



Gestalt Therapy

*Perspectives
and
Applications*

edited by

Edwin C. Nevis

GESTALT THERAPY

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SKETCHES

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GESTALT THERAPY

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Introduction

EDWIN C. NEVIS, *Ph.D.*

This volume attests to the continuing richness of Gestalt therapy as a conceptual and methodological base from which helping professionals can craft their practice. The contributors are a diverse group with varied backgrounds and ways of working. They represent all generations of those influenced by the founders of Gestalt therapy, and include four new voices of students of the students of Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, Paul Goodman, and Isadore From. Moreover, the volume reflects the freedom that Gestalt therapy allows for practitioners to express their individuality of style. From Bob Goulding's unique sharing of his "wise old man's insights," through Joseph Zinker's often poetic, metaphorical emphasis, to the intellectual sharpness of Joel Latner and Gordon Wheeler, and on to Ilana Rubenfeld's personal and caring way of working and sharing of her process—and to the other voices herein—we see the full measure of this diversity.

To set this volume in perspective, it may be helpful to take a brief look at the history of publication of works on Gestalt therapy. The first books by the founders, *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression* (Perls, 1947) and *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951), were essentially revolutionary treatises with a different way of looking at things. These books, and the workshops and seminars conducted by the authors of these books, generated a profound interest on the part of both seasoned psychotherapists and students and other beginners. As Fritz Perls, Laura Perls, Isadore From, Paul Goodman, and their associates found themselves in great demand to provide training workshops, institutes were formed in New York, Cleveland, and Los Angeles, and a "movement" was fully under way to actualize this new therapy.

What is interesting to note is that for almost 20 years no new books on Gestalt therapy were published. There were articles here and there, brief monographs, and presentations at various meetings, but no full-length volumes. And what did appear concerned itself largely with explaining what Gestalt therapy was and with extolling its virtues.

Beginning in 1970 this changed dramatically and numerous books appeared, most of them written by the first students of the New York group and some students of these students. It would appear that serious practitioners

had spent years developing themselves to the point where they had something to say to others. I do not list all the books of that period, but noteworthy are Fagan and Sheperd's (1970) *Gestalt Therapy Now*, Polster and Polster's (1973) *Gestalt Therapy Integrated*, Latner's (1973) *Gestalt Therapy Book*, Smith's (1976) *The Growing Edge Of Gestalt Therapy*, and Zinker's (1978) *Creative Process in Psychotherapy*. In 1978 the *Gestalt Journal* was founded to provide a forum for the growing number of serious papers that began to appear.

Viewed as a whole, this body of work made it clear that Gestalt therapy had taken its place as a psychotherapeutic approach of broad appeal. Moreover, these books displayed the stamp of their authors and went beyond repeating what the founders had laid down in their early writings and teachings. The authors concentrated on the basic issues of Gestalt individual psychotherapy, but they added to our understanding and our practice.

As a result of these publications and the work of the Gestalt therapy postgraduate training institutes throughout the world, new generations have become influenced by Gestalt therapy and have applied it to situations beyond individual therapy. We now have training programs for working with couples and families, for working with groups, for working with organizations, and so on. Although some people, notably Isadore From and Joel Latner, have questioned the applicability of Gestalt therapy beyond its model of individual growth and development, significant numbers of people who work in arenas other than the individual therapy, private practice setting have been adopting Gestalt therapy concepts and methods as a means of improving the effectiveness of their work. In short, the past 15 years may be viewed as the "Age of Applications," and this book is an attempt to bring together under one cover a discussion of some of the more important of these. It is one of several applications books being published by the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press, for whom the applied focus is a major objective.

The focus on application does not mean that there is little interest in examination and revision of the basic concepts of Gestalt therapy. Indeed, as a group of third- and fourth-generation students have matured they have revisited the basic concepts and looked at how confusions or weak points may be clarified. In addition, we now have some well-developed integrations of Gestalt therapy with other approaches to therapy and self-development. These broaden the perspective of the practitioner and enrich the ground between theory and application. Some of these are discussed in this book.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1, on perspectives, begins with an excellent statement of the theory of Gestalt therapy. In his usual articulate, succinct, and knowledgeable way, Joel Latner walks us through the core aspects of Gestalt therapy. He conveys the power of the approach and also

calls our attention to some of the soft spots in our theory and to the need to address these weaknesses. This chapter can serve as an introduction for beginning readers and as a pungent refresher for the more experienced. Latner conveys a great deal of useful material with grace and clarity.

Following this chapter is a conception of diagnosis from a Gestalt point of view. Joseph Melnick and Sonia Nevis deal here with an issue that Gestalt therapists tended to ignore or play down in the early years. The here-and-now, process emphasis of Gestalt therapy led many practitioners to believe that it was not necessary to engage in traditional diagnostic exercises or that the typical nosological entities made little sense in a Gestalt framework. Melnick and Nevis make a convincing case that clinical diagnosis not only is compatible with a Gestalt approach, but is very useful to the therapeutic undertaking. In particular, their presentation of the borderline personality in terms of sensory awareness malfunctioning is a real contribution.

The third chapter presents a model for looking at therapy over the entire span of the relationship. This model emphasizes an initial phase that is particularly useful with populations other than the typical Gestalt therapy clients, such as reasonably aware, generally professional class people. Norman Shub points out that the more or less unstructured awareness work of typical Gestalt therapy is not always suitable; many clients, such as borderline cases, have to be prepared for it in what he calls the "initial phase" of therapy. (We will be seeing more on this important area; a recent book by John Masterson (1988) deals with the same issue from the point of view of psychoanalytic object relations theory.) Following this, Shub deals with the middle phase of therapy, which he sees largely as a task of dealing with introjects.

The next chapter raises a critical, yet relatively neglected issue in recent times, that of values or ethics in Gestalt therapy. Gordon Wheeler, a fresh voice writing with fine literary skill, addresses the question by saying that we have emphasized the ethics of process and have shied away from taking stances on the substance of content. He shifts the emphasis from the ethics of good figure formation to the definition of Gestalt ethics in terms of the structure of the ground. He concludes that all figures or processes are not equal. He takes us through a Socratic-like dialogue around some of the most difficult issues in defining an ethical stance, concluding that the key to the dilemma lies in relatedness of figure and ground.

Bob Goulding's chapter reflects the ease and power available to a wise, talented master therapist. His work is supported by the conceptual and methodological bases of both Transactional Analysis and Gestalt therapy. The resulting perspective is one of fluidity in the service of keen attention to a few firmly held principles. Moreover, we get a glimpse of how the power

of Goulding's presence seems to energize the client. It appears easy, but his work has an underlying foundation of pliable steel rods that were forged over years of development.

Ilana Rubenfeld's personal and often moving account shows the power in the integration of Gestalt therapy with sophisticated approaches to body work. Anyone who has ever worked with Laura Perls knows that attention to the body was part of Gestalt therapy from the very beginning; we were taught to pay attention to what we were doing to and with ourselves physically. Likewise, Fritz Perls made sure that we were familiar with the work of Wilhelm Reich and how the muscular theory of repression was an important cornerstone of his model. Now we have new generations of practitioners who have done years of painstaking study and training in the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkreis Method, Polarity therapy, and so on, moving us further along in methodology to work with a true integration of mind and body. Ilana Rubenfeld is a prime example and one of the pioneers in this movement. This chapter gives us a detailed look at how she works and at the potential in this approach.

Janette Rainwater, one of the early people trained by Fritz Perls, discusses psychosynthesis, a powerful approach that was quite popular some years ago but does not now receive the attention it deserves. Partly because of the quiet style of its founder, Robert Assagioli, and the relative lack of proselytizing by him and his adherents, a significant movement did not develop in the United States. Some students of the approach studied at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in the 1960s, and the work with fantasy by the Cleveland group was much influenced by exposure to guided imagery. It may be that with the passage of time action-oriented methods have become more popular than the patient, inward-directed method of psychosynthesis. Also, as Maslow pointed out years ago, much of the value of psychosynthesis comes in dealing with higher level growth and development—as opposed to treating deficiency needs—and it may be most useful in expanding awareness and higher order insights rather than in symptom reduction. Hopefully, the perspective advanced herein by Rainwater will inspire others to study psychosynthesis and to integrate its methods and concepts into their work.

Part II turns its attention to applications, and discusses six areas in which experienced Gestalt therapists have enhanced their work through use of Gestalt concepts and methods. The authors identify for us the characteristics or requirements of these special situations and then show how they deal with them from the perspective of Gestalt therapy. Three of the chapters focus on the individual level and deal with difficult populations: alcoholics, psychotics, and children. The other three deal with people in units of more than one, reflecting the substantial interest in going “beyond the one”: groups, couples, and milieu therapy.¹

Carlock, Glaus, and Shaw present an extensive and sensitive discussion of issues in working with alcoholics. They lay out their treatment strategy in great detail, sharing their assumptions and concerns at each step of the way. The Gestalt cycle of experience serves as a foundation for looking at alcoholism as a disorder in self-regulation. Also noteworthy in this presentation is the way they include the use of Alcoholics Anonymous as an integral aspect of the therapy with alcoholics. The chapter is rich with ideas and examples; indeed, this work serves as an encyclopedic summary on its subject.

Cynthia Harris's chapter on working with psychotics places psychotherapeutic work in the context of an understanding of the care for the mentally ill and shows how it fits with overall treatment. She makes a case for the importance of medication, and considers psychotherapy to be an adjunct to use of psychotropic drugs. Having said that, she then shows how a Gestalt orientation enhances the work with this population. She deals with issues of contact and awareness, laying out a truly humanistic and noncondescending approach that serves to help the patient maintain a sense of personhood. Among the useful ideas presented is a discussion of the difference between "glue" and "solvent." Neurotics may need solvent to help them become "unstuck," but Harris makes a good case for focusing on glue with psychotics. Thus, she points out the need to work carefully with awareness with psychotics, and the value of reassurance and comforting interventions.

The chapter on working with children has been provided by Violet Oaklander, one of the foremost practitioners in this area. While many Gestalt therapists have worked with children at some point in their career, today most of them work with children only as part of family therapy. Oaklander has developed an approach that centers on the child, and brings in parents as adjuncts. Here she deals with negative introjects and the expression of anger, among the most difficult issues in work with children. The detailed presentation of therapist-child dialogue shows us the power of her approach and tells us that there is a place for work with the child that may supplement or take the place of work with the family that includes the child.

Next we have a chapter on working with couples, written by Joseph Zinker. This summarizes some of the research and practice done by Zinker, Sonia M. Nevis, and their associates at the Center for the Study of Intimate Systems of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. Highlighted are the concepts of fusion, differentiation, and the creative notion of complementarity and middle ground. The approach helps couples see the things that hold them together, as well as focus on the difficulties that may be driving them apart. In his inimitably lyric style, Zinker presents a framework to produce awareness about health, and a way of dealing with despair that enables people to come to better resolution of their difficulties.

The chapter by Huckabay on working with groups shows how this area of endeavor can meld the concepts of general systems theory, group dynamics, and Gestalt therapy into a more flexible and powerful approach than that provided by any one of these schools of thought alone. All three disciplines came into prominence simultaneously about 50 years ago, and ever since that time practitioners who have been exposed to them have worked toward an integration. The late Richard Wallen deserves mention here as being both one of the early members of the National Training Laboratories (NTL) and a founder of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in 1954. He taught many of us the power of these approaches in combination. By the time of the early 1960s, Gestalt-trained people were doing NTL workshops at Bethel, Maine and people trained in group dynamics were studying and teaching at various institutes for Gestalt therapy and other centers.

Huckabay's tightly woven paper summarizes in a succinct and provocative way the major accomplishments of these years of study and application. She makes it clear that we have now broadened our approach to groups and can work at all the levels of intervention that make for truly enriching learning experiences. In reading this chapter I realized how much I miss the work with groups that was a large part of my professional life for a 20-year period.

The book concludes with a chapter on the application of "Gestalt thinking" to the therapeutic milieu by Claire Stratford, who spent several years in organizing and helping to direct a highly innovative and successful milieu program. Stratford starts by redirecting us to see the patterns of interaction that the environment offers, rather than the individual, as the figure. From this perspective she outlines a way to look at what is required to provide a healthy environment as the main cornerstone of effective therapy. We see that the teaching and support of skills of everyday living become a central part of the repertoire of the milieu setting. As with the British version of halfway houses, individual psychotherapy takes a subordinate position. We do not hear much about milieu therapy these days, possibly because of deinstitutionalization of much of the care of the mentally ill, yet I am convinced that the powerful way of thinking discussed by Stratford is applicable to all kinds of settings. We still have many institutions that care for groups as diverse as the physically disadvantaged, the mentally retarded, and the elderly. The management of all of these can benefit much from this approach.

Here then is a book of diverse and rich offerings. The perspectives and applications presented are those of active, current practitioners who show us the power of Gestalt therapy in many arenas. What is even more noteworthy than the range of applications are the modifications and extensions that are reported: We are not just introjecting what we were taught; we are adding and changing as we continue to learn. This book tells us that Gestalt therapy is alive and well as we enter the last decade of the 20th century.

Note

1. Other areas where Gestalt therapy has been applied are work with families and with educational and business organizations. These are covered by Brown (1971) in the field of education; by Herman and Korenich (1977), Nevis (1987), and Merry and Brown (1987) in the organizational realm; and by Kempler (1974), Papernow (1992), and Zinker and Nevis (in press) in the area of family therapy.

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Part I

Perspectives

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1

The Theory of Gestalt Therapy

JOEL LATNER, Ph.D.

We believe that the Gestalt outlook is the original, undistorted, natural approach to life.

—Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*

THE THEORY OF GESTALT THERAPY takes as its centerpiece two ideas. The first is that the proper focus of psychology is the experiential present moment. In contrast to approaches which look at the unknown and even unknowable, our perspective is the here and now of living. The second idea is that we are inextricably caught in a web of relationship with all things. It is only possible to truly know ourselves as we exist in relation to other things.

These twin lenses, here-and-now awareness and the interactive field, define the subject matter of Gestalt therapy. Its theory provides a system of concepts describing the structure and organization of living in terms of aware relations. Its methodology, techniques, and applications, which are the subject of the remaining chapters of this book, link this outlook to the practice of Gestalt therapy. The result is a psychology and method with a rich and unique view of everyday life, the depths and difficulties which life encompasses, and “the high side of normal,” the ennobling and most creative heights of which we are capable. Gestalt therapists believe their approach is uniquely capable of responding to the difficulties and challenges of living, both in its ability to relieve us of some measure of our misery and by showing the way to some of the best we can achieve.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF GESTALT THERAPY

The theory of Gestalt therapy has three major sources. First is psychoanalysis, which contributed some of its major principles concerned with the inner life. Humanistic, holistic, phenomenological and existential writings, which center on personal experience and everyday life, constitute a second source. Gestalt psychology, the third source, gave to Gestalt therapy much more than its name. Though Gestalt therapy is not directly an application or extension of it, Gestalt psychology's thoroughgoing concentration on interaction and process, many of its important experimental observations and conclusions, and its insistence that a psychology about humans include human experience have inspired and informed Gestalt therapy.

Gestalt therapy emerged from the clinical work of two German psychotherapists, Frederick Salomon Perls, M.D., and Lore Perls, Ph.D. F.S. Perls, known to many of his students as Fritz, was trained as a psychiatrist. He worked with Kurt Goldstein, a principal figure of the holistic school of psychology, in his inquiries into the effects of brain injuries on veterans of the first World War. Later, in the 1920s, he trained in psychoanalysis with Karen Horney and Wilhelm Reich. Laura Perls—she adopted the anglicized spelling after she came to the United States—studied with the existential philosopher Martin Heidegger and was awarded a doctorate in psychology for her graduate studies. The most important of her teachers was the Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer. F. S. and Laura Perls fled Western Europe in 1933 ahead of the onslaught of Nazism to Johannesburg, South Africa, where they practiced until the termination of hostilities in 1945.

Ego, Hunger and Aggression was written during this period. The book, published under F. S. Perls's name in London in 1947, is subtitled *A Revision of Psychoanalysis*. It included chapters reevaluating the analytic viewpoint on aggression. They suggested that Freud and his followers had underestimated the importance of the development of teeth, eating, and digestion, and that this developmental watershed was as important as the others noted by Freud. These suggestions constitute an early contribution to the development of ego psychology. The book also contained chapters from holistic and existential perspectives and chapters describing therapy exercises. These exercises were designed to promote physical awareness rather than insight, and were called concentration therapy.

With the end of the war, the Perlises emigrated to the United States. They settled in New York City, in a community of artists and intellectuals versed

in philosophy, psychology, medicine, and education. Several years of collaboration with members of this group resulted in the training of the first generation of Gestalt therapists, a comprehensive formulation of the theory, methodology, and practice for this new approach, and a book describing it. Published by the Julian Press in 1951, the volume was entitled *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. Authorship was credited to F. S. Perls, along with Ralph Hefferline, a professor of psychology at Columbia University, and the writer Paul Goodman, perhaps best known for his subsequent best-seller, *Growing Up Absurd* (1963). Half the book consisted of reports of the results of exercises in awareness which Hefferline administered to his students. The other half was their statement of their new approach. Goodman wrote this section, basing his work on a manuscript by F. S. Perls and reflecting the common ground achieved by the collaborators. Goodman's keen and prolific mind—he wrote more than 30 books and hundreds of shorter pieces (novels, plays, poems, articles, short stories, and books of shorter essays in the fields of literature, psychology, philosophy, and social and educational criticism)—is reflected in the volume. His special respect for the many contributions to psychology of Otto Rank, perhaps especially the importance of art and the artist in understanding daily life, for Reich, and for communitarian philosophers like Kropotkin also find a place in *Gestalt Therapy*, and he is responsible for a large measure of its completeness and power. *Gestalt Therapy* remains the basic book of the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy, a cornerstone of the Gestalt approach.

AWARE RELATIONS

Here and Now: Primacy of the Present Moment

In its theory, its methodology, its practice, and its applications, Gestalt therapy is a present-centered approach. Both of the central concepts upon which Gestalt therapy is based—awareness, and the field—have meaning only in terms of the present moment. All of the important strains of philosophical, spiritual, political, scientific, and psychological thought which underpin Gestalt therapy's concentration on the phenomenology and problems of awareness share this, though some simply take it for granted while others put it front and center.

Gestalt psychology, for example, is concerned with the nature and structure of perceptual experience. This work is unavoidably present centered: By definition it is about what is perceived in the present moment. Many areas

of inquiry and knowledge are present-centered in this same way: physics, chemistry, biology, architecture, and nursing are examples. In contrast, others such as astronomy, sociology, anthropology, and political science, look to a significant extent at the past, while another group—history itself, of course, but also geology, paleontology, the law, archeology—turn their attention as much or more to the past as to the present. Holism, akin to Gestalt psychology, is another scientific and philosophical field which has made an important contribution to both the central ideas of Gestalt therapy. It is present centered in the same way as Gestalt psychology, because it is impossible to conceive of the holistic perspective without its present-centered focus.

This is also true of phenomenology. Phenomenology takes as its subject matter the study of the objects and events we perceive and the development of thorough and comprehensive methods for observing and examining them. The philosophical school called existentialism takes as its main concern modern (and present-centered) questions about the nature and meaning of living, death, and personal relations, and the nature of our relation to authorities, including God. Even psychoanalysis betrays a recognition of the importance of the here and now, in concepts such as transference and countertransference, which are ways of characterizing phenomena in the psychotherapeutic present moment, and in its current interest in what they call "the real relationship" in therapy. Reich's seminal analytic work on character analysis, where the therapy centers on the body and bodily experience in the present moment, was a step further forward in that same direction.

What does this mean, "present centered"? In essence, it means that what is important is what is actual, not what is potential or what is past, but what is here, now. What is actual is, in terms of time, always the present; in terms of location, it is what is here, in front of us. Hence this familiar phrase: the here and now. Behind this idea is the conviction that studying, describing, and observing what is available to us now will allow us to comprehend it satisfactorily. In Kierkegaard's famous phrase, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced." A present-centered approach is distinguished from a historical one, in which the present is seen as a consequence of past causes. The historical point of view stands inevitably in the present, looking backward to the past. A present-centered approach stands in the present and looks at it, here and now.

For a historical perspective the critical animating force is the question, Why? What caused these present conditions? The answers have to do with past events. This necessarily turns one's eyes away from the present moment. "To understand," wrote Poulet, "is almost the opposite of existing." A

present-centered approach raises different questions: How? What? What is this? What is the experience of this? Of what does it consist? How is this for me? How is this organized? From this point of view, the past is here, now. It is embedded in the present. The present contains everything. Memories, dreams, reflections are all present activities. They take place in the now. They concern events which occurred at some other time, as do anticipating, planning, preparing. But remembering is done in the present, planning is done in the present, reflecting is done in the present. It cannot be otherwise.

In the Gestalt present-centered approach, our interest is as much or more in the experience and awareness of remembering as it is in what is remembered. A present-centered approach leads more to attempts to embrace the present, to encompass it, and to appreciate it than it does to questions about the past (even the past in the present). A present-centered psychotherapy almost inevitably becomes a way of making it possible to better embrace the present moment, as well as a way of illuminating how we manage to miss so much of the present. Some present-centered philosophies come to despair in the recognition that our present lives are all there is. It is perhaps an article of faith in Gestalt therapy—or maybe just a profound commitment to its conception of our own human nature—that the present moment, should we be fully attuned to it and absorbed in it, is sufficient. It will allow us to make lives that are not only the best that can be lived in the circumstances, but also, granting some measure of decent circumstances, good enough.

The Nature and Shape of Awareness: Awareness as Creation

We usually think awareness is an indiscriminate, random, and passive process—that waves of light touch our eyes, that waves of sound touch our ears, that our awareness of events and people is controlled by the way they capture our attention. In our view, this is only a partial description of the character of awareness. It is a description of its passive aspect. Gestalt therapists consider awareness as an interplay in which both the individual and the environment participate. Each is both active and passive in turn.

Take this example. You are beginning to lose interest in your work, having become aware that you are hungry. Your textbooks and papers, your desk and chair fade out of your awareness as you begin thinking about the things in the refrigerator and whether the local pizza delivery place is still open. Opening the refrigerator door, you sort out its contents with your hands and eyes, shifting bottles and containers. Notice how your awareness is

shaped by what is important to you, and how you shape your reality accordingly. You see what is interesting and important to you now, at this moment—this hungry moment—reaching out into the field with your eyes: you seek out and see the refrigerator, not the dishwasher, the cans of beans, not furniture wax. Conversely, the things that are not important at this moment—your studies, your family, your sexual appetites—are phenomenologically insignificant. For the moment, they do not exist; you have caused them to disappear.

Or take this different example. It is early morning. You have been up late last night past the hour when you can count on having a good night's sleep. Sure enough, when your alarm goes off, it interrupts your sound sleep and wrenches you awake. From your point of view, your awareness is suddenly awakened by the sound of your alarm clock, as though the clock has thrust itself under your nose or shaken you by your collar. Here, the environment is active—vigorously so—from the phenomenological point of view. You, on the other hand, are positively pushed around by the force of the interruption in this particular interplay of individual and environment.

What Is Awareness?

Awareness has five distinct qualities. They are contact, sensing, excitement, figure formation, and wholeness.

Contact is the meeting of differences. For us—that is, from the point of view of our own experience—it is coming up against the other, what is different from what we think of, or feel, or experience as us. (This is discussed in the next section.)

Sensing determines the nature of awareness. *Close* sensing is sensate, touching or feeling; *far* sensing is visual and auditory perception. Although these last two are functions of our organs, they are experienced at a distance. Although most close and far sensing occurs outside us, sensing can also occur within us, where it is called “proprioception.” Thoughts and dreams are included here, as well as body sensations and emotions.

Excitement covers the range of emotional and physiological excitation from the most diffuse hum of well-being through the sharper alertness and interest to the most shrill and concentrated. If we turn to see someone on the street who reminds us of a close friend, our awareness includes contacting the person we see, the stranger in the environment. It also includes our memories, the proprioceptive contacting of ideas and feelings. Our interest, a form of excitement, might be just a mild murmur of attentiveness or it might be an arresting swell, felt as deep breathing or pleasure, tingling or flushing, or an impulse toward action. When we speak of our experience, it

is usually these qualities, awareness, sensing, and excitement, and figure formation to which we are referring.

Figure formation refers to the way awareness is shaped and developed. In this example of seeing a stranger, a central focus of interest has emerged. This is characteristic of the second phase of figure formation. Figure formation will be discussed in the section after contact.

The final fundamental quality of awareness is wholeness. The statement for which Gestalt psychology is perhaps best known, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts," embodies holistic principles. The word "greater" is meant qualitatively, not quantitatively. The whole is different from, more encompassing than what you can conclude by adding the parts together. Looking at the functioning of the components of our hands—the five digits, the palm, the back—is not sufficient to tell us what the totality is. A hand is a unity, a whole, which, while composed of elements, can be understood fully only in its entirety. In fact, it cannot be understood essentially at all except as a whole.

What is a whole? First, it is a loose translation of the German word "gestalt," meaning something which is experienced as a singularity although it is composed of distinct elements. The word "gestalt" suggests much more in its German context than do the words which are used in English as equivalents: whole, configuration, and figure. As a consequence, it is used in our own language even outside Gestalt therapy and Gestalt psychology to refer to these wholes of experience.

Anything which is experienced as a whole may be a gestalt. A person may be a whole, though he or she has a heart, a mind, a history. Yet, at another time, a person may be a part of a whole, part of a marriage or a class or a team or a music group. In these instances, each aggregate is the whole, and the individuals themselves are elements. Gestalts can be composed of any elements in the field. A hand is a grouping of physical elements; so is a body. Wholes may be groupings of ideas: The Rights of Man is one example; women's rights is another. Wholes may be composed of past events, such as a history of the Middle Ages, or of the American Revolution. Wholes may combine different kinds of elements; America, love, Buddhism, and evolution are examples.

These examples also illustrate how these wholes are given in the nature of our experience. In fact, it is basic to Gestalt thinking (brought over from Gestalt psychology) that wholes are existentially intrinsic to us. We cannot live without forming wholes of experience. Gestalt therapy is concerned with wholeness in other ways as well: with wholeness as a defining quality of healthy living; with the unity of mind, body, and spirit (the wholeness of the individual); and with ecological wholeness, the oneness of ourselves and our environment.

The Field Perspective

There are other principles which underlie Gestalt psychology and also serve as a basis for the theoretical structure of Gestalt therapy. They come from modern physics and are part of what is known as field theory. The field perspective views all phenomena as inextricably linked, part of a vast network of interaction which is called the field.

The field perspective makes the interactive nature of the field primary. From this point of view, particular things, be they objects, animate life, ideas, exist first by virtue of the interplay with each other and their relation to the entire field. Of course, their particular qualities are to be known as well, but these are never considered abstractly, by themselves, in isolation, but always in the context of the field.

As this applies to Gestalt therapy, the authors of *Gestalt Therapy* put it this way:

In any psychological investigation whatever, we must start from the interacting of the organism and its environment. Every human function is an interacting in an organism/environment field, socio-cultural, animal and physical. No matter how we theorize about impulses, drives, etc., it is always to such an interacting field that we are referring, and not to an isolated animal. [Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, p. 228]

The interactive grounding of Gestalt therapy inevitably focuses its psychotherapy on the interactions which occur in the here and now of the therapy meeting. By definition, the relation of the persons in therapy is a major focus of the therapeutic work, whether the therapy is individual, couple, group, or family therapy, or working with larger groups such as agencies, work groups, organizations, cities, or nations.

The field includes those who study or observe it. Since all the aspects of the field are related, there is no way to know a field except within it, as a part of it. Thus, studying the field means including yourself in your study. Elements of the field can be known only in terms of their relation to us, our relation to them, and of course in terms of the tools, instruments and sensibilities with which we meet and study them. There is no objectivity in field theory, because there is nothing you can objectify, nothing you can stand outside. You are related to everything; everything is different because you exist in relation to it. Since there is no objectivity, there is no subjectivity, either—you cannot have one without the other. Instead, there are only different perspectives, different positions.

Research in a field includes the researcher's own tools and perspective. Therapy includes the therapist. What takes place in therapy is created by

both the therapy and the person or persons who come to therapy, and the therapeutic work is the work done by all the individuals in the room. These principles underlie the conviction shared by Gestalt therapists that technical and theoretical knowledge is not sufficient for the thorough training of Gestalt therapists. Intensive personal therapy is required as well. Since the therapist is part of the therapeutic work, effective psychotherapy demands the therapist's fullest measure of self-knowledge, so that his or her contribution to the therapy can be fully known.

In the 20th century, the field perspective has begun to replace the Newtonian or mechanistic scientific perspective which emerged in Western civilization at the onset of the Enlightenment. It is useful to contrast them. The Newtonian universe is a universe composed of subjective experience and reality, consisting of objects which are connected in the way billiard balls are connected, the ways the parts of a machine are connected. They are connected by contrivances and collisions which move them without changing them in any other way. Reality in this perspective exists independently of our experience, outside us. It is objective reality, the pool players' place, God's viewpoint—outside of things. Because reality is objective, facts—right and wrong—and objective truth are possible in this universe.

In contrast, in the relativistic universe—the term comes from the relativity theories which first defined the new physics—"facts" are replaced by probabilities dependent on context. Objectivity disappears, since there are no independent objects, no view outside the field.

Elements of the field are altered by their position in relation to other things. Nothing is independent. In a relativistic universe, we are part of what we are observing, describing, or measuring. In the Newtonian universe, the emphasis is on objects and their properties. In the relativistic one, the emphasis is on interaction, and objects and their properties are inseparable and known only in the different contexts in which they are found, as wholes and parts of whole events.

Although the older mechanistic approach has been replaced in modern science, the reader will recognize that the peoples of most Western cultures, including our own, still see the world in this way. Naturally, most psychological theories are also of this type. They look for the individual and the individual's psychological properties, ego states, cognition, tendencies to self-realization or to individuation. These are objects, the equivalents of the planets in a Newtonian universe. Alternatively, the new perspective looks at the dimensions of interplay in time and space, the effects of relatedness over time. Its terminology reflects relatedness. Important wholes in the field, for example, are characterized as vague or pervasive, looming or far reaching, concentrated or diffused, directly or complexly related. This contrasts with

the equivalent mechanistic terms, which include "core," as in core neurosis; "deep"; "early," as in early trauma; "low" and "high," and as in higher functioning, for instance. The model of the latter is historical rather than present centered, and three or even two dimensional rather than four dimensional (the fourth dimension is time, which in this context is process), as well as object oriented.

A principal conclusion of the Gestalt psychologists shows how the interactive field perspective and a phenomenological, awareness orientation are unified. Their experiments demonstrated that organizing our experience is intrinsic to our nervous systems. In the very moment we perceive or sense, we organize what we experience. Life as we live it is already organized.

If what exists is shaped, created as it is apprehended, the field is part of our awareness; our awareness is part of the field. The interaction is primary. Reality and experience are inseparable. It is impossible to separate the two. This is not the same as saying we structure reality, for that suggests that reality exists, out there, and we structure it. Rather, there is only the reality we know, the organized reality of our experience. The field is ourselves, too; we and the environment. It is a whole composed of us and the environment. The Gestalt psychologists sought to define the principles by which our experience is structured in our interplay with the rest of the field. Gestalt therapy works to attune each individual to the organizing principles themselves, by concentrating on awareness, the primacy of relations, and their unity.

CONTACT

The Gestalt therapy interest in awareness in the field leads to a focus on the relation of the elements of the field. Seen from our individual point of view, rather than another position in the field, it is a focus on our relation to the environment. We call this encounter, or meeting, or even dialogue, but primarily we call it contact.

Contact can be described in terms of its distinguishing characteristic, its location, and its primary dimension. Its distinguishing quality is the meeting of differences. Its location we call the contact boundary, and the fundamental organizing quality of contact we call figure/ground. The following sections describe the nature, organization, intentions, creative dimensions, and experience of contact.

The Meeting of Differences

Ordinarily, "contact" means to connect, to meet, or to join. We say, "3-2-1-contact," and we say that a person makes good contact with another person. We say, as in this savvy and bellicose song, "Do you take me for such a fool / To think I'd make contact / With the one who tries to hide what he don't know to begin with?" Gestalt therapists use contact in a way which includes this meaning of meeting and refines it.

Contact is a quality of awareness which involves the meeting of differences. From the phenomenological, first-person perspective, contact is the experience of difference. Without difference, there is no contact. If you touch your own fingers, you will feel in one finger the pressure of the other. If you do not, you will not feel the meeting—there is no contact. For contact, there must be the experience of difference. Think of this as a perspective on personal relations: In order for people to meet, they must touch where they are different. Without knowing how we are different, there is no relationship, because relating must involve two. (An application of this: A couple in which each partner is trying to be like the other is avoiding contact, avoiding relationship.)

There are times when the field is not divided in this way, into disparate meaningful elements—in the kind of landscape in which sea merges into sky and nothing stands out, for instance. If there is no difference, no contact, no meeting, what is there? What is left besides contact? What is left is the awareness of the undifferentiated field, the experience that nothing is different—or, since these formulations are experiential ones, that nothing makes a difference: Nothing matters. Sometimes it is the experience of oneness, belonging, being a part of a whole. Before the field is separated into foreground and background, it is called undifferentiated. There is no focus. If we contact the other, we experience the difference between us. (The difference is between us, and it also joins us. Actually, it is more accurate to say there is no *between* at all, only differences touching.) If we do not experience the difference, we do not meet. We may instead feel part of the other, or we may feel indifferent.

The hallmark of contact is excitement. It accompanies the encounter in the same way the heat and light of the sun accompany each other. The relation is not causal. Excitement is an aspect of the contact. It implies feeling and concern, energetic response or action, perhaps pleasure, curiosity, and mobilization. It stands opposite to indifference. It is not the same as pleasure, and figure formation should not be confused with pleasure seeking. Even when enjoyment is present, it is not the point of figure formation. "Enjoyment is not a goal," wrote Goodman, "it is a feeling that accompanies important ongoing activity" (1960).

The Contact Boundary: The Venue of Contact

“Scarborough Fayre” is an English folk song with its roots going back nearly a thousand years, but it remains alive in cultures where English is spoken. It surfaced once again, in the 1960s, as a popular song. It is a beautiful, bitter song of love betrayed.

Are you going to Scarborough Fayre?
Parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme—
Remember me to one who lives there
He once was a true love of mine.

But he is no longer a true lover. He was untrue. He will not remember the singer as the singer remembers him. In a succeeding verse, the singer sets a task for the faithless lover. The task illustrates the singer’s bitterness and the impossibility of the situation.

Tell him to buy me an acre of land—
Parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme—
Between the salt water and the sea shore
And he will be a true love of mine.

He will never be true, because there is no land at all where the salt water meets the seashore. There is nothing at all between the water and the sand. And yet, what happens here, at this juncture of sea and sand, is central to Gestalt therapy. Let us look and see what does exist here.

There is nothing—no *thing*—in between, nothing between the water and the sand. There is no physical entity, as the sand is and the sea is. There is nothing additional to the sea and the land. But there is the shoreline, at this point where the salt water is meeting the seashore.

What is the shoreline, though, if it is not a physical entity? The shoreline is an encounter, a meeting, a venue—“the locale of a gathering,” according to *Webster’s Dictionary*, from the Middle French and Latin “to come.”

When the ocean’s waters are lapping the beach, the sand taking in the waters, they are meeting. If the shoreline is not a physical entity, what is it? It is a “whole of experience,” the kind of interplay we discussed under field theory. We usually call this actuality of occurrence an event, or a process. (Look carefully. We do not see the shoreline. We see the joining. It is a joining without a joint.)

We find the shoreline whenever and wherever water touches sand. The existence of the shoreline requires sea and sand, and it requires that they meet. Without these, there is no event called a shoreline. If sand touches sand, we call it sand, or sand dunes, or sometimes a beach. If water touches

water, we call it an ocean, a lake, a river. Only if sand touches water can we call it a shoreline. (Sometimes we use the word "beach" to describe the unity of sand and water, but that is a different whole altogether—not a meeting at all. Not all gestalts are meetings.)

This meeting consists of the touching of two things which are different: water and sand. In Gestalt therapy, the meeting of differences is called contact. So, this meeting of sand and sea is contact. The event that is created by this meeting of differences is called the contact boundary. In this example, the contact boundary is the shoreline.

The contact boundary takes into account both the differences between the elements which are meeting and also the unity of their meeting, the whole created by it. The contact boundary always has this duality within it: One, it acknowledges the differences, without which there would be no contact. Two, it acknowledges what unifies them, without which there would be no gestalt, no whole of experience. This is a special use of the word "boundary," which most often suggests only separation. In Gestalt therapy, it suggests union as strongly.

The boundary does not belong to one side or to the other. It is not the sand's boundary or the sea's. It is a collaborative effort created by the meeting. The boundary belongs to itself, to the meeting, not to either of the elements, the sand or the sea. In Gestalt therapy, we say it is a *function* of the meeting. Other psychologies use concepts and phrases involving the term boundary: ego boundary, for instance. Or we say, "He tried to push past my boundaries." The contact boundary is not that kind of boundary. It belongs to the encounter, not the individual or the ego. Another difference is that the boundary belongs to all meetings in the field, even those which do not involve persons—the salt water and the seashore, for instance. Still another difference is that contact boundary exists only as long as the boundary event itself. It is dissolved when the meeting ends. And, to repeat, the boundary is an event, a venue, not an entity.

The special qualities of the contact boundary are captured in this old story.

A Zen master, the seventeenth in a direct line of teachers of the Dharma from Gotama Buddha, when walking with his disciple, asked about the wind bells suspended from the four corners of the temple roof. "What is ringing," he said, "the wind or the bells?" The disciple said, "The wind is not ringing, the bells are not ringing, the mind is ringing."

Dogen, a later master who first taught Zen in Japan, commented on this story, "It is the wind ringing, it is the chimes ringing, it is the blowing ringing, it is the ringing ringing."

Foreground and Background: Contact's First Differentiation

Experientially, the field is usually organized into a center and a periphery. The center is the foreground, the figure or gestalt; the periphery is called the background, or the ground; and this primary structure is known as figure/ground. The foreground contains what is central, important, focal, meaningful to the present moment. The background contains what is irrelevant, unimportant, immaterial to the present moment. Because contact requires difference, figure/ground is a function of contact. When there is no contact, the field is not differentiated; there is no figure and no background.

The field is organized in this way according to our interests and the interests of other elements of the field. It is organized in this way because our nervous systems can do nothing other than this. This is how we experience. When we become interested, background and foreground appear. As the figure develops, with each change, each passing moment, the field—foreground and background together—is continuously reorganized. This process is called figure formation. It will be described in the next section.

At this very moment, you, the reader, have probably formed a figure that includes the book you are reading, the words on the page, related psychological concepts that you have studied, perhaps also the notes you are taking and the scratching sound your pen makes. Perhaps you are also aware, though probably less centrally, of your sitting position and the quality of the light which illuminates this book. Most of this is figural awareness, the center of your attention. Perhaps some of it—the lighting, maybe, or the sound of your pen, or your posture—is in the near background, along with such aspects of your present contact as the gravitational field in which you are adjusting your posture and the nature and quality of your breathing (slow or fast, deep or shallow, anxious or tense or relaxed, and so on). They may become figural as you read these words.

Farther yet into the background are a host of assimilated and partly assimilated experiences and undeveloped capabilities, from the earliest days of your life to recent times, from school learning to personal relations, including feelings about yourself, the place you live in, ideas about your future, your ability to understand your native tongue and perhaps other languages, musical and physical talents. This part of the background includes ideas, conclusions, memories, attitudes, feelings and beliefs. These may be true or false, accurate or not; our experience will likely include distortions of what we have heard or seen, and will surely include entirely fictitious elements (from books, plays, movies as well.) At any given time, these constitute a substantial part of the background.

Some of these elements remain continuously in the background, virtually irretrievable: memories of learning to speak, or of coming to love your parents, perhaps, or the way you developed your feelings about your native country or city, for instance. They are so thoroughly embedded throughout the farthest reaches of the ground that they will be brought to awareness only if the very ground of your being is challenged. This was the case for the allegiance of many Americans in the 1960s, as a consequence of the Vietnam War, and it is typically the case in a thoroughgoing psychotherapy.

The background is, for the most part, what is outside our awareness. In Gestalt therapy, it replaces most of what is usually termed "the unconscious" in other psychologies. The background, the elements of the field of which we are presently unaware, is dynamic and organized. The background is a field concept, not an individualistic one, as the unconscious is. It is a unification of the parts of oneself and the parts of the environment which are not in the present figure.

The background also has none of the connotations of the unconscious which suggest malevolence, nor those which suggest the unknown and unknowable. To the contrary, the background is always present as the foundation for contact, framing and supporting our present experience. It holds the figure together and is available to awareness as figures emerge and develop. We are continually in contact with aspects of the background, out of awareness. This can be seen in the way sleepers adjust their postures, taking into account the size of the bed and the overlay of blankets. A more vivid example occurs when the background thrusts itself into the foreground in emergencies, as when we wake bolt upright in the middle of the night, hearing an untoward noise in the house, or when a mother wakes out of the deepest sleep because her baby's breathing pattern has changed.

Creative Adjustment: The Design of Contact

Contacting is the way we change and grow. It is how we come to grips with our lives, organizing the field to make possible the best achievements and solutions it will support. At the same time, contacting is the way in which the environment, the rest of the field, adjusts us to it. We call this interplay, all of it, creative adjustment, because the result is assimilation and growth and because the process of adjustment is mutual. In creative adjustment, our achievements and solutions are made by us and given to us both in the give and take of our creative partnership with the rest of the field. Adjustment is creative as well because it cannot follow a formula. It must be accomplished uniquely, according to each opportunity. Our achievements

and solutions must be novel if they are to be the best each situation can produce.

This creative activity is a given for us as we live. It is living. Out of our needs and appetites, our wishes and desires, our curiosity, we encounter the environment and work and rework it to suit our own interests. And, out of the needs and appetites, wishes and desires of the environment, it encounters and molds us. The result is a true universal ecology.

From our first-person perspective, creative adjustment is organismic self-regulation, the way we use the abilities inherent in us to make the best of any situation. Conceiving of our lives in this way, as creative achievements, while unusual in psychology, is not unique to Gestalt therapy. Psychologists from Freud onward have been fascinated with the creative life of artists. Otto Rank, an intimate of Freud and an important earlier contributor to the growth of psychoanalysis, was singularly important in recognizing the kinship of the creative process of the artist and the everyday activities of ordinary people. For this reason, and others, his was a major influence on the development of Gestalt therapy.

All contact is creative adjustment, not only contact which results in new solutions and vistas. All of it is organismic self-regulation, the best we can do in the present circumstances—though some of it is not very good at all. The vitality of free functioning is worlds away from the dullness of apathy and indifference and the peculiar urgency, the driven quality which accompanies so much unsatisfying behavior. But each individual, even the one who continually avoids other possibilities in life—someone, for example, who has the reverse Midas touch, and can turn anything into dross—is, even so, doing the best he or she can. Though the lively, uniquely varied responses and reactions of free functioning are lacking, replaced by contacting that is routinized and stereotypic, this is creative adjustment. (Surely you know someone who insists on steering a destructive course, turning all possibilities to the same conclusion.) Creativity can serve many ends.

Creative adjustment replaces the conventional term “resistance” in the vocabulary of Gestalt therapy. Resistance is the usual psychological characterization for the individual’s seeming unwillingness to change or grow, or to accept the therapist’s direction. Implied in it is the conviction that the person in therapy being resistant should stop doing so. But resistance is creative adjustment, and organismic self-regulation. It is integral to the individual’s way of being in the world, and no approach driving at holistic solutions can ask a person to set aside parts of themselves. The goal in Gestalt therapy, and any holistic approach, is integration—or, in this case, reintegration—not amputation.

According to this principle, and as will be seen in the succeeding chapters of this volume, Gestalt therapy practice replaces the conventional emphasis

on overcoming, breaking through, or ignoring resistances with procedures which encourage and explore these creative adjustments. By taking them seriously, by bringing them into awareness, individuals can wrestle with their own conflicts and discover their own way to integrate these seemingly opposed desires into new wholes.

GESTALT FORMATION

Figure Formation: The Shape of Contact

Contacting, the way we work with the environment to create the most satisfying solutions, has a special organization and structure. Influenced again by Gestalt psychology, Gestalt theory describes in detail the way in which experience and action in the world are inevitably and inherently structured. It is an organization which shapes our phenomenology. It is called gestalt formation, or figure formation, or, more fully, gestalt or figure formation and destruction.

The Gestalt psychologists identified many characteristics governing the formation of visual figures in their attempts to understand figure formation. One researcher was able to find 114 of these laws, but there are perhaps a dozen basic ones. These include good organization, definite outlines, satisfying (good) form, closure, stability, balance, and proportion. These formulations are essentially aesthetic in character. Gestalt therapists have adapted and modified them in order to be able to characterize the entirety of experience, not only the perceptual aspect. Therefore, Gestalt therapists speak as well of figures which have power, liveliness, vigor, unity, and clarity, figures which are rich, compelling, satisfying, complete. Good figures have these qualities sufficiently or abundantly, bad ones have them less, or lack them entirely. At a certain point, the dearth of these characteristics turns poor figures into nonexistent ones. Perhaps these illustrations will clarify this point.

Any group of people—a class, a therapy group, a professional association, a nation—linked richly and often by interactions and interchange, with strong feelings among the members or a task which engages them all, is a good figure: clearly defined, lively, well organized, cohesive. An apathetic group, without much common purpose, is not. At the extreme, an apathetic group is no group at all, but simply an aggregate of individuals—elements in the field, but no figure at all. Acting as though an aggregate is a

group—perhaps because you think you should be involved with them, though you do not care to be—makes for a bad figure.

If you do not like the movie you are seeing and lose interest in it, the accompanying experiential figure will be diffuse, lacking clear outlines and vitality. Perhaps it will lack a sense of coherence altogether. You begin to think of walking out or slip into reveries of other situations or things you would rather do. Making yourself pay attention is no solution; it forces the figure, a contradiction in terms (a split figure, not a unified one).

The concept of marriage is a good figure, well defined and vital, though the outlines are not always clear, and for many it is not a figure of interest. A particular marriage may be a good or a bad figure. A “bad” marriage may be a bad figure: ill defined, dull, and at the same time rigid, but even with an abundance of antagonism and difficulty, it may be full of excitement, vitality, definition, good outlines, and so on.

Figure Formation: Health and Its Absence

In nature a repulsive caterpillar turns into a lovely butterfly. But with human beings, it is the other way round: a lovely butterfly turns into a repulsive caterpillar.

—Chekhov

We consider the ability to form and destroy good figures paramount to health. The ability to create lively, well-formed, clearly defined figures which make the most adequate use of the resources of the field *is* health itself. This is called free functioning. It is called *free* functioning because we can range anywhere in the field, through all of our abilities and knowledge and experience and everything present in the environment, to find those things which will make the most apt contributions to emerging figures. Our freedom consists not in being free to choose whatever suits us individually, because it is not only our personal needs, wishes, desires, and interests that control how figures best emerge and grow. The figure's needs determine the best figure. Free functioning is the freedom to seek out anything which will contribute to what is emerging, freedom to contribute whatever the figure requires, and freedom to follow the figure wherever it takes us, giving ourselves over entirely to its working.

Ill health, by contrast, is functioning which is not free. It is figure formation in a field so impoverished that good figures become impossible; or, it is figure formation in a promising field—but one in which we cannot partake freely, because we must avoid or are ignorant of elements in it which are at the same time essential to emerging figures. Instead of being whole, we are cut off from our essentials. We become split in two, into the parts of ourselves