

Editorial

JOSEPH MELNICK, Ph.D.

I AM PLEASED TO PRESENT OUR CURRENT ISSUE consisting of papers from the third annual Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT) Conference held in Cleveland in May of 1998. I am writing this editorial at an interesting time, for just in the last month, I have attended two important Gestalt conferences. The first was the Gestalt International Organization and Systems Development (OSD) Conference, May 13–16, 1999, in Cleveland, Ohio, and the second was the fourth annual AAGT Conference held this Spring in New York, May 28–31.

OSD Conference

The Gestalt OSD conference was the first international gathering of its kind.¹ Although the application of Gestalt principles to organizations is not a new endeavor, its popularity is rapidly increasing, and the conference was certainly a testimony to its growth. Gestalt practitioners are well suited to lend their expertise to the dilemmas faced by organizations dealing with the ever-quicken pace of change as multicultural and multinational organizations reconfigure through mergers, acquisitions and alliances.

The conference consisted of a wide array of workshops, with each having a strong experiential component. Gestalt concepts, such as building ground, multiple figures, emerging patterns, dealing with resistance, unit of work, and the experience cycle, formed the theoretical ground for many of the presentations. Some examples are: The Workforce of the 21st Century—Implications for Gestalt OSD; Generation X and the Gestalt Approach to Team Development; Applying High-Contact Modes in Large Group Change Settings; Complexity Theory and Gestalt OSD; Gestalt Organizational Work in Religious

¹ There was one other Gestalt organizational conference, though smaller in scope, organized by Carolyn Lukensmeyer and Edwin Nevis in 1983.

Settings; and Working with Resistance in the Executive Coaching Process.

AAGT Conference

The AAGT Conference was equally stimulating. It matched the OSD conference in its international flavor, (approximately 30 percent of both conferences consisted of non-U.S. residents). The theme of the conference was Bridging Our Diversity, Expanding Our Vision, and many of its workshops were also cutting edge. Some examples are: Self as Story; Gestalt Narration, Narrative Gestalt; How Politics, Policy and Reimbursement Impact Gestalt Therapy in the World; Awareness of Ground: Therapy with Diverse Lesbian Couples; Crises as Flourishing; A Gestalt Approach to Holistic Health: A Model to Work with Illness; Contact and Intimacy in Gestalt Group Therapy; and Pathways of Song: Sensing Self Through Singing.

At both conferences there were numerous instances in which participants were required to make decisions and had difficulty doing so. A closer look at these situations indicates confusion about how to build and maintain good relationships while at the same time carrying out organizational tasks. Even the organizational practitioners—with presumably greater sophistication in these matters—seemed hampered at times by emphasizing work at the interpersonal levels as the major aspect of decision making.

That this issue exists for Gestalt organizations is not very surprising because Gestalt therapy was never formulated to solve large system dilemmas.² The Gestalt approach rests on a base of awareness, authenticity, and contact, in short, the creation of intimacy, not the solving of work problems or tasks by groups.

Glancing back at our historical roots, we know that Gestalt therapy first gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s at a time when psychotherapy was beginning to rebel against the highly structured medical model format. By focusing on the here and now, dialogue, and the diminishment of patient-therapist hierarchy, the Gestalt approach helped redefine the therapeutic relationship. It was transformed into an *intimate relationship* in which *awareness of self and the other* and *contact* were the guiding principles.

² Although the founders of Gestalt therapy had a great interest in society as a whole and in large order change, the Gestalt approach was originally designed for individual psychotherapy and only later applied to intimate and semi-intimate systems such as couples, families, and therapy groups.

The important question that emerged from these two conferences is whether this model can successfully be applied to large groups where the goals include, but are not limited to, the creation of contact.

I would label our traditional way of relating as *intimate* and acknowledge that Gestaltists are drawn to it by *training and character*. A second model I would call *strategic*, and I believe that this approach is less consistent with how Gestaltists live their lives.

In a presentation at the OSD conference, entitled *Intimacy in the Post Modern Organization*, Stephanie Backman and I (1999) discussed some of the basic differences in the intimate versus strategic approaches.³

INTIMATE ⁴	STRATEGIC
Joining (associating) is the goal	Product is the goal
Nonhierarchical	Hierarchical
Consensual	Democratic–authoritative
Fewer constraints	More time limits
Focus on awareness	Focus on action
Here and now	Future oriented
Process	Structure
Spontaneous	Planful

In our presentation we argued that intimate systems, (couples, friends, etc.), often run into trouble with tasks and problems because they do not have enough strategic skills and that strategic systems often fail with tasks because of the strategists' lack of intimacy skills and concerns. Maybe the question should be "What is the correct blend of intimate and strategic perspectives and skills necessary to move our organizations forward?"

The Polsters

The AAGT conference also featured a tribute to Erving and Miriam Polster, who are stepping down from the running of the Gestalt Training Institute of San Diego, which they co-founded 25 years ago. Beyond their formal contributions, it is their presence, generosity, and authen-

³Strategic versus Intimate approach was primarily developed by Sonia March Nevis, along with Edwin Nevis, Joseph Zinker, Stephanie Backman, and me.

⁴This artificial division of experience into categories is meant solely for illustrative purposes. Further, because of a number of significant societal influences such as the feminist movement and the flattening of organizational hierarchies, many, if not most, organizations are becoming more intimate—for good and bad. Ironically, I find that it is often more difficult to teach strategic skills to intimate systems than the reverse.

ticity that most stand out. As individuals, they are excellent examples of living Gestalt theory. We are pleased that they will continue to write, teach, and serve on our editorial board and wish them well.

Our Current Issue

Our current issue reflects the diversity of the Gestalt approach. The authors come from England, Brazil, Australia, and Mexico, in addition to the United States. And what of their topics?

We begin with Selma Ciornai's keynote address, "Paths for the Future: From a Culture of Indifference Toward a Gestalt of Hope." Ciornai describes Gestalt therapy as it has evolved in Brazil from the 1960s through the present. She talks of it within the context of an evolving culture and focuses on how it has affected both its practitioners and its patients. Ciornai challenges us to focus more seriously on the interrelationship between the personal and the social and cultural.

Our second article is "A Gestalt Approach to the Treatment of Gambling" by Norman F. Shub. After first giving an overview of gambling in the United States, Shub asks the important question, "What can we gain by applying a Gestalt perspective to this problem?" He views gambling as more of a characterological than an addiction issue, and details an elegant treatment model that emphasizes a family context and a supportive environment. He ends with a case study that demonstrates the model at work.

Our next article is Alan B. Meara's "The Butterfly Effect in Therapy: Not Every Flap of a Butterfly's Wing . . ." In this wide-ranging essay, Meara presents a new way of viewing and analyzing group process and development. Grounding his article in Gestalt theory, he draws from Group Dynamics and the emerging field of Chaos and Complexity Theory. He ends with a creative and intriguing "mini-experiment" by demonstrating how his model can be tested empirically.

Next we present Guadalupe Amescua's "Autism in Gestalt Theory: Toward a Gestalt Theory of Personality." Drawing from Gestalt principles such as contact and boundary disturbance and her extensive experience, Amescua presents a model for the treatment of autism. She ends with a detailed case study that helps to illuminate her theoretical concepts.

Cara Garcia, Susan Baker, and Robert deMayo present "Academic Anxieties: A Gestalt Approach." They apply the Gestalt perspective to specific types of academic anxieties, utilizing basic Gestalt concepts such as boundary disturbances, the safe emergency and definition of anxiety. The paper is filled with specific suggestions concerning how to work with academic anxiety as well as an excellent case example.

Our last paper is Peter Philippson's "Cultural Action for Freedom: Paulo Freire as Gestaltist." Philippson describes the philosophy and "liberating education" of Freire, one of the most influential, widely known educators of our time. He finds much in common with a Gestalt approach, including self as relational and growth as arising from dialogue and interaction. However, Freire has a specific concern—the political dimension. He believes that we must face the culture of domination. Those who are being subjugated must be willing to confront those that dominate. Otherwise dialogue is impossible.

We end this issue with a series of abstracts from presenters at the 1998 AAGT conference. Some of these abstracts represent papers that we were unable to accept because of space limitations. Others consist of presentations that were submitted as abstracts, not full-length articles.

By presenting these abstracts, we hope to allow you, the reader, to be informed regarding recent, cutting-edge work with the Gestalt approach. We also hope to encourage you to contact these authors to learn more about their interests or to initiate dialogue, if your interests are similar.

One last bit of news that I would like to share is the inauguration of our *Gestalt Review* web page. It will feature articles, letters, and much more. Please visit us at <http://www.GestaltReview.com>.

References

- Backman, P. & Melnick, J. (1999), *Intimacy in the post-Modern Organization*. Workshop presented at the first GIC International OSD Conference, Cleveland, OH.
- Perls, F., Hefferline, R. & Goodman, P. (1951), *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. New York: Julian Press.