

What Gestalt Approaches Can Contribute to Climate Change Transformation

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Abstract

A main aim of this paper is to show how Gestalt approaches can contribute to climate change transformation. A fictional case loosely based on experiences from the Dadaab refugee camps serves as a basis for theoretical speculation. For many people climate change, natural hazard-related disasters and displacement entail major life changes. This paper discusses certain cross-cutting and overarching concepts that may be of value in the process of transformation in general and transformational adaptation in a refugee camp particular. The Gestalt concepts explored are field theory, existential phenomenology, relationships and contact, and conflict and change. Field theory, which posits that everything is in mutual interaction, can be the basis of an ecologically oriented worldview. Phenomenology helps people stand aside from their usual way of thinking, and have a more immediate and naïve perception of what is in the present situation. It is important to consider interpersonal relationships as well as relationships between people and trees, animals and the wider natural environment. Several modes of contact may be particularly relevant in a climate change context, including collective "chewing" of certain norms. Sometimes modes of contact, such as projection, are related to intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict. An essential task is to think about how a safe space can be provided for conflicts to be explored. The Gestalt theory of conflict sees the person as a conglomerate of polar forces. Change happens when one becomes what one is rather than trying to become what one is not. The paper concludes that Gestalt approaches have much to offer and points out future research possibilities, including carrying out actual case studies based on Gestalt-inspired transformation.

Keywords: climate change, transformation, Gestalt therapy, displacement, refugee camp

1. Introduction

Climate change is already influencing the frequency, intensity, timing and/or spatial distribution of certain natural hazards (IPCC, 2012). Factors such as population growth, poverty and conflict may increase people's vulnerability. Disasters resulting from these hazards and vulnerability influence human mobility, including forced displacement (IDMC, 2012; IPCC, 2012). For example, hundreds of thousands had to flee the drought that developed into a famine in Somalia in 2011 and 2012 (Kolmannskog, 2012). Displacement means having to leave your home and life, as you know it, behind. Often it involves changes in belief systems, self-perception and identity (Kebede, 2010; Marshall et al., 2012). Sometimes not only the places of origin but also the areas where the displaced people arrive are, or become, particularly vulnerable and affected by climate change. This is the case in the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya where many drought-affected Somalis arrived. While it is imperative to prevent forced displacement from occurring in the first place, efforts must also be made in the new areas of habitation.

With the realization that some climate change is inevitable regardless of mitigation efforts, the recognition of the importance of climate change adaptation has increased. Incremental adaptation involves "extensions of actions and behaviours that already reduce the losses or enhance the benefits of natural variations in climate and extreme events" (Kates, Travis, & Wilbanks, 2012). Key questions that challenge this concept of adaptation include what is being adapted to, why adapt, who decides on the magnitude and types of changes and what the alternatives are (O'Brien, 2012). Adaptation may merely accommodate change rather than contest and question it; current paradigms and systems remain intact (Pelling, 2011 cited in O'Brien, 2012). Furthermore, incremental adaptation may not be sufficient when faced with more severe vulnerability and climate change (Kates, Travis,

& Wilbanks, 2012). Such questions and challenges have given rise to another concept, namely climate change transformation.

O'Brien (2012, p. 670) refers to diverse definitions of transformation, which may involve "physical and/or qualitative changes in form, structure or meaning-making", "a psycho-social process involving the unleashing of human potential to commit, care and effect change for a better life", and "recognizing that some fundamental shifts are necessary to enable desirable futures to emerge". These shifts often require "the questioning of values, the challenging of assumptions, and the capacity to closely examine fixed beliefs, identities and stereotypes" (p. 670).

Gestalt therapy has its roots in Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, existential-phenomenological philosophy and other philosophies, theories and systems. It is often considered part of the humanistic third wave of psychotherapies, which focus on the human potential for growth. As such it fits well with the definition of transformation as "a psycho-social process involving the unleashing of human potential to commit, care and effect change for a better life" (Sharma, 2007 cited in O'Brien 2012, p. 670). As a first attempt to link Gestalt approaches and climate change transformation, this paper discusses certain Gestalt concepts that are of relevance to, and may enrich, the concept of climate change transformation in general and transformational adaptation in the Dadaab refugee camps in particular.

Transformation may occur on many levels and scales, from the personal to the societal. Historically, the focus in Gestalt therapy was on the individual and intrapersonal level, but in recent decades the interpersonal, group and societal levels are receiving more attention (Feder & Frew, 2008). While the main focus in this paper is on the individual, intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, the concepts explored could potentially inform interventions on all levels and scales of transformation. There is also an assumption that changes on the intrapersonal and interpersonal level influence change on other levels.

Transformation may be linked to both climate change mitigation and adaptation. While most concepts explored in this paper are relevant to transformation in this broad sense, there is a particular focus on transformational adaptation. Some authors make the types of outcomes crucial in their definitions of transformational adaptation, including for example relocation and adaptations that are new to an area (Kates, Travis, & Wilbanks, 2012; Park et al., 2012). Other authors focus on transformational adaptation as a process. Moser and Ekstrom (2010) base their framework on an idealized, rational approach to decision-making with phases such as understanding, planning and managing. Park et al. (2012) conceptualise incremental and transformational adaptation as a continuous process depicted by two distinct, yet linked, action learning cycles, the Adaptation Action Cycles. In contrast to the outcome- as well as the process-focused papers mentioned, this paper focuses on certain cross-cutting, overarching concepts that could guide the process of transformational adaptation. (There are several Gestalt models that might be of relevance describing phases of action, change and contact, but these are not discussed in this paper). Authors such as Kates, Travis and Wilbanks (2012) and Moser and Ekstrom (2010) mention certain cross-cutting conditions and issues, such as leadership, communication and deeply held values and beliefs; the exploration of these may benefit from an understanding of the concepts presented in this paper.

In the following, a fictional case is constructed loosely based on experience from humanitarian work and research in the Dadaab refugee camps (in particular Kolmannskog, 2012). The case serves as illustration and a basis for speculation in the further elaboration of what Gestalt can contribute to transformation.

2. Case

Ahmed, a young man in his late teens, came from a pastoralist background in Somalia. During the drought in 2011 livestock died and those remaining had to be sold cheaply. After some months, Ahmed's parents both passed away due to drought-related diseases and malnourishment. Finally, Ahmed walked together with a younger sister to the Dadaab refugee camps in a semi-arid area of Kenya approximately 100 km from the Somali border. They both got refugee status. Formally, he is not allowed to work or move freely outside the camp. To get food he lines up in a long queue in the camp where food is distributed. He also has some income from being a so-called "incentive worker" with an NGO that builds shelter. The compensation he gets is a lot less than the salary of his Kenyan co-workers. He also attends an educational programme provided by an NGO. On his free time, he chews khat. He hopes to be resettled or somehow manage to move to Europe or the USA. He says he is depressed and the solution is in the hands of Allah.

Ahmed's sister, Fatima, is in her early teens. She also attends the educational programme. In addition, she is responsible for firewood and water gathering. Due to the limited resources, the cutting of trees and search for water outside the camps sometimes lead to competition and conflict between the locals and the refugees.

Deforestation and environmental degradation may also have had an effect on the micro-climate and certainly made the area even more vulnerable to droughts and floods.

Abdi is a local, Somali Kenyan man in his 50s. He lives in Dadaab town near the refugee camps. He is a member of the local environmental committee. He owns a few cows, camels and goats. Most of his animals died or were sold during the drought in 2011. He says that the relationship with the refugees is good since they are all Somalis, but he also complains about the effect the refugees have had on the local environment and that they get much more assistance and support from the UN and NGOs than the local population.

There are several people working in local and international NGOs, UN agencies and governmental institutions present in the town and camps. Some of the NGOs are trying to implement environmental programmes, including the use of solar panels, reforestation, educational and training programmes. Maria, a Norwegian woman in her 30s, belongs to one of these NGOs. She has been in Dadaab for three months. She runs an environmental sensitivity programme that Ahmed and Fatima attend as part of their education, and cooperates with the local environmental committee and Abdi. In addition, Dadaab is increasingly being visited by researchers, journalists and politicians. Finally, community leaders-often the refugee elders-are important persons in the camps.

3. Discussion

3.1 Field Theory

The basic worldview of Gestalt is field theory. It can be defined as “a framework or point of view for examining and elucidating events, experiencing, objects, organisms and systems as meaningful parts of a knowable totality of mutually influencing forces [...]” (Yontef, 1993, p. 321). Other assumptions about fields tend to involve the field being “a systematic web of relationships”, “continuous in space and time”, “[p]henomena are determined by the whole field”, it is “a unitary whole: everything affects everything else in the field,” and “[p]erceived reality is configured by the relationship between the observer and the observed” (Yontef, 1993, p. 322). Field theory is closely linked to holism (Smuts, 1926/1996), and provides support for the Gestalt approach that includes attention to body, mind, emotions, spiritual aspects, social relationships and the wider environment. It challenges dualist views or dichotomies such as inner and outer, mind and body, humans and the natural environment.

Field theory is in line with basic ideas from social-ecological systems theory and findings in climate change sciences on how phenomena are connected and interact. According to the social-ecological resilience framework, social and ecological systems are intrinsically linked, and changes are variable, complex, non-linear and dynamic (Walker et al., 2004). This stands in contrast to Newtonian, mechanistic and unilinear causality and the notion of discrete, isolated particles.

In the 1990s, several psychologists realised that their discipline had paid insufficient attention to the human relationship with the natural world. Eco-psychology aims to re-examine the human psyche as an integral part of the web of nature (Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995). In Gestalt, the field is not the field of an organism, for example a human, but of an organism/environment. Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951, pp. 258-259) write that “the definition of an animal involves its environment: it is meaningless to define a breather without air [...] The definition of an organism is the definition of an organism/environment field.” The people living in Dadaab are to some extent defined by their environment and how they relate with the environment. They influence droughts and floods, and droughts and floods influence them.

The field is meaningful only when one knows the frame of reference of the observer. What one sees is somewhat a function of who is seeing, and how and when one looks. The home of Ahmed and Fatima could be seen as one field. Other fields could be the educational settings where Maria, Ahmed and Fatima meet, the shelter work place of Ahmed, and the environmental committee of Abdi. These are part of the larger field of Dadaab with refugee camps, town, people, plants and animals, which again is part of larger fields, such as Earth.

According to field theory what has effect must touch that which is affected in time and space. Gestalt therapists focus on the here and now while being sensitive to how the there and then currently manifests in for example body posture and habits. There are a series of current factors that may be relevant to Ahmed’s depression, including memories, and a sense of loss, of family and traditional lifestyle in Somalia; the lack of future prospects for jobs and life in Kenya or Somalia; effects of khat; a personal disposition; the natural environment which is degraded and overpopulated; the treatment the refugees get from locals, NGOs and others, etc.

Assume that Maria is getting increasingly frustrated with Ahmed. He does not seem to pay attention when she is teaching. Sometimes she thinks he is a good-for-nothing, khat-chewing Somali who would sell his sister if it

could take him to Europe or the USA. Her perceived reality is configured by the relationship between the two. The way Maria views him can also affect how she acts towards him, which can affect how he feels and views her, which in turn may affect how he acts, etc.

Maria and the NGO workers, who come in with an environmental perspective, think that a major cause for conflicts is that the refugees cut trees and bushes around the camps. The NGO is now trying to put a stop to this, implement reforestation programmes, supply the camps with firewood from elsewhere and fuel-efficient stoves. The conflicts continue, however. Some refugees are still cutting trees and selling the excess firewood. Importantly, there may be other factors involved in the conflicts-not least the presence of NGO workers and those coming in from the outside. Abdi and other locals feel that refugees are receiving most of the attention and his frustration is placed on the refugees. NGO workers, government employees, researchers and others coming in from the outside must acknowledge that they become part of the field, what they perceive is partly a function of who they are, and that their vulnerability assessments and programme activities influence the field.

A field perspective makes us appreciate complex wholes. This appreciation in itself may contribute to personal, interpersonal and planetary healing. Yet, this sort of thinking may conflict with other worldviews. For example, Ahmed, Fatima and most other Somalis believe that the drought they fled was primarily the will of God. Their belief system is that humans are separate and above nature, that God is separate and above humans, and that it is only God that can affect major changes. Such beliefs are themselves part of the field and influence-and are influenced by-it. Increasingly, the Somalis are experiencing that humans do play a role in the major disasters while God still functions on some other level.

3.2 Existential Phenomenology and Awareness

Phenomenology can be defined as “a discipline that helps people stand aside from their usual way of thinking so that they can tell the difference between what is actually being perceived and felt in the current situation and what is residue from the past” (Yontef, 1993, p. 124). The focus for a Gestalt exploration is the immediate, naïve perception “undeached by learning” (Wertheimer, 1945 cited in Yontef 1993, p. 124). This contrasts with approaches that treat what another person or group of people experience as mere appearances and uses interpretation to find real meaning, such as certain strands of psychoanalysis. It also contrasts with approaches that seek to condition or program a person or group of people based on ones own ideas.

A phenomenological approach is particularly useful for transformational approaches to climate change. Moser and Ekstrom (2010) mention deeply held values and beliefs and that we tend to look at new problems, tasks, and solutions through the lens of pre-existing preferences, beliefs and norms as some of the cross-cutting challenges in the process of adaptation. For example, during the understanding phase, the authors claim, a problem may not be detected because the actor’s mental model filters out the signal. People’s assumptions and past experiences are not always useful for the present and future. The phenomenological approach may help people see the present needs and possibilities better.

Phenomenology requires practice. Phenomenologists strive to be as phenomenological as possible; an immediate, naïve perception “undeached by learning” is not fully possible. The approach involves joint exploration of what is here and now and aims to increase awareness. For Maria, emotions and physical sensations in the present as well as what is observed outside herself, would be considered important data. Through dialogue, other people, such as Abdi, Ahmed and Fatima, could be encouraged to report emotions and physical sensations. Such dialogue would reduce the need for assumptions and interpretations about others, or at least enable their confirmation, rejection or modification. In a group, such as the environmental sensitivity programme or the environmental committee, a facilitator, such as Maria or Abdi, could seek to facilitate awareness on several levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal and group as a whole (Feder & Frew, 2008). The person or group could also learn how to become aware of awareness. In order to increase ones own and others’ awareness, focused awareness and experimentation can be used.

UN, NGO and government workers come to Dadaab with many assumptions, explanations, ideas about what to do, mandates and reporting duties. Due to experiences from previous projects, Maria may believe that Ahmed, Fatima, Abdi and others must stop living off cattle and stop cutting trees, and introduce certain drought-resistant seeds and agroforestry. While such ideas may have value, it is important that Maria “owns” them, that she knows that these are her own assumptions and not the one and only reality or solution in Dadaab. It may be an idea for her to “bracket off” her own theories and ideas and first attempt to phenomenologically explore what *is* in the field.

In relation to Abdi, a phenomenological approach could involve Maria stating what she observes and senses. She could for example say, “I see that there is very little grass, leaves and natural fodder here, and the cows are thin”.

This contrasts with statements such as “there are too many people and animals in this environment” and “you have to stop with cows”. The phenomenological approach with dialogue and exploration may bring up emotional and other aspects of keeping the cows. Perhaps Abdi has conflicting emotions and needs regarding the traditional lifestyle and the new setting. Perhaps he needs a safe space where it is possible to explore these and grieve.

In relation to Ahmed’s depression, a phenomenological approach could involve Maria stating what she observes, for example his body posture, eyes, etc., possibly describing how this makes her feel, for example heavy, depressed, etc., and ask him how he feels. Both may increase their awareness.

It is not possible to tell what the outcomes will be. Perhaps Ahmed, Fatima and Abdi will change how they interact with the environment. Drought-resistant seeds may be introduced or something completely different and unexpected might happen. The particular result may be something that nobody had thought of, including Maria with all her expertise. The phenomenologist can only trust the process and people. Importantly, by approaching and relating to others in a different way, Maria is affecting the entire field as well.

Existential phenomenologists focus on people’s existence as they experience it. Most people live in an unquestioned context of conventional thought. By becoming aware, one becomes able to choose and organise one’s own existence in a meaningful manner. The existentialists believe that people are endlessly remaking and discovering themselves. This is highly relevant in a climate change context. What do the changes in climate, environment and life entail for Ahmed, Fatima and Abdi on an existential level? For many, the change from a pastoralist lifestyle to being settled in a refugee camp or elsewhere is an existential crises of proportions (Kebede, 2010; Marshall et al., 2012). The more general questions posed by O’Brien (2012) can also be seen as existential, in particular what is being adapted to and why adapt. These questions could also be explored in a phenomenological manner in the educational sensitivity programme and environmental committee. This would be different from Maria and others coming in with their knowledge and ideas that they merely aim to transmit.

Admittedly, an existential-phenomenological approach may be challenging for those with clear mandates, goals and reporting duties, which is the case for many NGOs, government and UN agencies. Moser and Ekstrom (2010) believe the different institutional missions, jurisdictions, political interests and funding are potential barriers to adaptation. For example, Maria’s NGO defines itself as environmental. If the outcome of a phenomenological approach is not directly related to their mandate, she may be considered inefficient and not a good employee. Furthermore, many reporting systems, only measure outcomes such as trees planted, houses built, etc. This does not capture process, relationships, more fundamental changes and changes or outcomes that have not been predicted or aimed for. In other words, transformation is not facilitated and encouraged.

3.3 Relationship and Contact

The Gestalt approach pays special attention to present relationships. According to Buber (1937/2010) a person (“I”) has meaning in relation to others in I-Thou or I-It contact. In I-Thou contact both are seen as full, whole beings, ends in themselves, while in I-It contact the person is manipulating what is seen as an object or means.

What are the relationships between Maria, Ahmed, Fatima and Abdi? Power and privilege may play an important role. Ahmed may see the NGOs and workers such as Maria as means for obtaining food items, money, education, and hopefully resettlement. At the same time he may be able to see her as more than a means. Maria may in turn see the refugees and others as people that need her help, defining herself as helper and them as in need of help. This would also involve a reduction of whole human beings to objects or means. She may also see Ahmed as a troublesome Somali youth who has to be shaped and moved in what she considers the right direction. Once Maria starts interacting based on a phenomenological approach and an appreciation of Ahmed, Fatima, Abdi and others as full and whole human beings, their relationship changes, and fundamental changes in the field may occur.

In the environmental sensitivity programme and environmental committee, one could also focus on the relationship between the people such as Ahmed, Fatima, Abdi and Maria on the one hand and the trees, animals and wider environment on the other. The Judeo-Christian-Islamic view of nature has been one that largely sees the natural environment as something that can be used as a means for humans, something with little value in itself. According to Buber (1937/2010, p. 14), “[i]t can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*.”

Dialogue is an essential part of Gestalt and a necessary element in existential phenomenology. Dialogue is different from manipulating a person toward some goal, for example changing their attitudes and behaviour towards the environment. Gestalt emphasises certain characteristics of dialogue (Yontef, 1993): Inclusion involves putting oneself as fully as possible into the experience of the other without judging or interpreting while

simultaneously retaining a sense of one's separate presence. Presence involves expressing oneself to the other. For example, Maria may choose judiciously to express certain observations, feelings, personal experience and thoughts, thereby also modelling phenomenological reporting and increasing the joint awareness. Furthermore, contact is more than something two people do to each other; it happens between people. Can Maria surrender herself to this interpersonal process, allowing contact to happen rather than making contact? Finally, dialogue is something done rather than talked about, and can manifest as dancing, song, words, etc.

Contact is the experience of the dynamic boundary between "me" and "not-me". While some psychotherapists speak of resistances to, or disturbances in, contact, the Norwegian Gestalt Institute prefers the term "modes of contact". In line with the thinking of Wheeler (1996), the Institute teaches that people are always in contact with someone or something, modes of contact exist in polarities, and one cannot say that a certain mode of contact is absolutely unhealthy while another is healthy since this will depend on the situation. Psychoanalysts such as Randall (2012) have argued that inaction on climate change is often related to resistances or defences. She mentions examples that would correspond to Gestalt modes of contact such as projections (e.g. the problem is the mass-polluting Chinese, not me), introjections (e.g. being "a good mother" involves surprising amounts of pollution in some Western countries) or deflections (e.g. shopping in order not to think about it). She focuses mainly on climate change mitigation, but one can imagine many modes of contact in the Dadaab case that are also relevant to adaptation.

The refugees and locals may have "swallowed" whole certain ideas from parents, community elders, religious leaders and others-the mode of contact known as introjection. Some of these ideas may not fit well with the new environment and changing climate. Already mentioned are the ideas of nature as an object and God as supreme to the extent that people cannot really affect major changes in climate and environment (see 3.1 Field theory). There may also be norms that were suited to a pastoralist lifestyle in conflict- and drought-affected Somalia that are less functional in the new setting. Maria on the other hand surely has her share of ideas about how the Somalis should act, about what it means to be a humanitarian worker, a Western woman, etc. While some approaches to change might seek to program or condition behaviour, for example by replacing some norms with others, Gestalt explorations could involve "chewing" the norms-a polar opposite mode of contact-and leaving it open whether they will be "swallowed" and integrated as one's own or "spat out". The educational setting may involve introjection, for example if Ahmed, Fatima and others are "swallowing" messages and norms that are imparted from Maria, but the educational setting can also provide a space for collective "chewing".

Abdi and many locals-and perhaps also Maria, NGOs and the local government-are blaming the refugees for the environmental degradation and their own suffering. The local Kenyan government-and perhaps also refugees and locals if they are sufficiently informed-may blame the USA, Europe and China for global climate change and their environmental problems. These views may be rather accurate, but may also become fixated projections that are unhealthy and unhelpful in terms of climate change mitigation and adaptation. The polar opposite mode of contact is taking some ownership and responsibility. While the refugees and locals obviously do not bear much responsibility for global climate change, they may still be partly responsible for-and able to influence-the local climate and environmental degradation. Ahmed's khat chewing-and the khat chewing of several other refugees and locals-may be a deflection, another regular mode of contact in a difficult or challenging situation. The polar opposite mode of contact would be to focus and remain in what is difficult.

Maria could use the educational setting to explore projection and deflection and what each person or group feels that they can take responsibility for. Maria may herself be anxious about the amount of pollution she and her country represent and use projection such as blaming the larger polluters such as the USA and China or blame the locals and refugees for the local environment and climate. The ideal exploration would involve her not only encouraging others to stay with what is difficult and take responsibility but to also do so herself. This might also partly address the imbalance in power and privilege that exist between her and the refugees and locals.

3.4 Conflicts and Paradoxical Change

According to Randall (2012), part of the reason behind resistances and defences in the context of climate change may be that there are conflicting emotions and needs that create anxiety, guilt, depression, etc. Gestalt approaches acknowledge that intra- and interpersonal conflict can be connected with anxiety, guilt and other emotions as well as modes of contact. As already mentioned, several of the people in the Dadaab case may have conflicting needs and emotions within and also interpersonal or intergroup conflicts.

A Gestalt theory of conflict has polarities as a central concept (Zinker, 1977). In Gestalt, the individual is seen as a conglomerate of polar forces such as hardness and softness, yes and no, greedy and generous, polluter and cleaner, etc. Often, the self-concept excludes painful awareness of certain sides, such as for example the greedy

or the polluter. Intrapersonal conflict might involve clashes between two sides of a polarity. Unhealthy interpersonal or intergroup conflict may arise out of intrapersonal conflict. For example, people may project an uncomfortable side of themselves-for example the polluter-onto another. Gestalt approaches would acknowledge both these sides, and a possible experiment could be to encourage the person to act out both sides or people, creating a dialogue between the two. The person may then become more aware of the whole polarity.

In psychotherapy one would try to create a safe space for conflicts to be explored. The therapist person and the therapy room would be such a safe space. Randall (2012) argues that,

“An essential task for people working on climate change is to think about how this safe space can be provided for the public as a whole. This space is more than a metaphor. We need to think about policy and communication with an eye to how to align the truth about climate change and the need for emotional security”.

In terms of communication, how Maria, community leaders in the camps as well as politicians and other leaders talk about climate change and the environmental challenges could make a difference and be a safe space. At a community level, perhaps Maria and the environmental NGO could offer a safe space through for example the environmental sensitivity programme where the complexity of feeling is acknowledged and there is room for exploration. Creating forums that feel personal, supportive, participatory and respectful can be as important as installing a solar panel, addressing deforestation or introducing drought-resistant seeds in getting real action on climate change. At an individual level, a safe space can be offered by anyone with the courage and commitment to initiate an open and exploratory conversation. This could occur between Ahmed and Abdi, Maria and Fatima, etc.

The idea of accepting oneself as a whole being is related to the overall theory of change in Gestalt therapy. It has been formulated succinctly by Beisser (1970): “*change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not*”. Change happens when the uncomfortable or otherwise shadowy sides of polarities are embraced rather than rejected. With awareness and self-acceptance the person can grow. Perhaps needless to say, this theory of change stands in contrast to manipulative approaches where change is more or less forced by oneself or another in an attempt to actualise a goal. For example, a Gestalt approach would not involve shaming the polluter or other people or certain sides of people.

The founders of Gestalt therapy were clear that it was not a goal to adapt an individual to a sick society (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1950). Beisser (1970) claimed that the change theory was becoming increasingly more acceptable and valuable for other reasons as well. He referred to the times he lived in and the rapid changes. This is even truer of today with the additional climate and environmental challenges and related uncertainties.

Beisser believed that the change theory was applicable to social systems as well. It would involve that “the system becomes conscious of alienated fragments within and without so it can bring them into the main functional activities by processes similar to identification in the individual [...] The individual change process is but a microcosm of the social change process” (Beisser, 1970). Just as projections not only occur on individual but also group and societal levels, taking ownership of, and exploring, these projections may also occur in larger groups and societies. Particularly relevant questions for larger climate change transformation might be how and to what extent groups and societies in different places include and identify with refugees, the natural world and various Others.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that Gestalt approaches have much to contribute to climate change transformation in general and transformational adaptation in a refugee camp setting in particular. A fictional case loosely based on experiences from the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya served as a basis for speculation.

Several basic assumptions of Gestalt therapy seem to be compatible with climate change sciences and transformation theory. Gestalt concepts may be helpful to better understand, and address, cross-cutting transformation issues such as leadership, communication and deeply held values and assumptions. In addition, there are aspects that may challenge transformation theories and practices that are outcome-focused and involve conditioning, programming or otherwise manipulative approaches. For example, phenomenology helps people stand aside from their usual way of thinking, including their “expert knowledge”, allowing people to see more openly and clearly what needs and possibilities are present here and now. Relationships, dialogue and contact are crucial to Gestalt approaches. As opposed to approaches where change is more or less forced by oneself or another in an attempt to actualise an ideal image or goal, Gestalt approaches encourage awareness and

self-acceptance, trusting that change then occurs spontaneously. Strict mandates, goals and reporting duties are among the potential obstacles to the implementation of such a process-oriented and transformational approach.

As mentioned in the Introduction, this paper focused on cross-cutting and overarching concepts, excluding discussions of Gestalt models that describe phases of action, change and contact (see for example the contact cycle of Zinker, 1977). In future research it might be interesting to compare such Gestalt models with models in the transformation literature such as the Adaptation Action Cycle (Park et al., 2012). Since this paper merely presented a fictional case, it could also be interesting to carry out actual case studies to see how Gestalt-inspired transformation would work in refugee contexts and other contexts. It would also be interesting to see what Gestalt therapy in turn may learn or develop from transformation theory and practice. Hopefully, there will be an interesting cross-fertilization in the time to come.

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