

Introduction

By Joseph Melnick

Since the beginnings of the Gestalt approach, most practitioners have had an interest in social issues and social change, even though most have lived their professional lives focused on psychotherapy or, more recently, on coaching or organizational consulting. This fact was brought home to me while attending an AAGT (Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy) conference right after the New York Twin Tower bombings of September 11, 2001. While at a business meeting, we found ourselves discussing our sense of hopelessness and despair. I asked the thirty therapists in the room if any of them were involved in social change initiatives. Everyone raised their hand. We went around the room briefly describing our projects. The mood lifted, as our sense of community was reaffirmed.

In hindsight, what we did seems obvious. Whether we use language like “supporting an emerging figure,” “creating common ground,” or “connecting before acting,” the group was creating itself in relation to its field. A similar experience happened to the editors of this book. I will talk more about this later, because this process of *transformational creation* is fundamental to the Gestalt approach.¹ But before introducing this book, I would like to talk first about the beginnings of the Gestalt method and its founders, and then about social change, describing the skills and abilities needed to become a Gestalt social change agent.

The Founders

All movements, whether political, religious, corporate or cultural, inspire a series of stories regarding the founders, their contributions, and their relationships. (Cf., Jesus, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Bin Laden, Hitler, Freud and Steve Jobs, for example) These stories, once established, become an essential rallying cry for supporters. These *founders' myths* are often challenged and debated by later followers. This myth creation has also been true for the Gestalt approach. For example, stories abound debating how much Laura Perls contributed to *Ego Hunger and Aggression* (1947). Was *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951) largely the work of Fritz Perls or Paul Goodman,

1 Transformational change involves moving beyond the givens in order to create something new – a whole that is more and different than simply the sum of its parts.

or a combination (cf., Latner, 2012; Goodman, S.E., In Press). What we do know is that the Gestalt approach would not have been created without all three, nor advanced without the numerous contributions of others.²

Everyone familiar with their lives would agree that all three had experienced oppression, whether for being Jewish in Hitler's Germany, bi-sexual and anti-war during the US Vietnam era, or champions of a psychotherapy theory that challenged the Freudian status quo. Goodman and Fritz and Laura Perls did not have to read about oppression in a book. It was embedded in their very existence; in their hearts and souls. Rather than collapse or become invisible, as the oppressed often do, they did the opposite, continuously fighting back. And when the Gestalt approach finally achieved popular acclaim in the 1960's and '70's, they remained true to their values.

For example, Fritz Perls spent his life fighting for authenticity in relationships and being constantly suspicious of the political. He played a major role in creating the communal atmosphere at Esalen Institute in California, and later set up a commune in Canada, partly in response to Nixon's authoritarianism.

Laura Perls viewed Gestalt therapy as "... an anarchistic process in the sense that it doesn't conform to pre-set rules and regulations. It doesn't try to adjust people into a certain system, but rather to adjust them to their own creative potential" (Perls, L., 1992, p.16).

She believed that the repression of individual aggression usually brings about an increase in societal aggression. Furthermore, when individual aggressive capacities are restrained or not developed, then "...the community has developed its means of aggression into absolutely terrifying extremes" (Perls, L. 1992, p.41).³

And of course Paul Goodman, to whom this book is dedicated, believed deeply that psychotherapy was not just for nurturing individual awareness, but essential to creating a better society.⁴ In their discussions of Goodman

2 In addition to the three acknowledged founders, there were others who played a role in the development of the Gestalt approach, not just as a psychotherapy, but as a theory of social change. Please see Melnick and Nevis, 2012, p. 19 – 22 for a description of some of these individuals.

3 Philip Lichtenberg has written eloquently in a series of articles and books of the importance of what he terms "inclusive aggression" in community building. Most recently he has produced a DVD and paper that describe his theoretical views on this subject (Lichtenberg, 2012, 2013).

4 In addition to this volume, there are at least four recent books, (Aylward, 201;

in this volume, Bongers (2014) and Schulthess (2014) note Goodman's anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian values. He believed that it is not acceptable for one person to make the rules and that aggression begets aggression. He was against punishment, but also understood that, for many, rehabilitation would not work. Instead he believed that habitual criminals, while being treated humanely, should be isolated from mainstream society, so that they could no longer cause harm. He cared deeply about awareness, choosing to say the things that people thought but couldn't or wouldn't say. He gave permission to people to be who they were – not just through his writings, but through his example. He never hid anything and had little social restraint – living on the edge, emotionally, sexually, and intellectually.⁵

What Happened?

The question as to why Goodman and social change became less important to Gestaltists is an interesting one. Perhaps it was Fritz's PTSD from his war experience which resulted in his moving away from large social conflict instead of towards it. Consequently Perls, as the titular head of the Gestalt movement focused on individual psychotherapy and inspired others to do the same.⁶

Or it may have been that Gestalt therapy's popularity lead to its followers becoming part of the psychotherapy mainstream. Rather than living at the borders of society like the founders, many of us became insiders. Maybe it was simply that Goodman moved out of Gestalt circles, thus depriving practitioners of their inspirational social change leader.

On the other hand, maybe there is something about the training and character of the early Gestaltists who were primarily psychotherapists that did not draw them to social change initiatives as a profession. Is there something about being a therapist that pushes one to play on a smaller stage?⁷ Maybe social change agents need a perspective and a set of skills that expand those of a

Lukensmeyer, 2013; Melnick and Nevis, 2012; Schulthess and Anger, 2009) and two recent conferences (cf. Schulthess and Anger, 2009) that focus on a Gestalt approach to social change. Three of the four cited books acknowledge the importance of Goodman. Two are dedicated to him and one other is primarily a biography.

5 Personal communication, Sonia Nevis, 2014.

6 As a young trainee, I remember Isadore From, an influential colleague of Fritz and Laura Perls, railing against the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland's decision to begin training in couple's therapy. He said, "Do what you want, but don't call it Gestalt therapy" (Melnick, J.; personal communication).

7 In *Mending the World* (Melnick and Nevis, 2012), we point out that the majority of the contributors were not psychotherapists.

traditional Gestalt therapist. I will discuss these skills below. Whatever the reasons for the decline, both Goodman and social change have reemerged in importance to Gestalt practitioners.

Why Now?

The Gestalt approach has shifted more and more to working beyond the individual. Once we began focusing on intimate systems (i.e., couples and families), issues of culture, politics, hierarchy, power, and abuse become more relevant (Melnick and Nevis, 1994.) As Gestaltists began working more with organizations and teams, issues of work, in group/out group dynamics, oppression, coercion, and repression also began to emerge. And as the basic training of Gestalt practitioners began to address group process, practitioners were ready and willing to tackle social change issues.

Social Change

Social change practitioners support people to deal effectively with the major dilemmas facing the world. This involves helping people learn how to manage difference and influence the environment for social wellbeing.

The challenge to the intervener gets intensified by the power relationships among people. Long standing intergroup differences produce highly embedded projections by one group about the other. Underlying this dilemma are two competing needs – one for more interdependence and interconnectedness, and the other for increasing autonomy and independence.

If conceptualizing the problem is difficult, intervening to create social change is even more so. Most of the traditional approaches work primarily with individuals, usually leaders, using such techniques as shuttle diplomacy. We have named these negotiation or contractual approaches, which are primarily intellectual in nature, *strategic* (Melnick and Nevis, 2012).

As Gestaltists, we believe that a problem cries out for better dialogue and more tolerance for diversity, for confronting power differentials and for improving connectedness and mutual understanding. This is an awareness/relational model – emphasizing the broadening and deepening of awareness of self and others. The strategic and the awareness/relational approaches are often both necessary (Melnick and Backman, 2000; Nevis, Backman and Nevis, 2003).

Social Change Skills

A Gestalt social change agent must possess an array of social change skills that go beyond those of most psychotherapists, coaches and consultants. Throughout this volume, the authors describe and demonstrate them. Gestalt change agents must be able to:

- *Create Shared Awareness:* A Gestalt social change agent's first goal is to create a sufficient amount of shared awareness that there is a problem and how the problem manifests itself. Often creating this shared awareness requires years; sometimes even generations.
- *Create Shared Energy:* Change agents must know how to create shared energy. In any interest group there will be different opinions and different thoughts, not to mention different levels of concern. This is difficult to work with because often the multiple stake holders represent different cultures. And often part of the dispute may be about different rules of engagement that help define culture.
- *Believe that All Parties Are Doing the Best They Can:* There are no good guys or bad guys, bystanders, or non - players. We are all part of the problem and, hopefully, of the solution.
- *Intervene and Create Meaningful Dialogue at All Levels of System:* This includes being able to intercede at the individual, dyadic, group and community level. Creating effective dialogue among all the stakeholders is primary; dialogue that is supportive, authentic, and congruent.
- *Have a Powerful Presence:* The intervener must have a presence that others will notice, trust, be interested in and listen to. The first issue that an intervener has to address is "Why should you listen to me?" The change agent must be seen as someone who is equally interested in all the parties involved and who has something unique to add to the situation.
- *Manage Political Power:* This is one of the most important skills; for all global problems – no matter what their content – have, at their core, difficulties in power relationships among religious, political, and socio - economic groups.
- *Appreciate the Complexity of Sub-Groups:* These factions often see a commonly acceptable position as diminishing their power or violating the agenda of their followers. This demands being able to work with deeply embedded multi-general conflicts that contribute significantly to many of the current struggles. In fact, they can be so powerful and entrenched that friends for generations can get turned into instant enemies by suddenly ignited religious or cultural passion.
- *Live Out Their Values:* Above all, Gestaltists must be committed to living out their values and be willing to stand for integrity, commitment, and authenticity, while having the ability to stay curious about and respectful towards all stakeholders.

yes we care!

The three editors of this volume have all been involved in the field of social change for many years. The book grew out of a conference dedicated to raising awareness “... about our social, political and cultural environments in which we live today and their impact on our wellbeing and faith” (Klaren, Levi, and Vidakovic, 2013, p.9). Most of the contributors to this volume had been invited as presenters to the conference. The original edition (Klaren, et. al., 2013) contained transcribed lectures from the conference supplemented by lectures from other relevant conferences including three from outside the field of Gestalt.⁸ The chapters focused on a range of important subjects such as psychotherapy, psychopathology, psychotherapy training, education, and coping with war – including trans-generational trauma. This book also includes chapters in which a primary organizer and two participants present their reflections on the conference, and a chapter in which EAGT’s support of a human rights organization is described. This second addition also contains three additional articles as well as this introduction.

The conference that generated this book didn’t go as planned because differences and conflicts quickly began to emerge. A number of students from a local Institute were required to attend. The students were perceived by some as being unhappy to be there and their large numbers doubled the number of participants, significantly impacting the culture. There were differences between expert therapists and those in training; Italians and the rest of Europe; organizers and those being organized; and voluntary and forced participants. Some were concerned that they were not being consulted, nor given enough time to process the workshops and connect with other participants, while others objected to sitting in rows as opposed to a circle. Still others complained that they were being talked down to by presenters and that there was a lack of a coffee lounge within the hotel, forcing them to have to go out to restaurants, thus interrupting the continuity of the conference.

The organizers responded by creating increased opportunities for dialogue. They welcomed in the outliers and built community. Differences were aired; the “out groups” felt genuinely heard. The result was a conference in which hierarchy was diminished and which became improvisational, edgy, and interesting (Gecele, 2014; Pogacnik, 2014; van Duijnhoven, 2014).

8 They were from the fields of anthropology, sociology and philosophy. In all three chapters, the word Gestalt appears only once.

The response of the conference organizers to the participants' concerns captures the essence of the Gestalt approach. Rather than adhering to their original design, the organizers listened to the voices of the participants and responded in an inclusive and authentic way. They and the participants transformed the original conference into a co-created one. Goodman would have been proud.

This responsive, improvisational approach is also reflected in the current book. Rather than consisting of a tightly organized whole, it is instead more like a buffet – a series of papers by individuals from a variety of backgrounds who prepare and serve up their own unique dishes, some within the traditional Gestalt field, some not.

I appreciate that the editors did not insist that the writers follow a strict writing structure. As a result, each chapter has its own unique style. Some describe completed projects, while others work in progress. Some are personal; others more theoretical. Some of the voices are didactic, like lectures, while some are more informal and collaborative, like good conversations among friends. Each voice is distinctive and authentic, yet all are connected via their passion and adherence to Gestalt values and beliefs.

I guarantee that you will be drawn to these writings. Some will challenge or confront you, while others might interest, touch or provoke you. But you will be engaged. You will be stimulated. Have some fun. Learn about what attracts you or provokes you in the articles. Allow this book to transform you!

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