

## Sharing Disequilibrium A Link Between Gestalt Therapy Theory and Child Development Theory

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The theoretical concept of “disequilibrium” is at the heart of the developmental theories of Dewey (1934), Freud (1957), Erikson (1987), and Piaget (1964). It is also at the heart of Gestalt therapy theory (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951). In each of these theories, the concept of disequilibrium is used to describe the “destabilization” experienced by children as they move toward and into more complex levels of development. This article highlights the theoretical linkages between developmental and Gestalt therapy theory and, in so doing, provides further theoretical support for the “developmentally appropriate” work that gestalt therapists provide, particularly with children.

**T**HE CONCEPT OF DISEQUILIBRIUM is an important link between Gestalt therapy theory and the major theories of child development. A closer examination of this concept of disequilibrium in child development theories can provide Gestalt therapists with two advantages: (1) a deeper and broader theoretical grounding of child developmental thought and (2) a deeper appreciation for how the Gestalt approach to therapy with children serves as an effective approach facilitating a child’s healthy development.

The central theme of child development addressed in this article has been described by varying theorists and researchers in differing ways, yet the essential meaning has remained consistent. Various descriptions as “trouble,” “tension,” “disequilibrium,” or “conflict,” this pervasive

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concept attempts to describe the destabilization experienced by children as they move from one level of understanding about the world or themselves to a more complex level of understanding. As Serres (1997) states, anyone who wishes to learn must risk a voyage from the familiar to the strange and “no learning can avoid the voyage” (p. 8)

In this article, the developmental theories of Dewey, Freud, Erikson, and Piaget will be viewed through the lens of this central concept of disequilibrium in a child’s developmental path. First, I present a brief summary of the role of disequilibrium in Gestalt therapy theory.

### **Disequilibrium in Gestalt Therapy Theory**

In a previous article (Mortola, 1999), I proposed that the concept of “disequilibrium” is at the heart of Gestalt therapy theory. Perls (1947) makes this explicit in his articulation of the process of Gestalt formation and closure 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). This ongoing process of establishing equilibrium, losing equilibrium, and establishing a modified equilibrium is, in the view of early Gestalt therapy theorists, nothing more than the healthy process of being alive. Perls, et. al. (1951) state: “. . . The materials and energy of growth are the conservative attempt of the organism to remain as it has been, the novel environment, the destruction of previous partial equilibria, and the assimilation of something new” (p. 373).

In the sections that follow, I provide a brief overview of the major developmental theories and how they address this central issue of losing and regaining equilibrium in the developmental process. Last, I will discuss the implications of these theoretical links for practitioners of Gestalt therapy.

### **Disequilibrium in Dewey’s Developmental Theory**

John Dewey, like the original authors of Gestalt therapy theory, took an “organismic” view of development. He argued that child development takes place not only in an environment, but also as part of an environment. Also similar to Gestalt therapy theory, Dewey (1934) argued for the primacy of negotiation between organisms and their surroundings:

At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way [p. 13].

This “intimate interchange” did not, from Dewey’s perspective, always take place in a helpful manner. If the gap between the needs of the organism and what the environment could supply is too wide the creature dies. Also, if the interchange does not enhance the organism, it “merely subsists” (p. 14) without further growth. As eloquently stated in the following passage. Dewey saw the “enriching” experience of “disparity and resistance” as being central to the growth and transformation of the organism:

Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it—either through effort or by some happy chance. And, in a growing life, the recovery is never a mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed. . . . Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives [p. 14].

According to Dewey, each new transition to a “more extensive balance” by the organism is paradoxically the result of an experience of disparity or disequilibrium. Thus, Dewey saw that “equilibrium comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of, tension” (p. 14).

Dewey (1934) believed that emotions in human beings serve as a mechanism by which they recognize the rhythm of falling in and out of developmental equilibrium. In this way, feelings of discord help us to recognize disequilibrium and also supply us with the motivation to recover a new harmony, a restoration of a new form of equilibrium:

Emotion is the conscious sign of a break, actual or impending—  
Desire for restoration of the union converts mere emotion into  
interest in objects as conditions of realization of harmony [p. 15].

In his psychosexual theory of development, Freud also identified the significant role that emotion plays in the desire for a restoration of harmony. The function of the “pleasure principle” in regaining developmental equilibrium was fundamental to this process, as will be discussed next.

### **Disequilibrium in Freud’s Developmental Theory**

Freud’s thinking regarding the role of tension and disequilibrium in development is best approached through the pleasure principle, a centerpiece of his psychosexual theory. According to Freud (1957), this

principle is enacted when a child becomes aware of displeasure in her experience. The pleasure principle is the mechanism by which a child is able to “relax” the tension created:

Any given process originates in an unpleasant state of tension and thereupon determines for itself such a path that its ultimate issue coincides with a relaxation of this tension, i.e. with avoidance of “pain” or with production of pleasure [p. 141].

Freud saw the pleasure principle as an organismic, regulatory mechanism fundamentally concerned with “the tendency toward stability.” He did not, however, limit his notion of the pleasure principle to simply a “restabilizing” mechanism. Instead, Freud was concerned with the increasingly complex levels of organismic development achieved through negotiating episodes of disequilibrium among the three major forces of the psyche: the id, the ego, and the superego. The development of the arts, sciences, and the myriad richness of human cultures can be attributed, in Freud’s thinking, to the negotiations that take place between the pleasure-based needs of the id, the reality-based needs of the ego, and the social-based needs of the superego. Like Dewey then, Freud saw the individual as developing into new levels of complexity and differentiation as the “conflict or tension” (p. 17) between these psychic forces was resolved.

If emotion is the organismic “early detection system” of tension in both Dewey and Freud’s theories, Freud makes it clear that cognition plays a different role in the process of establishing a new and more complex equilibrium. To him, emotion was given the job to detect tensions in the organism, but thought—and the thoughtful ego in particular—was given the job of containing that tension until a way to resolve it could be determined. Freud (1957) states:

Thought was endowed with qualities which made it possible for the mental apparatus to support increased tension during a delay in the process of discharge [p. 41].

In this way, the ego in Freud’s theory is seen in a continual state of negotiation and tension—addressing the needs of both the id and the superego—yet, in the best case scenario, doing so by creative and developmentally adaptive measures. “A momentary pleasure,” Freud (1957) states, “uncertain in its results, is given up, but only in order to gain in the new way an assured pleasure coming later” (p. 43). These assured, if somewhat delayed, pleasures are what enable the organism to develop toward more complex states of equilibrium, with the ability of the ego to “hold tension” being a central component of this process.

The ego's role in not only holding tension, but also in resolving fundamental, developmental "crises" is discussed in the next section on Erikson.

### Disequilibrium in Erikson's Developmental Theory

Building on Freud's thinking, Erikson saw that a large part of the tension and disequilibrium produced in development stemmed from the differential demands of the two sides of a human being: the individual and the social creature. In his theoretical work, Erikson identified eight developmental crises that stemmed from tension between these two parts of the individual. These crises echo not only Dewey's idea of periods of developmental disequilibrium, but also Freud's concept of the tension that underlies developmental movement. Erikson stresses in his model that the crises of development are ambivalent in the true sense of the word—there is potential for movement in either a positive or a negative direction. In citing the interplay between individual and social pressures, Erikson (1987) stresses:

Strategic in this interplay are developmental crises—"crises" here connoting not a threat of catastrophe but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential, and, therefore, the ontogenetic source of generational strength and maladjustment [p. 598].

Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development each contain a "main task" that the individual must accomplish in order to move on to the next stage of development. The eight stages of Erikson's (1987) developmental theory are outlined in Table 1. This table includes the specific crisis inherent in each stage, the "psychosocial strength" needed to resolve each of the crises, and also outlines the increasing radius of "special relationships" needed to address these individual needs in the public sphere.

Although the clearly defined developmental stages of both Freud and Erikson are foreign to the thinking of Dewey, as well as the Gestalt theorists, the common underlying assumption of each of these bodies of thought is that of disequilibrium or tension that drives the developmental process of the human organism. Dewey identified "phases in which the organism falls out of step" with the environment while on the developmental path. Freud identified "tension" as a clear signal that a misfit exists between the contradictory needs of the id and the superego. Similarly, Erikson has noted a "crucial period of increased vulnerability" at each developmental stage where the organism experiences a kind of disequilibrium that he defined as "estrangement." This

**Table 1** Erikson's Human Life Cycle (1987)

	Psychosocial Crisis	Psychosocial Strength	Radius of Significant Relations
1	Trust vs. Mistrust	HOPE	Maternal Person
2	Autonomy vs. Shame, Doubt	WILL	Parental Persons
3	Initiative vs. Guilt	PURPOSE	Basic Family
4	Industry vs. Inferiority	COMPETENCE	Neighborhood, School
5	Identity & Repudiation vs. Identity Diffusion	FIDELITY	Peer Groups and Outgroups; Models of Leadership
6	Intimacy & Solidarity vs. Isolation	LOVE	Partners in Friendship, Sex, Competition, Cooperation
7	Generativity vs. Self-Absorption	CARE	Divided Labor and Shared Household
8	Integrity vs. Despair	WISDOM	"Mankind" "My Kind"

estrangement at each stage of development is the result of the unsettled crisis between the polarities of each stage—between trust and mistrust, for example, in infancy.

Erikson also believed, however, that the seeds for a positive resolution to the psychological discomfort experienced in each development crisis are contained *in* that crisis. Erikson (1987) stated that there is a basic human tendency "of individual life to round itself out as a coherent experience" (p. 598). In this way, the link between the theorists discussed so far in this article is also made clear: that is, the organism develops, changes, grows, and becomes more complex *through* the experience of disequilibrium.

As reflected in his emphasis of the development of more complex forms of logical thinking in childhood, Piaget (1964) too focused on new levels of equilibrium reached in the process of human development *through* periods of disequilibrium. However, by focusing on the role of disequilibrium in cognitive development, Piaget addresses a more specific aspect of development not directly addressed by Dewey, Freud, Erikson, or Gestalt theorists.

### Disequilibrium in Piaget's Developmental Theory

Piaget's theory of cognitive development was the result of a lifelong tension that he held in his own thinking between, on the one hand, an

interest in evolutionary biology and, on the other hand, an interest in the epistemological roots of human knowledge. This productive tension between Piaget's two intellectual interests resulted in over 40 volumes of research writings and over 100 scholarly articles published on the subject of the development of cognitive functions in children.

Interestingly, it was the combination of and tension between biology and epistemology that enabled Piaget to frame a theory of cognitive development that addressed questions overlooked in the discipline prior to his work: What is the evolution of thinking over the span of a lifetime? How do biological concepts relating to growth and adaptation—such as assimilation and accommodation—apply to the development of cognition?

Given the intellectual tensions contained in his own development, it is not surprising that Piaget focused on states of disequilibrium in his developmental theory. He (1964) wrote:

In the act of knowing, the subject is active, and consequently, faced with an external disturbance, he will react in order to compensate and consequently he will tend towards equilibrium. . . . Equilibration, as I understand it, is thus an active process. It's a process of self-regulation. I think that this self-regulation is a fundamental factor in development [p. 29].

In this idea of an individual tending toward equilibrium, we can hear echoes of Freud's central concept of the pleasure principle, of which Piaget was well acquainted. Piaget had, in fact, published an early article on the relationship between psychoanalysis and child psychology. We can also recognize in his work echoes of the gestalt concept of "organismic self-regulation." In the following passage, Piaget (1964) highlights the term *internal reinforcements* to describe this organismic process of self-regulation:

What are these internal reinforcements? They are what I call equilibration or self-regulation. The internal reinforcements are what enable the subject to eliminate contradictions, incompatibilities, and conflicts. All development is composed of momentary conflicts and incompatibilities which must be overcome to reach a higher level of equilibrium [p 33].

In his emphasis on transformative conflicts that play a central role in the individual's ability to "reach a higher level of equilibrium," Piaget's theory of cognitive development is similar to the theories of Dewey, Freud, and Erikson, as well as the Gestalt theorists discussed above.

Another theoretical link between Piaget's thought and the theory of Gestalt therapy put forth by Perls et al. (1951) is the concept of "assimilation." The Gestalt theorists used this term in their description of "the destruction of previous partial equilibria, and the assimilation of something new" (p. 373). Piaget also saw assimilation as the "taking in" of new experiences and added accommodation as the process by which new internal structures of understanding were built to allow this assimilative taking in.

Piaget (1971) called the internal structures of understanding "schemas." Like maps of the "New World" from the middle ages to the present, Piaget saw schemas as being in the process of continual modification to represent ever-closer approximations of reality. When a child's schemas work sufficiently to account for the information about the world they are receiving, the child is seen to be at a "stage" of relative equilibrium. Piaget outlined four major stages of relative equilibrium in cognitive development—sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational—that are summarized (Cole and Cole, 1989) in Table 2.

In order to be understood correctly, Piaget's four stages outlined above need to be seen as hierarchically related, with earlier stages being incorporated into the subsequently more complex later stages. Highlighting this hierarchical relatedness, Piaget (1971) emphasized not only the logical links between the stages of his four-part model, but also asserted the important role of reequilibration in the development of logical thought:

The construction of new forms . . . becomes intelligible only if seen as a new equilibrium, that is to say, a product of a reequilibration in response to some tension in the environment—such as occurs in any "upsetting of the equilibrium" through the realm of living matter [p. 203].

Because the child is growing rapidly and the world is forever introducing new information to be sorted out and made sense of, these stages or periods of relative equilibrium that Piaget describes are necessarily part of an ongoing process of growth, development and change. Applicable to this way of seeing development is sociologist Georg Simmel's (1904) famous structuralist statement that "in every peaceful situation the conditions for future conflict, and in every struggle the conditions for future peace, are developing" (p. 799).

From this perspective, the very things that attract children on their developmental path are those things that ultimately trouble them. This idea closely parallels the Gestalt theorist's (Perls et al., 1951) descrip-

**Table 2** Piaget's stages of cognitive development

Age	Stage	Description
Birth to 2	sensori-motor	Infant's achievements consist largely of coordinating their sensory perceptions and simple motor behaviors . . . infants come to recognize the existence of a world outside of themselves and begin to interact with it in deliberate ways.
2-6	pre-operational	Young children can represent reality to themselves through the use of symbols, including mental images, words, and gestures. Objects and events no longer have to be present to be thought about, but children often fail to distinguish their point of view from that of others, become easily captured by surface appearances, and are often becoming confused about causal relations.
6-12	concrete operational	As they enter middle childhood, children become capable of mental operations, internalized actions that fit into a logical system. Operational thinking allows children mentally to combine, separate, order, and transform objects and actions. Such operations are considered concrete because they are carried out in the presence of the objects and events being thought about.
12-19	formal operational	In adolescence the developing person acquires the ability to think systematically about all logical relations within a problem. Adolescents display keen interest in abstract ideals and in the process of thinking itself.

tion of Gestalt formation and closure. This core idea of Piagetian theory is articulated by Crain (1992):

As children seek out the environment, they encounter events that capture their interest. They are particularly intrigued by events that are moderately novel, events that do not quite correspond to their past experience. Children then adjust their actions to learn about these events, and in the process they build new ways for dealing with the world [p. 123].

This childhood process of building "new ways for dealing with the world" is a primary point of concern for each of the theorists discussed thus far in this paper. Also inherent in each of the theories of Dewey, Freud, Erikson, and Piaget, as well as the early Gestaltists, is the primary

role that disequilibrium plays in this process of building new ways for dealing with the world. These ideas will be summarized in the closing section of this paper.

### Disequilibrium in Developmental and Gestalt Therapy Theory: A Summary

In this article, my intention has been to demonstrate how the concept of disequilibrium is addressed in each of the developmental theories explored and how these developmental theories are linked to gestalt therapy theory by this same concept. Table 3 outlines key statements

**Table 3** Theoretical statements addressing disequilibrium

Theorist	Addressing Disequilibrium	Theory
<b>Dewey</b> 1934 p. 14	"Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives."	Interactional Development Theory
<b>Freud</b> 1957 p. 141	". . . any given process originates in an unpleasant state of tension and thereupon determines for itself such a path that its ultimate issue coincides with a relaxation of this tension."	Psychosexual Development Theory
<b>Erikson</b> 1987 p. 596	"Strategic in this interplay are developmental crises—'crises' here connoting not a threat of catastrophe but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential."	Psychosocial Development Theory
<b>Piaget</b> 1964 p. 33	"All development is composed of momentary conflicts and incompatibilities which must be overcome to reach a higher level of equilibrium."	Cognitive Development Theory
<b>Perls, Hefferline, Goodman</b> 1951 p. 373	". . . the materials and energy of growth are: the conservative attempt of the organism to remain as it has been, the novel environment, the destruction of previous partial equilibria, and the assimilation of something new."	Gestalt Therapy Theory

made by Dewey (1934), Freud (1957), Erikson (1987), and Piaget (1964) regarding the centrality of disequilibrium in their developmental theories. Also included in Table 3 is a parallel statement made by Perls et al., (1951), highlighting this theoretical link to Gestalt therapy theory.

In the preceding sections, I have reviewed the following theoretical views regarding the role of disequilibrium in the developmental process: Dewey's notion of a child "falling out of step" with the environment; Freud's concept of the negotiated "tension" between the id, the ego, and the superego, Erikson's developmental crises; Piaget's description of the cognitive process of equilibration; and the Gestalt therapy theoretical view articulated by Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) regarding the "destruction of previous partial equilibria."

Each of these various concepts addresses an important, key concern of developmental theory, that is, how children face and overcome obstacles in their developmental path. Implicit in each of the developmental theories discussed in this article is the idea that children are constantly engaged in an ongoing process of movement through disequilibrium on their way toward more complex levels of organismic equilibrium and balance.

By working out of a theoretical model that explicitly acknowledges the role of disequilibrium in the larger process of organismic self-regulation, Gestalt therapists implicitly link themselves up to a much larger body of developmental theory that also supports this stance. Such a developmentally appropriate stance, backed by a century of developmental theory and research, is in direct contrast to a troubling, but powerful, trend in psychology. This trend involves an increasing clamor for therapists to assume a medical model of intervention where they are pushed to "intervene" with increasingly more efficient "technologies" in order to remove or fix "pathologies" as a surgeon might. Instead, what the Gestalt perspective offers is a respectful approach to facilitating child development in the therapeutic context by acknowledging and enabling a child's "self-regulatory" process of moving through periods of developmental disequilibrium and organismic growth and change. As a pioneer in developmentally appropriate methods of counseling children from a Gestalt perspective, Dr. Violet Oaklander (1999) succinctly describes the goals of such an approach:

The healthy, uninterrupted development of a child's organism—senses, body, emotions, and intellect—is the underlying basis for the child's sense of self. As each need surfaces and is met without hindrance, not only is there homeostasis and balance, but new levels of growth and development are achieved [p. 165].

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