

Welcome to *Gestalt Review* An Editorial

JOSEPH MELNICK, Ph.D.

WELCOME TO THE FIRST ISSUE OF *GESTALT REVIEW*. IN 1947, FRITZ Perls published *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*,¹ the book that set forth the themes and principles of the Gestalt approach. For some of us, it is hard to believe that Gestalt therapy is 50 years old. Although it has reached "middle age," it is, more than ever, a groundbreaking contemporary psychotherapy and theory of change. We are brimming with newness and excitement.

I know that this comes as no surprise to Gestalt practitioners, and I hope that *Gestalt Review* will continue to stimulate your thinking, challenge your beliefs, and contribute to the ongoing development of your practice. However, it is not to you that I wish to speak in this editorial. Rather, I wish to address my thoughts mainly to those who are either unfamiliar with Gestalt therapy or to those who became familiar with it as a popular (and possibly outdated?) psychotherapy of the 1960s.

To readers new to the Gestalt approach and involved with such contextual paradigms as social constructivism (Gergen, 1994), narrative psychotherapy (White, 1991), collaborative language systems (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988), and intersubjective approaches (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992), I believe that you will find Gestalt therapy compatible with your theoretical constructs. Gestalt therapy shares with these perspectives the notion that experience is contextual and relative, as well as time- and culture-bound. To those of you who view yourselves as more systemic or holographic, we share a belief that in each of us there is a developing self. This self, when supported properly, reaches higher and higher levels of organization (Wilbur, 1996). And to those of you who are more behavioral in method, I believe that our Gestalt approach can be seen as an elegant form of phenomenological behaviorism (Kepner and Brien, 1970).

Dr. Melnick has been practicing, teaching, and writing about Gestalt therapy for over 20 years. He is the editor of *Gestalt Review*.

¹It was originally published in 1942 in South Africa but received little attention.

Gestalt Therapy: Its Historical Evolution

Just as schools of therapy share similarities, each is also unique. The historical facts regarding the birth of the Gestalt approach are clear. It was developed in the 1940s and 1950s primarily by four individuals: Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, Paul Goodman, and Isadore From. These professionals in the fields of psychiatry, psychology, literature, and philosophy brought to the creation of Gestalt therapy their passionate interest in social criticism, dance, gender dynamics, theater, and Eastern thought and practice. They added the teachings from Gestalt perceptual psychology, social psychology, existentialism, and sociology.

Each of these individuals made their unique mark on the development of this new therapy. Paul Goodman, along with other social critics of his day, focused on the interrelationship between the social environment and psychotherapy (Stoehr, 1977). Laura Perls and Isadore From, Gestalt therapy's primary teachers, emphasized environmental support and the cognitive aspects of psychotherapy. Among the many contributions of Fritz Perls was his focus on awareness and the creative use of experiment. In his recollections of Perls that appear in this issue, Beisser remarks that "He simply seemed interested in the obvious."

From Gestalt psychology came: an emphasis on perception, sensation, and pattern making; a focus on the here and now; and above all, a belief that therapist and patient impose order on random experience (see Hall and Lindzey, 1970). The basis for Gestalt therapy's approach to personality, which sees the individual as part of a dynamic field, is found in the social psychology of Kurt Lewin (1951). Its phenomenological and ideological roots draw from the work of Edmund Husserl (1931), Otto Rank (1958), and Martin Buber (1958).

Gestalt therapy reached a high degree of popularity in the 1960s when Western society was going through a profound change, quickly moving from a repressive to an expressive society. Its popularity was fueled by a generation of young adults who were in full rebellion against their parents' values. Their beliefs were idealistic in form, endorsing creative expression, freedom, inner exploration, and psychotherapy as a fundamental vehicle for growth and change. During this era, the popularized form of Gestalt therapy embraced these concepts—at least as demonstrated by its techniques. Unfortunately, it is often easy to confuse method with theory and, in fact, the version that became widely known during this period represented only limited aspects of the rich and complex theory. As a result, to many, Gestalt therapy and Fritz Perls became forever associated with confrontational, charismatic therapists who utilized a powerful array of techniques to heighten affect (Melnick, Nevis, and Melnick, 1994).

To understand the Gestalt approach as it is practiced in the 1990s, knowledge of its origins, its influential figures, and its theoretical constructs are essential, but not quite enough. For complete understanding of its uniqueness, one must also know how it evolved and how the here and now of experience impacted its development as a therapeutic modality. In so doing, one must especially consider the Gestalt philosophy and traditions regarding teaching and training.

Gestalt therapy was founded and continues to have its primary base in training institutes. As of 1993 there were more than 80 institutes in the United States alone (Friedman, 1993). With the increased popularity of the Gestalt approach worldwide, I estimate the number of institutes at more than 120.

Gestalt therapy also followed an apprenticeship model of learning, grounded in the uniqueness of the individual moment and the power of the living conversation. Knowledge traditionally has been transmitted via experience and dialogue, not through research and writing. Even *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951), often referred to as the "bible" of our approach, is largely interactive. Indeed, experiments designed to help the reader experience increased awareness comprise a full two-thirds of the work.

This disinterest in the written word, when combined with a world view in basic opposition to objectivist cause-effect paradigms, resulted in an avoidance of traditional research, causing Gestalt therapy to have little impact in universities. As a result, one has become a Gestalt therapist not by studying and conducting research at a university, but through apprenticeship at an institute, that is, by observing and by doing. Consequently, while psychotherapy was enjoying more cultural acceptance and as universities were becoming more and more the preferred environment for training therapists and change agents, the influence of Gestalt therapy was in a state of decline throughout the mid-1980s (at least in the United States).

This is all changing, as contemporary Gestalt therapists are increasingly embracing the written word. For example, prior to 1985, fewer than 50 books devoted exclusively to Gestalt therapy had been published in English. Since then more than 35 books have been written. Furthermore, Gestalt theoreticians are producing an ever-increasing number of dissertations and theses. For example, Woldt (1996, personal communication) training of qualitative researchers (see DROWL, THIS ISSUE).

This recent increase in writing is reflected not only in the production of research and books, but also in the recent creation of a number of new journals. Prior to 1985, the only Gestalt periodical of note was *The Gestalt Journal*. However, with the addition of *Gestalt Review*, there are now nine Gestalt journals worldwide.

In fact, with approximately 40 percent of the Gestalt institutes located outside the United States, and three-quarters of the journals published abroad, one can easily say that we are truly a worldwide community. In this spirit *Gestalt Review* is committed not only to publishing original articles in English, but also to translating and publishing the work of non-English-speaking authors as well.²

The increase in Gestalt institutes around the world, combined with our contemporary commitment to writing and research, certainly reflect our vibrancy and liveliness. As Gestalt therapists we are no longer isolated from each other or from other therapeutic schools and approaches. A number of newly created associations of Gestalt therapists, such as the European Association for Gestalt Therapy, German Association of Gestalt Therapists, and the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt therapy (AAGT), are flourishing. The AAGT recently had its first international conference in New Orleans and will be convening in San Francisco in April 1997.

Underlying Assumptions and Organizing Principles

Within the context of this historical review, I would like to devote the remainder of this editorial to what I believe to be our underlying assumptions and organizing principles. These are the threads that connect all who practice the Gestalt approach and which you, the reader, will find in various degrees throughout the articles that appear in *Gestalt Review*. In a recent paper, Resnick (1995) listed three key philosophical premises of the Gestalt approach: field theory, phenomenology, and dialogue. To these I would like to add the concept of figure/ground, resistances as creative adjustment, and the innovative use of experiment.

Field Theory

Field theory originally derived from the work of Kurt Lewin (1951) and is our primary way of looking at the world. According to Lewin, everything is dependent upon the environmental context. We are all part of and

²The first of these will be Bertram Muller's "The Total Therapeutic Context—The Craft of Gestalt Therapy: Theory and Practice," originally published in *Gestalttherapie* (1989). It will appear in our second issue.

related to everything else, that is, to the field. All parts or subsets of the field (e.g., person, meaning, desire, sickness, etc.) interconnect with, overlap, and influence one another. The consequence is that we are constantly creating our reality, which, at its core, is dependent on context. At the same time, however, no individual's experiential field is the same as another's.

The impact of this perspective on how we view the world is worth noting. As psychotherapists and agents of change, we look at how the system, be it individual, couple, family, or culture, organizes itself. We learn to examine phenomena both broadly and narrowly—without judgment and, to the extent possible, without prejudice. Our lens can shift from the precise notation of the flicker of an eyelid, to a sweeping social and even global perspective. (Parlett, in this issue, demonstrates the usefulness of a broad Gestalt lens grounded in field theory.)

Phenomenology

Gestalt therapy follows from the work of Husserl (1931) and emphasizes that you can only know that which you experience. Phenomenology deals with awareness and focuses on how people organize meaning and bring forth intention from the background of their lives. It dictates a focus on the uniqueness of each individual and considers all experience as legitimate phenomena.

However, as Resnick (1995) points out, phenomenology not only includes a set of assumptions, but also implies a method. This method involves a way of being with another in which we bracket off our biases and assumptions as much as possible, adopting a posture of choiceful transparency. Because the therapy situation is always co-created, we eschew explanation and interpretation and depend instead on observing and describing the phenomena of the self, the other(s), and the interpersonal dynamics that occur.

Dialogue

The development of Gestalt therapy was heavily influenced by the work of Otto Rank (1958), particularly his focus on the interaction between therapist and patient, and by the dialogical approach of Buber (1958). It demands a willingness of two or more individuals to be open in a broad and deep way to the other's experience. Or to paraphrase Resnick (1995), it is the open engagement of two phenomenologies. Within the therapeutic context one must, as a therapist, appropriately self-disclose in order to engage the patient in a real and authentic way and to create a shared language of meaning. Our goal is to allow the patient to grow via access to the interpersonal transaction.

While the dialogic approach involves a commitment to creating authenticity, the degree to which we self-disclose and engage the patient is limited in part by ethical issues and structured by the therapeutic context. The therapist, while significantly involved in the interaction of the moment, must be careful simultaneously not to violate patient boundaries, cause harm, or work his or her own issues (see Clarkson, this issue).

Figure/Ground

The Gestalt approach has been heavily influenced by the Gestalt psychology of perception (e.g., Kohler, 1947) from which it borrowed the important concept of figure/ground. Although the Gestalt psychologists talked of figure and ground in relation to perceptual phenomena, Gestalt therapists have applied it more broadly. They see it as relevant to all functions of the individual, of intimate systems such as couples and families, and of larger systems such as organizations and cultures.

Basically, as we experience the environment, a primary form, or "figure," stands out and is organized against its background, or "ground." The ground in contrast to the figure is unbounded and formless (Polster and Polster, 1973). It includes past experience, physiology, beliefs, constructs, culture, and so on, with its main function being to provide context.

As a figure emerges from the ground, it draws attention for a varied, but always finite, length of time. Eventually, when it no longer holds the focus (because of some form of completion or perhaps competition from another figure), it recedes back into the ground where it is, one hopes, reintegrated in such a way as to make new meaning. Gestalt therapists have spent much time articulating this process of figure formation and destruction (Perls et al., 1951). (A version of this process, the cycle of experience, is utilized by Matzko to describe the process of addiction in this issue.) Dysfunction, according to Gestalt theory, involves a chronic interruption or blockage in the natural flow of figure/ground formation.

Resistances as Creative Adjustment

In Gestalt therapy every symptom or defense is viewed as an attempt to solve a problem through creative adjustment. However, when these adjustments, originally spontaneous, fitting, and developmentally correct, become acontextual and chronic, the figure/ground process becomes distorted. These response patterns (known as resistances) include projection, retroflexion, introjection, confluence, and egotism.³

³Other resistances, such as deflection, desensitization, and profection, have been suggested. There has been controversy, however, as to whether they meet the criteria originally spelled out in Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951).

Unlike some other approaches, Gestalt therapy does not seek to remove or interpret them but instead seeks to bring them into awareness, with the goal of supporting new organization and self-regulation by the individual. More recently, some Gestalt therapists have preferred to use the phrase "contact styles," which subsumes the old label of resistance and stresses instead the individual's patterns of contacting the self, the other, or the environment (Wheeler, 1991).

The Gestalt Experiment

As originally developed, Gestalt therapy characterized psychotherapy as a form of experiment or "safe emergency" in which the individual could attempt to reorganize experience. Such experimentation contains elements of excitement, discovery, and emergency and allows the individual to integrate action into the decision-making process (Polster and Polster, 1973). Gestalt experiments are always co-creations in which the therapist helps to articulate goals and actively participates in the new organization. Compared to most other approaches, we are more transparent, disclosing, and involved. Much conceptual energy has been spent by Gestalt therapists in describing and categorizing different forms of experiment (see Melnick, 1980 and Polster and Polster, 1973), as well as in articulating the artistic process necessary for their creation and utilization (Zinker, 1977).

Gestalt therapy originally gained popularity through the utilization of its experimental techniques, often in a stereotyped and disrespectful manner. This is unfortunate, for it is our ability to ground experiment in our theory and to tie therapeutic action to ongoing assessment that is one of the hallmarks of the Gestalt approach and, I believe, sets us apart from all other theories of change.

Summary

It has been a difficult and challenging task to try to convey the breadth and scope of Gestalt therapy in a brief editorial. The theoretical influences discussed above could easily have been expanded to include humanism and psychoanalysis, just as the organizing principles could have included the concepts of contact, boundaries, and the self. I am confident, however, that these and many other Gestalt constructs will be illuminated in the articles of this first edition and in the editions to come.

Through *Gestalt Review* we hope to highlight both our uniqueness and our commonalities with other theories. Our goal is to present our approach and to engage in dialogue practitioners of all helping professions. I hope you will join us in this stimulating and mutually enriching conversation.

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17 South Street
Portland, ME 04101