

CHAPTER FIFTEEN¹

PRELUDE TO CONTEMPORARY GESTALT THERAPY²

CHARLES BOWMAN AND PHILIP BROWNELL

Three periods characterize the historical process leading to present Gestalt therapy: the predecessors to Gestalt psychology, the school of Gestalt psychology itself, and the development of Gestalt psychotherapy. The work of Franz Brentano, Carl Stumpf, and Edmund Husserl influenced both the school of gestalt psychology and the establishment of gestalt psychotherapy (Hergenhahn, 1992). This fork in the historical road is echoed even today in current debate over the major components of Gestalt practice: some talk of theory and others speak of method. The practice of Gestalt psychotherapy, however, cannot sustain itself apart from Gestalt theory, and without method, Gestalt theory evaporates like intellectual air. What follows is a historical sketch of some of the influences that went into the development of Gestalt theory and practice.

Franz Brentano (1838-1917) believed the study of what the brain does, its processes, is more important than what the brain has, its structure. His views became known as "act psychology." These mental processes were seen as performing a function, and some of the functions he identified were expecting, remembering, inferring, doubting, loving, hating, and hoping. Furthermore, Brentano distinguished between seeing a color and the actual color itself; the seeing is the mental act and the color is the content upon

¹ In the effort to retain the "feel" of the original journal (which published rapidly the development of ideas in the field and encouraged growing writers to publish), the editors have chosen to retain the original articles as they appeared in the online venue. The errors are not a reflection of the publishing policy of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

² Previously published in *Gestalt!* 4(3), 2000 and at the first web site for the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT), under the title, "Simplified Summary of Gestalt Therapy - Historical Antecedents."

which that action becomes focused. Consequently, for him every mental process had an antecedent in the environment. Among Brentano's students was Sigmund Freud.

Carl Stumpf (1848-1936) taught that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and for him the proper focus of psychology was on mental phenomena. His chair at the university of Berlin was passed on to Wolfgang Kohler.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) accepted Brentano's conclusion that mental acts are directed at something outside themselves and the means by which people make contact with the physical world. He studied with both Brentano and Stumpf. For Husserl, however, there were two types of introspection: one that focuses on intentionality and the other which focuses on whatever processes a person experiences subjectively. While the former investigates the object that hearing pursues, the latter pursues the experience of listening.

Brentano, Stumpf, and Husserl all maintained that the proper subject matter for psychology was intact, meaningful psychological experiences. This same phenomenological approach was to appear later in both Gestalt and Existential psychology. Meanwhile, existential philosophy, which began with Kierkegaard and was influenced by Marcel and Merleau-Ponty, contemplated experience as individual human existence; this included issues related to the meaning of human existence, such as freedom, destiny and the existence of God." (Wulf, R., 1996)

Martin Heidegger, considered by many the bridge from existential philosophy to existential psychology, had been Husserl's assistant, and later became his junior colleague at Freiburg University. Like Husserl, he was a phenomenologist, but he took an original direction. For Husserl the most important fact in the universe was the existence of awareness in the human being - the wonder of wonders was pure consciousness and the subjectivity that formed its vehicle, but for Heidegger the wonder of wonders was being itself, and being in the presence of other beings.

Heidegger's own central concern, moreover, is the problem of the meaning of this Being. To ignore this question seems to him an indefensible omission, to subordinate it to the problem of consciousness an inversion of the proper order. Being is more fundamental than consciousness. Indeed, consciousness is itself a manifestation of Being since it is the act or state of being aware...

For Heidegger man is not given an experience apart from the world; man's being (Sein) is only experienced as being-in-the-world (in-der-welt-sein). Man is not isolated in his own subjectivity; he is there (da) where

things are, in the midst of (bei) the things that make up the world. His being is then a being there, Dasein...." (McCall, 1983, p. 61-62)

Three of Carl Stumpf's students took research in a slightly different, yet influential direction. They were among those who developed the school of Gestalt psychology and believed that people do not experience life in isolated pieces. The German word for the perception of intact patterns is "gestalt;" accordingly, the study of these wholes became known as Gestalt psychology. It was fundamentally linked to phenomenology, because these early Gestalt psychologists preferred to study the mental experience as it naturally occurred to the observer, without further analysis or interpretation. Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler stand out as instrumental in the founding of Gestalt psychology (Hergenhahn, 1992).

Max Wertheimer (1880-1943) held that perceptions are different from the sensations that comprise them. His research, "Experimental Studies of the Perception of Movement" (1912) is regarded to be the formal beginning of Gestalt psychology.

Kurt Koffka (1886-1941) studied with Wertheimer, assisted him in his research, and in 1922 wrote an article in the Psychological Bulletin called, "Perception: An Introduction to Gestalt-Theorie;" that article influenced U.S. psychologists into thinking Gestalt psychology was only about perception, when in fact, Gestaltists in Europe were also interested in philosophy, learning, and the process of thinking. Nevertheless, the Gestalt conceptualization of perception has persisted and is utilized today, providing some of the basic principles for the practice of contemporary graphic design.

Wolfgang Kohler (1887-1967) assisted Koffka and Wertheimer, succeeded Stumpf in Berlin, but immigrated to the United States in the face of the rise of Nazi influence in Germany. His writings helped bring Gestalt psychology to the attention of psychologists in the United States. He taught at several U.S. institutions, and while at Swarthmore published his William James lectures "The Place of Value in a World of Facts" (1938) and "Dynamics of Psychology" (1940), which was a discussion of the relationship between field theory in physics and Gestalt psychology. He became president of the American Psychological Association in 1959.

Another associate of Wertheimer, Koffka, and Kohler, who also studied with Stumpf, was Kurt Lewin (1890-1947). He is most noted for extending Gestalt principles to motivation, personality, and group dynamics. However, Lewin's concept of "life space" has proven most significant. It is the field, consisting of all influences acting on a person at a given time. Those coming after Lewin have since developed the notion of life space into a full blown field theory.

Gestalt psychotherapy is most associated with the work of Frederick (Fritz) and Laura Perls. Fritz became an analyst influenced by Karen Horney and Wilhelm Reich, but Gestalt offered him an organizing principle for many of his ideas. He became interested in the philosophy of Sigmund Friedlander, the holism of Jan Smuts, and the semantic disciplines of Alfred Korzybski. Laura, while studying at the University of Frankfurt, became acquainted with, and influenced by, the existentialists Martin Buber and Paul Tillich. A large portion of the phenomenological and existential influences in Gestalt therapy were because of her, even though she wrote under Fritz's name.

In the 1920's Perls had several training analysts, his first being Karen Horney and his last being Wilhelm Reich. Reich's influence is obvious to one familiar with Gestalt Therapy and its attention to the physical body (in the 1960's Perls had close personal and professional contact with Ida Rolfe, also influencing the direction of Gestalt Therapy). Perls received supervision in his psychoanalytic training from Deutsch, Hitschman and Federn. The influence of Brentano and Rank is also cited by some as significant in Perls' early development as an analyst (in the early development of psychoanalysis, Rank organized his practice and theory around the importance of the current interaction between analyst and analysand).

A number of experiences moved Perls away from mainstream psychoanalysis. He became intrigued by the theater and existential philosophy, both keen cultural interests in the Germany of the 1920's, both part of the *Weltanschauung*, or world view, of contemporary Europeans. The Bauhaus groups of the 1920's included Reinhart and Wigman (theatrical influences) as well as Friedlander and Buber (philosophical influences). Perls had contact with the psychologists Kohler and Koffka and closer contact with Lewin and Wertheimer after meeting Laura, a graduate student of Wertheimer's at the time. Interested in (among other things) pattern perception, the Gestalt psychologists studied how people organize perceptual experience. Fritz, Laura and Paul Goodman later chose the term "Gestalt" therapy as a replacement for the method then called "concentration therapy". Among this group of academics was Kurt Lewin, a "field theorist" in the social sciences most often remembered for the equation "behavior is a function of the person in the environment".

Several years after they were wed in 1929, Fritz and Laura moved to South Africa, where they started a psychoanalytic training institute. Laura brought movement and interpersonal contact into the sessions while Fritz began incubating concentration therapy--moved by his analysis with Reich,

J.C. Smuts' Holism and Evolution, and Korbyski's Science and Sanity and Daseinsanalysis.

The Perls' had fled Nazi Germany, where Fritz lost most of his family members. His presentation to the 1936 Psychoanalytic Conference on "Oral Resistances" was shunned, as was *Ego, Hunger and Aggression* when it was published in 1942 (following a scathing review by Marie Bonaparte). By 1944, he had been a soldier for both the English and the German armies, and they had moved from affluence to poverty and back. Clearly, these life experiences influenced Gestalt therapy theory, providing concepts such as "zero-point," "homeostasis," and "polarity," among others.

In South Africa the Perls experienced apartheid as intolerable. In 1946 Fritz moved to New York City, where he met Paul Goodman and Isadore From. Laura and the children followed him a year later.

Laura started the first Gestalt group in 1950, held in Fritz and Laura Perls' apartment. Among those studying with the Perls were Paul Goodman, Isidore From, Elliot Shapiro, and James Simkin. During this period Gestalt therapy was also introduced to the American Psychological Association.

The theory and practice of Gestalt therapy had become influenced by the socio-political and scientific *Zeitgeist* of the time. In medicine and physics research had been shifting to the study of systems and fields. Einstein had declared everything to be relative to everything else. *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* is the definitive statement of Gestalt Therapy Theory, but it was sketched against this historical-cultural landscape. Paul Goodman wrote the theoretical section of the book in 1947, and the psychotherapy that emerged from its pages reflects his social concerns, which were themselves situated in the bio-psycho-social cultural context. The Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman text became a best seller.

In 1952 the Gestalt Therapy Institute of New York was founded. In 1954 the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland formed, with Paul Goodman, Paul Weisz, and Laura and Fritz Perls as the first trainers. Associated with the group in Cleveland were Erving and Miriam Polster, Elaine Kepner, Ed & Sonia Nevis, and Joseph Zinker. This model of training (post-graduate training institutes, free standing and unaffiliated with other institutions) continues to be very popular in Gestalt therapy today, although there are academic training centers and training institutions that are not solely dedicated to Gestalt practice.

In 1959 Fritz went to California with Isadore From, where he met Wilson van Dusen. In the early 60s he, Walter Kempler, and James Simkin offered the first Gestalt training workshops at the Esalen Institute in California. These continued through the late 60s, when Fritz left Esalen;

Irma Shepherd, Robert Resnick, and others continued to offer these workshops at Esalen through 1970. During this period another training institute in Los Angeles formed.

During this early development, especially contrasted with the analytic traditions against which the Perls formulated their practice and teaching, Gestalt therapy introduced many concepts and techniques that have since become standard in psychotherapeutic practice: exciting, direct contact between therapist and client, the use of experimentation congruent with an inclination for direct experience, emphasis on "the here and now," the client's own responsibility for his or her growth, trust in the client's self-regulation, the ecological interdependence of person and environment, and the desire for awareness.

Fritz continued his burning passion for theatrics and for spreading Gestalt Therapy. He was many things to many people, including a multimedia pioneer, leaving a legacy of audio and video tape. In his own words, he was a genius and a bum. Fritz Perls died in 1970 after a brief illness. He had started the Gestalt Institute of Canada at Lake Cowichan, Vancouver and had published *In and Out of the Garbage Pail* a year earlier. Fritz left Gestalt therapy both growing and in disarray. Laura and Isadore kept the theory, so elegantly promulgated in the Perls, Hefferline and Goodman text, alive in their teachings. Gestalt therapy has since embraced a range from theory to theatric while continuing a steady growth and development. Goodman, the Perls', and From have died. Gestalt therapy and Gestalt therapy theory continue to grow.

1978 saw the premiere issue of "The Gestalt Journal" in English. Other Gestalt journals in British, French, German, and Italian also exist. Over 600 training centers have developed world wide, and several Gestalt associations and organizations, including AAGT, EAGT, AND GANZ have emerged.

References

- Wulf, R. (1996) November, Gestalt Dialogue: Newsletter of the Integrative Gestalt Centre, 275 Fifield Terrace, Christchurch 8002, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Available on-line
<http://www.gestalt.org/wulf.htm>
- Bowman, C.E. (1999). 100 Years of Gestalt Therapy: Yours, Mine and Ours. Workshop given at the Fourth International Conference of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy, New York, May 27-30, 1999.
- Gains, J. (1979). Fritz Perls Here and Now. California: Celestial Arts.

- Hergenhahn, B.R. (1992) An introduction to the history of psychology. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company
- McCall, R.J.(1983) Phenomenological psychology. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Perls, F. S. (1969). In and Out of the Garbage Pail. New York: Bantam Books.
- Shepard, M. (1975). Fritz. New York: Bantam.

