The Sabotaging of Introjects: Thoughts about Processing Introjects in Gestalt Therapy in a Changing Culture
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ABSTRACT: This article presents a clarification of the significance of the concepts of introjection and introject in Gestalt therapy and some suggestions as to how they can be processed in therapy. The author presents the thesis that the “royal road” to processing the natural but unconscious sabotage of introjections is to support them therapeutically. Based on some sociological observations about the present state of our Western civilization, he emphasizes the importance of differentiating between neurotic introjections and healthy internalizations.

Keywords: introjection, introject, internalization, values, standards of civilization

I. The Difference between Introjection and Assimilation
Introjection and projection are the two terms of the contacting process that the founders of Gestalt therapy adopted from Freudian psychoanalysis, in which they were originally trained. They integrated them into the theoretical framework of their new form of psychotherapy using them for defining two types of interrupting the contacting process between individuals and their environments. In the Gestalt approach neurotic contact interruptions were seen as processes that occur at the contact boundary. Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1994, 32–35; hereafter PHG) focus at first on the process of introjection rather than on its result, the introjects. The basic idea is that the human organism, which is always embedded in its environment and dependent on exchange with that environment, has to take into itself material objects (e.g., food) and symbolic objects (e.g., language) if it wants to survive. If this process of incorporation is to lead to an enrichment and strengthening of the psychophysical organism, that is, if it is to be assimilated, it must involve the destruction of the gestalt of the object encountered. In other words, the food must be chewed and the non-material aspects of the environment need to be broken down and critically analyzed. Only with the aid of these aggressive functions—this was the hypothesis—can the input from the environment be assimilated, i.e., culminate in a nourishing adjustment to the physical and mental digestive abilities of the person. Or else: “In introjection the neurotic justifies as normal what the concentrating self feels as an alien body it wants to disgorge” (PHG 243).

Forty years after the first publication of PHG’s book in 1951, Joel Latner (1992) specified:
Thus we avoid the aggressive digestive labor, the tearing, and separating and destroying which is an important part of making things our own. We slip out of the obligation to assess what we encounter in the light of our own values, needs and circumstances. Instead we swallow them just as they are given, hook, line, and sinker. As with projection introjection sets the boundary not between ourselves and the environment, but between one part of ourselves and another. . . . If our lives are based on what we have introjected, our behavior may well be vague and colorless, our figures lacking the incisiveness and definition which come from using our own compasses to guide ourselves. We will seem inauthentic to others, and we are. We are almost believable; what we say and do is nearly heartfelt, but not quite. (To the extent that what is termed “superego” represents values that are incorporated in this fashion, we see it as a constellation of introjects.) 38–39

Importantly, Latner mentions here the “superego” which in Freud’s original version was to be integrated into the ego-structure of the personality—an idea inspired and strengthened by Freud’s disappointment and growing pessimism after the First World War—while in Gestalt therapy, superego was originally seen as a “constellation of introjects.” PHG had good reasons for their decision; with it, especially, their emphasis on the role of the aggressive functions of the self has proved useful in Gestalt therapeutic practice. In this sense, I support the classical view of introjection as defined by PHG and supported by Gestalt therapists until now. Whether this understanding needs to be revisited in regard to present day changes in Western societies—and I will strictly reserve my observations here to those—will be discussed below.

Another more recent definition of introjection states: “Introjection: interruption during full excitement and through habitual inhibition of needs” (Hutterer-Kirsch and Amendt-Lyon 2004, 159). However, the way Perls (1947) made “oral aggression” central to his theory has lead to an overemphasis on his paradigmatic significance of the process of eating. As a result, he and his trainees often had to distinguish between healthy and neurotic introjection. One consequence was that analyses of the development of non-material introjects paid too little attention to the role of the aggressive functions in learning. In my view, it makes more sense to use the clinical concepts of introjection and introject to refer exclusively to neurotic phenomena. Thus seen, processes of critical learning and food ingestion by chewing sufficiently before swallowing, so as to be assimilated, are by definition healthy. Another unfortunate consequence of this unclear use of terms consists in calling people who tend to introject neurotically “introjectors” (e.g., Polster and Polster 1987). This would suggest going back to talking about personality characteristics again rather than about a
process that takes place at the contact boundary.

If, in contemporary Gestalt therapy practice the work with introjects seems to be a matter of fact needing little discussion, in Gestalt theory Gordon Wheeler (2000) attempted a postmodern turn leading him to claim, in regard to the notion of introjecting, that the “texts”—or in dialogical therapy, the “tales”—our patients should be encouraged to tell, reveal the truth of their subjective experience of living with introjects. This is in a way a truism, for supporting the tales people have to tell is, and should be, a genuine part of all psychotherapeutic work oriented by depth psychology in its endeavor to dig out the unconscious or half conscious parts of their life experience. But even if the therapist is an attentive listener to the story he or she) will be participating in a construction, as all biographic stories are constructions in the interest of helping decision-making in actual life situations, not least by trying to convince powerful partners. Subjective truth is a social construction always influenced by real or imagined power relations (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

II. Causes and Effects of Changes in the Process of Introjection Today
But of course disturbances—that is, introjections—do occur, and their immediate cause is always to be sought in a weakness in the aggressive ego functions currently available to the self. In babies, who do not yet have teeth or critical faculties, such weaknesses are a normal developmental phenomenon, whereas when they occur in adults, some explanation is needed. The current state of society promotes an erosion of our positive aggressive forces. In the world of work, it is caused by the pressure of capitalist conditions of labor like the exploitation of part-time and contract workers, the realistic fear of loosing one’s job through globalization, digitalization, and the threatening prospects for many people of sliding into poverty in old age. Together the media and the advertising industry intensify the wear and tear, with a flood of seductive and addictive images and language that tends to obscure information that consumers need, rather than rendering it clearer. The more a person’s capacity to process the stimuli that assail them from outside in an active and participative way (i.e., their capacity for what Gestalt therapy calls creative adjustment) dwindles, the more the person will tend to introject fragments of a complex reality that they can no longer piece together to form a gestalt. This widespread fatigue then results in a spreading general confusion, which can lead us to devalue what is factual, even the truth of facts in general. This simply adds to the confusion, until finally it can only find an outlet in excesses of rage and hate, and the crazy conspiracy theories we find in the new media on the internet. Today, in this new field of introjects, we are more likely to find confusing, disconnected fragments of information and opinions
than existed in the rules, dictates, and taboos typical of people’s introjections in Perls and Goodman’s time. Furthermore, in this confusion about a more complex world, people tend to project: conspiracy theories are just one example. Others convert to fundamentalist religions; or adopt political ideologies; or just hate the “establishment,” or the “elites,” or just “the system” in Washington.

Sometimes, however, a closer look reveals a difficult-to-understand combination of family induced introjects of achievement orientations (the old-fashioned “father” introjects which still exist), with an attempt to escape the confusion through idealized images from alternate experiences. One such patient of mine wanted to become the director of a German school in some exotic country, to be above teaching duties he despised, but to have all the adventures of a foreign culture. He managed to get such a job in an Arabic country, though he did not speak the local language and therefore could not communicate with most of his fellow teachers and the parents of his students. In the background his father, in a top position of a giant international corporation, constantly pressed his son for better achievements. The man—part of the affluent, educated, middle class—developed a severe depression and so had to give up his job and return home. He then experienced himself as a complete failure, also for his felt inability to communicate, though it never occurred to him that he would have needed some command of Arabic for his job. Thus, the older forms of introjection had not lost their importance.

Today we observe, too, another risk of introjection arising from changes in the cultural beliefs of our society found in the development of gender relationships. The changes in the status of women are probably the greatest cultural transformation that western societies have undergone in the last half-century—a relatively short period of time. It is not yet possible to predict fully the consequences of these changes. Here, again, we find an ambivalent situation arising, insofar as the principles that have traditionally determined the role of women and men in society have dissolved. At least the younger generation of women has said “goodbye” to the old guiding principles formerly internalized—the caring handmaid in the household and family—and now must contend with the irreconcilable aspects of realizing all their liberated wishes. Men, in contrast, are torn between the loss or the fragmentation of the old role models: on average, they are physically stronger than women and therefore have a greater capacity to fight. If these advantages have now been rendered more or less obsolete by machines, they still haunt men in the form of eroded introjects. They are experimenting on equal terms with new roles as fathers and lovers, in which they still lack confidence. If these difficulties were not energy- and libido-sapping enough, the recognition of
same-sex desire and the existence of many people with biologically or psychologically unclear gender affiliation adds to the confusion.

In addition to these “modern forms” of introjection, we still have its classical “objects,” i.e., values and rules of conduct, prohibitions, and taboos that can still become introjects today. Here, though, there have been changes, as we shall see. In our Western societies there are also multicultural forms of introjection, including the “old-fashioned” introjects which are generally rooted in religion or the family. These often have an influence on political controversies on an unconscious level. Their effects are especially destructive when they are still firmly established in institutions, as is the case with the oath of celibacy, without which it is hard to understand the appallingly high level of child abuse among the Roman Catholic clergy. Therapists faced with a God introject have a particularly difficult task, as any therapist who has worked with priests or pastors will confirm. Refugees from uneducated Islamic backgrounds may present us with similar difficulties, because these backgrounds have not reached the level of internal secularization of the faith (disappearance of belief in the devil, fear of purgatory, and worldly conceptions of paradise) that has been attained in the European West.

We tend to have less difficulty with introjects that arise in a person’s family of origin, since in these cases the parental introjects are often already weakened due to the disappearing support of an extended family, personalized images of the parents as adversaries, rising rates of divorce and separation, and personal emancipation processes among young people. Such processes are often promoted by experiences with other cultures; in such cases, the introjects are not so firmly entrenched. It is easier to mobilize doubt, and therapeutic interventions are more likely to be successful if the patient’s positive aggressive functions are strengthened.

With a rising number of immigrants from African, the Near East, and Asia, Europe is now experiencing a situation long familiar to countries like the USA, Canada or Australia: immigrants come often from traditional cultures with values that distinctly differ from Western ones, especially in regard to gender relations, parental authority, and ideas about justice.

III. Different Types of Introjects

For therapeutic handling of introjects, it is important to recognize which societal milieux generally promote the tendency to introject, and with which type of introject we are concerned. The most easily recognizable introjects are those that lead people to be obsessional about complying with certain rules of conduct, which can easily lead to neurotic obsessive-compulsive processes. A certain
degree of obsessive behavior, however, is socially desirable in many spheres of society where
control, monitoring, and precision play an important role. All of us, of course, want to have security
when it comes to money matters and inroad traffic; most of us also in cross-border traffic and
“traffic” with our sexual partners (the literal translation of the German word for sexual intercourse is
“sexual traffic”). People who guard arms and depots, places where toxic materials are stored, and
scientists doing research, for example, need to be extremely reliable and meticulous. Wherever
modern technology is involved, the magnitude of the predictable consequences of negligent actions
and even those of their unpredictable consequences are potentially highly dangerous. We must
therefore ask ourselves whether it might not make it easier for the people entrusted with such tasks if
they have internalized these control virtues to a certain extent.

That is only the case, however, if they are able to limit the use of these behaviors to the
execution of the tasks for which they are deemed necessary. People who bring their professional
roles home with them, playing the teacher, policeman, or bureaucrat, will damage their families and
suffer from their inability to be flexible. PHG (1994) thought this type of introjection as being the
main problem affecting society in their time (Part 2, IX). They felt that people suppressed their own
aggressive forces too much and tended to adjust to prescribed societal roles too fast and without
sufficient discrimination. In other words, they were not flexible in how they managed behaviors
imposed on them by society. It is precisely the ability to adjust creatively to other tasks and spheres
of self-realization—on one’s own initiative and not under pressure from society to be more
productive—that therapy must promote and strengthen, wherever. This also applies to the pressures
to be more productive in therapy.

When working with introjects, there is a particular difficulty with a special type of introjects
we may find in patients who may cling to their introjects even after having given them due sober,
rational consideration, even after becoming aware of them, because they are “good” or “make
sense.” The difficulty may even increase when the therapist happens to agree with these values or
convictions. For instance, those who have introjected the idea—either from their parents or, more
often, later on, from living in milieux that promote a certain identity and have become important to
them—that it is always good to live “healthily” can, controlled by this introject, wear themselves out
shopping in organic food shops and going to fitness centers. Their lives then, paradoxically, may become unhealthy again precisely because of this behavior, as if
their own bodies do not know best what they need and what does them good. Nevertheless, this
bodily knowledge needs to be brought to light by means of a high level of awareness; in such cases,
this is the task of Gestalt therapy.

To give an example from my own circle of friends: when someone introjects the conviction that we absolutely must reduce our carbon footprint in order to slow climate change, and that this is the ultimate moral imperative, then their whole lifestyle takes on a highly fundamentalist tone. Introjects throttle the vitality of one’s own life and sour that of one’s friends and relatives with constant moral condemnations. In this case, a mutually long yearned-for love relationship, which initially went very well, broke up because the lover calculated the ecological costs of every loving action on the part of his partner, thus rendering it impossible for the two of them to enjoy going on trips together. In this case this was not a “good” introject (there is no such thing, anyway) exercising its control, but an introjected moral attitude that destroyed all vitality. It did nothing to prevent climate change and turned happiness in life into sadness. Gestalt therapy always focuses on increasing the aliveness of experiences. It does so by strengthening awareness which intensifies the experience, not necessarily to the detriment of the environment (see Dreitzel 2018, 131–39).

Apart from new, fragmentary, part-introjects, the most difficult introjects are the deep-rooted ones that exert an subtle “foreign” control over one’s whole life and are like the life scripts described in transactional analysis. This process may begin harmlessly enough on the surface, yet slowly undermine all autonomous decision making in family lives, as Joseph C. Zinker (1994) reports from his experience with family therapy:

> When awareness in a couple or family begins to gather energy, *introjection* is the lazy system’s way of resisting the awareness. The idea or solution is force-fed by one and swallowed whole by others. Introjection requires an investment of only a small amount of energy instead of the greater energy need for the fire of questioning and argument. Discussions and efforts at getting a “good fit” for all take energy and time. Introjection avoids the expansion of energy through arbitrary agreement. The family agrees not to chew things over, and there is no investment made to get everyone on board.

> As in projections, introjection avoids lively discussions. The family values doing business as usual, using old rules of thumb, rather than creating new, updated ways of doing things. (121–22; emphasis in original)

Thus, the noxious effect can take its course gradually and almost unnoticed, only to reveal its pernicious consequences later on. The subsequent generations of such families then introject a whole lifestyle which is marked by a chronic tendency to choose again and again the apparently easier option of introjecting—without resistance—goals, action strategies, values, and rules that have been
passed down; these become rigidified in directives that seem to be set in stone and adhered to simply by virtue of habit. As a result the potential of creative adjustment, the power of aggressively getting to grips with what our environments have to offer us, is rarely exploited to the full and wastes away due to lack of practice and experience. Children, teenagers, and unemployed young people are by nature in a weaker position from the start, vis-à-vis their parents, because they do not have the power and authority, or the energy and money, to make decisions independently and then put them into action. In this situation they are, of course, particularly prone to developing introjects that are often a hindrance to them for the rest of their lives.

Let us take a modern example which one of my supervisees presented: a woman whose father left her mother and disappeared without a trace, because her mother had forced him to accept her wish to have a child against his will. At this point, their daughter was no more than a year old. From then on, she grew up with her mother in a purely female environment of aunts and girlfriends, in which hostility towards men was the rule. She has now been living, for twenty-five years, with a man with whom she has two children but does not want to marry, because she considers herself “incapable of committing to a relationship,” and because she is not able to have satisfying sexual relations with him. Since she is afraid of completely subordinating herself to him, she cannot let go, and allows their marital sex life slowly to become nonexistent. Her frustrated husband reacts with withdrawal and a gradually deepening depression, which prevents him from leaving her or finding other alternatives. It is easy to imagine how this woman’s lack of a father, and the negative image of men she has introjected, have developed into a destructive life script which also causes unhappiness to her husband.

Thus far we have discussed five different types of introjects:

(1) rules and norms of conduct;
(2) fragmented part-introjects of pieces of information or fleeting experiences “reasonable” introjects;
(3) family or couple or other group: system introject life scripts;
(4) life scripts rooted deeply in early children experience;
(5) deep rooted basic introjects governing a tendency to fall into the grip of certain neurotic processes.

Numerous other imbroglios can be found in the life histories of both women and men. But it is not simply a question of rules and roles.

Not infrequently, our patients’ lives are governed by life-scripts conscious to them only
insofar as they suffer from them. Life scripts can be caused by many different childhood and other life determining experiences. In my therapeutic work, I have found that behind the most important neurotic processes with which people interrupt or undermine their healthy, lively contact processes again and again, there is usually a deeply rooted basic introject that creeps up on them and often takes complete subconscious control of how they lead their lives and experience their world (Dreitzel 2018, 134–35; Dreitzel 2010, Charts 9–17). These basic introjects are:

- Nobody is really interested in what I think and feel. (=> tendency to schizoid processes)
- Whatever I experience, do, or express, it makes no difference. (=> tendency to depressive processes)
- There is a right way of doing everything, a correct procedure. (=> tendency to obsessive-compulsive processes)
- I will only be heard if I get dramatic; my questions will not be answered. (=> tendency to hysterical processes)
- Every conflict I get involved in will lead to my being abandoned. (=> Neurotic anxiety processes)
- If I am afraid or show fear I will lose love and attention. (=> tendency to psychopathic processes)
- Letting go means losing control and that results in loss of love. (=> tendency to narcissistic process)
- I can’t stand life without my “drug” or my habit. (=> tendency to addictive processes)

Such introjects are usually largely unconscious but can be brought into awareness relatively easily because the patients are familiar with the behaviors and moods to which they lead. In therapy, they need to be explicitly named and linked to the beliefs that mask or are expressed in them. This leads to an increase in awareness but does not go so far as dissolving the introjects. Two more things are necessary in the practice of Gestalt therapy.

1. We need to go back to the patients’ early experiences in order to help them see two things. First, they need to be aware that they have developed such beliefs as creative adjustments to real and fundamental experiences. It is helpful for them to understand that they subsequently introjected the beliefs, because they proved to be an effective means of orientation important for survival in situations of relative powerlessness and helplessness.
(2) Now as adults, patients need to mobilize their retroflected energy and use it to examine and analyze these beliefs and above all to have new and more lively experiences.

This also applies to work on any introject, but when we are working with life scripts in therapy we need to persevere with a lot of patience and persistence. We also need to take into account that it is precisely these deeply rooted introjects that are often projected, usually onto all or “most” people. For example, most people are not interested in their fellow human beings. Or those at the top do what they want, in any case. Or if you do not “keep cool,” you are lost. In such cases in therapy, the best strategy is to work on reviving the perceptual senses. For instance:

Patient: Nobody is interested in me.
Therapist: But I am interested in you,
Patient: You look tired. I think I’m boring you.
Therapist: Please look at me. Look more closely. What do you see?
Patient: You’re looking at me.
Therapist: What are you seeing, how do you experience my eyes?
Patient: You look a bit tired.
Therapist: Yes, it’s been a long day. And what else do you see in my eyes?
Patient: Your eyes look attentive, sort of interested.
Therapist: Yes, I think you are interesting.
Patient: But only as a case.
Therapist: Nobody is just a case. Each of us is a human being with a history and many experiences to tell.
Patient: What do you mean?
Therapist: Would you like to tell me how you get the idea that nobody is interested in you? Tell me your story.

And so on.

What is helpful in therapeutic work with introjects depends on the type of introject with which we are dealing. We have seen:

• that in response to the constantly increasing complexity of our life worlds there has recently been a widespread tendency, promoted by the new media, to introject odd pieces of information, images, half-truths, and delusional conspiracy theories, and also the prejudices associated with them;

• that working groups, families, and couples, in which there is an avoidance of conflict and a
tendency towards confluence, are especially likely to introject unsatisfactory rules, agreements, or solutions to problems, often attributable to the milieu;

• that there are rules of conduct desired by society, and that this may even be of help to the people who have to ensure that they are adhered to internalize them, but that this can easily result in the development of introjects if they cannot muster enough role flexibility to let go of the need to exert control in other areas of life;

• that there are deeply rooted introjects that influence a person’s whole life, and even ones that shape people’s lives in a decisive way.

IV. Beginning Work on Introjects by Supporting their Sabotage

Introjects threaten our vitality. The experiences that gave rise to these beliefs do not match our real experiences in the present, despite the fact that real experiences in the present can be clouded by the projection of introjects, leading to a tendency to experience the whole world as hostile. But even in such cases, the introjects cannot keep up their control on behavior, simply because life is too unpredictable, too chaotic, too lively—and too seductive. Today, life is also too fast and complex to be governed by rigid rules and values, or to be simplifiable by dogmatic belief systems. Thus, most of us tend to sabotage our own introjects from time to time when it seems safe and convenient.

When the outside control seems to have lapsed, or when our self-control is diminished, for example due to some strong desire or transient positive aggressive energy that has been liberated in a therapy session, we will—usually, hesitantly or secretly—violate our own rules and overstep our own boundaries.

If as therapists we have learned to watch for that situation, we can see it happening in therapy sessions. Typically, when an introjected rule is violated, we will see glimpses of a fleeting smile betraying suppressed glee as the chronically suppressed vitality breaks through. If we invite our patients to criticize us and give them permission to become aware, together with us, of the other side of their (hopefully) otherwise positive experiences with us, and to put them into words without fear of retaliation, they will often experience a feeling of liberation which they will inevitably express mimetically. We must look and listen closely, because our patients will rapidly suppress this new vitality once more. It often reveals itself in the hint of a shy, fleeting smile that evaporates again as fast as it has appeared, or the voice becomes slightly higher and trembles, or the person unconsciously makes a reinforcing gesture of the hand.

After I had observed such responses several times, I began to address them and continue
working with them. We can start by drawing patients’ attention to such responses.

*Therapist:* I saw a hint of a smile on your face when you voiced that (criticism) to me. Did you notice it? Criticize me again, and notice exactly what it feels like.

In the next step you can make a game out of it, one that everybody has known as a child, the “cuckoo game” that every mother plays with her baby.

*Therapist:* Oh, there it was again, your little smile! Did you notice it? Pay attention to what you’re experiencing now.

And then you can repeat it, laughing, every time you see the smile again. It can take hours or sometimes even weeks for it to appear again. Thus, we must always remain attentive; these small signs of vitality that emerge when we sabotage our own introjects are fleeting and shy, like birds when we try to watch them.

Therefore, when patients tell us about how they live their lives with their introjects from day to day, the next step is to watch for the points at which they repeatedly sabotage them. And where we think we have detected such sabotaging as they tell us their stories, it will be helpful to ask about them. Transgressing introjects experienced as social norms lead to neurotic guilt feelings, or feelings of embarrassment, even though these violations have occurred unconsciously, inadvertently. That is, they result in emotional states which people do not like to admit they have experienced, and which they would like to repress or pass over as fast as possible. The emergence of feelings of guilt and embarrassment at such points is symptomatic of the presence of introjects that the therapist has often not previously noticed. We should then recognize these feelings as neurotic, and distinguish them from the genuine guilt feelings that arise when we fail to respect values that govern our coexistence as human beings, be it due to negligence or deliberate action. In addition, we should differentiate them from the genuine feelings of shame that can be experienced when someone violates norms of civilization established with great effort over the course of history and, one would hope, successfully internalized. It is also worth making the effort to clarify these differences in therapy because, when people punish themselves with neurotic feelings of guilt and embarrassment, this sustains the effect of introjects. When patients feel encouraged by their therapist’s unexpectedly positive response to their sabotaging an introject, and risk doing the appropriate experiments in the safe setting of therapy, this support can help them gradually to loosen the hold their introjects have on them. At the same time, it sets free their retroflected aggressive energy.

I am not saying that this is easy. The above-mentioned patient who fell into depression by overloading himself in deciding to accept a job as school director in Africa, against his better
judgment (as he told me), bears a chronic smile on his lips instead of a fleeting and shy one. It turned out that, for him, this frozen smile represented a constant begging for pardon for the sabotaging of his achievement introjects (according to the introjected standards he felt to be his own) by not functioning well enough in his job. In fact, we can understand his illness to be the sabotage of his introject itself. And, of course, this is tragic, for here the sabotage has no chance to be experienced as a liberating act of his liveliness at work. Not, that is, before he learns to unlock his retroflected aggressive feelings and act deliberately, consciously.

Yet, in my experience, supporting patients’ spontaneous self-sabotage of their introjects is the “royal road” to successful therapeutic work on introjects. This is so if it includes the identification of feelings of guilt or embarrassment as neurotic, i.e., harmful in that they support the repression of the individual’s own creative vitality. When a Gestalt therapist supports such sabotaging s/he is entering into an alliance with the patient and, in fact, with life itself. It is hard to imagine a better form of support.

V. Difficulties that May Arise When We Support Self-Sabotage of Introjects

There are, however, problems with this approach. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is associated with deciding where the sabotaging of the introject exceeds the limits of civilized behavior and the support needs to be withdrawn. Like all attempts to become emancipated, sabotaging one’s introjects can also push the limits of acceptability and cause harm that destroys not only the introject but also what is nutritious and valuable in the environment.

Let us take an example. A patient persistently arrives late for his session. He always has excuses as to why he has not managed to be punctual this time, which he delivers with evident verve. I suspect that he is sabotaging a punctuality introject, and I ask him about symptoms in this regard in his family of origin. Together we identify some. He increasingly begins to experience his lack of punctuality as a form of self-sabotage, which is associated with a pleasure that he does not dare permit himself. I try to support his apologetic stories, and he starts to enjoy ever more so telling them to me. I allow him plenty of time to tell his stories but never extend the session time, helping him to realize instead that he engineers things so that he arrives late. One day he arrives, late as usual, in a state of excitement:

Patient: This time there really wasn’t anything I could do about it!
Therapist: What happened?
Patient: I was driving behind a car.
Therapist: Where?

Patient: At a crossroads, and then all of a sudden he stopped!

Therapist: Aha, were there traffic lights? If so, what did they show?

Patient: They were green! Well, after it had happened, they were suddenly red.

At this point, I felt that we had reached the limit; it was time to work more on the patient’s own responsibility. After this accident, he almost always arrived punctually for the session.

VI. How Can We Distinguish Sabotaging Introjects from Rebellion?

When adolescents rebel against parental dictates and prohibitions, this is a normal sign that they are beginning to detach themselves from the family, even if this may take on dramatic forms and even if recklessness is involved. Particularly when their children are still in puberty, the parents are often faced with the difficult task of supporting this striving for autonomy or at least accepting it, with a shrug of the shoulders, while protecting them from endangering themselves or making irrational decisions. From the parents’ point of view, it is not always clear what can be assessed as an important experimenting with social roles and lifeworlds, and what must be considered dangerous. This will certainly not be clear from the perspective of the children’s peers, for whom parental values and convictions often seem like introjects and senseless restrictions. Much depends on the prevailing cultural norms. If they change, the representatives of the parental perspective can also rapidly begin to look foolish. Supporting children when they rebel against such parental opposition, i.e., the pressure of their parents’ introjects, can be an important task for teachers and therapists. Here sabotaging the parental introjects, which may already have been internalized by the children, is defined as legitimate resistance because the cultural norms have changed.

Since, however, we are living in highly differentiated culture that is also rapidly changing and developing, it is becoming harder to assess whether a behavior is a legitimate rebellion that merits support, or whether it violates important values. In order to make such a decision a therapist (and not only the therapist) must have attained a certain level of self-knowledge. For instance, when parents limit the amount of television their children are allowed to watch, or the amount of time they may play with their digital toys, the matter is not so clear. Where is the limit? Where is the dividing line between preventing digital dementia and stopping a child from learning how to cope with rapid developments in digitalization? In such situations the therapist’s attitude, and also her experience, are decisive. Take, for instance, parents’ not unjustified fear that their children could slide into addiction, or at least into abuse of alcohol. It is crucial here to approach the teenagers dialogically
and share with them one’s own experiences about the pleasures and dangers of drugs, so as to allow our own views to be challenged. We need to be willing to talk openly about our own experiences and, above all, about our fears.

There is also another complication that deserves mention. Sometimes highly resilient people with strong vitality manage, while they are still children or adolescents, to escape the influence of parental introjects by rebelling, and to take their lives into their own hands. A problem may occur if these people cling resolutely to the values they have worked out for themselves or discovered in other role models, as if these were still threatened long after they have reached adulthood. They may then be prone to reacting allergically when their hard-won autonomy seems to be threatened, for instance, in their relationships with their partners. Or, even worse, their constant inner struggle to overcome their parental introjects can lead them to follow a “life program,” in which the parents retain their power precisely because the daughter or son always feels compelled to do the opposite of what their parents would do, instead of discovering and following their own needs and values. If and for as long as this inner split is maintained, the grown-up child may lead a chaotic life with strong fluctuations that result from inner borderline experiencing, from feeling torn apart. This may be what from the outside looks like an impressive, but reckless and dangerous, lifestyle of which the person is proud. But their almost compulsively over-sensitive reactions to all threats to their own values is an indication that these values can, like the introjects, act similarly to a force exerted on them from the outside.

Most difficult is to judge whether something should be seen as a liberating rebellion or as a destructive, constricting source of new introjects, as in the case of religious conversions. (This is not the place to discuss the delicate question as to when, where, and to what extent a political rebellion, e.g. a resistance movement that uses violent means, can or must be considered legitimate.) In our culture and history, this assessment has usually been contaminated by typical cases in which majority religions coincide with the power interests of priesthood, or of secular rulers who have always, from the inquisition to modern “sect investigators,” known how to create their own jurisdictions. (In Germany, sect investigators or commissioners for sects [Sektenbeauftragte] are church officials charged with investigating cults, sects, and worldviews.) But how can and how should parents, teachers, and peers react when adolescents want to convert to Islam, thus exposing themselves to the anger of indoctrination by militant Islamists? This question is not irrelevant since, apparently, thousands of young men and women left Western countries to join the ISIS in Near East countries, a disturbing fact that needs explanation. In a world they evidently see as hopelessly
confusing, young people may believe that they will find meaning in life in the new religion, or at least stability and a clear value orientation. Important in these cases, apparently, is to start by mustering an understanding that young people can experience our culture as disturbing, confusing, and disorienting. It is extremely complex. Helpful here again is an authentic dialogue in which we admit to our own experiences of disorientation and, above all, to our own fears. Another way is to support these young people to have other sorts of experiences through carefully selected trips to, and experiences in, countries with different cultures, especially if such expeditions are associated with meaningful activities, like protecting the environment. Nothing promotes maturity and growth more than personal experiences of foreign cultures, if they include group activities felt to be significant.

The distinction between sabotaging psychologically harmful introjects and liberating rebellion is not easy to make, because it depends on the cultural contexts. We have seen that problems here may arise in three cases:

(1) Youthful rebellion against the rule of parental norms, often themselves introjects. Here, the task in education and in therapy is to help the young mature through dialogues that guide and support the process of self-discovery of their own values and competencies. An interesting case, newly appeared on the cultural and political scene in Europe, is the “Friday for Future” movement: children who go on “strike” every Friday demanding from their politicians immediate action to stop climate change. By doing that during school time, they deliberately violate the general duty to attend school. Critics are abundant among the “grown-ups,” but there is also much uneasiness in the reaction of politicians knowing their shortcomings, and fearing their future electorate and possible violent developments as with the Gilets Jaunes [Yellow Vests] in France. The implication here is that the best criterion for differentiating between harmful introjects and healthy rebellion may be whether or not values belong to the established and long fought for standards of human civilization which are or should be internalized as opposed to introjected. As I see it, in the case of this new “children’s crusade” for stopping the climate change, our civilization itself is at stake; I can see no better legitimization for rebellion as this threat.

(2) If a parental or institutional regime of norms and values is oppressive enough to suffocate the natural tendency of the young to “invent and discover” (to borrow PHG’s expression) their own norms and values through self-experience, then we can (at least in therapy) often recognize a stubborn clinging to the opposite values—especially if the person is one of strong resilience, i.e., energy, courage, and external support. This may prevent a healthy relation to one’s own real needs and creative resources leading to unhappiness and confusing conflicts with partners. Here we deal
with a kind of negative introjection, which once helped one to survive an oppressive atmosphere during childhood. I have known cases of people still remembering that they decided at the age of nine to resist from then on, openly or silently, all parental introjections. And how many remember constant opposition and conflict, or silent suffering through educational institutions, and then have become over-sensitive in regard to any attempt to be influenced so that their capacity to learn may be seriously damaged.

(3) In a globalized world containing many cultures, sabotages of introjects can take the form of cultural or religious conversions which imply a complete change of identity. Understandably, this may worry and shock parents and even peers, particularly if such conversion implies a flight into the arms of Islamist radicals. To comprehend these actions or beliefs, it is useful to realize that they may be caused by introjecting from our culture a need to develop a singular individual identity through which the person demonstrates uniqueness and originality, or in the new sociological jargon, singularity (Reckwitz 1917). After all, sociologists have been unanimous for a long time in declaring a tendency to extreme individualism as the most important feature of modern societies.

But young adults in the West may well experience this introjected cultural goal as an extreme pressure to attain something impossible, especially if they come from the educationally underprivileged strata of society. They may experience, at least for some time, leaving their home for a new community that offers another kind of family and milieu as well as an outlet for their frustrations through its celebration of violent acts, as a step into autonomy—while, paradoxically, searching for moral guidelines with a clear set of rules and values. If we keep in mind that introjects are a fully or partly unconscious psychological power, sabotaging them becomes, even in such radical cases, a plausible psychological solution. Of course, this would produce a lot of emotional confusion. Remember that a decision to leave one’s family would be the outcome of a long inner process which may well follow a sequence that Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1994) suggest as typical for neurotic processes where introjection holds just one place: “Withdrawal of the self / Resignation / Introjection / Conceit of the arrogated personality / Clinging for security / Need for victory” (146). PHG call this sequence a path of neurotic “self conquest.” Their description of this neurotic inner journey reads astonishingly plausible if applied to a young adult who today attempts to find a solution in converting into a new identity:

Sexual excitation, aggression, and grief may to a degree be released in a compartmented way, but unless one feels that one is risking himself in them, the fundamental dullness, boredom and resignation must persist; the outgoing acts are meaningless. Meaningfulness
is the same as the excitement of the coming solution. The premature interruption of the conflict, through despair, fear of loss, or avoidance of suffering, inhibits the creativity of the self, its power to assimilate the conflict and form a new whole. (146)

The fantasy involved here is that such sabotage would free these young adults from adult responsibilities and choices which our society or their parental field seem to demand, and which are experienced as unsatisfying, boring, and empty of meaning. Paradoxically by sabotaging—i.e., in this case, rejecting first secretly and then openly the values and life styles of their own social background which they have unconsciously introjected—they are driven to a radical turn towards a new (but possibly pre-modern) identity which may force them also to reject and violate value standards achieved by our civilization: for instance, the right of individual autonomy, the protection of their individual human rights, rational reasoning, scientific standards of truth, and the established monopoly of the state of the legitimate use of violence. Yet, this solution may appear attractive for sabotaging the values of one’s own culture if it is experienced as an exciting and energizing adventure, because the introject is experienced as a prison convicting one to an irrelevant existence in an irrelevant world. I would assume that this analysis is applicable to those growing parts of the extreme right in Western countries that are prepared to use violence.

VII. Values of Immigrants: Introjects or Internalizations?

Today, Western European countries experience the advent of immigrants in numbers formerly normal only in so-called immigrant countries, i.e., former British colonies like the USA, Canada or Australia and, to some extent, France. This new development leads to problems with which these countries have long been familiar. One basic question that always arises is: should the states and their communities (beyond economic interests in cheap labor) support or even push the cultural integration of immigrants who want to stay in their chosen country, or should they tolerate the culture and its values that the immigrants bring with them? The politics of immigration has a history of its own differing in each of these countries. A new chapter is just now opened in Europe, where the post-communist countries refuse to let refugees cross their borders. Donald Trump tries to do so at the southern border of the USA, and probably a post-Brexit United Kingdom will follow suit, while most Western European countries attempt a controlled immigration policy emphasizing the necessity of their cultural integration.

This fundamental issue also touches the question of introjects and their possible sabotage. There is no easy answer. My own notion is that we observe today the emergence of a global
civilization with common values in regard to human rights, and common technological ways encompassing different cultures with different histories and societal and political systems. This global civilization is, in view of the ongoing or progressing global disasters, of utmost importance: enduring use of wars, climate change, vanishing species, threats of Information Technology consciousness, or research into trans-human enhancement projects. Cultural heritage, valued in itself by UNESCO, must take second place behind these larger issues.

From all of this, it follows that the preservation of cultural values arising in the countries of origin of immigrants to the West must submit to the necessities of integration into the values of global civilization, even if these have a history dating back to the eras of European conquest of the world and the following colonialism. For instance, the mutilation of female genitals still practiced even in some corners of Western societies cannot be tolerated; nor can the Sharia (which prescribes prescribing both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for lawbreaking), incompatible as it is with human rights. These guidelines provide, in principle, a clear orientation for the decisions to be made, best by law courts, even if there are and will be many difficult particular issues to be solved.

I realize that, especially in the USA, difficulties may arise from a tradition of religious freedom, historically closely related to immigration. Yet I postulate that institutional religion, with its extraordinary history of war and sexual abuse, should not take preference over the values of our civilization hard won in our history since the age of Enlightenment, and even earlier. In regard to our topic, this means that in therapy with immigrants we must consider their own cultural values as introjects. Another question is how best to work with them in this case. Certainly, we should pay special attention to their present family situation and only slowly begin to address their introjects, carefully considering the actual power situation in their families. Beyond that, the family might provide an emotional support, which has to be taken into account in political decisions supporting or refusing families who follow refugees and labor immigrants.

Thus, in therapy the possible sabotaging of family introjects needs to be carefully supported, even though the family might be still an emotional haven. This must always imply close attention to the emotional conflicts, especially of the younger generation of immigrants. But the goal remains: integration into the global village as the only place of potential peace and possible creative adjustments. This is all the more true if we encounter criminal behavior as defined by the “new” legal environment. Such integration entails a difficult learning process, given the fact that Western societies are by no means united and homogeneous in supporting the values and civilized standards
which must be the foundation of life in the global village. On the contrary: immigrants have to learn that there are many enemies of these values among us, and that they as newcomers and outsiders will be targets and victims of them. To encounter racist reactions is unfortunately a constant danger in our societies. Immigrants have to learn that Western societies, too, have much “unfinished business” in regard to the emerging global civilization; that is part of their integration, and perhaps we can eventually win them over as helpers in this struggle. For those civilized standards can never be taken for granted but must be learned, achieved, fought for, and defended against the danger of their decline. Civilization is never achieved but an ongoing process and task for humanity.

There is no denying that, presently, the old plagues of racism and anti-Semitism are rising up again in the Western world. In fact, many old values shared at least by the bourgeoisie of all societies of the West seem to be endangered. To mention a few examples: the values of respect, courtesy, and politeness seem to deteriorate; the truth of facts was a benchmark of all scientific endeavor which is now constantly violated; the value of solidarity seems to be neglected more and more; the value of social and economic equality is simply ignored. It is pointless to deplore these developments, and this is not the place to study seriously their causes. I only wish to maintain here that they are affecting the daily life of all of us, causing widespread strain, and existing in the background of many anxieties and neurotic reactions of our patients and clients. If these claims are correct, then my next and last question is asked below.

VIII. Can Gestalt Therapy Help to Avert and Reverse the Decline of Civilizing Values?
I believe it can. First, I suggest to contemplate again the differentiation between the sabotage of neurotic introjects, which we should promote, and the loss of healthy internalized values of civilized behavior, which we should help to stop. Psychotherapists need to be aware of this difference as they work, and to orient their interventions accordingly.

The civilization of human beings, the taming of their drives, the control of their hostility has always been, and still remains, a task for child-raising and adult education. Surely, psychotherapy is something different: its aims are to heal and alleviate, to release vitality and raise awareness. And yet it has an educational aspect, too, since it aspires to help discover potentials, support personal growth, work on sharpening the senses, and awaken innate compassion—or, at least, Gestalt therapy does. In this sense, it is also a laboratory for promoting civilization. Committed as it may be to supporting the sabotage of introjects, it should therefore be concerned with avoiding instrumentalizing poorly internalized values of civilized behavior in its awareness experiments, like supporting violent
aggression for the sake of mobilizing retroflected energies. On the contrary, the focus must remain
on the “healthy introjection” I have been referring to as “internalization” (to distinguish it from
neurotic introjection), i.e., the positive, aggressive functions of the self: weighing up, differentiating,
critically examining, assuming a standpoint, being willing to process conflicts, saying No; all these
need to be supported as genuine tasks of Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt therapy has another objective: to work constantly on sharpening our sensory
perception and our feelings. The success of securing and furthering the values of the process of
civilization in which we are engaged—so as to develop the rules of contact in our growing global
village (e.g., fighting violence by learning to be more aware)—will depend on whether we manage
to become more familiar with our feelings and cultivate the art of expressing them better. A strong
voice and good articulation are more effective than shouting; a clearly stated “No!” is more effective
than violence; laughter or a genuinely friendly smile is more disarming than ill-humored
compromises; quiet tones are often more touching than stentorian speech. Buddhism recommends
that we detach the feeling of anger from its object to concentrate completely on this emotion, to
observe it without suppressing it. While that is a good example of a meaningful Gestalt experiment,
it needs to be practiced frequently before it begins to have a sustained effect. The most important
thing, however, is to discover the covert sabotages of introjects. It could help to go on a voyage of
discovery of our own introjects, and to be aware when the next secret joy lights up in us as we
violate them. Gestalt therapy’s contribution to the civilizing of our culture is potentially no smaller
than its contribution to promoting the emancipation processes of individuals. The lesson of the
present cultural situation is that both are complementary in our work as Gestalt therapists. We must
start by becoming aware of this interdependency.

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