

Editorial

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IN PREVIOUS EDITORIALS, I have talked about the ongoing dialogue concerning whether Gestalt therapy is applicable to intervention beyond the individual, to couples, families, groups, and even organizations. Our lead article, “Gestalt in the Boardroom,” continues this discussion and brings it into the arena of the corporate boardroom. It introduces into the debate not just the range of applicability of Gestalt theory, but also elicits consideration of the basic philosophical/political stance of the founders.

One might wonder what our founders would say if they were to look at this article. Would they not view this application as the ultimate capitulation, dishonoring their personal values and that of Gestalt culture? Would they be offended that our beloved approach, with its anarchistic roots, designed to free individuals from the oppressive phinness of the shoulds and should nots, is now being utilized to help further the goals of big business? Would they be critical of us for choosing to work within organizational systems, rather than outside of them?

I hope that they would cheer us on.¹ I hope that they would understand that the culture of corporations (and boards) has changed significantly since the 1950s and 1960s. Many corporations today are less hierarchical and more participative, humanistic, and interactive. Furthermore, because of the rapidness of change and the need for a quick response, they much more resemble fluid, adaptive systems than the structured organizations of just a few years ago. The men in gray flannel suits of the 1950s are today as likely to be women and minorities. I believe that the founders, in response to this changing corporate landscape, would have recognized this fertile ground for intervention and welcomed the opportunity to apply our principles to these highly influential and powerful systems.

However, although Gestalt theory has much to offer in terms of enhancing board and corporate work, presenting Gestalt therapy in cer-

¹Certainly Paul Goodman would have. He was, at his core, a social theorist and had a passion for changing the workplace.

tain environments as one's orientation often engenders confusion and even resistance. In some consulting situations I have hesitated when asked about my theoretical perspective. My problem has not been with the elements of our own approach, but with the name *Gestalt therapy*. Once I address the predictable question of "What does Gestalt mean?" the remaining dilemmas fall into two primary categories. The first involves situations in which I am concerned that the phrase Gestalt therapy might conjure up stereotypes or associations that are outdated and incorrect. The second, more complex one occurs particularly in organizational and business settings where the term *therapy* can seem out of place, confusing, and often troubling to clients who want consultation, not anything resembling their image of psychotherapy.

In order to circumvent these problems, I have sometimes called what I do a "Gestalt approach," or I say that I utilize a "Gestalt methodology." In my more avoidant moments I sometimes choose to say that I follow a "field, or system's, approach." Since many do not know what the words *system* or *field* really mean in this context, these terms tend to sound neutral, and I then don't have to answer the question, "What does the word *Gestalt* mean?"

I am aware that there is an irony in sometimes avoiding labeling my theoretical orientation. On the one hand, I truly believe that the term *Gestalt therapy* conjures up images that for many are rooted in the past and, of more importance, is too narrow to incorporate all that we do. To identify myself as a Gestalt therapist might generate resistance and biases at an inopportune time. On the other hand, our theory and its influences have remained largely invisible and unknown beyond its practitioners and, therefore, unrecognized. In retrospect, while avoiding certain problems, I miss opportunities to heighten awareness and recognition of our highly effective and elegant modality.

So again, as I have stated before, I am convinced that a most vital area of growth for the Gestalt approach is with larger nontherapeutic systems—work groups, communities, and even political systems. These systems exert great influence on the quality of human existence. It is ultimately in all of our best interest when organizational leaders (even corporate boards) can relate to each other and to others outside the boardroom. It is also in our best interest if they inform their decision making with the values and perspectives of Gestalt therapy.

Our Current Issue

In "Gestalt in the Boardroom," Trevor Bentley argues that most boards can be viewed, at least in part, as intimate systems. He believes that they tend to undervalue the importance of good relationships and hy-

pothesizes that, by improving these relationships, a number of positive outcomes are possible. These include easier conflict resolution, speedier decision making, and a “clearer focus on the needs of all the stakeholders as well as shareholders.” He applies such common Gestalt concepts as field theory, boundaries, the “here and now,” heightening awareness, and contact to board work, utilizing a case example to demonstrate his approach.

Peter Jackson and William Bradshaw, in their commentary, while agreeing with Bentley regarding the importance of heightening a board’s self-awareness and contact, underscore the dilemma posed by the amount of time necessary to implement Bentley’s model and question whether most boards would be able and willing to meet this important requirement. They point out that boards, at least in Canada, meet infrequently, although the use of one- or two-day retreats is becoming more commonplace. They stress that, as organizations become less hierarchical and the use of positional power diminishes, boards must become more relational and more field theory-based. They end by presenting their own model, also based on Gestalt principles.

In his rejoinder, Bentley highlights differences in their approaches. He feels that Jackson and Bradshaw emphasize control, while his emphasis is on relationships, personal emotions, and perceptions. He ends with a discussion on how to create good working practices that can be applied to all meetings, board or otherwise.

Our next article is Frank Staemmler’s “Like a Fish in Water: Gestalt Therapy in Times of Uncertainty.” He begins by outlining the rapid change that the world is undergoing, from the individual to society as a whole, and its effects on us physically, psychologically, emotionally, culturally, and economically. In this far-reaching essay, Staemmler describes the difficulty of maintaining one’s sense of cohesion in these turbulent times, which consists of three components—comprehensibility, competence, and life meaning.

He then goes on to argue that Gestalt therapy, with our process base, is an ideal therapy and life philosophy from which to deal with change and uncertainty. He discusses the importance of our phenomenological and hermeneutic approach, existential heritage, philosophy of dialogue, and field theory in dealing with change. Last, he invites us just to not learn to live and adapt to change and uncertainty, but to cultivate and view them as integral and essential parts of our lives.

Next we present Norman Friedman’s “Empty Ground/Structured Ground: A Critique of Gordon Wheeler’s *Gestalt Reconsidered*.” He argues that Wheeler, along with many others, misrepresents Perls, both the man and the theorist. Among these errors are that Perls ignored the importance of environmental support, that the original theory did not

adequately explain the concepts of creative adjustment and growth, and that the individual was overemphasized at the expense of larger systems.

In his commentary, "Dharma Combat over a Crazy Quilt: Friedman's Critique of Wheeler," Paul Shane admits to feeling aligned with both Wheeler and Friedman and argues that their differences all boil down to emphasis. Shane's thesis is that Perls did and said a lot and, like all of us, was sometimes contradictory. Furthermore, he argues, when looking over a body of work or an individual's life, one does best by looking at the repeated items and enduring patterns. Shane leaves us with an interesting question. How can we arrive at such different conclusions based upon reading the same material? His best explanation is that the richness of our ground is filled with ironies and contradictions, a rich grab bag including a little of this and a little of that.

Friedman, in his response, believes that his motives for writing the article, as well as some of the actual content, have been misconstrued. He emphasizes that he is not against the growth and development of Gestalt therapy, but that the original writings must be understood prior to change happening. He ends by arguing that *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951) is indeed difficult to understand and interpret. However, he believes that not all interpretations are equal and that, in the end, some are better than others.

Our last article in this *Gestalt Review* is "Diagnostics in Gestalt Therapy" by Reinhard Fuhr, Martina Gremmler-Fuhr, and Milan Sreckovic. The authors present a model based on the interaction between therapist and client. They describe diagnosis as a process, as the search for fixed polarities and habitual patterns, which cause suffering for the client and impede development in relation to the environmental field. They eschew cause-effect explanations and static labels and instead argue that categories and criteria must be transformed into process and field-oriented dimensions.

This article is translated from the German and originally appeared in *Handbuch der Gestalttherapie* (1999), edited by these same authors. This 1200-page volume includes a broad range of topics (from the individual to large systems), which are addressed by some of the most outstanding authors in the international Gestalt community. This work demonstrates the breadth and depth of our approach, and I salute the editors for creating this important volume.

We end this issue of *Gestalt Review* with Back Pages featuring reviews of Paula Bottome's *Completing the Circle* by Elaine Kepner and Lois Brien and Irvin Cohen's *Lessons from an Ever-Evolving Therapist* by Pauline Rose Clance.

I hope that the articles in this issue help to shed light on the range of contemporary Gestalt therapy. Like a good client system, it is ever evol-

ing, part of a larger field, and moving toward greater and greater complexity. It is not fixed, moves between form and chaos, and is constantly changing. Maybe, as Shane remarks, it is a crazy, complex quilt that somehow hangs together.

References

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- Perls, F. Hefferline, R. & Goodman, P., (1951) *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. New York: Dell.