

GESTALT THERAPY AND GESTALT THEORY (1997)

An open forum discussion on "Behavior Online" (www.behavior.net) among Timothy C. McNamara, Joe Wysong, Philip Brownell (USA), Gerhard Stemberger (Austria) and Afonso H Lisboa da Fonseca (Brasil) which took place over February and March, 1997.

Gestalt Therapy and Gestalt Theory

by Timothy C. McNamara, 2/10/97

I found this forum through the GTA web site. While there I was reading a number of rather critical articles written by Gestalt psychologists, some of whom don't seem to have gotten over a sense of hostility that Fritz and Laura Perls (initially) appropriated some of Gestalt psychology's ideas and adapted them to psychotherapy. In the process, the opinion of some of the writers seems to be that Perls "distorted" the meaning of those concepts and that, fundamentally, Gestalt therapy as formulated by Fritz Perls - and specifically Fritz - has "nothing substantive" to do with Gestalt theory. The article I found was by Mary Henle (<http://gestalttheory.net/archive/henle.html>). My impression was that Henle - and some of the other authors both in the fields of Gestalt therapy and Gestalt psychology - have committed the logical error of confusing the messenger with the message, i.e., that Gestalt therapy and Fritz Perls are identical. The discussion I am hoping to generate is in which ways Gestalt psychology continues to inform Gestalt therapy. How do advancements in the Gestalt psychology research of the past 40 years affect the theory and application of Gestalt theory? Or do they? Does Gestalt therapy pay any attention to Gestalt psychology?

Article on Gestalt Therapy & Gestalt Psychology

by Joe Wysong - Editor, *The Gestalt Journal*, 2/11/97

An excellent article, "Gestalt -- Antecedent Influence or Historical Accident," appeared in Volume IV, Number 2 (fall, 1981), of *The Gestalt Journal*. The author, Allen Barlow, addresses several issues raised by Henle in her 1978 article. We expect to post Barlow's entire article on our web site, <http://www.gestalt.org> within the next ten days. Joe Wysong, Editor *The Gestalt Journal*

Further comments and thoughts

by Timothy C. McNamara, 2/11/97

As I have thought about this further (coinciding with reading Laura Perls's book "Living at the Boundary" published by the *Gestalt Journal*), I have been thinking about the historical issue of introjecting Fritz Perls. Many authors raise this issue, that Perls's "style" is often mistaken for the content of Gestalt therapy (I think this is Henle's error, as well). Perhaps a contribution of Henle to the field of Gestalt therapy would be to challenge those introjects. I look forward to reading Barlow's article!

On Henle & Introjection

by Joe Wysong - Editor, *The Gestalt Journal*, 2/12/97

People do, indeed, tend to introject what I call the "later" Perls and see what he did to promote Gestalt therapy as Gestalt therapy. I don't, however, believe that is what Henle did. Henle and I were both on the graduate faculty of the New School for Social Research in the 70s and 80s. She taught Gestalt psychology and I taught Gestalt therapy. Needless to say, we were not bosom buddies. In the years shortly before his death, Fritz was declaring *Gestalt Therapy, Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* "obsolete" and *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* as the final word. Henle took Fritz at his word and based her critique only on GTV which, contrary to Fritz's claim, was not the final word on Gestalt therapy. When we recently digitized and retranscribed the materials for our edition of GTV, we made two interesting discoveries. First, the original transcriptions were about twenty percent in error (for example, Fritz called Esalen a "spiritual Coney Island" which appeared in the original GTV as a "spiritual colony island" -- quite a different meaning). Second, the original editor made significant editorial changes in the lectures, often distorting or changing Fritz's meaning so that the book was more the editor's view of Gestalt therapy than it was Fritz's. Henle was simply accepting Fritz's view of Gestalt therapy and was not, in my opinion, introjecting. Given Fritz's statements about

"obsolescence," Henle was not intellectually obligated to do otherwise. Joe Wysong Editor *The Gestalt Journal*

A clearing image!

by Timothy C. McNamara, 2/12/97

Joe, your explanation provides a firmer ground and a clearer figure in regards to Henle's article. Thank you; I will re-read Henle's article with a different perspective. I spent two months at Esalen in the work-scholar program in 1981; there were many ghosts fluttering about the place, particularly Fritz and Ida Rolf. No withdrawal there, it seemed. "Spiritual Coney Island" is not far off the mark, in some respects, although I met some wonderful people there!

Relationship Indeed!

by Philip Brownell, 2/12/97

I am happy for the direction of this thread. It seems that there is opportunity for leaving the dead behind. Not that we have to leave their ideas behind, but we needn't do unnecessary homage. Whether it be Mary Henle, who objected to Perls, or Perls himself, arguing over their clothing is not very interesting to me, especially since I believe enough time has elapsed to allow people interested in the field, versus devotees to various splinter sections of it, to forge a new and more robust community.

You have stated, "The discussion I am hoping to generate is ways in which Gestalt psychology continues to inform Gestalt therapy. How do advancements in the Gestalt psychology research of the past 40 years affect the theory and application of Gestalt theory? Or do they? Does Gestalt therapy pay any attention to Gestalt psychology?" In the current issue of *Gestalt!*, Hans-Jürgen Walter, of the GTA, discusses a contemporary understanding of the relationship between Gestalt psychological theory and cognitive behavioral psychotherapy. This would seem to be the kind of thing you are looking for. I welcome, and will look forward to the article Joe Wysong mentions that will be forthcoming at *The Gestalt Journal's* web site, in which the relationship between Gestalt Psychology and Gestalt Therapy is treated, but as for now I can say that in all my interactions with Gerhard Stemberger, who posted the Henle article (first on the AAGT web site through an act of professional courtesy and support while GTA was in the process of getting their own site up on the web, and later where it's now located) he has displayed an eagerness to engage with the community of Gestalt practitioners (and has actually done so by entering into discussion with practicing Gestalt therapists on the AAGT email discussion group) who have traditionally followed the development of Gestalt therapy according to the Perls School. There is a new, open spirit among people who used to be characterized by the antipathy seen in Henle. By the way, your URL for the GTA is incorrect, and the current one is ... (old address; new is: <http://gestalttheory.net>). That site has some tremendous links to Gestalt-related work, including the work of Lewin on field theory, and the application of Gestalt theory to organizational work in the United Nations-very exciting stuff, and all related to the thrust of your question, namely, is there any current action, dialogue, relating being done between Gestalt Psychology and Gestalt Therapy. I would say there is indeed, and it's just beginning to get interesting.

As I mentioned in a previous post, some object to the idea of the word "therapy" being dropped in discussing Gestalt principles; however, to me these things are all related and help inform one another. One sees, for instance, included among the workshops for conferences held by both the GTA and more Perls'ian groups presentations on the application of Gestalt theory to organizational development. It would seem that those busy applying classic Gestalt psychology to the clinical arena are making many of the same kinds of applications as those working with Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman.

I might add that I am excited by the emergence of several very viable electronic presences devoted to Gestalt principles: there is this discussion forum at BOL, the site for *The Gestalt Journal*, the electronic journal, *Gestalt!*, the web site for the *Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy* (AAGT), the site for the *GTA*, and several sites for Gestalt institutes worldwide, to say nothing of the email discussion groups related to the AAGT and *Gestalt!*. All of this can only help promote a greater

understanding of Gestalt principles, evidence of the field, and connection within and among the various Gestalt communities. --Phil Brownell, Sr. Editor, *Gestalt!*

Gestalt theory has to offer more than criticism

by Gerhard Stemberger, Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA), 2/17/97

As some of this discussion is focusing on Henle's critical remarks and since I am responsible for including them in GTAs web site I would like to put in some comments on this topic.

I agree with Joe Wysong who points out that Henle is not to blame for taking Fritz Perls up on his late statements that most of the previously published books on Gestalt therapy were obsolete or outdated (e.g. Perls/Hefferline/Goodman). And I think it is also true what many Gestalt therapists replied to (or perhaps thought) about Henle's remarks: That they are partially true in some respect or other but don't relate adequately to the 'whole' of Gestalt therapy (both theory and practice) as it has developed and advanced since its first days.

From my point of view (as a Gestalt theorist and Gestalt Theoretical Psychotherapist) I would (in detail) agree with many of the points Henle put forward but (in the whole) not agree with her general conclusion that Gestalt therapy had nothing in common with Gestalt theory. I think this relation between Gestalt therapy and Gestalt theory has to be seen much more differentiated.

In a very simplified manner I would say that most of the basic assumptions which are shared within the Gestalt therapy community are fully compatible with Gestalt theory, but many of the theoretical conceptualizations and expressed relations to Gestalt theory are not.

Just some few examples for the first and the latter:

Gestalt therapy's view of man as capable of self-regulation, its view of the importance of the present phenomenal field in psychotherapy ('here and now' including past, presence and future as represented in the given phenomenal field), its practice of stimulating awareness as a prerequisite for reorganizing experience and life - all these are fully compatible with views and findings of Gestalt psychology and theory.

Using 'Gestalt' as some kind of a metaphor instead of using it as a scientific concept is not compatible with Gestalt theory and means giving away a lot of potential which could enrich Gestalt therapy. Speaking of an 'organism-environment-field' instead of clearly distinguishing between phenomenal and transphenomenal entities and relations is not compatible with Gestalt theory (and has nothing to do either with Kurt Lewin's field theory - which is a clear-cut theory of the phenomenal field - or with Gestalt theory's view of the mind body problem). Reducing man's abilities of reorganizing his phenomenal field, his experience, his life to just one way how this can be accomplished ('closure' of 'open Gestalts') is not compatible with Gestalt psychology and unnecessarily narrows down the view of the much more differentiated abilities of man 'to put a thing right'.

E.g. most examples from therapeutic practice used as an example for 'closure' of an 'open Gestalt' are in fact no examples for closure in the Gestalt psychological sense but examples for re-centering; unfinished business can be finished in a lot of ways - 'closure' is only asked for in a 'system with a gap', e.g. mourning for the long dead mother when this mourning was originally blocked by certain circumstances; other 'systems' don't have such a 'gap' but are wrong in some other way, they need some kind of re-centering and so on; this whole field of the process and dynamics of re-organization of the psychic field is one of the main domains of Gestalt psychology and nothing is won by reducing it to just one thing, 'closure of an open Gestalt').

I think it is time to give the relation between Gestalt therapy and Gestalt psychology and theory some kind of a new start. There is much to gain for both sides. In our community (psychotherapy section of the international *Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications*) we are working for this aim since about twenty years now (though mainly in the German speaking countries) and we think it has proved possible and fruitful.

One last remark: There was a lot more work done by Gestalt psychologists in the last sixty years in the field of psychological research and also in the field of research on psychopathology and psychotherapy than is known to most Gestalt therapists. I just mention the work of Abraham S. Luchins, a great Gestalt psychologist who worked as a clinician for the American Veterans Administration and published some very inspiring articles and books on group psychotherapy, action psychotherapy, the importance of the social field in working with psychiatric patients and so on. Or Erwin Levy, an assistant of Max Wertheimer, who emigrated from Germany to the USA, worked as a psychotherapist and clinical psychiatrist there and contributed a lot to the understanding of psychic disorders and on the relation of Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis.

So I don't doubt that there is a lot to discover if one follows the proposal of Timothy McNamara to look what Gestalt psychology's development of the last decades had to offer in the psychotherapeutic field.

Following the thread to Gestalt psychology

by Timothy C. McNamara, 2/18/97

I very much appreciate Gerhard's remarks. As I thought about what he wrote, I realized that much of my understanding of Gestalt psychology came from my high school biology class, when we reviewed Gestalt psychology research findings on birds or something. In any event, this is hardly sound theoretical footing! My "other" experience with Gestalt comes from my experiences at Esalen Institute, in training with the Gestalt Institute of the Twin Cities (a "branch" on the Gestalt therapy family tree growing from the Cleveland Institute branch and currently in limbo), and subsequent readings, all from Gestalt therapy. I have three of Kohler's books which seem to be largely written for a general audience. Lewin's work, and Wertheimer's, are less accessible and have proven very difficult to find. Perhaps it would be possible to post a list of suggested readings to get caught up in the field of Gestalt psychology.

Gestalt Psychology Sources and Barlow Article

by Joe Wysong, Editor, *The Gestalt Journal*, 2/19/97

It is about 5:30 am Eastern Time on February 19. I expect to have the article on Gestalt Psychology/Gestalt Therapy posted at <http://www.gestalt.org/barlow.htm> by noon today.

One of the best resources on Gestalt Psychology is A SOURCE BOOK OF GESTALT PSCHOLOGY edited by W. D. Ellis and published in 1926. We will be announcing publication our reprint of the original edition within the next two weeks. Joe Wysong Editor *The Gestalt Journal*

Gestalt psychology sources, some suggestions

by Gerhard Stemberger, Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA), 2/20/97

Thanks to Joe Wysong for posting the interesting Barlow-article (and thanks, Joe, for sending it to me by mail, it arrived well). I would like to comment on this article later on.

I have posted today some remarks on the issue of Gestalt psychology and psychosis to another thread of this forum. There I gave some references to psychopathology related Gestalt psychological sources.

In addition to Joe's recommendation of ELLIS' Sourcebook I would like to mention some 'classics' of Gestalt psychology which seem to be still available in English (in fact I bought them over the last months to improve my ability to communicate about all this in English):

- Max Wertheimer, *Productive Thinking*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982 (ISBN 0-226-89376-6). Paperback edition. [This book has a lot more to do with psychotherapy as one might think at first glance. In this context I would specifically recommend Chapter 7, Two Boys Play Badminton; A Girl Describes Her Office. I think it touches some central topics in psychotherapy thinking of people getting out of focus and in urgent need of re-structuring and re-centering and how to do so. There are close links to Adlerian thinking in this too.]
- Wolfgang Köhler, *Dynamics in Psychology*. Liveright, New York 1968 (ISBN 0-87140-087-1). Paperback edition.

- Wolfgang Köhler, *The Place of Value in a World of Facts*. Liveright, New York 1966 (ISBN 0-87140-107-X). Paperback edition.
- Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology*. Liveright, New York 1992 (ISBN 0-87140-218-1). Paperback edition.
- Kurt Koffka, *Growth of the Mind*. Transaction Books, New Brunswick 1980 (ISBN 0-87855-784-9). Paperback edition.
- Kurt Goldstein, *The Organism*. Zone Books, New York 1995 (ISBN 0-942299-96-5)
- Mitchell G. Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995 (ISBN 0-521-47540-6). [Well, that's no 'classic' of course, but provides a lot of information about the further advancement of Gestalt psychology in the German speaking countries after its prime days, covering a time span from 1890 up till 1967. Perhaps this is just the thing some people are looking for to get an idea about later developments of Gestalt psychology.]
- Mary Henle, *1879 and All That. Essays in the Theory and History of Psychology*. Columbia University Press, New York 1986 (ISBN 0-231-06171-4). Paperback edition.

There are some more, mostly edited by Mary Henle as I remember, and of course the book of Solomon Ash on *Social Psychology*, but I don't have them at hand, so I'll leave it at that.

Another article on Gestalt therapy/Gestalt Psychology

by Joe Wysong, Editor, *The Gestalt Journal*, 3/2/97

I sent a copy of Robert Sherrill's article, "Gestalt Therapy and Gestalt Psychology," which originally appeared in *The Gestalt Journal* in 1986 to Gerhard Stemberger who agreed with me that it can make a contribution to the discussion.

You can find the article at <http://www.gestalt.org/sherrill.htm>

Joe

Not two parts, but a new whole

by Philip Brownell, 3/2/97

I greatly appreciate the most recent posting by Joe Wysong on the relationship between Gestalt psychology and Gestalt therapy. In it, the author writes, "Given these changes we have made, it is unlikely that traditional Gestalt theorists will accept Gestalt therapy as a direct descendant of their system; and I suggest that we do not try to assert such a close relationship. We can acknowledge frankly that we have made a value choice different than that of the Gestalt theorists, and similar to that made by Lewin and Goldstein."

Previously in that article the author also made a distinction between the positions of the Gestalt psychologists on the objective bases of Gestalten as applied to moral issues, and I found that a useful distinction. One of the objections I have had to a certain application of Gestalt therapy theory is the use of phenomenological method to reduce objectivity to irrelevance. Until reading that the original Gestalt psychologists regarded themselves more objective, in that they saw the actual conditions of the object one perceived to have a bearing on the formation of figure, and thus on the construction of meaning associated with that figure formation (just to add a bit here), I would feel like an apostate in the closet, because I believe that one's personal phenomenology is the truth for them, but I also believe there is something outside of each one of us that constitutes the actual truth, that is, what really happened if we could only be infinite and know it absolutely. Of course, one could say that would make no philosophical sense, because we couldn't talk about it, but that's another argument.

My point here is that it makes good sense, from the perspective of keeping our theoretical tenets compatible and internally consistent; to allow for the insights of the Gestalt psychologists who argued for an objective aspect to phenomenology/perception/figure formation, since that also fits well with our existential heritage in the dialogical. After all, there must be another, an actual "thou," rather than one's imagination of another, in order for true dialogue to take place. There must be difference for true contact to occur. If there is, then there must be an objective truth, the meeting of two phenomenologies.

I disagree with the author who writes that we should not try to own our roots in Gestalt psychology. I appreciate his history on the development of Gestalt therapy theory, but I think we would lose quite a bit to say that we do not have these roots. Furthermore, I believe the insights of those who grew out of Gestalt psychology, and developed an interpersonal psychotherapy from it, can now be seen to have insight for those more firmly within the original traditions themselves. The two finding one another is a benefit for all those who live in the here and now.

We are at point when the insights of both can be used to inform and expand the whole. The original Gestalt psychology, when applied to the field of therapy can benefit from the developments of the therapeutic school begun with Perls, et.al., and Gestalt therapy theory can benefit from the discipline of a careful interaction with the principles discovered in Gestalt psychological research, and really of cognitive science, which it stimulated.

Gestalt Psychology is not the Only Root of Gestaltherapy

by Afonso H Lisboa da Fonseca, 3/6/97

I completely agree with the ideas of your very rich message. Including the need to discover more and more Gestalt theory for Gestalt therapists. But I think it would be a mistake to assume Gestalt theory as the only or the main root of Gestalt therapy. As important as Gestalt theory is a sort of Life Philosophy which has its main roots, I think, in F. Nietzsche's Philosophy (I'm aware that to speak of Nietzsche is problematic sometimes, there is a lot of misunderstanding and conflict around him, and I want to come back to this later, because it seems very important.). There are some other roots specifically of Gestalt therapy as we know it, in theatre, Oriental Philosophy... which are independent of Gestalt theory. Sometimes I think we can feel that Fritz used Gestalt theory, but he was not that committed with it -- what could be a mistake. I don't want with this diminish the enormous specific importance of Gestalt Theory, mainly in the modern developments.

Sincerely, Afonso.