



Original Article

Spirituality as Part of the Whole: Gestalt Therapy's View of Spirituality

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Abstract

In contrast to the positivist perspective, which disregards the individual's spiritual beliefs and needs, many contemporary psychological counseling approaches view spirituality as an essential part of the individual. Rather than ignoring these religious and spiritual dimensions, psychological counseling approaches now include them as part of the integrity of the individual and therapeutic processes. Gestalt therapy, whose development was pioneered by figures like Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman, aims to help clients achieve wholeness by gaining awareness of the here and now. Influenced by psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, existential philosophy, phenomenology, field theory, psychodrama, Eastern religions, and spirituality, Gestalt therapy evaluates the client as a whole on the premise that the whole is not the sum of its parts, but rather the fine coordination of all of them. This study assesses Gestalt therapy's perspective on spirituality, the relationship between the basic concepts of Gestalt therapy and spirituality, and the application of spirituality in Gestalt therapy within this holistic framework.

Keywords:

Gestalt • Holism • Spirituality • Counselling • Psychotherapy.

Bütünü Bir Parçası Olarak Maneviyat: Gestalt Terapinin Maneviyata Bakışı

Öz

Bireyin manevi inançları ve ihtiyaçlarını göz ardı eden pozitivist anlayışın aksine günümüzde psikolojik danışma yaklaşımlarının önemli bir bölümü, maneviyatı bireyin önemli bir parçası olarak değerlendirmektedir. Psikolojik danışma yaklaşımları, bireyin dini ve manevi boyutlarını görmezden gelmek yerine artık bunları bireyin bütünselliğinin bir parçası olarak kabul etmekte ve terapötik süreçlere dahil etmektedir. Gelişmesinde Fritz Perls, Laura Perls ve Paul Goodman gibi isimlerin öncülük yaptığı Gestalt terapi, danışanların şimdi ve buradaya dair farkındalık kazanarak bütünlüğe ulaşmasını amaçlayan bir yaklaşımdır. Psikanaliz, Gestalt psikolojisi, varoluşçu felsefe, fenomenoloji, alan kuramı, psikodrama, Doğru dinleri ve maneviyattan etkilenen Gestalt terapi, bütünü parçaların bir toplamı değil; tüm bu farklı parçaların ince bir koordinasyonu olduğu görüşünü esas alarak danışanı bir bütün olarak değerlendirmektedir. İnsanı bir bütün olarak anlamının onun tüm yönlerinin kabul edilmesiyle gerçekleşebileceği fikrini vurgulayan bu yaklaşımda, insanın önemli bir yönü olduğu düşüncesiyle maneviyat ele alınacak konulardan biri olarak görülmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, sözü edilen bu bütünlük çerçevesi içerisinde Gestalt terapinin maneviyata bakış açısını, Gestalt terapinin temel kavramlarının maneviyatla ilişkisini ve maneviyatın Gestalt terapide uygulama sürecini değerlendirmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Gestalt • Bütünlük • Maneviyat • Danışmanlık • Psikoterapi.

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The mid-20th century is seen as a critical time in the transformation of psychotherapy. Especially after the Second World War, structural transformations took place in many political, economic, and social areas. This also affected psychology as new approaches emerged in the discipline. The psychoanalytic approach, which was effective at the turn of the 20th century, became less so over the following decades while the behaviorist approach, which reduced human behavior to stimulus-response links and focused on measurable behaviors, could not provide a holistic understanding of human beings. Consequently, new psychotherapy models began to emerge around the middle of the 20th century. One of these was Gestalt therapy, which views the person holistically and is still used effectively today.

“Gestalt”, a German word, is used in this form in many languages because it is a difficult word to find the exact equivalent. The verb “gestalten” in German means to shape or give a meaningful structure while its derivative, Gestalt, means “is a complete shape or figure which has structure and meaning” (Ginger, 2007). Perls et al. (1994, p. 26) claim that achieving a strong “gestalt” is itself the therapy. According to Seligman and Reichenberg (2014), who argue that psychological problems are caused by individuals becoming detached from important parts, such as their emotions, bodies, or contacts with others, Gestalt therapy aims to enable individuals to become aware of these neglected parts, gain integrity, and establish a balance.

Fragar (2009) emphasizes that traditional psychology has no interest in spirituality and transpersonal issues, so spirituality is ignored in research and clinical trials. In contrast to this positivist understanding that disregards clients’ spiritual beliefs and needs, a significant number of psychotherapy approaches today consider spirituality an important part of the human being and attempt to comprehend its psychological significance. The Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, the 36th division of the American Psychological Association (APA), supports psychological theorizing, research, and clinical practice to understand the significance of religion and spirituality in people’s lives and within psychology (APA, n.d.). According to the American Counseling Association’s (ACA) professional ethical rules (ACA, 2014), counselors should be sensitive to their clients’ spiritual dimensions.

Since the end of the 20th century, studies on spirituality have clearly increased in the psychology literature. These studies emphasize the importance of not ignoring the religious and spiritual dimensions of the individual in psychotherapy, considering the wholeness of the individual (Miller, 2003; Pargament, 2007; Post & Wade, 2009). Rose et al. (2001) found that a significant proportion of clients find it appropriate to discuss religious and spiritual issues in therapy. In Gestalt therapy, the client’s spiritual processes are viewed as an important factor in understanding them. Given that one can understand the human being as a whole by accepting all their aspects,

and that spirituality is an important aspect of the human being, a Gestalt therapist cannot ignore the client's spirituality.

In fact, those who have contributed to the development of Gestalt therapy are also affected by spirituality. Fritz Perls is known to have studied Zen Buddhism in Kyoto, Japan, and worked on Zen Buddhism and existential philosophy while Laura Perls and Paul Goodman had an interest in Taoism. At one point in her career, Laura Perls worked with the existentialist philosopher Martin Buber and the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (Shane, 1999; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014; Serlin & Shane, 1999). Perls was able to adapt some parts of Zen Buddhism to Gestalt therapy because Zen Buddhism does not evaluate behaviors as right or wrong, employs the paradoxical theory of change, and includes awareness exercises (Ayaz Başımoğlu, 2020).

Gestalt therapy has been influenced by psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, existential philosophy, phenomenology, field theory, psychodrama, spirituality, and Zen Buddhism (Voltan Acar, 2012). The influence of psychoanalysis is due to its emphasis on the importance of past experiences while Gestalt psychology similarly focuses on unfinished business and the figure-ground relationship. It is influenced by phenomenology in terms of its consideration of subjective facts and perceptions in experiences, by existentialism in terms of the use of responsibility and the here/now principle in therapy, and by field theory for its view of the importance of the environmental field and the study of the individual as a whole. It shares many techniques with psychodrama, such as the empty chair and role play, and shares spiritual elements Zen Buddhism and Eastern spirituality.

Gestalt therapy aims to ensure that the client takes responsibility, gains awareness, and integrates emotions, thoughts, perceptions, and bodily processes (Voltan Acar, 2012). According to Perls et al. (1994), therapy consists of analyzing the internal structure of real experience, whatever the degree of contact. What they mean is that rather than what is experienced, remembered, done, or said, as the importance lies in how what is being remembered is remembered, how what is said is said, with what facial expression, what tone of voice, what syntax, what stance, what emotion is present, and what is important in the expression or what is neglected.

Few studies have addressed spirituality in Gestalt therapy. Killoran (1993) studied 52 clients and concluded that they experienced spiritual awakenings and religious experiences during the therapeutic process. In addition, the participants valued those moments when therapists made a spiritual intervention. Other studies have shown that it is appropriate to include spirituality in Gestalt therapy (Crocker, 1998; Gürdil Birinci, 2017; Naranjo, 1978; Williams, 2006). Accordingly, the present study examines Gestalt therapy's perspective on spirituality within the framework of holism and explains the spiritual elements in Gestalt therapy. In doing so, it evaluates

the relationship between Gestalt therapy and spirituality, how Gestalt therapy deals with spirituality within the principle of holism, some techniques that can be used in Gestalt therapy about spiritual issues, the application process, and ethical elements.

Spirituality and Gestalt Therapy

There are various definitions of spirituality in the literature. What stands out in these definitions is the emphasis on the search for meaning and awareness of the transcendent. According to Pargament (1999), spirituality is the process of seeking meaning, unity, commitment, love, and the highest human potential. Koenig et al. (2011) define it as the individual's search to comprehend the answers to questions about life, its meaning, and the transcendent. Hodge (2001) defines spirituality as a relationship with God, or whatever is considered Ultimate, which fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in life. Contrary to the assumption that spirituality may only develop in conjunction with religion, spirituality can grow both in conjunction with and independently of religion (Fry, 2003; Koenig et al., 2011). In other words, non-religious people can also be spiritual, so spirituality is not exclusive to religious people (Breitbart, 2002). That is, spirituality is a universal trait.

A sense of connection with the universe or spiritual experiences can provide support and healing for many people and help them make sense of their lives. However, psychotherapy techniques have frequently avoided considering the position of transpersonal and spiritual concerns in their theories and avoided addressing or exploring clients' spiritual beliefs or needs during counseling (Mackewn, 1951, p. 150). This exclusion of spirituality from psychotherapy in the positivist paradigm was abandoned following a paradigm shift in science, which led to spirituality being regarded as a strength in psychotherapy. Gestalt therapy incorporates spirituality, which is an aspect of the client's personality, into the therapy process in order to understand the human being as a whole by accepting all their aspects while acknowledging that spirituality is an important aspect of the human being.

Joyce and Sills (2014, p. 284) emphasize that spirituality must be included in Gestalt therapy for three important reasons. The first is that clients' spiritual paths are inseparable from their individual lives. Second, clients may have spiritual problems that may require spiritual interventions. If these interventions are beyond the individual's competency, they may need to see to a professional in this field. Third, Eastern spirituality has played an important role in the development of Gestalt therapy since its inception. These factors illustrate the importance of incorporating spirituality into Gestalt therapy.

Spiritually Oriented Psychotherapy and Gestalt Therapy

Spirituality is regarded as one of the most essential aspects of human existence (Pargament, 2007). In spiritually oriented psychotherapy, which takes into account the individual's spiritual aspect, the client's belief perspectives should be investigated to promote a healthy and meaningful integration while supporting the transformation of these perspectives (Shafranske & Sperry, 2007, cited in Ekşi et al., 2016). Spiritually oriented psychotherapists, according to Lines (2006), are practitioners who feel confident and competent working with religion and broader spiritual themes.

The specific spiritual practices or interventions that may be used during spiritually oriented psychotherapy include conducting spiritual assessments, consulting or referring to spiritual leaders, teaching spiritual concepts, encouraging forgiveness, discussing scriptures, teaching mindfulness meditation, encouraging contemplative meditation and prayer, and praying specifically for the client are (Richards & Worthington, 2010). Because spiritually oriented approaches are inclusive, they can be applied to a wide range of spiritual beliefs and religious traditions (Sperry, 2012).

Spiritually oriented psychotherapy is integrated with Jungian, transpersonal, psychodynamic, cognitive, rational emotive behavior therapy, interpersonal, humanistic, and multicultural psychotherapies (Richards & Worthington, 2010). Flexibility is one of the most essential features of Gestalt therapy. This flexibility enables it to be integrated other therapies, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, person-centered therapy, transactional analysis, mindfulness-based therapy, and brief psychotherapy (Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014). This integrative characteristic of Gestalt therapy suggests that it may be combined with a spiritually oriented counseling approach. The spiritual components that Gestalt therapy includes are believed to facilitate this integration.

Spirituality From a Holistic Perspective

According to Fritz Perls (1969, p. 16), holism is critical in understanding Gestalt therapy because once a “gestalt” is broken up, it is no longer a “gestalt”. Therefore, it is critical in Gestalt therapy to evaluate the client as a whole. According to Daş (2017), humans must be considered as a whole, both with themselves and with their environment, to be understood. That is, dealing with the person apart from their emotions, thoughts, bodily processes, perception, and environment provides insufficient information about them. Gestalt therapy therefore views the client a whole. As Perls (1969, p. 5) puts it, “we are not a sum of parts but a very subtle coordination of all these different parts.”

The client's spirituality is one of the elements based on this holistic principle that must be addressed in therapy (Clarkson, 1991; Voltan Acar, 2012). One of

the assumptions in Gestalt therapy is that the human being is a whole organism comprised of intertwined physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Perls et al. (1994, p. 30) contend that these phenomena's integrity must be respected; they can only be broken down analytically at the cost of destroying what is being investigated. This indicates the importance that Gestalt therapy attaches to integrity. According to Clarkson (1991), the client's behavioral, physiological, emotional, cognitive, symbolic, and spiritual characteristics can be emphasized at different times during therapy to help integrate numerous aspects of the client. The Gestalt therapy approach is founded on the absolute inseparability of bodily experience, emotions, language, ethics, rationality, meaning-making, and spirituality. Consequently, it is very difficult to consider the individual as a whole in a therapy that disregards spirituality. Voltan Acar (2012) emphasizes the need to expand the closed circle of emotions, thoughts, and body to include spirituality, and thereby express the individual's integrity.

Regarding the inclusion of spirituality in Gestalt therapy, there seems to be some controversy in the literature. Feder (2001) argues that it is not necessary to evaluate spirituality separately. Mackewn (1997, pp. 150-151) asserts that the majority of Gestalt therapists initially had negative or neutral attitudes towards including spirituality in therapy. However, she then criticizes therapists for disregarding spiritual issues: "*Yet can Gestalt claim to be holistic unless it encompasses attention to spiritual beliefs and needs and to care of the sacred in people's lives and in the world?*". That is, in principle, it would be a wrong to ignore spirituality in therapy as it is one of the most important aspects of the individual in terms of Gestalt therapy's holistic principle. Finally, Joyce and Sills (2014, p. 284) note that spirituality has recently been given greater importance in Gestalt therapy under the influence of field theory and the dialogic method.

Gestalt therapy is founded on numerous fundamental concepts for integrating the personality, including awareness, here and now, polarities, contact, dialogue, unfinished business, organismic self-regulation, paradoxical theory of change, and peak experiences. By studying these concepts, the spiritual aspects of clients, which are part of their integrity, can be understood. This study examines the ways in which these concepts relate to spirituality.

Awareness

Awareness, which is an important concept in Gestalt therapy, is a process of holistic contact and meaning-making that occurs throughout our entire personality. It is about experiencing and being in touch with ourselves and our existence in the world from moment to moment (Mackewn, 1997). Naranjo (1978) emphasizes the importance that Buddhism and Sufism place on awareness, explaining that awareness is a spiritual element. Indeed, both Buddhism and Gestalt theory draw attention

to awareness of the here and now. Although awareness practices are frequently associated with Buddhist meditation traditions, they are included in most spiritual traditions and practices in various forms (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 365). Awareness is considered a major element in most religious worship since focusing on the moment during worship increases individuals' self-awareness and enhances their awareness skills (Kara, 2020). According to Williams (2006), raising awareness is recognized in the major spiritual traditions as an important tool for change, as it is in Gestalt therapy. Similarly, Joyce and Sills (2014, p. 289) emphasize that both spiritual traditions and Gestalt therapy can contribute to life-changing transformations.

According to Crocker (1998), every human being is a mysterious being. The Gestalt therapist uses the phenomenological method to assist the client reveal their own awareness, patterns of thought, and behavior. He thus believes that spirituality can deal with facts that are not fully known, controllable, or predictable, i.e., inner mysteries. Furthermore, Gestalt therapy requires the therapist to develop and apply their own spirituality in a similar sense as the Sufi concept of self-knowledge. Hence, despite some differences in their perspectives, self-knowledge in Sufism and psychology complement each other (Sayın, 2012). The Sufi expression “Whoever knows himself, he knows his Lord,” expresses how the individuals' self-awareness is crucial. Given that self-awareness in both client and therapist is an important condition for success in Gestalt therapy, Gestalt therapy and Sufism support awareness in similar ways.

Here and Now

Living in the moment is crucial and encouraged in Gestalt therapy, as it is in various spiritual traditions (Joyce & Sills, 2014, p. 289). In Sufism, living in the moment is expressed mostly through “ibn al-wakt,” defined as the ability to not bring past problems and concerns about the future into the present moment. It is considered a prerequisite for mental health (Sayın, 2012). In Sufism, a person must be *ibn al-wakt* to be free of the fear and sadness caused by the past and future (Yıldız, 2021). Similar to this Sufi perspective, Perls (1969, p. 3) asserts that individuals who live in the moment will not experience anxiety since excitement will flow into spontaneously experienced activities. Some clients may have concerns about the future in spiritual or religious matters. For example, when a religious client who believes in the afterlife has strong worries about their future day of reckoning, they may have difficulty focusing on the present and achieving harmony in daily life. Gestalt therapists can help their clients live in the present moment while respecting their beliefs, and can assist them in focusing on their current feelings and thoughts in relation to their spiritual issues.

Brownell (2011) explains that engaging in spirituality in therapy can help clients to be in the here and now and feel the close support of divine power. He suggests that, by praying for the guidance of this transcendent power (God, Cosmic force,

etc.) alongside the client, a Gestalt therapist can contribute to the therapeutic process. Accordingly, a Gestalt therapist may refer to the feeling that the transcendent power is with them and the client in the here and now (e.g., "I feel God is with us here and now."). Addressing these inner dialogues in a psychotherapy setting is crucial to understanding the client's internalized image of God and the impact of that image on their thoughts, behavior, and feelings, especially if clients feel the voice of the spiritual power in which they believe. This understanding also helps to comprehend the client's wholeness. Based on their literature review on the use of spirituality in psychotherapy, Post and Wade (2009) conclude that discussing religious or spiritual issues in psychotherapy helps the therapeutic process.

Polarities

As people become more self-aware, they realize that there are many polarities within them (O'Leary, 2013). According to polarities theory, opposite aspects of our traits may be contained within us. Yin Yang philosophy, which claims that everything in the universe has two inseparable poles, is one tradition that seeks to explain this. Joyce and Sills (2014, p. 119) emphasize that all poles are potentially necessary, so labeling either end as bad, weak, or undesirable is incorrect. For example, violence in the home may be disapproved of but required to combat an aggressive threat.

Of the many poles in Gestalt therapy, the best-known top-dog and under-dog. The top-dog pole includes evaluative, judgmental, and authoritative traits whereas the under-dog pole includes oppressed, docile, and apologetic traits (O'Leary, 2013). Poles cannot be evaluated apart from one another (Daş, 2017), so Gestalt therapy attempts to integrate the client's personality by integrating and reconciling opposing poles (Voltan Acar, 2012). To achieve wholeness, people must become aware of and integrate their own polarities. Individuals who can integrate their poles are more likely to exhibit creative behaviors (Daş, 2017) since neglected or rejected poles tend to stymie our efforts to grow (Seligman and Reichenberg, 2014).

According to Latner (1986), poles can emerge in any subject and at any time (as cited in Daş, 2017, p. 277). Gestalt therapists must be able to work with poles that can arise in spiritual or religious issues. In a religious dispute, for example, one side of the client may be accusatory and judgmental while the other may be passive and constantly asking for forgiveness. The goal of therapy is for the client to be able to express and integrate these two poles.

Taoism, particularly Ying Yang philosophy, and Sufism, particularly within its literature (Yıldırım, 2003), agree that opposites and polarities exist inside the human being. According to Gürdil Birinci (2017), the Sufi perspective is very similar to the way Gestalt therapy handles these poles. She claims that both approaches emphasize

that all human characteristics are present in each individual, so humans can integrate and grow through the dynamic relationships of these opposite characteristics. Sufism assumes that humans contain contrasting and complementary viewpoints. However, these opposites can coexist and work in harmony within the structure of a person who has reached the pinnacle of spiritual development (Uyar, 2021).

Figure-Ground

Perls integrated the concept of figure-ground with Lewin's field theory while Seligman and Reichenberg (2014) emphasize the importance of figure-ground in terms of how best to respond to life's changing needs and to live in the here and now. When the figure is incomplete or unresolved, it is referred to in Gestalt therapy as "unfinished business. In emerging from the ground, the figure manifests with emotions like anger, resentment, hatred, anxiety, guilt, pain, and grief. Because these emotions are experienced without awareness, they linger in the ground. This in turn prevents individuals from establishing an active relationship with themselves and sometimes with their environment, leading them to carry these emotions into the present (Corey, 2008). Unfinished business often causes the individual to live in the past, hence hindering them from focusing on the here and now, which creates tension within them and prevents the completion of the Gestalt (Tagay & Voltan Acar, 2020). As a result of the Zeigarnik effect, unfinished business demands completion and keeps resurfacing until completion (Skottun & Krüger, 2022, pp. 76-77). Failure to complete unfinished business may result in some contact barriers (Voltan Acar, 2012).

Joyce and Sills (2014) argue that discovering the client's spirituality is very useful in Gestalt therapy when the spiritual dimensions become figurative as it becomes possible to work on the spiritual themes in the figure during therapy. In addition, therapists can support clients to frame grounded and unfinished or unresolved spiritual issues and bring closure to unfinished business.

Contact

Contact, which concerns the individual's interaction with self and others, is an important concept in Gestalt therapy and one of the spiritual issues that therapy can address. Indeed, Gestalt therapy is based on contact, contact disturbances, and awareness of them (Voltan Acar, 2012). Contact refers to an individual's interaction with things both within and outside of themselves. Contact in Gestalt therapy refers to the conscious encounter with others, which necessitates awareness of the non-self (Brownell, 2010).

Contact styles begin to form in childhood, and certain negative attitudes in the family reflect contact disturbances (Tagay & Voltan Acar, 2012). Contact disturbances, which can be both healthy and unhealthy, are defined as relationship distortions that occur when

I and others attempt to make contact (Voltan Acar, 2012). The most common contact disturbances are confluence, withdrawal, isolation, introjection, projection, deflection, desensitization, and retroflection. Some clients can maintain their relationships with contact disturbances. For example, messages, rules, and models presented from outside are absorbed in introjection whereas expressions of necessities (must/should) that are dictated from outside reflect unhealthy introjection (Voltan Acar, 2012).

Most religious rules and doctrines are learned during childhood. Both parents and teachers can transfer information that causes anxiety during this process. People who introject these rules unhealthily are more likely to exhibit maladaptive behaviors in daily life. For example, compelling and non-internalized rules or superstitious beliefs that can cause negative reactions can be transferred to individuals from childhood. The individual may also introject these rules or beliefs. For example, a client who believes that making a mistake while reading a religious text or praying will have serious negative consequences will try to be perfect, which then makes them afraid. This person has so introjected the strict rules presented to them from the outside that they now feel anxiety and fear when praying rather than spiritual relief. In addition, they cannot be present in the moment during worship. A Gestalt therapist should make the client aware of these contact disturbances and encourage them to experience the here and now. In spiritual matters, various contact disturbances may also occur, such as withdrawal, confluence, or retroflection. In some cases, these are beneficial, for example, if the individual needs to withdraw after an intense situation to process what has happened (Voltan Acar, 2012). This state of withdrawal, also known as seclusion, can support spiritual development. Gestalt therapists should make clients aware of such contact disturbances.

Dialogue

In Gestalt therapy, the relationship between therapist and client is seen as a meeting of two people with different existences, that is, as a dialogue. This concept of dialogue is based on Martin Buber's I-Thou and I-It studies. Therapeutic communication can also be called a dialogue. Generally, communication is referred to as a dialogue when the therapist is referred to as I and the client is referred to as Thou (Tagay & Voltan Acar, 2020). According to Buber, an individual has two modes of existence: I-Thou and I-It. In an I-Thou style dialogue, I does not see Thou as an object to be defined, measured, or controlled whereas in an I-It style dialogue, I looks at It as an object to be explored, classified, measured, and compared with others. In an I-Thou dialogue, the two sides show themselves with their whole being, respecting each other's uniqueness, freedom, and spontaneity whereas in an I-It dialogue It is not unique but rather anything that I wishes to use (Tüzer, 2009).

Dialogue, which is the basis for growth and development (Daş, 2017), can take place between one person and another, or between a human and a Divine Person. This situation

forms the basis of therapeutic work with many spiritual/religious clients in Gestalt therapy (Brownell, 2010). Buber (2000) emphasizes that the only relationship that allows for a full encounter with God is the I-Thou relationship since the objective appearance of God, unlike all other beings, cannot be achieved. Mann (2010, p. 266) claims that experiencing the I-Thou moment provides the deepest form of human connection and explains that spirituality can also be valued within the context of this relationship, which can be formed between the individual and a person, a landscape, a work of art, or God.

Buber's I-Thou relationship is also found in Sufism. Hemşinli (2014) notes that Rumî uses a similar approach to Buber's I-Thou dialogue in the relationship between God and humans. However, Buber does not adopt Sufism's idea of giving up or getting rid of the I (self); rather, he believes that the I will inevitably exist in dialogue. Buber's expression "*Of course, he is the mysterium tremendum that appears and overwhelms; but he is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I*" (Buber, 1970, p.135) has a closely similar meaning to the Qur'anic verse "*and We are nearer to him than his life-vein (Quran 50:16)*" (Hemşinli, 2014). By helping their clients to have more I-Thou experiences, Gestalt therapists offer an important means for clients to have deeper spiritual and relational experiences.

Organismic Self-Regulation

According to Corey (2008), one of the principles of Gestalt therapy is organismic self-regulation, defined as a process in which the organism's balance is disturbed and then restored with the emergence of a need, emotion, or other information. Organismic self-regulation is realized with full awareness, according to Perls (1969, p. 17). People achieve balance by regulating themselves using environmental resources and their own abilities (Corey, 2008). Self-regulation and self-control are important in many spiritual traditions. For example, meditation is an effective method for developing self-regulation skills, which is one of the goals of psychotherapy, and helps clients relax and expand their awareness (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2016). In religious texts, self-regulation and self-control are usually associated with willpower. In the Qur'an, for example, willpower is mentioned 139 times, and attributed both to God and human beings (Çağrıç & Hökelekli, 2000).

Kılıçoğlu (2021), emphasizing the relationship between willpower and religion, argues that religion helps individuals strengthen their willpower by organizing life through various rules and criteria. In Islam, prayer and fasting are believed to strengthen willpower. Likewise, from their evaluation of the relationship between religious practices and psychotherapy, Şeker and Karakurt (2018) conclude that prayer and fasting increase willpower. Thus, a connection can be made between organismic self-regulation in Gestalt therapy and willpower in spiritual and religious teachings.

The Paradoxical Theory of Change

One of the most important concepts in Gestalt therapy is the paradoxical theory of change. That is, in order to change, we must first become who we are (Beisser, 1970). In other words, change does not occur when individuals try to be like someone they are not but when they actually are who they are. This actually provides a good summary of Gestalt theory (Philippson, 2012). The paradoxical theory of change requires the individual to be in touch with the moment they are in. Gestalt therapy assumes that transformation occurs through realizing the existential reality of the moment the individual is in, which is also found in Eastern traditions and spiritual teachings (Gürdil Birinci, 2017). For example, Zen Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, and Islamic Sufism all emphasize focusing on and noticing feelings and thoughts in the moment. In Sufism, it is believed that what is perceived should be observed and accepted without judging, evaluating, or controlling. In this way, everything good and beautiful will come by itself (Gürbüz, 2010, as cited in Gürdil Birinci, 2017). The paradoxical theory of change is considered one way to help clients achieve wholeness.

Peak Experiences

Williams (2006) states that Gestalt therapy promotes spirituality through the inclusion of peak experiences, also called spiritual, transpersonal, or mystical experiences. Depending on our personal orientation or tradition, peak experiences may reflect realization, being, or merging with something within or beyond us. Gestalt therapy values these experiences for the individual. What Perls calls peak experiences, Williams (2006) labels “mini-Satoris.”

Gestalt therapists can help a person have more peak experiences, which in turn supports their spiritual development. Clients can be assisted in becoming aware of the rituals they can use to have peak experiences in accordance with their religious/spiritual orientations. One of the goals within the framework of spiritual development is to transform clients' temporary peak experiences into more permanent states of awareness and/or experience; that is, to elevate the mini-Satoris to the level of the ultimate Satori (Williams, 2006).

Gestalt Therapy Techniques for Spiritual Issues

Gestalt therapy uses a diverse range of techniques to raise the client's awareness and ensure their integrity (Daş, 2017). Many of these techniques can also support the client's spiritual growth, such as those based on dreamwork, awareness, and holism (Au, 1991). The use of spiritual techniques can encourage clients who care about spirituality in their lives to participate in the therapy and prevent resistance. Ekşi and Keskinöğlü (2020) argue that solving problems through the client's spirituality improve the effectiveness of the process. However, before employing these techniques, therapists should obtain

informed consent from clients, take into account the client's religious/spiritual orientation, and explain the purpose and known effectiveness of the technique (Hathaway, 2011). Some spirituality techniques that can be used in Gestalt therapy include meditation, dream work, the empty chair, I take responsibility, and metaphor.

Meditation

Influenced by Eastern religions like Zen Buddhism, Gestalt therapy uses meditation to support the client's awareness and being in the moment (Voltan Acar, 2012). Meditation, which comes in many forms, such as classical, Zen, and transcendental, is one of the spiritual practices that can be used in therapy (Nelson, 2009). It is known that meditation and similar practices exist in many religions. Acknowledging that meditation is rooted in spiritual and religious traditions, Kristeller (2011) asserts that Hinduism, Zen Buddhism, Vipassana, and Tibetan practices tend to come to mind first, although Christianity, Judaism, and Sufi mystical traditions also include meditative practices.

Although meditation can help many clients reduce anxiety, clients from conservative religious traditions may find some forms, such as transcendental meditation, foreign (Pargament, 2007). Therapists should therefore first consider the client's religious/spiritual beliefs when choosing which form to use to avoid resistance. That is, therapists should help their clients benefit from meditative rituals within their religious/spiritual traditions.

Dreamwork

According to Perls, dreamwork is crucial for the understanding of personality. Perls (1969, p. 71) describes dreams as the royal road to wholeness. By providing the most spontaneous expression of human existence, he argues, dreams allow access into people's inner world. In Gestalt therapy, dreams are considered an existential message provider and creative means of expression (Fantz & Roberts, 1998). Mackewn (1997, p. 145) explains that we have many different kinds of dreams, including dreams about everyday things. Some reflect the meaning of our lives or our spiritual aspirations. Others help answer questions about life, guide actions, or make sense of the world (Elliott, 2013). The existential message of the dream becomes more understandable to the client if the parts of the dream are understood and assimilated (Corey, 2008). When working with their client's spiritual dreams, Gestalt therapists pay particular attention to several important points. Since elements like uncovering polarities and focusing on unfinished business are important in dream work, they focus on these in the client's spiritual dreams. They also ensure the expression of dreams in the here and now by giving importance to the client's feelings when describing the dream in the session. Finally, they treat dreams in accordance with the client's goal of integration.

Empty Chair

The empty chair technique provides a simple way to bring outside problems into the here and now of the therapy room. In this technique, a character from the client's current or previous life is imagined to be sitting in an empty chair, and the client is invited to converse with this character in the present tense (Mann, 2010). This technique attempts to recognize and make contact with the sides of the client that they have not adopted (Voltan Acar, 2012). When the client has spiritual aspects that they did not adopt, the technique can be used to try to contact and integrate these aspects by allowing the client to engage in dialogue with the spiritual aspects that represent the two polarities.

The empty chair technique can be used when working with clients' dreams as they can express during the session how they felt about the dream. In this case, the therapist asks the clients to sit in the empty chair and respond like the dream so that they can enter into a dialogue with it (Mackewn, 1997, p. 148). The dreamer addresses the empty chair as if part of the dream (the non-possessive aspect of the personality) were sitting in the chair opposite (Alban & Groman, 1975). Gestalt therapists can use the empty chair technique when working with their clients' spiritual dreams to help them better understand their spirituality and integrate it into their personalities.

I Take Responsibility

Gestalt therapy has been influenced in some ways by the existential approach. One of the most important common aspects is the assumption of responsibility by the individual. Gestalt therapists consider that all actions, thoughts, and feelings are one's own responsibility. In the I take responsibility technique, the therapist takes care to ensure that the client's language acknowledges responsibility, for example by asking them to add the phrase "I take responsibility for this" at the end of each sentence (Harman, 1974). Thus, clients who say they are angry about a particular situation may be asked to use the phrase "I am angry, and I take responsibility for it." It may be difficult for clients to form such sentences at first. If the client's philosophy of life or moral value system includes elements of taking responsibility, then therapists can focus primarily on raising the client's awareness of this. For example, their spiritual/religious beliefs can be considered as a resource to help them take responsibility. The client may be asked to collect information about the sections related to responsibility from their religion's sacred texts or examples may be given. The goal is for the client to develop an awareness of responsibility. By practicing the technique, the client can learn to use responsibility statements.

Using Metaphors

Gestalt therapy places great emphasis on metaphors and pays close attention to what metaphors clients use because metaphors are considered to provide clues to

clients' inner conflicts and unfinished business (Voltan Acar, 2012, p. 113). Thus, the metaphors that the client uses in therapy can provide important data their spirituality and make certain aspects more vivid (Griffith & Griffith, 2002, p. 64). Gestalt therapists should therefore pay attention to metaphors to better understand the client's spiritual dimension.

According to Ahammed (2010), the Qur'an contains many metaphors embedded in figurative language and mystical symbolism for Muslim clients. He therefore emphasizes the importance of metaphorical interventions for Muslim clients for positive therapeutic outcomes. Examples include the following: "*That no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another*" (Qur'an 53:38); "*Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. A likeness of His light is as a pillar on which is a lamp — the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a brightly shining star — lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof gives light, though fire touch it not — light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He pleases. And Allah sets forth parables for men, and Allah is Knower of all things.*" (Qur'an 24:35). Similarly, therapists can use metaphors in other sacred texts (Bible, Torah, etc.) or even secular metaphors depending on the client's spiritual orientation. Examples include "*Spirituality is a key that unlocks my life*" and "*Spiritual experience is a light that illuminates my soul.*" When using these metaphors, therapists should consider the client's religious/spiritual sensitivities and use them for a therapeutic purpose.

Practice and Ethics

Gestalt therapy takes a phenomenological approach to people and events, meaning that therapists avoid interpretations that explain client dynamics. Instead, as active participants, clients create their own interpretations and meanings (Corey, 2008). Considering that spirituality is also a subjective experience for each individual, it is the clients who do the interpreting and meaning-making process here too. Gestalt therapists should not question the client's spirituality or explain their spiritual dynamics. Instead, they should help the client to better comprehend their spirituality.

According to Joyce and Sills (2014), discovering clients' spirituality is very useful in Gestalt therapy when the spiritual dimensions become figurative. Spiritual evaluation is critical to incorporating the client's strengths into the therapeutic process (Hodge, 2001). Thus, spiritual evaluation is an important element in understanding how the client's spiritual dimension contributes to the problem or solution. It may therefore be useful to ask questions about the client's spiritual and religious orientation during the initial evaluation session. Some of the questions that can be asked for this purpose are as follows (Joyce & Sills, 2014):

- “What was your parents’ or caregivers’ religious or spiritual orientation? How did this affect you while you were growing up?”
- “What are your current religious or spiritual beliefs?”
- “How important are spiritual beliefs in your life?”
- “What spiritual elements support you, for example meditation, prayer, worship, spiritual communities, church, mosque, temple, etc.?”
- “How does your spirituality affect your current challenges or problems?”

In Gestalt therapy, the language used by the therapist and the client plays a significant role in therapeutic change because language is very important in creating an environment that supports change (Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014). The language used in Gestalt therapy includes I language, omitting qualifying expressions, changing verbs, turning questions into expressions, changing the form of questions, specificity, making demands, and being present tense-centered (O’Leary, 2013, p. 63). Clients can use language to experience and actively discover how they actually perform actions in life (Crocker, 2005, p. 75). In Gestalt therapy, clients are also helped to take personal responsibility for the language they use, given that one of the goals of Gestalt therapy is for clients to become responsible for themselves and to take responsibility for the present. Voltan Acar (2012) explains how clients learn to make choices and take responsibility for those choices. Spiritual traditions and religious teachings emphasize that individuals should be responsible for their own behavior. Thus, religious/spiritual clients can find support from their beliefs in taking personal responsibility for the language they use. Responsible, present-centered language can help clients take a supportive and solution-oriented stance on spiritual matters, rather than an accusatory and judgmental one.

Clients seek psychotherapy for many reasons, including their spiritual problems. Joyce and Sills (2014) explain that various spiritual problems can be the subject of Gestalt therapy, such as an existential crisis of meaning, questioning one’s traditional religious beliefs, or dissatisfaction with what life has given by feeling that something spiritual is missing in one’s life. In such cases, it is critical to identify the client’s spiritual/religious belief system, understand how the crisis is viewed within that belief system, collect data on what kind of spiritual or religious support the client is receiving and why the unhelpful support is not working, and create alternatives solutions within the client’s belief system.

Gestalt therapists should pay attention to ethical factors when working on the client’s spirituality or applying spiritual interventions. In particular, care should be taken to gain informed consent from the client, cooperate with the client’s religious

leaders, avoid relationships outside the therapist-client relationship, make referrals or directions when needed, respect the client's spiritual values, and be competent (Ekşi & İme, 2020). Therapists should inform the client of the spiritual/religious techniques they will be using, establish a trusting relationship with the client, assess the client's spiritual and religious background, take into account the values that have sacred meanings for the client, ensure that the interventions used are compatible with the client's religious beliefs, avoid imposing their own values and beliefs on the client, and be flexible in the techniques they use (Richards & Bergin, 1997; Ekşi & İme, 2020). The techniques used should only be employed to achieve therapeutic change in accordance with the client's needs.

Conclusion

Gestalt therapy is an approach that incorporates spiritual elements. Given that spirituality is one of the most important aspects of the individual in terms of Gestalt therapy's holistic principle, it should not be ignored in therapy. Indeed, the leading names in Gestalt therapy, which deals with the human as a whole, were influenced by spiritual traditions. Although some Gestalt therapists do not agree with including spirituality (Feder, 2001), most studies in the literature emphasize the need to include it, given that clients' spiritual aspects are inseparable from their personal lives, their problems may be spiritual, and Eastern spirituality has strongly influenced Gestalt therapy (Joyce & Sills, 2014; Mann, 2010; Voltan Acar, 2012).

This study examined Gestalt therapy's perspective on spirituality in terms of its principle of holism. Spirituality is also related to some fundamental concepts in Gestalt therapy, including awareness, here and now, polarities, contact, dialogue, unfinished business, organismic self-regulation, paradoxical theory of change, and peak experiences. These concepts are key to understanding the client as a whole within the spiritual framework.

According to Seligman and Reichenberg (2014), Gestalt therapy offers a flexible approach that can be successfully integrated with various psychotherapy approaches. Similarly, spiritually oriented psychotherapy can be integrated with many psychotherapy approaches (Richards & Worthington, 2010). Given Gestalt therapy's integrative nature and the spiritual elements it contains, Gestalt therapy and spiritually oriented counseling can be successfully integrated.

Gestalt therapy's many techniques can be used to increase the client's awareness and ensure their integrity (Daş, 2017) while some techniques can support the client spiritually and can contribute to their spiritual development (Au, 1991), such as dream work, meditation, the empty chair, I take responsibility, and using metaphors.

Therapists who make spiritual interventions in Gestalt therapy or work with the client's spiritual problems must be competent in both Gestalt therapy and spiritual practices. Therapists should inform their clients about the techniques used while not imposing their own worldview on them. It is crucial to adapt the spiritual techniques used to the needs of the client. Furthermore, if there is resistance, the client's religious and spiritual values should be respected. Thus, it is important to evaluate the client's spirituality at the start of the therapeutic process.

This study evaluated the place and importance of spirituality in therapy within the holistic framework of Gestalt therapy. In particular, it discussed the relationship between Gestalt therapy and spirituality, how Gestalt therapy evaluates spirituality in terms of holism, its techniques for therapy on spiritual issues, the application process, and ethical elements. According to Gestalt therapists, if the client is considered independently of their emotions, thoughts, bodily processes, perception, environment, and spirituality, therapy will provide incomplete data about that person. Thus, because it accepts the individual as a whole in all aspects, Gestalt therapy does not ignore the individual's spiritual needs, the things they see as sacred in their lives, the spirituality they have in making sense of life, and their connection with the transcendent. The relationship of Gestalt therapy's basic concepts with spirituality and its holistic approach to human beings makes it clear that the client's integration critically depends on the therapist dealing with spirituality during the therapeutic process. This result is also supported by the literature. The study contributes to the literature by revealing the relationship between Gestalt therapy and spirituality, as well as presenting the application process and techniques for spiritual content to therapists who wish to deal with spirituality in therapy.

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