

Nancy Amendt-Lyon

## It is the Context That Counts: Book Review<sup>1</sup>

Stemberger, Gerhard (Ed.) (2002). *Psychische Störungen im Ich-Welt-Verhältnis — Gestalttheorie und psychotherapeutische Krankheitslehre* [Psychological Disorders Within the I-World Relationship: Gestalt Theory and Psychotherapeutic Pathology]

Wien: Krammer. ISBN 3-901811-09-5; 184 pages; Euro 21,80

Gestalt psychology is mainly associated with research in perception. It is not widely known that Gestalt theorists also worked in the field of mental health and psychopathology. The starting point of this omnibus volume on Gestalt psychology and psychopathology is comprised of three historic Gestalt theoretical essays. They were written by Heinrich Schulte and Erwin Levy, two clinicians and theorists influenced by Max Wertheimer. Their essays are Gestalt theory classics on mental health and pathology, written in the first half of the last century, but still up to date.

The editor, Gerhard Stemberger, saved these essays from falling into oblivion. He decided not only to publish them together with commentaries by contemporary theorists, but also provided the first German translation of the two essays written by Max Wertheimer's assistant, Erwin Levy, who was expelled from Nazi Germany and worked in the United States of America as a clinical psychologist and psychiatrist.

The volume starts with an overview article by Stemberger, followed by the three classics: the first by Heinrich Schulte "Versuch einer Theorie der paranoischen Eigenbeziehung und Wahnbildung" ("An Attempt at a Theory of the Paranoid Idea of Reference and Delusion Formation" — 1924), a contribution that must be conquered by the reader, and two by Erwin Levy: "Ein Fall von Manie und seine sozialen Implikationen" ("A Case of Mania with its Social Implications" — 1936) and "Einige Aspekte der schizophrenen formalen Denkstörung" ("Some Aspects of the Schizophrenic Formal Disturbance of 'Thought'" 1943). All these essays are inspiring and vividly written. Each of them includes a model, structured according to Gestalt theoretical principles, for dealing with a certain psychopathology in its respective context.

The entire volume strongly emphasizes the specific connection between an individual and his or her fellow human community. These essays explore how a human being and his or her environment "fit together" according to the principles of Gestalt theory with regard to what this signifies for human behavior and experience. The individual and his or her community are explored within the relationship of the parts and the whole, according to the laws of the "good gestalt." Therefore, a certain behavior is only comprehensible and may only be judged as healthy or sick when viewed within the context of the whole. The three historic essays present core ideas and are applicable as models — these are, however not instruction manuals or complete theories on a certain disorder. They offer approaches which can help the therapist to work on a mental disorder within its own appropriate context.

In order for a pathology to warrant the label "Gestalt theoretical" it must deal completely with the full potential of Gestalt theory according to Wertheimer. His concise definition of Gestalt theory is the following:

*There are "wholes", the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole. It is the hope of Gestalt theory to determine the nature of such wholes. Gestalt theory is neither more nor less than this. (Wertheimer, 1938, p. 2)*

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<sup>1</sup> Erschienen in: *International Gestalt Journal* 28/1, 131-135

Therefore, we might pose the following questions with regard to the efficacy of Gestalt psychotherapeutic practice: What does the Gestalt theoretical approach offer to us in view of psychopathological behavior and experience? How useful are these models and do they really comprise the phenomena they were made to include? What meaning does the Gestalt theoretical model of pathology have for the Gestalt psychotherapist?

I do not have simple answers to these questions. However, it is my conviction that dealing with this approach as well as the theory of productive thinking regarding psychopathological issues is a worthwhile endeavor, not to be limited to practicing Gestalt therapists. The Gestalt theoretical approach offers such teachings on psychopathology which are not derived from a medical model. In this pathology, the relationship between foreground and background is given a very important role. Its focus is not on the isolated individual, but rather on the human being in his or her own life context. This is first and foremost an interpersonal theory of pathology which underscores the idea that a human being can only be understood in relation to other human beings (*Mitmenschen*). This aspect of the theory brings us one step further from the intrapsychic model. As Erwin Levy says: "Man is not just an isolated I but also a we-being" (p. 81), and Michael Ruh discusses "we-intending situations" (p. 92).

The Gestalt psychological approach to issues of psychopathology demonstrates that there is basically no categorical difference between disturbances and disorders on the one hand and healthy experience and behavior on the other both adhere to the same laws. According to the holistic approach of Gestalt theory, a behavioral disorder which does not fit the demand characteristics of the situation must always be judged as a part of a greater whole. Thus, disorders can be more easily understood within a larger context and from the perspective of a phenomenological relational theory. The anthropology of Gestalt psychology describes an individual as an open and dynamic system that strives for equilibrium, achieves it, tries to maintain it and, once the circumstances in the field have again changed, can achieve it once more. A human being is able to deal with drastic changes in life thanks to the ability to reorganize and restructure his or her personality.

The American Gestalt psychologist, Abraham Luchins,, reminds us in his commentary on the Schulte paper of Wertheimer's

*... challenge that the duty of the therapist is not merely to diagnose or theorize about the patient but to help him. It is a problem solving situation for both the patient and the therapist who, with social support, create a learning environment. The idea is to change the patient's focus and to help him to recenter his concepts of his social relationships, e.g., through role playing, psychodrama, and action research in his everyday life. The goal is to help the patient restructure his phenomenal world, to develop a viable world that is compatible with social reality. (pp. 135f.; here cited from the English version in Luchins, 1998, p.175)*

Following the three essays, the book contains a variety of commentaries on the Wertheimer-Schulte theses, written by clinicians and theorists from the USA, Germany and Austria, including, among others, such theorists as Luchins, Tholey, and Ruh. Several authors support the thesis of the Wertheimer School, whereas others contribute critical confutations. All in all, this book deals in a stimulating and qualified way with this material and places it into its proper context. In conclusion, the book also provides short biographies of Schulte and Levy and bibliographies of their work, so that - following the relationship between the parts and the whole - the reader can better comprehend the multifaceted backgrounds of these two figures, and the black and white images of the printed word can absorb more of the colors radiating from these two fascinating men.

It is to the publisher's great merit that earlier works of German Gestalt psychologists and critical commentaries have been united in a German language

omnibus volume (some of the contributions have previously appeared individually in other publications<sup>2</sup>). As I was reading the book, I occasionally drifted away in my thoughts, taken back thirty years in time. I found myself in Mary Henle's lectures at the New School for Social Research in New York, listening to her passionate defence of the theory of Gestalt psychology.

### **References**

Luchins, A. S. (1998): On Schulte, Wertheimer, and Paranoia. *Gestalt Theory* 20/2,173-177.

Wertheimer, M. (1938): Gestalt theory. In W. D. Ellis (Ed.), *A source book of Gestalt psychology* (pp. 1-11). New York: The Humanities Press.

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<sup>2</sup> 1. The English versions of some of the texts included in this omnibus volume are accessible online in the Gestalt Archive at <http://gestalttheory.net/archive>.