

Editorial

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AS A GRADUATE STUDENT IN THE 1960s, I became fascinated by community psychology. I remember going to sensitivity labs, Black-White encounter groups, making home visits to families; and doing training and organizational work with nonprofit agencies. It was during this period that I and many others discovered Gestalt therapy.

Many of us originally entered the field, drawn not by individual therapy, but by the possibility of applying our therapeutic learning to the community. We wished to touch segments of society beyond the reach and interest of traditional psychotherapy. It was a time of optimism. We believed that the tenants of psychotherapy, shaped to fit different contexts, could literally change the world.

In retrospect, this *human potential movement* was “a period of great flowering, not because organizations changed that much, but because it became possible to change the consciousness of large numbers of individuals in all walks of life” (Nevis, 1997, p. 117). Gestalt therapy played a fundamental role in this movement. For example, there was Eliot Shapiro applying Gestalt therapy to school systems, Fritz Perls building his Canadian commune, and of course, Paul Goodman committing his heart and soul to the antiwar movement.

I am uncertain as to all the reasons why this movement seemed to diminish in the 1970s and 1980s. Whatever the reasons, our society became more conservative, and psychotherapy became more insular and narrow. It shifted from an emphasis on growth and expanded awareness to the curing of illness and reduction of symptoms. Whereas symptoms in the 1960s had been viewed as reflecting a larger environmental context, by the 1980s for many, the symptom was the disease.

The pendulum is beginning to swing back. Gestalt-trained people are moving out into the community, and they are making a difference. They are working with and within political, legal, and religious systems; with nonprofit agencies; with environmental groups; and with the economically disadvantaged. Gestalt values that emphasize awareness, use of self as an instrument, and resistance as the existence of

multiple realities are fundamental components of our field theory base from which to work with(in) the community.

Gestalt Review, from its inception, has been committed to printing articles that highlight the reemergence of the Gestalt approach as an agent of social change. Because of this commitment, I am especially pleased to complete our third year of publication by featuring two articles that are outstanding examples of the application of Gestalt principles to the community.

Our Current Issue

We begin this issue with Beverly Reifman's interview of Joyce Wheeler, a district court judge who has had extensive Gestalt training. In this personal and wide-ranging interview, Wheeler describes how her Gestalt training has become her ground as a judge, by discussing such topics as gender, self-support, and transference issues. She discusses how she has learned to hear "on many different levels . . . hearing in your body, your heart, and your intellect." Most of all she describes her commitment to maintaining a stance of openness and integrity in her work.

In our second article "An Experiment in Community Psychotherapy," Nigel Copsey and Talia Levine Bar-Yoseph describe their application of Gestalt principles in the inner city of London, an area rich in cultural and religious diversity. Arguing that providers of mental health services have failed to recognize the importance of religions and cultural belief systems, they discuss their experiment in creating a system of community support that is neither western nor clinical. What it is instead is the respectful application of Gestalt principles within a specific cultural milieu. This ongoing experiment in social action that moves away from traditional therapeutic methods results in the co-creation of relevant novelty.

In response, Miriam Munoz Polit agrees with Copsey and Bar-Yoseph that the Gestalt approach, with its emphasis on phenomenology, is well suited to address people within their own cultural context. However, she responds from her own cultural perspective, as a woman who has spent a good deal of her life practicing community psychology in Mexico. She describes her country's resistance to outsiders "through Latin American eyes," cautioning the authors, as well as all of us, not to project our beliefs on the individuals that we serve. Last, in contrast to Copsey and Bar-Yoseph, she describes poignantly how religious faith in Mexico has severely damaged the mental health of communities.

Copsey and Bar-Yoseph respond by agreeing with Polit on the dangers of religions that view "anything psychological as dangerous." They argue for the opening of a dialogue between the worlds of faith and psychology.

In "Narrative Formation and Gestalt Closure: Helping Clients Make Sense of 'Disequilibrium' Through Stories in the Therapeutic Setting," Peter Mortola attempts to reconcile a Gestalt approach with that of narrative therapy. Elaborating on the theoretical links between the two, Mortola argues convincingly that both approaches at their core focus on helping the client make sense out of the "disequilibrium of experience." Utilizing a transcript of a case, he describes a therapeutic process of moving from equilibrium to disequilibrium and to a modified equilibrium. He ends by listing the important implications of his analysis to the Gestalt approach, especially in working with children.

Backman in her response discusses two similarities and one significant difference between the two approaches. She agrees with Mortola that a well-formed narrative and a collaborative process are essential to both approaches. However, she believes that there is an important difference between the two. She believes that in their attempt to minimize therapist/patient hierarchy, narrative therapists have substituted a chaotic and poorly formed format. Thus, the approach focuses on intrapsychic work, resulting in a narrow and unnovel outcome.

Lobb, in her commentary, traces the use of narrative in Gestalt therapy and emphasizes the contribution of Polster. She points out that narrative at its core is a relational event inserted in a field. The individual to whom the story is being told is as important as the client in creating the narrative.

Mortola's article is followed by "Clinical Films as Training Tools: A Comparison of REBT and Gestalt Therapy with Children" by Sheila Aspinall and Iris Fodor. Students reported expected differences in the two approaches, but also some exciting similarities.

We end this issue of *Gestalt Review* with James Kepner's in-depth review of *Touch in Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice* by Edward W. L. Smith, Pauline Rose Clance, and Suzanne Imes (eds.). The fact that this book has been written is noteworthy, for as Kepner points out it is the first overview of this topic. It also comes at a time when touch is viewed with suspicion by many.

Kepner, drawing from his wide experience as a body-oriented therapist, trainer, and author, raises a number of intriguing questions in his commentary. While lauding much of the book, he questions whether it is too "culture bound." He expresses concern that issues related to gender, cross-gender, cross-ethnic, and cross-racial touch are not addressed.

Joel Latner, the editor of "Back Pages," adds a more personal perspective in his commentary. He talks of the beauty of touch and laments its disappearance from the American scene.

His commentary provides an excellent segue back to my opening comments. As I said previously, Gestalt therapy is by definition contextually sensitive. Therefore, it can flourish in the East End of London or rural areas of Mexico and inform a judge in her legal work. Gestalt

therapy, at its core, is a philosophy of life that transcends its psychotherapeutic roots.

From the Editor

I would like to apologize for the lateness of this issue and for the delay in the completion of our web page. We expect to have Gestaltrev.com up and running soon.

As I write this, our first issue of 2000 is in production and is expected to be off press this spring. It features an exciting dialogue concerning issues of sexuality in therapy, training, and consultation. These five writers approach this controversial topic from historical, contemporary, ethical, legal, personal, and of course, Gestalt perspectives. In addition, this issue also includes a conversation devoted to marital therapy and a research study focusing on mysticism and Gestalt resistances.

In the new millennium, *Gestalt Review* will be offering stimulating and exciting articles covering a wide range of topics such as Gestalt in the boardroom, an approach to mourning, group therapy, and self-esteem.

If you have not subscribed, now is the time to do so!

Reference

Nevis, E. (1997), Gestalt therapy and organization development: A historical perspective. *Gestalt Review*, 1:2, pp. 110–130.