Structure and Process—the Organization of Body and Self

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We all have remarkably similar basic biological equipment and are all subject to the same laws of mechanics and physics that govern postural distribution and movement. I will call this given structure and mechanics of body functioning our biological body structure.

All humans, with some variation among racial groups and individuals, are born with the same biological structure dictated by the evolutionary adaptations of our species. But if we carefully observe people from a body point of view, we notice something striking: there are many variations in the ways in which people posture themselves, move, and breathe. It is these variations in body structure among individuals the characteristic tensions, postures, stances, movements, and expressions of the body parts that are of interest to us as students of human nature.

The beach or local swimming pool is a good place to observe variations in body expressions. We see one man who stands as if he has the weight of the world upon him. His shoulders roll forward over his chest, his head and neck slump forward, his upper back is humped, and his chest is collapsed and compressed. Another person draws her head into her collar bones like a turtle withdrawing into its shell. Her neck is shortened, her shoulders are thrust up around her ears, and her lips are tightened with a grimace. A third person stands with arms akimbo, legs splayed and belly hanging, jaw jutting forward—looking for all the world like a sergeant on a parade ground rather than a father watching his children splash and play.

The posturing and body expressions I have described are not a matter of conscious choice. The "turtle" cannot snap out of her muscular shell. The burdened "Atlas" cannot easily straighten his slumped and hunched posture. Often such postures and tensions are not noticed by the individual, although the pain and discomfort that result may be. Despite the fact that we know these variations are not a natural or necessary part of the mechanical structure of the body, it seems as if they are built into the individual's body, an inherent part of the bodily structure.

I refer to these individual variations of the body as the adaptive body structure. Whereas the biological body structure is our common genetic base formed through biological growth and maturation, our adaptive body structure is formed out of our adaptation to our life history and experience as persons. These adaptations are many and varied, and their cumulative effect profoundly affects our physical being in the world.

Adaptive body structure is characterized as postures, stances, and tensions that are:

1. Consistently and persistently used over time.
2. Either frozen into the musculature so that the structure is continually visible, or preprogrammed muscular responses that channel energy and movement into a stylized movement pattern.
3. Automatic and involuntary (under most circumstances).
4. not easily or comfortably modified merely by trying to stand or move differently (i.e., behavioral change).

Most of the body-oriented therapies have grown out of trying to understand and modify the nature of such chronic structural tensions. The classic formulations have attempted to typologize the variations in body structure and relate these body types to character and childhood trauma (Lowen, 1958; Reich, 1945/1972) and temperament (Sheldon, Stevens and Turner, 1940). The approach of Gestalt therapy differs from body topology approaches in its experiential and phenomenological emphasis. The following presents a formulation of the nature and origin of adaptive body structure from the perspective of Gestalt therapy.

THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF ADAPTIVE BODY STRUCTURE

Rolf (1977) has called the variations from biological structure "randomizations." By this she means they are often random with respect to good mechanical organization of the body in relation to the earth's gravitational field. But my belief is that the individual variations in body structure, despite the apparent randomness of their gravitational organization, are not random, but are full of meaning and significance. A person's body structure is a total of the person's organismic adaptations to life and becomes meaningful when seen in this context.

The context in which our individual variations in body structure must be seen is that of our adaptation and creative

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1 Rolf (1977) superbly describes the basic movement mechanisms and ideal postural organization of biological structure in our species.
2 These labels are used as metaphorical descriptions and are not intended to define character types.
adjustment to our personal life experience. We each have a unique family history, set of life experiences, and sense of self, all of which we adapt and respond to not merely by shaping our thinking and attitudes, but also by shaping the way in which we embody ourselves—how we physically respond, move, stand, sit, and so on. Just as the patterns of family interaction, behavior, or sense of self become persistent, so too does the way in which we shape our bodily nature until it is so habitual that it seems a part of our bones and fiber.

Recall how you have responded physically to a situation of danger, threat, or fear. The natural processes of defensive posturing—holding your breath, hunching your shoulders, turning aside to avoid the danger—form a part of how you adapt yourself to this environmental change. Imagine what it would be like to live in a situation of constant threat or danger. These processes, which are easily enough to alter after a momentary startle, become a constant reaction. Your held inhalation (startle), hunched protective shoulders, and askance position may become a part of your stance and harden into your muscles. What was a momentary and flexible process of adjustment becomes a constant and fixed structure of your body posture.

Organismic processes of adaptation and adjustment become fixed body structures when they are used habitually—either because the environment constantly requires the same response, or because we come to fix our sense of self, allowing ourselves little flexibility. An example of the former is a family situation in which constant threat of punishment or criticism requires constant physical readiness to retreat or defend. An example of the latter is a young boy’s attempt to define and feel his self as tough and to obviate his sense of weakness by hardening his chest and pectoral muscles and assuming a rigid posture. These become part of the adaptive body structure: the way we shape ourselves and have been shaped by our life experience.

For the inexperienced it is often exceedingly difficult to distinguish between biological body structure, the genetic given, and adaptive body structure resulting from life experience. In training workshops my students frequently have a difficult time seeing that individual variations in posture and muscular development are something the person has developed. They frequently “genetize” such variations, attributing them to familial similarities: “My father hunches his shoulders the same as I do.” Or they normalize such variations: “But I’ve always had a stiff chest” or “I’ve never been able to inhale much.” This results in part from inexperience, but in even greater part because, by normalizing or geneticizing adaptive body structure, we can maintain our lack of awareness of the meaning of our bodily nature and the disowned parts of the self to which these structures relate. Experienced body-oriented therapists know that much of what appears fixed and given about a person’s body is actually quite plastic and changeable under the right conditions. If such seemingly fixed structures can be altered, then perhaps they have been shaped and altered in the first place from the more balanced and flexible body structure we all have in common.

The examples of body structure given earlier will help illustrate what I mean by adaptive structure. The “turtle’s” chronic withdrawal into herself and protection of her head has become a frozen structure rather than a temporary process of adaptation to a difficult situation. Regardless of the relevance of the protective process during the time in her life when it was necessary, the structural continuation of her avoidance now leaves her with no other option. The process or act of avoidance has become a built-in stance, and her ability to move out into the world is delimited by her physical structure. An adaptive process becomes a fixed structure.

The drill sergeant, like the turtle, has institutionalized and frozen certain organismic processes into his body structure. His aggression and stubbornness have become chronic structural attitudes towards his world. No matter what the situation, his body structure supports only certain behaviors because his patterns of muscular tension are habitually structured. Like a railroad car, he can slide along only one track. The aggression and stubborn resistance that is useful at times for anyone is ready all of the time for this man. It is likely that his structure also prevents him from softening and opening himself, and so limits his sensing and expression of warmer and more contractual feelings. His adaptive structure forces him to perceive and behave one dimensionally.

But merely to call them habit does not sufficiently explain the meaning of these adaptive body structures. We must ask how these processes become as habitual and predominant as to become structural. Earlier I discussed the notion of the unity of body and self, and pointed out that when parts of the self are disowned, it is frequently the bodily aspects of the contact functions that are alienated from one’s sense of self. It is the process of disowning one’s body self the inhibition of certain movements, the desensitization of bodily feeling, the removal of “I” from

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3 See Dyehtwald (1977), Keleman, (1985), and Kurtz and Prestera (1976) for diagrams of some of the most common variations in adaptive body structure.
body experience, the unfinished physical expression of self that becomes structured into the body over time. In this sense one's adaptive body structure has implicit in it the disowned contact function, the disowned movement or feeling, and the process by which it is disowned, i.e., the tension that blocks it from awareness and expression. The self has been split into parts and is in conflict with itself. The emotional conflicts that are most important to the individual, and thus are persistent, inevitably become structurally manifest in the body.

Let us return to the example of the drill sergeant. He shows himself as tough and aggressive, as is evident in his posture, movement, and stance towards the world. Where is his capacity for vulnerability and softness expressed? His braced and stiffened chest, his set jaw and hardened face allow no alternative stance. His muscles are set in place and he has no control over their positioning. It may be that he identifies with his tough side and calls that "me." He would see no point in being soft and vulnerable, and might even see such vulnerability as dangerous. His body structure expresses what he can own about the nature of his self, with the opposite polarity of softness and vulnerability literally unavailable to him.

Or he may see himself as warm and soft, and would be surprised if you pointed out the incongruence of his body structure with his self-description. He may be troubled that others always react to him fearfully when he feels friendly, unaware of how he physically presents himself or what that relates to in his life. In this instance it is the nature of his body structure that is the ego-alien and disowned polarity of the self, and the rigidity of his structure prevents him from feeling, owning, and knowing the part of himself that is aggressive and hard. That stance is so much a part of him that he does not feel it, it is "normal" and yet disconnected from his sense of self.

Another common origin of adaptive body structure is adaptation to and compensation for physical trauma, disease, or genetic defect. For example, one man with whom I was working stood with his right shoulder two inches higher than his left and his neck twisted and shortened on his right side. This was so frozen into his musculature that he could not balance the position of his shoulders and neck without strain. As we explored the nature of these structures through touch, it soon became apparent that he was also extraordinarily sensitive to intrusion in his right shoulder and neck. He had been very athletic in his youth, and had received a number of injuries. Over time he was able to experience how his positioning of his shoulder and neck emerged from a severe fall and blow to that area of his body, and the resulting pain, fear, and injury. His continued unaware structuring of his body to protect this vulnerable area from further insult became less necessary as our work allowed him to express the unfinished feelings from the event. Each integration allowed him to straighten his neck and drop his shoulder more.

We react in similar organismic fashion to adapt to the bodily and emotional trauma of disease, surgery, and other injury. These events require not only mechanical adjustment to protect a painful body area or to compensate for limitation of movement, but also emotional adaptation that involves bodily tension and feeling. The physical adjustments to the limitation of movement due to a disease such as polio, and the unfinished emotional reactions to the disease such as fear and mourning for the lost bodily wholeness, become part of the individual's posture, movement, and breathing — the adaptive body structure.

**STRUCTURE, PROCESS, AND THE THERAPEUTIC TASK**

Given this view of body structure and the self, the therapeutic approach to working with structure takes on a new meaning. The task is to help change frozen or automatic body structures to active organismic processes, and to facilitate the integration of the underlying split of the self. Thus the aim is not to remove structures, but to transmute them into the processes they represent, and to integrate that which has been disowned or unassimilated into the self.

Gestalt therapy is distinguished from many therapeutic orientations by its emphasis on holism, the unity of the organism, and its focus on the experimental and phenomenological. These distinctions also apply to a Gestalt approach to body process and body structure.

The emphasis on holism implies that mere physical change in the body is not enough. The Gestalt practitioner, in working with body structure, is equally focused on improving the physical support and range of movement and exploring the meaning and feelings involved in the maintenance of that structure. The goal is not merely physical change, but change of the person as a whole. It is my experience that body work which focuses on physical change and deemphasizes emotion and meaning is as one-sided and unintegrated as psychotherapy that ignores body processes.

The Gestalt focus on the experiential and Phenomenological brings to body work an emphasis on
how the client experiences his or her physical being rather than how the therapist analyzes the client's body structure. The Gestalt body therapist is interested in finding ways for the client to experience the body more fully and to define the meaning of these experiences for him or herself, rather than in interpreting the client's body and experience.

Out of this emphasis comes the basic unit of work in Gestalt therapy, called the experiment. An experiment is an activity designed to heighten a person's awareness by focusing experience or bringing into the foreground an aspect of experience that is vague. The exercises, manipulations, stretches, and movements used by the therapist are aimed at increasing the client's experience of his or her body and increasing choices, rather than changing the client in a way predetermined by the therapist. Rather than saying, "You need to bring your chest up, try this exercise," I might say, "I notice your chest is collapsed. What changes in your experience of yourself if you raise your chest? What do you feel if you collapse it more?" My interest is not in "changing" the client's chest. The purpose of the experiment is for the client to experience the meaning of his or her chest structure.

This gives the general philosophy and orientation of a Gestalt approach to body structure. But what do we actually do? The following provides a general framework for experiment with body structure. Keep in mind that not all of the stages are so straightforward in actual practice as they may seem here.

Awareness of "What Is"

Most structures that are important to a person's way of being are not a matter of conscious choice; at least the person is unaware of the meaning of a particular posture or tension. The obvious first step is to help the client become more aware of what he or she is doing physically by bringing the experience of body into the foreground of experience. (This is what I call the process of "resensitizing," which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.)

In this initial stage of work, the aim is not to push for the meaning or significance of the posture or tension, but simply to sense more clearly what is so that the meaning can emerge naturally out of clear sensation. I may do this by simply having the person physically exaggerate the structure. I may also use direct contact (manipulation of the muscle structure), movements, or stretches to revitalize and enliven specific parts of the body.

Heightening "what is" initiates a process of re-ownership. When I can consciously "do" this posture or tension, it becomes more "mine," less separate and alien. I begin to identify with my body structure.

The Emergence of Body Process from Body Structure

As ownership and identity with the structure increases, the client begins to get a sense of the process or meaning behind the posture or tension. For example, I was working with John, whose rib cage and chest were chronically stiff and structurally fixed in a hyper-inflated position. He had no awareness of holding his chest up or of its meaning for him.

We worked initially to open up and resensitize him to his shoulders and chest through touch and stretching of his tense muscles. When I began to focus on his breathing, I noticed that his structural inability to allow his chest to drop prevented full exhalation. Does this mean he can not "let go"? Is this part of a frozen startle response (catching one's breath)? Is he bracing himself in pride? Rather than impose my interpretation on him, I suggested an experiment to heighten his own experience of what he did with his chest and how it affected his breathing.

For the experiment I asked him to consciously exhale fully while I encouraged fuller exhalation by pushing down on his chest. Initially he found this difficult to do. It was as if he literally did not know how to exhale by dropping his chest. Gradually he began to take over more of the work from my hands and to re-own the act of exhaling. When I asked him to tell me his experience of the experiment, he reported that he felt very energetic and excited. As we continued to experiment with pushing out his exhalation and his excitement increased, he also began to feel anxious. We explored the process of him energizing himself through breathing and controlling his energy through tensing his chest, and his related beliefs about "getting too excited", which he reacted to with anxiety.

Experimenting with the experience and behavior of a body structure brings the active process behind the static structure and makes the client more aware of the conflict at its root. There are a number of alternatives at this stage of work. One approach is to emphasize the opposite of the structure. This is essentially what I did with John by having him drop his chronically raised chest. This approach explores the least aware polarity, and therefore may be experienced as frightening and high risk. It must be used carefully in an atmosphere of support so that the client does not feel suddenly thrust into a part of the self with which the client cannot cope or admit to awareness.

Another approach is to emphasize the structure itself. I might have John hyperinflate his chest or inflate while
pushing against my hand on his chest. His experience would have been focused on that part of himself he uses to avoid the energized and scary feelings. He might, for example, have reported that inflating his chest made him feel tough and big, or that it made him feel as if he had created a wall with his chest. This approach generally feels less alarming because it explores and supports the more acceptable and protective side of the self.

Regardless of which approach is used first, both sides need to be explored and developed. Unlike body therapies that try to break through resistance and self-protectiveness, the Gestalt approach aims to integrate parts of the self rather than make one part dominate over the other. Rather than say to John, "Stop holding on to your inhalation, you are breathing wrong and you shouldn't do that," I would say, "Both your holding of your inhalation and your feelings that come with full breathing are important parts of you, so let's see how these two needs can find a fuller expression so that we can understand your dilemma."

One way of fleshing out this dilemma is to have the client physically alternate between the structure and its opposite. I would ask John to alternate between exhaling while letting his chest drop fully and inhaling while pressing his chest up against my hand. This would not be a mere mechanical shifting back and forth, but a continuous exploration of John's experience of the alternating processes. I would also pay attention to what else emerges during the experiment. What changes in skin color, facial expression, or breathing pace occur? How does John physically organize himself to perform this shift? All of these observations can be used to facilitate John's experience of his polarities and find what is meaningful for him.

**Development of Theme from Structure**

Theme emerges as the meaning of a structure and its underlying process becomes clear. A theme to explore for John might evolve out of the question, "What do you fear when you become energized?" It might develop that, as he continues to breathe fully, he feels anger or the desire to hit someone, and feeling his anger is frightening for him. The theme might be phrased as "controlling my energy so I don't get too angry." Or John might begin to feel sadness as he exhales, and then respond by stiffening his chest to wall off this feeling. The theme here might be stated as "walling off sadness." The theme is a way of capturing and stating the essence of experience, what is most meaningful and important about John's here-and-now experience.

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4 Use of theme in Gestalt therapy is detailed in Polster and Polster (1973) and Zinker (1977).

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Statement of theme is not seen as curative in itself, as interpretation or reflection is considered in other therapies. It is intended to organize the direction and flow of work. In developing the theme further, we would be interested in the nature and process of John's fears, and with supporting the expression and integration of the polarities involved.

The theme emerges out of awareness of body structure, and thus, is explicitly tied to body experience, movement, and physical expression. In body-focused therapy, theme development will generally maintain an explicit physical connection, how the theme is embodied. Problems in contact and intrapsychic conflict are not only things we think and feel; they are also things we feel and do. In developing a theme, it is essential to continuously pay attention to its psychological meaning and verbal expression, as well as to its representation in posture, movement, and other body phenomena. This prevents verbal therapeutic work from becoming overly abstract and maintains the principles of an integrated and holistic therapy.

To the development of theme from body phenomena and the physical experiments to transmute body structure into lively process, we add the use of verbal dialogue. While at certain times focusing purely on physical process can be appropriate (particularly for those who are already highly verbal), eventually the polarities manifest in the body must be given words or we merely continue to dichotomize body and mind. This prevents the conflict from being isolated to physical tension and body experience and moves the conflict and feelings into the realm of the ego, which includes words and abstractions.

Body structure can be seen as a frozen conversation or dialogue between conflicting parts of the self. The conversation has been frozen only because one part has gained dominance, and a balance of power, fragile or taxing though it might be, has been achieved. What was once an active power struggle between individual and environment, then between parts of the self, has become institutionalized in physical behavior and structure. The aim is not merely to physically express the feelings and behaviors of each side, or to reverse the balance of power from one polarity (aspect of the self) to the other, but to resolve the conflict and allow all aspects of the self to exist and function for the total organism.

One way to begin this process is by verbalizing the meaning of the bodily expression as one actively engages the behavior. With John this might be having him experiment with stating, "I am walling myself away from you" or "I am a wall," as he actively inflates and stiffens his chest. Approaching his conflict from the other side, he
would say, "I am sad" or "I feel my sadness," as he softens his chest and allows his breathing to deepen.

Further work may use dialogue between the two parts of the self or with the introjected figures that were part of the original adaptation. With John we might develop a dialogue between his image of those who originally rejected his feelings (the parent he had to wall his sadness from) and his feeling self. The dialogue would be explicitly tied to body experience and expression through the use of movement, posturing, and the support of breath and sensation through my use of touch.

As change and balance occur and the ego-alien becomes more tolerated and acceptable to the self, new ways of contacting the environment and fulfilling needs without the tension and distortion of conflict must be developed and practiced. It is not enough to express the unexpressed and change one's internal state. The distorted structure developed as an adaptation to the environment and continues in response to the environment. It is important to reestablish a more flexible adaptation to the environment.

The use of experiment stresses the importance of doing something new and different in the here and now. John and I would experiment to find new ways of being, first with me, and later with others in his day-to-day world. John first needs to be able to be both soft and walled in relationships with me in the safety of the consulting room. He needs to practice these fully in my presence and in relation to contact with me. Then his softness" and his "wall" must be capable of conscious and full expression (both verbal and physical) in his interpersonal contact with others. Through this he can allow himself flexibility and begin to learn to discriminate between environments where feelings are appropriate and safer to express and environments where he needs to wall and protect himself.

John may also need to find more active and less constrictive ways to protect his feelings. We may experiment with John stopping someone verbally before his feelings are hurt, or with acting tough through words so that he does not have to toughen his body. In this way John learns to respect the need to protect his feelings while finding more flexible and adaptive (less harmful to himself and others) ways of accomplishing this.

The goal is not to invalidate or get rid of the defense, but to make it more functional and discriminative so that the other side of himself can also find expression when the environment is supportive and appropriate. For John always to be tough and walled is no longer adaptive to his present life or he would not have sought to change. Yet there will always be times when he will need to protect his feelings from "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." It is possible to find ways to live feeling fully, judicious in our expression of feeling, and aware of the differences between environments that support our feeling and expression and those that do not.