ATTACHMENT THEORY AND GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY

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In connection with the title of the conference "Relations and Structures" I would like to present to you some results of the research in the field of Attachment theory because I think that they are interesting for Gestalt psychology and Gestalt theory.

Concerning the question of whether there are parallels between Attachment theory and Gestalt psychology I will start with something Wolfgang Metzger, a famous Gestalt psychologist of the second generation, mentioned when he wrote about Adler and the child`s need for tenderness:

"Although the child demands physical nearness and contact to its caregivers the child does not expect some sensation of the skin in a psycho-sexual meaning. The child requires nearness, connection, membership and holding in the sense of being with others and belonging to others (as later described by Balint). Alfred Adler regarded this as the early and fundamental form of the feeling of belonging to a community." (Metzger 1977, English translation KSt).

This comes close to Fritz Künkel´s term of "We-ness" (Künkel 1974), which is regarded by Adler as the basis for the development of psychic health. And it was Max Wertheimer, the main founder of Gestalt theory, who has suggested already very early in 1924 that many disturbances of mental health can be understood and should be seen as problems of the individual in establishing, maintaining and adequately shaping his or her connectedness to a "we".

John Bowlby who established the Attachment theory expressed something similar in his speech at the University of Regensburg in 1988.

"Within the attachment theory attachment is neither submitted to nutrition or sexuality nor does it derive from there. In spite of the theory of dependence which understands the urgent demand for comfort and support within difficult situations as infantile, the tendency to build attachments (as the person who gives support or as the person who needs support or both) is a fundamental aspect of a good functioning personality and therefore the basis of psychic health." (Bowlby 1995, English translation KSt).

Both Gestalt theory and Attachment theory emphasize the sociable nature of the child within their considerations.

The Attachment theory assumes that the child is born with the ability and tendency to create attachments. The main aim of attachment is the need for a feeling of security. At the beginning the child tries to be physically near to its caregivers to feel secure. Later on this physical nearness changes into a psychological feeling of nearness and security. If the child`s requirement for attachment is accepted by its caregivers in a good way, the child will feel secure and therefore it will be encouraged to explore the environment.

Attachment theory with its dynamic and systemic approach is closely related to Gestalt Theory. Neither of these approaches investigate the child`s behaviour in an isolated way, but they study its behaviour in the context of, and in interaction with, the environment. That means that they try to consider all the factors within the whole

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system. This is reminiscent of the field theory developed by Kurt Lewin (Lewin 1963) and the so called "life-space" in which the person and the environment are regarded as a dynamic constellation of interdependent factors, and therefore the behaviour of the person arises from this constellation.

With regard to Lewin, the group which one lives in provides a basis for our development and therefore the belonging to this group influences the behaviour of the individual. From this point of view we can say that the experience of good early relationship and bonding supports the child to develop a stable basis that later on will help the child to deal with challenges and stress. On the other hand if the child is detached and alone tension, frustration and anxiety will increase. The feeling of anxiety activates attachment but it inhibits exploration and this has an impact on later development.

Based on infant research, we know that the child is able to have more than one interacting partner, but in general the child prefers one main person for attachment – in most cases this is the mother. This selection is influenced by factors such as care, responsiveness, tenderness, availability, regularity and adequate stimulation and treatment.

According to Fremmer-Bombik´s description (Fremmer-Bombik 1995), Bowlby assumes that the early experiences form a regulation-system for the affections and emotions and so they constitute representational systems. These representational systems of the self in interaction with the others are called internal working models or inner working models. The internal working models support the child to anticipate the behaviour of the mother, to regulate its own behaviour, to estimate happenings and to develop anticipation in the future.

They are conceived as dynamic models arising from the actual interactions between child and mother. They are the basis for the development of different internal structures and representational systems which later on influence both perception and behaviour. Although these internal working models tend to be stable and unconscious they are open systems and can be influenced – maybe by psychotherapy. For me this seems to be as well a parallel to Lewin who regarded the life-space as a dynamic open system.

Concerning representation researchers such as Beebe, Jaffe, Lachmann, Feldstein, Crown and Jasnow (2002) differentiated representational levels. They describe them with regard to the memory and the organisation of social behaviour.

"Whereas the explicit (declarative) memory has to keep in mind organised information and occurrences, the implicit memory contains emotional and procedural facts, which are not conscious. The procedural memory refers to skills and sequences of behaviour which are not symbolized. They are trained and happen automatically and this influences the processes that organize and regulate the behaviour ….. the procedural approach means that the control of our social-behaviour is mainly not conscious, it is based on the relation between organism and environment, so that the information to structure the behaviour is already inherent in the relation between organism and environment …… behaviour is regarded as a dynamic system, as the result of the dynamic interaction between organism and environment which is re- organized every moment and changes according to influences." (Beebe et al., 2002, 57f, English translations KSt).

Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al. 1978), a noteworthy researcher in the field of Attachment theory observed the behaviour of children in the so-called "Strange Situation". The experimental situation was that the one-year-old child is left alone in a room for some minutes and then the mother comes back. The results of the observa-

tions were interpreted in relation to the child`s experiences of acceptance or rejection concerning attachment. They concluded that the typical behavioural patterns of children refer to internal working models and following main patterns of attachment were identified.

Secure attachment: When the mother leaves the room, the child is sad and protests as a normal reaction to detachment. When the mother comes back it will quickly be comforted. In general the mother is sensitive enough and supports the needs of the child so that the child is trustful. Secure attachment is the result of a good and adequate interaction. Later on this could be a supporting factor with regard to resilience.

Insecure-avoiding attachment assumes that the avoiding behaviour of the child is the answer to rejection or neglect. A child who cannot trust in the mother´s availability and support, shows a lack of sadness during detachment. When the mother comes back there is less interest because the child has extremely controlled affections. This can be regarded as a strategy of defence. On the one hand, the child´s behaviour is seemingly normal, on the other hand one can find a high concentration of cortisol – a stress-hormone in the child`s saliva (personal information of Dr. Brisch within a seminar, 2007).

(I often observed similar behaviour treating patients with psychosomatic or depressive symptoms. Such patients often have problems to perceive or to express their emotions, but they offer a lot of somatic symptoms. Here I would pose the question whether internal working models have a long-lasting impact on the present situation in terms of influence on the phenomenal world of patients. If so it could have significant consequences for the psychotherapeutic treatment).

By observing insecure-ambivalent attachment one sees a desperate child who protests strongly against detachment. The main point is that when the mother comes back it cannot be comforted. The child shows strong emotions, perhaps to get attention from its mother. This reaction is often the result of inconsistent and unpredictable treatment by the caregivers. The relationship experience of the child is often overstrained and contradictory.

(In the clinical work I think this behaviour sometimes is similar to the panic behavioural style which is expressed, for example, by patients with anxiety disorder or patients with borderline personality organisation. These patients suffer extremely from real or imagined loneliness and they are often not able to regulate their emotions alone).

In Ainsworth's Strange Situation there were children who had not established a certain working model. Although the mother returned the child seemed to be more or less confused and behaved disorganized. Main and Hesse (Main & Hesse 2002) explored the behaviour of disorganized children and adults. It seems logical that disorganization often arises from a background of unstable family structure. The parents of the disorganized child often had experiences of unresolved loss, abuse or suffered from some kind of mental illness. Such parents risk evoking anxiety or they are anxious themselves and this seems to make it difficult for their children to develop a coherent working model. Disorganized behaviour is not really a stable behavioural style. On the contrary, it is the interruption and instability of behav-

iour and more or less the breakdown of behavioural structure. This observation is reminiscent of Lewin`s description of regression (Lewin 1982). He distinguishes regression exactly from retrogression. He said that regression is primitive behaviour, which means less different, less organized, less coherent, less reflected behaviour. All of this shows the change in the behavioural structure in the way that there is less complexity. According to Lewin regression arises from illness, frustration, insecurity and high tension.

There exist many investigations of the connection between attachment and the affect regulation. I would like to conclude simply that secure attachment refers to the ability to regulate the affections whereas insecure attachment forces the individual to regulate the affections too much or to regulate them less. Insecure-avoiding attachment often includes the suppression of affections as a possibility to defend oneself. Whereas insecure-ambivalent attachment often refers to a high level of affectiones because the person is not able to calm down. In both cases the affected person often is not able to behave according the requirement of the situation.

Today the stability of attachment classification and the influence on later development is widely discussed. There exist numerous studies suggesting that disorganized attachment refers to later psychopathology, especially to the borderline personality disorder, which is also described by Peter Fonagy (Fonagy 2003, 2004).

In summary, one could say that, according to Attachment theory, the aim of attachment is to give a secure and stable basis to support the child to explore the environment and to regulate its emotions. Furthermore, the early experiences of relationship influence and establish representational systems, which are called internal working models. These internal working models are based on experiences within the phenomenal world and later they have an influence on the perception of the phenomenal world and the behaviour.

Peter Fonagy, a psychoanalyst, contributed to Attachment theory with his theory of the "Reflective Function" (Fonagy & Target 2003, Fonagy et al. 2004). His theory is based on the observation that the child notices that human behaviour is influenced and motivated by psychic processes. In the first years the child starts to regard its own behaviour and the behaviour of others as meaningful and having some purpose and some intention. Fonagy developed a theory of mind and uses the term *reflective function* which is based on Daniel Dennett and his concept of intention (Dennett 1987). Reflective function/competence means that the individual has got a basic knowledge of mental processes.

 "Reflective competence is a developmental achievement which is reached within the context of close emotional interpersonal relationships in the first five years of personal development. This allows the individual to develop a rich inner world of mental representation concerning oneself, others and the interaction..." (Reinke 2003, 7, English Translation KSt).

Fonagy maintains that the quality of attachment and early relationship is not only important for the development of reflective function but also for affect-regulation and the development of the psychic self (Fonagy et al. 2004). For Peter Fonagy the reflective function or "mentalization" includes both cognition and affect. Concerning the ability to regulate affect, he distinguishes two forms of affect regulation: namely a simple and a complex one. The simple form of affect regulation is based on the idea

that there must be a mother to help the baby to regulate affections in the sense of a co-regulation. Whereas the complex form of affect regulation means that the development of the reflective function supports the child in learning to regulate itself. Fonagy also emphasizes that the reflective competence of the mother is particularly important for the development of the child´s reflective function and the development of its psychic self. This competence allows the mother not only to understand the child`s behaviour but also to respect the underlying mental state of the child. By respecting the child as an individual with intention the mother fosters the development of the child`s reflective competence.

This description fits well to my understanding of the Gestalt-theoretical approach in the therapeutic setting. In the process of exploring the phenomenal world we encourage our patients to perceive and understand their affections, thoughts and intentions. In this sense we also support the perception and the development of the self.

For the development of the reflective function within the interaction between child and mother Fonagy describes two processes which are important: the connection of representations (representational mapping) and the representation of rational action (Fonagy & Target 2003, 36). Within the interaction with the mother the child builds representations and develops the ability to adapt its own affectionate state with the mother`s affection by trying to share experiences with her. Fonagy wrote:

"According to Gergely and Watson (1996) the representation of the inner affection of the child is built in the process of "mirroring – interaction" between child and mother." (Fongay & Target 2003, 37, English translation KSt).

If the mother is empathic enough she can interpret and even modify the affectionate signal of the child. The child can learn to organize itself because the representation of the child`s expression by the mother can be connected with the representation of the self. Fonagy concludes that the mirroring of the mother represents a meta-representation of the child`s experience and plays a decisive role in the child`s organization. He predicts that if either the answer of the mother is too near or too far from the child`s experience then the process of mirroring fails. If the child`s signal is inadequately mirrored by the mother then the child cannot build a certain representation. In contrast, if the mirroring is too strong then the child is confronted with a strong affection because this affection is not regulated and symbolized enough to calm the child.

I think that these assumptions are useful to understand what happens within the clinical work treating patients who show a low tolerance to stress and have a tendency to be anxious. With regard to Lewin (Lewin 1982), the tension in their life-space is high, followed by regression and the inability to reflect and behave adequately. From my point of view they need more "phenomenal distance" concerning their experiences. Psychotherapy can support such patients to develop more reflective competence and affect regulation. (Concerning the clinical work Fonagy (Fonagy 2004, 436-468) describes some interesting case studies.)

To develop the reflective function Fonagy maintains that the child also needs a logical structure to understand and interpret behaviour. It needs representations of expected states and therefore it is relevant that the caregivers show a logical and foreseeable behaviour. By observing the behaviour of disorganized children and

adults Main (Main 1995) found out that disorganized children often have problems interpreting the parent`s behaviour and so they cannot develop coherent behavioural structures. If the parent`s behaviour is frightened or frightening the child often cannot differentiate whether it is the source of the parent´s behaviour or not. Some children start to observe and control their parent`s behaviour at the cost of having less energy for their own development. (I believe that this aspect has parallels for the treatment of patients in that it also requires a reliable, clear and transparent therapeutic relationship.)

According to Attachment theory one can agree that the responsiveness and empathy of the parents are main factors for the development of secure attachment and the development of the reflective competence. Within the early interactions between child and parents, the parent`s attribution of the motive of intention is extremely important for the child because this promotes the development of the reflective function and the development of the psychic self.

One can summarize that good early relationship and secure attachment supports the development of the reflective competence whereas the development of the reflective function is inhibited or fails altogether if the relationship is traumatic, hostile or empty.

At this point, I would like to reiterate that the new researches in the field of Attachment theory and reflective competence are interesting and useful for Gestalt-theoretical psychotherapy.

The most important parallel to Gestalt psychology is that they all emphasize the importance of interaction and relationship for development and psychic health or its failure to develop. This idea refers to a lot of Gestalt-theoretical contributions which one can read in Gerhard Stemberger`s edition: "Psychische Störungen im Ich-Welt-Verhältnis", where Stemberger wrote:

"The starting point is that relationships to others are important for the relation between the individual and the world. According to this interpretation not all, but a lot of psychic diseases are the result of an imbalance between the individual and the others."(Stemberger 2002, 19f, English translation KSt).

The systemic and dynamic approach of Attachment theory comes close to Gestalt theory because they consider the child`s experience and behaviour in the context of the whole situation. Concerning early interactions between the child and the mother they explore the dynamic interdependence between the interactions and the development of mental structures and its influence on the structure of the phenomenal world. Attachment theory and Gestalt theory are also compatible in their epistemological approach because both emphasize the necessity of the exploration of phenomenal processes without confusing them with trans- phenomenal aspects.

Concerning the results of Attachment theory I think that early relationships have an influence on the structure of perception and behaviour. In this context I would like to mention Lewin`s concept of the perspective of time and Koffka`s system of imprints.

Lewin: "Behaviour is not only influenced by the psychological present, but also by expectations, wishes and fears concerning the future and the knowledge of the past. Psychological present, psychological past and psychological future are main parts of the life-space of the individual at any given moment." (Lewin 1982, 309, English translation KSt).

Koffka: "One assumes an imprint of the past which represents the past in the present and one assumes a current process which refers to this imprint and therefore a new process of recognition and reproduction starts (compare Lewin`s perspective of time). This system of imprints is organized and it changes according to principles of Gestalt-Theory like the principle Prägnanz." (Koffka 1935, cited from Walter 1985, 50, English translation KSt).

It could be interesting to observe in which way those models have an influence on the structure and dynamic in the life-space of a person if similar conditions exist. For example: There are a lot of patients who are successful in some areas of their lives but have problems with near relationships because these intimate relationships trigger their attachment-system. Within psychotherapy it could be useful to understand the internal working models of our patients, especially for the exploration of past and current relationships. This aspect also includes the reflection and understanding of the relationship between patient and psychotherapist.

Also the assumptions about the connection between attachment, reflective function and affect regulation could be useful for clinical work because we often have to treat patients who need our support to perceive and to regulate their affections. This means we often have to support them to develop more affect regulation and more reflective competence.

As a practical psychotherapist I ask myself whether theories are important and make sense for my psychotherapeutic understanding and behaviour. Walter refers to Kurt Lewin and his description of the constructive method for a theory of personality:

"According to Lewin a theory is constructive when the method helps to understand phenomena in the context of the individual and his environment instead of outer classification. Therefore the whole creative process has to be understood .…. A theory of personality has to be at the same time a theory which describes processes of development, maturation and psychic growth. And therefore it has to be a theory about developmental changes and the therapeutic influence on such processes to be relevant." (Walter 1985, 74, English translation KSt).

Attachment theory and the theory of reflective function are significant because they help us to understand more about interactive processes and their influence on the development of the individual. As a Gestalt-theoretical psychotherapist I feel it is particularly important to create an atmosphere of security and recognition within the psychotherapeutic relationship in order to encourage patients to explore themselves, others and their phenomenal world.

Summary

The basic Gestalt theory assumption that human relationships are important for development is reinforced by observations made in attachment theory.

Bowlby regards attachment as a fundamental human requirement which corresponds to the need to belong to a community as described by numerous Gestalt theorists (such as Metzger, Wertheimer, Lewin a.o.). Results of attachment theory research suggest that experiences of attachment and relationship in early childhood influence the development of mental structure which Bowlby refers to as an "Internal working model". That means that attachment experiences produce images which affect the perception and handling of later relationships. Fonagy expands on attachment theory by using the "Theory of the Reflective Function". He assumes that the reflective function builds the basis for a consciousness of the psychological self and influences cognition and affection.

Zusammenfassung

Die Betonung der Wichtigkeit menschlicher Beziehungen von seiten der Gestalttheorie wird durch Beobachtungen der Bindungsforschung untermauert. Bowlby betrachtet Bindung als grundlegendes menschliches Bedürfnis, was dem von etlichen Gestalttheoretikern (z.B. Metzger, Wertheimer, Lewin u. a.) beschriebenem Bedürfnis nach Zugehörigkeit zu einer Gemeinschaft bzw. Gruppe verwandt ist. Ergebnisse der Bindungsforschung belegen, dass frühkindliche Beziehungserfahrungen die Basis für die Bildung „Innerer Arbeitsmodelle" darstellen und dahingehend die Entwicklung mentaler Strukturen beeinflussen. Fonagy trägt mit dem Konzept der „Reflexiven Funktion" maßgeblich zur Erweiterung der Bindungstheorie bei indem er darstellt, welche bedeutende Rolle diese Funktion sowohl für die Entwicklung des Selbst als auch für die Affektregulierung besitzt.

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