

Editorial Level of Awareness

JOSEPH MELNICK, Ph.D.

GESTALT REVIEW IS PLEASED TO PRESENT our fourth annual issue devoted to papers from the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT) Conference that was held in New York, May 26–30, 1999. As I organized this issue, I reread the papers to decide upon an editorial focus. In good Gestalt fashion, I crossed my fingers and waited for one to emerge. Very quickly, a theme became obvious, that of awareness.

It is easy to understand why. A few months ago staff from a Gestalt institute invited me to spend 5 days teaching trainees about awareness. To a Gestalt therapist, awareness is as essential as the air we breathe, but like a breath of air, it is also primarily invisible, existing, to a large extent, out of our moment-to-moment awareness. The request for a workshop solely devoted to awareness forced me to look at “how I breathe.” In fact, in the initial issue of *Gestalt Review*, in an article focusing on the organizing principles of Gestalt therapy, I list field theory, phenomenology, dialogue, figure/ground, resistances as adjustments, and experiment, but take awareness for granted and do not mention it (Melnick, 1997).

In order to prepare for the training, I traveled back in time to the awareness experiments in Part II of *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951) to the “zones” or levels of awareness as outlined by Perls (1969): “Awareness covers, so to speak, three layers or three zones: awareness of the self, awareness of the world, and awareness of what’s between—the intermediate zone of fantasy that prevents a person from being in touch with either himself or the world” (p. 49), and I also reread John O. Stevens’s (1971) book on the subject. It is interesting that Stevens defines awareness of the outside world as “actual sensory contact with objects and events in the present: what I now actually see, hear, smell, taste or touch” (p. 5). For Stevens and many of the original Gestalt practitioners, the emphasis was on sensory experience

Focus	Title of Article
Self	"A Gestalt Approach to Self-Esteem"
Awareness of another	"Supervision: A Collaborative Endeavor"
Dyad/Group	"A Practical Guide to Fostering Interpersonal Norms in a Gestalt Group"
Culture/Community	"Experiments in Community Building"
Spiritual	"Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning: A Gestalt Perspective"

of oneself and, to a lesser degree, another, as they are experienced in the here and now.

As the Gestalt approach has expanded and changed, our focus has shifted from awareness of self to realms beyond the single individual. This fact became evident to me as I prepared my design. I decided to start with our traditional focus on self, but to move on to awareness of more complex figures such as an intimate system, a dyad, or a group.

I ended my teaching design by focusing on two areas even more removed from the individual level: culture/community and the spiritual (i.e., the mystery of the unknown, of life, and of death). In rereading the articles for this issue, it became obvious that the range of interests covered at the AAGT conference reflected my teaching design as follows:

Issue Content

In introducing these articles to you, rather than follow the format listed above, I would like to begin with "Experiments in Community Building" by Brownell, Cook, Toman, Wolfert, Gregory, Bowman, Fodor, Grey, and Robertson. I choose to begin here because this article captures the heart and soul of AAGT. At its core, this organization is an ongoing, lively experiment committed to meeting the diverse needs of *all* of its members, to being inclusive, and to embracing the whole. We see this commitment lived out as the authors take us through their experiment from conception to completion.

This article raises important questions for AAGT and the Gestalt approach. In its quest for associating, is the organization valuing a profound confluence? Looking beyond AAGT, can the Gestalt approach be applied to large populations and groupings, or at some point, do we need to switch paradigms?

Our next article is Norman Shub's "A Gestalt Approach to Self-Esteem." Self-esteem is a term that we all use and hear frequently but

have trouble defining and understanding. Our clients and patients often come to us with “low” self-esteem, wanting us to help them “raise” it. Shub gives his own answer to the question of “what is self-esteem?” and, utilizing case examples, presents a model for working with this elusive issue. It should be pointed out that Shub’s method of expanding intrapsychic awareness is very different than that of the founders of the Gestalt approach. It utilizes concepts such as assimilation and introjection in ways that might surprise many.

Next we present Rita Resnick’s and Liv Estrup’s “Supervision: A Collaborative Endeavor.” As the authors point out, supervision (and consultation) are often done without much thought or awareness; one usually supervises the way one was supervised. They present an elegant, inclusive model for how to view this complex process. I believe that every therapist and consultant will come away from this article with expanded awareness concerning their values and focus as they work in this exciting and challenging arena.

Our fourth article is “A Practical Guide to Fostering Interpersonal Norms in a Gestalt Group” by Jay Earley. The ability to create, maintain, and support an interpersonal focus is a skill that is essential for Gestalt therapists working with groups. Earley combines theory, case examples, and helpful suggestions to guide the therapist in practicing this approach.

Our last article is Stephanie Sabar’s “Bereavement, Grief and Mourning: A Gestalt Perspective.” After first acknowledging the scarcity of Gestalt writing on this important subject, she then describes how a Gestalt approach, with its emphasis on dialogue and relationship, phenomenological method, and theory of change and experiment is ideally suited to assist individuals in working through grief. She ends with a discussion of when a traditional Gestalt approach might seem incompatible with her model.

We end this issue with two abstracts from presenters of the AAGT conference who chose not to submit their papers in their entirety. Please contact them directly for a full-length copy of their presentation.

In presenting *level of awareness* as a unifying theme, I make the assumption that each of us, through temperament, training and life experience, tends to be more interested and skilled at working at certain levels in comparison to others. The Gestalt approach, with its emphasis on awareness of process supports our working with client systems at all levels. The articles, in this our fourth AAGT issue, demonstrate the range of our approach and will, I hope, stimulate and inspire our readers to explore further the role of awareness, in their private and professional lives.

References

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