or like, you can have an intimate friendship with this person you’re romantically interested in without damaging your other relationships”.*

The previous session hadn't ended particularly well, Max was quite distressed, and very fixed on the impossibility of having his needs met. I was attempting suggest that there was another way, a bit clumsily perhaps, and a bit too in my head. I was also uncomfortable with having to end the session with Max feeling so distressed, and rightly or wrongly made a statement that “It’s not a comfortable way to end a session.... for me either.”

About which Max wrote:

*“I was pretty annoyed. Like, what am I meant to do with that? Wanna sit down and talk about it for an hour? I never get to leave a session in a comfortable way, I never get to wake up or go to sleep in a comfortable way, or eat comfortably. That’s why I’m coming to therapy. I keep thinking about what you said about not having the secret to happiness that you’re just refusing to tell me”.*

I felt uncomfortable to receive this, and looked for a way to respond. I acknowledged his anger, and the risk he took in telling me, and invited him to ask me directly the question that his anger held. I offered my sense of his anger as something brittle. I thought about how his anger might function in relationships to create a stalemate with me, as if to push back against something that feels like it can’t be born, towards a painful desire.

However, while offering validation and attempting to articulate again the question of “how am I with you” may have been of benefit, my responses may also have asked Max in the somewhat difficult and unequal position of having to reveal himself, specifically in his anger towards me, without me revealing anything about myself. In order to reveal myself, I had to own my actions and stand by my feelings at the end of the previous session.

Then, and other times, I disclosed how a turning away can arise in me, and even if it was a mild form of turn as it was here, still is a turning away. I also acknowledged to Max that my remark at the end of the session could have been experienced as a request that he look after me. I said to Max that “I do not need you to take on this role” and that “I offered this comment in the spirit of showing that your discomfort matters to me.” In this I stood by my feelings, even the messy ones, and affirmed that these have a place in relationship with him. To my mind, even this small self-disclosure led to a very useful exchange about his feelings of being misunderstood at last session, his anger towards me, and a reflection on the power dynamic between us.

I’d like to go a bit further with this. I was looking for a structure to support me to show myself to him a bit more than what I did here. The framework I used is drawn from a relatively recent article by Spagnuolo Lobb (2017). Spagnuolo Lobb “tries to overcome the individualistic language of contact” styles (p. 28). The point she makes is that even if the concepts underlying terms like introjecting, retroreflection were originally intended to be relational, the language describes “what one person does with another, not what happens between the two” (p. 29). The terms she came up with to describe contact are shown in Table 2, and are not necessarily sequential steps but are better considered as

overlapping layers of harmonies, each building on the previous layer. According to Spagnuolo Lobb, the clients capacity to contact the therapist in the present is influenced both by their developmental acquisition of relational competencies or skills, combined with the relationship with the therapist as it is unfolding. Spagnuolo Lobb likened this to a dance set to music, in which “the client’s acquired contact skills belong to the background experience (the acquired music, or polyphonic development of domains), whilst the dance, the actual process of contact between psychotherapist and client, is the figure.” (p. 31).

Table 2

*Domains for contact co-creation*

<b>Domains of contact co-creation</b>
To intuit each other / resonate with each other To perceive each other
To recognise each other / intentional resonance To adjust to one another
To take bold steps together To have fun
To reach each other To let oneself go to the other / take care of the other

*Note:* Adapted from Spagnuolo Lobb (2017)p. 34.

To return to Max’s email, he states that he doesn’t expect that I will be there for him when he is feeling bad, in effect that he expects that I will not be able to see him. Applying Spagnuolo Lobb’s (2017) framework generates the hypothesis that Max’s experience is more than an expectation though, and that in the state he was in, that he was unable to perceive me as existing at all for him as a person. Spagnuolo Lobb’s framework places such a rupture in the capacity to perceive each other at an early phase in the development of contact (Table 2). The abruptness and absoluteness of the rupture is reminiscent also of the sudden shifts in Max’s relational contact revealed in the exploration of this attachment and CCRT styles earlier in this paper.

Checking this hypothesis with Max involved asking him whether he felt isolated, distance from everyone, and unable to perceive that anyone was there (including myself) when writing the email. He agreed. He spoke of how long the days were and how this filled him with despair. His experience suddenly reminded me of something from my own history, back in high school. I went to a school that was pretty awful in many ways, and one of the more minor

ways that I experienced it as awful was that some classes were excruciatingly boring. I remembered managing these hour long classes by drawing 60 circles and colouring them in one by one as each minute passed. I shared this with Max, and he told me of how in school he would take an almond and try to make the lesson pass by eating it as slowly as he could, to see if this took the whole hour. Disclosing my own experience perhaps allowed him a sense of being resonated with in his isolation, initiating a repair to the relationship based on returning to the very first dance step of Spagnuolo Lobb's framework (Table 2), to "resonate with each other" (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2017, p. 32).

I was struck by a sense of how Max saw me while writing the email – and commented that for him at that time I was "an almond", barely there at all as a person. Max acknowledged some truth in this – that he saw his emails to me as a place to file his "shit" feelings. He then also recognised that I might be impacted, and this evoked a feeling of sadness and a little guilt in him. Through this exchange, he was able to perceive me a little again, and have the sense that I could perceive him.

The dance continued. These kind of relational exchanges repeated with Max over time, and to my mind (which may be different from Max's perspective) were one of the things that made the most difference in therapy. Over time, Max's life began to change. Although he continued to struggle, he smoked less marijuana, began to find places of intellectual and social belonging, began to engage in activities he valued, and was less certain that his future was hopeless.

## **Conclusion**

My search for a way to collaborate on the task of articulating relational patterns with this client traversed a range of frameworks, each one generating a version or hypothesis about Max's pattern. From psychological testing was drawn a sense of his watchfulness in relationships, and his difficulty in knowing what he wanted and felt. From attachment theory was drawn a sense of his discomfort with closeness and an expectation of others' unreliability, reflecting a tendency for an avoidant style from Max in relationships, but also revealing the potential for sudden shifts into a disorganising anxiety in relationships. From Character Styles theory came recognition of the importance of regaining self-initiative, and a coping strategy emphasising both "giving up" and "never giving in" to another demands. The CCRT method began to pull together these separate threads into a summary of Max's wishes, expectations, and reactions in relationships. Spagnuolo Lobb's (2017) articulation of the dance steps through which contact between people is created provided a framework that supported an understanding of the sudden shifts into despair as occurring with a loss of the ability to perceive another's presence. This framework also pointed the

way to repair through Max regaining a sense of resonating with another, which occurred in this case through therapist self-disclosure.

While some of the descriptions could be summarised in a few sentences, the process itself was not succinct and was interwoven with the therapy and the therapy relationship. Each framework was useful in part for the content offered, but perhaps more so for the opportunity to support Max and I to engage in the therapeutic relationship in a real and meaningful way.

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## **Biography**

Anthony Jones holds an Advanced Diploma Gestalt Therapy from GTA and M Psych (Clinical) from Swinburne University. Anthony is a clinical psychologist and Gestalt Therapist with many years' experience in the health and welfare sector. He currently works in community health and private practice, and has a particular focus on trauma and dissociation. Prior to working as a therapist, Anthony also worked in an industrial sugar mill for 10 years in earlier times.

# ON WRITING AND THE ART OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

**Leanne O'Shea**

Why write? It's a question I ask myself often enough, and facing up to a deadline or worse still waiting for the inevitable email from an editor who has lost all patience and the remaining shreds of their generosity, I wonder at this process that in equal measure evokes dread and delight. In the moments of questioning though, it's always the dread, and dread often mixed with a sense of failure and inadequacy. It's a process, familiar enough by virtue of it being a long and oft-repeated struggle, and one I mostly manage to find my way through. But does this make it any easier? Maybe, but on a bad day I'd probably hedge my bets.

Writing presents us with a challenging dilemma. It's often a necessary step on the path to becoming a therapist. Written work typically forms the basis of much academic assessment, and remains a significant factor in the processes required for professional accreditation. As such, it's rarely something we can avoid. But few people like writing, and even fewer think it's something they can do well. But necessity aside, I want argue that writing is such a rich resource that I don't think we should be content to letting it languish in the margins as an option for only those few who dare. Let me explain...

Much of the focus on writing, the kind of writing we might consider beyond the requirements of study, relates to publication. It remains the primary way of gaining professional recognition. And while important, what I think is at risk of being lost with this focus on publication, is the development of reflective practices that have as their basis some form of writing. This might be in the form of journaling, those personal notes that give testimony to the hard work of cultivating the capacity to be engaged, not just in the work we do with clients, but in our willingness to explore the impact of our clients on our lives, the things we struggle with, agonise about, react to, weep over.... A reflective writing practice can be a process which engages us deeply in our own growth and our ongoing commitment to learn.

## **Writing as reflective practice**

If I have a regret some twenty years into being a therapist, and in truth I probably have more than a few, it would be that I did not manage to continue (with any consistency) the practice of journaling began in my late teens. Somewhere in the decade that followed, I lost my appetite for the kind of

courageous self-reflection that poured itself onto the hand-written pages of carefully selected journals. Those journals, I discovered, could too easily be read by others. Thoughts rendered in such an unselfconscious, dis-inhibited way were too easily misconstrued and misused by others. No longer trusting a process I had naively assumed was mine and mine alone, my writing, now too considered, was underpinned by a reflexive second-guessing of my thoughts that stripped away the value of a process I had cherished. In later years I've often kept note-books of ideas, conference presentations or workshops that I've attended, but they remain sterile by comparison. And my dalliance with computer-based journals, effective to some extent in that they mostly address privacy concerns, lack the visceral and embodied feel of ink on paper, and the labor required to form and shape words that cannot so easily be erased.

And the regret? A self-reflective process compromised and pushed into forms that have been less satisfying, and in that process, much rich material has been lost.

It's not a regret that has its basis from some imagined lost opportunity for literary greatness, I never held such pretensions. But rather that I understand that I have compromised my own reflective capacity, and lost much of the richness to be had from a detailed account of my practice over many years. I understand this only too well when I read the work of authors like Irving Yalom and Oliver Sacks. They are, unquestionably, gifted writers, but much of the strength of their work lies in what has been a life-long commitment to journaling. Their writing is vivid and deeply textured, detailing not just the lives and struggles of their patients, but their struggles, deeply nuanced and laid bare for the reader to see and better understand.

Rather than the academic articles, theoretical reflections or even the kind of evidence-based research that is currently so de rigueur, it is this kind of writing that most moves and stirs me, pushing me to stretch and think and grow. It is writing that is experience-near, phenomenologically rich, and courageously self-aware. In this sense, writing that is fundamentally informed by core gestalt principles.

To return to my regret, it's not just that I've missed recording so much of my own process, but that too few of us do. And the loss is the availability of material that would create a different ground for our conversations together as clinicians. By this I largely mean case material, but not case studies as we typically see them, which invariably stand as neatly crafted stories of therapeutic success, but rather accounts that lay bare the souls of therapists who struggle against the often immovable weight of human suffering.

If there was one project I would like to support, it would be the development of peer-based writing groups that would have as their shared project, the creation

and sharing of case-based memoir writing that reflects these very struggles. With a view to publication? Potentially, for while I can appreciate the value of engaging in this task privately and within the confines of a trusted group, the benefit to wider community of sharing such work should not be underestimated. At a minimum, it would serve as a defense against encroaching sterility of training programs that move ever-further away from experientially-based learning that has self-awareness as a primary goal.

But the risk of such sharing such writing, either with a group or for publication, invites considerable personal vulnerability, evoking a multitude of fears. The fear of not being good enough, of not being able to write, of having nothing to say, of being judged... and when it comes to publication, let's not forget the very real fear of being edited.

Let me digress briefly and say something about the role and burden of editing. It truly is a thankless task, and I've lived both sides of this divide.

Being an editor is no easy task (and editing takes many forms). When editing a journal, it is the looming nightmare of having no or not enough articles to publish. It is the personal cost of having to beg, cajole, and persuade others to write. Against this reality, the risk is that editors reach for the same voices, not from any desire to privilege those who write more easily, but because it is so hard to find people willing to take the risk. Then there's the actual editing bit. Not easy. Engaging with the often tenuous threads of an emerging writer's fragile self-esteem requires a delicate touch; how to support without shaming, encourage without demoralizing, all the while maintaining a dialogue that feels collaborative, respectful and robust. And I know that writers submit work in various states of completion, everything from half-finished to perfectly formatted, but often with the implicit rider – change nothing! It's a treacherous path to navigate, with the risk of bruising well-defended egos on the one hand, and the crushing of the aspirations of fledgling writers on the other.

And the other side? Being a writer? I know what it is to want to avoid the editor's gaze, and more particularly the dreaded 'red pencil'. I've had to find my way through the process of subjecting my work to eyes and opinions of another. In the face of being critiqued or challenged or being asked for something different than what I've provided, it can be hard not to feel the pull of a defensive reactivity, understandable at one level, but a position that neglects to account for the effort and care that I know editors bring to this task. There are those to whom I owe a debt of gratitude, and those I need belatedly to thank for their time and energy and for the care I perhaps have not always recognized or appreciated in the moment. Too often their labors go unappreciated.

I know too what it is to promise and fail to deliver, either in fact through offering up something that feels so far short of what I had hoped for or

imagined. It can be an excruciating process, for all involved, and the inherent difficulties mean that much of what might be instructive or interesting never makes it into print.

I'm not sure how to change this, although a long held commitment to cultivating a community of writers within our Australian and New Zealand community remains for me a pressing concern.

I understand the reluctance of writers, I can more than appreciate the complexities that need to be navigated in the collaboration between writer and editor, and perhaps more importantly, writer and audience. Several possibilities come to mind that might better support this process.

Firstly, we need more opportunities to support the process of writing. It would seem that in much academic training, gestalt included, there is a move away from experiential processes. The possible (and perhaps only) benefit of this is a greater focus on academic writing. This in and of itself serves an important role in developing new writers, but perhaps what is at risk of being lost is an emphasis on developing more reflexive writing practices amongst students and emerging therapists. By this I mean writing that engages with the immediacy of the therapeutic process, all with a view to exploring and deepening the awareness and understanding of the therapist.

But any writing is hard to do in isolation. In saying this I understand the writing itself is often done alone, but without support and without the experience of testing ideas and words with trusted others, it can be hard to find the momentum need to finish, refine and re-work the various ideas and drafts that are an inevitable part of the process. Writing groups, can be a crucial support for this process, and in collaboration with the journal, GANZ is actively exploring how we might support a number of groups that would support this aim. It's a model that has been used with great effect in other parts of the world.

Secondly, it's important that there are places that support a variety of forms. The Gestalt Review and the British Gestalt Journal, are long-standing gestalt journals, but each with their own well-developed style. Even the idea of approaching these publications can feel intimidating. A newer option, developed primarily for students and those previously unpublished is New Gestalt Voices. This wonderful initiative provides a much needed entry point for those that might lack the confidence to approach the more established journals. Of course the GANZ Journal is not to be forgotten, and many new writers have found their voice amongst these pages. While upholding a commitment to excellence, I for one have appreciated the often flexible and creative approach of the journal's current and previous editors.

Writing for publication won't happen unless more of us take up the challenge to write. And I urge this, not so much for the sake of publication, but

because I genuinely believe that writing and the reflective process it necessarily entails is a rich resource for better understanding what we do as therapists, not just personally but collectively as we find ways of taking the risk to share what we do write.

It is an important form of research; a reflexive engagement and one thick with possibilities. It perhaps falls outside of the push towards evidence-based projects that seek to justify the efficacy of gestalt, but it is, I believe, more closely aligned with the theoretical base that underpins our approach. In saying this I don't mean to be naïve or even parochial, I understand as much as anyone the threat to gestalt if we are not able to willing to articulate what we do. But I'm clear this needs to be balanced against an understanding that success as a therapist has much less to do with interventions that can be observed, tested and validated, and much more to do with a critically reflective awareness that is willing to inhabit, understand and share the complex, dark and troubling places that working as a therapist necessarily involves. Writing, and writing with a kind of undefended, courageous honesty, opens that door and fosters the spirit of inquiry that stands at the heart of the best kind of research.... description of what it means to be a therapist, and of what it means to be human, and all the glory, shame, despair, love and hope that this entails. It is for these ends that we should write.

*If you have some interest in participating in writing group or writing workshop, please contact me at [leanne@gestalt.com.au](mailto:leanne@gestalt.com.au)*

The link for New Gestalt Voices is: <http://newgestaltvoices.org/>

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# GANZ COMMUNITY GATHERING, MAY 2019. UPDATE



## Catalysts for transformation: Diversity, inequality, dialogue &.....?

12th GANZ Community Gathering/Hui  
3-5 May, 2019 / Q Station, Manly, Sydney, Australia



**Imagine a meeting space alive with transformative ideas, processes and actions that have emerged from a multitude of voices & perspectives.**

### Circles within circles

Our gathering is an opportunity for you to join a conversation space and inquire into the necessary catalysts for transformation in all areas of our functioning and relating. You will have a chance to explore the effects that flow from valuing diversity, challenging inequality and fostering dialogue. Join us as a community in the creation of processes that explore and add to our understanding and capacity for transformation.

To find out more, visit:

**[ganzgathering.com.au](http://ganzgathering.com.au)**

Our GANZ gathering aims to offer such a space and provide an opportunity for people to:

- come together, to meet and speak with one another
- find and express personal and communal voices
- have all voices listened to and heard
- enact and develop the values we wish to live individually and communally.

Our gathering also aims to offer opportunities for contact, connection and community, through exploring, experiencing and engaging with ‘catalysts of transformation’.

The five large circle sessions across two and a half days will begin with creative processes that:

- enliven our shared space as a place of excitement and growth
- warm up those present to their personal experiences, ideas and wisdom
- serve as conversation starters to cultivate fertile ground to explore the themes of the gathering.

Flowing from these experiential processes we envisage opportunities for people to self-organise into smaller circles reflecting areas of personal interest and preferred ways of sharing, to maximise meeting, speaking, expressing, listening, hearing, witnessing, confirming and enacting.

In the spirit of the radical origins of gestalt, this unconventional conference design aims to support participation and connection; you get to choose your course through the smorgasbord of options and opportunity on offer.

The facilitation group, over the coming months, will be offering a range of pre-gathering activities that aim to orient you to your relationship with the theme. We want to encourage you to come warmed up and ready to engage.

We look forward to you being part of this unique and novel event in experiencing our present and shaping our future. And on a practical level, don’t forget to register and book your accommodation.

### **Gathering Facilitation Group**

Ashleigh Power, Mike Reed, Brenda Levien, Gabe Phillips and Alan Meara.

# Guidelines for Contributors

## Submission and preparation of manuscripts for publication

The Editors welcome submissions from the Association's members, students and trainers from Gestalt Institutes and Centres and from writers outside the association with an interest in the field of Gestalt practice and theory. The Editors are available to consider your ideas for submission and to answer questions about the submission process. We are committed to supporting writing in this region, and encourage enquiries from all aspiring contributors no matter what stage you may be at.

All contributions are to reflect (or challenge) Gestalt theory or practice and will be peer reviewed twice. Submissions may be sent by email to: [ozgjeditor@ganz.org.au](mailto:ozgjeditor@ganz.org.au)

**Submissions must follow the contributor guidelines for authors and APA style which can be found at links at the following URL <https://www.ganz.org.au/gjanz/>**

Following submission, constructive feedback will be given to contributors. Submitters can expect some suggestions to refine their article in readiness for publication and the Editors are available for support with this process and to answer questions or concerns.

## Journal Sales

The sales policy is under review.

Please direct enquiries to: [ozgjeditor@ganz.org.au](mailto:ozgjeditor@ganz.org.au)

## Advertising

The Gestalt Journal of Australia and New Zealand is issued twice a year and provided to members of GANZ and to Training Institutes and Centres.

Advertising will be accepted for conferences, books, writers' groups and other journals.

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**Closing dates are:**

**May issue – 1 March, November issue – 1 September.**

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