

FIGURE/GROUND IN GESTALT THERAPY AND GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY (1998)

An open forum discussion on "Behavior Online" (www.behavior.net) among Mercedes Azevedo (Mexico), Raoul Claret (Frankreich), Gerhard Stemberger (Austria) and Karen Bischoff (USA) which took place over October, 1998.

FIGURE/GROUND IN GESTALT THERAPY AND GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY

by Mercedes Azevedo, 10/24/98

I have read somewhere that there is a different use of figure and ground in Gestalt therapy and in Gestalt psychology. Perhaps it has something to do with intentionality, I am not sure. Could somebody please explain??? Thank you so much, Mercedes

Some important differences indeed

by Gerhard Stemberger, Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA), 10/25/98

Mercedes, there are indeed some important differences in the use of figure/ground terminology between Gestalt psychology and what you usually find in Gestalt therapy literature.

For a Gestalt psychologist the use of figure/ground terminology in Gestalt therapy at first glance appears completely wrong and in total contrast to human phenomenal experience. Take for example the notion that your interest or need creates a figure before an empty background, e.g. you notice a person you are urgently looking for in a crowd. In this everyday experience nobody ever sees the figure of this person before an EMPTY background, but this so-called background is full of people and these other people forming the crowd still remain figural in the sense that they are segregated, formed units. Your interest in this case does not CREATE a figure, but focusses on a specific figure out of a multitude of other figures.

Or take the notion that it is a sign of healthy functioning if you are able to switch figure/ground. Again, from a Gestalt psychological view this does not make sense. Take for example the figure of a tree before the background of the sky. That the tree is figure and the sky is ground is not a matter (only) of your interest but of the specific properties of the tree and the sky. For example the sky "goes through behind the tree", if you take away the tree, there is not a hole in the sky, but you see the part of the sky which was hidden by the tree. What is figure and what is ground does usually not depend on what you are looking for, what you desire, what you are needing, but of the specific properties of the one and the other. It would by no way be a sign of healthy functioning if you would be easily able to see the tree as ground for the sky in this example, in the contrary. There are only very specific cases where it is quite easy to switch figure and ground (like in those special ambiguous pictures you have perhaps seen somewhere, vase / faces, checkerboard and so on). In normal situations this is not the case.

So, from a Gestalt psychological view, is it complete nonsense what Gestalt psychotherapy literature is talking about when it uses the figure / ground terminology? Not entirely. But you have to "translate" this usage in Gestalt psychological terms.

When Gestalt therapy literature is talking about figure and ground this is not what Gestalt psychology means by figure and ground. What Gestalt therapy literature is talking about when using figure / ground terminology actually means what in Gestalt psychology is called the "intentionally accented figure" and the "intentionally neutral ground" (these terms were coined in the 1930s by German Gestalt psychologist Kurt GOTTSCHALDT). An example for that: You stand in front of your bookshelf and you are looking for a specific book. Both the bookshelf and the books on it are PHENOMENALLY FIGURAL for you (the phenomenal ground in this case will normally be the wall before that the bookshelf is standing). Now your interest in a specific book does search and select this specific book from all the others, this one book becomes INTENTIONALLY FIGURAL before the INTENTIONALLY NEUTRAL GROUND of all the other books (which still are phenomenally figural, but intentionally neutral).

Now all the contradictions pointed at above (relating to the use of figure/ground in Gestalt therapy literature) can be easily resolved: If you make this important Gestalt psychological differentiation

between phenomenal and intentionally accented figure, phenomenal and intentionally neutral ground, it does in fact make some sense to say that the ability to variations in what you make your intentionally accented figure out of an intentionally neutral ground says something about your healthy functioning.

By the way, from this it should have become clear that the widespread rumor that Gestalt psychology was/is not interested in intentionality, the influence of needs and so on on perception and behavior, and that Gestalt therapy had to overcome this Gestalt psychological restriction, is complete nonsense. Gestalt psychology has - as I have demonstrated in short strokes - not only taken into account intentionality and other states of the person and its surroundings, but has also developed its own terminology for this. Perhaps it would be not so bad an idea to adopt this terminology in Gestalt therapy literature too, because it could help to overcome the confusion in the use and understanding of the figure / ground terminology which seems to be widespread in Gestalt therapy literature and discussion.

Gerhard

As an afterthought:

If I recall correctly Norman Wheeler has said something like that Gestalt therapy should not focus only on the figure but also on the ground. Somebody else said that this was absurd because if you focus on the ground this former ground becomes figural and you are again focusing on the figure.

Taking into account what I said in my previous message this contradiction is resolved: If you use the Gestalt psychological terminology for what Norman Wheeler is talking about, you would speak not of figure and ground but of the intentionally accented figure and the intentionally neutral ground. And here it is possible to glide between the accentuation of one out of many figures (forming the intentionally neutral ground) to another one by recentering your attention, interest and so on. All these figures remain figural in the phenomenal sense (the phenomenal ground is something else anyway) but they change position in the sense of being phenomenal accented figure or part of the phenomenally neutral ground.

Gerhard

Thank you but ...

by Mercedes Azevedo, 10/25/98

Gerhard, thank you very much for your very interesting reply. I did not know of this distinction in Gestalt psychology and it seems to be valuable. I am not sure if I understood what you are saying about healthy functioning and ability to exchange figure and ground. Could you please give an example for this? Mercedes

A case of ground becoming figure

by Gerhard Stemberger, Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA), 10/25/98

Dear Mercedes, - okay, a simple example:

You are sitting at a table. There is a piece of cloth on the table and a glass of water sitting on this cloth.

You are looking at the glass of water. It is the figure on the ground of the cloth.

Now you want to drink from that glass. But unfortunately for some reason you can stretch out your hands just a little, not enough for reaching the glass.

Now the following might happen: You realize that the cloth is lying on the table and by pulling the cloth you can move the glass within reach of your hands.

What has happened here? To find this solution for your problem you had to be able to see the cloth (which *was* and still *is* ground for the glass) as figure on the ground of the table. This ability to change in figure / ground formation was necessary for the solution of your problem.

Small children are at first not capable of this transformation. Adults sometimes lack this ability too in specific situations or because they are more or less disturbed. In this sense one can say that the ability for this figure / ground transformation may be a sign for healthy functioning.

I hope it is obvious that what I have demonstrated for such a simple case is important also for other, much more difficult problems man has to solve in his life. But not every problem can be solved by figure / ground transformations. Many problems demand other transformations and re-organizations of one's perceptual and behavioral field like re-centering, re-grouping, finding an adequate closure and so on. And the ability to do such re-organizations can be developed or hampered in many ways. One could say that what happens in psychotherapy is more or less the search for and actual progress in such adequate re-organizations, a process which in most cases demands the involvement of the whole (feeling, thinking, acting) person.

I hope this answers your question. If you would like to see these ideas applied to a practical psychopathological case have a look at Gestalt psychologist's Erwin Levy's article on formal schizophrenic thought disorders in the GESTALT ARCHIVE (at http://gestalttheory.net/archive/levy_schiz1.html).

Gerhard

Unfinished situation and closure?

by Mercedes Azevedo, 10/30/98

Gerhard, thank you for this beautiful example. I shall use it in my paper if you allow me to do so. May I ask you a further question (or two)? Your example, is it also an example of an open or unfinished situation and of closure? And are there also differences in the use of these concepts between Gestalt psychology and Gestalt therapy (it is said that the unfinished business concept was borrowed by Gestalt therapy from Gestalt psychology but I am not sure in what way exactly)? What about intentionality in this concept?

Warmly, Mercedes

Wolfgang Kohler riding again?

by Raoul, 10/26/98

Gerhard, reading your astonishing message (astonishing because I had never heard of these Gestalt psychological distinctions) I wonder: Am I right assuming that this is what Wolfgang Kohler found out experimenting with his chimpanzees on Tenerife? That they were capable of solving problems by variations of figure / ground formation? And could you please give me the exact source for the GOTTSCHALDT text you mention in your post? Is it in English?

Raoul Claret

Gottschaldt

by Gerhard Stemberger, 10/28/98

Raoul,

the Gottschaldt source is:

Kurt GOTTSCHALDT: *Der Aufbau des kindlichen Handelns - Vergleichende Untersuchungen an gesunden und psychisch abnormen Kindern*. Leipzig: Barth (1933).

I am afraid it was never published in English. Kurt Gottschaldt was an honorary member of the GTA (<http://www.gestalttheory.net/cms/index.php?page=roll-of-honour>). He was one of the most eminent figures of the second generation in Gestalt psychology in Germany. If you are interested to learn more about him and his work you could find some in Mitchell G. ASH's book: *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture 1890-1967 - Holism and the Quest for Objectivity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995).

Best, Gerhard

Gestalt therapy / Gestalt psychology dialogue: A pleasant surprise

by Karen Bischoff, 10/30/98

It was a pleasant surprise for me to find Gestalt therapists and Gestalt psychologists in constructive dialogue on this forum. After Mary Henle had written her demolishing critical article about Gestalt therapy (I think it is somewhere around in the WWW) it seemed not possible for a long time to get something constructive going between Gestalt therapy and Gestalt psychology.

So if find it extremely useful that there seems to be something done about this unnecessary and unproductive chasm between these two important schools of thought which have so much in common (both ideas and problems I think).

Thank you Gerhard for putting in some energy in that. Especially your last replies to Mercedes' questions seem to be very clarifying and useful for me. I hope this will go on.

Karen