



Opinion Article

## Trauma as a Fracture of the Ecological-Relational Field: Gestalt and Ecopsychological Contributions to the Clinical Understanding of Complex Trauma

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### ABSTRACT

The prevalence of complex trauma and chronic psychological suffering has prompted renewed reflection on clinical models that focus exclusively on traumatic events or individual vulnerabilities. Simultaneously, the ecological crisis and the degradation of living environments affect emotional, bodily, and relational regulation processes. This opinion article proposes a reinterpretation of complex trauma through a Gestalt field perspective integrated with insights from ecopsychology. Within this framework, trauma is conceptualized not only as a response to a critical event but as the outcome of a systemic fragilization of the organism-environment field. The impoverishment of the ecological-relational field may weaken implicit supports for self-regulation, co-regulation, and experiential continuity, thereby increasing vulnerability to stress and chronic distress. The article examines theoretical and clinical implications of this perspective, with attention to regulation, rhythm, embodiment, and the expansion of the therapeutic field beyond an exclusively dyadic relationship. Natural environments are discussed as potential regulatory contexts that may support sensory orientation, physiological stabilization, and experiential integration in trauma work. Although this contribution is primarily theoretical, it suggests that incorporating the ecological-relational field into trauma conceptualization may broaden the clinical horizon of psychotherapy and encourage attention to environmental conditions that sustain psychological well-being and continuity of the self.

### Keywords

Complex trauma, Gestalt psychotherapy, Ecopsychology, Ecological-relational field.

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**ABSTRACT in ITALIANO**

La prevalenza del trauma complesso e della sofferenza psicologica cronica ha promosso una rinnovata riflessione sui modelli clinici focalizzati solo sugli eventi traumatici o sulle vulnerabilità individuali. Parallelamente, la crisi ecologica e il degrado degli ambienti di vita influenzano i processi di regolazione emotiva, corporea e relazionale. Questo articolo d'opinione propone una reinterpretazione del trauma complesso attraverso una prospettiva gestaltica di campo integrata con i contributi dell'ecopsicologia. In questa cornice, il trauma è concettualizzato non solo come risposta a un evento critico, ma anche come esito di una fragilizzazione sistemica del campo organismo-ambiente. L'impoverimento del campo ecologico-relazionale può indebolire i supporti impliciti di autoregolazione, co-regolazione e continuità esperienziale, aumentando così la vulnerabilità allo stress e alla sofferenza cronica. L'articolo esamina le implicazioni teoriche e cliniche di questa prospettiva, con attenzione alla regolazione, al ritmo, all'embodiment ed all'espansione del campo terapeutico oltre una relazione esclusivamente diadica. Gli ambienti naturali sono considerati potenziali contesti regolativi in grado di sostenere l'orientamento sensoriale, la stabilizzazione fisiologica e l'integrazione esperienziale nel lavoro sul trauma. Sebbene questo contributo sia principalmente teorico, suggerisce che includere il campo ecologico-relazionale nella concettualizzazione del trauma possa ampliare l'orizzonte clinico della psicoterapia e promuovere l'attenzione alle condizioni ambientali che sostengono il benessere psicologico e la continuità del sé.

**Parole chiave**

Trauma complesso, Psicoterapia della Gestalt, Ecopsicologia, Campo ecologico-relazionale.

**INTRODUCTION**

The increasing presence of traumatic experiences, chronic psychological suffering, and psychopathological diseases over the past decade has prompted a critical re-evaluation of psychopathological models grounded exclusively in individual or environmental explanations. At the same time, the ecological crisis and the distancing from direct contact with nature have been associated with emerging forms of psychological distress, highlighting the fragility of the conditions that support emotional, bodily, and relational regulation. This article offers a generative theoretical lens for understanding trauma not only as a response to a critical event but also as the outcome of systemic dysregulation of the organism-environment field, combining the Gestalt field perspective with contemporary ecopsychological frameworks. This contribution proposes a reading of complex trauma that considers the impoverishment of the ecological-relational field, conceptualizing nature as an active component of regulation, co-regulation, and experiential integration.

**THEORETICAL PREMISE:  
THE FIELD IN GESTALT THERAPY  
AS AN ORGANISM-ENVIRONMENT  
SYSTEM**

Within Gestalt therapy, trauma is not understood as an isolated episode or a purely intrapsychic characteristic. Rather, it is con-

ceptualized as a breakage in the dynamic relationship between the organism-environment field [1]. In the traditional Gestalt formulation, such a breakage involves continuity of contact, the organism's ability to modulate exposure and withdrawal, the I-functioning, and the ability to take effective action [1]. From a contemporary field-oriented perspective, this disruption extends beyond the memory of the traumatic event itself, affecting the system's ongoing capacity to maintain authentic contact in the present. The organism loses trust in the field as a source of support and orientation, resulting in a constriction of the horizon of possibilities, known in Gestalt theory as the now-for-next [2].

Building on this perspective, an ecopsychological approach further broadens this view. The environment is no longer limited to social, cultural, or interpersonal dimensions [3-5], but explicitly includes the natural world as an essential component of the field [6]. Trauma can therefore be understood as a complex disconnection: from others, from bodily self-perception, from relational and affective processes [3-5], and from the broader ecological context [6].

In this sense, the field is no longer exclusively human, but ecosystemic. It follows that structural weakening of fundamental supports [3-5] may increase vulnerability to trauma even in the absence of a single extraordinary event [6]. From this standpoint, the ecopsychological integration thus expands the Gestalt framework: the therapeu-

tic field may include the natural world as a third, non-human yet relational regulator [1, 2]. Nature is not conceived as an alternative setting or neutral backdrop, but as an active component of the field, capable of performing specific regulatory functions particularly relevant to trauma work.

### **CORE HYPOTHESIS: NATURE AS A REGULATOR OF THE FIELD**

Ecopsychological and psychophysiological research highlights how exposure to natural environments can promote key regulatory functions, including stress reduction [7], regeneration of attention [8], by activating evolved affiliative dispositions toward living systems (biophilia) [9]. From a Gestalt perspective, these processes may be conceptualized as foundational supports of the field, operating on multiple levels:

- Physical grounding: rhythm, respiration, sensorimotor support, and landscape qualities [2, 8];
- Relational grounding: experiences of interdependence, mutual care, and continuity between self and the living world [3, 9];
- Symbolic grounding: meaning-making, belonging, and positioning the self within a broader ecosystemic matrix [3-5].

The ecological-relational field refers to the set of human and non-human conditions that co-constitute processes of regulation, perception, and contact. Compared with the classical Gestalt notion of the organism-environment field [1], this formulation makes explicit the specific role of the ecological dimension as an implicit and continuous support of experience, highlighting how its rhythm, variability, and livability influence the organism's possibilities for integration and response [3, 6, 8].

At the neurophysiological level, these processes can be understood as facilitating states of calm and safety associated with vagal functioning and the capacity to remain in contact without collapsing into hyperarousal or shutdown [10]. The hypothesis proposed is that the impoverishment of these supports, or their replacement with hyperstimulating environments, may be a factor of traumatic vulnerability [6] and limit both self-regulation and co-regulation capacities [8-10].

### **TRAUMA AND FIELD IMPOVERISHMENT: AN ECOPSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Within contemporary ecopsychology, constructs such as ecological grief, solastalgia, and clinical and psychosocial formulations of eco-anxiety describe forms of suffering linked to environmental degradation or loss [11-13]. From this perspective, eco-anxiety is understood not simply as concern about the ecological crisis, but as a persistent difficulty in finding orientation, trust, and continuity in one's relationship with the surrounding world. From a Gestalt field perspective, these conditions may be interpreted as field impairments, that is, alterations in the quality of the organism-environment field that reduce the system's capacity to process critical experiences. Phenomenologically, this may appear as a diminished sense of ground, a weakening of familiar supports, and a reduced ability to rely on places, rhythms, and sensory continuities that previously sustained contact and regulation. This may involve:

- Disruption of the flow of continuity between oneself and the environment, with loss of orientation and experiential "ground" [11, 12];
- Loss of contact routines (places, rituals, cycles) that previously supported emotional and bodily regulation [8, 11];
- Reduction of opportunities for creative adjustment [1, 2].

Within this perspective, trauma concerns not only the impact of what has happened, but also a contraction of what can still happen within the field. What can no longer happen refers to the reduced availability of ecological, relational conditions that previously supported orientation, regulation, and restorative contact, reliable places, rhythms, and sensory continuities through which the organism could regain ground, modulate arousal, and re-establish a sense of continuity with the environment. Thus, suffering concerns not only the event itself but also the loss of the conditions that would allow for reparative experience [6, 11, 12].

### **TRAUMA AND EMBODIMENT: THE ENVIRONMENT AS AN EXTENSION OF THE BODY**

In Gestalt therapy and ecopsychology, the body is where trauma primarily manifests, altering respiration, internal rhythms, sen-

sensorimotor processes, and self-regulation [14-16]. Somatic and sensorimotor perspectives emphasize that regulation unfolds through countless micro-movements, orienting responses, and the completion of interrupted action tendencies [15, 16]. From this point, the body is not only a container of suffering, but the primary place in which the field organizes itself. Experiences of safety and threat emerge first through physiological, postural, and perceptual configurations. The environment functions as a sensory scaffold that directs attention and regulates activity, supporting states of vigilant calm or, conversely, amplifying hypervigilance and defensive closure [10]. Environmental features also facilitate attentional restoration and recovery [8]. For example:

- Walking on natural terrain and exposure to non-artificial sounds (rhythm, bilateral movement, variability) support sensorimotor integration and orientation [15, 16], promoting physiological stabilization [10, 14, 15];
- Exposure to natural light contributes to rhythmic and attentional synchronization, with effects on alertness and recovery [8, 10];
- Contact with complex, variable sensory stimuli supports neural plasticity and modulation of excitation and withdrawal [8, 10, 14].

The traumatized body is thus not only dysregulated, but de-environmentalized: deprived of ecological conditions that historically co-supported regulation. Regulation is therefore not only an “internal” process, but depends on access to sufficiently rhythmic, variable, and non-invasive contexts that allow the system to reorient without coercion [10]. Consequently, the loss of such conditions may contribute to a form of sensory monoculture that reduces nervous system flexibility [8, 10, 14] and increases vulnerability to traumatic stressors [15, 16].

## **NATURE AS CO-REGULATOR AND NON-JUDGMENTAL WITNESS**

In Gestalt trauma treatment, safety is understood as an emergent quality of the field, constructed through contact and co-regulation. Co-regulation between therapist and client constitutes a central axis of the therapeutic process, particularly in complex trauma, where trust in the field as a source of support and orientation has been compromised [1, 2].

## **Nature as an Implicit Co-Regulator of the Nervous System**

Extensive trauma literature emphasizes that recovery depends on bodily processes and the restoration of physiological self- and co-regulation [14, 15]. Van der Kolk [14] and Levine [16] describe trauma as compromising the organism’s capacity to experience safety in the present, maintaining the nervous system in persistent states of hyperarousal or collapse. Within this framework, natural environments may function as implicit co-regulators [3-5], operating at rhythmic, sensory, and neurophysiological levels, and facilitating states of calm alertness and safety [16]. Porges’ polyvagal theory provides an explanatory framework: environments perceived as safe, non-threatening, and rich in signals of life promote ventral vagal activation, supporting states of connection, curiosity, and openness to contact [10]. Empirical studies show that exposure to natural settings is associated with improved autonomic regulation, including increased heart rate variability [17, 18]. From a Gestalt perspective, these processes may be understood as foundational supports of the field.

## **Nature as a Non-Judgmental Witness and Safe Contact Space**

A central issue in trauma work is the possibility of being seen without being evaluated or threatened [14]. In this sense, nature may be conceptualized as a non-judgmental witness: a living presence devoid of evaluative intent, offering diffuse containment of the field. The absence of requests, performance, or adequacy reduces relational pressure and allows the organism to experience fewer defensive states of presence.

From a Gestalt perspective, this form of contact supports an unforced awareness [1], in which experience need not be immediately organized into a clear figure. This is particularly relevant in the early phases of complex trauma treatment [14, 15, 19]. Ecopsychology further emphasizes that engagement with natural processes supports the recognition of nonlinear rhythms, normalizing states of retreat, slowness, and transition [9, 20]. Clinically, this may translate into the capacity to tolerate quiet states without collapse and move through activation without perceiving it as dangerous.

## ECOLOGICAL DYSREGULATION AND EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

The impoverishment of the ecological-relational field reduces implicit self-regulatory supports and increases traumatic vulnerability [9, 21, 22]. From a Gestalt perspective of the field, this impoverishment concerns not isolated environmental factors but the overall quality of the conditions that sustain contact, orientation, and modulation of excitation and retreat [21, 23, 24]. Trauma, in this sense, is not solely the result of a critical event, but the outcome of a systemic fragility of the field that limits available resources for coping with stressors [14, 15, 21].

Several authors argue that the relationship with the natural environment builds a structural dimension of the psyche. Lingiardi's metaphor of the psyche as landscape highlights the link between subjective organization and engagement with living, complex environments [22].

### Vulnerability to Traumatic Events and Integrative Processes

A field lacking adequate regulatory support, where reliable rhythms, relational cues, and environmental anchors are weakened or inconsistent, may leave the organism with fewer resources to orient within experience [9, 21]. The loss of connections and systemic complexity can manifest phenomenologically as reduced sensory differentiation, difficulty identifying bodily signals, and a diminished sense of continuity between self and environment. In such conditions, disorganization in the stress response system may appear in lived experience as oscillations between hyperactivation, emotional flooding, or states of withdrawal and numbness [14, 21].

When the field becomes inflexible, predictable, or excessively stimulating, the organism has fewer possibilities to respond creatively to unexpected events, relying instead on rigid or defensive patterns. Experiences that might otherwise be gradually metabolized can therefore remain unintegrated and acquire traumatic qualities. Integrating a traumatic experience requires a sufficiently stable field in which sensations, emotions, and meanings can reorganize over time. Embodied perception develops through ongoing dialogue with a more-than-human world capable of mirroring and modulating senso-

ry experience. When this dialogue weakens, orienting cues may become uncertain, and the organism may struggle to maintain contact. In therapy, this may appear as narrative fragmentation, reduced bodily awareness, or repeated shifts between activation and freezing [14, 15, 23].

### Reduction of Creativity and Creative Adjustment

In the Gestalt psychotherapy approach, health is closely linked to the capacity for creative adjustment. Creativity, however, is not an exclusively intrapsychic resource; it emerges from the interaction between organism and environment. Human evolution was shaped by a deep relationship with complex natural environments that stimulated exploration, play, and learning. Contemporary human-built environments, often standardized and highly functionalized, may reduce opportunities for sensory and symbolic exploration, contributing to a progressive rigidity of responses [9, 25].

### Amplification of Dissociative States and Post-Traumatic Rigidity

The hyperstimulation characteristic of many urbanized and technological contexts – marked by constant noise, artificial light, speed, and attentional fragmentation – may interfere with physiological regulatory mechanisms [10, 26, 27]. In the absence of natural rhythms and sensory pauses, the organism may increasingly rely on dissociative defenses or hypercontrol as survival strategies. From an integrated polyvagal and ecological perspective, these responses can be understood as adaptive attempts to cope with a field perceived as chronically invasive or unpredictable [10, 14].

## CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR GESTALT PSYCHOTHERAPY

Conceptualizing complex trauma as a dysregulation of the ecological-relational field directs a reconsideration of the processes of clinical intervention. In Gestalt psychotherapy, change emerges from the dynamic interaction between organism and environment [1], a perspective further expanded by ecopsychology [3, 6, 9, 28]. Within this

framework, the introduction of natural elements into the therapeutic process does not take the form of prescriptive techniques but emerges from the phenomenological field, guided by the therapist's attention to processes of contact, regulation, and awareness. The focus on these elements is co-constructed within the relationship, supporting the unfolding of the contact cycle [1, 2].

### **Regulation, Rhythm, and Support**

In complex trauma, the capacity for self-regulation is fragile and discontinuous [14, 15]. Regulation cannot be imposed, but requires sufficiently stable, coherent, and predictable contexts [2, 10]. Natural environments can offer such conditions: exposure to regular rhythms (waves, wind, natural paths) can modulate arousal and support bodily orientation [8, 10, 17]. These experiences are introduced from what emerges in the here-and-now of the session. For example, the therapist may invite the patient to attend to breathing or bodily sensations while observing or interacting with a natural element, facilitating the transition from pre-contact to figure formation in the contact cycle [1]. Activities such as walking, observing the sea, or touching natural elements (water, sand, leaves) may emerge within the relational field as experiential supports for awareness and self-regulation without introducing performative demands [6, 28]. The therapist may also propose micro-experiments, such as synchronizing breathing with natural rhythms or using natural materials for sensory grounding, accompanying the client in recognizing variations in arousal, continuity of contact, and the capacity to remain in the experience [1, 15]. In this way, the work unfolds along the contact cycle, fostering both mobilization and assimilation of experience [2].

### **Aesthetic Experience and Reorganization of the Field**

The aesthetic quality of experience signals the degree of integration of the field [1, 19]. In complex trauma, this function is often compromised, with a reduction in sensory vividness and in the capacity to attribute meaning [14, 22]. Natural contexts characterized by a non-chaotic complexity can support processes of perceptual and affective

reorganization [8, 9, 18]. In the therapeutic process, the therapist may orient attention toward emerging elements of experience (forms, colors, movements), supporting a non-forced awareness [1]. Aesthetic experience does not constitute a direct goal, but a possible outcome of a sufficiently organized field [20, 24]. Activities such as observing the light among the leaves or drawing natural elements can become moments of integration if supported by relational presence, facilitating contact and symbolization [28].

### **Expansion of the Clinical Field**

A further implication concerns overcoming an exclusively dyadic conception of the therapeutic relationship. The clinical process can be considered part of a broader field that also includes non-human elements [24, 27]. In this perspective, the environment can mediate the intensity of interpersonal contact, facilitating a less threatening sense of belonging, particularly relevant in cases of complex trauma [14, 15]. The inclusion of the natural context, therefore, supports the therapeutic process not as an additional technique, but as an extension of the field, within which the patient can experience new modes of contact, regulation, and continuity of experience. As highlighted by Danon et al [28], the expansion of the field makes it possible to conceive care as a shared process between the individual and the environment, in which non-human elements also participate in the regulation and organization of experience.

### **Positioning with Respect to Other Trauma Models**

The proposed model is in dialogue with the main contemporary approaches to trauma, including those of Van der Kolk [14], Levine [16], Ogden [15], and Porges [10], sharing their attention to bodily processes and neurophysiological regulation. While integrating these contributions, it maintains the phenomenological autonomy proper to Gestalt psychotherapy, placing at the center the organism-environment field and processes of contact [1, 2]. In this perspective, trauma is understood not only as individual dysregulation but as the expression of a weakening of the ecological-relational field, offering a complementary interpretative key to existing models.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article has proposed a reinterpretation of complex trauma as an expression of a fracture in the ecological-relational field, integrating Gestalt psychotherapy with contemporary ecopsychological perspectives. Trauma is thus understood not only as the outcome of a critical event or an intrapsychic dysfunction, but as the result of a progressive compromise of the conditions of contact, regulation, and continuity that sustain organisms in their environment [3, 6, 11]. The impoverishment of this field, particularly in its ecological dimensions, may reduce implicit support for self- and co-regulation, increasing vulnerability and limiting possibilities for experiential continuity and aesthetic integration [22, 26, 27].

## Limitations

This contribution is theoretical and reflective and does not present original empirical data. The proposed hypotheses require further clinical and empirical investigation. A further limitation concerns the risk of conceptual overextension: the integration of Gestalt psychotherapy and ecopsychology is proposed here as a general framework rather than a set of specific protocols or clinical guidelines [24, 27].

## Future Directions

Clinically, greater recognition of the ecological-relational field may orient interventions that are more sensitive to patients' environmental conditions, broadening therapeutic reflection on access to regulatory and rhythmic contexts. From a research perspective, future studies should include qualitative and longitudinal designs that explore interactions among ecological conditions, emotional regulation, and trauma processes, as well as clinical investigations assessing the impact of therapeutic interventions that incorporate elements of the natural world within the field.

In conclusion, incorporating the ecological-relational field into trauma conceptualization expands the clinical horizon of Gestalt psychotherapy, orienting therapeutic work not only toward symptom reduction, but toward the restoration of conditions of belonging and continuity with the living world [1, 24, 28].

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the conception, writing, and revision of the manuscript, and approved the final version.

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