

Narrative Formation and Gestalt Closure: Helping Clients Make Sense of “Disequilibrium” Through Stories in the Therapeutic Setting

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THERE IS AN IMPORTANT LINK between Gestalt theory and the narrative theory. Gestalt theorists (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951; Latner, 1973) describe how individuals are constantly engaged in an ongoing process of losing and then reestablishing organismic equilibrium. In a parallel way, narrative theorists (Labov, 1982; Bruner, 1990; Linde, 1993) describe how we tell stories about troubling events in our everyday experience in order to regain some sense of equilibrium in our lives. The important shared concept at the heart of both Gestalt theory and narrative theory is that we are constantly addressing and attempting to make sense of “disequilibrium” in our experience.

In this article I will make visible how individuals work to reestablish a sense of equilibrium in their lives through the stories they tell. I will also show how these efforts parallel what Gestalt theorists have described as the process of Gestalt formation and closure. Through this analysis, I hope to show how a working knowledge and awareness of narrative theory can help Gestalt practitioners in their work with clients in the therapeutic context.

In Part One of this article, I present a case example in the form of a transcript of therapeutic work between Dr. Violet Oaklander (“Dr. O” hereafter) and a 14-year-old girl named Elisa. In Part Two, I elaborate on the theoretical links between Gestalt therapy theory and narrative theory before analyzing, in Part Three, the exchange between Dr. O and

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Elisa. In Part Four, I outline implications of this study for Gestalt practitioners.

Part One: A Case Example

In this section, I present a transcript from a therapeutic demonstration that took place during a 1997 summer training given by Dr. O on the “Gestalt therapy approach with children” (Oaklander, workshop materials, 1997). In the transcript Dr. O is working with Elisa, a “child guest” in the workshop who had also been in therapy with Dr. O over the previous year. A significant issue for Elisa at that time in her life had been the separation from her two brothers, Matthew and Jason, both of whom were being held in juvenile detention centers. (All names and identifying information in the transcript have been changed for purposes of privacy and confidentiality.)

The 24-minute demonstration in the workshop between Dr. O and Elisa was meant to show participants how Dr. O worked with children in the therapeutic context. Dr. O and Elisa both sat on the floor in front of the 25 workshop participants. While working with Dr. O, Elisa used pastels and large sheets of paper that were spread out on the floor to draw. In the transcript presented below, italics are used to denote words that were spoken with emphasis, and hyphens are used to denote a brief pause in speech. Additional descriptive information, when necessary, is provided in parentheses.

Transcript of Dr. O and Elisa

Dr. O: Because you’ve mentioned your brothers, Matthew and Jason, I’d like you to maybe draw a picture of that feeling you have missing them. You know, like colors, lines, and shapes. . . .

Elisa: Okay—With Jason . . .

Dr. O: You know, *how you feel* about not having your brothers around anymore. . . .

Elisa: With Jason, I lived with him longer and so—it feels like sometimes, when you’re just sitting there . . .

Dr. O: Hm, mmm.

Elisa: . . . There’s just like this really big, dark tunnel. I never really told anybody before, but there’s a big chunk missing. Because Jason had, he was a lot of me. People don’t really understand sometimes why I miss him that much. But in life he was—he was a *really* big part of me. It was like, he was part of me and, when he’d leave, I kinda—fall down. Like if I was like a table? He’d be one of the legs. . . .

- Dr. O: Wow. . . .
- Elisa: . . . And he'd go and I'd be *sitting* there going all crooked. . . .
- Dr. O: Wow . . . Yeah. . . .
- Elisa: . . . And it'd be really hard to live my *life* without him because he was always something that when I made decisions—it was his part too. And so, ummm (crying, wiping nose)—it was just like all my life depended on him too. Even though he had his own feelings too. But, I never really told him *that* either, that he was a lot of me . . . but . . .
- Dr. O: Hm, mmm . . .
- Elisa: So when I think of him, it's like . . .
- Dr. O: Now, how old is he now?
- Elisa: He's going to be 16 in September. So, he's going up (she draws a line going up) and I'm staying down (she draws a descending line). So he's kinda like living his life—he just keeps going, but I'm still down here trying to figure out what to do, so . . .
- Dr. O: Hm, mmm—If he were here, how would it be different for you?
- Elisa: Actually, it'd probably still be the same. I'd have to get adjusted to having him back. And it'd be awhile before he started being part of me again? See, because I've lived—now I've lived like—a year I think, or *two* years—without him, and so, I've gotten used to sort of being on my own. I've gotten used to making decisions, without me asking “Jason, what do you think?” A lot of the reasons I got my answers was from him 'cause he helped me. So if he *did* come back, I'd get used to—*having* him there. But I don't think I'd be so much with him anymore.
- Dr. O: And maybe you've learned—you've *had to* learn a lot of how to do that yourself.
- Elisa: Yeah. . . . That's happening a lot where—I live my life on my own, without having Jason there. . . .

Part Two: Bridging Gestalt Theory and Narrative Theory

Before analyzing the transcript above, I will first elaborate on the important connections between Gestalt and narrative theory. Although the concepts within Gestalt theory and narrative theory are divergent in many ways, both sets of theories hold at least one thing in common. That is, the concept of a central, three-part, or “triadic” process involving a movement through equilibrium, disequilibrium, and modified equilibrium. In Gestalt theory, this movement is described as being central to the ongoing process of Gestalt formation and closure. In narrative theory, this three-part movement is described as being central to the process of telling a story and “making sense” of human experience. In the following sections, I briefly outline how both Gestalt theory and

narrative theory address this centrally important three-part process involving disequilibrium. In Part Three, I then use these theoretical frameworks to analyze the transcript provided above from the work of Dr. O with Elisa.

The Triadic Process in Gestalt Therapy

Perls (1947) makes it clear that the concept of “disequilibrium” is at the core of Gestalt theory by stating: “The organism is striving for the maintenance of an equilibrium which is continuously disturbed by its needs and regained through their gratification” (p. 7). Perls et al. (1951) describe this ongoing process as including the “destruction of previous partial equilibria, and the assimilation of something new” (p. 373). The constantly revisited process of establishing equilibrium, losing equilibrium, and establishing a modified equilibrium is, in the view of Gestalt therapy theorists, nothing less than the healthy ongoing process of being alive.

Latner (1973) describes an individual in need of water as an example of the creation of a need—or Gestalt formation—and the destruction of a partial equilibria. When the individual finds water, there is Gestalt closure—the fulfilling of a need and the organismic assimilation of something new. The individual is able to move on and address his or her next need as it arises. Latner argues that the process of being alive is the process of addressing needs and being changed by these encounters with the environment as one does so. In other words, one is constantly moving through the process of equilibrium, disequilibrium, and modified equilibrium as one grows and changes.

In Table 1, the Gestalt theorists discussed in this section are listed in the left-hand column. Across the horizontal rows, their particular de-

Table 1 Triadic elements of Gestalt therapy theory

Theorist	Equilibrium	Disequilibrium	Modified Equilibrium
Perls (1947)	“equilibrium”	“disturbed” equilibrium	“regained” equilibrium
Perls et al. (1951)	“attempt of the organism to remain as it has been”	“destruction of previous partial equilibria”	“assimilation of something new”
Latner, (1973)	“organism . . . striving to regulate itself”	“organismic imbalance will occur”	“organism rebalances itself”

descriptions of the “triadic” process of moving through equilibrium, disequilibrium, and modified equilibrium are listed.

The Triadic Process in Narrative Theory

Narrative is a universal, verbal, and nonverbal phenomena found in most, if not all, cultures across time and place (Heath, 1986; Goodwin, 1990; Ervin-Tripp and Küntay, 1996). Narrative appears in many forms including myth, history, cinema, comic book, and news item (Barthes, 1988) and has been defined in many different ways from varying theoretical perspectives (Spence, 1982; Ricouer, 1985; Leitch, 1986). For the purposes of this paper, the definition of narrative provided by Scholes (1982) will be used. In this definition, narration “rests upon the presence of a narrator or narrative medium (actors, books, film, etc.) and the absence of the events narrated” (p. 58). Thus, with narrative there is always a “teller” and “told.”

Regarding the form of a story, narrative theorists have in the great majority agreed upon at least three consistent elements that make up a narrative. Whether such stories are written for the dramatic stage, told to children in fairy tales, or spoken to a counselor in the therapeutic context, stories contain the same elements of triadic structure as described by Gestalt theorists above. That is, stories tend to include a “scene setting” description of some kind of normative reality (i.e. equilibrium), a description of a “troubling” breach of those norms (i.e. disequilibrium), and some effort at “sense-making,” wherein a new understanding of reality is constructed (i.e. modified equilibrium).

In the *Poetics* (Aristotle, trans. by Janko, 1987), Aristotle highlighted these three essential elements within Greek tragedy, describing not only the natural human act of “representing” reality in narrative form, but also the common act of portraying both “complication” and “resolution” as a necessary part of dramatic structure. Using slightly different terms than Aristotle in his seminal work on the analysis of Russian folk tales, Propp (1968) also identified a similar three-part structure of folk narratives nestled among other narrative elements. Beginning with a description of a protagonist’s “initial state,” these folktales next invariably described some “villainy,” or “lack,” that is the focus of the resolution in the denouement of the story.

It is interesting to note that both Gestalt therapy theory and Propp’s narrative analysis of folktales describe a central role for an unmet need or a “lack” that must be fulfilled in some way for there to be some kind of resolution. In the same way that Latner (1973) used the example of an individual in need of water to describe the process of Gestalt formation, the protagonists represented in Russian folktales are also propelled by a need that must be met. Russian folktales about kidnapping, drag-

ons, or the pursuit of a mate, argues Propp, unfold as the protagonist addresses a need that “creates an insufficiency and provokes a quest” (p. 35).

Cognitive psychologists Bruner and Lucariello (1989) also address this issue of unmet needs as the “trouble” that lies at the heart of most narratives. In their research on the development of narrative in early childhood, the authors describe that the “engine of a narrative is a violation of the expectable” (p. 77) in our lives. Thus, Bruner and Lucariello also outline a three-part structure of narrative where a “normative” scene is set and where a “violation” of those norms creates “trouble” that somehow must be addressed. They state: “The narrative is a vehicle for characterizing, exploring, preventing, brooding about, redressing, or recounting the consequences of ‘trouble’ ” (p. 77).

In linguistic research, Labov (1982) also emphasizes how people use narratives to make sense of troubling experience. In what has become known as a “classic,” or “standard,” form of a narrative (Ervin-Tripp and Küntay, 1996), Labov (1982) outlines six elements of a narrative which include:

- 1) Abstract: what is the upcoming story about?
- 2) Orientation: the time, the place, the participants?
- 3) Complicating Action: *then* what (crucially) happened?
- 4) Resolution: how did these actions come to a closure?
- 5) Evaluation: so what?
- 6) Coda: what is the relevance to the present context?

Table 2 Triadic elements of narrative

Theorist/ Theory	Equilibrium	Disequilibrium	Modified Equilibrium
Propp (1928); Literary theory	“initial state”	“villainy or lack”	“liquidation of misfortune or transfiguration”
Bruner and Lucariello (1989), Cognitive theory	“the legitimate”	“violation of the legitimate”	“legitimacy redefined”
Labov (1982), Linguistics theory	“orientation”	“complicating action”	“evaluation and resolution”

Although Labov identifies six elements of a narrative, an essential three-part structure of narrative similar to that described by Bruner and others above provides the foundation for his analysis: The “orientational” aspects of a narrative describe some kind of “equilibrium”; the “complicating actions” describe the “disequilibrium” or “trouble” at the heart of the narrative; and the narrative elements of both “resolution” and “evaluation” are used to come to some degree of “closure” and make sense of that troubling experience.

The narrative theorists discussed in this section and their descriptions of the triadic aspects of narrative are detailed in Table 2.

Summary of Part Two

In Part Two, I have drawn connections between narrative theory and Gestalt therapy theory. I have described how both Gestalt and narrative theories have identified a similar three-part process that includes movement through “equilibrium,” “disequilibrium,” and “modified equilibrium” The essential conceptual bridge that is articulated in both narrative theory and Gestalt therapy theory is that “disequilibrium” is an integral part of human experience. This disequilibrium comes as a result of being in constant negotiation with, as Perls et al. (1951) describe, a constantly “novel environment” in which we must work to get our needs met. As Bruner (1990) has argued, the process of addressing those experiences that do not meet our expectations is a primary human need that is, in part, worked out through the construction of narratives.

In Part Three, I present an analysis of the narrative data provided above to show how Elisa used a story about her own life to make sense of “disequilibrium” that she had experienced. Furthermore, I make visible the way in which Dr. O, as a skillful Gestalt therapist, helps to facilitate and “co-construct” this process of narrative formation and Gestalt closure.

Part Three: Narrative Analysis of Elisa’s Story

In the following paragraphs, the three-part structure of Elisa’s narrative—that is, “equilibrium,” “disequilibrium,” and “modified equilibrium”—will be made visible using the frames of narrative analysis discussed thus far in this paper. Dr. O’s role in the collaborative construction of Elisa’s sense-making narrative will also be made visible. As Capps and Ochs (1995) state, “Co-participants . . . contribute information that is critical to interpreting the significance of the events under consideration” (p. 117). Such co-construction of narratives is especially relevant in regard to the counseling context for those profes-

sionals wishing to help clients “make sense” of difficulties they have faced.

Narrative “Equilibrium”

In the transcript presented in Part One above, Elisa opens with a statement about her older brother Jason: “With Jason, I lived with him longer.” Elisa then elaborates on this statement by describing what had been “normative” (Bruner, 1990) in her young life with a series of phrases that captures the importance of her brother’s presence:

- “He was a lot of me.”
- “He was a *really* big part of me.”
- “He was part of me.”
- “My life depended on . . . him.”
- “He was lot of me.”

Elisa highlights these references to the norms that once existed in her life by use of repetition—“he was a lot of me”—and by emphatic stress—“he was a *really* big part of me.” She next uses a series of graphic images to highlight the pain she felt losing her brothers and having her “norms” disrupted.

Narrative “Disequilibrium”

Tannen (1989) states that instances of repetition in a story “underline a key phrase or idea” that the narrator is emphasizing. In Elisa’s case, repetition of the idea that “something is missing” underlines the disequilibrium that she has experienced in the process of losing her brothers. To emphasize her feelings of missing her brother Jason, Elisa uses multiple metaphors in her first lengthy passage to portray her troubling feelings in clear images:

- “There’s this really big, dark . . . tunnel.”
- “There’s a big chunk missing.”
- “When he’d leave I’d kinda fall down.”
- “If I was a table, he’d be one of the legs and he’d go and I’d be *sitting* there . . . going all crooked.”

Capps and Ochs (1995) note that storytellers emphasize their meaning within a spoken text through the use of “intensifying” adverbs and adjectives as in Elisa’s emphasis placed on her descriptions of trouble through her repeated use of “really” (e.g., “*really* big, dark . . . tunnel,” “he was a *really* big part of me,” “it’d be *really* hard to live my life with-

out him"). Thus, through both repetition and emphasis, Elisa makes clear that losing her brothers was a significantly troubling event in her young life. In Gestalt terminology, Elisa brings into "figure" a verbal portrait that clearly articulates her foregrounded disequilibrium. By having encouraged Elisa to express herself through the images of "colors, lines and shapes," Dr. O can be seen as facilitating both narrative construction as well as Gestalt formation with her client: "The figure (Gestalt) in awareness," state Perls et al. (1951), "is a clear, vivid perception, image, or insight" (p. 231). What Elisa has done thus far through her image-laden words is to articulate a "vivid perception" of the trouble in her story, which she next works to make sense of in collaboration with Dr. O.

Narrative "Modified Equilibrium"

Elisa's story about missing her brothers in the transcript is not over once she has described the images that so clearly articulate the "disequilibrium" that losing her brothers has caused her. Instead, Elisa moves quickly into the "sense making" part of her story with the use of what Labov and Fanshel (1977) has identified as the evaluative conjunction "so" (i.e., "for that reason, therefore"). Elisa repeats the use of "so" four separate times within three sentences, thereby highlighting the point she wants to make in summing up this story of loss:

- "So when I think about him, he's like—"
- "So he's—going up and I'm staying down."
- "So he's kinda like living his life—he keeps going, but I'm still down here trying to figure out what to do, so."

In these lines, Elisa's grammatical use of *present progressive* verb forms ("I'm staying down," "he keeps going," "I'm still down here trying") describe her perception of a continuing action or a state of being that is still in progress. Thus, in both aspect and tense, Elisa is highlighting a residual negative effect of her brothers having left, an effect that still affects her. Her repeated use of directional *adverbs* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which put her in a "down" position, also emphasize this ongoing negative state: "He's going up, and I'm staying down," "he keeps going, but I'm still down here." Together, these evaluative adjectives and adverbs are used by Elisa to cast her present state as one of being idled, stuck, and unchanging since her brothers left.

Importantly, Dr. O—in her "co-constructive" role in eliciting and helping to make sense of Elisa's narrative—does not allow Elisa to end the story after Elisa concludes in line 24: "So he's kinda like living his life—he just keeps going, but I'm still down here trying to figure out what to do" Instead, Dr. O poses a question regarding how Elisa's life

might be different if her missing brother returned. Dr. O asks, "If he were here, how would it be different for you?" With this question, Dr. O asks Elisa to imagine her missing brother as if he were "here," that is, with her in the present moment.

In considering this question about the "here and now," Elisa surprisingly reevaluates and makes sense of her story in a way that almost diametrically opposes her first set of evaluative statements described above. In responding to Dr. O's question, Elisa again introduces the evaluative marker "so" and again employs repetition (e.g., "used to") to make a second series of evaluative comments to describe that she has in fact changed, in some ways for the better, in the absence of her brothers:

- "So, I've gotten used to—sort of being on my own."
- "I've gotten used to making decisions."
- "So if he did come back, I'd get used to—having him there. But I don't think I'd be so much with him anymore."
- "So . . . I live my life on my own, with having —Justin there."

In this second set of evaluative comments, Elisa gives a "particular evaluative hue" (Capps and Ochs, 1995) to herself in the narrative as someone who has not only been changed by her experience, but also grown from it. With the use of *present perfect* verb forms, Elisa describes a process that was started in the past but has been completed by this present time: "I've gotten used to—sort of being on my own." "I've gotten used to making decisions." These statements stand in stark contrast to her use of the *present progressive* verb forms in her first attempt at evaluation: "I'm staying down"; "I'm still down here trying to figure out what to do."

Moreover, Elisa's use of the phrase "I've gotten used to" signals that she has developed through habit or custom a "new norm" in her life since her brothers have left. Such habituation signals not only a kind of "modified equilibrium" that was described by narrative theorists above, but also a kind of "regained equilibrium" that was described by the Gestalt theorists as well. To highlight this change of state, Elisa closes this second series of evaluative comments by again returning to the use of the *present tense* to describe her present state, in spite of not having her brother with her:

"I've had to learn a lot of where—I live my life on my own, without having—Justin there"

Peterson and McCabe (1983) discuss how tellers of a story achieve some kind of "resolution" after they have addressed the trouble that was described in the "high point" of the story. The authors state that

“such later events resolve the high point action in some sense, clearing the stage or capping off the experience” (p. 31). Reflecting this notion of resolution, Elisa ends the transcript with a statement that works to resolve or, in Gestalt terminology, bring closure to the conflicts she has been describing. Additionally, it can be argued from the Gestalt perspective that such phrasing is evidence of what Perls et al. (1951) have described as “the destruction of previous equilibria, and the assimilation of something new” (p. 373). At the end of the transcript, Elisa presents herself not simply as “down” about losing her brothers, but as someone who has incorporated that difficult loss into a larger perspective of herself, gaining some closure on it in the process.

It is important to highlight the fact that this example of narrative formation and Gestalt closure was not accomplished by Elisa in isolation, but within the particular context of a therapeutic relationship established over time with Dr. O. Thus, Elisa’s sense making can be seen as being both verbally and nonverbally “co-constructed” with the able assistance of a caring adult in the form Dr. O. In the following section, I discuss the implications of this study.

Part Four: Stories Are Not Just “Stories”

This study has important implications for Gestalt therapy practitioners, especially in relation to working therapeutically with children. First, the theoretical linkages that exist between Gestalt theory and narrative theory can be used by Gestalt therapists to inform the moment-to-moment verbal interactions between the therapist and the client in the context of therapy in the Gestalt tradition.

Specifically, this study asserts the need to pay close attention to the role that words—and particularly narratives—play in the process of Gestalt formation and closure. Narratives, I have argued, carry with them powerful constellated images of troubling experience that the client is attempting to work through in the “sense-making” process of talk. Moreover, the formation of a complete narrative—that is, one containing each of the three elements of “equilibrium,” “disequilibrium,” and “modified equilibrium”—enables the client to fully “bring into figure” not only images, but also feelings, responses, thoughts and evaluations of their experience. In this way, narrative formation can be seen as related to the process of Gestalt closure in that both processes involve “the assimilation of something new” (Perls et al., 1951).

This study also raises important implications regarding the interactions of adults and children in the therapeutic context. For example, from a developmental perspective, children’s narratives need to be understood by adult therapists as more than just a child “telling stories.” As Bruner and Lucariello (1989) state:

There is compelling evidence to indicate that narrative comprehension is among the earliest powers of mind to appear in the young child and among the most widely used forms of organizing human experience. [p. 75].

Furthermore, as the data in this study demonstrate, Dr. Oaklander had a vital role in helping Elisa to better “organize her experience” through story in their work together. Specifically, Dr. Oaklander helped Elisa to move through a process of narrative formation and Gestalt closure in two important ways. First, Dr. Oaklander prompted Elisa to tell her story (“I’d like you to maybe draw a picture of that feeling you have missing them”) in a way that helped Elisa fully bring into figure the trouble she was facing. Importantly, this prompt included the non-verbal use of drawn images to facilitate the child’s storytelling. Second, Dr. Oaklander helped Elisa to “reevaluate” the story she told by bringing her more fully into the present (“If he were here, how would it be different for you?”). In this way, Elisa was able to see that she had changed over time and that her old version of the story, her old attempts at “closure,” no longer fit her present life. Through these examples, it is clear that therapists who work out of a Gestalt orientation can act in important ways not only to facilitate the process of narrative formation, but also of Gestalt closure.

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