

The Gestalt Perspective On Psychotherapists’ Experience Of Complex Trauma And Posttraumatic Growth — *A Narrative Approach*

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Research Gap

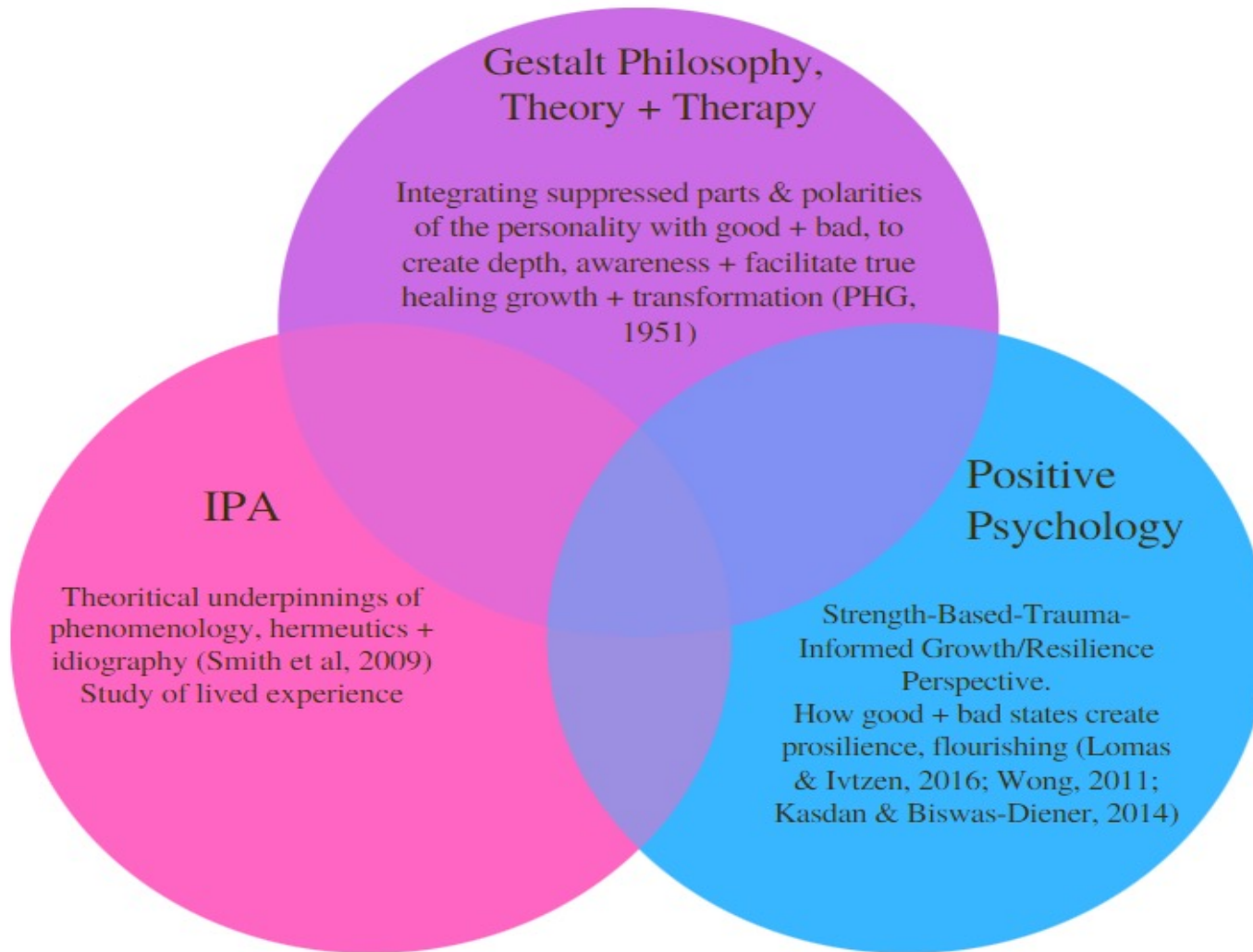
- ❖ There is scarcely any research, qualitative or quantitative, concerning Complex Trauma and Post Traumatic Growth in Gestalt Therapy, moreover concerning Psychotherapists.
- ❖ In Malta, both Complex Trauma concepts and Post Traumatic Growth concepts have barely been researched, more so connected with the Wounded Healer and Gestalt Psychotherapy. The concept of PTG, the flagship of positive psychology has scarcely been discussed in context of Complex Trauma, the kingpin of traumas as standardized in the ICD-11.
- ❖ Providing a mapping of the challenging, complex journey from Complex Trauma to Posttraumatic Growth.

Aim of Research

- ❖ Bridging two different domains of research – Complex Trauma and Post Traumatic Growth through the lived experience of psychotherapists, exploring the relevance of positive psychology to Gestalt practice and therapy.
- ❖ This research will help to disintegrate the false boundary between sufferer and helper, exploring and celebrating the psychotherapist's humanity, sensitivity and imperfections, in all their vibrant forms. It also explores that the wounds we experience can make us more sensitive to others, and may be a gateway for healing, growth, transformation and enlightenment for ourselves, acknowledging that not only trauma has impacts that can be named and managed but it can be a springboard for growth and transformation.
- ❖ Question: *What are the lived PTG experiences of Gestalt psychotherapists who have experienced CT?*

Aims and Objectives of Research

- ❖ To explore the experiences of psychotherapists who have undergone CT who can narrate their unique capacity to learn and grow from extreme adversity.
- ❖ To identify the themes which supported the participants in the process of PTG.
- ❖ To examine how the role of wounded healer emerging from PTG can help therapists to be facilitators of growth, expert companions (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006) and enlightened witnesses (Miller, 2007); 'holy witnesses' (Myss, 2013).
- ❖ To explore how the GT phenomenological approach could be engaged in the trauma therapy process to enable the emerging of PTG.
- ❖ To provide information relevant for specific training for practitioners and clinicians in providing treatment for trauma clients to improve the already existing knowledge, attitude, and skills in this area, and thus support further development of trauma-informed care.



Conceptual Framework

A Gestalt approach to working with Trauma in Psychotherapy (Kepner, 1999)



ASSESSING THE HEALING PROCESS

- General functioning
- Trauma symptomatology
- Systemic support
- Management of affect, stress, and restimulation
- Self-perceptions and self-care
- Acknowledgment of abuse
- Stance toward survivorship
- Reality testing
- Orientation to past, present, and future
- Spiritual perspective

Trauma, Gestalt and IPA

Trauma	Gestalt	IPA
Embodied	Embodied	Embodied
Existential	Existential	Existential
Experiential	Experiential	Experiential
Experimental	Experimental	Experimental
Relational	Relational	Relational
Phenomenological	Phenomenological	Phenomenological
Humanistic	Humanistic	Humanistic
Holistic	Holistic	Holistic
Narrative	Narrative	Narrative

Choice of Methodology - Qualitative

- ❖ Qualitative methods are not only applicable and opportune, but have additional vitality as well as information to the area of trauma, undoubtedly seeming to be a summoning for descriptive research which continue to be paramount in trauma research (Long & Astin, 2014).
- ❖ The importance of studies to use "depth interviews" to the growing body of information about trauma and PTG (Cross, 1981).
- ❖ The requirement for "qualitative studies that capture the fullness of experience, the richness of living" (Rubin, 1996, p. 14).

Why IPA?

- ❖ Is an apt phenomenological method when searching for perceptions and understandings of a particular situation that are (1) complex, (2) poorly understood, or (3) previous unexplored. The concepts of CT and PTG tick all the above three.
- ❖ Can support elucidate previous quantitative studies by providing rich and nuanced analyses of constructs of interest, and can also be drawn on by practitioners to aid with designing and making sense of their interactions and interventions with clients (Smith & Nizza, 2022).
- ❖ One of the IPA strategies is the development of a structure, frame or gestalt which illustrates the relationships between themes, and this particularly confirms the harmony of Gestalt and IPA (Smith, 2007).
- ❖ Research on Gestalt therapy and PTG is very scarce, but Gestalt and IPA is even scarcer, and only a qualitative research can identify how Gestalt can be promoted and utilized as a relevant therapy to process and facilitate PTG.

Process of Methodology

- ❖ Selection of 12 participants – Gestalt psychotherapists; women; between 40 and 55 years of age; Purposive, homogenous sample by 'snowballing' sampling; experienced CT – Complex Trauma Checklist & DESNOS.
- ❖ Ethical considerations - choosing own pseudonyms – giving a voice and empowering due to choice – understanding inexpressibility of trauma – changing narrative.
- ❖ Data Collection – Triangulation
 - Pilot Interview - gain a better understanding of how therapists talk about their trauma, PTG, and to identify key experiences which appeared significant
 - Phenomenological Interview – dialogic encounter (Seidman, 2006); (1) lifestory & major events; (2) trauma, impact; (3) PTG; (4) Wrap-up, future goals and purpose, additional topics, questions & reflections – gives meaning by exploring experiential narrative material
 - Self as participant – immersed myself; enmeshed within the Heideggerian phenomenological approach – heuristic inquiry – not only the 'lived experience' but the 'living experience'.
 - Zoom recordings
 - Transcription and Data Analysis
 - PHENOMENA (McCormack & Joseph, 2018)

Findings

4 Group Experiential Themes (GETs – Super Ordinate Themes) with Experiential Statements (ESs – Sub Ordinate Themes)

GET 1: Not Sinking with the Titanic – Psycho-Socio-Spiritual Resources

GET 2: Surgery of the Soul – Excavating the Lost Fragments of Myself

GET 3: The Wounded Warrior – Alchemizing the Pain

GET 4: Eudiamonia and Posttraumatic Transformation: the Apotheosis of the Heroine

Emerging Constructs: *differences and similarities between participants; personality profile prone to trauma; personality characteristics facilitating growth; parent transferential relationship; resources; prosilience; androgyny*

Findings

Not Sinking with the Titanic: Psycho-Socio-Spiritual Resources

Angels in the Field: Benevolent and Positive Childhood Experiences

The Spiritual Healer: Relationship to God

The Search for Identity: The Family's Guardian

Personal Growth Initiative & Intelligence: The Roots of Resilience

Surgery of the Soul: Excavating the Lost Fragments of Myself

Eating from the Tree of Knowledge: Awareness

The Emotional Archaeologist of the Authentic Self: Collecting The Artefacts

The Shedding of Myself: Losing Psychological Weight through Emotional Muscle

The Lived Body: Transforming from Cocoon to Butterfly

Gathering of Allies: Relating, Connecting and Engaging

Positive Affect Enhancement: Compassion, Forgiveness and Gratitude

The Wounded Warrior: Alchemizing the Pain

The Road of Trials: The Personhood and Humanity of the Therapist

Becoming a Guardian: Companion, Ally and Witness

Sharing the Skin: Parallel Process

Eudiamonia and Posttraumatic Transformation: The Apotheosis of the Heroine

The Calling: Woman's Search for Meaning

Prosilience: The Liminal Space

Kintsugi: Creative Adjustment and Integration

Persephone's Resurrection: Returning from the Abyss of Hell and Transcending the World

Profile of participants

Androgynous	Filial maturity	Positive Affect Enhancement	Intellectual curiosity	Optimistic Humorous	Perseverant & Determined
Scapegoat & Black sheep	Psychological mindedness	Personal Growth Initiative	Spiritual	Self-efficacious	Introceptive & Intraceptive
Parentification	Clairsentience	Aesthetic Relational Knowledge	Resilient & Prosilient	Adversity quotient	Sensitivity & Intuition
Symbiotic therapist & wounded healer	Emotionally Intelligent	Insecure Attachment – Earned Attachment	Creative	Flexible & Adaptable	Achievement-focused

Trauma & the Maltese Culture

- ❖ Polarized Maltese society – psyche, identity & culture – due to 5 centuries of famine, pandemics, slave raids, war, colonization and abandonment – which can cause trauma and create a terror of chaos and unknown so search for protection in tribes, associations, political parties and of belonging to a group.
- ❖ Extremity of Maltese polarities may be demonstrated by the 2 most common nouns in every language:
 - Mother** – *Omm* (Maltese) – *Umm* (Arabic)
 - Father** – *Missier* (Maltese) – *Messeri* (Sicuelo-Norman) – *Monsignore/Mio Sire* (My Lord in English)
- ❖ Maltese wives and children called husbands and fathers *Messieri* but called mother *Omm* which shows the difference between child's relationship with mother and father.
- ❖ Also, they still struggle to discover identity between African and European cultures, and Italian and English cultures.
- ❖ It is as though the Maltese unconsciously and frantically search for motives to be polarized with their fanatical, irrational rivalry and territoriality which shows extent of their trauma.

CONCEPT OF THESIS

In essence this thesis puts forward how trauma can be understood as “fragmentation” of self and healing and growth as stretching and integration” of selves. It is protection instead of connection. The purpose and journey of life is discovering one is an engine of co-creation and that choice is one’s fundamental power.

Implications of the Research

Practice of Gestalt Psychotherapy for Complex Trauma and also as an Integrative modality

Therapists' Personal Trauma Therapy

Specialized Clinical Supervision

Training of Psychotherapists

Trauma-informed Clinical Practice

Support for Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

Encompassing cultural practices e.g. ceremony, prayer, nature

Future Research

IPA with a Male sample – therapists - who experience CT and PTG

IPA with different modality therapists

Different professionals

Doctors and Medical profession

Laypeople (not therapists/not professionals)

Quantitative and mixed methods approach to trauma based on this research

Thematic analysis based on this research

My Learning Curve as a Researcher

- ❖ This journey has been extremely supportive in my growth as a person and a therapist, shaping my identity as a research-practitioner.
- ❖ The meaningful interactions with the research participants and the ongoing reflection and processing of my experiences in my thesis were instrumental in my learning.
- ❖ I found myself continuously reflecting on myself, my clinical practice and the limitations within it.
- ❖ This process helped me explore my insecurities as a therapist as I began to inquire the effectiveness of my work with CT survivors.
- ❖ This research gave me permission to gradually abandon my need for perfection and to embrace my humanity and vulnerability.
- ❖ Like my participants' journey from hubris to humility this iterative process outcome in a more realistic, holistic, balanced image of myself as a researcher, academic, therapist, and person.

A photograph of a single purple flower with five petals and green leaves, growing out of a crack in a grey asphalt surface. The background is a blurred asphalt road.

Message of the Research

The spirit of the concept that personal alchemy and turning lead into gold, believing that heroes are people who experienced and overcame trauma, and who succeeded to heal, grow, thrive and transform through working with polarities, creating an integrated mosaic, which is a dialogue between fragments and a narrative that provides awareness, power, safety, mobility and a voice. Their journey in life is the purpose to create and contribute by empowering oneself and ultimately support others to find their own power by responding differently to life.

summary

Using positive psychology, a strengths-based approach, trauma-informed and heroic terminology, contrary to diagnostic terminology and a pathology based-approach, may accentuate the person's resources and empower healing, integration, posttraumatic growth and transformation, supporting an alternative identity.

The complexity of a Gestalt polarity mosaic gives structure and ground, with freedom, in the quicksand of trauma, and also gives them back their power and dignity, which are two characteristics that they may feel had been snatched away from them. Gestalt is the therapy of polarities: science & art; practical & spiritual; safety & challenge; here-and-now for present & hope for future; staying & action.



thank you

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