

Exploring Presence at the Heart of the Gestalt and Salesian Encounter and How the Two Paths Converge and Diverge

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General Outline of my Presentation

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- **Analogy:** A bird with one wing is unable to fly
Psychology and Spirituality support holistic growth
- **Two Paths Supporting Growth:**
Gestalt Therapeutic Relationship and Salesian Educative Pastoral Presence
How do they resonate?
Where do they converge and diverge?
- **Methodology:** Literature Review
Focus Groups
Thematic Analysis
Conclusions

What inspired me to my Research

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- Main Focus - PRESENCE
- My training highlighted divergence - My experience emphasised convergence
- Understanding Presence from a Gestalt and Salesian Perspective: exploring convergence + exploring divergence

Research Question

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How does presence as experienced through the Gestalt Therapeutic Relationship and the Salesian Educative Pastoral Approach unfold in a Therapeutic and in an Educative Environment? Where do the paths converge and diverge?

Structure of the Dissertation

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- Chapter 1: Literature Review
Understanding how Presence is experienced in Gestalt Therapy and Salesian Education
- Chapter 2: Methodology
A Qualitative Approach
- Chapter 3: Findings
An in-depth examination of the themes as they were discussed in the Focus Groups
- Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings
Understanding the meanings that emerged from the Findings.
- Chapter 5: Conclusion

Chapter 1: Literature Review (1)

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- General Psychological Approaches to Presence

Porges & Dana: The neurological response to presence and the importance of creating a safe space.

Rogers: The concept of empathy and non-judgemental attitude.

Buber: I-Thou relationship that allows the other person to be present.

Rank: Allowing the client to be the centre of the relationship.

Scharmer: Presencing, emptying oneself and being present in the now for the future.

Chapter 1: Literature Review (2)

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- Gestalt Theoretical perspective on Presence

Perls: Awareness in the present moment and contact at the boundary between the person and the environment.

Zinker: Creativity in an encounter allowing for mutual transformation.

Cohen: Presentness as the ability to maintain awareness to be present.

Hycner: Refers to the in-between and the transpersonal reality.

Brownell: Intentionality that leads to a fertile ground for transformation; and embracing spiritual reality.

Spagnuolo Lobb: The expression of the full presence of both persons in a creative dance.

Oaklander: Emphasising the relationship between therapist and client to deal with interruptions in the cycle of experience.

Chapter 1: Literature Review (3)

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- Educational/Developmental understanding of Presence

Naranjo: The transformation and rehumanising of education with the emphasis on emotional education.

Freire: The importance of transformative relationships for student and educator.

Piaget, Kohlberg, & Fowler: Focusing on stages of development rather than states as explored by Spagnuolo Lobb and experienced by Bosco.

Mezirow: Refers to the process of transformation as a learning process.

Capitano: Refers to spiritual accompaniment as unfolding in stories within relationships towards growth.

Chapter 1: Literature Review (4)

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- Bosco and Salesian approaches to Presence

Bosco: The emphasis that a young person needs to know that they are loved since education is a matter of the heart.

Lenti: The essential quality of familiarity and affection in building mutual trust.

Finnegan: Loving Kindness as the foundation for pastoral educative accompaniment.

Grech: Focusing on experiential states rather than stages of development.

Rodriguez: Education aimed at bringing out the best in all aspects of each person.

- Design: Qualitative Research
 1. Literature Review
 2. Focus Groups
 3. Analysis
 4. Conclusions

Gathering the Data: Focus Groups (1)

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- Why Focus Groups?
 1. Allows understanding of the concept of Presence as experienced by professionals in the Gestalt and Salesian environments.
 2. It allows group interaction and cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Pilot Project: Lessons Learned

Gathering the Data: Focus Groups (2)

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- Two Groups - three sessions each
 - Group 1: Gestalt Therapists
 - Group 2: Salesian Educators
- Themes Explored:
 - Meaning
 - Experience
 - Contact
 - Transformation
 - Spirituality
 - Depth

Processing the Data

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- Transcripts of recording of focus group sessions.

- Braun and Clarke:

Step by Step Guide to the phases for working with themes

1. Familiarization with Data
2. Generating Codes
3. Searching for Themes
4. Reviewing Themes
5. Defining and Naming Themes
6. Producing the Report

Contacting the participants: Informed Consent prior to the Focus Groups.

Participants as contributors and not the subject of the research to promote freedom and spontaneity.

Participants could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Anonymity - names and reference to individuals were removed and replaced by pseudonyms.

Third party confidentiality was guaranteed and binding non-disclosure agreements with participants and facilitators.

Ethical considerations were repeated at the start of every Focus Group session.

The researcher abided by the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards of both EAPTI-GPTIM and the Salesians of Don Bosco.

Findings (1)

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Main objective: Authentic representation of themes generated by participants.

Observations:

- (1) Some themes identified prior to the focus groups varied from the themes and sub-themes discussed by participants.
- (2) English language was used in the discussion to guarantee a more faithful transcription.

Findings (2)

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Eight Identified Themes:

1. Contact as a gateway

Convergence: The key element in this theme was the creation of a safe environment.

Divergence: Clients enter freely into therapy while students are often obliged to attend.

2. The centrality of context for a meaningful presence

Convergence: The nonformal family spirit of Salesian Education embracing a non-judgmental stance focusing on the individual.

Divergence:

Therapy often takes place in a one-to-one context education often happens in a classroom environment.

Therapy has no pre-defined path while education has a pre-determined curriculum.

Findings (3)

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3. Enriching Presence through reciprocity

Convergence: The limitation of having a giver and a receiver in the relationship was recognised by both therapists and educators and mitigated in both fields by the element of reciprocity and openness for co-creation.

4. Presence as process

Convergence: The value of intentionality towards positive transformation was emphasised in both professional groups.

5. Effects, Functions and Qualities of Presence

Convergence: The recognition of the other person both in therapy and in education is at the heart of presence.

Divergence: General (non-Salesian) education was highlighted for its lack of appreciation of the value of each person.

6. Interruptions to Presence

Convergence: Both groups of participants identified four main types of interruptions related to (1) the environment, (2) the size of the group, (3) the therapist/teacher, (4) physical proximity.

Findings (5)

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7. Spirituality and Psychology as paths to understanding the person

Convergence: Spirituality and psychology compliment each other and are essential elements of the person.

Divergence: Therapists highlighted the distinction between therapy and religion that carries judgemental attitudes. Salesian educators referred to faith in God and values related to religion.

8. Navigating Presence through Language

Convergence:

The language that is used in both fields is often associated with power relations creating a hierarchical distance.

Body language is a strong component of communication.

Divergence: Therapist strongly emphasised the distinction between the language of spirituality and moralistic language.

Discussion on Findings (1)

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In the discussion on the findings, I focused on 11 areas:

1. The primacy of context

Supportive context promoting safety, freedom and openness is essential for the establishment of a positive transformative presence.

2. Understanding power in relationships

An imbalance of power in relationships in both therapeutic and educational context. The need to redress this power imbalance is recognised in both fields.

3. Reciprocity and Intentionality

Reciprocity is essential for a meaningful presence that enables the co-creation in the between and must be sought with intentionality. This implies the recognition of the other's presence and the adoption of a language and an attitude that overcomes the status of giver and receiver.

Discussion on Findings (2)

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4. The Contact Process

Relationships start from a point of contact are developed through commitment and time. While this process is directly intended in therapy, in an educational setting this can be difficult to achieve. The Salesian Educative Approach intentionally creates the space for this process to happen.

5. Working in groups

Gestalt Therapy intentionally works with individuals and small groups, avoiding the larger encounters one finds in educational establishments. Salesian Education also chooses to work with small groups within the larger set up.

6. Building healthy boundaries

Clear boundaries must support a true transformative presence. They do not obstruct the formation of presence but enhance this transformative process.

Discussion on Findings (3)

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7. A non-judgemental attitude

A non-judgemental attitude is both expressed through verbal and non-verbal messages. While therapists are trained to be sensitive to both physical and spoken language, educators are generally less prepared and need greater support and intuitive insight.

8. Being valued and understood

The therapeutic context is essentially more conducive to recognising the value of the other than the educational set up. However, in the Salesian approach intentionality offers the space for a creative presence.

9. Mindfulness, silence and stillness

In educational settings, moments of silence often appear uncomfortable. Salesian education can learn from Gestalt Therapy to embrace the effectiveness of silence and mindful presence.

Discussion on Findings (4)

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10. Spirituality: beyond religion and psychology

Both fields can benefit from embracing spirituality as different from religion and psychology. The 'care for the soul' implies caring for the whole person.

11. The challenge of language

It would benefit Gestalt Therapy to move away from medical language, and Salesian education to move away from moralistic discourse.

Conclusion

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In both a therapeutic and educational environment, persons arrive with a story that they might be willing or reluctant to share.

Both fields require intentionality directed at the aboutness of the experience.

An empathic presence has the power to create the space for stories to emerge, merge and discover new paths for further transformation.

Thank you ...

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