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# THE ORGANIZATION OF EXPERIENCE IN HAKOMI THERAPY

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HIS ARTICLE PRINTED HERE PUTS IN FOCUSED FORM AN ASPECT OF HAKOMI THERAPY THAT RON NOTICED ALL STUDENTS NEEDED UNDERLINED FOR THEM WHEN GOING THROUGH TRAINING IN HAKOMI. RON CAN BE CONTACTED FOR QUESTIONS OR DIALOGUE EITHER THROUGH THE INSTITUTE ADDRESS IN BOULDER OR AT HIS HOME ADDRESS OF 745 IOWA STREET, ASHLAND, OR 97520 / TEL: (503)482-2049

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The difference between working with  
experience and working with the organization  
of experience.

In Hakomi Therapy we focus on and study--and help our clients focus on and study--how they organize their experience. As we do this, we work with clients' experience, work which takes a great deal of skill in itself. Beyond this, and much more important, we are working with the organization of experience.

Two very different processes determine what each of us experiences: what is actually happening around us, and the habits and other structures that convert these external events first into basic sensory information, then on up the levels of the nervous system, finally into conscious experiences.

To a great extent, especially at the lower levels of conversion, these habits are effective and not problematic. It is at the levels of feeling and meaning that the conversion of events into experience becomes highly individual, creative, distinctly human and sometimes unnecessarily painful and limiting.

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The organization of experience at these levels has evolved through an emotional-psychological history. It is based upon ordinary knowledge, occasional misinformation, beliefs, images and, at the deepest levels, memories of emotionally intense events, relationships and interactions. These key beliefs and memories have the emotional power to create the basic habits with which we organize experience.

In Hakomi we call central organizing habits, memories, etc., core material. This material strongly shapes the processes of personality with obvious influence on thinking, feeling and behavior. A careful observer can see the organizing effects of core material even in the most casual details of behavior.

The explicit study of the organization of experience is the very essence of Hakomi Therapy. The extent to which the "rituals of experience" are studied rather than simply acted out or lived through, is one of the big differences between Hakomi and many other forms of therapy.

In Hakomi we carefully protect the emotional experience of the client, providing safety and support wherever possible. We give the client all the support possible for emotional expression and experience. But, we don't stop there. Within that delicate, supportive environment, we are still able to initiate and further the processes by which the client first comes to know and then to change the habits which make some experiences

automatically and unnecessarily painful, limiting and destructive.

In one way or another, all therapies work with experience and its organization. But only a few work with it explicitly and consciously; call it that; make it primary; and have principles, methods and techniques specifically designed to do so. Hakomi does.

So, how do we work this way and what's the difference between this way and other ways of doing psychotherapy?

If you let the client take all the time he or she wants to describe what happened to him or her last week, last year and all the years before, if you focus on and stay very long with this level of talking about experiences that have happened sometime in the past, you will end up mostly listening, perhaps sympathizing or offering commentary, but you'll have a very hard time doing anything about any of it.

Yet, this is how much psychotherapy proceeds. Proceeding this way greatly limits the interventions that are possible. (While not discussing them in any detail here, it should at least be mentioned that therapies like Gestalt, Psychodrama, Psychomotor, and several others circumvent these limitations by making the therapy itself highly experiential.)

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If the client is talking about something that happened and felt terrible yesterday or ten years ago, what can be done about that now? Let's look at what happens in such situations and what makes them therapeutic in spite of the limitations.

First, clients are listened to. And, they feel better for having talked with someone who knows how to listen with intelligence and care. A sympathetic ear can be a big help.

Secondly, the therapist may make statements about what he or she imagines the client's experience must have been. "That must have been rough for you." Like that.

This often helps the client feel listened to and understood. And, it may help the client to stay with an experience and to feel it again and to begin to see it in a new light. It also may help the client to understand him- or herself and to feel better.

Finally, the client may feel the same feelings as present experience and from that may gather insights about how past events influence what he or she feels and does in the present.

There's lots happening that's helpful. And it is not anywhere near as effective or efficient as it could be. It can be more powerful and deep and can work much more rapidly. It can also be much more interesting to both client and therapist.

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WHAT'S NEEDED IS A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING  
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What's needed is a clear understanding of the therapeutic job at hand, a clear, sharp focus on the explicit task of studying the organization of experience. The work needs a clear "job description".

Without one, therapist and client get stuck in the rituals of polite conversation. Because the situation is taken as one where people are talking about experience, it is thought of therefore as a conversation. That's wrong from the point of view of a Hakomi therapist. Therapy isn't conversation; it is studying the organization of experience. You can get in a lot of trouble if you're not clear about that.

You get in trouble for the ridiculously simple reason that the rules of polite conversation are designed to expedite the flow of information between people, not within people. The eye movements, the pauses, the head turns all control who speaks when and how much. The polite listener does not interrupt and ask the speaker to try some experiment or other. The polite listener doesn't take charge of the conversation and tell the other what to say and do, asking the other to focus on some feeling or to focus awareness in one place or another.

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AND REACTIONS REQUIRES SOMETHING VERY  
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Yet this is exactly what the therapist must do to help the client study how he or she organizes experience. The therapist must help the client turn awareness inward and must be able to suggest little experiments and get cooperation. The process of studying internal states and reactions requires something very different from conversation.

All therapies work in some way with the organization of experience. The difference is they're not working with it explicitly. Interactions are not focused directly upon studying and attempting to change the "organizers of experience." When interactions are not thus focused, the task is not clear and confusion arises about the tools, methods and purpose of core therapy. And this leads to long, polite interchanges that delay the process, do little to reach the deeper layers of the personality and are, quite frankly, boring to both parties. (We will talk more precisely about what the organizers of experience are in the next section.)

A second important aspect: Hakomi helps clients to access and work with the organizers of experience in conscious, direct and completely voluntary ways.

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Though we work for and with the cooperation of the unconscious, the client is supported in his or her efforts to follow the process consciously. Indirect methods are not used. There are no tricks or manipulations. Change is supported and encouraged, but the decision and power to change is always with the client.

There are powerful ways to change people that do not require consciousness or voluntary decision. (Hypnosis and NLP are a couple of examples.) These are powerful

methods and some of their power comes from the fact that they avoid most of what is conscious and voluntary.

In Hakomi, we do just the opposite; we promote consciousness and self-regulation with great consistency. The reason is this: when you work in a way which leaves the client in the dark about what's happening, you are in effect, supporting and encouraging passivity, unconsciousness and dependence, the very opposites of awareness, self-determination and personal power. That seems too high a price to pay for whatever power the therapist gains to go deep, quickly. It runs counter to goals of greater consciousness and personal power. For these goals, the client must understand and make conscious choices.

And, it isn't necessary to avoid consciousness to go deep. There are ways to help people change that are direct, efficient and deep and at the same time powerfully supportive of the processes of consciousness and self-determination. Hakomi has this power and depth within a clearly humanistic framework of values. That's just the best of both worlds.

When you work directly with the organizers of experience, you proceed differently and you interact differently with your clients. It is of the greatest importance that the client understand what the two of you are trying to do.

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YOU HAVE TO MAKE IT CLEAR TO THE CLIENT  
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You have to make it clear to the client that, together, the two of you are going to study how the client creates his or her own experiences. Just doing this will save you a lot of time and trouble.

With more experience doing this work, you won't have to tell every client about this. You will know how to work this way and will be doing things quite automatically that will tend to bring your interactions with the client into line with your way of working. At that point in the evolution of your work, you'll only have to explain things to some

clients and usually only the first time you meet. Many clients come in with ideas about how therapy proceeds; they've had other therapy experiences or they have imagined what therapy will be like. So with these clients, you've got to tell them how you intend to work.

Once you and the client are working this way, that is focusing on the organization of experience, you proceed basically by (1) taking something from present experience, for example, a thought, a feeling, a gesture, movement, sensation, whatever, and (2) using it as a significant, workable example of experience being organized.

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Say the client has a particular sensation, perhaps something familiar, like tension in the eyes, or perhaps something in reaction to what's going on in therapy, an experiment you've set up, something you've said. So, you decide with the client to study this sensation in order to get closer to the organizing beliefs, memories or images that are making that exact sensation part of the experience evoked. The client's experience is not a problem to be solved and the client's descriptions of experience are not stories to be listened to; they are all examples of experience being organized and they provide opportunities to study, experiment and get closer to exactly what it is that organizes experience in just that way.

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THE CLIENT'S EXPERIENCE IS NOT A PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED AND THE CLIENT'S DESCRIPTIONS OF EXPERIENCE ARE NOT STORIES TO BE LISTENED TO; THEY ARE ALL EXAMPLES OF EXPERIENCE BEING ORGANIZED AND THEY PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO STUDY, EXPERIMENT AND GET CLOSER TO EXACTLY WHAT IT IS THAT ORGANIZES EXPERIENCE IN JUST THAT WAY.

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In short, experience is grist for the mill. Important? Yes, very! Painful? Often. Needing of respect and care and kindness? Absolutely! But still, when you are doing effective core therapy, they are grist for the mill. Always and ever in the path of growth and change, grist for the mill.

Who or what does all this organizing of experience and how does he, she or it do that sort of thing?

Let's first get a cursory look at what gets organized. After that we'll discuss the main organizers and, lastly, we'll look at all of this in relation to therapy. So, first...

Consider this: a group of people with cancer are given a placebo and they're told it's a highly toxic chemotherapy drug. Over forty percent of them lose their hair. That's an example of a belief organizing physiological changes. Let's call that the output end, to include bodily change and all kinds of behavior, movement, style, posture, breathing, gestures, facial expressions, blood flow, digestion, muscle tension and lots more.

The list is very long. All these get organized. And many of them can be used in therapy, as grist for the mill, as examples of experience being organized. Because one can almost always bring attention to these behaviors, they can be experienced.

So, that's a whole category of experience being organized that we can use in therapy: output, expression, style. A characteristic gesture is a good example. Client and therapist focus on it and study its connection to ideas, memories, and so forth, until the core organizer, a memory say, or an image, emerges into consciousness.

Okay, what about the input end, perception? It is notoriously malleable. We create what we see. Perception is something taking place within the nervous system.

So, how much control do we have over the creation? Are we stuck with literal translations of the various pressures, sound waves, electromagnetic fields, light waves impinging on the nervous system? Absolutely not! We select. We listen to the music and

ignore the traffic in the street. Or we listen for someone's car in the drive and miss a sentence or two of what we were reading. We select. We modify, lowering light levels, numbing ourselves to the cold or heat. We fill in the blanks, imagining the faces of our friends on strangers down the street.

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PERCEPTION IS ALWAYS AN ACT OF CREATION.

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Perception is always an act of creation. It is adding to and taking from, shaping, modifying, enhancing here, deleting there.

And, it gets tied up with meanings, when it's influenced by needs, wants, fears, beliefs, memories, in general, by interpretation and conditioning. Perceptual experience, the world we create and notice, is organized at every level.

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PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE, THE WORLD WE CREATE AND NOTICE, IS ORGANIZED AT EVERY LEVEL.

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Perceptions are also extremely useful in therapy, again as examples of experience being organized. If I ask a client to notice what happens when I touch him or her, they can usually describe their reactions. Whatever those are, when they are automatic and spontaneous, they are shaped by perceptual habit and the unthinking assignment of meaning to experience. We can ask for that meaning. We can explore the way in which that particular experience was created out of the perception of touch. In doing so we come that much closer to a conscious encounter with the central organizers that are the hidden shapers of that creation.

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We must add that systemic experience is also organized. The experience of our relatively stable, internal states, such as tensions, feelings, the "internal who-we-

are," the experience of self on this basic level--as on all levels of self-perception--is highly organized.

So, what are the central organizers, the important ones at the focal points of all this fervent creativity? What are we trying to get at when we do core psychotherapy? We are trying to get at beliefs, images, memories, decisions about who we are and what kind of world we're part of--pieces of the long ago that established patterns of perception, behavior and systemic experience and still control what can be experienced, felt, thought and expressed, to this day.

The central organizers are central because they organize at the deepest and most pervasive levels, affecting nearly all of our experience, all of the time. When you work in therapy to study how a gesture, a feeling or whatever is automatically made part of experience, you eventually come to memories, images and beliefs about who we are, what's possible for us, what kind of world it is, what it wants from us and what it will give and take.

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WHEN YOU WORK IN THERAPY TO STUDY HOW A GESTURE, A FEELING OR WHATEVER IS AUTOMATICALLY MADE PART OF EXPERIENCE, YOU EVENTUALLY COME TO MEMORIES, IMAGES AND BELIEFS ABOUT WHO WE ARE, WHAT'S POSSIBLE FOR US, WHAT KIND OF WORLD IT IS, WHAT IT WANTS FROM US AND WHAT IT WILL GIVE AND TAKE.

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These core organizers are definitions and blueprints of the most basic issues about our being in the world. They are our reference points, our measures of the self and others, with which we set our expectations, goal and limits.

When you bring one of these to consciousness, it is recognized as the power figure that it is. Like some high priest emerging from the shadows. Of course, this is what core psychotherapy is all about, bringing these powerful memories and images out of the shadows, into consciousness. We all know they organize experience; that's not a big secret. It's in how you bring them into consciousness that makes the difference.

If you try to do that through ordinary

conversation, you will be hampered by the hidden rules for that kind of process: rules about listening, asking questions, being polite, no one being in charge of anyone else, and so forth. Effective core therapy requires a quite different attitude towards the conversational content than what most of us are used to. It requires an experimental attitude and the openness of spirit that implies. If you work with experience by studying how it is organized, your route to core material is direct and much less encumbered.

Examples of working with the organization of experience in contrast to simply working with experience.

First let's look at three roughly defined ways of interacting in therapy. One, the therapist and client engage in "ordinary conversation." That puts very wide limits on what can and will be discussed. It could be anything from a movie you saw ten years ago to something you're noticing about yourself right this minute. It could be about you or it could be about the Australian carrot crop. Personal-impersonal, present-past-future, concrete-abstract, that's the range of ordinary conversation. That kind of range is much too wide for effective core psychotherapy. The therapist must know how to bring the client into a narrower range of more pertinent topics.

Two, there's present experience. This quite narrows the range of interaction. Try it with someone, sometime. The both of you just stay within the range of discussing only what each of you is now experiencing.

I did that for three hours once, with two very good Gestalt therapists. The three of us staying in the here and now and talking only about our own experience. It led to one of the most beautiful states of consciousness I've ever experienced. I felt a perfect, peaceful timelessness and I was completely present.

Okay, the therapist tries to keep the client focused within these limits, for periods of time ranging from a few seconds up to a whole session. The important experiences that emerge in those moments are then studied as examples of experience being organized by core material. And that's

number three, studying the organization of you know what.

Here's some examples of going from one to two, that is bringing the client into present experience: The client is talking about something that got her angry last week. It's obvious from her voice that the anger is still there a little. So, the therapist says something along the lines of, "still some of it here, huh." Or, the therapist listens for a while and then asks the client to go inside and see what's happening about "any of that, now."

The point is to get out of ordinary conversation and narrow the focus to present experience. There are any number of creative ways to do this little operation and therapists, especially Hakomi therapists, should know a few dozen without even thinking.

The next examples are of working with experience without yet working with the organization of experience: The client is sad and is crying about something. The therapist tries to stay in contact with statements like, "Feels sad, huh." Or the therapist asks the client to put some words to the sadness. Or the therapist puts a hand on the client, and supports the client's head. Or a client has just noticed the sadness and the therapist asks, "what kind of sadness is that?"

This is all about making contact and deepening and stabilizing the experience. It isn't yet going for the core. It's necessary and very important but it isn't the heart of the matter.

Here's a few examples of studying organization: The client has been feeling some sadness and the words are something about "nobody's here for me." So, the therapist asks the client to, "notice what happens when..." and then there's some classic probe about, "I'm here for you now." Or the therapist touches the client with the same invitation to study what automatically comes into awareness. Some little thing is used to study reactions.

That's one big way you study the organization of experience, you set up experiments in consciousness. The you-get-mindful-and-I'll-do-something-and-we'll-see-

what-happens-when-we-do-that approach.

Experiments are basically of two types: one where the client is passive (mindful, still) and the therapist does something, a probe, a touch, walks towards the client, closes his or her eyes, etc. In the second type, the client is asked to be active and do something like: "notice what happens when you slowly make a fist"; "see what words come up when you tighten your body, the way you feel it tightening when you think of being at work".

We're not asking the client for his or her answer; we're asking for a report on what's experienced. There's a big difference and both therapist and client should be very familiar with that difference. Experiments are for gathering information and getting reports. It's not polite chit-chat. The task at hand requires that the client report upon the results of these little experiments and that the client know that this is a part of his or her work in therapy. This task must be clear. If it isn't, therapy drifts constantly back to ordinary conversation and loses the momentum needed to go deep and stay there.

Another contrast between working with experience and studying it is that when you're studying, you can go back over something and try it again. Or you can try it a little differently, like: the client feels some tension in his leg when you experiment with the statement: "your life belongs to you." So, you say, "let's do it again and this time notice anything else that goes on or any particular quality in the tension."

That's so different from ordinary conversation. Nobody says things like, "let's say that again and you notice..." in ordinary interchanges. So, when you do things like that, you're defining the job that's being done. And that's what this paper has been about, defining the job of core psychotherapy as the study of the organization of experience. I hope we've given that job the clarity and emphasis it deserves.

#### Some Theoretical Background

Theoretically, there's a deep and

wonderful question here about how all this organizing happens. Myriad and beautiful complexities arise when we consider all the loops and turns, ups and downs the brain creates. At such a point, we have to think like systems people. How do systems like this function? What are their general properties and characteristics?

The best model I know of right now is that of Ilya Prigogine. It is a model of systems which spontaneously organize matter and energy, incorporating these into their own ongoing processes, thus exchanging with their environment while maintaining their identity. Though they interact with their surroundings, they don't act as simple cue balls. They select from the environment and incorporate what they take in, in ways that maintain their own goals, needs, programs and identity. They're called dissipative structures, in Prigogine's terminology. They are self-organizers.

In chemical systems, they organize ongoing chemical reactions. And they will maintain the size of those reactions, within limits, in spite of changes in their surroundings, thus demonstrating a degree of independence of their environment; or in other words, an identity.

This kind of talk (about chemicals!) sounds exactly like the kind of talk we'll need to do about how core organizers organize in human beings. First, they self-organize. And, they maintain in the face of external changes. They are selective and have identities. Core organizers in people sound like they may have some of the same functional properties that Prigogine describes in relation to other physical-biological realms. I would say that there's no better model to use right now. It's a model of what living systems do, and life is what psychotherapy is all about.

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AS BEAUTY,  
THERE ARISES THE RECOGNITION OF UGLINESS.  
WHEN THEY ALL  
KNOW THE GOOD AS GOOD,  
THERE ARISES THE RECOGNITION OF EVIL.  
-LAO-TZU