

## Managing Differences: A Gestalt Approach to Dealing with Conflict<sup>1</sup>

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It seems obvious that our world is in the middle of an epidemic of discord. Equally alarming is that this discord seems to be increasing wherever we look—whether at countries, cultures, religions, races, political affiliations, or social classes. I see it first hand in my office every day in my work with couples. Their relating often follows a predictable pattern. More often than not they ask few questions and, when they do ask, they do not wait for answers. The word “we” is barely spoken, while “you” is repeated constantly. They barely seeming to hear each other, much less respond in an open and non-attacking way. There is much curiosity and connection, but of a negative kind. The interest is focused and strategic; the connection is stagnant and repetitive. The result is much pain and suffering.

Before continuing, I want to be clear that I am not talking about the type of disagreements that are an essential part of relating: the ones that occur every day and result in relatively quick resolution. Nor am I talking about the creative conflicts that Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) discuss: the ones that lead to growth and learning. I am talking about the recursive disputes that Miller (1996) sees in couples, that we all witness and are part of, not only within ourselves and with our intimate others, but across all levels of system.

As Gestalt practitioners, we have a lot to say about conceptualizing, intervening, and resolving conflicts across a wide array of situations.<sup>2</sup>

In this introduction to the subject of conflict, I will first describe some relevant Gestalt concepts, and then briefly list some skills that Gestalt practitioners can use in working with those in conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article were originally presented as a keynote address at the Third National Gestalt Conference in Arhus, Denmark (March, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Gestalt theorists have addressed the issue of conflict since our beginnings. It is discussed in nearly every publication starting with *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* (F. Perls, 1947). Examples of relevant articles that have appeared in *Gestalt Review* include “Conflict, Emotions and Appreciation of Differences” by Judith Brown (2004), “Reactivity-An Integral Gestalt Approach in Fights and Strife and a More Peaceful World” by Reinhardt Fuhr & Martina Gremmler-Fuhr (2003), and Hank Karp and Danilo Sinias’s “Generational Conflict: A New Paradigm for Teams of the 21st Century” (2001).

## Gestalt Concepts

### *Appreciation of differences*

The Gestalt approach is based on a positive interest in differences. Not only do we accept that in any situation there will be differences in attitude and perspective, but we *value* those differences. This perspective may seem simple, but it is revolutionary. *We do not shy away from differences, nor see them as problematic.* Instead, we are attracted to and move towards them. In fact, we look with suspicion at attempts to homogenize and create sameness (confluence), believing instead that growth and development occur at the boundary of the other.

### *Aggression*

Aggression is also necessary for development to occur. To grow, we cannot just meet the world in a passive way. We must reach out assertively and engage our environment. We must “chew each other” and “chew over” our experiences (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951). Spagnuolo Lobb (in this issue) describes the importance of chewing—more specifically, dental aggression in Gestalt theory.

### *Projection*

Projection is noticing something out there that is also inside us. It is an essential part of our humanness, necessary for empathy and for relational connection. As Lichtenberg (in this issue) points out, there is some truth in every projection or the mechanism would not work. However, projecting without awareness results in the attribution of the source of the projection to the outside world.

### *Polarities*

Everything can be conceptualized on a scale of more or less. Gestalt theory views polarities as the forming of two ends of a continuum, with the middle underdeveloped and underrepresented. If we are aware not just of the extremes, but also of the relationship that exists between them, we can develop the flexibility to move between the two poles. However when the poles are experienced as disconnected opposites or as either/or, it is easy to forget that both sides are valid and that there is a relational connection. In conflict there is little movement. Thus the middle does not get developed, resulting in responses that seldom change. (See Evans in this issue.)

### *I/Thou Attitude*

Meaning arises through the meeting of others. As a result, life is always a co-creation. If this basic fact of mutual dependency is not acknowledged and embraced, then the relational aspect of living is minimized, and the potential for connection and resolution of difference is hampered.

When there is ongoing conflict, most if not all these processes do exist—except that they are present in a distorted or diminished form, with some of the positive qualities missing. For example, there is aggression, but without thorough chewing. There is a high degree of projection, but without awareness and empathy. There are polarities,

but without the awareness of a relational connection. There are aspects of an I/Thou attitude, but it is minimal and replaced, instead, by an emphasis on I/It.

### What is Conflict?

Simply stated, conflict is “two different world views; *i.e.*, perceptions of reality, occupying the same place at the same time” (E. Nevis, personal communication). Its hallmark is a narrow and caricatured awareness of the other. This diminished awareness is present not just in terms of actions, but in the actual construction of the experience (Lichtenberg, in this issue). Most ongoing conflicts, no matter what their origins or unique characteristics, have a number of things in common.

- There is a focus on the “I” and the “you” and a minimization of the “we.”
- There is rampant projection, primarily in the form of blaming of the other.
- There is a lack of acknowledged interest or positive curiosity about the other.
- There is a redundancy to the interactions.
- Speed and mobilization are privileged at the expense of slowness and integration.
- Energy is focused on “putting out,” not “taking in.”
- There is a lack of a sense of humor.
- There is a polarization into winning and losing.
- There is a high degree of mutual dependence which is minimized.
- There is an overreactivity of all parties (Fuhr & Gremmler-Fuhr, 2003)
- There is *mutual contempt*—more about this later.

The results, of course, are powerful and profound. Ongoing conflict destabilizes each party’s experience of both self and the other resulting in a lack of safety and trust: “I do not know who I am in relation to you and to us.” Furthermore, as the conflict continues, both parties become more vulnerable and self-absorbed. A vicious cycle of attack and counterattack becomes patterned, and a recursive cycle ensues.

Conflicts takes place at all levels of system. They can occur intrapsychically (the classic Top Dog/Underdog dilemma that is known to most Gestalt practitioners), and between two individuals; for example, between a couple or two peers at work. They can also occur between sub-systems; that is, between liberal and conservative wings of a religious organization, at a system or group level such as a work team, or between systems, such as between countries; for example, Israelis and the Palestinians, or Mexico and the U.S.A.

Most Gestalt therapists and consultants are trained at working on the intrapsychic level where Fritz Perls’s conception of Top Dog/Underdog comes into play. When one works with conflict on this level, it is relatively easy to see the aggression, rigid polarizations, projections, and the I/It interaction.

On the surface, it appears that the Top Dog, which represents the shoulds and should nots, is more powerful and in control. But appearances can be deceiving. The Underdog has a different type of power: the power to say no, to sabotage whatever it wishes unless it is acknowledged and taken into account (Backman, 2007). The person cannot

move forward unless there is contact and connection between the two parts; that is, unless both sides are able to hear, acknowledge, and empathize with each other.

The power of the Underdog is even easier to see in group or multi-person situations. It takes just a few “nos” to override the yeses, generate a similar chorus of “nos” on the other side, immobilize a situation, and bring progress to a standstill. What is at the heart of these “nos” that are so impervious to influence and change? I would like to argue that it is the construct of *contempt*.

### Contempt

Contempt is both a cause and result of ongoing conflict. Its form is hierarchical, its attitude, dismissive. When we feel contempt for others, we experience them as beneath us, as “less than.” In his pioneering research, John Gottman (1994) found that ongoing contempt was the primary negative mechanism that led to the destruction of intimate relationships. As Brown (2004) points out, it leads to escalation and ultimately annihilation. Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951) discussed the concept of self-contempt, agreeing with Harry Stack Sullivan that it results in a weak self-system and is the core of neurosis.

It may be surprising, but contempt also incorporates a strange form of attachment. When we experience this syndrome, we do not want to be interested in the other, yet we are. We find ourselves both pulling away and moving towards—often at the same time. Furthermore, the attachment to the other is *counterintuitive*. One would think that when we are contemptuous of another, we would turn away quickly. Instead, we experience a focused, sometimes obsessional interest in the other. Sadly, the interest is *negative*, filled with projection and ambivalence, for we really do not want to know more about them. In fact, it is an overdeveloped interest in ourselves.

This syndrome is often at the center of the rage, sadism, righteousness, and arrogance that are seen in ongoing conflict. The result is a process that is frozen, in which patterns are fixed and resolution is seemingly unreachable. However, as Gestalt practitioners, we are experts at working with process and we possess a set of skills to help our clients create new figures and expand relationships—no matter how deep the conflict or level of system we are addressing. Most of these skills spring from our ability to create trust and connection—qualities that are prerequisites for the resolution of conflict. I’d like to list some of them below:

- We know how to make phenomenological observations concerning process without privileging one part of the system.
- We know how to look at systems in a holistic way without looking for “root causes” or “good guys” and “bad guys.”
- We know how to manage energy—both our own and that of others.
- We know much about how to work with hierarchy, culture, and power. We understand that all have to be respected or trust cannot develop.
- We are not afraid of aggression and differences, and know how to work with them.
- We know a great deal about closure and how to create respectful endings.

- Above all, we are skillful at destructuring patterns and creating a lively figure.

These skills are not enough without resting on the Gestalt base of self-awareness. We can never find an end to conflict until we find an answer in ourselves, until we own our own projections, until we establish dialogue between our internal and interpersonal polarities, and until we learn to establish trust within ourselves.

It seems fitting to close this introduction by returning to the topic of conflict and quoting from Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951): “Every conflict is fundamentally a conflict in the grounds of action, a conflict of needs, desires, fascinations, pictures of oneself, goals hallucinated; and the function of the self is to live it through, to suffer loss and change and alter the given” (p. 412).

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