# Contemporary gestalt psychotherapy: The tensions between practitioner education and the current cultural context

Return to Articles

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This paper provides a review of the literature that concerns the nature of gestalt professional education within the contemporary cultural context. It suggests that there are significant challenges to providing an ethically congruent training program within that context. It is based on the literature review that formed part of my PhD thesis (O'Regan, 2021), exploring the experiences of gestalt professional education providers. That research identified a perceived gap in the professional knowledge of contemporary gestalt therapy. This paper provides an account of contemporary gestalt therapy, illustrating important developments since its inception. It also expands and updates ideas articulated in an earlier article regarding the training of gestalt therapists (O'Regan et al., 2017). It does so by identifying thematic issues relating to the delivery and management of the training of gestalt therapists within the contemporary cultural context while noting gaps in knowledge. Those identified issues are the nature of gestalt therapy, the nature of the contemporary cultural context, and the impact of this context on the provision of gestalt professional education.

## Contemporary Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy originated in the 1950s after two significant events: the publication of the seminal text *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* by Fritz Perls, Ralph Hefferline, and Paul Goodman (1951/1994), and the opening of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy (NYIGT) in 1952. This seminal text is known within the gestalt community as "PHG", with F. Perls and Goodman acknowledged as contributing to the theoretical sections while Hefferline authored the chapters containing practical exercises (Knapp, 1986). The word "gestalt", which has no direct English translation, has been defined as a "whole, configuration, integration, a unique patterning" (Smith, 1976, p. 3). F. Perls stated that he used the term gestalt to describe the synthesis of several diverse philosophical and psychological traditions that formed a distinctive system of psychotherapy, claiming he and the other founders critically examined and assimilated philosophy, psychoanalysis, and semantics into a new comprehensive theory (F. Perls et al., 1951/1994).

Gestalt therapy draws from specific theories that produce a distinctive contemporary praxis (Brownell, 2010) to guide its method, which is influenced by humanistic and existential philosophies (Yontef, 1993). While gestalt therapy is practised mainly as a form of individual psychotherapy, its principles are used in settings such as group facilitation, relationship counselling, organisational consultancy, and education. The competent practice of gestalt therapy requires certain knowledge, skills, and attributes in its therapists, and the training of a gestalt therapist is designed to develop this knowledge, promote these skills, and instil these attributes (Joyce & Sills, 2010). Since its inception these skills have been practised and taught through institutes that are now located worldwide (O'Leary, 2013).

Gestalt therapy's principles are directly linked to the various philosophical and theoretical influences and formulations of its founders as well as how they attempted to synthesise these influences into a coherent therapy (F. Perls et al., 1951/1994). Although often not acknowledged for the extent of her input, Laura Perls, who was married to F. Perls, has in fact significantly contributed to the theory and development of gestalt therapy (Taylor, 2009). In particular, her contribution to the embodied, movement-based features of gestalt therapy are noted (Taylor, 2009). The founders drew from both Western sciences of the time and Eastern practices, including Zen and Tao traditions, but especially gestalt psychology (Brownell, 2010).

The gestalt psychology movement was engaged in the phenomenological study of perception, and although there are fundamental differences, it had a significant influence on gestalt therapy (Taylor, 2009). The experiments conducted by the gestalt psychologists found that humans organised information as wholes, rather than as constitutive parts, and that perception was an active process in which people select, filter, and fill in missing information to make sense of the world. Consequently, all perception is understood as an active process of interpretation and meaning-making (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). This interpretivist paradigm was a radical departure from the dominant, associationalist psychological paradigm that focused on stimulus and response and conceived the brain as a recorder of objective reality (Stoehr, 1994; Taylor, 2009; Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). However, gestalt therapy was most influenced by two people associated with the gestalt psychologists: Kurt Goldstein, a neurologist and psychiatrist, and Kurt Lewin, the founder of social psychology (Brownell, 2010; Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). Goldstein, who was influenced by Husserl's phenomenological method, developed a theory highlighting the relationship between an organism and the environment necessary for the organism to survive (Brownell, 2010). Lewin extensively studied this relationship between the person and their world (field) in social settings and theorised that behaviour is a function of the field (Brownell, 2010). It is largely from their investigations that F. Perls, L. Perls, and Goodman developed gestalt therapy with its emphasis on awareness and *contact*.

The conceptual centre of gestalt therapy's theory is *contact*. The founders first introduced the concept that "experience occurs at the boundary between the organism and its environment" (F. Perls et al., 1951/1994, p. 3). It is at this boundary that contact occurs, and this represents the first reality for a person in the environment or the

"organism/environment field" (F. Perls et al., 1951/1994, p. 5). This perspective submits that the organism is not separate from the environment but is touched, limited, and restrained by it (F. Perls et al., 1951/1994). Such contact can only be brought to concentrated awareness in the "here and now" experience. Existential preferencing of immediate experience signified a deliberate and fundamental departure from Freud's theories of unconscious drives and defences shaped by childhood experiences (Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). Rather, the ability for a person to make contact with their environment to identify a clear need, sometimes called "figure" or "gestalt", determines their ability to satisfy their needs in the present world in order to learn and to grow. The quality of this contact with oneself, others, and the environment is synonymous with health in the gestalt model (Cain, 2002). F. Perls and Goodman regarded the process of healthy contact as a "creative adjustment" to the environment that allows the individual to grow, and this growth is optimised by supportive contact with novelty (F. Perls et al., 1951/1994). F. Perls et al. (1951/1994) also believed that human nature includes lifelong growth, which Wheeler and Axelsson (2015) stated is the "capacity to integrate ever increasing complexity of response and meaning making in relationship to our world" (p. 43). Thus, gestalt therapy assumes that the process of creative adjustment occurring at the contact boundary supports organismic processes that are authentic, creative, healthy, and growth orientated. Conversely, processes that are rigid or unresponsive are regarded as neurotic (F. Perls et al., 1951/1994). Gestalt therapy aims to raise the client's awareness of how they engage in these creative adjustments.

The aims and processes of gestalt therapy intend to support people to learn how they interrupt creating figures from the present ground by superimposing habitual past situations (grounds) and thus incongruent and unspontaneous meanings to the present situation. Then, the process of psychotherapy supports clients to build awareness of their process of contact and figure formation. L. Perls (1992) affirmed the fundamental nature of awareness in gestalt therapy:

The aim of Gestalt Therapy is the awareness continuum, the freely ongoing Gestalt formation where what is of greatest concern and interest to the organism, the relationship, the group, society, becomes Gestalt, comes into the foreground. (p.8)

Here, awareness is seen as the function that promotes healthy contact between a person and their environment, and consequently, growth and change. Thus, gestalt therapy outlines its position that human growth, learning, and health are synonymous (J. Harris, 1999). The idea of the contact process is drawn from the humanistic concept that people are growth orientated, self regulated, and understood only in relation to their environment, and gestalt therapy has also incorporated the principles of phenomenological enquiry, holism, and field orientation into this approach (Yontef & Jacobs, 2010). These humanistic and existential ideas are differentiating and defining features of gestalt therapy. They situate it within a humanistic/existential psychotherapy paradigm.

Gestalt therapy is recognised as a humanistic psychotherapy because both share several defining characteristics. These include an optimistic view of the individual as tending to move towards their best potential as well as a view of the individual as self-responsible

and free to choose how they live (Cain, 2002; F. Perls et al., 1951/1994). Furthermore, individuals are seen as whole and embodied beings, indivisible from their social world and only understood in relation to the life-space they occupy (Barber, 2006; Cain, 2002; Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). Humans have evolved to be essentially social, and most human problems are interpersonal and relational (Cain, 2002; Fairfield, 2013). Humanistic gestalt therapy values people's rights and desires to know what is best for them. Furthermore, democratic processes of decision-making are respected (Cain, 2002; Lahood, 2013). Humans are understood as being engaged in active meaning-making—constructing and interpreting their reality (Bagnall & Hodge, 2017; Cain, 2002; Wheeler & Axelsson, 2015). These humanistic features of gestalt therapy are explained further through elements of field theory along with several related humanistic or existential concepts (Cain, 2002; Dublin, 1976; Gaffney, 2010). The concepts are fundamentally interrelated and include phenomenology, existential dialogue, and experimentation (Dublin, 1976; Yontef, 1993).

Field theory has influenced gestalt therapy from its beginnings. Attending to the total situation of a person's experience was instrumental in the formulation of gestalt theory (Evans, 2007). Field theory is linked to the gestalt psychology notion of "figure and ground" in which an individual organises their attention based on their uppermost need and assumes the fundamental nature of the always-present environment. Gestalt therapy strives to build people's awareness of how they are in contact with their environmental fields (Yontef, 1993). The emerging contemporary theory regarding therapy from a field model is that therapy is conducted with an impaired "person–world interaction" situation rather than a pathology within a person (Wollants, 2012, p. 37). Contemporary theorists such as Wollants (2012) highlight the inseparability of the field:

The Gestalt-theoretical approach regards all psychic events, problems and solutions as comprehensible only as parts of a person's total situation (gestalt-situation). Only the forces in the present situation are relevant as far as study and therapy or change is concerned. (p. 7)

In a gestalt therapy session, the field is understood as "the entire situation of the therapist, the client, and all that goes on between them" (Parlett & Lee, 2005, p. 43). It follows that the pragmatics of therapy from a field perspective requires a phenomenological methodology to support the exploration of awareness in the field (Evans, 2007).

Gestalt therapists have been influenced by phenomenology as developed by Husserl and more recently by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013). Gestalt therapy holds that part of its purpose is to analyse the structure of existence through phenomenological methods in order to appreciate and attune to the client's "being-in-the-world" (Burley & Bloom, 2008; Dublin, 1976). Husserl's phenomenological method was designed to create a philosophical attitude to clarify the foundation of the positive sciences and the nature of consciousness (Bloom, 2009). The philosophy of phenomenology has been modified to create a therapeutic method by adapting Husserl's proposal of phenomenological reduction, or bracketing, in an attempt to minimise

intersubjective distance (Burley & Bloom, 2008). Gestalt therapy emphasises the psychological rather than the philosophical aspects of phenomenology (Burley & Bloom, 2008). It draws on the methods or rules of phenomenological reduction, such as the rule of epoché or bracketing of biases and assumptions; the rule of description, which preferences description over explanation; and the rule of horizontalisation or equalisation, where all information is treated equally without hierarchy for use in therapeutic settings (Spinelli, 2005).

Rather than transcending psychologism to find a mundane reality like the phenomenologists, in gestalt therapy, the modified phenomenological method uses the therapist/client field to explore the natural or everyday experience with selected material building or leading to new awareness (Bloom, 2009, 2020; Burley & Bloom, 2008;). Here, in the therapeutic exchange, the therapist and client use phenomenological observation, not as a philosophically based method, but as a skilled technique to reveal experiences in the here and now that are specific and concrete, thus avoiding abstraction and theorising (Barlow, 2016). The existential phenomenological stance is associated with a foundational person-to-person relationship within therapy, and gestalt therapy has developed practices designed to support authentic relating. This *being-with* relational intent is influenced by dialogic existentialism as proposed by the philosopher Martin Buber and has been adapted within gestalt therapy (Hycner, 1985).

Laura Perls, who was profoundly influenced by the work of Buber, introduced dialogic existentialism into gestalt therapy (Hycner, 1985). Buber's (1923/1996) concept of the "I–Thou" relationship as an authentic meeting between two people, in which both are fully respected in the humanity of each other, is regarded highly in gestalt therapy (Clarkson, 1989). Gestalt therapy has reframed some of Buber's (1923/1996) ideas for application in therapeutic situations, such as the requirements of genuine dialogue, which involves presence, genuine and unreserved communication, and inclusion (Jacobs, 1989). These requirements assume an authentic relationship where the therapist is not fulfilling a role or taking on a persona. The issue of the therapist as an individualistic and authentic person has come under scrutiny in the gestalt literature recently, and the need for an empathetic caring relationship has been emphasised (Fairfield, 2013; Fairfield & O'Shea, 2008). The importance of these original relational aspects of gestalt therapy have been revisited in the contemporary literature as a response to the later work of F. Perls and other gestalt therapists who, according to some, evolved from its origins as a relational practice of care to instead emphasise a challenging and shame-inducing approach to therapeutic change (Dublin, 1976; Wheeler, 2000).

The early strivings of gestalt therapy have been developed in the emerging literature regarding the importance of attending to shame and the cost of the confrontational nature of the early therapists such as F. Perls (Dublin, 1976; Wagner-Moore, 2004; Wheeler, 2000). More recently, the early ecological model of gestalt therapy has been re-emphasised to match the call for a critique of the aspect of humanistic thought that emphasises the self-sufficient and self-regulating individual within the modern isolating culture (Bloom, 2011; Fairfield, 2013). Rather, writers such as Fairfield (2013) have

argued for a "relational movement" (p. 22) within gestalt therapy, where the value of "rugged individualism" (p. 25) is rejected and the evolutionary imperative of human relationships is valued. The relational movement problematises the turn towards isolation in the contemporary culture (Fairfield, 2013; Fairfield & O'Shea, 2008; Frew, 2016; Wheeler, 2000) and suggests that the care of the environment and the relational inclusion of humanity is synonymous with health, whereby health is understood as inevitable in a culture that values compassion, diversity, equity, and sustainability (Fairfield, 2013). Fairfield (2013) articulated four values of the relational approach:

1. Health can only be defined relationally and holistically.
2. Embodied experience should be included in important decision-making.
3. Diversity is essential to all development.
4. Sustainability depends on sharing leadership. (p.23)

The contemporary practice of gestalt therapy is defined by its humanistic and phenomenological methodology. Gestalt therapy is present centred, phenomenological, experimental/experiential, relational, and field orientated. These core characteristics of gestalt therapy inform the required knowledge and attributes of gestalt therapists. In turn, the preferred attributes of gestalt practitioners shape the curriculum of gestalt professional education settings. The following sections explore these attributes.

## The Characteristics of Gestalt Therapists

The foundational humanistic/existential underpinning of gestalt therapy theory and practice influences the preferred characteristics and attributes of gestalt therapists, which constitute the outcome of training processes. Since the desired attributes of gestalt therapists are aligned to the humanistic nature of gestalt therapy, aspects of the therapist's disposition and *being* are valued (Bagnall & Hodge, 2017; Bar-Yoseph & Levine, 2012; Meara & Levien, 2005). In a humanistic and existential modality such as gestalt therapy, the therapist's *being* or self is understood as the instrument of therapeutic change, and so the being of the therapist is more important than the *doing* of therapeutic techniques (Meara & Levien, 2005).

The qualities valued in a gestalt therapist are related to the attributes required in an authentic, existential, and dialogical relationship, which include authenticity, presence, inclusion, and confirmation (Jacobs, 1989). Gestalt therapists must be capable of engaging in the phenomenological method, which includes attributes of self-awareness, attuning to emotional states of the self and other, attending to the figure and ground process of the immediate interaction, and entering into a full relational contact episode with the client (Vidakovic et al., 2013). Furthermore, gestalt therapists require understanding and knowledge of theories and concepts that support therapeutic contact, such as the phenomenological method, field theory, and theories of self, change, and diagnosis (Vidakovic et al., 2013). These desired attributes of gestalt therapists inform the nature and practice of their education within various educational settings. The

professional education of gestalt practitioners is shaped by the core characteristics of gestalt therapy, the tenets of gestalt education philosophy and practice, and the desired attributes of a gestalt practitioner.

## The Education of Gestalt Therapists

Humanistic values and gestalt therapy methodologies discussed in previous sections are represented in the literature as essential aspects of the formative education of a gestalt therapist. While John Harris (1999) noted a scarcity of writing surrounding gestalt approaches to gestalt therapist education, the existing literature argues for congruence between the values of gestalt therapy and the education of gestalt therapists. Woldt (2005) confirmed the values of gestalt therapy that must be incorporated within the practice of educating therapists, including, "authenticity, optimism, holism and trust" (p. xv). Furthermore, the humanistic educational principles of inquiry, including holism, autonomy, experiential enquiry, and democracy, should underpin the training of gestalt psychotherapists (Barber, 2006; Peterson & Kolb, 2018). Dawson (2000) and J. Harris (1999) stated that the principles of gestalt therapy need to be congruent with the practices of therapist education. Furthermore, J. Harris (1999) suggested that the disciplines of phenomenology, existentialism, and field theory offer a coherent basis for the education of gestalt therapists. The contemporary values of the relational movement within gestalt therapy are also relevant, especially the attention to existential dialogue and relational practices within the professional educational experience (Dawson, 2000). J. Harris (1999) highlighted the field theory aspect of therapist education and argued that the gestalt therapists' learning environment should value student autonomy within a supportive learning community that is therapeutic and educational. Meara and Levien (2005) identified that the education of gestalt therapists should be experiential, process orientated, and focused on developing the learner's dispositional "beingness" rather than their "doingness". Here, the literature highlights the need for gestalt therapist education to be congruent with gestalt therapy theory. However, the practice of psychotherapy is different from that of professional education, and gestalt institutes have drawn from adult education theories to support their curriculums (O'Regan et al., 2017).

Some theories of adult education complement gestalt therapist education and are used in the design of gestalt therapy curriculums (J. Harris, 1999; Meara & Levien, 2005; O'Regan et al., 2017). These theories tend to promote practices of experiential and experimental learning, including the use of theory and practice. Models such as Heron's (1989) experiential learning, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning, and Bateson's (1972) levels of learning model are referenced as models that are compatible with gestalt education (J. Harris, 1999; Meara & Levien, 2005). Using these models, gestalt education strives to incorporate divergent learning styles where valued learning is student centred and idiosyncratic; however, a completely humanistic student-centred learning program has not been adopted fully by gestalt institutes (J. Harris, 1999). Nevertheless, Woldt (2005) and Garcia et al. (2005) noted that some gestalt educators invite practices in which students are supported to investigate their learning process phenomenologically by noticing what figures of interest emerge and how they authentically meet their needs. The

extent of these practices varies across institutes that are shaped and constrained by the nature of the curriculum and consequent assessment requirements. The humanistic and existential values of gestalt therapy underpin the training of gestalt therapists, but a wide variety of educational practices exists in gestalt institutes.

The settings for training gestalt therapists are typically gestalt institutes (O'Regan et al., 2017). Thus, the nature of the institute's educational framework shapes the nature of the education methodology for trainee gestalt therapists (Brownell & Melnick, 2008). Educational practices of institutes vary considerably, ranging from highly formalised training to highly informal (O'Regan et al., 2017). The original NYIGT does not regard itself as a training institute, rather as a collegial study and practice community (Bloom et al., 2014). Conversely, some institutes, such as the Metanoia Institute in London (Osborne, 2010) and Gestalt Therapy Brisbane, provide accredited higher degrees in gestalt therapy within higher education settings. These are higher education providers outside the university setting. Frew (2013) asserted that gestalt training, while rare, has at times existed and even thrived within certain academic settings in the United States. Gaffney (2013) described a similar situation in Europe and Britain. He detailed a gestalt-orientated PsyD program at Pacific University in the United States, which incorporates theory, research, and experiential learning, although that presence is waning (Frew, 2013, 2016). Mortola (2013) suggested that an embodied modality like gestalt education does not easily fit in the verbal and numeric domains valued in universities. He identified the need to find "eddies" in universities within which to apply gestalt principles.

I draw on these descriptions of gestalt professional education to argue that three different modes of provision are manifest, generally, within gestalt professional education: (a) unstructured and student-directed programs—these are non-accredited programs; (b) structured and multi-year non-credentialing programs—these are generally professionally accredited programs; and (c) formal higher education accredited and credentialing programs (O'Regan, 2021; O'Regan et al., 2017). The different modes of education reflect a deep philosophical variance in the practice of educating therapists (O'Regan, 2021). The NYIGT refuses to become a training institute because it rejects bureaucratic hierarchy (D. Bloom, personal communication, 6 June 2016). At the same time, other institutes provide education in the higher education sector as a response to the increasing demand for professional qualifications for psychotherapists as well as to ensure the financial sustainability of their practice (Meara & Levien, 2005). The tension between these positions has had limited attention within the gestalt literature. However, there is some discussion regarding the impact of the current regulatory environment of gestalt educational curriculums (O'Regan et al., 2017).

The nature of a gestalt training curriculum is shaped to an extent by the local regulatory requirements for accreditation as a psychotherapist and the demands of the increasing professionalisation of psychotherapy. In Europe and New Zealand, all psychotherapists must be accredited by the state, and accreditation requirements have shaped the curriculums and assessment processes of the institutes in these countries (Bar-Yoseph et al., 2008). In Australia, while this tends to position gestalt therapy education towards a

more outcome-driven or instrumental educational approach that prioritises credentialing, limited literature exists on this impact or experiences of these issues in the gestalt community.

## The Contemporary Cultural Context

The features of the contemporary cultural context include the transformation of the culture that incorporates and deconstructs the values of modernity, the concurrent and related rise of globalised capitalism and its associated neoliberalism, and the related transformation of the value and nature of knowledge and learning through performativity within the culture (O'Regan et al., 2017). The contemporary cultural context situates conditions that value certain practices and marginalise others (Bagnall, 2001; Bagnall & Hodge, 2017; O'Regan et al., 2017). It is described in relation to, and differentiated from, the preceding cultural tradition of modernity (Bagnall, 2001; Bauman, 1992; Lyotard, 1984).

Modernity emerged in Europe during the 17th century and is linked to the rise of science, reason, and systematic enquiry over providence and divine revelation as the source of knowledge (Howe, 1994). Modernist culture celebrated the Age of Reason and valued the positivist paradigm's preferencing of the human's ability to be, or design, a sterile instrument separate from the subject that could perceive and understand the world accurately and objectively (Howe, 1994). Within modernity, knowledge was categorised by its associated discipline and was gained by developing accurate instruments, including the rational mind, to uncover a truth about reality. This truth could be understood progressively over time, and past knowledge contributed to current understandings (Bagnall, 2001; Howe, 1994). Within modernity, knowledge was valued for its function of alleviating humanity of its ills and freeing humans from the shackles of ignorance through the dominance of science and the intellect over nature. Modernity has produced changes in technology, communication, and capitalism, resulting in a profound shift in contemporary culture.

In such a culture, the nature of knowledge has been transformed from an end in itself to a commodity produced in order to be sold (Lyotard, 1984). This *mercantilisation* of knowledge has shaped the nature of knowledge and how it is understood (Lyotard, 1984). Knowledge is no longer an end in itself. Rather, it has become commodified, produced, and consumed within a market; moreover, it has an exchange value (Roberts, 2013). Here, the legitimacy of knowledge is no longer attached to its truth but rather to its technical value (Edwards & Usher, 1994; Lyotard, 1984). Because knowledge has become a commodity, its efficient production and value to the economy become emphasised. This knowledge economy positions knowledge as a form of capital essential for economic success (Marginson, 2004; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Within such a culture, valued knowledge is that which is aligned to efficiency and effectiveness within particular situations (Bagnall, 2002). Lyotard (1984) referred to such knowledge as "performative" knowledge that associates efficiency with "performativity". Performativity is a concept that involves decision-makers deploying measures of

efficiency as the criteria to measure the value of knowledge (Edwards & Usher, 1994; Lyotard, 1984). Ball (2000) defined performativity as a form of regulation that "employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change", where the "performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection" (p. 1). Lyotard (1984) asserted that performativity in education has received special focus in contemporary culture because education is required to provide the skills for an efficient society.

The commodification of knowledge and associated rise of performativity has transformed the roles of the producers of knowledge. The contemporary cultural context, as referred to in above sections, is defined by disenchantment with metanarrative, the advance of technology, and the transformation of globalised capital. These cultural features have provided conditions for the rise of global neoliberalism. The doctrine underpinning neoliberalism is not clearly unified or coherent, yet has several common threads (Davies, 2014; Harvey, 2005).

Davies (2014) discussed the nature of disenchantment with metanarratives, including political discourse, and the assertion that market processes can replace ambiguous political processes with empirical, non-political, economic evaluations offered by the market. Such preferencing of the market is linked to the centrally defining characteristics of neoliberalism, which include hostility to ambiguity of political discourse; a commitment to the explicitness and transparency of quantitative economic indicators, of which the market system is the model; and disenchantment with politics by the more empirical model of economics (Davies, 2014; Harvey, 2005). Harvey (2005) stated that competition is the primary virtue in neoliberal thought that should exist in a setting (the neutral marketplace) where free choice determines an item's value. Neoliberalism values the idea of neutrality where facts are seen as more reliable than judgements, moral rules are replaced with market choice within the competitive market, and normativity is moved to the realm of audits (Davies, 2014; Jenkins, 2014). Davies (2014) asserted that the strivings of neoliberalism situate the auditor as an eminent figure in society existing outside politics, a "resolutely sceptical and empiricist technician, who is free to apply an efficiency audit to all institutions—public and private—equally, regardless of whether they appear 'economic' in character" (p. 96). The elevated role of the auditor and the neoliberal disenchantment with politics has transformed the role of the state within the neoliberal project. The neoliberal conditions of competition, privatisation, and audit must be monitored and enforced by systems of power and authority.

Competition, which is essential to the neoliberal vision, must be promoted by the neoliberal state. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) asserted that capitalism requires a strong state to develop and enforce policies that support capital accumulation. It is the state's role to release most institutions as well as cultural and social processes to the market and into the "realm of competition" (Davies, 2014, p. 68). However, the state must ensure

accountability and efficiency through processes of governance or oversight. This performative governance is enacted in the public sector through new public management, within which knowledge itself has been redefined as capital (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Neoliberalism assumes that individual freedoms are guaranteed by market freedom (Harvey, 2005). This assumption presupposes a specific view of the nature of the individual built on a classic liberal orientation (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Davies (2014) suggested an a priori notion of the individual exists within neoliberal philosophy: they are autonomous selves, separate from property, and existing in the marketplace. According to this individualistic view, people are self-interested, rational, and able to measure the cost–benefit of a product to them. Olssen and Peters (2005) added that the individual is an "enterprising and competitive entrepreneur" (p. 315). Davies (2014) noted that individuals within the current cultural context are understood as engaging in a cost–benefit analysis, not only within traditional markets, but in all non-market settings, including social networks and all institutions. In such a culture the individual is most understood as having freedom within a realm that allows competition (Davies, 2014). A significant body of literature indicates competition, performativity, privatisation, auditing, and managerialism have been imposed within the professional education sector aligned to policies concerned with managing the knowledge economy.

## Professional Education Within the Contemporary Cultural Context

The cultural reforms emerging within the contemporary context are exemplified in government policies concerning professional education, which is perceived as an essential vehicle for the economic goals of the state (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The contemporary cultural context is described as valuing teaching and learning practices that are instrumental in, extrinsic to, and align with efficiency and effectiveness in performative situations (Bagnall & Hodge, 2017). Such teaching and learning practices become instrumental because they are used to achieve other ends: they are extrinsic in that actions and behaviours are valued over a human being's disposition and they are performative in that these practices are promoted through standards and competencies (Ball, 2000; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The intent of professional education then is to achieve more effective and efficient outcomes in a competitive economy (O'Regan et al., 2017). The state supports such methods of knowledge production by designing policies that shape the field of professional education, promote instrumental education by gatekeeping access to professions, and provide incentives to join specific educational settings (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In this environment, professional education providers are offered incentives from the state, such as income-contingent loans (FEE-HELP in the Australian context) and graduate access to Medicare rebates (e.g., through studying psychology) to offer education aligned to valued knowledge (O'Regan et al., 2017).

These incentives tend to be directed to formal accredited settings such as higher education, for example, income-contingent loans for students, direct funding to institutes, formal credentialing of institutional qualifications, and regulated graduate entry to professional associations (O'Regan et al., 2017). However, all types of provision are

affected by policies that have seen a transformation from humanistic and social democratic education policies towards the economisation of education policy (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). These policies shape the practices of professional education institutions, which transform their emphasis from idealistic or humanistic endeavours to more functional or skills-based processes. Ball (2012) described a redefinition of the purpose of knowledge production within the context of the market when he defined performativity as linking "effort, values, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output" (p. 19).

## The Challenge for Gestalt Professional Education

An earlier paper (O'Regan, 2021) built the case that gestalt training institutes were enticed to co-opt the benefits of higher education or relevant professional associations. Shifting to these forms of provision risk compromising the underpinning values of gestalt (O'Regan et al., 2017). Meara and Levien (2005), in their discussion of the experience of those within gestalt institutes under a regulated environment, noted the emerging interest in professional qualifications for potential students at gestalt institutes in Australia and New Zealand. That interest, along with the professionalisation of psychotherapy, has drawn gestalt institutes into regulated practice and towards the higher education sector (Meara & Levien, 2005).

The attraction of institutes towards accreditation and higher education qualifications presents an ethical challenge to gestalt institutes. Dawson (2000) stated that a shift in training emphasis towards evidenced-based qualifications risks compromising the values of gestalt therapy. This risk, according to Dawson (2000), presented gestalt training institutes with a dilemma between sustainability and value congruence. Gestalt educators, such as Belinda Harris (2010), asserted that the contemporary education policy environment is "linked to systems of targets and performativity" (p. 20) in order to meet the demands of global capitalism. Furthermore, B. Harris (2010) argued that the resultant instrumental forms of education are contrary to the core values of gestalt.

## Implications

This paper has discussed certain challenges existing in the delivery of a congruent gestalt training program. The management of these tensions has required responses from the providers of gestalt professional education. It is hoped that the issues presented in this paper set the scene for a detailed discussion based on how these challenges have been understood and managed by relevant players. The author (O'Regan, 2021) of this paper has recently completed an empirical study (PhD) exploring the experiences of gestalt education providers in managing the challenges suggested in this paper. It is hoped that further writing reporting on the results of that project will be produced soon.

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## Declarations

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