

Editorial

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Two Faces of Marginality

THERE ARE MANY DEFINITIONS and uses of the term *marginality*; economists, sociologists, and other professions use it. Two of these definitions or perspectives are highly informative in understanding the foundation of the Gestalt model and the position of Gestalt therapy in the professional and academic world:

- Marginality: living in two worlds and not deeply embedded in one of these worlds, the world of the psychotherapist or organizational consultant.
- Marginality: a state of being irrelevant, invisible, or not essential: being of little benefit or value; not central to a dominant cultural perspective

Gestalt therapy was born out of the insight that someone who worked “at the margin” could harness a marginal position to a powerful mode of intervention. The notion that “growth occurs at the boundary” would not be possible without conceiving an energy exchange across two worlds—one that is accepted and one that challenges the accepted by being different. However, any radical approach to growth and development does not simply influence what happens in the privacy of the consultation session; it creates a disturbing force that extends more broadly into the cultural milieu. In this way, the two faces of marginality intersect and influence each other.

When talking to Gestalt practitioners, sooner or later the question arises, “How are we doing as a model or as a movement?” “Why are we not more accepted in establishment circles?” “Are we becoming less significant theoretically?” These questions have to do with the second definition above, that of relevance and invisibility. In addressing them, a subset of concerns are raised:

- How much writing is being done?
- Do private practices of people who identify themselves as Gestalt therapists thrive?
- Are Gestalt institutes attracting students?
- Is the theory expanding while at the same time not being diluted?
- Are insurance companies and psychotherapy governing boards (especially in Europe) recognizing Gestalt therapy as a reimbursable and legitimate psychotherapy?
- Is there research being conducted that supports the theory and, more importantly, its effectiveness?

These questions are not new; they have been the subject of concern for 60 years. From the beginning, we have wanted to be connected to the prevailing culture yet different from it. How to position ourselves professionally was as much a concern in the 1950s and 1960s as it is today. The following letters present an interesting exchange between Sonia M. Nevis and Jim Simkin¹ that illustrates the dilemma of balancing acceptance of dominant cultural practice and remaining independent and singular.

September 16, 1969

Dear Sonia,

Recently Irma Lee Shepherd, Frederick S. Perls and I participated in a "Recognition Weekend" for Gestalt Therapists at Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California.

The purpose of this weekend was to have a panel of Gestalt Therapy trainers evaluate persons who have had adequate training in Gestalt Therapy and who are now practicing Gestalt Therapy and seek recognition in the field. In addition these persons were expected to have adequate educational and clinical backgrounds as psychotherapists within their own discipline.

After evaluating the 15 people who presented themselves, we arrived at a consensus of those we believed demonstrated proficiency as a Gestalt Therapist.

I am writing to you as one of the senior members of the Gestalt Therapy family. We know of your proficiency as a Gestalt Therapist, and would like to issue a certificate to you—if you would like one.

If you are interested in such a certificate, please send me a check for \$5.00 which is to defray the estimated costs involved.

¹ James Simkin was one of the most well known of the second generation of Gestalt trainers. For many years he headed his own training program in California and trained many of the third generation of Gestalt practitioners. Sonia M. Nevis, for many years, was head of training at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and currently heads the Center for Intimate Systems of the Gestalt International Study Center.

Cordially yours,
James S. Simkin, Ph.D.
Diplomate in Clinical Psychology

JSS/hes

October 6, 1969

Dear Jim,

In response to your "if you are interested in such a certificate," my answer is no. I trust your answer would have been the same if I put the same statement to you.

You would have elicited my interest if you had suggested I express "interest" in whether or not we ought to get involved in such a procedure at all. Certification most often makes more problems than it solves. Disciplines rigidify when for healthy functioning they must be fluid and ever-changing. Politicking, policing and inner-family squabbling are encouraged. Just look and listen to what is happening now. We needn't go on as you know its negative aspects as well as I do.

This is not to say that we ought not to certify. You might be facing problems in California and Atlanta that I am unaware of and which might make certification advisable regardless of its destructive side effects. I do not know—I wish you had gotten the "senior family" together when that question was the issue—not whether or not I would send \$5.00 for the certificate you granted me.

Cordially,
Sonia M. Nevis, Ph.D.

SMN:hs
cc: Irma Shepherd, Ph.D.
Erving Polster, Ph.D.

The ground for this dilemma was seeded by our founders. As Edwin Nevis points out in this issue, the Gestalt approach began as a rebellion by individuals who led risky lives on the fringe of mainstream society and who were willing to pay the price for this. They put energy into trying to gain social acceptance—writing books, lecturing, founding institutes—but they became heroes only to a segment of the professional population that identified itself with marginality and hardly with the mainstream world of clinical psychology.

Now things have changed. Many of the original concepts and insights, especially in individual therapeutic work, have been incorporated into other approaches. Moreover, many current practitioners do not want to pay the professional price of being marginal. Gestaltists all over the world seek legitimacy in the form of licensure, academic affiliation, insurance eligibility, and government endorsement. Is this a retreat from marginality?

The Power and Price of Working at the Margin

If we believe that growth occurs at the boundary and that remaining marginal in the sense of living in two worlds is the desired stance (the first definition above), it follows that we need to look at the positive values of the “irrelevance definition” of marginality. We need to be cautious about embracing too much of the mainstream judgment that if we are not central to the dominant central perspective then we are of limited professional and theoretical value.

When you are marginal, you have the freedom to be more experimental. You are not tied down by the rules and introjects of the prevailing culture. Nor are you governed by bureaucrats who often stifle creativity, replacing it by rigid standards of conduct and practice.

In addition to fostering experimentation, marginality seems to attract creative minds that have the courage to live outside the endorsed norms of the culture. It often, in return, leads to the formation of groups of individuals who are forced to find their own way, resulting in a vitality and passion. One common outcome is the creation of a flexible community open to multiple realities and possibilities.

In sum, when pondering the question, “Are we becoming too marginal?” my response is, “Not marginal enough.” I believe that our challenge is to hold onto our marginality in the future.

Our Current Issue

Our opening article consists of Beverly Reifman’s interview with Eti Ben-Ziv, an organizational consultant from Israel. Her professional life epitomizes the creative adaptation of the Gestalt approach to working in different contexts, such as large systems that incorporate differing religious, geographical, cultural, and philosophical perspectives. In an insightful and balanced way, she talks about peace and war, describing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from a field perspective. According to Ben Ziv this conflict is not just about territory and religion, but is about east versus west—truly a war of worldviews. It is also not confined to just the Middle East, even impacting her as she waits to board a flight in New York’s LaGuardia Airport. Her unique perspective allows her to look at how Gestalt values play out against different cultural backdrops, such as the “I” and personal responsibility of the East (i.e., Israelis) versus the “we” of the West (i.e., Arabs). The interview ends with Ben Ziv giving a detailed description of her work that is split between Kibbutz and modern entrepreneurial organizations such as a coffee shop chain.

This interview is followed by Edwin Nevis’s “Choices for the Future,” in which, after analyzing the Gestalt movement, past and present,

he predicts some of the future challenges. He first describes the evolution of the Gestalt method "from rebellion to institutionalization." He points out that, although we may, as a group, be less radical than the founders, our original values still ring true and that we still adhere to the change making and revolutionary philosophy of Goodman and the Perls. Nevis calls for a broader perspective concerning what we consider to be therapeutically relevant. He especially advocates for working with larger systems; for focusing on the positive, on politics, on the environment, and on ecology; and on incorporating a broader world view into our work.

Our next article is Vernon Van De Riet's "Gestalt Therapy and the Phenomenological Method." Gestalt practitioners have been debating the usefulness of the phenomenological method in the practice of psychotherapy for many years. After first describing its development by Edmond Husserl, Van De Riet lists three principles for the method's use by an observer or therapist: *bracketing*, *describing*, and *horizontalizing*. He then makes an excellent point in demonstrating the narrowness of seeing the Gestalt method as a solely phenomenological theory. He ends with a comparison of Husserl's assumptions, principles, and conclusions with those of field theory.

Van De Riet's article is followed by two commentaries, "Let the Straw Man Speak: Husserl's Phenomenology in Context," by Mark McConville, and "A Relational Perspective on 'Gestalt Therapy and the Phenomenological Method,'" by Kenneth Meyer. McConville, while agreeing with much of what Van De Riet has to say, clearly disagrees with his characterization of Husserl and his "place in the landscape of Gestalt therapy." He wishes to place Husserl within a different context, as he clearly describes Husserl's historical and philosophical roots. He ends by differing from Van De Riet in a fundamental way. McConville, rather than viewing Husserl's phenomenology and field theory as independent, instead posits that Husserl's phenomenology is the founding basis for the Gestalt therapy field approach.

Meyers argues that the main value of the phenomenological method is that it is a way of changing perspective, of breaking up habitual ways of seeing, hearing, and sensing. The negative side of bracketing, or "reducing," one's experience is that it runs the risk of interfering with a [relational] way of being with our clients. He ends by discussing the act of "seeing" and questions the utility of *bracketing* our preconceptions and judgments.

We end this issue with two important reviews: James Little and Morley Segal's review of three recent books that deal with organizational change and James Weaver's review of Liv Estrup's groundbreaking video, "What's Behind the Empty Chair." As Weaver points out, this video is a sweeping overview with wide-ranging scope. Gestalt

principles are presented in a scholarly, yet creative, way. I agree with Weaver that even the most experienced of Gestaltists will find it stimulating and challenging.