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G E S T A L T R E V I E W

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Contempt¹

JOSEPH MELNICK, PH.D.
SONIA MARCH NEVIS, PH.D.

ABSTRACT

A perusal of any newspaper will generate many stories of escalating violence—physical, psychological, and emotional—across a wide range of relationships. These include violence towards one’s self; within marriages and families; and between religious groups, political parties, and countries. In this article, we hypothesize that the concept of contempt can shed light on how these destructive thoughts, feelings, and actions get generated and maintained. After first describing its origins and defining it, we will discuss how to work with contempt on many levels of system.

¹We would like to thank Gloria N. Melnick, Ph.D., for her editorial assistance.



Joseph Melnick, Ph.D., is a clinical and organizational psychologist. He is the founding editor of *Gestalt Review*, co-chair of the Cape Cod Training Program, and a member of the board of the Gestalt International Study Center. He has published extensively on a wide range of topics related to the Gestalt approach. Most recently (2009) he, along with Edwin Nevis, Ph.D., co-edited a book on a Gestalt approach to social change entitled, *Mending the World: Social Healing Interventions by Gestalt Practitioners Worldwide*. He teaches and trains throughout the world.



Sonia March Nevis, Ph.D., is co-founder of the Gestalt International Study Center and has practiced and taught Gestalt and family therapy concepts worldwide for over forty-five years. She was a founder of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, where she created the Center for Intimate Systems, devoted to the training of couples and family therapists. She is the primary contributor to the Cape Cod Model, an approach to working with couples and families. She is currently co-writing a book that describes the development of the Cape Cod model and contains a collection of her published papers.

Introduction

Much of our life progresses by moving from interest to interest. This process happens so naturally that we seldom notice it.² Mainly, our encounters and relationships are with people, but they also include our interests in sports, books, and music; our tastes in clothes, wine and food; our spiritual and religious practices; and our social and political beliefs. They also encompass our experience of intimacy found in our sense of family; and our feelings of belonging anchored in our culture and country.

These encounters and relationships have a “to and fro” dynamic and can include moving towards or away from, attraction or repulsion, and at times a mixture of both, which defies logic. It often does not feel like a choice that we make, but instead something that seems to happen to us. This back and forth movement does not exist in a vacuum. We are always in relationship to someone or some thing. When life is going very well, we move towards others, and they join us with more or less equal energy. And, if we are lucky, they want the same type and amount of connection with us.

Sometimes, however, the interest is unbalanced; what we want from each other is different, either in form or degree. Others may want more or less of us than we want of them. If this is the case, it becomes more difficult to engage in a mutually satisfying way. Dealing with and managing these discordant experiences form much of the work of psychotherapy, as we deal with loves and losses, addictions and obsessions, and yearnings and desires (on living with desire, see J. Melnick, S. Nevis, & G. Melnick, 1999).

Then there are other times when we neither join nor move away; we stay in the middle. This staying in the middle is a complicated affair, filled with conflicting feelings and desires, yet is quite normal. Do we go to the movies or stay home? order the chicken or the salad? have a child now or wait? take the new job or stay put? It can be a comfortable experience and a wonderful opportunity for learning, if we know how to navigate through it. Such an ability rests on understanding three points: first, that ambivalence is always present in life; second, that most of the ambivalence we experience involves choices that nourish us and make us grow; and third, that managing and resolving differences is essential for growth and development (Melnick, 2007).

Instead of being an opportunity for choice and growth, however, the

²Gestalt theorists have many ways to describe the movement, usually referring to it as the contact cycle or cycle of experience. For a detailed discussion, we would recommend the dialogue that occurred among Gaffney, E. Nevis, and Bloom in *Gestalt Review*, 13.1 (2009).

overall experience can be a painful, turbulent time when both individuals fight for who is right, while never learning to live with differences. Marriages and many other forms of relationship can go either way, towards growth or stagnation.

Contempt: Its Origins

Another form of relationship in which ambivalence exists, often without awareness, takes a very specific form. It appears, not in terms of mixed or conflicted feelings for those are, in fact, clear and primarily negative. We do not like, value, or respect the other(s). We may be envious, jealous, or resentful, hold them in disdain, or wish them harm. But despite our negative feelings, we are unable to turn away, even though staying where we are does not feel good, especially in the long run.

This negative interest creates a powerful, complex, and sometimes obsessive form of connection. While, on the one hand, we want less of these individuals, at the same time we find ourselves putting a great amount of energy into them. Examples of this dynamic include the experiences of jealousy and *schadenfreude* (Melnick & S. Nevis, 2001). These multifaceted and potent forms of negative attraction are common to all of us. And they exist, not only towards those connected to us but even towards people with whom we have no personal connection, such as politicians, sports and movie stars, religious and political leaders. Even more surprising is that this negative attraction can be as great in our encounters with collectives, such as groups, organizations, and institutions whose values and beliefs differ from our own.

In this article, we will discuss a specific form of negative, ambivalent attraction—the syndrome of *contempt*—which, like jealousy, *schadenfreude*, and envy, is a way of self-regulating and managing differences. But even more than these three examples, long term, ongoing, and unchecked contempt is dangerous, for it holds within it the seeds of destruction. This is true not just for individuals and intimate relationships but also for cultures, countries, and possibly our planet (see, for example, Keenan & Burrows, 2009). One might argue that our inability to manage contempt is a serious threat not only to our individual and intimate well-being but to our global survival.

We shall first describe the effects of this experience, followed by a discussion of how others view it and how we view it. Utilizing a Gestalt frame, we will describe how it operates, its emotional and cognitive mechanisms, the gestures it generates, and the actions it sometimes produces. Lastly, we will discuss how to work with it from a Gestalt approach.

Creating the Ground: How We Became Interested in Contempt

Joe's Story: Traveling, Part I

A year or two ago, I boarded a transcontinental plane early. As I settled into my seat, I looked up and saw a man attempting to stuff an oversized suitcase into an overhead compartment. People were beginning to back up in the aisle behind him. No one was speaking, but some were giving him dirty looks. Unfortunately, he was oblivious to them all. To my surprise, I caught myself muttering quietly, "You idiot." I was amazed at my strong negative reaction to watching this stranger. As luck would have it, he ended up sitting next to me. He turned out to be a delightful person who had never traveled before by plane. In addition, he was exhausted, having been traveling for more than 24 hours.

When I told the story to Sonia, her first response was to say that contempt was not something very well developed in her. She called me back a few days later and said that she had been mistaken. It just took a little focus for her to locate this experience within her. After we got through laughing, we decided to explore the concept further.

In case you, the reader, think that you are immune to this syndrome, we would like to give you a few common examples. After reading each of them, see if you can describe your own thoughts and feelings.

- You are driving down the highway and someone in front of you: a) is traveling well below the speed limit; b) cuts you off; or c) forgets to signal before turning.
- You are in a supermarket and in a hurry. The person ahead of you in the check-out lane: a) does not know how to use the credit card machine; b) takes out a checkbook after all the bags have been packed; c) begins a friendly conversation with the cashier; or d) fill in the blank.
- You are at a movie theater: a) two people begin a casual conversation just as the movie begins; b) a person is reserving two seats by putting a coat over them, even though the theater is crowded; or c) the person in front of you begins text messaging while the movie is going on.
- You are sitting alone on a beach reading a book and enjoying your solitude when: a) a person places a blanket right next to you and begins talking to you; b) two people begin throwing a ball, and it nearly hits you; or c) a person ten feet away starts playing horrible music loudly.

We would like to point out that these examples are transitory and involve mainly a temporary invasion of time and space by individuals with whom we have minimal or no relationship. Imagine if these experiences were ongoing with individuals whom we viewed as beneath us because of race, sex, class, religion, etc. Imagine further that our relationships not only were continuous and long term but also involved some type of mutual dependency. This is the brew that helps create ongoing contempt.

Contempt Defined

A perusal of three dictionaries generates a list of common terms and phrases that can be used to describe this syndrome. It is an attitude in which the other is viewed as inferior, base, vile, or worthless. It is similar to scorn and open disrespect. On the recipient side, it is a state of being despised, dishonored, or disgraced.

While agreeing with the basic definition, theoreticians also emphasize the notions of hierarchy and status. For example, Nathanson (1992) defines contempt as "a form of anger in which we declare the other person, the object of our negative affect, so far beneath us and worthy only of rejection" (p. 129). Solomon (1993) emphasizes the concept of status. He relates it to resentment and anger, with resentment being directed towards a higher status individual, anger towards an equal status individual, and contempt towards a lower status individual. Kearns and Daintry (2000) define the contemptuous person as someone who feels superior and sees others as lesser or inferior beings lacking in some way. Bell (2000) describes contempt as containing a judgment. Because of some moral or personal failing or defect, the scorned person has compromised his or her standing, either deliberately or by a lack of status. Bell also views it as a perceived failure to meet an interpersonal standard.

All of these theorists focus on the interpersonal relationship, which is understandable. Yet, it is important to reiterate that we can also find contempt towards whole groups with whom we have minimal contact. And many of us are contemptuous of entities like church and state, which are grounded in different values and belief systems we consider different and beneath us.

It is important to talk about the form of contempt which, like jealousy its cousin, is acontextual (Melnick & S. Nevis, 2001). By this we mean that it is narrow and isolating, that it distorts and impoverishes experience. For even if our assumptions, characterizations, and beliefs were accurate (which they rarely are), we would still be unable to justify the actions that sometimes flow from this powerful emotion; or the obsessive grip that

ongoing contempt has on people's lives.

Now, to be clear, the experience of contempt is a normal and all too common way of managing differences, with great individual variation in how we experience and handle the mixture of thoughts, feelings, gestures, and actions. Some of us move into contemptuous places only occasionally, others more easily, while for still others it might constitute a primary organizer of our character and sense of self.

The Syndrome of Contempt

We have talked earlier of the thoughts that contribute to the concept of contempt. We have talked, too, of the "better than" feelings that are part of the experience as well. But this syndrome also includes *expressions and actions*. We will delve more deeply into these aspects in this section.

Emotions/Sensations

Contempt is a universal experience that cuts across cultures (Ekman & Heider, 1988). Theoreticians have long debated whether it is a primary or secondary emotion. Rather than consisting of a singular emotion, we believe that it is a unique blend. Metaphorically, it is a "bitter taste in our mouth." Some love the taste, some hate it, while many of us do not know what to make of it. But the primary sensation is that of disgust (Nathanson, 1992). The words "You disgust me" or "They make me want to vomit" fit here. We also believe that it contains a dose of arrogance—the unaware projection of our inadequacy onto another. And, of course, sadism, rage, and righteousness are also part of the mix.

Finally, it is important to talk about what emotion is missing when contempt is present. That emotion is **empathy**. It is the capacity to identify emotionally with someone else's experience, to "put one's self in someone else's shoes." And it must be present for contempt to soften and diminish.

Expressions

Surprisingly, Darwin is given credit for first describing the facial expression of contempt (Izard & Haynes, 1988). Most agree that the facial expression involves one side of the mouth being raised while the other is pulled down (Tomkins, 1963). Ekman and Heider (1988) point out that this behavior occurs primarily on one side of the face, also noting that contempt is the only emotion expressed asymmetrically. Sneering is also common, as are dismissive gestures.

Contempt can be expressed through a turning away. On an individual level it might mean a refusal to acknowledge the presence of another. In terms of collectives, many religions and countries throughout history have used shunning, which involves a refusal to speak to or even acknowledge another's existence.

Gossip is an interpersonal magnification of contempt. It allows us to keep the experience alive and energized. Also, teasing often partially masks a contemptuous attitude. And while gossip and teasing are not always destructive, bullying, which involves behaving abusively towards a person judged inferior, nearly always is. Bullying involves a fuller, more direct expression of contempt that is sometimes physical and always verbal. When bullying is taken to an extreme, strangers can become victims of hate crimes based on their gender, race, or ethnicity.

Recently, there has been much press regarding a female teenager who moved to the USA from Ireland. She briefly dated a star athlete, generating rage and jealousy on the part of a number of classmates. She was harassed constantly in and out of class. She was verbally insulted ("Irish whore"), threatened with physical harm, and had objects thrown at her. Teachers and other students witnessed these episodes. What little intervention was attempted was minimal and insufficient. After taking as much as she could bear, she committed suicide. Not surprisingly, recent research indicates that people who are simply watching their peers get verbally or physically abused experience as much psychological distress as the actual victim, if not more (American Psychological Association, 2010).

The most damaging form of contempt involves a spiraling escalation between parties who have both the wish and the ability to harm one another physically. It results in an ongoing state of high mobilization, interspersed with increasing streams of aggression and counter-aggression. It can occur at all levels of system from the intimate to the global. Given the increased accessibility to weapons of mass destruction, our whole world will be in jeopardy unless we can find a way to deal with this expression of contempt.

A Gestalt Perspective

Before continuing, we need to mention that we found little writing on the subject of contempt in the Gestalt literature. We should also state that we agree with the above-cited theorists on two fundamental points: that contempt is a hierarchical experience status and value based; and that it involves a negative judgment resulting in a narrowing of experience. Nevertheless, as we have also said, its range goes far beyond what

happens in a relationship, and it occurs in many different types and levels of system (Melnick & E. Nevis, 2009). For example, contempt can often focus on one's self. Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) describe it "as a core element that results in a weak self system and is the core of neurosis" (p.157). In addition, Gestalt writers have written extensively about the concept of shame (e.g., Lee & Wheeler, 1996), which is often the outcome of contempt turned inward.

Intimate and Work Systems

Contempt can occur in many types of small systems such as work groups; it can also occur in intimate systems such as couples, friends, and families. The presence of a power differential often leads to abuse—if not physical, then certainly verbal—resulting frequently in an experience of shame. If there is a large amount of ongoing contempt, an escalating stream of insulting behavior that seems almost immune to change is common. Carstensen, Gottman, and Levenson (1995) found that ongoing contempt is a major cause of dysfunctional marriages.

Contempt can occur between sub-groups, including segments of society. For a current example in the USA, we have only to look at the political left and right. It is exemplified by competing television and radio show personalities who continuously demean and trivialize those with different opinions. And, as with all forms of contempt, it involves a simplistic caricaturing of the "other." For instance, the political left often refers to the right as illiterate, lower class, beer drinking, car racing, country music loving, fundamentalist, etc. The right, on the other hand, refers to the left as atheistic, elitist, pro-abortionist, intellectual, tree hugging, socialistic, and wine drinking snobs.

It is also easy to witness episodes of contempt while watching sports teams. In fact, in this country the National Football League has had to enforce penalties for taunting. And, of course, when one combines sports with nationalism, such as in the worldwide football (soccer) competition, it has resulted in a level of aggression leading to physical injury and even the death of fans.

Lastly, contempt can occur between systems. This is a common occurrence in professional organizations. The well-documented, long-term turf battle between psychiatrists and psychologists in the USA is a relevant case in point. But these conflicts are trivial when compared to the struggles between countries and religious institutions. Our history is filled with religious intolerance fueled by contempt. Although examples abound, modern day struggles between Muslims and Christians, Hindus and Buddhists,

Catholics and Protestants, are easy cases in point. And, sadly, it can occur between countries, for instance, between South and North Korea and between the two Chinas. When religion, nationalism, and neighboring territories are combined—as with Palestine and Israel, India and Pakistan, and Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland—the perfect breeding ground for contempt of the worst kind is created.

The Experience of Contempt

When we experience contempt, we have a negative interest in the other. We are in the confusing experience of both pulling away and moving towards—often at the same time. Our attachment is counter-intuitive, for one would think that when we are scornful of another we would turn away and our interest would decrease quickly. But instead, our interest can rise to a level of obsessiveness, from which it is almost impossible turn away.

Contempt is difficult to extinguish because it is largely an unaware process that is highly projective.³ The qualities we hate in the other person are those that live within us in an essentially unaware state, for we simply do not know how to deal with those aspects of ourselves. As a result, nearly all of the focus is on *them* and little on us. It is primarily about output—not input. And this is why it is so confusing and difficult to manage, for a contemptuous attitude is an overdeveloped interest in ourselves, masquerading as an interest (in this case highly negative) in the other. Often this lack of awareness and understanding creates the “stuckness” in systems riddled with contempt.

There are also other reasons why a contemptuous attitude is so difficult to impact. Contempt and its brew of thoughts and feelings, although the generator of much emotion and energy, is frequently kept inside or expressed solely to like-minded individuals, often resulting in a sense of righteousness. Thus, unlike self-contempt, contempt of others can feel strangely good because we do not have to deal with feelings we commonly deny. This experience of hierarchical positioning and negative judgment, and of seeing others as “less than,” has always been a way to protect us from feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. It is a retroflective reminder to ourselves that we are OK.

As we mentioned above, contempt is also a projective syndrome. We are not taking in or incorporating new experiences but instead projecting negative assumptions and judgments onto others. We believe we know and understand them, but what we are really doing is making up stories

³Lichtenberg (1990) has written extensively on the role that unaware projection has had with respect to the role bigotry has played in society.

about them in our mind; these projected stories, it should be emphasized, often consist of disowned or unassimilated parts of ourselves.

Usually our experiences of contempt are fluid and changing. We move in and out of the experience, hopefully learning a little and letting go. But the type we are describing is habitual. It consists of a fixed belief (Gestalt) in the correctness of our ways of seeing the world and others in terms of values, beliefs, and actions. It also includes the denigration of the others' values, beliefs and actions. It is highly resistant to change because it is a projective stereotyping and caricaturing of people or groups we hardly even know. And, most importantly, there is little or no experience of them beyond a narrow range, for once a person is contemptuous of others, genuine contact is usually avoided. Instead, data that support the stereotypes are favored, and experiences not in line with the fixed Gestalt are dismissed or minimized. Without openness to new experience, there is no way that the fixed stance can be changed or softened.

Let us give you a relatively benign example. One of us lives in the state of Maine, which borders on Massachusetts. We Mainers hold a caricature of Massachusetts residents as rude and aggressive drivers. If we notice a driver who behaves rudely, we look at the license plate of the car; if it is from Massachusetts, we nod knowingly. If it is from Maine, we respond with surprise and a feeling of puzzlement. The caricature remains intact.

Given all the negatives involved with a contemptuous character or stance, it can seem puzzling as to why ongoing contempt is so prevalent in the world. Maybe the answer lies in a core aspect of our human experience: our common feelings of being "less than" and "not good enough." Feeling contemptuous feeds a primitive need to feel "better than." It is a way to ward off the insecurities and doubts that are part of our human condition.

Contempt is usually generated when we experience our values being violated, either actively or passively. Our values—around space, manners, religion, politics, etc.—play a fundamental role in determining how we define our relational self. And though responding to these perceived violations with contempt provides some immediate relief, ultimately no real relief comes about.

When Facing Contempt . . .

While the potential responses to being the direct object of contempt are many, they often fall into two categories. The first involves a type of internal collapse. When this happens, we join the person who is contemptuous of us in some way—we buy into their negative projection, becoming

vulnerable and losing self-esteem. There is often a feeling of humiliation and loss of face; the common experience, as we have stated, is that of shame. Erskine, Moursund, and Trautmann (1999) view the experience as a disavowal and retroflection of anger, in order to maintain a semblance of a connected relationship with the person who had engaged in the humiliating behavior; the result is a diminished sense of self.

The second response is to lash back in a contemptuous manner. In a relationship filled with much mutual contempt, ongoing rage is often the result, leading to a long-term "back and forth" whose outcome can be physical harm and sometimes death. Sadly, this spiraling escalation, which often involves reprisals, makes up a significant part of what we read in our daily newspapers. And even when the physicality is stopped, these sensations and emotions can remain in the individual for a long time, or in the collective fabric for generations. (See Keenan and Burrows [2009] for a description of the long-term PTSD felt in Northern Ireland, years after the armed conflict had ended.)

How to Manage Contempt

As indicated previously, contempt is highly resistant to change and often feeds upon itself. When turned into action, it is a root cause of much of the destruction we experience in this world. Having said this, we all need to become aware of our undeveloped feelings in order to diminish its occurrence and clean up the mess we are all making. In this section, we will describe how an intervener can work with contempt, using different levels of system as a frame.

Working Intrapsychically⁴

When individuals voluntarily choose to seek psychological help, the establishment of trust is relatively easy and they are motivated to look at their own behavior. One tool available to Gestalt therapists is the heightening of the internal conversation between the client's "top dog/underdog" (Perls, 1969). We all have the top dog/underdog dynamic within us. In some, the resulting aggression is self-contained and self-directed, leading to self-loathing and shame: "I'm stupid, ugly, incompetent, etc." The overall sense is one of being "less than." In others, the underdog experience is not in the person's awareness. Instead, these feelings are suppressed or projected onto an object of contempt: "That person doesn't

⁴The focus of this paper is not to address the therapeutic issues of the person experiencing hatred or shame. The interested reader should see Perls (1969).

dress right, is stupid, impolite, etc.” So, rather than experience these difficult and uncomfortable underdog feelings and sensations within ourselves, we embrace contempt based on the mistaken belief that we are the top dog.

Because these unaware feelings towards another involve a threat to oneself, they can be addressed first by supporting the individual’s expression of the affect, and then by exploring the introjects that are often its source. For example, let us imagine what it would be like if Joe were a client and his therapist asked him to have a conversation between his top dog and his underdog:

Top dog: You are so stupid. I can’t believe that you have no consideration for other people. All you care about is yourself.

Under dog (pleading): I do have consideration for others! He was just exhausted, and it was his first time on the plane. I feel so bad about it.

Therapist: Do you know where you first heard such words coming at you?

Client (smiling): Yeah, from my father. In many ways he was generous and had a heart of gold. But he was pretty non-trusting and dismissive of others. I would argue with him constantly about his contempt for others. I guess a little of him seeped into me.

If the conversation were to continue, I might explore further the values that underlie my response. For example, I could examine the belief that “one should always focus on others first, and that focusing on oneself is selfish and bad.” These internal exchanges can result in an integration of the self, which reduces the need to resort to contempt.

Working with Intimate Systems

It is important to mention that when contempt passes a certain threshold and is physically abusive, we are now dealing with a legal issue in that and the intervener must take appropriate action to stop the abuse. Assuming that this is not the case, the intervener’s task is first to gain the trust of all individuals in the system so that they are open to being influenced. Gestalt practitioners, given our field perspective, know how to remain close to phenomena, to avoid judgmental stances, and to stay aware of potential countertransference experiences.

The building of trust with intimate systems is more complex than it is with individual work. The first job of the intervener is to become interested in the relationship between all parts of the system, and to get the

clients to the point where they can turn to the intervener and be open to growth. The interventions also have to be balanced in order to create openness for conversation and dialogue. Once this occurs, the clients are more capable of looking at their experience.

Intimate systems filled with contempt often manifest high degrees of negativity, resulting in little openness. Gestalt practitioners are experts at affect management; they know how to help these clients manage their emotions so that they are able to hear and respond to each other. Once this occurs, the individuals may then be able to focus on more productive aspects of their relationship.

Working with Hierarchical Systems

When working with hierarchical systems such as families and multilevel organizations, trust building becomes even more complex because the hierarchical dimensions are important and need to be addressed. It is essential to understand and respect the power and importance of hierarchy for the system's good functioning. The absence of respect breeds contempt in families and organizations: when either the leaders or the followers do not feel respected, a cycle of contempt much resembling the top dog/underdog dynamic can get created.

In one of our workshops, a consultant told the story of a privately held factory where she consulted. The owner was known for his demeaning and belittling attitude towards all of the employees, but mainly towards the workers. For example, he would fire workers regularly, often on a whim. In an attempt to save money, he decided to fire one of the janitors, a well-loved man, whose primary role was to clean the machines. After this dismissal the workers staged a spontaneous slow down, and the quality of their work began to diminish. The consultant was appalled at the owner's behavior, which she saw as the "last straw." She invited him to a meeting, gently critiqued his behaviors, and explained that she was quitting because his behavior had breached her sense of ethics. In discussing her experience with a colleague, she became aware that she had been inducted into the system and had ended up behaving in a righteous and contemptuous manner.

When dealing, for example, with two or more hierarchical systems attempting to merge, it is common for them to have two different realities that lead to disagreements, disputes and, all too often, contempt. There is regularly a sense of urgency that the consultant needs to manage well. Time must be spent with both sides in order to create trust. A common mistake is to move forward to action before the trust builds. Only when trust

builds can the parties put aside their contemptuous stances and become open to new information and possibilities. As manifested in the above story, consultants need to be aware of their own contemptuous feelings, be able to put them aside, and not shame or embarrass either party.

Even if one is successful in working with the leaders, there is no guarantee of ultimate success in managing these sorts of differences. And it is important to work at all levels of system. In merger situations, for instance, often the leadership benefits from the new reorganization, whereas the followers are frequently kept in the dark and run the risk of being demoted or of losing their jobs. If the merger is not addressed honestly at all levels of system, contempt is often the result. Numerous examples of working with organizations in conflict are cited in *Mending the World: Social Healing Interventions by Gestalt Practitioners Worldwide* (Melnick & E. Nevis, Eds., 2009).

Political and Religious Systems

It is difficult, if not impossible, to read a newspaper without finding a story about conflicting religious and political organizations filled with contempt for each other. The leaders have an unusually tough job, for they have the hard task of managing not only their own righteous beliefs and attitudes but also those of their followers. As consultants, there are a number of issues of which we must be aware.

First, generating trust takes even longer in these situations—often years. Second, the consultant needs to work with all of the leaders in order to create safety. Often “shuttle diplomacy” is used in the initial stages, but at some point the consultant has to establish credibility while in the same room with all parties. It is easy to forget that the consultant’s purpose is not to help with the content but to provide safety. Safety comes from being neutral and supporting the leaders to continue talking until they can begin (at least temporarily) to put aside their differences and start looking for commonalities. Third, “you can’t be in a hurry,” for premature actions do not work in the long run. Until a consultant can help the leaders understand how complex these situations are, and how many similarities and differences exist among them, success will be difficult to achieve.

An area that the consultant needs to address immediately is the structuring of the work, which includes contracting and reaching an agreement as to rules of conduct. An unclear contract and unclear rules can actually create mistrust and therefore be useless. For example, in the Public Conversations Project (1997), a set of rules was agreed upon, e.g., “Ask questions” and “Do not try to convince.” These agreed upon rules

allowed the individuals to hold onto their stances and beliefs in a “soft” way, so that they could slowly hear the complexity of the issues and begin to notice similarities and differences. Another framework for proceeding in a situation filled with contempt is found in *Difficult Conversations* (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999), which also provides a frame utilized in generating the Belfast Peace accords.

Joe’s Story: Traveling, Part II

A few months after my airplane adventure cited earlier, I had another experience involving contempt. I had just landed, exhausted from an overnight international flight. I boarded a shuttle van to my hotel and found myself sitting next to a well-dressed American deep in conversation with a European couple seated behind him. My semi-dreamlike state was punctured by a series of phrases from this man. “Obama is a lot like Hitler”; “He also took power during a time of economic depression”; “Do you know that children in America are taught to say “Hail Obama?””; “He really is a foreigner; he was not born in the United States.”

I felt rage—and, yes, contempt began quickly to build inside me. I struggled whether to speak or to remain silent, knowing that speaking from my anger might feel good in the moment but ultimately would serve no purpose. I also knew that I could not remain silent. Taking a breath, I tapped him on the knee, smiled, and said, “I want you to know that I disagree with basically everything you have been saying since I entered this van.” He looked startled and surprised. I then said, “I rarely have an opportunity to discuss things with people who have your political beliefs. My guess is that this is the same for you.” He nodded slowly and began to relax.

I then said, “It is too bad that people who feel so passionately about our country as the two of us do rarely get an opportunity to have a good conversation.” He relaxed further, and slowly we began to talk. To be truthful, he was mainly doing the talking and I the listening. But in my listening I continually reminded him in a soft way that I disagreed with him “nearly 100%,” but I also told him that I was interested in his thoughts because, as I put it, “I rarely get to hear people with your views.” As I was leaving the van, he held out his hand and said that it was too bad we were staying at different hotels, because he would like to have had a drink with me and talked further. I told him that I agreed with him.

Did I change any of his views? I doubt it. But I do hope I created a little bit of openness on his part with respect to other perspectives. As for me, I do know that I was able to “get out of the middle” and move on.

Summary

It appears that we are experiencing an epidemic of contempt at many levels of system, from the intimate to the global. We have described contempt from several different perspectives. We view it as a failed attempt to manage differences—differences primarily around values. Furthermore, for contempt to flourish, empathy must be minimal or nonexistent.

Describing the syndrome seems relatively easy when compared with what to do about it. If we had to choose the most important key to working with contempt, we would say it is to reverse the dynamic of maximum output and minimal input. We would argue that the primary goal of the intervener, consultant, therapist, or peacemaker is to create the conditions for respectful dialogue to happen. This belief is supported by a recent conversation one of us had with a Republican (Catholic) activist in Belfast. I asked her what the citizens thought of George Mitchell, the American who had brokered the peace accords between the two sides. She spoke quite highly of him and asked me if I knew his three principles for dealing with high conflict situations filled with contempt. When I said, “No,” she replied: “1) Listen. 2) Listen. And 3) Listen.”

Joseph Melnick, Ph.D.
josephmelnick10@gmail.com

Sonia March Nevis, Ph.D.
smnevis70@gmail.com

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Commentary I. Contempt

ISABEL FREDERICSON, PH.D.

I have long admired and enjoyed the work of the writing partnership of Joseph Melnick and Sonia Nevis. It is consistently seamless, fluid and clear, opening our eyes to new ways of looking at everyday emotions and their effects on our lives at personal and group as well as societal levels. As they have done in the past, Melnick and Nevis have become interested in a subject that is familiar, a commonplace part of our daily lives, and have explored its depth, importance, and even its implications for global peace.

They often startle with one-word titles like "Desire," "Jealousy," and most recently, "Contempt"—all expressions of powerful, everyday emotions. By the time that Melnick and Nevis have developed their ideas, the meanings have broadened and the applications have deepened their significance. Reading their writings reminds me of watching a spider spin its web. One little thin line, barely visible, grows and grows, spreading out into space, until it is a sizable and useful object. So, Melnick and Nevis take their one-word titles and develop their ideas into more and more areas of significance, from the intensely personal to larger and larger systems, always including ways of dealing with them in Gestalt. They have done that again in this article on the concept of contempt and the consequences of



Isabel Fredericson, Ph.D., is semi-retired from her private practice in Santa Barbara, California. She is a co-founder, with Joseph Handlon, Ph.D., of the Santa Barbara Gestalt Training Center. She is still active in the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AATG) and enjoys participating in writing workshops.

feeling and expressing it.

Through their writings, both individual and as a team, they have not only broadened but further humanized Gestalt theory and practice. The concept of "contempt" was not part of the Gestalt vocabulary, nor was it present in the consciousness of practitioners in the early years (1960s, 1970s, and even into the 1980s). But it was frequently expressed, even by Fritz himself. Some leaders might have felt that its shock value hastened awareness, while other leaders might have believed that that every emotion should be expressed. I still feel deep regrets about an incident that involved a group in which I participated, and for which I felt responsible.

I had invited a woman from the Esalen Gestalt community to present a workshop on integrating Gestalt into the learning process, a subject about which she knew a lot, to a group of educators in Cleveland. She was informative and stimulating, but also rather abrupt in her responses to questions or comments from the participants. One member of the group seemed to annoy her particularly, until the leader asked the woman to leave the room. To my distress, I was stunned and said nothing. The leader turned to me and asked me to see that it was done. I was frozen, shocked, and speechless, and did nothing. The woman left and to this day, 40 years later, I regret not having countermanded the leader's request, supported the woman who was asked to leave, and said to both the leader and the group that this was very "ungestalt." It was an expression of contempt in a most obvious and hurtful manner, and I was ashamed to have participated in it.

The concept of empathy, the opposite of contempt in many ways, was not foremost in those early days. Fortunately, empathy has returned to the theory and practice of Gestalt, aided by such work as done by Melnick and Nevis.

The word "contempt" is complex, containing within its meaning many other emotions, e.g., *shame*—"the other should not be doing what she is doing"; *anger*—"the other is doing something against me"; *irritation*—"the other is doing something to make it inconvenient for me"; *snobbery*—"the other is simply not as good as I am." Thus, I found that some of the examples given for the situations suggested in the article evoked—at least in my experience—not so much contempt as irritation or differing degrees of anger. For instance, if a car in front of me is going too slowly, and if this continues for a long distance, I am likely to feel, and have felt, irritation or anger rather than contempt. Disdain is inherent in the meaning of contempt, and it was not present in the situations referred to.

The writers have chosen a complex and complicated subject with implications for many more discussions. There is a vast difference, for example,

between a temporary feeling of irritation or contempt and a practice of it that is embedded in a culture—such as feelings in the USA between blacks and whites, or feelings in Israel between Arabs and Jews. The article mentions only briefly the global dangers engendered by tensions that exist and are expressed in the syndrome of contempt. Indeed, it would take a book to do the topic justice. Examples are numerous and seem to be increasing. In many cases, they have led to violence both within and between countries. A vivid example of intra-culture contempt is the way women in the Congo are treated when freely used as sex objects by men who take no responsibility, either for the consequences of their multiple rapes, or for the children who are born because of their actions. It is hoped that further writings will examine these subjects as well.

Isabel Fredericson, Ph.D.
freddy9282@gmail.com

Commentary II. Contempt

“One finger pointing at you, the rest pointing back”

ROSIE BURROWS, PH.D.

ABSTRACT

As a Gestalt practitioner working in the north of Ireland, a place Melnick and Nevis view as an example of a “breeding ground for contempt” at large system level, I wish to reflect and respond. The combination of historic field conditions of unequal power, structured discrimination, religious fundamentalism, and findings about the role of embodied traumatic experience and memory, have undoubtedly fostered the development of relations based on contempt in the north of Ireland. There are also less known stories to tell of how groups, in spite of institutionalized discrimination, managed to hold solidarity in various ways, with new possibilities continuing to influence the field.

*

Contempt is difficult to extinguish because it is largely an unaware process that is highly projective. . . . A contemptuous attitude is an overdeveloped interest in ourselves, masquerading



Rosie Burrows, Ph.D., is an independent Gestalt practitioner who works with young people, adults, and groups in private practice and in communities that have little access to therapeutic support. Her interest lies in contributing to the transformation of relationships in the north of Ireland.

as an interest (in this case highly negative) in the other. (Melnick & S. Nevis, "Contempt," 2010)

I wish to respond to the article on "Contempt" as I experienced a "gut reaction" to the word, due to the relevance of the issue to me as a Gestalt practitioner living and working in Belfast, in the north of Ireland, a society emerging from long-term political conflict. I appreciated the reference made by the authors to the north, and my response is a "first thoughts reaction-response." This field represents something I both experience and seek to influence (in the sense of an "in and out of the garbage pail 'emergency,'" into the light of day, with increased contact and awareness).

At the time of writing, the daily news was focused on a major financial scandal with Irish banks being bailed out by the Government, to the sum of unimaginable amounts of money, a debt of billions. This is international and local financial dysregulation that smacks of the contempt, recklessness, and greed of a financial and political elite stinging the next generation. I experienced flashes of my own rage—contempt for top bankers and the political elite that enable, collude, and benefit; and I appreciated the authors' frankness with respect to discovering their own contempt and how to handle it.

Melnick and Nevis state that, in the long term, unchecked contempt holds within it the seeds of destruction; they describe "discordant experiences" (e.g., "when individuals fight for who is right, while never learning to live with differences") as showing features of contempt. The north of Ireland is cited as one example of a "perfect breeding ground for contempt."¹

The Belfast phrase "sour bake"—or for more than one non-intimate system "a bunch of sour bakes" (i.e., a sour face, someone who is unhappy, soured by life experiences)—emerged from the field of northern dark humour that helped get us through painful conflicts with a smirk rather than a smile. Relational sour notes versus graceful notes.

I was particularly interested in the descriptions of what can occur when others treat a person or group as an object of contempt in the absence of self and environmental support; this involves first an internal collapse, often with a feeling of humiliation and loss of face; while a second response is to lash back with rage, at the risk of escalating mutual contempt and the dangers associated with that reaction. These sensations and emotions remain in the body, sometimes emerging two decades later, since "trauma is in the body not the event" (Levine, 1997). In the absence of sufficient support, we experience and witness this process as "transgenerational trauma": all of the unspoken non-

¹The British Government and Armed Forces is a primary force in Ireland that historically has represented mainly the aggressor/oppressor as a colonial power, rather than as a neutral or even rescuing force; though historically, Unionists and Loyalists were largely allied with the British, save for a few radical Presbyterians or dissenting radical Protestants.

verbal ways that children learn how to be and to survive (Burrows & Keenan, 2004; Keenan & Burrows, 2009).

Multiple connections and memories sprang directly and indirectly from my ground, often conveying the experience of being “held in contempt,” subtly and not so subtly; for example:

- primary school children being lined up and handed small Union Jack flags to wave at the English Queen, who speed by in an instant in a large black limousine with her arm up in the air, seemingly waving, though it was hard to tell;
- sitting the 11 plus exam, which divided children, aged 11, into a minority of those entitled to a better quality education, and those not entitled since they were not found intelligent enough by definition of the test;
- listening to a haughty Conservative or Unionist politician speaking with a kind of authentically snobbish English accent, or emulating an inauthentic English accent and tone that revealed not only an attitude of contempt but also power relations of blatant inequality;
- the British Army on Belfast streets stopping cars randomly and asking for personal identification—all that could be seen initially at night was the blinding, white light of a megapower torch waving in slow circles, and then gradually beyond that, uniformed soldiers.

These connections are flickering images of a complex, challenging, frightening, sickening, deadly, exciting, and changing environment. Memory exists as pinball machine that speedily pings the silver ball to and fro, as the feelings and sensations I associate with contempt at a personal level in the north of Ireland constellate: fear, shame, exposure, adrenaline fuelled anger-rage, resignation, revulsion, exhaustion, keep going on automatic, power and powerlessness, terror, isolation, tight “trauma” bonding/merging with a group. The sensations of restriction, sighing, numbing, choking/airlessness, shallow breathing, wanting to take flight and/or to fight or freeze. Familiar. “Familiarity breeds contempt”—the close-in confluence of trauma bonding while under threat, the “breeding ground” mentioned by Melnick and Nevis in their article. And the turning away from.

Reflecting upon the act of “turning away” that can be an aspect of relational contempt, I recognize the necessity of this movement in oppressor/oppressed relations and in other mutually oppressive relations at least as a temporary form of regrouping, as a way to stop hostility from becoming more destructive in the absence of support for fuller contact. Since the peace process and signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the north of Ireland has ironically become increasingly segregated, as we choose to live with those we

perceive as “our own”–facing “our own,” then, who I/we actually am/are in a changing environment. The paradoxical theory of change.

Working through the absence of self and environment is a challenging process. This supports me as a practitioner to continue to explore with clients and colleagues what the authors describe as “our common feelings of being ‘less than’ and ‘not good enough’” (i.e., contemptuous/“under dog”); as well as the accompanying needs to feel “better than” (i.e., contemptuous/“top dog”) and to develop support for feeling “good enough.”²

There are many instances of Gestalt practice in Northern Ireland. Examples of Gestalt practice in the north with individuals, groups, and communities who are discriminated against and often “held in contempt,” and who are working to transform oppressive relations include: parents and grandparents who have survived life threatening events³ with their children; young people from the two main political/cultural traditions working in an interface community; a community those members have been displaced through state and sectarian violence; lesbians and bisexual women (Quiery, 2002); parents of children on the Autism Spectrum⁴; and a supervisory group for practitioners (Gaffney, 2009). My own interests lie increasingly with the importance of awareness and skills in working with the physiology of experience as a neglected aspect of personal and interpersonal integration, given the impact of prolonged unresolved trauma (i.e., overwhelming events involving a sense of physical or physiological annihilation and helplessness, which usually include intense feelings of self-contempt and shame).

Melnick and Nevis offer examples of interventions with individuals and with intimate, hierarchical, political, and religious systems. They provide many insights, including those of benefiting from hindsight, of having being “inducted into the system,” and of having “ended up behaving in a righteous and contemptuous manner.” Both their article and the work of Herman (1992) have inspired me in respect of what Gestalt practice offers and of our need to continue supporting ourselves and each other,⁵ while also serving as a warn-

²Supporting integration, especially working with sensation to support bodily and relational integrity, has increasingly been part of my personal and professional practice.

³As this society carries on with the slow transformation of unjust, unequal political and social relations, other forms of social oppression continue to be revealed (e.g., this society has the highest use of prescribed medication for anxiety, depression, stress, and post/complex traumatic stress in Western Europe). Serious health problems and early deaths continue to emerge, particularly among this generation of adults, many of whom are also parents and grandparents. The ways of survival that once served no longer serve, not to mention the lack of adequate state intervention and leadership.

⁴The prevalence of children diagnosed on the “Autism Spectrum” is up 400% in the last decade in Northern Ireland (Burrows, 2010).

⁵In the north of Ireland, the first Gestalt Institute in Belfast is being established. We welcome your interest and any support you might offer to make Gestalt practice more available. The email address of BGI is: gestaltireland@yahoo.com

ing echoed by Herman: "In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness" (p. 9).

By way of conclusion, I offer up the words of the Chorus in Seamus Heaney's (1991) version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, rendered as *The Cure at Troy*:

Human beings suffer,
they torture one another,
they get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
can fully right a wrong
inflicted or endured.

The innocent in gaols
beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:
The utter self-revealing
double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
the outcry and the birth-cry
of new life at its term.

– Seamus Heaney (1991)

Rosie Burrows, Ph.D.
rosieburrows@ntlworld.com

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Commentary III. Contempt

CHANTELLE WYLEY, MIS

The article on “Contempt”—spanning levels of system and offering a social message—is welcome to practitioners who look to this journal and to these writers for conclusions from therapy-rooted practice applicable to work in organisations and wider social systems. Since the mid-1990s Gestalt has supported a group of us involved in socio-economic development, mainly in Africa, with our socio-economic change agenda.¹ As I write, we are working with the Presidency in an African country in government-wide systems and cultural change around performance monitoring and delivery; and with the Secretariat of a regional African community in a leadership development program to give effect to its governance and economic integration strategy. We believe in “mending the world,” one group, one person at a time.² Joseph Melnick and

¹We began our journey with Gestalt by attending the International Organization and Systems Development Program (the first in our group attended Program II, 1995-1996); we have continued with the Cape Cod Training Program and other offerings from the Gestalt International Study Center, the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, and the Organization and Systems Development Center (Cleveland). We work as development (project and program) management facilitators, trainers and consultants in West, East, and Southern Africa, on behalf of donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and in the public sector. Our guiding principle is: “All (development) interventions are interventions in the lives of people. As such we believe they need to be conducted with professionalism, expertise, and sensitivity, and need to leave people with the wherewithal to continue their lives more productively than before” (see www.baobab-ct.org).

²This phrase acknowledges the title of Joseph Melnick and Edwin C. Nevis’s edited volume, *Mending the world: Social healing interventions by Gestalt practitioners worldwide* (2009), to which we have contributed.



Chantelle Wyley, MIS (Masters in Information Services), is based in Cape Town, South Africa. A coach, facilitator, and trainer specialising in development project management training, facilitation training, and leadership development, she uses emotional intelligence techniques and the Gestalt approach to organisation and systems development. She coaches and supports leaders in the South African public and private sector in the technical aspects of project management, leadership, personal development, diversity, and the cultivation of powerful personal presence and resonant relationships.

Sonia M. Nevis's strong message in this article, to manage individually and societally our contempt for denied aspects of self that we deem disgusting and unworthy of respect, is a strong, specific, and well-argued pointer at where and how to focus our work.

The authors' approach echoes another "pointer" we have found useful, taken from the discipline of social neuroscience. Rock (2008) applies recent studies of the brain to workplace behaviour. He draws on the work of Gordon (2000), arguing that human activity is motivated by two primary survival drives: that of minimising threat (hence avoid, flight/fight), and that of maximising reward (approach, connect). Both drives are strong and primitive, and are located in the non-rational area of the brain. My reading of the neuroscience research suggests that this perspective offers a starting point for understanding the strong pull-push, negative attraction (avoid/approach) tension that Melnick and Nevis identify as characterising the contempt experience. These primitive urges activate the limbic and reptilian brains via the amygdala, triggering physical and verbal defence mechanisms or flight (this has also been well understood and applied to workplace behaviour by emotional intelligence researcher Goleman [1998; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002]). In Gestalt terms, this hard-wired mechanism of forming memory/experience-informed fast and fixed figures enables human beings to stay alive by quickly accessing dangers and options in a complex and uncertain ground/environment.

Rock's useful contribution is to identify workplace factors that activate the avoid or the approach response. Interactions which promote status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness (hence his "SCARF" model) evoke the approach/connection response. Actions which diminish status, evoke uncertainty, limit autonomy are unfair and provoke defensive/avoid responses. Melnick and Nevis's identification of status and (negative) hierarchy and "better than" feelings, as being part of the contempt picture, are supported by Rock. In primitive situations, status guarantees survival; modern humans have retained the neural hard wiring that directs us to calibrate status relative to others in almost all social situations (Zink et al., 2008 as cited in Rock, 2008). Being subjected to a real or perceived reduction in status activates the same areas of the brain as physical pain (Eisenberger, 2004 as cited in Rock, 2008). Attaining status (e.g., winning a race against others) activates the primary reward circuitry and increases dopamine levels; hence, the "better than" feeling.

Rock's conclusions explain the lure and triumph present in the "topdog" expression of contempt identified by Melnick and Nevis. Those expressing contempt are feeding their "feel good" circuitry and contributing to their own sense of survival, longevity, and health. It is a primitive urge that oc-

cupies the survival circuitry of the brain, disabling the cognitive functions and increasing the likelihood of generalisation to justify triumphing over others. As Rock explains (drawing on Subramaniam et al., 2008), “the increased overall activation in the brain inhibits people from perceiving the more subtle signals required for solving non-linear problems, involved in the insight or ‘aha!’ experience” (p. 3). This research backs Melnick and Nevis’s point about the “narrow and isolating” nature of contempt.

In addition, because the human brain is more finely attuned to threatening stimuli, it is easier to trigger an avoid/defensive response (closing down our ability to take in new data from the environment) than an approach/connect/engage response (where we are open to new stimuli, can take risks, and can relax and think deeply). And the avoid response creates much more activation in the limbic system of the brain, resulting in a long-lasting, lingering, smouldering effect.

A contempt-laden situation may also involve (perceived or real) uncertainty, diminished autonomy, violation of relatedness/belonging, or unfairness. These are also identified by Rock as triggering the defensive/avoid/fight response and, if present in addition to diminished status, make for a potent mix of emotional memory-fuelled defensiveness and aggression.

With the amygdala attuned to incoming threats, critically engaging with our environments and ourselves, we are usually making contact from a stance of (close to the surface) fear and uncertainty. As Melnick and Nevis state: “Maybe the answer lies in a core aspect of our human experience; our common feelings of being ‘less than’ and ‘not good enough.’” This is another frame for understanding the authors’ identification of projections as determining and fuelling our contempt of others. A need to establish a sense of elevated status relative to others is based on a sense of personal inadequacy/low status to start with, which is difficult to acknowledge without further threatening personal status.

Melnick and Nevis have admirably tackled how to work with contempt, usefully supporting the work of practitioners like myself. Rock gives practical suggestions regarding how to minimise the activation of the avoid/defensive response in the modern workplace. For example, by giving positive and public feedback to employees and reports we activate the reward response and allow the creative areas of the brain to function; furthermore, by emphasising mentoring, coaching, and learning in performance feedback, we activate a reward response related to elevated status based on betterment versus a past self.

Rock advocates using the SCARF model to identify when one’s threat response has been triggered; and thereby to name and reframe the experience, to know why one cannot think clearly, and to start gradually to introduce

more rational, creative and appropriate responses (this echoes Melnick's experience of working with his own response to the man in the airport van).

Clearly, the primitive wiring/contact mechanisms no longer serve us well in a world that demands connection, support, curiosity about diversity; and collaborative, creative thinking around solutions to the world's challenges. We need precisely the trust, openness, and holding ourselves in a place of listening and responding with curiosity and tolerance for difference (maximum input), and of enabling "respectful dialogue," as suggested by Melnick and Nevis.

Their emphasis on the empathy required for this stance is also backed by the research informing the Goleman-Boyatzis-McKee (2002) model of emotionally intelligent leadership.³ The model defines empathy as one of 18 competencies required for leadership, singling it out as one of three foundational competencies (alongside self-awareness and emotional self-control). Empathy is defined as: "sensing others' feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns" (The Hay Group, 2002, p. 11; Teleos Leadership Institute, 2005). The behaviours related to the empathy competency back up Melnick and Nevis's recommendations for avoiding the stuckness of contempt. In ascending order of complexity and difficulty they are:

- 1) Listens attentively;
- 2) Is attentive to people's moods or nonverbal cues;
- 3) Relates well to people of diverse backgrounds;
- 4) Can see things from someone else's perspective.

(The Hay Group, 2002, p. 11)

Melnick's and Nevis's conclusions are based on years of reflective observation of the human condition, in self and others, from an empathetic, supportive stance as Gestalt interveners (therapeutic and organisational). The social neuroscience research, with the new technology of mapping activity in parts of the brain to sets of behaviours and related emotions, supports these Gestalt-based observations and conclusions.

At the time of writing this commentary, public conflict in the South African ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), can helpfully be understood by using the frame of contempt. The ANC is approaching its centenary as a liberation movement in Africa, with a noble and ethical history. Today, after 16 years in power, the current leadership publically heralds and claims this legacy but, in some cases, is active privately in personal, excessive, and sometimes illegal material gain, courtesy of public office. Elements in the ANC

³Annie McKee is a graduate of the Gestalt International Organization and Systems Development Program III.

Youth League are enriching themselves through lucrative government contracts, at the same time that they are adopting a radical agenda of resource and wealth distribution (e.g., nationalisation of mines) for the benefit of “the people.” These elements are crudely accusing party leadership of straying from a redistribution-of-wealth agenda, with contempt written all over their accusations (culminating in a crude criticism of polygamy directed at the President). Senior ANC leaders seemed helpless in the face of this aggression, which violates party norms about respect for elders and loyalty to the party. At the recent ANC general national council in Durban, the senior leadership lashed back, ordering the uncouth youth to behave and advocating new measures around “cadre education” and discipline. These contemptuous exchanges are received by the public as unnerving and anxiety-provoking, and as an opportunity to take sides and express its own contempt for either the youth or the mainstream party. This is a dangerous place for the ANC and the country to find itself. The ANC is a majority party and wields enormous power and control of resources. Consumed with contempt-ridden engagements within its ranks, creative thinking is unavailable for analysing and addressing the country’s challenges. In contemplating this political posturing and power-play through the Melnick and Nevis lens of contempt, I gained insight and understanding. I kept myself from taking sides and heaping derision and *contempt* on the other side, I got curious about what was driving the contemptuous expression, and I am developing ideas on how to influence positively the political players to whom I have access. Thank you.

Chantelle Wyley, MIS
cwyley@baobab-ct.org

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Response

JOSEPH MELNICK, PH.D.
SONIA MARCH NEVIS, PH.D.

As Isabel Fredericson points out in her commentary, our process is to find a topic, many times an everyday emotion, which interests us. We then engage in numerous conversations, often bringing our ideas into workshops and conferences, and if our interest persists, some of these interests eventually turn into papers. Our conversations frequently continue long past the publication of the article, in that our writings are never finished. There are always other voices and other perspectives that help enrich and develop the topic.

This is certainly the case regarding our interest in the concept of contempt. Because we have devoted much of our professional teachings and writings to the study of intimate systems, we ended up emphasizing that level of system more than the internal experiences of individuals. The same is true with respect to our cursory focus on the global level. In hindsight, too, we might have paid more attention to our own Gestalt origins, to how clients and participants were treated historically by Gestalt practitioners. Not surprisingly, our three commentators, Isabel Fredericson, Rosie Burrows, and Chantelle Wyley, have helped not only to fill in these gaps but also to extend the conversation. For this we thank them.

As Fredericson points out, contempt was not part of the original Gestalt vocabulary, though it was frequently embedded in the work of many teachers and trainers. She describes a personal incident when an invited leader humiliated a group member. She reports remembering that incident many years later. Many of us can still recite those "rules" of Gestalt: turn questions into statements; do not use qualifiers (i.e., do not say "I *really* love you"; say instead, "I love you"). Clients were often told what they were doing wrong, routinely corrected, and told what to say and how to say it.

Much attention was also paid to emotions. It was thought that every emotion—no matter what emotion (and certainly aggression)—should be expanded

and expressed fully. Although many experienced a freedom from retroflected and repressed feelings, others felt shamed and humiliated. Of equal importance, the impact of our words and actions directed at others were not a part of our early Gestalt principles.

Fredericson believes that she differs with us on the point of our commonplace examples, such as being behind someone driving a car too slowly. She describes how, when she is in that situation, she is likely to feel irritation or anger rather than contempt. She rightly adds that she would not feel disdain—a necessary emotion in order for contempt to exist. We agree with her. We did not mean to imply that those commonplace situations would or should produce contempt. Ideally, they would generate low-level negative emotions that we could turn away from. What interests us is that they sometimes result in responses that seem much larger and more negative than what we would have expected. Our article attempts to understand what is going on when overly large negative reactions occur.

Fredericson ends her commentary by mentioning the global dangers engendered by cycles of contempt, rightly pointing out that they are only briefly referred to in our article. We certainly agree with her. This lack of attention to both the global and the individual is also addressed by Rosie Burrows, who has spent much of her professional and personal life dealing with the after-effects of the conflict in Belfast, in the north of Ireland. One simply has to look at the murals that dominate the city, which describe horrible acts on all sides, to understand that though physical violence has mostly been quelled, a contemptuous climate still exists on a large scale.

An expert on stress, Burrows reminds us that the experience of ongoing contempt has great negative and physiological consequences, just as in all prolonged, unresolved trauma. She points out how long cycles of contempt not only result in horrible actions but also find an uneasy home as embodied traumatic experiences passed on generation after generation, in what she calls “transgenerational contempt.” Burrows cites Levine (1997) to underscore that trauma is found in the body, not the event. She lists some of the consequences of ongoing contempt as: “fear, shame, exposure, adrenaline fueled anger-rage, resignation, revulsion, exhaustion, keep going on automatic, power and powerlessness, terror, isolation.”

Burrows also discusses tight “trauma bonding” that involves a powerful merging with the group. It is this “confluence of traumatic bonding” that creates the breeding ground, and often the energy, for greater isolation and more narrow, negative projections of the other, which are highly resistant to change (Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2010). This is certainly the case in the north of Ireland. Sadly, Burrows reports that since the signing of the peace agreements, the north of Ireland has grown increasingly segre-

gated. So, rather than becoming interested in differences, the two sides have turned increasingly less interactive and their positions more intractable.

Our last commentator, Chantelle Wyley, also discusses the physical outcomes of prolonged cycles of contempt. Focusing on the developing field of social neuroscience, she describes a way of looking at the “negative attraction” inherent in a contemptuous experience. When we are faced with situations that have the potential to diminish our sense of status, contempt is evoked as a defensive/avoidant response. Similarly, in primitive situations, anything that brings about a rise to a higher status results in “better than” feelings and supports survival. Unfortunately, our inborn wiring mechanisms no longer serve us well. The dilemma is how to alter our primitive physiological reactivity.

Wyley ends her commentary by describing the public conflict within the South African ruling party, the African National Congress. This is the party of Nelson Mandela that has been in power for 16 years and has embraced the philosophy of reconciliation to help people move through experiences of long-term contempt and oppression. This conflict particularly saddens us, since we both taught there and were impressed by what we perceived as successful reconciliation.

To free us from this ancient and primitive syndrome—or at least to lessen its hold on us—we not only have to become more aware of its triggers, but we also have to train ourselves and others to counter them. As Wyley writes, we need to teach people to listen actively, to become more attentive to others’ moods and nonverbal cues, and to relate better to people of diverse backgrounds. And, most importantly, we must teach people the skills of empathy, so that they can see things from others’ perspectives.

Joseph Melnick, Ph.D.
josephmelnick@gmail.com

Sonia March Nevis, Ph.D.
smnevis70@gmail.com

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